‘Networked’ Religion in Network Society:
The Case of Swaminarayan Sect

Mira and Kapil Desai

ABSTRACT

Historically, religion is a potential dynamite in India and is a reason of political, social and economic upheavals. The twenty-first century Indian society is witnessing the dynamics of change where religion is no exception. While globally, the Internet is being viewed as ‘individual’ driven space, in an Asian context the same may not be the case as evident culturally.

The paper is based on textual and semantic analysis of web presence of one of the Hindu sects known as Swaminarayan. Google comes up with “52,70,000 results” as of March 4, 2015 for the word ‘Swaminarayan.’ It explores what is the nature of online presentation of the sect of Swaminarayan and what are offline strategies the organisation is using which suggest merging online and offline existence of the religion as well as organization.

Tracing the journey of the sect and its sub-sects and its intervening presence in Indian socio-political space including the terrorist attack on one of the temples in Gujarat in 2002 and judgment in 2014, the paper examines how online presence of offline institution indicate network of networks. As self proclaimed “socio-spiritual” organisation, the website remarks, “though varying in size, every node of this network runs in synchronization with others providing inspiration for better living. For the ease of access, Global Network of BAPS (Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha) is divided into five geographical regions.”

The website analysis clearly indicates that a ‘local’ religion is no more ‘local’ but a ‘global brand’. It is not about ‘asian-ness’ but an interesting interplay of ‘Hindu,’ ‘pan-Indian,’ ‘global Indian’ identities, simultaneously attempting to attract ‘global’ audiences to ‘Indian cultural traditions, heritage and not ‘religion’!! The paper concludes that in a network society, religion is becoming ‘networked’ identity of ‘collective culture’ rather than ‘individual preference.’

Background

For centuries, religion has been responsible for socio-cultural and political upheavals in India and influenced the very existence of Indian state, post-1947. Historically, India is a melting pot of multiple cultures and religion is no exception. Indian Census officially counts six religions yet notes ‘other religious persuasions’ for its billion plus population in its Census. Table 1 shows that miniscule proportion of Indian population ‘does not report’ religion and ‘other religious persuasions’ include ‘tribal religions.’

Table 1: Diversity of religions in Indian population over the last decade

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religions</th>
<th>2011</th>
<th>2001</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hindu</td>
<td>966257353</td>
<td>827,578,868</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muslim</td>
<td>172245158</td>
<td>138,188,240</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>27819588</td>
<td>24,080,016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sikh</td>
<td>20833116</td>
<td>19,215,730</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buddhist</td>
<td>8442972</td>
<td>7,955,207</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jain</td>
<td>4451753</td>
<td>4,225,053</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other religions and persuasions</td>
<td>7937734</td>
<td>6,639,626</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion not stated</td>
<td>2867303</td>
<td>727,588</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1,210,854,977</td>
<td>1,028,610,328</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source Compilation from: http://censusindia.gov.in

Mira Desai, PhD is an associate professor and in-charge head at the Department of Extension Education, SNDT Women’s University, Mumbai, India. Kapil Desai is a professional stock market analyst with individual interest in philosophy, spirituality and religion.

Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha (BAPS) is a socio-spiritual organisation that operates in five geographical regions: North America, South America, Europe, Asia, and Europe.

Twenty-first century Indian society is witnessing the dynamics of change due to technological development and religion is no exception. While the Internet is being viewed as ‘individual’ space, in an Asian context the same
may not be the case. Multiple religious organisations have been taking to the
digital space like fish in water.

Manuel Castells’ book *The Rise of the ‘Network Society’: Information age:
Economy, Society and Culture* first published in 1996, subsequently in 2000
and then in 2010 examines how ‘networks’ in information age goes beyond the
borders of nation/state and constitute itself as a global system. Technology and
nation/state both play significant role in network society and space is redefined in
the concept of flows and not mere place.

