

ENGAGING IN THE WORLD:
SEVĀ IN HINDU *BHAKTI* TRADITIONS

By

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To Anu, Rachu, Bhavu, Milio, Maho, and Sony,
for keeping things light

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Western scholarship has looked at the concept of *sevā* in Hinduism for many years. The focus of these studies has often been on how the concept of *sevā* has been expanded, appropriated, and repackaged. On one front, scholarship has looked at the Neo-Vedanta groups that have seemingly absorbed Western methods of social service and guised them as indigenous Indian concepts. The second major area of scholarly interest has been on the Hindu nationalist groups, such as the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), that have utilized the concept of *sevā* as a means to push forth an anti-Islamic and xenophobic ideology. In fact, until very recently, little effort had been allocated to the study of Hindu devotional movements that have both textual and philosophical underpinnings that advocate *sevā* and a substantial precedent of performing *sevā*.

This thesis argues that the idea of *sevā* in some Hindu devotional movements is not a form of appropriation or repackaging of a Western service ideal; it, instead, has an innate connection with *sādhana*, or a means for spiritual progression. *Sevā*, even when found in unique forms such as health fairs, blood drives, and education seminars, is felt by practitioners of certain Hindu devotional groups to be deeply connected to and

qualified as *sādhanā*. This research will illuminate the philosophy and historical precedent that underlie the performance of this *sevā* by these two Hindu groups. In doing so, there is a unique and necessary addition to the ongoing dialectic regarding Hindu *sevā*.

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

Setting the Stage

In the 1930s, Paul Hacker began his study of Indology at numerous universities in Germany. By the end of the 1940s, he began studying Indian philosophy, with a particular interest in the *Advaita* tradition. His study of *Advaita* often engaged in comparisons by taking Christian theological understandings of concepts such as man and God as paradigmatic, a standard against which other systems should be measured.¹ Hacker also tended to study philosophical concepts chronologically, noting the shifts in the meaning of these concepts with the passage of time. Consequentially, his studies of *Advaita* in this manner eventually lead him to dividing the tradition into two parts: traditional *Advaita* and Neo-*Advaita* or Neo-Vedanta.

Hacker understood Neo-*Advaita* to be little more than an adulteration of the original *Advaita* concepts and teachings.² One of these adulterations, Hacker reasoned, was the inclusion of an ethical dimension that had no basis in traditional *Advaita*. Hacker held that this inclusion was a result of Neo-Vedanta leaders being in contact with western and Christian ideas; the idea of ethics in Neo-*Advaita* was little more than an instance of appropriation of foreign concepts. Accordingly, Hacker sharply criticized Neo-*Advaita* groups, such as the Ramakrishna Mission, which displayed this ethical dimension in the form of social service projects. This critique of ethics in Neo-

¹ Peter Gaeffke. Book review of *Philology and Confrontation: Paul Hacker on Traditional and Modern Vedanta*, by Wilhelm Halbfass, *Journal of American Oriental Society*, Vol 117, No. 2, 1997, 398-400.

² Wilhelm Halbfass, *Philology and Confrontation: Paul Hacker on Traditional and Modern Vedanta* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995), 8.

Vedanta reverberated in western academic religious scholarship for many years, even after Hacker passed away in 1979.

By looking at the theological, epistemological, ontological, and performative contexts of two Hindu devotional traditions in the Atlanta area, this thesis will look to add to the western academic dialectic surrounding Hindu *sevā*, or service. It will commence by closely analyzing Hacker's claims regarding *sevā* in the *Advaita* system and laying out the resulting academic scholarship that followed Hacker's initial work. Thereafter, a delineation of the different definitions of *sevā*, as understood by a number of Hindu groups, will be provided to show the variety of understandings surrounding the term. It will emerge that the underpinnings for the *sevā* that is performed by these groups are different; even amongst the several of the *bhakti*-oriented groups there are different rationalizations for performing *sevā*. Nonetheless, these underlying foundations show that there is a deep connection between the *sevā* activities and Hindu theology. This remains true even when looking at two Hindu temples in Atlanta, Georgia. The study of these two temples will show that the connection between *sevā* and Hindu theology remains in diasporic communities despite being situated in a context, such as the United States, with a long-standing precedent of social service performance.

In the first chapter of this thesis, I will provide a literature review tracing this scholarship dealing with *sevā* in Hinduism and carrying forth a few of Paul Hacker's ideas. This literature will largely reference scholars who addressed Hacker's stance on the place of ethics within the *Advaita* tradition. As there has been little scholarship on *sevā* as social service in *bhakti* movements or other philosophical schools thus far, an inquiry into the topic begins with the extant literature regarding *sevā* in the *Advaita*

tradition. What will become clear is that scholarship steadily moves away both from initial positions regarding the incompatibility of *Advaita* ontology and performance of *sevā* and the long-lasting emphasis on the *Advaita* tradition. Ranging from Hacker's work in the mid-1950s to Andrew Nicholson's recent publication in 2010, this review will leave us at a point of uncertainty. Nicholson's recent book, *Unifying Hinduism: Philosophy and Identity in Indian Intellectual History*, points out that many of the previous academic categorizations and characterizations of Hindu philosophical systems may be flawed. Thus, there emerges a need to revisit past scholarship that was based primarily on the very assertions that Nicholson challenges. These will be proffered in the first chapter. Old paradigms regarding Hindu *sevā* have been questioned and in some places overturned.

It is at this space, with scholarship re-evaluating the previous analytical approach to *sevā* in *Advaita*, that the second chapter offers a new dimension to the study of *sevā*. This dimension is study of *sevā* as social service in the Hindu *bhakti* traditions. More specifically, the chapter looks primarily at two different ways that *sevā* has been understood by various Hindu *bhakti* groups, as *arcana* and social service, and provides some initial analysis of the theologies that underlie the performance of these types of service. Additionally, alternate types of service within *bhakti* movements are mentioned to make the reader aware of the variety of *sevā* forms in Hindu *bhakti* traditions. Through this process, it becomes clear that *sevā* is closely tied to the concept of *sādhana*. A more detailed explanation of both of these terms is necessary prior to moving any farther.

The Question of Terminology

Sevā is being used specifically in this thesis to refer to the service activities that are akin to social service. Yet, the activities grouped beneath the umbrella term *sevā* are those activities subsumed under both the traditional Indian category of charity and identified as feeding the poor, undertaking water and irrigation projects, and buildings public edifices, as well as the traditionally labeled “western” ones such as medical relief and education centers.³ In choosing to focus on this form of *sevā*, there will not be as much space throughout the thesis dedicated to other forms of the concept, such as *arcana* and *nām-japa*, in *bhakti* traditions. Yet, although I will use *sevā* nearly synonymously with social service, there remains a qualitative difference between the two. Social service in the west, particularly the United States, has commonly been understood as a secular enterprise, driven by non-profit NGOs and other similar government based groups commonly driven by concepts such as altruism and humanism.⁴ Yet, *sevā* in Hindu *bhakti* movements, even when used in relation to social service activities, also has a deep connection to underlying Hindu theologies.

These theologies are the source for the performance of these *sevā* activities. They entail what *sevā* should be performed and the exact method of performance. If an individual is able to serve according to these tenets, then spiritual advancement is attained. These tenets are known as *sāadhanā*.⁵ *Sāadhanā* is both the agent that separates *sevā* from social service qualitatively and the means to guide the performer of

³ Gwilym Beckerlegge, “Swami Vivekananda and *Seva*: Taking ‘Social Service’ Seriously,” in *Swami Vivekananda and the Modernization of Hinduism*, ed. William Radice (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 180.

⁴ See John H. Ehrenreich’s *The Altruistic Imagination: a History of Social Work and Social Policy in the United States*.

⁵ Exceptions to this definition of *sāadhanā* will be noted in the second chapter.

sevā towards spiritual gain. Thus, in this thesis, *sāadhanā* will be understood as a means to achieving a wide variety of spiritual gains ranging from erosion of *dosas* to moksha, or ultimate liberation. Moreover, in the groups studied here, *sāadhanā* seems to come primarily from two sources, religious scripture and direct command from a spiritually advanced individual. Some of the movements discussed will appeal to one of these sources, whilst others will appeal to both. As such, even though numerous Hindu *bhakti* movements appeal to the *sevā-sāadhanā* relationship, they do so in different ways.

The final chapter will provide an ethnographic account of two Hindu *bhakti* groups in Atlanta, Georgia. These groups, the Hindu Temple of Atlanta and the Bochasanwasi Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha (BAPS), are both heavily involved in *sevā* as social service. This was one of the reasons that they were chosen. The other main reason was to analyze how a Hindu *bhakti* group adapts, whether through conformation or resistance, to a new cultural and geographic context. Would placement in a western country with different established understandings of social service be influential in any way? Would these Hindu groups seek to mimic other service groups around them to increase efficacy and public visibility? Would reference to traditional concepts such as *sevā* and *dharma* be abandoned altogether? What will be seen is that despite being located in the American suburb of Atlanta, these Hindu groups continue to appeal to traditional Hindu concepts and understandings pertaining to the performance of service.

Accordingly, these service activities are dual in nature. In addition to providing aid to the recipient of the service, they provide spiritual gains for the performer. Each of these two groups, however, appeals to different sources as the underlying foundation

for *sevā*. At the Hindu Temple of Atlanta, *sāadhanā* comes from numerous textual sources spanning from *Vedic* literature to the Epics and *Purānas*. The main message obtained from these scriptures is that service of man, if performed correctly, can equate to service of God. At the BAPS temple in Lilburn, *sāadhanā* is based on a litany of internal scriptures and also draws both from historical precedence of *sevā* performance by former leaders and Swāminārāyan philosophy. Combined together, there emerges an inversion of the *sāadhanā* at the Hindu Temple of Atlanta; it is not service to man that is service of God, but rather service of God that leads to the service of man. Thus, the chapter provides some critical insight into two Hindu *bhakti* communities that are based in the diaspora and actively engage in *sevā*. The study of these two groups invokes subtopics of diaspora studies and Indian nationalism. Moreover, it elucidates an internal rationale for engaging in numerous service activities. This rationale will make clear just how both of these groups have continued to appeal to the Hindu concepts of *sevā* and *sāadhanā*, albeit in different forms, despite being situated in a western country with long existing social service ideals.

In reaching this conclusion, a number of methods of research were utilized. The first chapter relies primarily on the works of five scholars in delineating the progression of the western academic study of *sevā*. Additional scholarship, if even tangentially related to the inquiry into Hindu *sevā*, is also referenced. For example, the second chapter mentions the multiple inquiries in the late 20th century regarding the topic of realism and ontology in the *Advaita* tradition. This is important to the dialectic surrounding Hindu *sevā* because much attention has been given to the seeming contradiction between traditional *Advaita* ontology and modern *Advaita* groups engaging

in service. The second chapter also makes use of scholarly literature regarding research of Hindu *bhakti* movements, such as the Pushti Mārga and Sai Movement, that has been completed holistically; usually there is both a study of the particular movement's texts and theology *and* an ethnographic component. The final chapter minimizes reference to scholarly work. Instead, a major portion of the chapter is ethnographic in nature, comprising of both participant observation at two separate health fairs conducting by two different groups and personal interviews that were both electronically recorded and transcribed. There is also analysis of internal scriptures of the BAPS movement that are relevant to the practice of *sevā*. Overall, the thesis combines both primary research, through textual and ethnographic methods, and secondary research, through reference to extant scholarly material.

Together, this thesis has been written in hopes of providing some initial frameworks and findings regarding the inquiry into Hindu *sevā*. With a quickly growing number of Hindu *bhakti* groups engaging in *sevā*, this study might well be a precursor to a more prevalent topic of interest in the future. Perhaps, just as western scholars have become more aware of Hindu *bhakti* groups over the last few decades, a greater awareness of *bhakti* groups that engage in this type of *sevā* will also occur.

CHAPTER 2
HINDU SEVĀ AS ANALYZED BY THE ACADEMY: A TALE OF TWO DISTINCTIVE
EPOCHS

Making and Breaking Paradigms

The purpose of this chapter is two-fold. First, there will be a delineation of some of the past scholarship regarding Hindu service and engagement. Nearly all scholarship discussed here will refer to *Advaita* and Neo-Vedanta. Despite the topic of this thesis, *sevā* as social service in *bhakti* movements, and the emergence of scholarship focusing on *bhakti* traditions over the last few decades, most of the extant western academic literature on *sevā* corresponds to *Advaita* and Neo-Vedanta. More specifically, this chapter will introduce the work of five important scholars, Paul Hacker, Wilhelm Halbfass, Andrew Fort, Gwilym Beckerlegge, and Andrew Nicholson, who have helped to form, and perhaps break, certain scholarly paradigms regarding social service in Hinduism. From my study, it seems that scholarship has followed a roughly consistent pattern in interpreting Hindu social service from the time of Indologist Paul Hacker (circa mid-1950s) onto more recent times (pre-2000). This is not to say that scholarship from this period can be categorized in a monolithic manner. To assume such would be akin to saying scholarship has remained stagnant and unsuccessful despite the heuristic engagement with Hinduism for several decades. That is not the case. As time has passed, scholarship has definitively grown and taken into account the great sensitivity required to approach a complex subject of study such as Hinduism.

Accordingly, this increased nuance and sensitivity applies to the subject of social service within Hinduism. This becomes quite evident in the comparison of the three scholars, Hacker, Halbfass, and Fort, mentioned in this chapter that fall within this fifty year slot. There are several noteworthy differences among the trio; this serves as

indication that subsequent scholarship has objectively attempted to engage the subject matter at hand. Of greater note, however, is that at the turn of the millennium there has been a marked and distinct shift in the particular scholarly foci as they relate to Hindu social service. The remaining two scholars, Beckerlegge and Nicholson, explicitly demonstrate just how noticeable this shift is. This shift is away from conceptualizing Hindu social service in terms of dichotomies of authentic and inauthentic, traditional and modern, and indigenous and foreign. Instead, there arise different foci that these two scholars look at. Beckerlegge looks at the place of social service in the Ramakrishna Mission and the context in which the ideology of service arose. Furthermore, he at least entertains the possibility that this ideology is indigenous to India and not a mere mimetic product that was created through Vivekananda's interaction with the West. Nicholson does not directly touch upon the subject of Hindu social service, making him the most puzzling addition to this group of scholars. His contribution, however, is absolutely pivotal not only to this thesis, but to the study of Hinduism in general. Nicholson provides copious evidence to show both that the previous categorization of Hinduism, primarily in terms of the six philosophical schools, is flawed and, more importantly for this thesis, that the dichotomous approach to Hinduism that Hacker, Halbfass, Fort and many others have taken is undermined by this flawed categorization. In essence, the very categories that Western scholars have helped to create and reify are erroneous. This is a monumental claim to make. It might very well stir scholars to reevaluate the way Hinduism has come to be represented in text books and taught in classrooms at various levels.

In addition to expanding on the very short summary provided above, this chapter will touch upon upcoming scholarly publications, regarding Hindu social service, that show promise for the further exploration of this subject. To conclude the chapter, it will be discussed as to why very little has been written about Hindu social service from the perspective of the *bhakti*, or devotional, literature and movements. Until now, the focus has been nearly entirely on how social service can and is implemented according to the *Advaita* Vedanta ontology. Because of this focus, there has been much literature written about how Neo-Vedanta groups (perhaps better referred to as Neo-Advaita) seek to undermine the world-negating ontology of Sankara's *Advaita*.¹ This is undoubtedly a reasonable facet of inquiry, particularly if one takes into account the numerous Hindu groups that claim affiliation with the *Advaita* School. Yet, it is quite puzzling that such little scholarship has focused on *sevā* in the *bhakti* movements when there are available sources of support for the performance of *sevā*. For example, there are both textual, such as the writings of the Gaudiya Vaisnava movement, and ethnographical, such as the regular performance of *sevā* by numerous *bhakti* movements around the world, sources that have yet to receive any deserved scholarly attention. This is a point that will be further expanded upon in the second half of this chapter.

The organization of this chapter, based on its dual purpose, will be to present a thematic literature review of the aforementioned five scholars. To allow for some form of uniformity, the major themes of inquiry are **authenticity, appropriation, and negotiation**. These three themes will be discussed in depth to show how each of the five scholars approaches them. What will emerge and become clear is that there is a progressive movement away from hard line categorizations, assumptions, and

¹ See Halbfass (1988, 1991, 1995), Radice (1998), Fort (1998), King (1999)

understandings. Each scholar builds upon what has already been previously established by adding new perspectives and interpretations. What results, then, is a seeming inversion, by Andrew Nicholson, of the ideas initially offered by Paul Hacker. Upon presenting this review, the chapter will conclude with a short section clarifying the need for studying Hindu social service in the *bhakti* movements and considering the telling signs that could provide positive indications of future academic engagement with this topic of research.

Paul Hacker: Setting a Standard

Paul Hacker is a legitimate point of origin for two primary reasons. First, he had a substantial background in Indian philosophy, particularly *Advaita* Vedanta, and in Hindu textual sources such as the Puranas and Epics.² He was interested in comparing and contrasting the nondualism of Sankara with Western, particularly Christian, theology.³ That is not to say that his comparisons would naturally qualify as objective or fair under the criteria of scholars conducting comparative theology today such as Francis Clooney; by numerous accounts, Hacker wasn't interested in the constructive engagement or dialogue between *Advaita* Vedanta and Christian theology. Rather one of his main intentions in undertaking this comparison was to show that there were major deficiencies in *Advaita* Vedanta, such as the discounting of a need for a personal God, that were accounted for in Christian theology. In some ways Hacker was undoubtedly a Christian apologist.⁴ Nonetheless, the reason he remains relevant is because his

² Wilhelm Halbfass, *Philology and Confrontation: Paul Hacker on Traditional and Modern Vedanta* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995), VII.

³ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 7

understanding of *Advaita*, in spite of his negative viewpoint, is quite profound. Second, Hacker is one of the earliest individuals to utilize the label of “Neo-Hinduism”. This is particularly important because it becomes the basis for later scholarship, until the turn of the millennium, regarding the place and understanding of certain “modern” Hindu groups such as the Ramakrishna Mission. What this appellation comes to denote is, according to Hacker, an inherently disparate ideology that is joined together only through the miming of Western, primarily Christian, ideas regarding ethics, religion, social, and political values.⁵ These values are then clothed in Hindu terms and concepts and appropriated as indigenous to the Hindu tradition. Hacker adds on to these characteristics by enumerating a few more:

1. This modernization, though amounting to a Westernization, is an outcome of nationalism, which is the chief impulse of Neo-Hindu thinking.
2. Although nationalism is ultimately an importation from the West, it has a somewhat different meaning here than in the West. National pride in India is not primarily grounded in reminiscences of the political history or in political ideals but in the consciousness of the cultural, in particular religious, achievements of the native country.
3. This cultural nationalism includes the idea that India has a message to proclaim to the world.
4. Neo-Hinduism asserts that Hinduism is a spiritual unity.
5. Neo-Hinduism claims to be tolerant.
6. Neo-Hindus hold that all religions are equal in essence or value.⁶

Hacker shows a penchant for making overgeneralizations regarding Neo-Hindu ideology. He is also explicit in claiming that there is a clear cleavage between Neo-Hinduism and traditional Hinduism. Traditional Hinduism, according to Hacker, and

⁵ Ibid., 231.

⁶ Ibid., 251.

thereby authentic Hinduism, has a living link with the past through the old religious values.⁷ It is highly exclusive and based on ancient textual sources. More specifically, that which can be deemed *dharmic*, or full of *dharma*, must have some connection to the Vedic corpus.⁸ To give an illustration of what he means by “Traditional” Hinduism, Hacker points to the concept of *dharma* and the differing definitions that have been historically attached to the concept. Traditional Hinduism, according to Hacker, interprets *dharma* in terms of the *varnasramadharm*a system found originally in the *Rg Veda* and expounded upon in the Hindu *dharma* literature. Because *dharma* is bound within this socio-religious system, it can only be applied to those that qualify as *Aryan* or are situated in *Aryavarta*.⁹ It is in no way universal or marked by inclusivity. Furthermore, among those that qualify as *Aryan*, there exists a definite hierarchy that places the Brahmin at the top and the subsequent classes in descending order. This hierarchy determines the interaction members of each class have with each other; Brahmins cannot, therefore, perform any service of a lower class member.¹⁰ This is the original, or authentic, interpretation of *dharma* according to Hacker.

Neo-Hinduism, on the other hand, survives because it has the keen ability to assimilate foreign ideas and elements. Hacker explains that it has no continuity with the past because it is so greatly different from the original Hindu teachings.¹¹ To understand what Hacker means by this, we can once again turn to his interpretation of *dharma*. For

⁷ *Ibid.*, 232.

⁸ Paul Hacker, “Dharma in Hinduism,” *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 34 (2006): 487.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 485.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 235.

¹¹ Halbfass, *Philology and Confrontation*, 232.

Hacker, the traditional understanding of *dharma* is no longer applicable. It extends beyond the required “commitment to castes, life stages, and geographical places”.¹² It has become universalized to appeal and apply to the rest of the world. At the center of this universalized *dharma* is a universalized ethical value; *dharma* comes to mean caring for all. As per this understanding, there is no restriction on performing the service of all individuals regardless of class, life stage, or geographical location. In fact, to act with compassion and serve is to live by *dharma*.¹³ For Hacker, this understanding is an absolute abomination of the original conception of *dharma*. There can be no place for this compassion and desire to serve, particularly from the *Advaita* Vedanta ontological understanding of cosmology and liberation. The ontological status of the world as illusory precludes any possibility of developing compassion for other living beings. Furthermore, the path to liberation is marked by the need for a sincere understanding of the true nature of the world as illusory.¹⁴ The introduction of ideas of universality and ethics in Neo-Vedanta, Hacker reasons, is from interaction with West. Hacker ties these ideas of universality and ethics back to European positivism and modernism. For example, Hacker points out that the line “*tat tvam asi*” from the *Chandogya Upanisad* never originally had an ethical connection. Nor was it intended to have one. The first figure to imply that this line could have an ethical connotation was reportedly the German Indologist Arthur Schopenhauer. Only after Schopenhauer’s initial connection did Neo-Vedantists take up the cause; *tat tvam asi* became a call for social service and increased humanism.

¹² Hacker, “Dharma in Hinduism”, 494.

¹³ See Vivekananda’s addresses at the World Parliament of Religions

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 240.

Originally, Hacker reasons, there were references in the *Upanisads* and *Bhagavad Gita* that could be seized and utilized as a foundation for Hindu ethics. Yet, Hacker's interpretation of these scriptural passages, namely chapter six of the *Chandogya Upanisad* and chapter thirteen, verses 27-28, of the *Bhagavad Gita*, is that there is nothing that is suggestive of performing ethical action. Although these instances do refer to a relationship and connection between the self and the divine, Hacker asserts that there is no explicit message to serve others because of this knowledge. Instead of ethical action, realizing unity with the divine is an intellectual process of discerning the ultimate truth.¹⁵ Understood as such, ethical action remains a possibility but not a necessity. Furthermore, even if one does engage in ethical action, it is, according to Sankara's *Advaita*, a mere precursor to the ultimate task of discerning the pervasive nature of Brahman. Later doctrines, primarily from Neo-Vedanta groups, based on ethical action, then, are what Hacker refers to as the pseudo- Vedantic *tat tvam asi* ethic.¹⁶ It arose, apparently, from Swami Vivekananda's interaction with Schopenhauer's follower Paul Deussen in 1896. After discussing with Deussen the ethical principles that Schopenhauer had apparently found within the Hindu scriptures, Vivekananda began referring to the *tat tvam asi* ethic for the first time.¹⁷ *Karma-yoga* thus became a serviceable path for the *Advaita* follower; service to human beings became a signifier of true realization. As such, there became the possibility for universalism; all beings were ultimately part of Brahman and therefore viable to serve. This became the platform for service in Neo-Vedanta groups.

