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# The 'Inexhaustibility' of Jalaram Bapa:

# Narrative, Presence and Social Service in the Hindu Diaspora.

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## Abstract

Food miracles permeate the historical and contemporary Gujarati Hindu landscape, from the homeland to East Africa and throughout the wider diaspora. However, approaches to food miracles differ from one tradition to the next, and approaches to the divine or the saint can often have a direct impact upon a tradition's ethical approach to wider society. This article considers food miracles as they are more widely understood in the Hindu context, especially in the Hindu diaspora, but with a specific focus on the Jalaram Bapa tradition. By engaging both spiritually and physically in this relationship, food miracles offer a direct and personal experience of Jalaram himself. Furthermore, this presence promotes an ethical framework that draws directly upon the narratives that speak of his life, namely that of seva for all, regardless of social status or religious background.

**Keywords:** Food, Gujarat, Hinduism, Jalaram Bapa, miracle, seva.

Food miracles characterize the historical and contemporary Gujarati Hindu landscape, a landscape that extends from the homeland to East Africa and throughout the wider diaspora (Mattausch 1993, 1998; Vertovec 2000). However, approaches to food

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miracles differ from one tradition to the next. Some traditions locate them firmly in the spiritual realm; though not entirely sceptical, they tend to dismiss the possibility of physical food miracles. For example, a devotee in the International Society of Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) at Bhaktivedanta Manor near Watford, ISKCON's main centre in the UK, stated: 'The physicality of such events are not important to us here, the food is always eaten by Krishna, not necessarily in a physical way, but consciously.' (Female devotee, Bhaktivedanta Manor, 2004). Furthermore, whilst some traditions provide lengthy accounts of food miracles in their religious literature and the hagiographies and narratives of their founding saints and gurus, their religious spokespersons emphasise that miracles are not central to the devotees' religious lives (Wood 2008); as a senior Swaminarayan *sadhu* (*sādhu*—religious renunciate) explained,

> Miracles are not that important to our faith that's not to say that they do not happen, they happen all the time, but we do not highlight them, it is not something that is going to dramatically affect your faith…foster your faith in God rather than miracles, our faith is not based on miracles.
>
> (Senior sadhu, Neasden Mandir, 2007)

All the traditions that I have conducted research with (see below) accept the mode of exchange whereby the deity consumes what the devotee sets before it, leaving that which is left over for the devotees as prasad or prasadam.[2] In the Jalaram Bapa tradition in particular, food miracles are openly and fully engaged with, and Jalaram is fully present. Furthermore, as well as consuming a spiritual, immaterial portion of the offering, Jalaram will go on to physically multiply that which is left over, thus ensuring that all those present, whether they are Hindu, Muslim, Sikh or otherwise, are able to fully partake of his prasad. It is precisely this multiplication of food that underpins the tradition's ethical approach to *seva*,[3] and its commitment to 'feed the hungry irrespective of caste, creed or religion...[regarding] all with the same kindness' (Rajdev 1966 20-21).

In this respect, the presence of the saint is extremely important. Themes of the presence of Jalaram, and his food multiplications both during his life and after his death,

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[2] Sanskrit *prasāda* 'favour, grace'. It is generally understood by devotees that when one prepares and offers food to the *murti* or representation of the God/Goddess, *guru* or saint, with the requisite sense of love and devotion, it will be accepted, consumed in a non-physical manner and that which is left over, *prasad*, is believed to be of special religious significance to those who eat it.

[3] *sevā* 'service', especially 'religiously motivated acts of humanitarian service' (Beckerlegge 2015: 209).

permeate the fabric of the hagiography of the saint's life, and lay the foundations for this inclusive ethical approach. Therefore, whilst this article will consider food miracles as they are more widely understood in the Hindu and non-Hindu context, especially in the Hindu diaspora, I will suggest that by engaging both spiritually and physically in this relationship, these miracles are a direct and personal experience of Jalaram himself. Furthermore, this presence promotes an ethical framework that draws directly upon the narratives that speak of his life, namely that of all-inclusive *seva*.