The objective of this paper is to analyse digital representation of the
Swaminarayan sect on the Internet. In order to understand ground realities,
the authors of this paper visited three temples of Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar
Parshottam Swaminarayan Sanstha (BAPS); two at Gujarat (Valsad and
Sarangpur) and one at Maharashtra (Mumbai-Dadar) besides interviewing Adarsh
Jivan Swami from Dadar temple for about two hours on January 14, 2016 by
the second author. Textual analysis of multiple websites of Swaminarayan sect
was also undertaken. Reasons for examining BAPS more closely was the finding
that amongst all the sub-sects of Swaminarayan, BAPS appear to be the most
‘digitally networked’.

**Swaminarayan: Sect of Hinduism**

Multiple encyclopaedias on religion refer to Swaminarayan as a ‘movement’
initiated by Sahajanand Swami (1781-1830) known by his followers as
Swaminarayan, incarnation of Lord Vishnu/Krishna. Though born in Ayodhya,
northern India, he spent most of his life in Gujarat, Western India. The sect was
borne out of fighting social evils during British and French rule in India at that
time.

Though the sect came into being in the 18th century and got divided into
factions/sub-sects in the 19th century. The bochaswanwasi akshar purshottam sanstha
(BAPS) was founded by shastriji maharaj in 1907 after he parted ways with the
vadtal temple. In 1947, dharamjivandas swami left the vadtal temple to form
institutions which provide hostels and education at the high school level, called
‘gurukuls’. Another sub-sect was formed in 1940 after muktajivandas swami left
the Amadavat temple and established his own sect in Maninagar, known as the
Swaminarayan gadi whereas in 1966, Dadubhai patel and his brother bababhai,
(both devotees) left the BAPS to form the yogi divine society. The yogi divine
society also initiates women as ‘sadhus.’ Interestingly the sect went global as early
as 1973 yet the expansion and global presence in the 20th century is remarkable.

Swaminarayan remains a complex tradition for outsiders with vast temples,
large number of higher education institutions and boarding school spaces. There
are multiple subsets within the Swaminarayan, which is a sub-sector of Hinduism
itself. No sect within Swaminarayan talks about other subdivisions of the sect
may be for competitive or complementing reasons. Wikipedia elaborates individual
affiliations of the sect sub-divisions which needs verification. Amongst all the
websites of the sub-sects of Swaminarayan, http://www.kakaji.org/ is the only site
which refers to other fractions of the Swaminarayan sect as shown in Figure 1.

**Figure 1 ‘Other Centres’ of Swaminarayan referring to fractions within the Sect**

![Swaminarayan Sector](http://www.kakaji.org/)

Source: http://www.kakaji.org/

The Descriptions of the fractions within the sect varies so as their websites.
Different factions label them differently like Sampraday-sect, Satsang-collective prayers, Sanstha-organisation, Gaadi-seat, even Society. The sect
is broadly divided into six major ‘panths’; Ahmedabad (also kalupur), BAPS,
vadtal, maninagar, vasna and sokhada (The Times of India, 2002), most of
which are present in digital space as shown in Table 2.
Table 2: Digital Presence of Swaminarayan sect

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>Name of the Faction/Place</th>
<th>Website</th>
<th>Site Descriptions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

There is a website of Swaminarayan Akshar Purshotam religion ([http://live.gunatitjyot.org/](http://live.gunatitjyot.org/)) which is predominantly in Gujarati. There is also [http://www.swaminarayan-gurukul.org/](http://www.swaminarayan-gurukul.org/) which is a domain registered for international school/college but there is no content on the site. Both these sites are listed on the site shown in Figure 1. The Maninagar Gadi sanstha site has ten separate web-sites ([http://www.swaminarayangadi.com/sites/sites.php](http://www.swaminarayangadi.com/sites/sites.php)). The site descriptions listed in Table 2 above clearly indicate the global connect and intersected identity of Swaminarayan as a sect of Hinduism. Interestingly Hinduism is not an ‘institutionalised’ religion unlike most Swaminarayan sub-sect listed above.

**BAPS: The Sub-sect**

Google came up with “52,70,000 results” as of March 4, 2015 for the word Swaminarayan which became “62,00,000 results” on January 4, 2016, the rise of 9,30,000 entries in mere ten months. If the search is refined to “baps shri swaminarayan mandir” in 2016, the results are about “3,67,000.”

