

AN INTRODUCTION TO SWAMINARAYAN HINDUISM

Third Edition

An Introduction to Swaminarayan Hinduism, Third Edition, offers a comprehensive study of a contemporary form of Hinduism. Begun as a revival and reform movement in India two hundred years ago, it has now become one of the fastest growing and most prominent forms of Hinduism. The Swaminarayan Hindu transnational network of temples and institutions is expanding in India, East Africa, the United Kingdom, the United States, Australasia, and in other African and Asian countries. The devotion, rituals, and discipline taught by its founder, Sahajanand Swami (1781–1830), and elaborated by current leaders in major festivals, diverse media, and over the Internet, help preserve ethnic and religious identity in many modern cultural and political contexts. Swaminarayan Hinduism, here described through its history, divisions, leaders, theology, and practices, provides valuable case studies of contemporary Hinduism, religion, migrants, and transnationalism. This new edition includes up-to-date information about growth, geographic expansion, leadership transitions, and impact of Swaminarayan institutions in India and abroad.

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Preface

“No person can step into the same river twice, for it is not the same river or the same person” (Heraclitus quoted in Plato, *Cratylus*, 402a). The axiom is universal for research based on phenomena governed by space and time. That axiom is particularly applicable regarding research on social phenomena and religions, which extend across decades and change in number and expanse. A book based in one period of research is like a photograph of a runner, which distorts the phenomenon of running by stopping the process in midstride. One captures once and only once something that goes on and on. An aphorism attributed to Mark Twain paraphrases the axiom from Heraclitus but indicates a reason why study of the past and present is important for the future: “History does not repeat itself, but it rhymes.”

Hence, tracing developments of Swaminarayan Hinduism over time has been a worthwhile and pleasant academic experience. The first book on Swaminarayan Hinduism published by Cambridge University Press in 1986 was based on research begun in Gujarat more than four decades ago, and it introduced Swaminarayan as *A New Face of Hinduism*. Rapid developments in Gujarat and increased migration of Swaminarayan Hindus led to the second edition as *An Introduction to Swaminarayan Hinduism* in 2001. Even more dramatic developments in the past quarter-century called for a revised third edition. The author is very grateful to be able to continue this chronicle of Swaminarayan Hinduism by presenting this new edition. As with the earlier publications, the goal is a comprehensive introduction of the early Swaminarayan history, theology, and practices and an expanded update regarding recent developments in a manner that, while resisting normative judgments as consistent with a scholar’s independent role, will nonetheless be accepted by Swaminarayan leaders and scholars as an accurate, accessible, reasonably complete introduction, and also as appropriately respectful of the theologies and practices of Swaminarayan subgroups.

Any researcher's work is based on the presupposition that the findings of previous researchers are inaccurate, misinterpreted, and/or incomplete. Hence, a second axiom: "No authoritative last word has been spoken or written about any topic." Were it otherwise, no research would be possible or important. Research builds on the insights gained from others in the past and strives to add new knowledge or new analyses/interpretations that will deepen our understanding and move the scholarly enterprise forward. My doctoral advisor at the University of Chicago was asked, "What are you doing in retirement?" His wry response: "I am trying to correct the errors I made prior to retiring." That seems to be an acceptable and enabling response for any scholar during retirement. St. Augustine's *Retraktionen* seems a bit grandiose as a model for a researcher. This revised edition provides the opportunity for many corrections of previous errors and omissions. The author is grateful for the assistance of many who either in personal communications or in other publications have identified errors. A special pleasure in retirement is to learn about and from younger scholars who are extending and enriching Swaminarayan studies by correcting errors and providing new insights. They will make significant advances in the future. Recent work and future potential of several of these younger scholars are noted in this edition.

Throughout the decades of research and association, Swaminarayan leaders and followers were unfailingly welcoming and helpful to an academic guest who appeared as a Christian stranger/researcher in their midst. Some young *sadhus* studying in the School of Philosophy in the Bombay temple in the early days are now prominent sadhus; young lads playing games with friends in their living rooms are now *acharyas* and leading householders; brothers doing their first *pujas* at home shrines are now sadhus serving in different countries; indeed, many of them have become valuable tutors and friends. Some of us have grown old together. Often during research, I heard an old Gujarati saying: "Four people are to be treated as gods: your parents, your *guru*, and the guest in your house." I have enjoyed the hospitality enjoined by the saying, and I continue to be enriched by the many friendships.

Mota Acharya Tejendraprasad Pande and his son, Acharya Koshalendraprasad Pande, of the Ahmedabad diocese, Sadhu Narayanswarpudas, popularly known as Pramukh Swami, and his successor, Keshavjivandas, popularly known as Mahant Swami, the leaders of the Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha (BAPS), and Sadhu Purushottampriyadas, the acharya of the Swaminarayan Gadi, have been kind and generous in their welcome, hospitality, and encouragement over several decades.

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Without their permissions and assistance in facilitating interviews, attendance at festivals, and visits to temple and residences of sadhus, research would not have been possible. In the course of research, I interviewed scores of Swaminarayan sadhus and hundreds of householders and have attended hundreds of Swaminarayan meetings and festivals. It is not possible to name all those who contributed information and understanding to this research. Dinkerbhai Ashier of London, a friend now of blessed memory, provided exemplary lessons from the everyday life of a devoted Swaminarayan family throughout decades of research.

Among those who have been helpful in gathering information for this new edition are: Mota Acharya Tejendraprasad Pande, Paramtattvadas Swami, Yogi Trivedi, Tushar Shah, Yogvivekdas Swami, Janak Dave, Ritesh Gadhia, Mahesh Varsani, Jethalal Savani, Ashokkumar N. Patel, Magalnidhidas Swami, Avni Chag, and Kanu Patel. No work is completely free from the author's errors and misinterpretations, but this book is much more accurate and complete because of their kind assistance. Over the decades the staff of Lilly Library of Wabash College have been helpful with aspects of research. Aaron Elam and his staff in the Media Center, and Steve Charles, director of Publications at Wabash College, have been helpful in preparing figures for publication.

Many words from Indian languages have become assimilated into English; others remain quite foreign. The result is that any decision about the use of italics and diacritical marks in the text seems arbitrary. The practice in this work is to italicize the first appearance of words from Indian languages about which some question may arise. Each such word then appears in the glossary with diacritical marks and a brief definition or description. Some variations in spellings in Swaminarayan publications result from the use of both Gujarati and Sanskrit forms of words.

Names of two organizations appear so frequently throughout this book that it is efficient to use acronyms, which are also commonly used in the publications of the groups: BAPS for Bochasanwasi Akshar Purushottam Sanstha (or its sometime legal title, Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha) and ISSO for International Swaminarayan Satsang Organization.

Ahmedabad, Baroda, Bombay, Calcutta, and Madras were English spellings of city names until the official respelling changes to Amdavad, Vadodara, Mumbai, Kolkata, and Chennai by state governments beginning in 1974. Use of the previous spelling is continued throughout this work to avoid confusing anachronisms, for simplicity, and to follow the usages most common among Swaminarayan Hindus. The goal is to make

the work both accurate and as accessible as possible to beginning students and to all who are interested in learning about Swaminarayan Hindus.

I have dedicated previous books to several groups: academic department, church, family, and Lois. As one ages, some things become more simple and clear and the future becomes more precious. Hence, this revised edition is dedicated again to Lois with additional dedications to younger scholars with whom I have recently collaborated in publications – Lois Williams, Yogi Trivedi, Paramtattva Swami, Andrew Kunze, Tushar Shah – and the bright future of Swaminarayan studies.