## Hagiography and Miracles: The Presence of the Real

My interest in contemporary Hindu food miracles initially led me to work closely with devotees of the Jalaram Bapa tradition at their Prathana Mandir in Leicester during my doctoral research on food rituals, miracles and vernacular traditions in the Hindu diaspora. Much of this research, with the Jalaram tradition and those mentioned below, was qualitative in nature and based on informant interviews as well as participant observation. The interviews, for the most part, were pre-arranged and conducted at the various mandirs mentioned below, whilst some of the conversations were spontaneous in nature and others were held at places of work or in devotee's homes. The interviews were based on a number of pre-determined questions concerning related themes, but at all times room was left for spontaneity of response, allowing devotees to expand upon wider issues that they felt were important.

As well as working closely with Jalaram devotees at the Leicester *mandir,* my research also involved developing close working relations with devotees of the BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha[4] based at the *mandir* in Neasden, London. This particular *sampradaya* [5] emerged from the nineteenth century reform movement in Gujarati led by the founding saint Sahajanand Swaminarayan (1781-1830), believed by many devotees to be the ultimate Godhead. It has expanded into a substantial transnational movement, part of what Raymond Williams considers a resurgence in neo-Hinduism (Williams in Cush, Robinson and York 2008: 845). This research is also informed by ISKCON at Bhaktivedanata Manor. ISKCON is a modern movement with a global profile that

[4] *Bocāsaṇavāsī akṣara puruṣottama saṃsthā* 'foundation of the imperishable supreme God located in Bochasan [a town in Gujarat]', the largest branch of the Swaminarayan *sampradaya*.
[5] *Saṃpradāya:* religious tradition based on the teachings of a saint or guru, in this case Sahajanand Swaminarayan, and carried on by lineage of spiritually descended religious personalities.

emerged from the medieval Gaudiya Vaishnava tradition of Krishna *bhakti,* and since the early nineteen-seventies 'has assumed an exceptional place among British Hindus, particularly among East African Gujaratis' (Vertovec 2000: 101).[6]

I also worked closely with several *Sanatan Dharma mandir* communities in Bristol, London and Leicester. When I speak of *Sanatan Dharma* I am referring to a wider, more rationalised approach to belief and practice underpinned by neo-*Vedanta* philosophy as well as popular Puranic literature. *Sanatan Dharma* tends to favour the Sanskritic traditions at the expense of the so-called 'little traditions', and has a dominant drive towards Vaishnavism with an emphasis on bhakti (Vertovec 2000: 12), although in my experience any number of regional and pan-Hindu deities, gurus and saints may be found in *Sanatan Dharma mandir*s throughout the diaspora, reflecting what Vertovec calls the 'ecumenical' nature of modern Hinduism in the diasporic context (2000: 28).

I also conducted four weeks of comparative research with the above traditions in Auckland and Wellington in New Zealand in 2005. In Auckland I conducted qualitative research on the same themes with devotees from the Swaminarayan mandir in Avondale, The Sri-Sri Radha Girihari Temple, Kumeu, which is ISKCON's administrative headquarters in New Zealand, the Shri Radha Krishna (Sanatana Dharma[7]) Mandir, Eden Terrace and the Bharatiya (Sanatana Dharma) Mandir, Balmoral. In the central North Island region, I worked with devotees from the Bay of Plenty Indian Association, Rotorua, and in Wellington, with the Wellington Indian Association and [sanatan dharma] Mandir in Kilbirnie.

More recently (from 2009), I have worked specifically with the Jalaram community in Greenford, West London, focusing on the diverse experiences and beliefs of devotees concerning the presence of the saint and the miracles that he bestows upon them. I have worked very closely with two of the *mandir* priests as well as several members of the board of trustees, and numerous devotees who visit the temple on a regular basis to

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[6] Brodbeck describes *bhakti* in its broadest sense as 'The path of devotion…indicating a position of dependence *vis-à-vis* another, in which offerings are made in the hope of grace…[and that such devotion]…is said to be indispensable for direct experience of the god…one god [being] made the focus of all a person's attention (in Cush *et al* 2010: 88).