As self proclaimed “socio-spiritual” organisation, the BAPS website remarks, “though varying in size, every node of this network runs in synchronisation with others providing inspiration for better living. The website presents its global connects using words like ‘For the ease of access, Global Network of BAPS (Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha) is divided into five geographical regions: USA, UK-Europe, Africa, Pacific, Middle East’”.

Figure 2. Global Network of BAPS with Centre Locator
As per the website, founded on the pillars of practical spirituality, the BAPS reaches out far and wide to address the spiritual, moral and social challenges and issues through more than 160 activities in six categories. BAPS strives to care for the world by caring for societies, families and individuals. This is done by mass motivation and individual attention, through elevating projects for all, irrespective of class, creed, colour or country. It has received many national and international awards and affiliation from the United Nations. BAPS Global Network is composed of more than 1100 mandirs and 3,850 centers. BAPS is also well known for the cultural monuments Akshardham (New Delhi & Gandhinagar, India) and the Swaminarayan Mandirs in London, Houston, Chicago, Toronto and Atlanta.

Swami Adarsh Jivan Swami informed that the website functions are managed by volunteers. The monks (Swamis) are not associated with the digital management of the site but are mainly into religious and social activities. The headquarters of digital processes for BAPS is at Ahmedabad. Video conferencing is used for international connection but is not within India. The main change after computers for the Swami is now he does not need to carry material for Satsang as one only brings a pen-drive. He was of the opinion that the digital presence is more to reach out to audiences and not for ‘interactivity.’

The site is a network of sites since the Swaminarayan.org main site (http://www.swaminarayan.org/index.htm) links multiple sites including the sect site (http://www.baps.org/). The site has sections on prayers, food, herbal products, education (Satsang exams with old exam papers) and other country temple sites and so on. There is a section on food within the site with elaborate recipes (http://www.swaminarayan.org/thal/index.htm). But the herbal products from soaps to shampoos to herbal supplements as evident in Figure 3 is a sister site (http://herbal.baps.org/) with highlighted ecommerce “now credit cards accepted” tag. No doubt the announcement for herbal product site mentioning “products of this site are not for sale outside India” makes it geographically localised, the website analysis clearly indicates that a ‘local’ religion is no more ‘local’ but a ‘global brand’.

Interestingly none of the three temples of BAPS visited has any public mention of website addresses. Most people, few of whom were asked by the authors, were not even aware about the web presence of the sect. Even the two publications: one about BAPS (Gurg, 2011) and other on the Sampraday (Sect) (Mukundchrandas, 2012) obtained from temple stores (both were in Hindi as there were no English editions) have any mention of digital presence. Dadar temple visit and interview with the Swamiji provided an English booklet on the BAPS temple Dadar which is more of the corporate document about the organisation. The booklet titled “BAPS Swaminarayan Mandir (temple), Dadar” having inspirer credit to Pramukh Swami Maharaj does not have publication date or details but it talks about BAPS as an organisation.

Analysis based on BAPS temple visits, interview with Swaminiji and website analysis suggest that locally the organisation is ‘local’ but in digital space it is not only ‘asian’ but interplays ‘Hindu’, ‘pan Indian’, ‘global Indian’ identities simultaneously attempting to attract ‘global’ audiences to ‘Indian cultural traditions, heritage’ and not ‘religious sub-sect’!!
Digital Swaminarayan Sect

Most Swaminarayan sites listed in Table 2 has unique sections like chanting recording, radio, mobile ringtones, downloads (screensavers, songs, wallpapers, virtual darshan, videos of respective sub-sect Swamis, publications and products with e-commerce options, even hall booking or even hospital sister site with promo. Most sites have calendar to inform readers about festivals and activities to be performed around the festival. Three sub-sect sites have stronger digital presence compared to others. http://www.smvs.org/, http://www.baps.org, http://www.swaminarayangadi.com/ have most updated site version where BAPS has real time updated sites. Most sites are in multiple languages- English, Gujarati and Hindi suggesting attempt for extended reach. The kids site of BAPS (http://kids.baps.org/) has a section for Gujarati learner suggesting design to reach next generations who may not know the language. Besides it also for immigrants children who may not be speaking in Gujarati.