¹⁵ Ibid., 277

¹⁶ Ibid., 294.

¹⁷ Ibid., 297

To summarize, Hacker has provided a foundation for interpreting social service that is dependent on a strict divide between “traditional” and “modern” Hinduism; there is no legitimate connection between the two. Traditional Hinduism is deeply dependent on ancient textual sources and the socio-religious structures and regulations that emerge from them. Stepping outside this textual corpus is an explicit break away from what is legitimate and authentic. Modern, or Neo, Hinduism has thus broken away from traditional Hinduism through its inclusivist stance regarding Western ideas. Thus, in spite of being forced to negotiate global contexts and new challenges, Neo-Hinduism has appropriated western ideas and become disconnected from traditional Hindu ones.

Wilhelm Halbfass: Gently Rocking the Boat

Many of Wilhelm Halbfass’s observations, in his books *India and Europe: an Essay in Understanding* and *Tradition and Reflection: Explorations in Indian Thought*, seem surprisingly coterminous in content with Hacker’s work. Despite Halbfass publishing these books in 1988 and 1991, nearly thirty years after Hacker had printed the bulk of his own work, there is agreement by both scholars on certain ideas. In general, Halbfass tends to agree with Hacker that there is a definite divide between modern, nuanced, Hinduism and traditional, orthodox, Hinduism.¹⁸ Like Hacker, Halbfass identifies the orthodox as the six *astika* schools.¹⁹ Additionally, Halbfass forms his understanding of what constitutes “orthodoxy” solely from the *Advaita* and *Purva Mimamsa* schools. As expected, this leads Halbfass to conceptualize orthodoxy as

¹⁸ Wilhelm Halbfass. *Tradition and Reflection: Explorations in Indian Thought* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1988), 51-74.

¹⁹ *Astika* has a number of translations, the most common of which are theistic or vested in the Vedic literature.

heavily dependent on textual sources that can be tied back to Vedic authority.²⁰ By taking this approach, Halbfass fails to take into account Hindu texts such as the *Panchratra* and *Puranas* that can hold as much authority as the *Vedas* for particular Hindu communities. These non-Vedic texts can hold far more importance in the lives of Hindus today. Thus, the definition of orthodox Hinduism that Halbfass provides is a limited one. In the end, Halbfass points out, like Hacker, that traditional Hinduism is deeply tied to a specific geography, socio-religious system, and textual corpus. There is no room for universality; nor is there room for ethical action towards those outside the *varnasramadharm*a system.

Neo-Hinduism, according to Halbfass, has altered this inflexibility and locality by making ethical action and the *ahimsa* principle central to its presentation of Hinduism. Early figures such as Debranath Tagore of the Brahma Samaj placed an emphasis on avoiding xenophobia and exploring and experiencing other religions.²¹ Later on, Vivekananda introduced Vedanta to the West as the universal religion within which the rest of the religions of the world could fit. In doing so, Vivekananda disregarded the concept of *adhikara* which is based on the Vedic literature and determines certain birth, geographical, and societal demarcations.²²²³ Thus, Hinduism was shaped so that it could adapt to an increasingly expanding world. This is what is particularly troublesome

²⁰ Ibid., 55.

²¹ Wilhelm Halbfass, *India and Europe: an Essay in Understanding* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1988), 225.

²² Adhikara can be translated as viability, eligibility, or worthiness.

²³ Halbfass, *Tradition and Reflection*, 53.

for Halbfass; traditional Hinduism did not allow for the universal angle that modern Hinduism has taken.

What is it, then, that separates Halbfass and Hacker? There are, I would argue, two small, but important, differences that help to illuminate the subtle shifts in scholarship from Paul Hacker's time. First, Halbfass holds that a complete divide between Neo-Hinduism and traditional Hinduism cannot exist today. Halbfass points out that to believe such would be reductive and an oversimplification. He reasons that for Hacker to suppose that there can be an authentic, traditional Hinduism is erroneous; even *traditional* Hinduism has modernized to some degree.²⁴ Thus, although Neo-Hinduism has incorporated many new and foreign elements, traditional Hinduism has also changed to adapt to globalization. Furthermore, the encounter with the West forced even traditional Hindu movements to adapt and assimilate as necessary. In this regard, Halbfass points, as did Hacker, to the realm of ethics. Halbfass places ethics at the center for "the self-understanding and self-articulation of modern Hindu thought".²⁵ This applies even to more traditional reformers. Hacker's two categories, then, are not nearly as mutually exclusive as he believed; there is at least some degree of overlap between modern traditional Hinduism and Neo-Hinduism. The second important point that Halbfass makes is that Neo-Hindu leaders were forced to make certain changes to appeal to a broader audience. He gives a few linguistic examples of Indian terms, such as *darsana*, that have been translated into and equated with English words to increase receptivity. These will be expanded upon in the next section discussing Andrew Fort.

²⁴ Halbfass, *India and Europe*, 220-221.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 241.

To recapitulate, Halbfass has not sharply critiqued the claims Hacker has made regarding the definite divide between traditional Hinduism and Neo-Hinduism. In fact, Halbfass agrees with many of these claims. Where he does differ, however, is in his consideration that perhaps this divide is over-generalized and the two categories have degrees of ambiguity. Furthermore, he touches upon the idea of religions needing to adapt to temporal and contextual changes as globalization occurs. Although there is not an outright aversion of Neo-Hinduism that was displayed by Paul Hacker, there is at least some degree of questioning of legitimacy.

Andrew Fort: Rounding out a Millennium

Andrew Fort does not entirely focus on ideas of ethics and social service in his book *Jivanmukti in Transformation: Embodied Liberation in Advaita and Neo-Vedanta*. The focus of the book is dedicated to exploring the place of the *jivanmukta*, or liberated being, primarily in the *Advaita* tradition. The final section of the book, however, does mention the way that the conceptualization of the *jivanmukta* has been altered in Neo-Vedanta to buttress the idea of performing of social service. It is this section that will be discussed here.

To begin, it must be stressed that Fort tends to agree with many of Hacker's original views regarding the relationship between traditional Hinduism and Neo-Hinduism. There is a distinct split between Neo-Hinduism and traditional Hinduism. Fort believes this split to be the result of modern Indian thinkers having been profoundly

influenced by Western categories and ways of thinking.²⁶ One of Fort's specific critiques of Neo-Vedanta will be highlighted here.

This critique by Fort hinges entirely on a binary involving the *Advaita* of Sankara and the *Advaita* as interpreted by Neo-Hindu thinkers. Sankara's *Advaita* becomes the paradigmatic model against which to compare the *Advaita* of Neo-Hinduism. For Fort, the *jivanmukta* according to traditional *Advaita* does not show much concern about the world and other beings after attaining a liberated state. Instead he is inclined to be totally detached from works and enjoyments.²⁷ Neo-Hinduism, however, has tended to highlight that the *jivanmukta* has a great degree of compassion and love for other beings. For Fort, this Neo-Hindu focus stems from the Western and Christian perspective of perfected beings looking after the welfare of others. He points out that there is little Hindu textual evidence to show that the *jivanmukta* should engage in any form of social service. If anything, the *jivanmukta* is interested in helping others towards the path of liberation.²⁸ He is not interested, however, in the worldly wellbeing of other living beings.

Despite this critique, Fort, like Halbfass, is not as willing as Hacker was in sharply dividing traditional and modern Hindu groups. Fort also takes into consideration the limitations and challenges that Neo-Hindu leaders underwent in facing a modernizing and expanding world. He recognizes, unlike Hacker, that the context of religion is constantly changing. Thus, Neo-Hinduism has had the difficult task of forging an identity

²⁶ Andrew Fort. *Jivanmukti in Transformation: Embodied Liberation in Advaita and Neo-Vedanta* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998), 129.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 34.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 173.

that is both traditional and globally applicable. For example, Fort concedes that the use of certain terminology, such as religion and philosophy in place of *sampradaya* and *darsana*, is to be expected considering the diverse audience that Neo-Hinduism has attempted to appeal to. In admitting as much, Fort is differentiating himself from Hacker by ultimately not interpreting the binary of traditional and Neo- Hinduism as authentic and inauthentic or legitimate and distortion. He does agree that the two are different. This does not mean, however, that change is merely detrimental to a tradition.

Gwilym Beckerlegge: Opening a New Door

Beckerlegge, in his book *Swami Vivekananda's Legacy of Service: a Study of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission*, differs so sharply from the previous scholars in his focus that a brief aside is required to explain his relevance. What separates Beckerlegge, and ultimately Nicholson, is that his approach to the aforementioned themes of authenticity, appropriation, and negotiation is greatly expanded. Thus far, the ideas of Hacker, Halbfass, and Fort have coalesced on three major points. First, all three have operated heavily on a traditional Hinduism and Neo-Hinduism binary. Even after considering that each of these scholars has interpreted this binary differently, it is still clear that it both exists for and is central to each scholar. Second, each of the scholars holds that Neo-Hinduism has emerged out of interaction with the West. The emergence of Neo-Hinduism marks a covert mimetic practice that is dependent on the presence of the West. For example, Fort states that Christianity had a profound impact on the ideology of Vivekananda.²⁹ Finally, there is little in-depth analysis of the Neo-Hindu figures that are constantly the focus of criticism. Of the three scholars, Halbfass dedicates the most space to analyzing Vivekananda. Yet, his analysis of Vivekananda

²⁹ Ibid., 178.

leads to a characterization that can similarly be found in the work of Hacker and Fort in which Vivekananda is cast as a figure who simplified and schematized his message so that it would be accessible.³⁰ He used his knowledge of Western philosophy and positivism to relay a message that would appeal to his Western audience. Furthermore, his establishments, the Ramakrishna Mission and Math in particular, were direct results of his experiences in America.³¹ Finally, all are in agreement that Vivekananda's teachings were not in line with traditional *Advaita* or, perhaps, even his own spiritual teacher Ramakrishna. The point to be made regarding this depiction of Vivekananda is not that it is incorrect; there is definitely some veracity to the claims made by these scholars. Yet, these characterizations are incomplete primarily because they do not look at Vivekananda's life holistically. The examination of Vivekananda's life is limited to his interaction with the West.

It is this final point that makes Beckerlegge's work so vital and different. His work is primarily focused on taking into consideration the possible Western and *indigenous* influences that may have impacted the creation of an ideology of service in the Ramakrishna Mission. More specifically, he is quite explicit that the creation of a service ideology was neither static nor monolithic.³² His purpose, then, is to take into account the social, economic, and political factors that helped to influence the movement. In doing so, he approaches the concepts of authenticity and negotiation differently. He looks at the ideology of service created by Vivekananda and compares it with the

³⁰ Halbfass, *India and Europe*. 229.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 233.

³² Gwilym Beckerlegge, *Swami Vivekananda's Legacy of Service: a Study of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006), 14.

teachings of Ramakrishna and other Indian figures that were contemporaneously engaging the idea of performing organized social service. In doing so, Beckerlegge avoids the pitfall of giving precedence to one ideology over the other; Vivekananda's ideas are not labeled as the aberrations or misconstructions of a binary system. They are instead taken to be part of a larger milieu that was representative of 19th-century Hindu reform.

Beckerlegge has three main foci in his book. The first is a comparison between the teachings of Vivekananda and the teachings of Ramakrishna. As the spiritual successor of Ramakrishna, it is reasonable to assume that Vivekananda undertook a number of his initiatives at the behest of Ramakrishna. It follows, then, that the ideology of service should have been both constructed and taught by Ramakrishna for Vivekananda to have undertaken it. The second is an analysis of the other indigenous factors that could have helped to influence Vivekananda prior to his excursions to America. Finally, Beckerlegge concludes with a holistic reading of Vivekananda's Practical Vedanta that accounts for both the indigenous and foreign elements that contributed to this ideology.

The analysis of Ramakrishna's life and teachings brings about puzzling initial results; there is very little data that refers to social service at all. This information can have a very profound effect on the Ramakrishna Mission. If Ramakrishna did not propound the performance of social service, there can be two detrimental outcomes. First, Vivekananda's own teachings and subsequently established lineage have to be approached as possible innovations. Second, the initiatives of the Ramakrishna Mission would no longer qualify as direct *sādhana* given by Ramakrishna. Thus, the need to

establish a connection between Vivekananda's teachings and those of Ramakrishna is a strong one.

There are three main incidents from Ramakrishna's life that show support for the performance of social service. The first two occurred during the droughts at Ranaghat and Deoghar from 1868-1870. Ramakrishna, upon seeing the pitiable conditions of the people in these areas, is reported to have said that some action should be undertaken to help.³³³⁴ The interpretation of the third example, of Ramakrishna cleaning the bathroom floor of a low-caste with his own hair, is shrouded in a bit more doubt than the first two. Some have interpreted the incident as a precedent for taking part in *sevā*. Others have interpreted the action as Ramakrishna's attempt to undermine caste distinctions and his personal pride.³⁵ In addition to these three incidents, there are a number of recorded (via written accounts) instances of Ramakrishna speaking about the performance of *sevā*. Two phrases that the Ramakrishna commonly refers to are "serve jiva as Siva" and "religion is not for empty stomachs". If these two phrases are contextualized in Ramakrishna's ontology it becomes quite clear why Vivekananda felt that they supported performance of *sevā*. Ramakrishna felt that because the world was in *Kali Yuga*, the paths of *karma* and *jnan* were not very feasible.³⁶ Instead, he felt that *bhakti* was the most practical form of spiritual action. Surprisingly, he didn't constitute

³³ Ibid., 87.

³⁴ There are three main accounts of Ramakrishna's life. The first, by Vivekananda and his followers, records the most incidents regarding Ramakrishna's support for *sevā*. The second, by Mahendranath Gupta, a close lay follower of Ramakrishna, makes no references to Ramakrishna advocating the performance of *sevā*. Finally, there is a middle ground held by a group of followers that believe Ramakrishna called for the performance of a non-institutionalized *sevā*.

³⁵ Ibid., 91.

³⁶ Ibid., 96.

sevā as a form of *bhakti*. In fact, he repeatedly stated that service was a dangerous path because it could lead to the development of ego.³⁷ The only way service could lead to spiritual progress is if it is performed without any form of expectation. The likelihood of such service, according to Ramakrishna, is very low. Thus the *bhakti* of Ramakrishna revolved around serving the images of God (akin to *puja*). This could be extended to the guru or fellow followers. Yet, there was no mention of performing service for non-followers.³⁸ It follows, then, that there is little basis for connecting Vivekananda's ideology of service with Ramakrishna's teachings.

What, then, influenced Vivekananda to take up social service if it wasn't prominent in Ramakrishna's teachings? It has been commonly understood that because little development took place with regards to an institution based form of *sevā* prior to Vivekananda's visits to America, the formation of the Ramakrishna Mission can be attributed to the influence of the West on Vivekananda. Beckerlegge disagrees with this idea in part. He does not dismiss that the West has definitely impacted Vivekananda; Vivekananda had exposure to the Western thinkers Jeremy Bentham, Augustus Comte, Spencer Mill, and Herbert Spencer during his college education.³⁹ In addition to this Western influence, however, there were a number of indigenous influences that helped Vivekananda make *sevā* prominent in his ideology. The first influence that Beckerlegge identifies is the Brahma Samaj. Keshab Chandra Sen was devoted to social service in the latter 1800s and focused heavily on famine relief. Vivekananda's idea of preparing young and learned *sannyasis* for performance of social work may have also come from

³⁷ Ibid., 100.

³⁸ Ibid., 125.

³⁹ Ibid., 136.

Keshab Sen's initial idea to send learned young men throughout India.⁴⁰ Beckerlegge also points to the time segment from 1889-1890, Vivekananda's *parivrajaka* stage, as a pivotal space in which Vivekananda began to consolidate his plan for organized *sevā*. Two other figures were Pramadadas Mitra and Pavhari Baba.⁴¹ Mitra was central in helping Vivekananda situate his movement in the Hindu tradition. He helped Vivekananda to consider what sort of connection needed to be drawn to the *Advaita* tradition. On one hand was the legitimacy that came from associating with the *math* of Sankara. On the other hand, Vivekananda disagreed with Sankara's idea of the necessity of the caste system. Thus, Vivekananda had correspondence with Mitra through numerous letters until their first meeting in April, 1890 to work through these issues regarding the ideology of the movement.⁴² Pavhari Baba was another important figure that had quite an impact of Swami Vivekananda. Vivekananda was so impressed by Pavhari Baba that he briefly considered renouncing Ramakrishna as his own spiritual leader and learning under Pavhari Baba instead.⁴³ A potential third source of influence may have been the Swāminārāyan movement. Vivekananda spent at least twelve months in Gujarat, specifically in the regions of Ahmedabad and Junagadh, immediately prior to his visit to America. By this point, in early 1892, the ascetics of the

⁴⁰ Ibid., 142-143.

⁴¹ Ibid., 156.

⁴² Rajagopal Chattopadhyaya, *Swami Vivekananda in India: a Corrective Biography* (New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas Publishers, 1999), 85-87.

⁴³ Carl T. Jackson. *Vedanta for the West: The Ramakrishna Movement in the United States* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 24-25.

Swāminārāyan movement had already been involved in community service projects for several decades and may have made an impression on Vivekananda.⁴⁴

In addition to meeting, consulting, and learning with these figures, it was likely the experiences of human suffering that also helped Vivekananda to create his ideology of *sevā*. Beckerlegge notes that Bengal underwent five major periods of famine during Vivekananda's lifetime (1866-1902). Although, again, scholars have strongly hinted that Vivekananda's methods of service were likely influenced by Christian Missionary work in India or social service groups in America, it seems that these famines may have had a particular impact on Vivekananda deciding to undertake *sevā*. It was fathomable that these harrowing experiences, most of which took place *before* his initial travel to America in 1893, led Vivekananda to tie together the condition of the public and the few justifications for *sevā* found in Ramakrishna's life.⁴⁵

Yet, the manifest testament to this ideology, the Belur Math, did not come into existence until 1897. It is likely, then, that the time spent in America helped Vivekananda to materialize the ideology that he had formed primarily prior to his 1893 excursion to the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago. At the very least, it can be pointed out that Vivekananda saw America as an opportunity to put his ideas in motion after he had largely failed to garner support in India. Overall, the Belur Math drew upon Vivekananda's experiences in India and America to create a lasting institution of social service that operates under the preciptice of fulfilling the *sādhanā* given by Ramakrishna.

⁴⁴ Raymond Williams, *An Introduction to Swaminarayan Hinduism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 24; Beckerlegge, *Swami Vivekananda's Legacy of Service: a Study of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission*, 190.

⁴⁵ Beckerlegge, *Vivekananda's Legacy of Service*, 179.

Andrew Nicholson: Reexamining the Foundation of Hindu Studies

Andrew Nicholson provides a fitting end to this thematic literature review. In his book *Unifying Hinduism: Philosophy and Identity in Indian Intellectual History*, Nicholson examines the conceptions of authenticity and appropriation created by Indologists in the twentieth century and turns them on their head. Nicholson never gives any clear conception of what can be determined as authentic or appropriated; for him it is nearly impossible to determine what can fit under these two umbrella terms. In fact, the main point made in his book is that between the twelfth and sixteenth centuries CE in India, certain thinkers began to approach and conceptualize the seemingly disparate six *darsanas*, or systems, as a single whole.⁴⁶ This conception of a whole was brought about by a number of medieval philosophers. Of these, Nicholson singles out the somewhat enigmatic, and definitely provocative, Vijñanabhikṣu, a proponent of the *bhedabheda* (literally difference and non-difference) position. In providing the teachings of Vijñanabhikṣu, Nicholson offers an entry into a medieval social and philosophical milieu that is particularly important for understanding the progression of the western academic understanding of *sevā*. The findings of Nicholson, although not entirely novel considering that David Lorenzen and Sheldon Pollock have already presented copious evidence to prove the existence of a unified Hinduism prior to the arrival of the British, are important here in two specific ways.

First, it means that one of the fundamental methods of organizing Hinduism both philosophically and historically is flawed. One of the ways in which Hinduism is historically presented is through the philosophical development spanning from the time

⁴⁶ Andrew Nicholson, *Unifying Hinduism: Philosophy and Identity in Indian Intellectual History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 2.

of Vedic literature onto the modern period. Additionally, this means that the particular idiosyncrasies that have been attributed to each philosophical school are problematic. For example, the *Samkhya* School has commonly been labeled as atheistic. Yet, as Nicholson shows in his book, it is likely that only later commentaries, roughly beginning in the 16th century CE, began to depict *Samkhya* as atheistic.⁴⁷ Prior to this period, nearly all the relevant textual and commentarial references refer to *Samkhya* as theistic. In fact of the three major texts, *Samkyakarika*, *Tattvasamasutras*, and *Samkyasutras*, thought to be fundamental to the Samkhya philosophy only the *Samkhyasutras* explicitly deny the existence of God; the other two are primarily silent on the subject. This follows Nicholson's assertion that only later Samkhya literature began to portray the school as atheistic as the *Samkhyasutras* were written well after the *Samkhyakarika* and *Tattvasamasutras*. Furthermore, Johannes Bronkhorst points out that all of the commentaries on the *Samkyakarika*, a text considered to be the most authoritative expression of *Samkhya* philosophy, accept the existence of God.^{48,49} Other Hindu texts, such as the *Upanisads*, *Bhagavad Gita* and *Puranas* also refer to *Samkhya* as thoroughly theistic. How is it, then, that an atheistic conception of *Samkhya* arose and remained until modern times? Nicholson provides two main reasons. First, an atheistic philosophical school "functions as something like an early Indian analogue to Darwin's theory of evolution" and provides a point of comparison for Western scholars studying

⁴⁷ Ibid., 76.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 76.

⁴⁹ Johannes Bronkhorst is a professor of Sanskrit and Indian Studies at the University of Lausanne.

Indian philosophy.⁵⁰ It also provided an alternative to the other-worldly Vedanta that instead hinged on rigorous and demanding mental development. Secondly, and more importantly, the *Samkhya* system was presented as atheistic in the doxographies that western scholars gathered and relied upon. These doxographies were constructed in such a manner as to systematically present the numerous philosophical schools in a hierarchical structure. Moreover, although these medieval doxographies do not tend to excoriate the *Samkhya* system as it had largely long fallen from prominence by this time, there was a clear presentation of the system as atheistic in nature. Due to the heavy reliance of western scholars on these classificatory texts, the idea of *Samkhya* as an atheistic school became reified over time.

Vedanta is the second school that has been perceived by Western scholarship in a somewhat faulty manner. In particular, “Vedanta” has become synonymous with *Advaita*. *Advaita* has come to be understood as the purest form of Vedanta. Taking into consideration both that the original Orientalists learned from texts that could systematically organize the different philosophical schools and that many of these texts, or doxographies, were *Advaitic* in nature, it is easy to see how the *Advaita* school came to be given prominence in the Vedanta *darsana*.⁵¹ Maadhva’s doxography *sarvadarsanasamgraha*, for example, would have helped to give Orientalists the impression that *Advaita* was the purest and most authentic form of Indian philosophy. This doxography not only provides an excellent purview of the different philosophical

⁵⁰ Ibid., 71.

⁵¹ Ibid., 143.

stances, but also presents *Advaita* as the culmination of these stances. *Advaita* is reported to be the corrective of the other different and incomplete perspectives.⁵²

In addition to this elevated status, a number of peculiar idiosyncrasies were attributed to *Advaita*. Perceived to be one of the foundational beliefs is that the world is entirely unreal. This is the basis for the “world-negating” tag that many early Orientalists and Romanticists gave to the people of the Indian subcontinent. It seems that those same doxographies that helped to label *Samkhya* as essentially atheistic also helped to label *Advaita* as rejecting the realness of the world. The question that arises, for Nicholson and apparently some other scholars, is whether Sankara actually perceived the world to be insentient. If all is ultimately Brahman and Brahman is sentient and conscious, can an effect or product, the universe, of Brahman be insentient or *jada*? According to Sankara it can. It must be understood, however, that the universe cannot be *unreal* but merely illusory. If all is Brahman, then a product of Brahman cannot be wholly different from Brahman. Essentially, the world must be Brahman even if it is slightly altered. It cannot, therefore, be ontologically different from Brahman.⁵³ Thus, when Brahman produces the world, it merely assigns particular forms and names that seemingly make the world ontologically different. When true knowledge is attained, these forms and names are nullified.⁵⁴ Never, however, does the world become “unreal”; it is merely realized to be a part of Brahman. The mistake of equating the two, according to both Nicholson and Srinivas Rao, is the result of later Advaitin commentators. Rao specifically faults the followers of Sankara for misinterpreting what

⁵² Ibid., 159.