[7] *Sanātana dharma,* literally 'eternal law', or just *sanātan,* is often used to designate temples which do not belong to a particular *sampradaya*, deity or saint.

partake of the *sadavrat*[8] or free food kitchen. I have also conducted field research in Rajkot and Virpur, the saint's home village, in Gujarat, looking at the above themes as well as examining the related sacred geography and role of narrative in the Indian context.

The Jalaram Bapa tradition follows the teachings of the popular saint of the same name who lived and taught in Virpur in the Rajkot region of Gujarat. Born in 1799, he married Virbai at the age of sixteen, opened a charitable kitchen in 1820, and died in 1881. The tradition itself has been broadly spoken of as a Hindu tradition (Michaels in Burghart 1987: 43-49, Jackson & Nesbitt 1993), but I have argued in favour of seeing the Jalaram Bapa tradition, especially in the U.K. context, as a unique and distinctly vernacular Hindu tradition (Wood 2010; 2015). It tends to defy any attempts to define it simply as 'Hindu';[9] it is not a *sampradaya,* as no line of spiritual descendents followed the saint after his death. Furthermore, there is no central authority, although the saint's home village of Virpur, Gujarat, is seen as a central point of historical and contemporary religious significance and pilgrimage. Each *mandir* dedicated to the saint maintains a large degree of autonomy, with its own self-selected trustees who employ the priests who minister to the needs of the local community. Many devotees challenge a number of assumptions concerning what it is to be Hindu, with all the suggestions of homogeneity of belief and practice, and offer a picture of openness to all that transcends caste and religious identities, as exemplified by Jalaram himself. Indeed, unsurprisingly, many devotees that I have worked with would rather avoid the expression 'Hinduism' altogether.

The Jalaram tradition should be considered a *sant*[10] *bhakti* tradition, but we should bear in mind that, despite being the absolute focus of devotion for the tradition, Jalaram Bapa made it clear that he was not God, and that Rama[11] was working through him. This

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[8] *Sadāvrata* 'perpetual vow.' A *sadavrat* in this context is the undertaking and religious obligation that Jalaram Bapa took to feed those in need; the charitable kitchen that represents the physical manifestation of this vow is spoken of as the *sadavrat* and the *annakshetra* interchangeably.

[9] The same could be said of any number of diverse traditions that are subsumed beneath the vast canopy of Hinduism. For the discussion concerning the terms 'Hinduism', 'orthodox', 'little and great', 'official and unofficial' see Vertovec (2000: 39-62).

[10] According to Vaudeville (1987: 36-37), a *sant* is 'a holy man of a rather special type…is not a renunciant…wears no special dress or insignia…The *Sant* ideal of sanctity is a lay ideal, open to all: it is an ideal which transcends both sectarian and caste barriers.'

[11] Rāma: the seventh *avatar* or incarnation of the god of Vishnu whose story is told in the Rāmāyaṇa and is one of the most popular deities in India.

tends to throw up some difficulties, in that although the main spokespersons for the tradition say that Jalaram has no divine status, many ordinary devotees do speak of him as God, and the focus for ritual *mandir* activity is palpably Jalaram. Food, for example, is offered to Jalaram in the form of *thal*s[12] which are then taken back as spiritually transformed *prasad*. The understanding that food should always be blessed by Jalaram, in the same way as Krishna or Swaminarayan might bless food before it is distributed, also suggests that the saint is divine. It is also essential in the multiplication process, as one male devotee explained:

> If you believe it then it will never run out, before we prepare anything we make devotions to Jalaram Bapa and as long as we make devotions the food will never run out. We offer him the food first then everyone else can eat.

Furthermore, as with many Vaishnava deities, Jalaram's name is invoked; for example, in the *Vrata of Shree Jalarambapa* the mantra '*om shree Jalaram ray namah*' is repeated, as are his 108 names in the *Shree Jalaram Ashtottarshatnamavali*.