Most of the material presented across sub-sect sites, is not only for their own ‘devotees’ but also for onlookers who may be digital natives. Even the e-commerce applications suggest ‘marketability’ of products may or may not be for their own devotees. Examination of sites and nature of online presentation suggest that offline strategies the organisation is merging online and offline existence of the religion as well as organisation apparently is getting presented to global audiences in general and immigrants and diasporas in particular.

Religion and Society

In 2004, following a criminal proceeding against Vadital sub-sect Swaminarayan monks, for murdering Chairman of the sect, media glare to the sect was enormous. Indian socio-political space was shaken when terrorist attack on Akshardham temple at Gandhinagar (Gujarat) took place in September 2002 and the judgement came in 2014. Innocent Muslim mechanic who was falsely charged by Gujarat police spent 11 year in jail for no fault of his except for his religious background (The Hindu, 2014).

American Ex-president Mr. Bill Clinton made an unscheduled visit at Gandhinagar (Gujarat) Akshardham temple April 2001. On March 5, Prince Charles launched the ‘sponsor-a-home’ scheme for the earthquake-hit Gujarat, at the swaminarayan temple in London. Research studies by international university in Swaminarayan temple (Rudert, 2004) also suggest the global character of the sect.

Goyal (2015) elaborates recent quitting of corporate boss of Fortis to join Radha Soami Satsang Beas (established in 1891) and economic and social capital of the sect which is one of the richest spiritual sects. Swaminarayan too is one of the rich religious sects from India which is now global. There is no doubt that it has employed all the digital devices not only to reach out to its followers across fractions but also engage them through their digital interface.

Conclusion

As a neo-Marxist sociologist, Castell takes a critical view of internet whereas BAPS as a stream of Swaminarayan sect became global only because of internet. The digital presence of the sect also suggests that religion is becoming ‘networked’ identity of ‘collective culture’ rather than ‘individual preference’.

BAPS and other Swaminarayan websites clearly show that as per Castell’s analysis, social flows are characterised by art, ritual and myth in the immigrant experience. Imagination is consequential in its collective form, motivating migrants and migrant communities to consider alternative ways of social life. At the same time Castell’s network concept has no ‘centre’ unlike BAPS organisation which is very central in terms of design and operations. The formulation of flexible, decentralised network by Castell is not applicable to BAPS website and its functional processes.
The Role of Multimedia in Islamic Teaching
Propagation: (Da’wah):
An Indonesian Experience

Gunawan Adnan

Abstract

This study is aimed at elaborating the role of multimedia in spreading out Islamic teaching among Muslim society, particularly as it is practiced and experienced in Indonesia. It is found that high technology, particularly information technology extraordinarily influence almost all aspects of human life. The development of technology has indeed contributed to the emergence of various inventions and simplified human daily lives, including the methods of preaching Islamic teaching to the Moslems. This research finds out that there are many programs and strategies of doing da’wah (Islamic teaching propagation) and developing its methods, among others, by utilizing multimedia both electronic and printed, both digital and non-digital ones. This sort of program integrates different kinds of media, such as, radio, television, text, internet, picture, MP3, animation, narration, video, and music and others. Another important role of this multimedia is to strengthen interactive and communicative ability and attitude between the da’i (propagator/communicator) and his/her mad’u (communicant/audience). By utilizing multimedia the so-called ummah (moslem

---

1 Da’wah (also transliterated daawa(h); Arabic: دعاء “invitation”) means the proselytizing or preaching of Islam. Da’wah literally means “issuing a summons” or “making an invitation”, being a gerund of a verb meaning variously “to summon” or “to invite” (whose triconsonantal root is d-ʕ-w دعاء).

2 Da’i (Arabic: “missionary”) refers to a person who engages in Dawah, the act of inviting people to Islam. Da’i is different from Da’i al-Mutlaq, which means dai

---

Gunawan Adnan, PhD is an associate professor at the State Islamic University, Banda Aceh, Indonesia. This article was presented during the 8th ARC International Roundtable held at St. John’s University, Bangkok, Thailand from February 16 to 18, 2016.

This text is the final part of a longer paper considering the usual traditional media in a more general way.