⁵³ Srinivas Rao, “The Two Myths in Advaita,” *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 24 (1996): 270

⁵⁴ Ibid., 270.

Sankara held to be true regarding the insentient nature of the universe. Furthermore, he holds that these followers understood the *Sankhya* conception of insentience as an absence of sentience rather than a non-manifestation of sentience.⁵⁵ It is noteworthy that some of the earlier Orientalists did discern that the idea of the denial of the reality of the world was a relatively recent development. H.T. Colebrooke, one of the few early western scholars to heavily utilize the *Samkhyapravacanabhāṣya*, Vijnanabhikṣu's commentary on the *Samkhya* scriptures, to better understand the *Samkhya* perspective actually accepted Vijnanabhikṣu's position that the non-reality of the world was an idea ascribed to Vedānta by later commentaries.⁵⁶ Colebrooke went so far as to label this idea as non-central to Vedānta and a later addition that was likely unoriginal and borrowed. Today, Srinivas Rao is one of the more recent scholars to touch upon the need to reconsider the place of the world and "world-negating" tag in *Advaita*.

In terms of contributing to the points made in this thesis, Nicholson is also pivotal in getting across the central point that previous scholarship has chosen to focus on three key points related to *sevā*. The first, also discussed above, is that *Advaita* has come to be understood as representative of Vedānta in totality. Although we may recall that western scholars could only readily utilize available doxographies, it is still highly problematic, since it downplays the prominence of other schools in the Vedānta system, one of which is the *Viśiṣṭadvaita* School.

Secondly, Nicholson's book should lead scholars to seriously reconsider the categorical system that is currently in place regarding Hindu philosophy and history. As the first part of this chapter has shown, much effort has been made in deciding which

⁵⁵ Ibid., 271

⁵⁶ Nicholson, *Unified Hinduism*, 131

Hindu ideas are orthodox and heterodox. Usually, those ideas and groups that fall under the umbrella of Neo-Hinduism tend to be labeled as heterodox. Such was the case with Swami Vivekananda, a figure that both Hacker and Halbfass labeled as an innovator who had mixed various indigenous and foreign ideas to create an ideology that would be appealing to the West. Yet this critique of “inclusivism” that Hacker alludes to is a moot point; the evidence that Nicholson provides makes this quite clear. Although Hacker is intent on claiming that Neo-Hinduism simply incorporated Western ideas to combat Christian missionaries, he disregards the inclusivism that was already present in India well before the arrival of the British; Nicholson’s presentation of the Hindu medieval philosophical milieu, of which Vijnanabhikshu was a part, is ample proof of this. Furthermore, Puranic literature serves as an excellent source of earlier attempts by Hinduism to absorb Jainism and Buddhism.⁵⁷ This allows, at minimum, the opportunity to re-analyze the foundations of service in the Neo-Vedanta groups that are linked to the *Advaita* School. Gwilym Beckerlegge has already commenced this process with his thorough and novel analysis of *sevā* in the Ramakrishna Mission.⁵⁸

Finally, there seems to be an unaddressed gap that needs to be mentioned regarding scholarship prior to the 21st century. Hacker, Halbfass, and Fort are fixated on the point of reality in the *Advaita* worldview. All three repeatedly comment that traditional *Advaita* precludes the possibility of *sevā*. Yet, *Advaita* is only one of multiple Hindu philosophical schools. Perhaps now there can be headway into the study of

⁵⁷ Ibid., 187.

⁵⁸ In addition to his book covered in this chapter, Beckerlegge has a number of separate chapters and articles that look at different facets of *sevā* in the Ramakrishna Mission. See “Swami Vivekananda and *Sevā*: Taking ‘Social Service’ Seriously” (1998), “Human Rights in the Ramakrishna Math and Mission: For Liberation and the Good of the World” (1990), and “Swami Vivekananda and the Immortality of Modern Famine” (1994).

Hindu *bhakti* groups that also engage in service. This can add to the scholarship already done on *sevā* in *Advaita*, thereby greatly expanding the scope of scholarly inquiry regarding the topic. This thesis will attempt to commence this expansion in the following chapters.

New Approaches

Where Nicholson leaves us, then, is at a critical juncture in deciding upon the future roads that can be taken in regards to *sevā*. Thus far, we have seen, in brief, the changes in scholarly focus in regards to *sevā*. It has been my impression that these changes have shown scholarship is not stagnant; there has been considerable progression in attempting to understand *sevā* as a legitimate spiritually-driven practice as opposed to a mimetic exercise reflective of a superior western culture. Overall, there are two central questions that will be considered to conclude this chapter and segue into the next.

First, there is the question of what other scholarly work has been recently produced in regards to *sevā*. This question is vital in discerning whether *sevā* has and will continue to be studied academically. Thus, there needs to be a consideration of some of the other scholarly work in addition to Beckerlegge and Nicholson that have focused on the concept of *sevā*.

There are two publications that are of particular relevance. The first is Kenneth Russell Valpey's book *Attending Kṛṣṇa's Image: Caitanya Vaisnava Murti-Sevā as Devotional Truth*, which opens an entirely different method of understanding what can constitute *sevā*. Thus far, this chapter has identified *sevā* as some form of public social service. All of Hacker, Halbfass, and Fort's critiques were aimed at Neo-Hindu groups that were advocating for worldly engagement, primarily through social service, based on

the *Advaita* philosophy. Beckerlegge, on the other hand, looked at the emergence of the *sevā* ideology in the Ramakrishna Mission and the possible factors that helped to consolidate this ideology. Finally, Nicholson helped to challenge the very categorization that was foundational to creating the labels of “authentic/traditional” and “Neo”. Yet, there has not been a mention of *sevā* as a practice that can be interpreted apart from social service. This is why Valpey’s book is quite integral to this thesis as a whole; it explains to us that there are many different form of *sevā*. Although *sevā* has come to be commonly interpreted as social service more recently, it has often been used in a devotional context in the past. Valpey introduces the idea of *sevā* as *bhakti* towards a *murti* of Sri Krsna. This devotional practice is an integral part of the Caitanya Vaisnava tradition. Valpey focuses on this form of *sevā* and how it has been adapted to a modern world and global context. More specifically, Valpey compares the practice of *murti-sevā* at a temple in Vrindavan, India and a temple in London. His intent is to see whether there emerge any alterations to the performance of this *sevā* and the theological underpinnings that inform the *sevā*. Furthermore, Valpey discusses *murti-sevā* in connection with a concept that was mentioned briefly earlier in this chapter and will be expanded upon in the next chapter. This concept, *sāadhanā*, is perceived within the Caitanya tradition as a transformative spiritual process that the devotee can undergo, in part, through the performance of *murti-sevā*.⁵⁹ Additionally, devotees are expected to take part in listening to *krsna-kathā*, narratives about Krsna’s life, and performing *kirtanam*, chanting and glorifying the name of Krsna, to complete their *sāadhanā*.⁶⁰ Thus,

⁵⁹ Kenneth Russell Valpey. *Attending Krsna’s Image: Caitanya Vaisnava Murti-Seva as Devotional Truth* (London: Routledge, 2006), 2.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 40.

sevā in this form remains a means of transformation, as it would, seemingly, in the Ramakrishna Mission. The difference, however, is that there is no longer service to humanity as an emanation of Brahman. Instead there is service of a sacred image of Sri Krsna.

The second book worthy of mention is *From Seva to Cyberspace: the Many Faces of Volunteering in India*. Edited by a number of sociologists, the book focuses on how *sevā*, in this instance understood as volunteering, has grown as a phenomenon in India. Through interviews and case studies, the book also attempts to capture the voices of the individuals and organizations that are taking up volunteering throughout India. In some sense, due to the authors involved and the focus of the study, there is not as much space given to the role of Hindu theology or philosophy in sparking the performance of *sevā*. In fact, in total there is just one chapter dedicated to this facet of social service. Even in this limited space, there is no attempt made to look at historical precedent and development of the practice. Instead, a superficial overview of foundational religious principles, such as *zakat* in Islam, is utilized to cover connections between religions and the performance of *sevā*. Furthermore, the focus is on how *sevā* has pragmatically affected India; there are attempts to answer the question of how *sevā* is performed rather than why it is performed. Nonetheless, although the focus of this thesis is on the rationale behind *sevā*, this book at least provides an additional perspective on what can qualify as *sevā*. Here, *sevā* is volunteering to perform social service.

The second important question that was mentioned at the very beginning of this chapter is why has *bhakti* not been made a focus in exploring the concept of *sevā*? With

the amount of material available, both in textual and lived emanations, it is quiet perplexing that little scholarship has been produced on the performance of *sevā* in *bhakti* traditions. Perhaps one of the most straightforward responses to this oddity, is that the academic study of Hinduism tends to progress according to certain trends and interests of the constantly evolving world around it. What this means, simply, is scholarship tends to broach new research areas and topics as they emerge. Historically, this has been applicable to western academic study of religion as a whole. From the 19th century onto the mid-20th century, for example, the inquiry into the concept of religion drew the interest of scholars from multiple disciplines ranging from psychology to history; it probably also led to the emergence of arguably the first major figure in the separate discipline of religious studies, Mircea Eliade. The same sort of pattern can be seen within the Hindu Studies academic circle. During the early 1990s, Hindu nationalist groups drew upon the idea that Hindus are the true and authentic Indians. Along this vein, these nationalists group incited violent riots and acts against those that fell outside their own definition of what constitutes Hinduism. At that time, a slew of articles appeared that attempted to explicate the nationalist conception of Hinduism and the validity of such a conception.⁶¹ Similarly, during the latter 1990s and early 2000s, new questions began to arise regarding the place of emic and etic scholars in the study of Hinduism. Certain individuals, such as S.N. Balagangadhara, went so far as to question whether the categories of religion and Hinduism were actually applicable to South Asia or just a misappropriation by the West.⁶² A number of scholars discussed this issue through a number of articles in the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* in

⁶¹ See the *Wilson Quarterly* Summer 1991, Vol. 15 Issue 3.

⁶² Sarah Caldwell and Brian Smith, "Introduction: Who Speaks for Hinduism," *JAAR* 68 (2000): 707.

2000. Thus, perhaps the recent increased emphasis on scholarship pertaining to *bhakti* movements is indicative of a forthcoming study of *sevā* in *bhakti* traditions. *Bhakti* movements and groups that are involved in *sevā*, such as the Sai Movement and the Mata Amritananda Mission, are garnering increased interest. It seems that it is merely a matter of time before scholars isolate the *sevā* performance undertaken by these global movements and analytically approach and study them.

CHAPTER 3
SEVĀ AND SĀDHANĀ: A DELINEATION

An Alternate Approach

Having shown the relative lack of scholarship regarding *sevā* in the bhakti movements, this chapter will sift through the different conceptualizations of *sevā* and *sāadhanā*. As a precursor, it is important to note that the suggestion that it is necessary to delineate the types of *sevā* and *sāadhanā* implies there is a natural implication that both terms are not monolithic; there are different understandings of each. As it stands now, there is not much scholarly material that has attempted to create a typology of *sevā*. When scholars have taken up study of *sevā*, it has largely been contextualized according to the particular Hindu group that is being studied.¹ In these case studies, *sevā* is generically translated as “selfless service” or “service to humanity”.² This works well for this study, of course, as the focus will eventually turn to how particular groups perform *sevā* and on what basis the *sevā* is performed. Although this will be the objective of the subsequent chapter in this thesis, the current focus is to delineate some of the different ways *sevā* has been understood by different “Hindu” movements.³ *Sāadhanā* has also been understood in numerous ways. One interpretation has been as

¹ See Gwilym Beckerlegge’s work on the Ramakrishna Mission, Maya Warriar’s work on the Mata Amritanandamayi Mission, and Peter Bennett’s work on the Pushti Marg.

² Gwilym Beckerlegge, “Swami Vivekananda and *Seva*: Taking ‘Social Service’ Seriously,” in *Swami Vivekananda and the Modernization of Hinduism*, ed. William Radice (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 158; Maya Warriar, *Hindu Selves in a Modern World: Guru Faith in the Mata Amritanandamayi Mission* (New York: Routledge Curzon Press, 2005), 7.

³ I put Hindu in quotation marks not because of the obscurity surrounding the validity of the term, but because one group covered in this chapter utilizes it quite differently from the others.

disciplined action that new initiates abide by after taking *dikṣā*.⁴ Here, *sādhana*, as mentioned in the introduction, will be understood as a means to attain spiritual gains that can culminate in *mokṣha*, a definition also elucidated in Peter Bennett's study of the Pushti Marga.⁵ At the same time, it must be kept in mind that this purview of *sevā* and *sādhana* is a limited one; a more comprehensive analysis is more suitable for a bigger project. At the very least, it must be noted that there are differences in interpreting these concepts even amongst Hindu *bhakti* movements. The idea of *sādhana* in the Sri Vaisnava tradition, for example, elicits *prāpatti* and *bhakti* as the two essential elements for liberation. *Prāpatti*, or self-surrender, requires a feeling of absolute dependence on God.⁶ Then, through the grace of God, the surrendered individual is viable to attain liberation. Through self-surrender to God, the devotee is able to attain God and escape the cycle of rebirth.⁷ Thus, there remains a varied understanding of the concepts covered here.

Prior to moving forth with a further delineation, however, a clear and concise framework needs to be provided that will organize the chapter. Conceived as a combination of layers, this chapter is comprised of three main strata. The outermost layer is a binary that considers and differentiates the two specific types of *sevā* known as either *arcana*, devotion towards sacred images of a deity, or social service, used in the sense of physically aiding living beings. Additional conceptions of *sevā*, such as the

⁴ Kenneth Russell Valpey, *Attending Kṛṣṇa's Image: Caitanya Vaisnava Murti-Seva as Devotional Truth* (London: Routledge, 2006), 19.

⁵ Peter Bennett, *The Path of Grace: Social Organization and Temple Worship in a Vaisnava Sect* (Delhi: Hindustan Publishing, 1993), 68.

⁶ Dr. N.S. Anantharangachar, *The Philosophy of Sadhana in Visistadvaita* (University of Mysore: Prasaraṅga Publishing, 1967), 198.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 199.

Srivaishnava practice of chanting and the internal *sevā* amidst different movements, will also be covered in brief. The middle layer will look at particular case studies that perform at least one of these types of *sevā* to discern what kind of activities are performed, the rationale behind such performance, and the extent or range of individuals that receive the benefits of such work. Specifically, the first part of the chapter will look at the place of *arcana* in the Vaisnava tradition, ISKCON movement, and Pushti Mārga. The second part will look at one *Advaita* movement⁸, the Ramakrishna Mission, one nationalist group, the RSS, and two *bhakti sampradāyas*, the Sai movement and Mata Amritanandamayi Mission to understand the place of *sevā* as social service amongst these organizations. The innermost layer will then revisit the *arcana* and *sevā* as service binary to determine what the relationship between the two is. It will be hypothesized that specific factors, namely *sādhanā* stemming from both scriptural and figural authority within the movements, are critical in transforming seemingly mundane acts of social service into *sevā*. Due to this transformation, both *arcana* and service seem to provide the same end results to the performer. In this sense, if *arcana* can be considered both *sevā* and *bhakti*, so too can social service, provided that it is qualified in certain ways.

The objectives of this chapter, based on this framework, are seven in number. First, there will be an analysis of the practice of *arcana*, including a glance at particular groups that apply the practice. Second, there will be a general overview of the different groups that perform *sevā* as social service. Subsequently, there will be a refined focus on *sevā* as social service within the *bhakti* traditions. This will help to show that there is

⁸ This relies solely on internal self-identification because it is not the focus here to decipher how the Ramakrishna Mission has abided by or altered traditional *Advaita* beliefs.

diversity even amongst *bhakti* movements in how different types of *sevā* are conceptualized. Fourth, a connection will be drawn between the *sevā* of *bhakti* groups and the concept of *sāadhanā*.⁹ Fifth, an overview of some of the idiosyncrasies of *sevā* as social service and *sevā* as *arcana* will be given. Next, a brief interlude into both the *Srivaishnava* conception of *sevā* and internal *sevā* will show that there are forms of *sevā* outside the *arcana* and *sevā* as social service binary. Finally, a case will be made that *arcana* and *sevā* as social service can be conceptualized in a similar manner because of the transformative power of *sāadhanā*.

Arcana as Sevā

The practice of *arcana*, or service to the material image of the divine, is an important one in the Hindu *bhakti* movements. It is one part of *nāvdhabhakti*, the nine types of *bhakti*, described in the *Bhāgavata Purāna*. In the *Srivaishnava* tradition, the *arca* form, or *murti*, of Visnu is the most important of the five types of manifestations because of its accessibility as an object towards which to direct devotion.¹⁰ Understood to be one of the five manifestations of Visnu, the *arca* form is not held by followers to be a mere symbolic representation of the divine. Rather, despite being carved out of worldly materials and represented in a mundane form, the *murti* is accepted as a full manifestation of Visnu. As such, the image is held to be constituted of *suddha-satva*, an element of such purity that it cannot be found anywhere on earth. In fact it is believed

⁹ This term will also be utilized in discussing the Ramakrishna Mission and RSS.

¹⁰ Vasudha Narayanan, "Arcavatara: On Earth as He is in Heaven," in *Gods of Flesh, Gods of Stone: the Embodiment of Divinity in India*, ed. Joanne Waghorne and Norman Cutler (New York: Columbia Press, 1985), 54.

that this is the same material that constitutes the body of the divine in its heavenly realm.¹¹ The *arca* form is thus viable to be worshipped as God.

The two crucial elements of *arcana* include developing deep emotion or tenderness for the sacred image and abiding by a strictly regulated worship routine for its service. These two elements aid the follower in engaging with the *murti* with both emotional and physical propriety. For example, in the Sri Caitanya Vaisnava tradition, an ideal follower is one who is able to develop both *vaidhi-bhakti*, routine practice of devotional worship, and *rāga-bhakti*, emotive attraction.¹² Both of these practices are considered forms of *sāadhanā* within the tradition; *vaidhi-bhakti* is dependent upon the instructions provided in internally accepted textual sources, such as the *Bhāgavata Purana* and *Haribhaktivilāsa*, and *rāga-bhakti* is based upon the presence of a paradigmatic figure that has already achieved complete attachment to Kṛṣṇa and can lead practitioners to develop their affection for the image.¹³ In the Caitanya tradition, one such figure is believed to be Caitanya himself. Thus, the life of Caitanya is studied and mimicked in an attempt to attain communion with Kṛṣṇa.

The *vaidhi-bhakti*, known alternately as *nitya-sevā* in the Pushti Mārga, sets forth a lucid and rigid regimen that must be followed very closely during daily devotional services offered to the *murti*. Information regarding these procedures can be found primarily in the *Pancarātra* literature. Peter Bennett notes the daily schedule of the temple priests of the Pushti Mārga in Ujjain as being particularly scrupulous and time consuming. Although the practices there vary according to seasons, days start, at latest,

¹¹ Ibid., 61.

¹² Valpey, *Attending Kṛṣṇa's Image: Caitanya Vaisnava Murti-Seva as Devotional Truth*, 10.

¹³ Ibid., 31

at five in the morning and can stretch until nine at night. During this time period, several meticulous rituals are undertaken by the priest. For example, during the last ritual period of the day known as *shayan*, the priest's schedule begins with making the second full meal of the day for the *murti*. After serving this meal, the priest engages in the *ārati* ceremony. This *ārati* is different, however, as it must take into account that as night falls, Kṛṣṇa becomes drowsy; as a result, the bell cannot be rung too loudly as it might awaken him. Night clothes are used according to the season, with warmer material being designated for the winters. Finally, *pān*, a mouth refreshing condiment, water, and some sweets are left to satisfy the needs of Kṛṣṇa should he become hungry during the night.¹⁴ Thus, each part of the day corresponds to particular rituals that are dedicated to serving the *murti*.

Alongside this *vaidhi-bhakti* is the *rāga-bhakti*. In the Caitanya tradition, the life of Caitanya is utilized as a model of perfect emotional attraction to Kṛṣṇa. For example, Caitanya is noted, in the *Caitanya Caritāmṛta*, as attentively listening to the recitation of the *Bhāgavata Purana* and reveling in the descriptions provided of Kṛṣṇa and his devotees.¹⁵ Additionally, there are numerous references to Caitanya exuberantly engaging in festivals at Jagannāthpuri by dancing, singing, and eating *prasāda*.¹⁶ These examples serve as guides unto how *rāga-bhakti* can be undertaken and developed by devotees.

Taken together, both forms of *sevā* are directed towards the *murti* and are eventually qualified as *mādhurya-bhāva*, the sweetness of emotional devotion. This,

¹⁴ Bennett, *The Path of Grace: Social Organization and Temple Worship in a Vaisnava Sect*, 107.

¹⁵ Valpey, *Attending Kṛṣṇa's Image: Caitanya Vaisnava Murti-Sevā as Devotional Truth*, 31.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 32.

according to the Caitanya tradition, is the goal that is sought through *sāadhanā*. It is the highest attainment. As such it can often be without the strict ritual regimen that characterizes *vaidhi-bhakti*. It is complete surrender and absorption in God. Thus, the Gopis, although disregarding all social norms in interacting with Sri Kṛṣṇa, are understood to have engaged in *mādhurya-bhāva* because of the profound devotion they displayed. The counterpart in the Puṣṭi Mārga is *mānasik-sevā*, the mental service of God. This type of service, above physical and monetary offerings, is based upon the sentiment of absolute loving concern for Kṛṣṇa.¹⁷ In this process, there is a relational binary that is invoked between the devotee and the *murti*. The devotee is always, in the Caitanya tradition, the *sevak* or *dāsa*, a servant. The *murti* towards which the devotion is directed is held to be the *mālik*, or master.¹⁸ In such a relationship, the *sevak* dedicates and surrenders himself fully to God. In the *Srivaishnava* tradition there is bit of variation from this. The relationship of *sevak* to *mālik* is seen as one of the numerous ways in which the devotee interacts with the divine. Furthermore, the attainment of *mādhurya* is accepted as one legitimate means to God; there are others that are just as legitimate. Thus, *mādhurya* in the *Srivaishnava* tradition is not a culmination as much as an alternative means. Through *arcana*, this sense of surrender is exemplified by the dedicated service that is emotionally and physically offered to the *murti*. Eventually such sustained service, if done according to prescribed *sāadhanā*, can lead to the transformation of the *sevak* and the attainment of a heightened spiritual status. Yet, the performance of *arcana* is not necessarily done with spiritual transformation or status in

¹⁷ Bennett, *The Path of Grace: Social Organization and Temple Worship in a Vaisnava Sect*, 69.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 70.

mind. For some, service of the *arca* is an end in itself. Heightened spiritual status does, however, remain a possible outcome for the performer.