One of the senior priests at the Greenford *Mandir* explained:

> 'You ask me about the Swaminarayan, (this is a) tradition (i.e. *sampradaya*), in (the) Jalaram Bapa temple and faith there is no particular tradition, in [the] Jalaram faith the only tradition is humanity and *seva* to humanity, do the *prabhu seva* [service to God] but try to do as much *jan seva* [service to humankind] …feeding, give to the poor, help the poor. After (doing this) the *seva* he [Jalaram Bapa] got strength and blessings from Lord Rama, he never tried to get an ability to do the miracles… God gave it to him.

And on the question as to whether some devotees see him as God:

> Yes…most of them. But people are like that, if they have been cured or have got help they will believe that he is God…but you can say that Jalaram Bapa is a messenger of God. According to my thinking, when God needs to, when he sees people need helping, then he will send a man like Jalaram Bapa to heal the people, to feed the people.
>
> (Greenford Mandir, 2014)

So we can see that the Jalaram tradition differs from the other *bhakti* traditions mentioned here, in that the other traditions emphasize devotion to the deity of choice (*iṣṭadevatā*), as do many *Sanatan Dharma* temple communities, or have a specific divine

[12] Small dishes of specially and ritually prepared food offerings for the deities.

focus of devotion as does ISKCON, or consider their founding saint to be divine as does the BAPS Swaminarayan *sampradaya*. For devotees of the Jalaram tradition the saint seems to walk a line between the divine status of a Vaishnava *avatara*[13] and that of a fully human but divinely favoured saint, thus allowing him to be legitimately seen as God, yet at the same time no less worthy of devotion by those who consider him fully human. As for his presence in the here and now, this is simply accounted for in the hagiographies: 'Bapa left the body, yet he is ever here with us. Bapa is immortal' (Soni 1984: 64).

As I have mentioned, Jalaram's hagiography plays a central role, functioning as 'a genuine receptacle of the past that guides individual adherents, religious communities and societies' (Monge, San Chirico & Smith 2016: 2). On the role of hagiography and accounts of the lives and events of saints, gurus and religious personalities, be they oral, written or both, there has been a substantial amount of scholarly attention, producing a sizeable body of work that considers the ways that narrative is transmitted in and among Indic traditions in general. Narayan (1989) discusses the way that folk narrative and story have been employed by Hindu religious teachers as a means of passing on important religious beliefs and practices, and raises some important theoretical issues concerning the performance of narrative as a means of instruction. Rinehart (1999, 2004) considers the use of hagiography as a 'mediator' of the sacred (1999: 12), and he also provides a stimulating chapter concerning orality, literacy and memory in relation to textual and vernacular Hinduisms (2004: 67-98). Pauwels (2010) discusses the links between religious community formation and hagiography, offering an important insight into the way different communities employ narrative in laying claim to religious personalities; whilst Hegarty discusses the role of Sikh hagiography and Guru Nanak, suggesting that it provides an insight into 'Sikh ways of "comprehending and representing things"' (2011: 133). More recently Monge, San Chirico and Smith (2016) have provided a comprehensive account of the role of hagiography in a number of Abrahamic and Dharmic traditions, examining the wider theoretical and practical concerns that inform contemporary debates surrounding the role of hagiography and the nature of truth in the study of religions.

[13] *avatāra* 'Descent…Mostly used in connection with the bodily appearances of Viṣṇu.' (Klostermaier 1998: 32).

When it comes to the Jalaram tradition, the central hagiography, *Bhakta Shree Jalaram,* has an impressive record of food miracles. Compiled by Saubhagyachand Rajdev and first published in 1958, it includes oral accounts of the saint's life by devotees who actually met him, or whose parents and grandparents had met him. It also contains numerous accounts of miracles from devotees in East Africa who speak enthusiastically of his continued appearances, presence and blessings. This work has been translated into English several times, most notably, Rajdev (1966), Soni (1984) and Shah (2000); furthermore, in recent years, websites and various alternative forms of literature such as *mandir* newsletters, guide books and souvenir brochures continue the tradition of accounting for miraculous blessings throughout India and the diasporic context.

The term *miracle* is difficult to pin down, especially when we consider that there is no single equivalent Indic word. The Hindi term *alaukika* ('not of the world') implies something that is beyond the normal expectation of things. Davis suggests *adbhut*, an extraordinary event, or *vismaya,* indicating wonder and astonishment (1998: 8). In my experience, however, the term *chamat kar* 'miracle' was more commonly used when describing such events, but above all the expression *parcha* 'blessing' was the preferred term for devotees of Jalaram. Furthermore, when speaking of modern miracles in the Indic traditions, Dempsey and Raj (2008: 2) say that in their experience 'most miracle accounts are assigned dates within the past decades, while others exist as past events frozen in narrative time, yet no less alive to their modern audiences'.

For the Jalaram tradition, however, neither he nor his *parcha*s are frozen in narrative time; they are real events in the here and now, despite the fact that Jalaram himself passed from normal mortal existence well over a century ago. This direct and very real experience of the saint is extremely important, and locates him and his narrative well beyond what Dipesh Chakrabarty refers to as domesticated, 'social fact' (in Monge, San Chirico & Smith 2016: 19). Devotees do not just believe in the example of Jalaram; he is real and he is present. For example, one devotee explained: 'you can say that the personal point of view and that so many of the devotees feel that Jalaram Bapa is here;' and this was echoed further:

> It is all down to faith and it happens here, you know like now we prepare food for say 500 people and 1000 people eat it. Before we distribute the food we always give to Jalaram Bapa and we have faith that he is there…

(Female devotee, Jalaram Prarthana Mandal, Leicester, 2004).

Furthermore, Jalaram is, as Robert Orsi points out when speaking of a Pentecostal woman's experience of Jesus, something greater than the sum of the devotee's 'intentions, desires, hopes and fears and that cannot be completely accounted for with reference to [their] social circumstances.' Jalaram has a life of his own in the lives of devotees (Orsi 2012: 84) just as much as he did when he was still physically alive some two centuries past; as one male devotee pointed out, 'still, *parcha*s are going on and Jalaram is still healing…always he is everywhere' (interview at Greenford Mandir, 2014).

When exploring this relationship between the tradition's narrative and the devotee's lived everyday experience of the saint, echoes of Orsi's notions of presence can be heard in the ideas of Paul Ricœur (1985) when he says that religious discourses claim meaning but also truth. Claims of Jalaram's presence, Ricœur might suggest, have to be understood on their own terms irrespective of verification or falsification; and here Ricoeur argues for a new formulation that points to manifestation (1985: 35). This is illustrated by Rico Monge who uses the example of Van Gogh's *Starry Night;* the picture, he suggests, hardly matches the reality of a star-filled night sky, but what is important is the 'truth it manifests of the beauty of the world'. (2016: 21). Monge finds that for Ricœur, religious discourse manifests truth or reality in the same way that Van Gogh's *Starry Night* manifests truth, and that this manifestation of truth occurs through 'the world of the text' (2016: 21). Here, the world of the text is intensely personal and potentially transformative, and functions according to an understanding of truth that manifests what could be (2016: 21). Monge sums this up by asserting that the truth of 'literature reveals to us what could be depending on how we choose to interact with that which is.' (2016: 21).

For devotees, the presence or manifestation of Jalaram Bapa is true and real; he is present both in the narrative text and beyond the narrative text, and the expectation of the way in which Jalaram manifests, and what he does when he is present, is not strictly determined by the narrative text; rather, it is informed by it. In the case of the hagiography of Jalaram, 'what is opened up in everyday reality is another reality, the reality of the *possible*.' (Ricœur 1985: 45-46). As one of the Greenford priests put it,

> If I am doing things for Jalaram Bapa in the *sadavrat* he will help me, he will protect me… my life will be happy, my children will be happy, and sometimes if you are suffering and you do *seva* you might think Jalaram Bapa will heal me…
>
> (Priest, Greenford *mandir*, 2014).

This central theme of *seva* as motivated and promoted by the presence of Jalaram will be discussed later.