This status indicates the great spiritual advancement of the devotee. His devotion to the *murti* becomes a way to this advanced status. Yet, this relationship between the devotee and God is not temporally constrained; having attained an advanced spiritual status, the devotee desires nothing more than to continuously engage in devotion. His end reward is an uninterrupted opportunity to continually worship Nārāyana. In this way, *arcana* remains a practice that is performed on earth and in heaven; it is a means towards God and is also an end result or reward.¹⁹

To reiterate, *arcana* is a type of *bhakti* that is commonly described as performing *sevā* to a *murti* of God. This *murti* is understood to be the complete manifest form of God; it is not a mere representation. Furthermore, the devotee, also known as a *sevak*, serves the *murti* according to prescribed textual procedures and develops a keen sense of attachment and love for God. This sense of attachment can often be learned from a *guru* that has already attained such a status. As such, both of these practices qualify as types of *sādhana*-based *sevā* that can lead to eventual self-transformation of the individual and liberation from the rebirth cycle. It must be noted, however, that such spiritual gains are not the motivation for *arcana*. Instead, the devotee serves with the intention of only obtaining eternal service of God.

Social Service as *Sevā*

The second type of *sevā* explored here, social service, is a relatively novel subject of inquiry compared to *arcana*. As such, as evidenced by the previous chapter, it

¹⁹ Narayanan, "Arcavatara: On Earth as He is in Heaven", 63; Bennett, *The Path of Grace: Social Organization and Temple Worship in a Vaisnava Sect*, 73; Valpey, *Attending Krsna's Image: Caitanya Vaisnava Murti-Sevā as Devotional Truth*, 31.

has garnered substantial criticism as an inauthentic Hindu practice. Nonetheless, more recent scholarship has started to re-analyze these very scholarly criticisms and reject them in part.²⁰ Gwilym Beckerlegge, for example, presents the case that the idea of charity is thoroughly present in ancient Hinduism. References to charity, known as *dāna*, are replete in numerous Hindu texts. These texts expand upon who is fit and expected to engage in charity, what should be given in charity, and what is gained through charitable action.²¹ For example, there were three basic types of *dāna*: *nitya*, that which is given daily, *naimittika*, that given at specified times such as eclipses, and *kāmya*, that which is given in the desire of securing a gain.²² The charity that is most highly eulogized is the donation of land, a practice commonly undertaken by kings from ancient times in India.²³ Over time, this idea was expanded into organized social service and can be historically found in Hindu groups without explicit indication of western influence. The study of the Swāminārāyan movement, for example, has shown little indication that the movement's commitment to *sevā* can be traced back to anything other than Vaisnava *bhakti* roots.²⁴ Yet, the purpose in covering these organizations that heavily take part in *sevā* as social service is not to uncover the origins of such a practice. Rather, it is to decipher the underlying theologies, although they may not be internally understood as such by groups like the RSS, behind these practices and how these conceptualizations served to qualitatively separate *sevā* as social service from the

²⁰ For example, see Gwilym Beckerlegge's "Swami Vivekananda and *Seva*: Taking 'Social Service' Seriously".

²¹ P.V. Kane, *History of the Dharmasastra*, Vol 2, Pt. 2 (Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1974), 841-847.

²² *Ibid.*, 848.

²³ *Ibid.*, 858.

²⁴ Gwilym Beckerlegge, "Swami Vivekananda and *Seva*: Taking 'Social Service' Seriously," 189.

primarily secular practice of social service. In doing so, there will emerge certain similarities and differences between *arcana* and *sevā* as social service. These will be highlighted at the end of this section.

Sevā in the Ramakrishna Mission

“Thus service done as worship of God in man helps in two ways: it helps physically or mentally the person who is *served*, and it helps spiritually the person *who serves*.”²⁵This, according to the official Ramakrishna Mission website, is the foreseeable outcome of performing social service as *sevā*. Founded upon the idea of *sevā* being prescribed as a *sādhana* by Ramakrishna, the Ramakrishna Mission has expanded from its founding by Swami Vivekananda near the end of the 19th century, and today boasts a sizeable reach in terms of its service projects. Here, some of the activities will be described and the process of reaching spiritual ends will be closely analyzed. Additionally, further explanation will be given as to how spiritual progression is envisioned and qualified in the Ramakrishna Mission. These findings will reflect the insider perspective as the scholarly one has already been provided in the previous chapter. An epitome of this scholarly perspective, so that it may serve as a reference point from which the insider perspective may be contrasted, is that the *sevā* ideology of the Ramakrishna Mission is not seen as a direct continuation of the teachings of Ramakrishna. Yet, a strong possibility exists that Vivekananda roughly conceptualized the ideology *prior* to his interaction with the west and consolidated it after his visit to the United States in 1893. As such, although the *sevā* ideology can be seen as at least

²⁵ Ramakrishna Mission, “Ideology of Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission,” Ramakrishna Mission, <http://belurmath.org/Ideology.htm> (accessed August 29, 2012).

partially indigenous, it does not seem to espouse the teachings of Ramakrishna, thus disqualifying it as a direct *sāadhanā* from Ramakrishna to Vivekananda.

The Ramakrishna Mission began to keep public online records of its social services beginning in 2004. At that time, it had divvied its services into five separate subcategories: medicine, education, women's welfare, youth welfare, and tribal/rural aid. Although these records are a bit dated, the *sevā* numbers are still substantial. According to the Mission website, there were over 80,000 patients treated at the Mission's fifteen hospitals in 2004; an additional 2,000,000 patients were treated as outpatients.²⁶ In education, the Mission was able to provide facilities for over 200,000 people, some being dedicated specifically to tribal areas. There is also mention of the disaster relief work that the Mission took part in, with some instances including the tsunami relief in Sri Lanka and the cyclone relief in Cooch Behar.²⁷ The numbers from the past year show that the Mission has vastly increased its activities far beyond the already considerable levels of 2004. In 2011, reports indicate that over 100,000 patients were treated as inpatients in the Mission's hospitals and an astounding 8,000,000 as outpatients. Educational opportunities provided for students had also greatly increased, as, reportedly, 3,000,000 students utilized the educational offerings of the Mission; of these at least 13,000 were tribal children.²⁸ Even prior to delving into the *sevā* ideology, there is little doubt that the Ramakrishna Mission is heavily involved in social service

²⁶ Ramakrishna Mission, "Activities of Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission," Ramakrishna Mission, <http://belurmath.org/activities2004-2005.htm> (accessed August 29, 2012).

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ramakrishna Mission, "Activities of Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission," Ramakrishna Mission, <http://belurmath.org/activities.htm> (accessed August 29, 2012).

activities. The question that remains, however, is how does the movement qualify its social service activities as *sevā*? Also, what is the rationale for such *sevā*?

A clear progression of the Ramakrishna Mission's understanding of *sevā* can be traced over time. The official website succinctly gives the current rationale behind *sevā* and the expected results as such:

- a) According to Vedanta, the physical universe is a manifestation of God known as Virat. Hence, as Sister Nivedita has stated, there is 'no distinction between the sacred and the secular'. What this statement means is that all work is sacred. Even menial work such as sweeping the floor or mending shoes is to be done with as much attention and devotion as work in the shrine.
- b) The Gita (18.46 & 9.24) states that the all-pervading God is the ultimate source of all work and the enjoyer of the fruits of all sacrifice. Hence all work is to be done as worship and the fruits of actions are to be offered to the Lord.
- c) One of the important principles Swami Vivekananda learned from his Master was Shiva Jnane Jiva Seva, 'to serve Jiva as Shiva'. Since man is potentially Divine, service to man is indeed service to God. Instead of looking upon a needy person as an object of pity, he is looked upon as an object of worship. Such an attitude elevates both the giver and the recipient.
- d) Swami Vivekananda was the first religious leader in India to speak for the poor and the downtrodden and to state boldly, 'He who sees Shiva in the poor, in the weak and the diseased, really worships Shiva; and ... with him Shiva is more pleased than with the man who sees Him only in temples.' It was Swamiji who coined the word *daridra-narayana* to refer to the poor. Swamiji's love and concern for the poor continues as a directive principle in Ramakrishna Mission's service programmes.
- e) When work, any work, is done fulfilling the above conditions, it becomes a spiritual discipline: the mind gets purified and the potential Divinity of the soul manifests itself more and more. Thus work done as worshipful service benefits the doer himself spiritually: it becomes a spiritual discipline or Yoga. It is with this understanding of work as a spiritual discipline (Karma Yoga) that all the service activities of the Ramakrishna Mission, such as giving food and clothing to the poor, nursing the sick etc, are undertaken. Thus service done as worship of God in man helps in two ways: it helps

physically or mentally the person who is served, and it helps spiritually the person who serves.²⁹

Here, it is obvious that there is a complex inner dynamic in this response. First, there is a connection drawn to pan-Hindu philosophical traditions and scriptures. Second, because Ramakrishna is held by the Ramakrishna Mission to be an *avatara*, a connection is drawn between the sayings and teachings of Ramakrishna and the teachings of Vedanta and the Bhagavad Gita. Next, it segues to Vivekananda's role in implementing these teachings into the Mission's activities. Together, there emerges a *sevā* ideology that is linked closely to *sāadhanā* prescribed by both scripture and spiritual leader. This is an explicit attempt to show a profound precedent for *sevā* that has been taken up and carried out by Ramakrishna and successive Mission leaders. This ideology, according to Western scholars, came about slowly over time and culminated into what it is today only several decades after Vivekananda's death.³⁰ Here, however, there will be no focus on how Ramakrishna synthesized the teachings of several philosophical schools or whether Vivekananda appropriated or reconstructed Ramakrishna's teachings. Instead, what will be analyzed is whether and how the ideology informing activities today were initially envisioned and expounded by Vivekananda. This will serve to show what the progression has been from these initial thoughts and actions of Vivekananda to the exponential increase in *sevā* that the Ramakrishna Mission engages in today.

The earliest evidence of the *sevā-sāadhanā* ideology is seen in the compiled talks of Swami Vivekananda. The *Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda* gives clues to

²⁹ Ramakrishna Mission, "Ideology of Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission," Ramakrishna Mission, <http://belurmath.org/Ideology.htm> (accessed August 29, 2012).

³⁰ Gwilym Beckerlegge, "Swami Vivekananda and Seva: Taking 'Social Service' Seriously," 174.

how Vivekananda initially understood the eventual place *sevā* would have in his movement. At the crux were both *karma-yoga* and unity between all living beings and the divine. This latter principle comes up in Vivekananda's 1896 lecture in London. He mentioned that each living being is pure and part of the almighty; as such all are of the same divine substance.³¹ The former principle is found in his speeches as early as 1893, during Vivekananda's first visit to the United States. During a series of lectures, Vivekananda explained the concept of *karma-yoga* and provided his own practical implications of the ideal. Initially, Vivekananda propounded that the performance of the actual action had a gradation of results. Engaging in service and helping an individual or a group does not constitute the greatest outcome. Rather, it is the ability of the performer to improve their own spiritual self and move towards perfection that is the true fruit of helping others. By itself, social service is merely a moral exercise.³² Guided by *sādhana*, however, it has a transformative power.

This is what he was able to eventually impress upon his fellow disciples of Ramakrishna. In essence, he told them that it wasn't just personal *bhakti* and detachment that would be able to grant liberation; service to others combined with a *correct understanding* could prove just as effective. His rationale in supporting this idea, however, was multi-faceted. In one instance, he wrote a letter to follower Alasinga Perumal in 1894 and implored him to work to organize large scale service with the

³¹ Swami Vivekananda, "Practical Vedanta Part I," in *Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Vol. 2 (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1959-1964).

³² Swami Vivekananda, "We help ourselves, not the world," in *Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Vol. 1, Ch.5 (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1959-1964).

understanding that he was performing *guru-bhakti*.³³ Here, Vivekananda asked Alasinga to perform service with the understanding that it is Vivekananda, Alasinga's *guru*, who is demanding action. In the same year, Vivekananda used quite a different rationale in a letter to Swami Ramakrishnananda, an ascetic disciple of Ramakrishna. In this correspondence, he wrote that it was the explicit wish of Ramakrishna that the poor and needy were taken care of and nursed.³⁴ Thus, he called, numerous times in other letters, for young, educated, and dedicated men to be found and organized together to help the poor and spread knowledge for enlightenment.³⁵ He made such a claim based on his understanding and conceptualization of Ramakrishna. This conceptualization was two-fold. First, Vivekananda held Ramakrishna to be an *avatāra* of the divine. As such, Ramakrishna was viable as an object of service and devotion.³⁶ Furthermore, Ramakrishna was also held as an authoritative source from which to draw spiritual directives. It becomes quite apparent, then, why Vivekananda saw it as vital to connect his interest in uplifting those in need and the teachings of Ramakrishna. This would elevate the work done above mere social service; it would become a *sāadhanā*-based *sevā* as elicited by Ramakrishna. If the recent *sevā* numbers reported by the Ramakrishna are any indication, the *sevā-sāadhanā* ideology has held irrefutable staying power and has successfully inspired many to serve.

³³ Swami Vivekananda, "Correspondence with Asalinga," in *Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Vol. 5, First Series of Epistles (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1959-1964).

³⁴ Swami Vivekananda, "Correspondence with Swami Ramakrishnananda," in *Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Vol. 6, Second Series of Epistles (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1959-1964).

³⁵ Swami Vivekananda, "Correspondence with Asalinga," in *Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Vol. 5, First Series of Epistles (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1959-1964).

³⁶ Swami Vivekananda, *Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Vol. 7 (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1959-1964).

This ideology, thus, has its underpinnings in Vivekananda's interpretation of Ramakrishna's teachings. Vivekananda, due to his understanding of Ramakrishna as an *avatāra*, took sparse utterings and actions from Ramakrishna's life that supported social service and took these to be a *sādhanā* from his *guru*. The result was that social service came to be understood as leading to the same outcome as personal *bhakti*: complete liberation.³⁷

Service to Hindus: The Conception of *Sevā* in the RSS

On *Vijaya Dashami* of September 1925, Dr. Keshav Baliram Hedgewar founded the *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangha* (RSS) in Nagpur. Hedgewar had long been an activist in the Indian independence movement.³⁸ He had several influential experiences prior to his formation of the RSS that were, or are at least portrayed as such by the movement today, vital to his ideology of social activism. One of these is the incident from the 1913 flood in Kolkata, during which Hedgewar joined members of the Ramakrishna Mission to provide aid to the afflicted.³⁹ Another anecdote comes from his years spent in Kolkata, during the early 1900s, helping control crowds during the Gangasagar Mela.⁴⁰ These incidents would later serve as the springboard for the *sevā* initiative that developed in the RSS. In fact, the biography of Hedgewar, *Dr. Hedgewar the Epoch Maker*, speaks at length about Hedgewar's early involvement in protecting Hindus from Muslim attacks. It also mentions Hedgewar's commitment to physical

³⁷ Swami Vivekananda, "Letter to Ascetic Disciples," in *Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Vol. 6, Second Series of Epistles (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1959-1964).

³⁸ Des Raj Goyal, *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (New Delhi: Radhakrishna Prakashan, 1979), 21.

³⁹ Gwilym Beckerlegge, "The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh's 'Tradition of Selfless Service,'" in *The Politics of Cultural Mobilization in India*, ed. John Zavos, Andrew Wyatt, Vernon Hewitt (New Delhi: Oxford Press, 2004), 107.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 107.

conditioning and pride for India, both highly emphasized elements of the RSS movement today.⁴¹

In spite of his heavy involvement in the Indian independence movement, Hedgewar broke away in the mid-1920s to form the RSS. It seems that one of the major reasons that Hedgewar broke away from the main movement was because of the emergence of Mahatma Gandhi as the dominant leader; Hedgewar was not supportive of the pacifist strategies that Gandhi preferred to employ. In effect, Hedgewar disagreed with Gandhi's interpretation of *swarāj*, or self-rule. For Hedgewar, *swarāj* could not be extended to Muslims; it was applicable only to the Hindus. *Swarāj* came to represent the unity and freedom of the Hindus that lived in India.⁴² This idea is thought to have come from V.D. Savarkar, who although never a member of the RSS, was thought to have deeply influenced Hedgewar through his book *Hindutva/Who is a Hindu?*. The delineation of who Hedgewar took to fall under the term "Hindu" is drawn from this book. Specifically, Savarkar refers to the concepts of *pitribhum* and *punjabhum*.⁴³ Both concepts call for inhabitants of India to identify the country as foundation of cultural and religious identity. This identification excludes Muslims and Christians because of the religious connections to differing geographic locations. Similar strands of reasoning are found in M.S. Golwalkar's work *We, Or Our Nationhood Defined*. Golwalkar even openly

⁴¹ B.V. Deshpande and S.R. Ramaswamy, *Dr. Hedgewar the Epoch Maker* (Bangalore: Sahitya Sindhu, 1981), 20.

⁴² Goyal, *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh*, 40.

⁴³ John Zavos, "The Shapes of Hindu Nationalism," in *Coalition Politics and Hindu Nationalism*, ed. Katharine Adeney and Lawrence Saez (New York: Routledge Press, 2005), 41.

admitted to using both V.D. Savarkar and G.D. Savarkar's ideas, claiming that both thinkers had presented scientific arguments that could withstand repudiation.⁴⁴

How is it, then, that these two seemingly unrelated facets helped to form the RSS ideology of *sevā*? On one hand, there were the early experiences of Hedgewar involving what was deemed the service of the mother country. His involvement had helped to develop a system of service that advocated heavy involvement and vigor. On the other hand, there is an espousing of anti-Muslim and anti-Christian rhetoric, even if Muslims and Christians are long-time residents of India. Combined together, there emerges a unique ideology of *sevā* that will be looked at here in two different ways. First, the insider perspective will be considered using the writings of and about former RSS leaders, the RSS website, and the recent *sewa* publications offered digitally by the RSS.⁴⁵ Second, scholarly analyses of RSS *sevā* will be offered to show points of divide and solidarity between the two perspectives.

The insider perspective holds surprising transparency in some aspects and troubling opacity in others. What the RSS does is actually quite clear; it is very active in the performance of what is internally held to be *sevā*. Attempting to answer why the movement performs these activities, however, leaves us with a rationale fraught with ambivalence. Prior to delving into internal ideology, however, a brief overview of the activities undertaken is in order.

The main webpage (rssonnet.org) has a special section dedicated to the social activities that are performed by the group. Labeled *Rashtriya Sevā Marathi*, the section provides a number of internal publications that attest to the expansive influence of the

⁴⁴ Goyal, *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh*, 80.

⁴⁵ The RSS publications choose to utilize “sewa” as opposed to “sevā”.

group in India. To give a general idea of the activities said to be conducted, the 2007 magazine publication titled *Sewa Sadhana* reported over 95,000 activities conducted by the RSS, and affiliate groups, up to that point.⁴⁶ Just two years later, a new edition of the magazine documented that number at an impressive 151,979 activities.⁴⁷ These numbers, presuming that there is no sense of inflation, are quite high. One reason for this is that the activities have no set criteria for what can actually successfully constitute an activity. In essence, an activity could be rendering aid, be it educational, social, medical, or other, to a single person. Additionally, the number of volunteers undertaking an activity could amount to a mere handful; this too would constitute enough for an activity. Going beyond the numbers, one finds that these magazines provide copious examples of the service being undertaken by the RSS. For example, the first article in the 2007 edition introduces the work undertaken by members of the Sewa Bharati amidst a number of homeless children around the Jhandewala Mata Mandir in Delhi. These children are taken in by the volunteers as part of the Kunj Behari Project. The project centered on ridding the young children of habits they had developed living on the streets, such as chewing tobacco, stealing money, and gambling.⁴⁸ This project is quite paradigmatic of the central focus groups of the RSS: children and women. Of the activities reported in the *Sewa Sadhana* magazine, more than two-thirds of them fall under the categories of “social” and “education”. What is quite clear is both that the RSS is heavily involved in social service and that this service is understood as a *sevā*. How it qualifies as such, however, is much more difficult to discern.

⁴⁶ Surya Prakash Tonk, “Service Activities at a Glance,” *Sewa Sadhana* 1(2007): 6.

⁴⁷ Suhasrao Hiremath, “Service Activities at a Glance,” *Sewa Sadhana* 4(2009): 8.

⁴⁸ Tonk, “Service Activities at a Glance, 5.

At the foundation of the *sevā* ideology of the RSS is the concept of *sāadhanā*. This *sāadhanā*, however, is quite different from the explication of the concept above. It seems that *sāadhanā*, here, is based according to the main constituent of historical precedent. It is internally held that there is an existing precedent of *sevā* that can be found in Hinduism.⁴⁹ Figures such as Vivekananda are looked to as predecessors who have paved a path for the performance of service. These predecessors are said to embody the Indian ideal of society as an extension of the divine.⁵⁰ This line of thinking is important for two reasons. First, it illuminates the equation of Indian and Hindu that is fundamental to the RSS. Although there are numerous instances in Golwalkar's book that explicitly deny that the RSS utilizes "Hindu" in a religious manner, there is little evidence that can buttress this statement. Golwalkar defines "Hindu" as unflagging loyalty to the Indian land and culture. Yet, this concept of culture is thoroughly embedded in Hinduism. For example, the introduction to *Bunch of Thoughts* mentions that all those loyal to India should live by the concept of *dharma*. In doing so, people should look to the Hindu paradigms, such as Rama and Krishna, of *dharma* as sources of inspiration.⁵¹ Thus although the RSS attempts to shed the communalist tag that it is commonly designated, there does not seem to be much of an espousing of the freedom of religion that the RSS publicly posits. Second, it is accepted within the RSS that Dr. Hedgewar merely reinstated the historical practice of *sevā* that had long been practiced

⁴⁹ RSS is heavily ambiguous in its usage of cultural, historical, and religious markers. This is what makes it particularly difficult to understand what is meant by the usage of "Hindu". At times this appellation can include Jains, Sikhs, and even Muslims. At others, however, it relates directly back to Hindu deities, scriptures and observances.

⁵⁰ M.S. Golwalkar, *Bunch of Thoughts* (Vikrama Prakashan, 1966), 166.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 9.

in India. As such, Hedgewar became a model figure alongside others such as Vivekananda, Ram Mohan Roy, and Gandhi.⁵² Thus, in addition to alluding to previous figures that had instituted a form of social service, Dr. Hedgewar also becomes a legitimate source to initiate *sevā* in the RSS. His commitment to *sevā* becomes the basis for subsequent commitment to *sevā* by the RSS.

The scholarly interpretation of the *sevā* ideology found within the RSS is, expectedly, quite different. Whereas the insider perspective has presented *sevā* as a continuation of a Hindu paradigm by Keshav Hedgewar and subsequent *sarsangchalaks*, the scholarly position heavily repudiates any notion of unhitched continuity and instead suggests a dynamic adaptation of the ideology that reflected the changing political and social milieus of an independent India.⁵³ Additionally, scholars, although in particular Gwilym Beckerlegge, have made a connection between the Ramakrishna Mission and the RSS *sevā* ideologies; it seems as if the former heavily influenced the latter. The basis of such assertions will be analyzed here.

The first act of *sevā* undertaken by the RSS occurred in 1926 during the Ram-Navmi festival in Ramtek. The main objectives of Sangh members were to engage in crowd control by managing the lines of people, providing water, and overseeing commercial activities.⁵⁴ This role mirrored the one that Hedgewar undertook during the Gangasagar Melas in Kolkata. John Zavos remarks that the performance lacked the communalism facet that has come to characterize the activities undertaken by the

⁵² Ibid., 6.

⁵³ Gwilym Beckerlegge, "The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh's 'Tradition of Selfless Service'", 107-108.

⁵⁴ John Zavos, *The Emergence of Hindu Nationalism in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003), 184-185.

RSS.⁵⁵ During the following year, RSS members took on a similar role in protecting Hindus during violent outbreaks in Nagpur. Beckerlegge agrees with Zavos' assertion and goes on to qualify the early *sevā* activities of the RSS as primarily policing roles.⁵⁶ These roles complemented the early mindset of Hedgewar to build the character of young Hindus so that the feelings of apathy that he had perceived during his earlier experiences could be overcome. Accordingly, Hedgewar pointedly declined to be affiliated with any political group; this was a decision that initially led to some RSS officials leaving the movement. Undaunted by this result, Hedgewar focused on implanting national pride in the young boys and teenagers that were the earliest volunteers in the group. These boys, ranging primarily in ages 12-15, took part in numerous physical activities, such as swimming, and mental activities, such as listening to stories of Hindu "heroes" such as King Shivaji, whilst keeping close contact with Hedgewar.⁵⁷ By 1927, volunteers were learning to use weapons such as swords, javelins, and daggers. Lectures were also given highlighting the futility of Gandhi's *Satyagraha* approach and the incompatibility of the Hindu nation and non-Hindus.⁵⁸ Yet, it is clear that Hedgewar's programs have little similarity to the activities that began to develop after his demise or those that are described in recent RSS publications. His programs had little formal structure and seemed to be in line with preventative or protective measures as opposed to active social service. This is the primary reason that

⁵⁵ Ibid., 185.

⁵⁶ Beckerlegge, "The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh's 'Tradition of Selfless Service', 111.

⁵⁷ Goyal, *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh*, 61.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 62.

scholarship has pointed to Golwalkar as the figure that brought the systematized ideology and protocol of *sevā* within the RSS to maturation.

Madhav Golwalkar was a bit of an unusual selection as Hedgewar's successor. Ascetic in nature, Golwalkar abandoned the RSS in 1937 to attend to his spiritual inclinations by becoming a disciple of Swami Akhandanand of the Ramakrishna Mission.⁵⁹ His ascetic appearance was a testament to the vow he had given his *guru* to never cut his hair or beard. His contributions to the development of the RSS are monumental. He increased the number of *shakhas* (branches) and *swayamsevaks* (volunteers) exponentially and constantly travelled throughout India to boost morale and inspire new members. He also prepared the RSS for India's independence in 1947 and the subsequent partition that resulted in mass casualties. Whereas the official independence movement was heavily focused on the British imperialist foe, the RSS decided to turn its attention to the Muslim community in India.⁶⁰ Eventually, one of the outcomes of this anti-Muslim sentiment has been seen as the assassination of Gandhi by Nathuram Godse on January 30th, 1948. Because Godse was a former member of the RSS, many held the RSS to be accountable for the attack.⁶¹ Goyal notes that *shakhas* were the object of attacks by angry mobs soon after the assassination of Gandhi.⁶² Furthermore, the government banned the group only five days later. As a result, the previously expanding RSS became the object of a violent backlash that led to

⁵⁹ Ibid., 78.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 93.

⁶¹ In court, however, the RSS was never found guilty of any connection to the murder of Gandhi. Moreover, the prosecution did not even try to implicate the RSS in the murder.

⁶² Ibid., 100.

quickly dwindling support. An appeal to both Nehru and the public ended in failure. The ban lasted for merely fifteen months, but the disdain for the RSS amongst the public lasted far longer. It is here, with the RSS reeling from the fallout of Gandhi's assassination, that social service began to play an integral part in the RSS ideology.

With a bleak future outlook, Golwalkar was faced with a dire need to rejuvenate the positive public opinion of the RSS. One of the major ways this was accomplished was through the embracing of large scale social service, or *sevā*. Golwalkar's rationale behind *sevā*, serving the people of the nation was akin to serving the divine, seems very similar to part of Vivekananda's own rationale in starting the Ramakrishna Mission. The connection between the two has been analyzed elsewhere.⁶³ For our purposes, it is enough to mention that the key distinction between the two is that the RSS focused on service of the nation and not humanity in general.⁶⁴ Those deemed as "Hindu" were the ones deserving of service. In the mid-1960s, Golwalkar called for a meeting between the RSS leaders and other affiliate group leaders to push forth an agenda of unifying the disparate religious groups of "Hindu" society. The result of the meeting was the creation of the VHP, a branch that heavily pushed the *sevā* initiative and both formalized and centralized social service activities.⁶⁵

With Golwalkar's passing in 1973, Balasaheb Deoras became the *sarsangchalak* and immediately took steps to increase the political involvement of the RSS. *Shakhas* no longer solely existed to train new young members. They were also expected to help

⁶³ See Beckerlegge's "Saffron and Seva: the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh's Appropriation of Swami Vivekananda".

⁶⁴ Beckerlegge, "The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh's 'Tradition of Selfless Service', 119.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 124.

RSS nominees for political positions garner votes.⁶⁶ This decision was heavily influenced by the seemingly negative perception that the government, at that time under the tutelage of Indira Gandhi, held of the RSS. Fearing another ban of movement, Deoras decided to rally against the incumbent government party rather than merely wait for the government to act. Aligning with Jayprakash Narayan, the main opposition to Indira Gandhi, the RSS, and its affiliate political branch BJP, began to slowly rebuild its public image. In addition to greater political recognition, the RSS, through the actions of the VHP, began to greatly expand its social service activities. Some of these, such as the protection of cows and upkeep of temples, had a direct religious connection. Others, such as medical care and education did not.⁶⁷ By 1994, after Deoras had stepped down as *sarsangchalak*, an internal record of *sevā* activities was commenced. As the numbers above indicate, the *sevā* undertaken continues to grow yearly.

To recapitulate, the *sevā* ideology in the RSS is connected to a nuance in the understanding of *sāadhanā*. Although there is an attempt to appeal to a precedent of *sevā* in Hindu culture and Indian history, the greatest reason behind performing *sevā* remains to unite the seemingly disparate groups that are truly “Hindu”.⁶⁸ This is an attempt to regain the same peoples that are seen by the RSS as initially having been part of the Hindu nation. With this mindset, the greatest difference between the *sevā-sāadhanā* connection found in the RSS and that found in both the Ramakrishna Mission and *bhakti* movements is that the end results differ greatly. The former makes no

⁶⁶ Goyal, *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh*, 114.

⁶⁷ Beckerlegge, “The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh’s ‘Tradition of Selfless Service’, 126.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 129.

mention of soteriological aims, whereas the latter groups explicitly state the ultimate goal to be liberation for the performer of *sevā* according to *sādhanā*.

Sevā as a Direct Command of an Avatara

This section will focus on two organizations, the Sai movement and the Mata Amritanandamayi Mission (MAM), that are each centered on a charismatic figure. These figures, Sathya Sai Baba in the Sai movement and Amritanandamayi (Amma) in MAM, are vital to the discussion of *sevā* as social service that is conducted in these two organizations because both figures are the direct cause of it. The words and actions of both figures inspire as well as exhort followers to actively engage in *sevā*. It will be analyzed as to how the followers' ontological understanding of these two figures adds to the *sevā* ideologies that are created by the figures themselves.

Both Amma and Sai Baba hold an exalted place in their respective organizations. In addition to being understood as spiritually advanced beings and unmatched *gurus*, both figures are held to be *avatara*s of God. Sai Baba is understood by his followers to be *bhagavan*; he has come down as an *avatara* to restore righteousness. More specifically, Sai Baba is held to be the *avatara* of Siva and Sakti, the second of three incarnations.⁶⁹ The previous incarnation was Shirdhi Sai Baba as Sakti and the subsequent incarnation will be Prem Sai as Siva. Similarly, Amma is understood by her devotees as the manifestation of Sakti, or the female divine energy. Like Sai Baba, Amma is believed to have also incarnated to restore righteousness and restore humanity in the world. Further similarities between the two come from their respective statuses as renunciators. Both are believed to be perfectly celibate, abiding by the rules

⁶⁹ Lawrence Babb, "Sathya Sai Baba's Saintly Play," in *Saints and Virtues*, ed. John Stratton Hawley (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 172.

of an ascetic lifestyle. Furthermore, neither comes from an established spiritual lineage, thereby relying on personal charisma and displays of miraculous abilities to gain public legitimacy.⁷⁰

Perhaps most importantly, the two figures share the organizational pattern of their own movements; each has been placed at the center of the movement as an object of devotion. As such, both can be qualified as *bhakti*-based movements in which devotion is seen as the pre-eminent means of liberation. Thus, as living embodiments of the divine, both Sai Baba and Amma have the ability to profoundly influence their followers through their words and actions. Due to this influential power, it is unsurprising that *sevā* is such an integral part of both organizations as both leaders have included *sevā* as a systematic part of their missions to restore earthly righteousness. Their specific methods, very similar in nature, of incorporating *sevā* will now be looked at, starting with the Sai movement.

On the international Sai movement website, sathyasai.org, there is a specific webpage dedicated to the social service activities that are undertaken. On this page is a manual that has been put together to address any questions that may arise regarding service projects in the United States. This manual is important, here, because it provides a very systematically constructed philosophical rationale for the movement's performance of *sevā*. The answers to the questions of how and why a devotee should serve are presented as follows:

Why?

You should follow Swami, the leader. This is because, from morning to night, Swami performs even the smallest task Himself; and all His work is for

⁷⁰ Maya Warrior, "The *Seva* Ethic and the Spirit of Institution Building in the Mata Amritanandamayi Mission," in *Hinduism in Public and Private: Reform, Hindutva, Gender, and Sampraday*, ed. Antony Copley (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003), 255.

the good of the world. It is in this context that I often say, "My Life is My Message." [4]⁷¹

Avatars of God are engaged in service; that is why Avatars come. Hence, when you offer service to mankind, the Avatar is pleased and you can win grace. [5]

When a devotee seeks with humility and purity to give service and love to My creatures who are in need of such selfless service, as his beloved brothers and sisters, as the blessed manifestations of My Immanence, then in fulfillment of my role as Sathya Sai, I descend to help, accompany, and carry that yogi. I am always near such a yogi to guide him and to shower My love on his life. [22]

Service is the best form of worship, [41] the highest spiritual discipline, [42] the essence of devotion. [43] The bliss you receive through service cannot be gotten through any other activity. [44] Service is more fruitful than repetition of the Name, meditation, or sacrifice. [45] There is no morality higher than truth, no prayer more fruitful than service. [46]

How?

What exactly is selfless service? It is the very essence of devotion, the very breath of a devotee, his very nature. It springs from the actual experience of the devotee, an experience that convinces that all beings are God's children, that all bodies are altars where God is installed, that all places are His residences. [15]

Do not serve for the sake of reward; serve because you are urged by Love. [33] Service is its own reward. [34] Do not worry about the result. Help as much as you can, as efficiently as you can, as silently as you can, and as lovingly as you can; leave the rest to God, who gave you a chance to serve. [35]⁷²

A number of interesting concepts emerge out of these few sub points from the manual. First, in relation to why followers should engage in *sevā* there emerge three

⁷¹ These numerals are present in the actual manual. The reason for gaps in the presentation here is because not all numbered statements relate to the specific questions asked in this thesis.

⁷² Sri Sathya Sai Organization, "A Guide to Service in American Sathya Sai Centers," Sri Sathya Sai Organization, <http://us.sathyasai.org/resources/06aug10ServiceGuidelines.pdf> (accessed Sep 25, 2012).

main reasons. The first reason is that *sevā* is openly identified as the premier method of worship or devotion, trumping meditation and *nām japa*. Second, the life and actions of Sai Baba are mentioned as a paradigm for followers to mimic. In essence, if the spiritual leader is willing to serve by dedicating his life to liberating others, his followers should also be willing to serve. Finally, the most important reason is both an ontological and soteriological one. If *sevā* is performed as *bhakti* to Sai Baba, then Sai Baba will provide spiritual progression and, ultimately, liberation for the performer. Invoking the idea of *karma-yoga* mentioned in the Bhagavad Gita, the concept of *sevā* in the Sai movement is based upon dedicating all service to Sai Baba. Performed as such, the service becomes qualified as *sevā* and is qualitatively different from other forms of social service.⁷³ Whilst social service that is performed by any other agency or individual can also provide aid to those in need, the service in the Sai movement is *sevā* because it is both based on the *sādhana* provided by Sai Baba and an offering of *bhakti* to Sai Baba. If a follower is able to perform *sevā* in this manner, then he is viable to accumulate a number of benefits:

- Control and purify the mind
- Put a ceiling on our desires
- Erase our karmic burden
- Remove the ego
- Bring love into our lives
- Experience the Unity of all
- Become aware of the God within all
- Win the Grace of God⁷⁴

Strongly reminiscent of Swami Vivekananda's early rationale for *sevā*, the benefits provided here advocate the improvement of the individual through the

⁷³ Ibid., 4.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

performance of *sevā*. All the benefits, however, pale in comparison to the final one: winning the grace of God. Because Sai Baba is understood to be the Supreme Being, his directive for followers to engage in *sevā* emerges as a means to earn Baba's grace, an essential component for liberation. Taken together, *sevā*, according to the Sai movement, is the best means for liberation.

MAM holds striking similarities to the Sai movement's ideology of *sevā* and *sādhanā*. On the official website, amma.org, there is a special webpage dedicated to the service projects undertaken by MAM. Grouped under the name *Embracing the World*, the services are said to span over forty countries and address issues such as education, healthcare, disaster relief, and children's and women's welfare. Moreover, the capacity of the network is sizeable; the main web page mentions a million dollar bridge that was built near the Kerala backwaters, to be used as an emergency escape means during a tsunami, as one of its main disaster relief projects. Furthermore, the movement has done great work in the medical field, constructing a 1,300 room hospital in Cochin, and the environmental movement, planting 30,000 trees in Kerala post-2004.⁷⁵ All of this commendable service is ultimately traced back to Amma. Like the Sai movement, all of the *sevā* that is performed in MAM is considered *bhakti* that is offered to Amma. This is not, surprisingly, the rationale provided on the main website, amma.org. There, a more official rationale is given:

As you perform good actions selflessly, true love will blossom, which will purify our emotional mind.

Our highest, most important duty in this world is to help our fellow beings.

⁷⁵ Embracing the World, "Green Initiatives," Embracing the World, <http://www.embracingtheworld.org/what-we-do/green-initiatives/> (accessed Sep 28, 2012).

In this age of selfishness, selfless service is the only soap that truly purifies.⁷⁶

Here, the connection to *bhakti* is not drawn. There is also no explicit mention of *sevā* or any soteriological gains from the performance of *sevā*. Rather, the focus has been cast on an improvement and purification of the individual. Closer analysis of the branching webpages, however, shows that the more general terminology of “service” or “social service” gives way to more traditional terminology. Gleaning over specific center pages, for example, shows that service is also referred to as *sevā* and *karma-yoga*.⁷⁷ Nonetheless, there remains a public presentation of a sterilized rationale for service. It is nearly impossible to find any allusion to provision of knowledge or preparation for liberation as results of service.

Oddly enough, despite this sort of generic reasoning provided on the webpage, *Embracing the World* openly admits to both being initiated by Amma and attempting to mimic her acts of love as exemplified by her embraces.⁷⁸ It begs the question, then, of what connection can be drawn between the *bhakti* and service aspects of MAM. From the main webpage, it seems little connection exists. This connection becomes far clearer, however, through the study of Amma’s own words delivered in speeches around the globe. Numerous examples are available in which Amma explicitly connects service and spirituality. One such connection is that service should be done selflessly as

⁷⁶Mata Amritanandamayi, “In Amma’s Own Words,” MAM, <http://amma.org/teachings/ammas-own-words-service> (accessed Sep 29, 2012).

⁷⁷ San Ramon M.A. Center, “Karma Yoga Program,” MAM, <http://amma.org/groups/north-america/ma-center-san-ramon/guides/karma-yoga-program> (accessed Sep 29, 2012).

⁷⁸ Embracing the World, “Our Brand,” Embracing the World, <http://www.embracingtheworld.org/our-brand/> (accessed Sep 28, 2012).

a *sādhanā* that is a means to please God.⁷⁹ A second connection is also drawn between *sevā* and other spiritual practices such as *japa* and meditation, all of which are necessary for spiritual progression. There also emerges the role of Amma as the inspiration for *sevā*. As such, she encourages her devotees to serve selflessly and according to their abilities. Furthermore, from the research that has taken into consideration the views of Amma's devotees, there is little doubt that she becomes the main reason for *sevā* performance. In fact, although devotees take seriously the ability of *sevā* to rid of internal impurities and *vasanas*, they understand that it is also a means to offer *bhakti* towards Amma.⁸⁰ Additionally, because it is a *sevā* assigned specifically by Amma, there is also the presence of *sādhanā*; performing *sevā* according to Amma's direction has the ability to induce liberation.⁸¹ Somewhat similar to the *arcana* form of Visnu, Amma provides the means, through her direct commands and directives, and, as the manifestation of God, serves as an end goal for her followers.⁸²

The Idiosyncrasies of the *Sevā* Binary

Thus far, two seemingly different forms of *sevā* have been presented and analyzed as they appear in numerous Hindu groups. The form of *sevā* as social service, however, has certain elements that are quite foreign to *arcana*. As explained above, the practice of *arcana* has a legitimate sense of intimacy; the individual shares a relationship with

⁷⁹ Mata Amritanandamayi, "Amma on Selfless Service," MAM, <http://www.amritapuri.org/6762/selfless-service.aum> (accessed Sep 29, 2012).

⁸⁰ Maya Warrior, *Hindu Selves in a Modern World: Guru Faith in the Mata Amritanandamayi Mission* (New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2005), 51.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 60.

⁸² Warrior seems to see things a bit differently. For her, all *sevā* seems aimed at the expansion of MAM (see pages 7, 59, and 60). This seems like a rather superficial understanding of the *sevā* initiative in MAM, a point that at least one book reviewer (Surya Prakash) picks up on.

the *arca* form of God. Whether this occurs in a Hindu temple with immovable *murtis* or at a home with movable *salagramas*, there primarily remains an acute sense of privacy.⁸³ In fact, through the specific rituals, a sense of deep attachment forms between the *sevak* and the *murti*; there grows a feeling of complete longing and love. This, in turn, allows the *sevak* to reach an exalted spiritual status.

Sevā as social service lacks this acute intimacy. Instead, this form of *sevā* is heavily dependent on publicity. To engage in this *sevā* is to immediately preclude the possibility of any privacy. In short, this *sevā* must include agents extraneous to the *sevak* and form of God that are found in the practice of *arcana*. These external agents play a pivotal role in *sevā* as social service, one that goes well beyond simply receiving the fruits of activities such as food drives and education seminars. They are essential for success, helping to qualify these activities as *sevā* as opposed to the more conventional, and primarily secular, practice of social service. How is it, though, that these external agents, whom are primarily outsiders to the Hindu groups performing service, can prove to be so influential? The answer to this query resides in the ideology underlying *sevā* as social service.

The groups covered in this chapter place considerable emphasis on the mindset of the *sevak*. Although a *sevak* may perform considerable *sevā*, either in the form of *arcana* or social service, it is the mindset that the *sevā* is performed with that is crucial to the success of the *sevā*. Thus, these forms of *sevā* are mental processes in addition to physical ones. In *arcana*, the *sevak* must initially act with complete subordination, administering to the every need of the *murti*. Then, a sense of internal longing and attachment is fostered. Yet, this mindset is only in relation to the *murti*. For

⁸³ Some common exceptions are during large festivals or other large gatherings.

those involved in *sevā* as social service, there must be a mindset that is developed through interaction with the external agents. This is made quite explicit by groups covered in this chapter. In particular, this mindset consists of three distinct parts. The first provides details on how the recipient of the *sevā* should be seen. Although the recipient is most likely an outsider to the *sevā* group, he must never be regarded as inferior; like all human beings, he too is either to be seen as an emanation of the divine (Ramakrishna Mission) or as a dwelling place for the divine (Sai and MAM).⁸⁴ Although there is variation in how exactly the individual is connected to the divine (the Ramakrishna Mission holds each individual is part of the divine, whilst MAM and Sai hold each individual belongs to the divine), there remains an elevation of the individual.

Second, there arises the negation of the self. This includes removing both ego and identification with the body. Logically, acts of service would tend to be conducive to reducing individual ego. Activities such as food distribution, health fairs, and reconstruction projects all require performance of menial work. Yet, *sevā* goes beyond simply taking part in occasional humbling service. At times, *sevā* can be quite involving, requiring the full capacity of the *sevak*. It is in these situations that the *sevak* is pushed beyond normal toil and must leave previous levels of comfort. Accordingly, the body is pushed harder than it has become used to and fatigue and discomfort must be ignored.

⁸⁴ Sri Sathya Sai Organization, "A Guide to Service in American Sathya Sai Centers," Sri Sathya Sai Organization, <http://us.sathyasai.org/resources/06aug10ServiceGuidelines.pdf> (accessed Sep 25, 2012); Mata Amritanandamayi, "Work and Service," MAM, <http://www.amritapuri.org/10181/work-worship.aum> (accessed Sep 29, 2012); Ramakrishna Mission, "Ideology of Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission," Ramakrishna Mission, <http://belurmath.org/Ideology.htm> (accessed August 29, 2012).

Through this process, the individual slowly stops identifying himself with the body, and instead with his true self.⁸⁵

Finally, the *sevak* must develop emotionally, kindling true feelings of love and compassion.⁸⁶ These feelings are essential for developing empathy for those in need; a *sevak* should be distraught at the sight of those in suffering. Furthermore, with these feelings the *sevak* is far more willing to serve. This idea tends to be explicitly tied to the concept of *karma-yoga*. If an individual is able to serve without expectation of rewards, he begins to serve out of sheer compassion for the wellbeing of others.⁸⁷ This is also essential as a prerequisite to seeing divinity in those served. Only by first loving and having compassion for those in need can a *sevak* begin to see the divine in them.

Sevā as Recitation and Darsan in the Srivaisnava Tradition

Thus far, much attention has been paid to two forms of *sevā*: as *arcana* and social service. This binary is by no means exhaustive; there are other forms and understandings of *sevā* that hold considerable weight in different Hindu groups. One of these is the *Srivaisnava* tradition that has already been briefly discussed in the *arcana* section. A South Indian tradition, *Srivaisnavism* worships Visnu alongside Sri and accepts both the Tamil works of devotion by the *alvars* as equivalent to the Vedic

⁸⁵ Mata Amritanandamayi, "In Amma's Own Words," MAM, <http://amma.org/teachings/ammas-own-words-service> (accessed Sep 29, 2012).

⁸⁶ Sri Sathya Sai Organization, "A Guide to Service in American Sathya Sai Centers," Sri Sathya Sai Organization, <http://us.sathyasai.org/resources/06aug10ServiceGuidelines.pdf> (accessed Sep 25, 2012); Mata Amritanandamayi, "In Amma's Own Words," MAM, <http://amma.org/teachings/ammas-own-words-service> (accessed Sep 29, 2012).

⁸⁷ Ibid.

literature and Ramanuja as the foremost *acarya*.⁸⁸ Of particular interest here are the three different usages of the concept of *sevā* within the tradition. The first usage of the term is as recitation. The *Divya Prabandham*, or collection of verses from the *alvars*, is recited at both auspicious, such as birth, and inauspicious, such as death, occasions. During these occasions, the recitation period is referred to as *sevā kālam* (literally time of service).⁸⁹ This recitation also occurs during the *Adhyana Utsava*, or Festival of Recitation. Here, alongside the recitation, there is the performance of certain myths and verses from the *alvār* poetry by *araiyars*, specially selected performers that are believed to descend from the lineage of the first *Srivaishnava Ācarya* Nāthamuni. This performance is known as *araiyar cevai*.⁹⁰ Overall, this recitation is taken to be service to God and the community.⁹¹

The second utilization of *sevā* comes through the ritual of *darsana*. Normally, *darsana* involves the dual dynamic of seeing the sacred image and being seen by it. In the *Srivaishnava* context, however, the ritual is also called *sevā*. Having vision of God is seen as an instance to buttress the glory of the divine and relative insignificance of the devotee. Eventually, this act also becomes a reflection of the spiritual status of a devotee. The ability to constantly see the divine combined with regular recitation of the verses by the *alvars* is an indication of salvation that has already been attained.⁹²

⁸⁸ Vasudha Narayanan, *The Vernacular Veda: Revelation, Recitation, and Ritual* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1994), 224.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 58.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 117.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 117.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 141.

The final usage of *sevā* is used in the context of service to both God and the devotees of God. Service to God is understood to be *kaimkarya*, or loving service.⁹³ It involves offering service at the feet of God after purifying the sense organs of the body. Service to the devotees of God, on the other hand, is understood as serving those that have already attained communion with God. This practice actually becomes a means to attain God. Moreover, service to *Srivaishnavs* is equivalent to the service of God.⁹⁴ Thus, these *Srivaishnavs*, upon being served, are also capable of making the present world equivalent to the blissful heavenly realm of God.

This brief interlude brings across additional forms of *sevā* that have not been looked at in depth in this chapter. While this understanding of *sevā* is idiosyncratic to the *Srivaishnava* tradition, this form serves as a gentle reminder that there are different interpretations of *sevā* that lay beyond the scope of the *sevā* binary presented here.

Sevā as Internal Service

A second type of alternate *sevā* is the service performed by devotees for the benefit of their own spiritual movement. Members of MAM, for example, are often assigned different responsibilities that are completed regularly for the upkeep and expansion of the organization. Maya Warriar gives examples of Amma's devotees that serve in numerous sectors of MAM. These devotees are selected because of their proficiency in skills and knowledge that is applicable to their specific internal *sevā*. Warriar points out the narrative of one particular individual that was politically active in the Delhi area. This devotee was specifically chosen by Amma to serve as president on

⁹³ John Carmen and Vasudha Narayanan, *The Tamil Veda: Pillan's Interpretation of the Tiruvaymoli* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1989), 133.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 124-125.

the Delhi ashram branch service committee because of his organization skills.⁹⁵ Often, devotees can be singled out for specific responsibilities because of specific educational backgrounds that best suits them for the performance of such a duty. Moreover, this form of internal *sevā* is not limited to MAM but can be found in many different movements. This *sevā* results, like *sevā* as social service and *sevā* as *arcana*, in spiritual progression. In *bhakti* movements with centralized charismatic figures, this internal *sevā*, particularly if assigned directly, is seen as a means of earning the grace of that charismatic figure. Additionally, as mentioned above, these direct commands are taken to be a form of *sāadhanā* that ultimately leads to liberation. Thus, serving within the movement can be just as beneficial as serving outside of the movement.

A Different Means to Liberation

In this chapter, the concepts of *sāadhanā* and *sevā* have been looked at in detail. The relationship between the two is a close one. In fact, the emergence of *sevā* often relies on the presence of *sāadhanā*. For example, the practice of *arcana* is based on the *sāadhanā* prescribed by certain devotional texts and the paradigmatic actions of spiritual leaders. In terms of *sevā* as social service, there also emerges the constant presence of *sāadhanā*. The Sai movement and MAM, for example, both undertake service activities at the behest of their spiritual leaders. Due to the encouragement and direction of Sai Baba and Amma, there has been considerable development of service programs, resource pools, and volunteer forces in these two movements.

As a result, the outcome for both types of *bhakti*-based *sevā* remains the same: ultimate *mukti* or liberation. Although two, seemingly, vastly different forms of *sevā* have been covered, both produce identical results. *Arcana* has the ability to bring about

⁹⁵ Warrior, "The *Seva* Ethic and the Spirit of Institution Building in the Mata Amritanandamayi Mission", 272.

liberation for the *sevak* if the *sāadhanā* prescribed in texts and by certain individuals is followed. Similarly, due to the presence of spiritual leaders who have attained internal legitimacy in these movements, social service emerges as *sevā* due to the *sāadhanā* offered by these individuals. In the end, although *sevā* as social service may not be as prevalent or renowned as *arcana*, it can produce the same end result in *bhakti* traditions and thus emerges as a different *mārga* to liberation.

CHAPTER 4
HOME AWAY FROM HOME: HINDU *SEVĀ* IN ATLANTA, GEORGIA

A Practicum Introduced

Thus far, the concept of *sevā* has been analyzed in different ways. The first chapter was a hermeneutical device of sorts, analyzing previous scholarship as it related primarily to the performance of *sevā* by Neo-Advaita groups. It emerged that older scholarship denied the basis of such service; more recent scholarship, however, began to look at the issue differently, utilizing alternate methods to understand the *sevā* initiatives amongst these movements. The second chapter was a doxography in the list sense; the practices and beliefs of different Hindu groups were presented sequentially. The aim was to show the internal rationalizations of several Hindu groups that engage in *sevā* as social service. Moreover, there was an emphasis on the connection between the concepts of *sevā* and *sāadhanā* that tends to be present within Hindu *bhakti* traditions.

This closing chapter will serve as a practicum to the *sevā-sāadhanā* theoretical framework that was presented in the previous chapter. This framework has thus far been analyzed in *bhakti* movements, Sai and AMMA, which are based primarily in India. As such, the analysis is quite limited to groups that are embedded in a Hindu-dominant society where such understandings of service are normative. Moreover, this analysis, because it has been largely taken from websites and limited scholarly work, is more a reflection of the “official” stance of both movements regarding *sevā*. Does this stance stand when research is done ethnographically amongst members of *bhakti* traditions? Additionally, what occurs when a Hindu *bhakti* organization performing *sevā* is situated in the west? And what if that western country, such as the United States, already has a

long history of social service?¹ Do these *bhakti* groups begin to incorporate western rationale for their service activities to appear more accessible to western audiences?

These are the questions that will be addressed in this chapter. In particular, two groups, the Hindu Temple of Atlanta (HTA) and the Bochasanwasi Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha (BAPS), were studied because of their heavy involvement in service projects.² The layout for systematically presenting the results of this study is comprised of four sections. First, there is an introduction to the rationale behind such ethnographic research. Second, each of the groups and the particular locations of research will be briefly introduced. This portion will also present the initial ethnography that was completed in collaboration with both of these groups. This ethnography consisted of attending one large scale service event hosted by each of the groups. Next, an analysis of the results of this initial ethnography will be given. It will be suggested that there is far more to the performance of *sevā* in both movements than is perceptible at first glance. Finally, an insider perspective of the rationale for *sevā* will be presented based on a number of interviews with individuals that have close links to the service projects conducted by BAPS and HTA respectively. Based on these interviews, a theory for supporting the performance of *sevā* becomes evident. This theory is inherently tied to the concept of *sādhana*. As such, it appears that what is the “official” stance regarding service can very well be the “popular” stance as well.

¹ Some scholars have traced the practice of social welfare in America to pre-Civil War with the introduction of almshouses.

² The traditional BAPS temple in Lilburn, Atlanta was utilized as the research site.

The Role of Ethnography

From the outset of this thesis, there was a presentation of existing studies regarding *sevā* as social service in Hindu traditions. These studies were of the textual type, referring primarily to Hindu scripture rather than exploring the extant Hindu communities that continue to embody these *sevā* ideals. Although this approach certainly has produced intriguing results, a question which lingers is whether these results are at all applicable to living Hindu communities. Is Hacker's claim that Advaita groups cannot ontologically support the performance of this type of *sevā* still viable amongst the multiple Hindu groups that are *sevā* oriented? Does it become a moot observation if the vast majority of Hindu groups performing *sevā* are *bhakti* movements? Partly, this chapter aims at answering these questions. Additionally, it seeks to add a new dimension to the extant scholarship on *sevā* as social service by employing an ethnographical approach to the study of service in BAPS and HTA.

The ethnography offered here is an attempt to provide a method of analysis that has not been employed often in the study of *sevā* as social service. This ethnography is comprised of two distinct parts: participant observation and personal interviews. The participant observation is designed to both overtly and covertly study a particular *sevā* activity undertaken by both BAPS and HTA. By observing the proceedings and briefly speaking with the volunteers and attendees at the events, initial collected data will help to formulate an idea of how *sevā* is understood by these two Hindu groups. The interviews will be utilized to build upon or, if contrary data presents itself, challenge initial interpretations of the observed *sevā* activities. These interviews will involve individuals that both have strong involvement in the *sevā* activities and have decent

understanding of the possible theology or philosophy that informs the *sevā* activities in each group.

Both of these forms of ethnography are taken together in hopes of attaining the thick description that anthropologist Clifford Geertz alluded to long ago in his book *Interpretation of Cultures*. To successfully provide this thick description would require the ability to discern between a wink and a twitch, from a symbolic gesture and an empty one. Here, accordingly, there is an attempt to discern some of the underlying meanings behind service activities. Initial participant observation is buttressed with personal interviews so that perceptions can either be rejected or consolidated. The objective is to understand and analyze the insider perspective regarding the engagement in *sevā* activities. Yet, this ethnography does fall short of the lived religion approach offered by Professor of Religion Robert Orsi. There is no attempt made to interpret symbolic meaning in the everyday lives of members of BAPS or HTA.³ Instead, the research is limited to religious institutions and official projects and activities.

The last point to make here is in regards to my own position in approaching these two groups. In some ways, I am both an outsider and insider. As a practicing Hindu, and therefore insider to the Hindu tradition, I approached both of these groups with particular normative understandings of Hindu practices and beliefs. This may have limited the breadth of the ethnographic account provided below. A non-Hindu researcher may have given a more detailed account of his observations because he is unfamiliar with Hindu temple rituals and the proceedings that go on at these temples. At the same time, although I am limited to some degree by these normative understandings, I also have

³ Robert Orsi. *Between Heaven and Earth: the Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 2.

access to certain insights that an outsider might not have. For example, interviews with individuals from the HTA and BAPS groups often included conversations about *murti-puja*, Hindu scriptures, and *homa*, terms and ideas that I am familiar with and able to converse about. This knowledge allowed the interviewees to speak more freely without worrying about constantly translating or defining these terms for me. Yet, I am also an outsider because I approached these groups as a scholar rather than a practitioner. In doing so, I attempted to interpret and analyze data objectively and judiciously. During interviews, I also utilized open questions that would not push an interviewee to answer in a particular manner which I felt was correct. Thus, keeping these dynamics in mind, we will now proceed to the ethnographic accounts.

The Hindu Temple of Atlanta

The temple was decided upon in 1980 with a small group of Indians that came together with similar ideals of fostering cultural and religious ideals for the future generations. The main objectives were to provide a place of worship for the performance of religious services, a center for religious and cultural education, and a foundation for performing service.⁴ By 1990, the image of *Ganesh* was installed and full services were offered. Just two years later, the shrine dedicated primarily to the form of *Visnu* known as *Venkateswara* was completed and the temple measured in at 25,000 square feet. Then in 2000, a shrine dedicated to *Siva* was decided upon and completed by 12 artisans from India in 2004.⁵ Finally, in 2003, an additional educational center was constructed to provide eighteen classrooms for yoga, dance, music, and religion classes; it currently serves 350 youth on a weekly basis. In terms of service activities,

⁴ Personal interview with former temple president Dr. B. Krishna Mohan.

⁵ Ibid.

the temple has remained committed to numerous projects for over twenty-five years. Some of these activities include a weekly sandwich distribution to the downtown Atlanta homeless population, a seasonal toy-for-tots drive, and a yearly can food drive in conjunction with the Atlanta Community Food Bank. Additionally, the temple has been active during disaster relief, providing substantial material and monetary aid after the 2001 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the 2004 hurricane devastation along the Gulf Coast. More recently, the temple, under the leadership of Dr. Sujatha Reddy, has conducted quarterly health fairs around the city of Atlanta. Future local projects include an interfaith homebuilding project in conjunction with Habitat for Humanity. Internationally, the group is also involved during disaster relief in India and other countries, providing aid after the tsunami in 2008.⁶ Thus the temple, because of its heavy involvement in public service projects, proved to be an ideal *bhakti* community to study.

My advisor put me in touch with Dr. Ravi Sarma, the former temple president. Through some internal communication with him, I was eventually introduced to Dr. Sujatha Reddy, the current board member that takes care of many of the temple's service projects. One of these projects is the quarterly health fair. After an initial invitation to the event by Dr. Reddy, I decided that it would be a good opportunity to observe one of the service activities that the temple undertakes. In addition to observing the proceedings, a fairly simple job at a health fair, I also decided to speak with some of the doctors and visitors to note their perspectives and outlooks regarding the fair. In doing so, I was looking for a number of markers in their responses. One marker, for example, was how they understood and qualified the event. More

⁶ Personal interview with former temple president and leader of temple services Dr. Ravi Sharma.

specifically, did these visitors see the fair as a type of social service that was merely being offered altruistically to the community? Could there, upon taking in the different backgrounds of the visitors, be variations in this outlook? Or, because a vast majority of the visitors were Indian, would some connect the health fair to certain Indian, if not pointedly Hindu, concepts of *sevā*, *dharma*, or *dāna*? Another marker was how this event affected the public perception of the Hindu Temple of Atlanta. Recent scholarship by Dr. John Zavos, a senior lecturer at the University of Manchester, suggests that there may be underlying dynamics in the performance of *sevā* by Hindu groups such as connections with Hindu nationalist ideology and community identity politics.⁷ Thus, it was my intention to gauge how the visitors perceive both Telugu Association of Metro Atlanta (TAMA) and the Hindu Temple of Atlanta (HTA) and whether they are profoundly swayed by events such as this health fair. To achieve these objectives, my research at and with the Hindu Temple of Atlanta was two-fold. The first part was simply attending the health fair and interacting with the attendees. I will briefly recount the experience here.

On August 25th of this year, I entered the South Forsythe Middle School in Cumming, Georgia to attend a health fair organized by the HTA in conjunction with TAMA. It was a typical health fair, in that it provided free consultation with doctors as a preventative health measure, blood work and EKG stations, and access to alternative forms of medicine. Additionally, pharmacy students from the local universities, primarily Georgia University and Emory University, were invited to simultaneously satisfy school requirements to serve in the community and help take blood pressure measurements

⁷ John Zavos, "Small Acts, Big Society: Sewa and Hindu (nationalist) Identity in the UK" (draft obtained with permission)

and provide information seminars on prevalent diseases in the Indian community.

Overall, there were over thirty healthcare specialists at the fair, which ran from eight in the morning to nearly one in the afternoon. Upon my arrival at half past eight, there was already a flurry of activity. Visitors were initially ushered into the gymnasium where most of the basic and initial checkups were occurring. Roughly twenty to thirty individuals were seating in front of each of the three sections of blood pressure, lab fees and registration, and blood work results. Outside of the gymnasium, different services were also placed inside nearby classrooms. Some of these included bone mineral density screening, EKG screening, and consultation with specialists such as dentists, orthopedists, and cardiologists. A larger classroom was allocated for alternative forms of medicine such as Ayurveda and homeopathic therapy. After a relatively quick walkthrough, I decided to approach some of the doctors, medical students, and volunteers prior to engaging with the visitors. Some questions I posed to both groups, however, were quite similar. They were:

1. How did you hear about the health fair?
2. What particular health services are you here for?
3. What is your general perception of the fair? Is it beneficial for the community?
4. What can you say of the efforts of TAMA and HTA in putting this together?

Due to the heavy influx of visitors, most of the doctors were initially busy. Some of the medical students, however, were free at an information booth on drug abuse.

After introducing myself and succinctly describing my project, I was informed that they were pharmacy students from the local Mercer University. This was actually their first experience working with TAMA and the HTA. The confluence between the two groups actually came about when they were approached by Dr. Reddy and her associates to volunteer at the health fair. It was a unique opportunity for the students because of the

cultural Indian makeup of the visitors. Nonetheless, they lauded both the temple and TAMA for providing an absolutely necessary service for the community. Beyond providing a basic required health checkup, the health fair, according to these students, was commendable for providing information that is vital for treating *and* preventing poor health. When asked the pivotal question of how they would qualify the event, they didn't hesitate to label it a secular form of social service.

As the lines started to wane, I quietly approached some of the doctors and volunteers who were kind enough to give some time to me. To obtain a satisfactory gamut of responses, I tried to speak to a doctor or volunteer in most of the classrooms. Overall, their replies were fairly standard and uniform. One of the volunteers, who had been serving the Telugu community for over thirty years, remarked that the service projects had grown substantially over time. In fact, he mentioned that this health fair was one of the largest collaborative events in which he had participated. Yet, when asked about the rationale behind such an event, he appealed to ideas of humanitarian concern and altruism. This fair, according to him, was a social service that was for the good of the community.

Eventually, I made my way over to some of the visitors. Attempting to be as unobtrusive as possible, I spoke with individuals ranging in age groups from teenager to senior citizen. I was limited to some degree by language; most of the elderly did not speak English, Gujarati, or Hindi. Nonetheless, in these situations I would often find that the middle-aged sons and daughters, with whom these elderly had come, knew English and could translate appropriately. Most of the responses I was able to garner were those of deep gratitude; these elderly individuals were very thankful for the health

opportunities that had been offered to them. They also mentioned that such events fulfill a dire need in the community and that such future events should happen with more regularity.

Overall, my experience spanning over three hours produced a number of important bits of information regarding my project. In regards to my initial objectives, it became clear that the visitors, despite being primarily Indian, did not make any explicit connections between the services offered at the health fair and Hindu concepts of charity or *sevā*. The organizing doctors corroborated this point by heavily emphasizing the importance of these activities for the local community. Moreover, they also continually reiterated that often times both the new immigrants and the Indian elderly have a difficult time becoming accustomed to life in America; the opportunity for these elderly to receive healthcare practically in their backyards from people with whom they share a language and some cultural values is extremely comforting. This was actually a very common response I received from doctors, volunteers, and visitors alike.

There are a number of interpretations that can be made regarding this feedback. First, there is the most obvious interpretation that this sort of service has absolutely no connection to Hindu theological concepts such as *sevā*. Second, there is the possibility that publicly the organizing groups were pushing the health fair based on concepts of community service and social service to attract a larger number of doctors and medical students. If there had been a public display of the fair as an act of *sevā* it may have alienated both doctors and visitors alike that were unfamiliar with the concept. Finally, it must be kept in mind that it was very difficult to seek out doctors that were solely from either TAMA or the HTA. TAMA is an ethnically based group, while HTA is a religiously

based group. Due to a few doctors being part of both groups, it was initially unknown to which group's rationale each would refer; as the research eventually showed, they chose to appeal to TAMA's initiatives and goals. Furthermore, the HTA didn't have very many representatives at the event itself. Thus, the research, in my estimation, might have shown results that were quite skewed and not at all representative of the position of members of HTA.

One point that did emerge, however, is that large scale and public service activities like these can serve the purpose of introducing new immigrant members of the HTA to the local American culture. A few of the HTA non-doctor volunteers at the health fair were adults over the age of forty and informed me, in conversation, of their recent migration to the Atlanta area from various parts of India. Furthermore, in events such as toys-for-tots and yearly can drives that the HTA conducts, these immigrants have an opportunity to work with children and other organizations, such as the Atlanta Community Food Bank, that take part in social service activities. This is at least one informal channel for these temple members to undergo some degree of acculturation. Nonetheless, the research results were quite clear: the health fair, despite being partially organized by a Hindu temple, was seen as a secular form of social service. The implications of such research are not nearly as clear.

The BAPS Swāminārāyan Mandir

The second site of research was the recently constructed Bochasanwasi Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha (BAPS) *Mandir* in Lilburn, Georgia. This site was selected for a number of reasons. First, as an insider to the Swāminārāyan faith, I have the ability to analyze the practice of *sevā* utilizing a combination of academic tools and my own profound understanding of the Swāminārāyan philosophy. This combination in

itself is a rare one. It is not one that I had during my time at the HTA. Second, BAPS is slowly coming to the attention of the western academy as a Hindu movement that is both rapidly expanding and spreading. Its recently growing public image has increasingly appealed to the interests of numerous scholars, and the movement has been covered from numerous angles. Finally, the *sevā* of BAPS has been lauded by academics and non-academics alike; even many of the interviewees at HTA mentioned the BAPS *mandir* as being far better organized and pervasive in the community in its service efforts.⁸ With this in mind I chose the Lilburn *mandir*. Prior to giving a brief history of the temple, a brief history of the BAPS movement will be given.

BAPS was founded in 1907 by Shastri Yagnapurshdas, also known internally within the movement as Shastriji Maharaj. Shastriji Maharaj created the movement by splitting from the existing two *gadis*, or dioceses, of the Swāminārāyan Sampradāya because he felt that the original philosophical teachings as enunciated by Swāminārāyan were not being suitably followed and understood.⁹ More specifically, Shastriji Maharaj held that the essential principle of *Akshar-Purushottam Upasana* had been neglected. This *upasana* maintains that Swāminārāyan (1781-1849) is *purushottam*, or supreme God, and that the individuals comprising the subsequent spiritual lineage in BAPS are forms of *akshar*, or the choicest devotee of Swāminārāyan. The two *gadis* did not accept the lineage of spiritual leaders following Swāminārāyan to be emanations of *akshar*. Thus, Shastriji Maharaj left the *gadis* to create a movement that would propound this *upasana*. Henceforth, the movement

⁸ Personal interview with Ravi Sarma.

⁹ Hanna Kim, "Being Swaminarayan: The Ontology and Significance of Belief in the Construction of a Gujarati Diaspora" (Ph.D. Diss., Columbia University, 2001), 317.

expanded exponentially under the leadership of Shastriji Maharaj and subsequent *gurus*, Yogiji Maharaj and Pramukh Swami Maharaj. Today, Pramukh Swami still resides as the *guru* of the movement and has successfully qualified BAPS as a transnational movement that has touched down in dozens of countries across the globe. Some of the more noteworthy diasporic settlements of BAPS are in East Africa, Great Britain, and the United States.¹⁰ The movement, amongst other things, is particularly well known for its temple building activities. Overall, BAPS has constructed over seven hundred temples around the globe. Certain temples, such as the one in Neasden, UK, and monuments, such as the ones in New Delhi and Gandhinagar, have become emblematic symbols for BAPS amidst the public eye. Another well-known facet of BAPS is its heavy involvement in humanitarian services. BAPS Charities, conducted under the auspices of the independently registered social services initiative known as, functions alongside the BAPS Swāminārāyan Sansthā. According to the official website, BAPS Charities has over 55,000 volunteers that serve at 3,300 centers worldwide.¹¹ Some of its more notable projects include disaster relief that started in India since the mid-1970s and was eventually expanded to an international level, numerous schools and hospitals spread throughout India and the UK, and continuous literacy and anti-addiction campaigns. Furthermore, each of the BAPS centers, whether in India or abroad, undertakes these same activities on a smaller scale. Thus, the BAPS temple at Lilburn provided an ample opportunity to analyze *sevā*.

¹⁰ Hanna Kim, "Edifice Complex: Swaminarayan Bodies and Buildings in the Diaspora" in *Gujaratis in the West: Evolving Identities in Contemporary Society*, ed. Anjoom Mukadam and Sharmina Mawani (New Castle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007), 62.

¹¹ <http://www.bapscharities.org/aboutus/index.htm>

The history of the BAPS *mandir* in Lilburn actually dates back to 1982 and the initial *mandir* that was in Birmingham. Despite a dearth of Swāminārāyan followers in the Atlanta area, BAPS spiritual head Pramukh Swami Maharaj asked for a *mandir* to be completed in Atlanta prior to his arrival in the area in 1984 so that the inauguration ceremonies could be completed. Originally the temple was constructed in place of an old skating rink.¹² That temple was utilized by the local *satsangis*, or devotees, for sixteen years. In 2000, however, it became increasingly apparent that the available facilities were insufficient. Thus, a new thirty acre plot of land was purchased. Construction of the new *mandir*, built in the traditional scripturally ordained manner, commenced in 2004. That same year, the groundbreaking ceremony was conducted in the presence of Pramukh Swami Maharaj. Thereafter, there remained at least thirty-five artisans at the temple site that continually worked alongside numerous local *satsangis* to complete the *mandir* within three years.¹³ Quite a bit of the interior design for the ancillary buildings that surround the main temple shrine was completed by the BAPS devotees. The temple, completed in 2007, culminated into an extremely ornate edifice. In terms of service, the temple first started with a free weekly medical clinic at the temple that was led by a number of local BAPS *satsangi* and doctors. In total, today, there are nearly forty doctors that rotate amongst each other on a weekly basis. In addition there is the yearly walk-a-thon, a trademark event for nearly all BAPS centers in the diaspora, the regular quarterly food can drives that helped in buttressing the supplies at the Atlanta Community Food Bank, and the annual health fair and blood drive. More recently, BAPS Charities has undertaken a children's health awareness

¹² Personal interview with Sādhu Munitilakdas.

¹³ Ibid.

event in North America. The event took place at the Lilburn temple on September 25, 2012 and I decided to attend to see the kind of service that the temple performs.

There were some different dynamics at play from my experience at BAPS than from my experience at the HTA. At BAPS, although I was an observer, I was also a volunteer. This has both advantages and drawbacks. The major drawback is that if there is a need during the event, and more importantly a sustained one, I have to be willing to help, even at the expense of not being able to observe the proceedings and talk to some of the health professionals and children visitors. Alternately, by volunteering alongside many of the doctors, I have the opportunity to engage in small talk with the professionals and slowly transition to questions relevant to my project; this is a tool that I did not have at the HTA where I was clearly just a visitor. By the end of the event, it was quite clear that the dynamic had worked in my favor, as evidenced here.

I stepped into the Family Activities Center (FAC) at the Lilburn temple at precisely 10:45AM. The FAC is a massive complex, housing the Sunday *satsang sabha*, or religious assembly hall, numerous classrooms for youth, and a full kitchen and dining area on the bottom floor. The children's health awareness day had been organized primarily in the main auditorium and immediately adjacent rooms. Overall, the event had been planned to place the kids in sizeable groups that would then run a circuit that was comprised of four different stations. The main station, at which I was situated, was full of general physicians and dentists that would address the kids and groups through presentations and live simulations. The dentist station, for example, was led by two Indian dentists, husband and wife, and their dental assistant. There was a

demonstration on proper brushing habits and the importance of eating healthy.

Thereafter, each child was gifted with a complementary toothbrush, toothpaste tube, and flossing instrument. The idea behind the awareness day was not to provide the same services that are available at a full-fledged health fair, but to stress the importance of preventing future health complications by eating healthy, exercising, and regularly seeing the doctor.

To accomplish this, temple volunteers devised an innovative means to both keep the children's attention and deliver a meaningful message. Each child, ranging from ages 3-12, would enter the main auditorium and be given a teddy bear. Along with this teddy bear, each visitor received a paper detailing a health issue that the bear was experiencing; these included ear aches, itchy skin, colds, amongst other ailments. The child was then told to take both items to an available volunteer doctor and explain the problem to the doctor. The doctor would, in return, expand upon the issue in hopes of preparing the child for any future experiences with a similar affliction.

The layout and plan for the event was explained to me as I walked into the main auditorium. Immediately after identifying myself as a volunteer, I was ushered over to the far end of the room to the dentist station and asked to make the gift bags that consisted of the brush, toothpaste, and floss. Whilst filling out the bags, I engaged in a conversation with Dr. Uday Parikh about his profession and involvement with BAPS. He explained that he, like quite a few of the doctors present, weren't actually part of BAPS, but knew a good bit about the movement and strongly supported many of its activities. Thus, he, and his wife, had volunteered their Saturday afternoon to assist the

awareness day event. Similar to the HTA health fair, I posed a few questions that were aimed at discerning what people understood the event to be. These questions were:

1. 1. What is your general perception of this event? Is it beneficial for the community and is it a necessary topic of discussion?
2. 2. What can you say of the efforts of BAPS in holding this event?

These questions were neutral in tone so that the individual was not led towards describing the event as either social service or *sevā*. As the hours passed, I increasingly posed these questions to nearby doctors and garnered their responses. Overall, the responses tended to prove similar to the ones received at the HTA. Due to the decent percentage of non-BAPS affiliated doctors at the event, the typical answer for the initial question was along pragmatic lines. Nearly every answer touched upon the rising problems of obesity, inactivity, and laziness amongst American children. For the doctors, there remains a desperate need to reach American children and inform them of the dire consequences of living a slovenly lifestyle; BAPS is filling this need. By reaching out to local parents and kids by providing useful information via innovative means, BAPS has proven successful in addressing a topic of great relevance and importance. The second question tended to be answered by looking at BAPS as a socially active organization as opposed to a religious organization. For example, responses tended to highlight that BAPS Charities had a long historical precedent of engaging in all kinds of service projects on local, national, and international levels. Furthermore, BAPS was again labeled as being extremely pragmatic; interviewees stated that although BAPS emphasized the need of spirituality and religious values, it also understood that people required guidance and assistance in other avenues of life. Thus, these individuals reasoned that BAPS is able to provide support in improving an

individual holistically. Additionally, the doctors tended to stress that BAPS is motivated by pure altruistic humanism. When BAPS sees a need and believes that it can be of assistance, it puts forth a total effort behind its dedicated volunteers and *satsangis*. As such, BAPS has become an organization with a reputation of performing selfless service.

Here, again, there are multiple possible interpretations of the collected data. Like at HTA, there was not any real mention of *sevā* or any other Hindu concepts related to service. The most obvious explanation for this is both that numerous doctors were non-BAPS individuals and that the particular event was not publicly marketed as such.¹⁴ Although it was mentioned above that some of the doctors are quite knowledgeable about BAPS despite not being members, this knowledge tends to be limited to the service aspect of BAPS; little is known about Swāminārāyan philosophy or metaphysics. Thus, it follows that these doctors would logically highlight the service element of the BAPS organization that they are familiar with. Another interpretation is that BAPS, like HTA, understands that non-*satsangis* will come if they feel a sense of comfort and invitation. One way that BAPS successfully accomplished this was by reaching out to local Indian doctors and dentists that already knew of BAPS through their colleagues and patients. In doing so, BAPS was able to spread news of the awareness day through both formal, such as on their official website, and informal, such as through the health professional grapevine, mediums. Thus the turnout potential was greatly increased.¹⁵ Furthermore, the precedent set by BAPS Charities since the 1970s is indication enough

¹⁴ The international BAPS Charities website also doesn't cover or mention the concept of *sevā*. Although there is no mention of "social service", there is usage of terms such as "humanitarian service" and "selfless service".

¹⁵ Overall, the event brought in roughly 200 children.

that the service wing has never limited its assistance to particular groups of people; those that are in need, regardless of geographical location or ethnicity, will receive aid.

Interpretations aside, however, the first portion of my fieldwork, participant observation at two different health fairs organized by two different organizations, found that service was being performed with little reference to the concept of *sevā* found in the Hindu tradition. Alternately, it was social service, of a secular nature, that was commonly appealed to in responses by the volunteers, professionals, and visitors at these events. It is my estimation, however, that these results are far too simplistic in truly delineating why both these organizations perform service. The second portion of my research, detailed interviews with leaders from both Atlanta temples, will show that there is indeed an underlying philosophy that intimately links the services performed and the Hindu concepts of *sevā* and *sāadhanā*.

Deep Analysis: Avoiding Superficialities

The findings at these events lead to a number of questions. Why do explicitly Hindu organizations refuse to appeal to Hindu foundational concepts of service such as *sevā* and *dāna*? Why are there new types of service, such as blood drives and food can drives, that are being taken up by American Hindu groups that aren't as prevalent in India?¹⁶ Moreover why does western language that is associated with these service activities, such as “community service” and “humanitarianism”, get employed? A simple response to these queries might be to just summarize these idiosyncrasies as forms of mimesis. As these Hindu communities become acculturated, they find that American

¹⁶ Vasudha Narayanan. “Sacred Land, Sacred Service: Hindu Adaptations to the American Landscape,” in *A Nation of Religions: The Politics of Pluralism in Multireligious America*, ed. Stephen Prothero (University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 154-156.

forms of social service are worth imitating, perhaps because they serve as a means to community acceptance.

This response, however, although offering a plausible rationale, does not take into consideration the different levels of meaning attached to any diaspora that is being analyzed. As Professor Steven Vertovec mentions, studies of diasporic communities can too often create a binary between the “authentic” tradition that existed on the Indian subcontinent and the “deviation” that has come to exist in different parts of the world.¹⁷ A second element to consider is that this approach naturally paints the diaspora as a mere passive object upon which the new host country can act upon. Rather there is a deep dynamic of give and take that is at play between diaspora and host. Both attempt to influence the other. Thus both are agential.¹⁸ This is a more balanced approach to the questions of interest in this section. It must be kept in mind that Hindu groups abroad tend to encounter different contextually based issues from Hindu groups in India, although some of these issues may be shared. At the most basic level, these differences stem from the fact that Hindus in the diaspora are required to know and be able to explain aspects of Hinduism that they were not expected to in India. This requires sources that will provide systematic and uniform information “bytes” that can help non-Hindus better grasp the faith of their new neighbors. Often times, these bytes are created and offered by Hindu diasporic temples.¹⁹

¹⁷ Steven Vertovec. *The Hindu Diaspora: Comparative Patterns* (London: Routledge Publishing, 2000), 1.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 156-158.

¹⁹ Karen Pechelis Prentiss, “The Pattern of Hinduism and Hindu Temple Building in the U.S,” Pluralism Project, http://www.pluralism.org/articles/pechelis_hindu_temples (accessed Oct 10, 2012).

Other dynamics such as lack of resources can also come into play. At Hindu temples in America, the temple priest, for example, may be expected to undertake far greater and varied responsibilities than he might normally undertake in India. These responsibilities can include learning multiple languages to accommodate the multitude of visitors to the temple and performing rituals at the temple which would normally be performed in the home in India.²⁰ These are necessary adaptations required of a diaspora that has likely migrated from a location of religious majority to one of minute religious minority. In a constant process of self-definition and adaptation, the Hindu diaspora is forced to identify those elements which are regarded as essential so that they can be safeguarded in the face of foreign religious elements and culture.

Different Hindu groups identify different core beliefs and practices and attempt to abide by these more conservatively than those practices and beliefs that they deem nominal. What has been considered core and nominal, however, can only be verified through the performance of ethnographic research, a practice that is becoming far more prevalent within the western academy. Through ethnography, one is able to note the structures that constitute the habitus of particular diaspora. This habitus illuminates what a diaspora has considered essential; it also shows what adaptations have been made to accommodate a new contextual setting.²¹ Thus, the ethnographic approach is employed here. Through this approach, a deep foundation for the performance of *sevā* did emerge and successfully challenge the initial offering of two passive Hindu communities that had mimicked a widespread American practice of social service.

²⁰ Vasudha Narayanan, "Hinduism in America," 26-27 (received through personal communication).

²¹ Steven Vertovec, "Three Meanings of 'Diaspora', Exemplified among South Asian Religions" *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 6 (1997): 27-28.

Getting to the Heart: Behind the Public Face

This section will follow the format of the previous one; data collected from the Hindu Temple of Atlanta will be presented first followed by that collected from the BAPS temple in Lilburn. Prior to getting to the actual interviews, however, it is necessary to cover why certain individuals were selected from each research site.

At the crux of my project is determining the theological and philosophical underpinnings of bhakti-based *sevā* that appears in the form of social service. These underpinnings are needed to delineate what motivates certain Hindu groups to perform the substantial *sevā* that they undertake. Thus, the best individuals to sit with for interviews are those that both are heavily involved with the temple service projects and have a sizeable knowledge base regarding the theology or philosophy that the two groups subscribe to. In presenting these two requirements, there is already an understanding that most, if not all, interviewees will be adults and leaders within each temple. Younger individuals, such as children or teenagers, are more unlikely to have deep philosophical knowledge that could explain the purpose behind performing *sevā*. Nonetheless, taking into consideration that both the BAPS temple and HTA have classes and resources to educate the youth on Indian history and philosophy, I posed the question at each temple to determine who would be most viable for the interviews. Yet, I received the response that the experience and knowledge of senior and prominent leaders would suit the project best. With this information, it was decided upon to sit with four board members or leaders from the HTA. Three of these, Dr. Sujatha Reddy, Dr. Ravi Sarma, and Dr. Krishna Mohan, were able to sit and conduct an official interview. The fourth individual, Mrs. Sarma, Dr. Sarma's wife, spoke with me in brief regarding some of the individuals they have worked with, in conjunction with the temple,

in completing large and small scale *sevā* projects. At the BAPS temple, interviews were conducted with three *sādhus*, or Hindu monks, and two prominent devotees. These *sādhus*, namely Munitilakdas, Anupamdass, and Shantmurtidas, were chosen, in addition to the reasons given above, because of either their extensive involvement with the Lilburn temple or extensive involvement with the Lilburn temple and other BAPS temples across the United States. The two devotees, Hiten Patel and Paresh Patel, also had extensive experience with the administrative and service arms of the Lilburn temple. Thus, selection of interviewees was a decision made in an attempt to get the best relevant information.

Serving Man is Serving God

The HTA interviews were conducted over a two-day period spanning September 29-30. The first interview was done with Dr. Krishna Mohan, a former president of HTA from 1995-1996. He was recommended as a good candidate for interviewing by both Ravi Sarma and current HTA vice-president Narender Reddy. The interview was based on a list of questions that had been emailed to each of the interviewees prior to the conversation.²² Here, three main sections will be presented. The first two, consisting of the rationale behind the performance of *sevā* and a short summary on the relation between performance of *sevā* and possible resulting spiritual gains up to, but not limited to, salvation, will be based upon the responses of the interviewees. Finally, an analysis of these responses will be given.

Prior to sitting down to the first interview, Dr. Mohan cordially gave me a tour of the temple grounds and explained in detail the two temple shrines and the purposes of

²² The rationale for sending out the questions earlier was to elicit the best responses from each interviewee as opposed to each individual stumbling over a spontaneous response.

the other buildings and facilities. Thereafter, Dr. Mohan began the interview with a brief overview of where service fits into the mission of the HTA. Initially, he reasoned, the HTA was envisioned to provide worship services, religious education, and charity. Here, charity can be equated to *sevā*, a fact that Dr. Mohan quickly pointed out. When pressed for the rationale behind this temple mission, he replied with one simple statement:

Manava sevā is Madhava sevā²³

This short phrase, a general one that can be found in the ideologies of numerous Hindu groups that engage in service, translates to service to man is also service to God. This is, unsurprisingly, the same rationale that is found on the Ramakrishna Mission webpage. When pressed to elaborate, Dr. Mohan responded with the following well-known Hindu *shlokas* from the *Taittiriya Upanisad*:

Pitru devo bhava, Matru devo bhava, Atithi devo bhava²⁴

Translating simply to father, mother, and guests are God, these verses are prevalent amongst numerous Hindu groups, often being taught to children from a very young age. Initially, this response was a bit puzzling because of its overwhelming simplicity. Dr. Mohan further clarified that the temple was engaging in *sevā* because of these specific verses that are found in the ancient Hindu scriptures. As such, they serve as a form of *sādhanā* that validates the *sevā* that the temple undertakes. I couldn't help but wonder if the other members would buttress Dr. Mohan's viewpoint. It didn't take long to affirm that they did. In the two interviews the following day, Dr. Sarma mentioned

²³ Personal interview with former temple president Dr. B. Krishna Mohan

²⁴ Ibid.

that the notion of *sevā* is deeply embedded in Hindu philosophy. More specifically, he referenced the following common sayings:

Daridra Nārāyana, Mānava *sevā* is Mādhava *sevā*, and Nar *sevā* Nārāyana *sevā*²⁵

These two sayings, in addition to one already laid out by Dr. Mohan, can also be found in the Sai and Ramakrishna movements. Dr. Sarma then elaborated by pointing out the Hindu principles of *karma*, or action, and *dharma*, or truth/duty/righteousness. These two concepts combined actually exhort individuals to engage in service of those that are in need. Furthermore, they should instill feelings of empathy within the individual performing the *sevā*. Dr. Sujatha Reddy presented a unique perspective because her *sevā* coincides with her own profession as a general doctor. Throughout the interview with Dr. Reddy, it became quite apparent that she considers her profession of helping patients as equivalent to the *sevā* she performs during the temple health fairs. The two realms of profession and service, for her, are not mutually exclusive. For example, she elucidated that often times throughout her days at the hospital, which can last fifteen hours, patients that are new to the country and without insurance or much financial stability often either come to see her personally or contact her for help. At times such as these, when there is little to be gained financially, Dr. Reddy communicated that she remembers that service of these people is also service of God. Keeping this in mind, she helps all that come to her. Dr. Reddy explained that she abides by this same mentality when taking part in the temple health fairs. The health fair is designed to provide services at a nominal fee so that more people can attend and attain needed assistance. Thus, lab blood work that would normally cost over

²⁵ Personal interview with former temple president and leader of temple services Dr. Ravi Sharma.

six hundred dollars is offered for merely twenty-five dollars. Even then, some of the visitors do not have the means to pay; in situations such as these, Dr. Reddy personally picks up the outstanding balance. Not a single person is turned away. This, according to Dr. Reddy, is *sevā*; her service to man is considered as service to God.²⁶ For her, *sevā* isn't performed with an expectation of attaining *moksha*. Rather, it is performed with the singular understanding that it is beneficial for the recipient. By helping and serving these people, there is also service of God. Overall, all three of these interviewees agree that they have based *sevā* activities on foundational Hindu precepts and scriptural concepts. As such, these acts of *sevā* have an intimate connection to *sādhana* and, although they are not necessarily performed at the HTA with an end goal of heightened spiritual status or liberation in mind, can potentially lead to spiritual advancement as well.

This spiritual advancement can occur only if *sevā* is performed as suggested by the Hindu scriptural verses above. More specifically, for this service to qualify as *sevā*, it must be performed in a specific manner. First, the individual must perform the *sevā* without any internal expectations or desires. Otherwise, it is an incomplete *sevā* and there can there be no spiritual gains. Dr. Sarma clarified this point with two Hindu scriptural references. The first was the story of Sabari from the *Rāmāyana*. Dr. Sarma pointed out that Sabari has patiently awaited the arrival of Rama at her residence. Here, she served Rama lovingly and failed to demand, even once, for any material or spiritual rewards. The second reference, one that Dr. Reddy also made, is to the principle of *karma yoga* in the *Bhagavad Gita*. According to this principle, Dr. Sarma explained, only actions that are performed without any expectations escape the accumulation of *karma* and lead an individual towards salvation. Thus, any *sevā* performed by the members of

²⁶ Personal interview with current leader of community services at the HTA Dr. Sujatha Reddy.

the temple without any expectation can bring about a variety of spiritual gains. One such gain is the eradication of *vāsanās*, or bad qualities or character drawbacks.²⁷ The eventual gain, however, can be salvation. All three interviewees were quite insistent that there is definitely the possibility to perform *sevā* and attain *moksha*. One does not, however, perform the *sevā* with this end goal in mind. One serves, at the HTA, to merely please God. Furthermore, performance of *sevā* as social service has just as much potential potency as more traditional practices such as *arcana* or personal *bhakti* rituals.²⁸ In the end, the acts of services and the resulting gains are all dependent on the mindset of the individual. If he is able to perform *sevā* as prescribed by scripturally based tenets then there is definitely the potential to attain salvation.

The question that remained, however, is whether this ideal of selfless service is truly attainable. Dr. Mohan and Dr. Sarma were a bit hesitant to indicate whether all the volunteers in the temple were able to achieve this ideal. They did admit, at the very least, that they had worked with some individuals who truly did serve selflessly. Dr. Reddy also admitted that often times it is hard to obtain volunteers to come and give assistance at health fairs. Certain doctors, for example, have to be constantly cajoled into dedicating a few hours of time for a good cause. Yet, she also admitted to working with fellow doctors that were willing to approach her to help out at health service events. It was these individuals, she noted, that merely wanted to help to serve the people. To serve in such a manner is rare, although not impossible. This was made pointedly clear by all three board members at the HTA.

²⁷ Interviews with Dr. Reddy, Dr. Sarma, and Dr. Mohan.

²⁸ Ibid.

What emerges from these interviews is a general connection between what some might consider pan-Hindu texts, such as the *Bhagavad Gita*, and the *sevā* activities conducted at the HTA. Here, *sādhanā* is reminiscent of that found amidst the *arcana* practice of the ISKCON movement. Certain texts in the ISKCON movement, such as the *Caitanya Caritamṛta*, are held to be authoritative sources according to which rituals should be conducted. Here at the HTA, however, pan-Hindu texts were referenced by interviewees in both validating the practice of *sevā* as well as tying the practice back to the greater Hindu tradition. This is not, however, anomalous if taking into consideration that the HTA is non-denominational. As such, it is understandable that the HTA doesn't ardently adhere to sectarian texts as does ISKCON. Moreover, due to the presence of dual shrines at the HTA, it is likely that devotees come from multiple *sampradayas*, thereby bringing different perspectives regarding the concept of *sevā*. As such, the reference to well-known Hindu figures such as Sabari by interviewees is not as unexpected as it may have been at a sectarian temple. Regardless, what does emerge is that the HTA is well aware of a Hindu basis for the service that it conducts. Furthermore, there is also an acceptance of the fact that the scriptural references to *sevā* and the resulting fruits have the potential to still prove applicable today. Thus, there emerges an overarching understanding of *sevā* that, with the *sādhanā* provided in scripture, has a transformative power. If a devotee is willing to perform *sevā* properly, then this *sevā* becomes a means to the end of salvation.

Service to God is Service to Man

The interviews at the BAPS temple in Lilburn were conducted in the same time frame as those conducted at the HTA. As with the interviewees at the HTA, a list of question was emailed out to the potential interviewees at the BAPS temple. These questions were

very similar to ones dedicated to the interviews at the HTA. One notable exception that did arise during the course of the interviews at the BAPS temple, however, was the pointed question regarding accusations by a few scholars regarding BAPS connections with Hindu nationalist groups and ideologies. This question was not unfounded; it was based primarily off of the work of two scholars, Prema Kurien, professor of sociology at Syracuse University, and Edward Simpson, senior lecturer at SOAS. Both of these scholars have explicitly portrayed the BAPS movement as either having intimate connections with Hindu nationalist groups or espousing Hindu nationalist agendas. More specifically, and of particular interest to this thesis, Simpson has written about the BAPS relief efforts following the 2001 earthquake in the Kutch area. In his book chapter on the subject, Simpson mentions that BAPS reconstructed villages with a Hindu-centric agenda that placated the needs of all Hindu residents by providing the best available facilities; non-Hindus, primarily Muslims, were left to the outskirts of the town with dilapidated homes.²⁹ This was actually one of the first scholarly instances in which the *sevā* performed by BAPS was labeled as nationalistic in nature. Thus, at least one of the interview questions reflected this scholarship to both gauge the internal awareness of such scholarship and measure any local response. Otherwise, however, both sets of questions were nearly identical.

In terms of personnel, the three *sādhus* were specifically chosen to monitor potential variety in the responses. Two of the *sādhus*, Munitilakdas and Anupamdas, were originally born and raised in the United States and UK prior to choosing the path of renunciation. The third *sādhu*, Shantmurtidas, was born and raised in India, but has

²⁹ Edward Simpson, “‘Hindutva’ as a Rural Planning Paradigm in Post-Earthquake Gujarat,” in *The Politics of Cultural Mobilization in India*, ed. Vernon Hewitt, Andrew Wyatt, and John Zavos (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004), 156.

spent over fifteen years as a *sādhū* in the southeast region of the United States. All three were interviewed prior to the other two devotees. Nonetheless, all the responses were similar in nature and the rationale behind *sevā* emerged very clearly. To present it in a straightforward manner, this section, while following the rationale, connection to salvation, and analysis model above, will also divide the rationale portion into historical precedence, scriptural reference, and ontology.

The first basis of performing *sevā* in the BAPS movement is historical precedence that spans from the birth of Swāminārāyan (1781) to the present leadership of Pramukh Swami Maharaj.³⁰ The lives of Swāminārāyan and the subsequent six spiritual leaders of the BAPS movement have been closely documented and numerous examples of service emerge from this documentation. Specifically, these interviews revealed two examples from the life of Swāminārāyan that are commonly cited as precedent for *sevā* in BAPS. The first anecdote comes from the main scripture from the Swāminārāyan movement, known as the *Vachanāmṛut*.³¹ This text, containing the closely documented spiritual discourses of Swāminārāyan during his lifetime, is divided according to the different geographical locations that the discourses took place at. As such, the first section is based in the city of Gadhada in Gujarat, India. In the tenth *Vachanāmṛut* of that section, Swāminārāyan recounts an incident from his teenage years during his travels throughout India. Whilst in transit from Venkatadri to Setubandh Rameshwar, Swāminārāyan, at that time known as Nilkanth Varni, encountered a learned ascetic by the name of Sevakram. Sevakram was lying helplessly on the side of road, suffering from a severe bout of dysentery. Nilkanth Varni, seeing that nobody was

³⁰ Interview with Sādhu Shantmurtidas

³¹ *Vachanāmṛut* can denote the entire scripture or each individual discourse (273 in total) comprising the scripture.

willing to nurse the ascetic back to health, took the task upon himself. He prepared a bed of banana leaves measuring one-and-a-half feet high under a nearby tree.

Thereafter, Nilkanth Varni nursed Sevakram back to health by providing him food daily and regularly changing his bedding which would periodically become sullied due to the passage of blood. For two months, Nilkanth Varni served Sevakram in this manner. Yet, when he saw that Sevakram was fully recovered, he left without asking for any sort of compensation.³²

The second anecdote occurred during the construction of the Swāminārāyan temple in Gadhada in 1825. At that time, Swāminārāyan advised each of his *sādhus* and *satsangis* to carry back one stone, which could be used in the temple construction, upon returning from bathing at the nearby Ghela River. Accordingly, each day the *sādhus* and *satsangis* would obediently bring one stone on their heads while returning from the river. To emphasize the importance of this *sevā*, Swāminārāyan also personally brought a stone upon his head while returning from the river. Seeing this, the devotees and *sādhus* became reinvigorated in their *sevā* efforts.³³

Incidents such as these are widespread throughout the life of Swāminārāyan. Subsequent leaders of BAPS, starting from Gunatitanand Swami and continuing up to Pramukh Swami Maharaj, have similar life anecdotes that show the importance of *sevā* within the movement. Although there is not enough space here to cover all of these, at least one example from the life of the current leader, Pramukh Swami Maharaj, will suffice to show that the commitment to *sevā* in BAPS has stayed consistent since the inception of the Swāminārāyan movement.

³² *Vachanāmṛut*Gadhada Section 1, Number 10.

³³ Personal interview with Sādhu Shantmurtidas.

This incident arose during the interview with Sādhu Anupamdas. It took place in September of 2002, after the major earthquake in the Kutch area in Western India. Within hours of the 7.9 scale earthquake, BAPS, under the leadership of Pramukh Swami Maharaj, had mobilized volunteers with equipment and rations to the affected area. Multiple relief agencies were also on the scene, distributing supplies to those in need. Similarly, Pramukh Swami Maharaj had the goal to help these individuals as well as he could. This meant that his volunteers would have to reach levels of care that the other agencies were not focused on reaching. For example, most of the agencies that had arrived were handing out food packets to those that could come visit their base camps. Initially, BAPS had also planned on giving pre-packed food, a feasible project considering the number of BAPS centers in the surrounding area. Yet, Pramukh Swami Maharaj immediately called the *sādhus* leading the relief efforts and asked for freshly made food to be served in place of the food packets. As a result, 45,000 hot meals were made and distributed daily.³⁴ His rationale for such a decision was twofold. First, hot food is far more comforting to people in general, much less those that are in great distress and pain. Second, to truly serve someone means to serve them with love and respect. Thus, Pramukh Swami asked for hot meals, even though producing fresh food daily on such a scale is far more time and labor intensive than putting together food packets. Moreover, at 11:30 pm every night, Pramukh Swami would call the *sādhus* and ask for constant updates regarding the status of the affected people. On one of these calls, he raised a concern regarding some people that wouldn't come to the camps to partake in food distribution. He reasoned that these people were previously affluent and well-regarded in the society and would thus feel embarrassed to stand in food lines with

³⁴ Personal interview with Sādhu Anupamdas.

the common populace. Thus, he asked that fresh food be packed into metal containers and personally delivered to these individuals wherever they had taken up temporary residence. This, Sādhu Anupamdas emphasized, is a true testament to how Pramukh Swami Maharaj, in spite of his age, has continued to remain dedicated to *sevā*.

A second foundation for *sevā* in the BAPS movement is based upon the internal scriptures. The two most important scriptures, *Vachanāmṛut* and *Shikshapatri*, give some credence to the concept of *sevā*. The *Shikshapatri*, a scripture enumerating the moral injunctions given by Swāminārāyan to his followers, was written in 1825. This scripture is structured in such a manner as to elucidate both general moral injunctions for all of Swāminārāyan's followers and specific injunctions that apply to a particular group of followers.³⁵ In the section designated for the male *satsangis*, there is a verse that explicitly supports the performance of *sevā*:

My disciples shall serve their parents, preceptors, and ailing persons till they live, to the best of their ability.³⁶

In the *Vachanāmṛut*, one of the most relevant instances occurs in the second Gadhada section, number 25. In this particular *Vachanāmṛut*, a connection between *sevā* and spiritual progression is made through an exchange between Swāminārāyan and his senior *sādhu*:

Then Muktanand Swami asked, "If one has such strong worldly desires and wishes to eradicate them, by what means can they be eradicated?" Shriji Maharaj replied, "Just as Uka Khachar has become addicted to serving the *sādhus*, in the same way, if one becomes addicted to serving God and his *Sant* to the extent that one would not be able to stay for even a moment

³⁵ The specific order is householders, married women, widows, acharyas, rulers, and ascetics.

³⁶ *Shikshapatri*, verse 139.

without serving them, then all of the impure desires in one's *antahkaran* will be destroyed".³⁷

Here, the idiosyncrasies of the BAPS understanding of *sevā* start to emerge. While the *Shikshapatri* verse explicitly advises householder devotees to engage in physical service, it is the *Vachanāmrut* reference that begins the process of explaining why and how service should be performed. Specifically, *sevā* is that which is directed towards God and his *Sant*, two ontological entities that will be discussed hereafter.

The Swāminārāyan ontology rounds out the theological foundations for *sevā* in BAPS. At the basis of this ontology are five eternal entities, *jiva*, *ishvar*, *māya*, *brahma*, and *parabrahma*.³⁸ Of these entities, *brahma* and *parabrahma* are of particular importance here because they are integral for understanding the structure of BAPS today and the activities undertaken by the group. Out of the five eternal entities accepted by the Swaminarayan faith, *parabrahma* is explicitly the most important. *Parabrahma*, also known as *purushottam* and *paramatma*, is the ontological entity for God. *Parabrahma* in the Swāminārāyan movement is understood to be Swāminārāyan. As such, the actions and words of Swāminārāyan hold an exalted place within the movement, and followers are wholly expected to abide by the injunctions and philosophy laid out by Swāminārāyan during his lifetime. Furthermore, the ability to act according to the commands of Swāminārāyan constitutes far greater gains than the immediate results of any other action. For example, a member of BAPS that performs *sevā* because it is mentioned in internal scriptures actually engages in a *sādhanā*. As a *sādhanā*, the act has the ability to help the individual progress spiritually. Perhaps a

³⁷ *Vachanāmrut* Gadhada Section 2, Number 25.

³⁸ Hanna Kim, "Being Swaminarayan: The Ontology and Significance of Belief in the Construction of a Gujarati Diaspora" (Ph.D. Diss., Columbia University, 2001), 318.

query that emerges, then, is whether there ever emerges a conflict between a constantly modernizing world and injunctions that were laid down multiple centuries ago. Put another way, are the teachings of Swāminārāyan, which were recorded primarily in rural Gujarat in the early 19th century, still perfectly applicable to a movement today that has become an international movement and openly embraced urbanization and numerous technological advances? The short answer seems to be yes.

The rationale behind this response refers directly back to the Swāminārāyan ontology. The entity of *brahma*, known also as *akshar*, is held within BAPS to have two distinct forms. The first is the *nirakar*, or formless, emanation which serves as the abode of *parabrahma* known as *akshardham*. The second is the *sakar*, or with form, emanation which is forever present on the earth. In this form, *akshar* has the sole purpose of turning humans towards worshipping *parabrahma* through him.³⁹ In essence, taking into consideration the relationship between *akshar* and *parabrahma*, serving *akshar* is equivalent to serving *parabrahma*.⁴⁰ Accordingly, as the words and commands of Swāminārāyan are taken to be forms of *sāadhanā*, so too are those of *akshar*. Thus, referring back to the original dilemma of religious injunctions and a constantly modernizing world, the entity of *akshar* is the pivotal cog in making this a possibility. *Akshar* is the only being with the ability to interpret and explain the teachings of

³⁹ Ibid., 320.

⁴⁰ This principle is found throughout the *Vachanāmṛt*, with Gadhada Section 1, Numbers 27 and 37 being just two examples.

Swāminārāyan correctly.⁴¹ In BAPS, there has been a lineage of spiritual leaders that have all internally been understood to be emanations of *akshar*. Today, that emanation is understood by members of BAPS to be Pramukh Swami Maharaj. As *akshar*, Pramukh Swami Maharaj has the right and ability to enjoin all members of BAPS. One of his commands is to engage in *sevā* as social service. He has encapsulated this command in one short phrase:

In the joy of others lies our own⁴²

Through service, one is able to attain satisfaction. Moreover, through performance of service at the behest of *akshar's* commands, one is able to progress spiritually according to the BAPS movement.

The historical precedence, scriptural references, and Swāminārāyan ontology combine to form a very strong internal motivation for the *sevā* initiative. In the BAPS movement, the lives of Swāminārāyan and subsequent spiritual leaders are paradigmatic; they have paved an ideal path that straddles both *nivrutti*, detachment or disengagement from worldly activities and pursuits, and *pravrutti*, engaging in worldly activities and affairs. Thus, *satsangis* in the BAPS movement closely study their lives and attempt to mimic them; this itself entails an unspoken form of *sāadhanā*. Adding on to this process of emulation is the necessity for all *satsangis* to study, understand, and imbibe the concepts and teachings of the movement's scriptures. Texts such as the *Vachanāmṛut*, *Swāmi ni Vato*, and *Shikshapatṛi* are seen as the direct commands of Swāminārāyan and his subsequent lineage. They are, therefore, explicit forms of

⁴¹ Personal interview with Sādhu Munitilakdas.

⁴² Ibid.

sāadhanā that buttress the implicit *sāadhanā* that emerges from the study and emulation of the lives of this lineage.

Finally, there emerges the role of *akshar* in both interpreting the commands of Swāminārāyan and relaying these teachings to the *sādhus* and *satsangis*. *Akshar*, also referred to as the *Sant* and *Satpurush* in the *Vachanāmrut*, has continued to stay present on the earth following Swāminārāyan's life, according to BAPS philosophy. Accordingly, Pramukh Swami Maharaj is the current form of *akshar* and therefore has the ability to give additional commands to the *satsangis*. These commands, known as *āgnā*, also emerge as forms of *sāadhanā*. They can range from simple *niyams*, or prescribed habits of behavior, such as giving up alcohol or similar addictions, to complex, such as choosing the life of asceticism and becoming a *sādhu*. Yet, eventually they lead to the exact same outcome.

These commands serve two distinct purposes. The first is that they serve as forms of purification. *Satsangis* will point out that the marked purity of Pramukh Swami Maharaj is a reflection of his deep commitment to the *niyams* given by Swāminārāyan for his *sādhus*. Thus, they reason that by taking part in physical and mental austerities they are able to eradicate all desires and impure thoughts.⁴³ This becomes a necessary requirement to achieving a *brahmroop*, or form similar to *brahma* or *akshar*, status that signifies readiness for attaining *Akshardham*, the abode of Swāminārāyan.

The second purpose, by far the more important one, is that by following the commands of Pramukh Swami Maharaj one is able to attain salvation. This was a point that emerged in the interviews with all the *sādhus* and *satsangis*. The process is both arduous and multifaceted, but the end result is the attainment of *moksha*. First, a

⁴³ Ibid., 413.

member of BAPS must approach a *sevā* with the right mindset. Like it was mentioned at the HTA, intentionality is foundational for any type of service. If an individual serves merely for personal gain then there can be no spiritual progression. Instead, a person must serve with the sole purpose of attaining the *rājipo*, or happiness, of Swāminārāyan and Pramukh Swami Maharaj.⁴⁴ If he is able to serve with this intention, then his actions initiate spiritual progression. The second aspect is the performance of *sevā* in line with the *āgnā* given by Swāminārāyan and Pramukh Swami Maharaj. For example, the BAPS temple in Lilburn was the result of direct *āgnā* from Pramukh Swami. In the early 2000s, he advised the local *sādhus* to purchase the land and start construction of a traditional *shikarbadh mandir*.⁴⁵ Thus the temple that stands today is a symbol of *sāadhanā*-based *sevā* that earned the *rājipo* of Pramukh Swami. The final facet is the sustaining of the first two points. *Sevā* is a continuous activity that is wrought with difficulties and trials. *Sevā* that is akin to social service has an even higher likelihood of difficulties due to the presence of the external agents mentioned in the first chapter. Thus, often the most trying aspect of performing proper *sevā* in BAPS is to sustain the end goals of earning *rājipo* and staying within *āgnā* and not allow any ulterior motives to emerge.

What emerges, then, is an inversion of the principle of serving man is akin to serving God that was found in the Ramakrishna Mission, HTA, and, at times, in the Sai Movement. In BAPS, it is service to God and *akshar* that then leads to service to man. Due to it being the *āgnā* of Swāminārāyan and subsequent leaders to engage in *sevā* as social service, the members of BAPS have enthusiastically taken up the task by

⁴⁴ Personal interviews with Sādhu Anupamdas, Paresh Patel, and Hiten Patel.

⁴⁵ Personal interview with Sādhu Shantmurtidas.

serving on a large scale. At a superficial level, they are engaging in the service of mankind, a fact attested to by the numerous projects undertaken by BAPS charities. At a deeper level, however, these *sādhus* and *satsangis* are steadily moving towards *moksha*. Yet, even in BAPS the performance of *sevā* is not completed with the end goal of *moksha* in mind. Instead, it is the *rājipo* of the present form of *akshar* that remains the only ideal motivation for any service activities. It is understood that *sevā* performed selflessly, with the aim of only pleasing *akshar*, does result in spiritual gain. Through *sevā* as social service performed in this manner, these individuals eventually attain the ultimate end.

An Addition to the *Sevā* Dialectic

It has been shown repeatedly in this chapter that there is much that needs to be taken into consideration when analyzing the Hindu practice of *sevā*. In particular, when Hindu *bhakti* groups engage in *sevā*, they tend to do so according to a foundation of internal theological and philosophical concepts that are understood to be a form of *sādhanā*. This can hold true even for *bhakti* organizations that have local chapters in the diaspora. As shown above, both the HTA and BAPS groups continue to engage in *sevā* in the diaspora whilst appealing to traditional pan-Hindu or *sampradāyik* literature. Thus, even though some forms of *sevā* as social service such as blood and canned food drives are somewhat novel, they are still performed with the same rationale as more traditional forms of *sevā*. As such, these diasporic communities do indeed showcase the agency that Steven Vertovec alluded to earlier. They do not display the mimesis that Hacker explicitly referred to in his study of Neo-Vedanta traditions. Rather, they seem to adjust to their context, accommodating some of the prevalent cultural practices of the

new host whilst simultaneously keeping hold of foundational Hindu concepts and teachings. Newer practices, therefore, become part of an older tradition of *sevā*.

CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSION: FINAL REFLECTIONS

Finishing Thoughts

In this thesis, a number of novel observations and points have been made regarding a relatively unexplored topic in the western academic study of Hinduism. First, that the extant scholarship on *sevā* as social service, ranging in authorship from the mid-1950s unto the present, has tended to focus on one philosophical school of Hinduism, *Advaita* Vedanta. Yet, even the analysis of social service in *Sankaracarya's Advaita* and more modern Neo-*Advaita* groups, such as the Ramakrishna Mission, has undergone continuous reinterpretation over the last several decades.¹ Today, there remains no consensus on how ethical action and social service fit in to *Advaita*. Furthermore, the idea that there exists a binary of traditional *Advaita* and Neo-*Advaita* has been challenged.

Second, the performance of *sevā* as social service is also undertaken by numerous *bhakti sampradāyas*. Yet, the rationale for performing this type of *sevā* remains varied even amongst these *bhakti* groups. Devotees in Sai and MAM, for example, appeal to their charismatic leaders for direction on how to perform this type of *sevā*. These followers undertake *sevā* because it is a command of their leader. This process of abiding by the commands from a legitimate source, be it a figure or, in other *bhakti* groups, a number of texts, results in the creations of *sādhanā*. *Sādhanā* is able to qualify social service as *sevā*, thereby transforming it into an activity which can bring about spiritual progression for the performer of the *sevā*. There is not, however, a set

¹ Bina Gupta, for example, has argued against Paul Hacker by supporting the place of ethical actions in the *Advaita* School. She maintains that good actions are necessary to lead an individual towards *brahman* realization. Only after attaining this state of realization does one understand that all differentiation and empiricism, previously understood to be real, is illusory.

understanding of what *sevā* or *sādhanā* can be amongst all Hindu *bhakti* groups. As pointed out in the second chapter, *sevā* can also refer to specific periods of recitation or service activities that are undertaken to ensure the stability and future expansion of a religious organization. Similarly, *sādhanā*, although it has been understood as this transformative power by a number of different Hindu groups, has multiple meanings. Finally, it is important to clarify that although a *sevā* may be guided by *sādhanā*, the conceptualization, by devotees, of the ultimate end result of such service is also varied. For example, in the *Sri Vaisnava* movement, *arcana* results in an eternal place in both the divine abode and service of God. Thus, *arcana* is performed as *sevā* that will eventually lead to continuous *sevā* in heaven. This is quite similar to the understanding of *moksha* in the BAPS movement. If members of BAPS perform *sevā* as social service according to the *sādhanā* given by textual sources and to earn the *rājīpo* of the present form of *akshar*, then they are able to attain *Akshardham*, the abode of Swāminārāyan. Yet, even after attaining an exalted spiritual status, these liberated souls eternally remain in the *sevā* of Swāminārāyan in *Akshardham*. Thus, whereas *sevā* in the Ramakrishna Mission can lead to *moksha* as a state of realization that all is *brahman* and duality is false, *sevā* in *bhakti* movements may often mark both the means to liberation and liberation itself.

Finally, this form of *sevā* is being performed by multiple Hindu groups outside of India as well as within the subcontinent. These diasporic groups face a number of different issues that are not as prevalent in India. For example, there are questions regarding language and cultural barriers. Should *sevā* activities performed by specific temples involve the surrounding non-Hindu community? Should terms that may seem

foreign to non-Indian community members, such as *sevā* and *dāna*, be utilized? Should the connection between these service activities and Hindu concepts be publicly stated? These are all questions that Hindu groups with service activities must address in the diaspora. At times, what may emerge are different public and private fronts. The HTA, for example, makes little mention of the connection between its organized health fairs and Hinduism publicly. My research at the HTA health fair in Cumming, Georgia revealed no mention of the concepts of *sevā* or *sādhanā*. Yet, during personal interviews with the HTA board members, it became clear that the service activities undertaken by HTA are understood to be *sevā*. Additionally, ethnographic research revealed that both the HTA and BAPS temples appealed to distinct Hindu concepts as the basis for *sevā* projects. Thus, these temples show a sense of agency that can be indicative of diaspora communities in general. Although both temples undertake new projects that are not commonplace in India, such as toys-for-tots programs and regular blood drives, there remain the same underlying ideologies that motivate the *sevā*. A blood drive can be a *sādhanā*-based *sevā* just as easily as a food distribution project. Furthermore, these newer types of *sevā* can help new immigrants at the temple undergo acculturation through interaction with service volunteers from other organizations and those that are served. As such, this type of *sevā* cannot be qualified as a mimetic act. Rather, an alternate perspective is that *sādhanā* can be inclusive. Particularly in *sampradāyas* with charismatic leaders, new forms of *sevā* can emerge and continue to qualify as *sādhanā*. Furthermore, with globalization, it is likely that new forms of *sevā* will continue to develop as needs of individuals in particular contexts change.

In the introduction it was mentioned that this thesis has been written in hopes that future scholarship would be dedicated to further study of *sevā* in the *bhakti* traditions and other Hindu groups. There are many directions in which the topic of *sevā* can be taken, spanning the disciplines of religious studies, sociology, anthropology, and history. To conclude, some of these plausible future inquiries will be mentioned.

New Paths

Each of the *bhakti* movements covered in this thesis that engages in *sevā* as social service has a lengthy history regarding the internal inception and eventual development of this *sevā*. These groups, such as Sai, MAM, and BAPS, have made considerable headway outside of India, receiving recognition across the globe. Thus, one feasible scholarly project would be to trace the historical development of *sevā* in each of these movements. Of course, considering the size of each of these movements, perhaps it would be more plausible to cover each of them individually in separate projects. For example, *sevā* in the Swāminārāyan movement can be traced from the early 1800s, when Swāminārāyan involved his ascetic disciples in famine relief projects in Gujarat, up until the present time in BAPS under the leadership of Pramukh Swami Maharaj. The inception of this *sevā* initiative marked the start of a pattern of utilizing ascetics that have undertaken a life of *nivrutti*, marked primarily by renunciation, and involving them in *pravrutti*, marked by engagement in the world. This fact, that ascetics were used to perform service activities, is one of interest for the academic study of Hinduism. For multiple decades now, scholars have attempted to discern what influencing factors led Vivekananda to deploy his ascetic disciples and brothers into social service projects. Some scholars have pointed to Vivekananda's early involvement in the Brahma Samaj and Keshab Sen's insistence on sending out young men to bring

about religious and social change.² Beckerlegge, however, points out that there may have been influence from the Swāminārāyan group. Vivekananda stayed in the Gujarat region from 1891-1892 in the cities of Ahmedabad and Junagadh, two strongholds for the Swāminārāyan movement. Thus, by tracing *sevā* in the Swāminārāyan movement, there emerge other historical interactions with different Hindu figures and groups that have also engaged in this type of *sevā*.

A second direction that may be taken is a sociological one. Recently, Dr. John Zavos delivered a presentation at the European Conference for South Asian Studies in Lisbon in which he explained that the yearly event in the UK known as Sewa Day was an intertwining of both UK government policies and Hindu nationalist ideologies. More specifically, the government officials select representatives from local communities to speak on behalf of these communities. Often the local representatives for Indian communities have connections to Hindu nationalist groups such as the VHP.³ This assertion by Dr. Zavos adds to a fair amount of scholarship that has covered Hindu nationalism in the diaspora. Yet, it is one of the first instances connecting *sevā* as social service in the diaspora to Hindu nationalist ideology. Perhaps one novel avenue of inquiry would be to see if Dr. Zavos' assertion is applicable to other Hindu groups in the diaspora. Is there also the presence of Hindu nationalist ideology for Hindu groups in the United States that take part in service activities? Moreover, how does this nationalist ideology get conveyed? In the UK, it is seemingly through local community

² Gwilym Beckerlegge. *Swami Vivekananda's Legacy of Service: a Study of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006), 142-143.

³ John Zavos, "Small Acts, Big Society: Sewa and Hindu (nationalist) Identity in the UK", 4. (draft obtained with permission)

representatives. Yet, in the United States could there be another means of dissemination?⁴ Thus, there can be the application of theory to different case studies to determine if applicability exists.

There remain, then, a number of viable paths that can be taken to expand on the research and conclusions provided in this thesis. With the scholarly inquiry into Hindu *sevā* as social service in its nascent stages, this thesis is one step towards informing scholars about the prevalence of this activity. As the western academy turns more steadily to the study of *bhakti* movements, perhaps this is one topic that will generate more interest in the near future.

⁴ Prema Kurien has mentioned the role of temples in the United States in disseminating nationalist ideology. See *A Place at the Multicultural Table: the Development of an American Hinduism*.

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