## Miracles in the wider Hindu and non-Hindu context

Of all the Hindu traditions in Leicester, it seems that the reputation for the miraculous at Jalarama Prarthana Mandir is the most established, as devotees from the Shree Sanatan Mandir in Leicester suggested with reference to food multiplications:

> Take tomorrow at the big Jalaram Bapa puja, they may cook for 1000 people and 2000 people turn up but there will still be food left over. You can eat as much as you like.'
>
> (Female devotee, Shri Sanatan Mandir, Leicester, 2004).

Of course, miracles, be they the miraculous multiplication of food or otherwise, are by no means the exclusive property of the Jalaram narrative tradition. The tradition of the miraculous in Hinduism in relation to food consumptions and multiplications or manifestations has long been exemplified both in classical literature and in the contemporary milieu. The epic poem the *Mahābhārata* speaks of the wondrous *akṣaya pātra*, the vessel given to the Pāṇḍava king Yudhiṣṭhira by Sūrya which provided a never-ending supply of food until the wife of the Pāṇḍavas, Draupadī, finished eating (*Mahābhārata* 3.4). The narrative has a sequel in which Krishna, himself hungry, visits the Pāṇḍavas in their forest exile and asks them to bring the *akṣaya pātra,* and upon taking a single grain of rice announces that he is satisfied. Then thousands of holy men who are supposed to be fed by the Pāṇḍavas become replete even though they have not eaten; the *akṣaya pātra* has provided an unlimited supply of food.[14]

Furthermore, Jalaram himself can be located in a long line of Indian men and women who were believed to have been favoured by the divine and possessed of miraculous abilities. As David Hardiman points out, such holy figures, much like Jalaram, 'revealed

[14] This sequel to the story of the inexhaustible vessel is given in Appendix 1, No. 25 of the critical edition (Sukthankar 1933–66: 4.1082–84). The editors describe it as 'famous', but 'a clear interpolation' (p. 869).

their close relationship with the divine, and even their divinity, through displays of miraculous powers such as…materialisation of rare objects and foodstuffs, restoring the dead to life…and healing the sick' (2015: 358). Drawing upon a number of hagiographical traditions, Hardiman goes on to discuss the likes of the thirteenth-century Maharashtrian healer Guṇḍum Rāul, and the fourteenth-century Gujarati saint Vallabhācharya who could miraculously inflict sickness and heal it. Hardiman also examines such medieval and early modern bhakti saints as Rāmdās, Tukārām and Eknāth, and their ability to bring about miraculous healing, providing a substantial account of the healing miracles of Jalaram himself and then returning to focus upon Shirdi Sai Baba, who is himself well known for the miraculous.

Neither is the ability to manifest and multiply confined to the medieval and early modern milieu. Contemporary narratives concerning the reincarnation of Shirdi Sai Baba, Satya Sai Baba, speak of his ability to materialize not only seemingly endless amounts of sacred ash (*vibhūti*), but also *amṛt* or nectar which according to a dedicated website (http: //www.saibaba.ws/miracles/babasmanifestations.html) appear on his photographs and images around the world and continue to do so even though he passed away in 2011. Sai Baba, however, warns against becoming too enthralled by the miraculous, and teaches that his miracles should be seen more as 'ladders that will enable you to ascend to a bright future… do not give importance to miracles. Do not exaggerate their importance' (Gadhia 2005: 27).

The Mata Amritanandamayi Mission likewise reports on the 'countless miracles attributed to her [Mata]' (Warrier 2004: 3). Mata's miracles tend to be more subtle and transformative; however, they still play an important role in the tradition, as 'Devotees cherish every opportunity to narrate their own and others' experiences of miracles worked by Mata' (p. 3). Furthermore, Mata tends to avoid miracles of the more sensational type, eschewing the conspicuous nature of Sai Baba's miracles but nevertheless performing miracles that have distinct echoes of those performed by Sai Baba and Jalaram, as one devotee points out:

> I heard one story. She was feeding people out of a bucket—in the crowd,…people kept coming…and this was a bottomless bucket. And people started saying—oh! Miracle! Miracle! And she finished feeding them and throws the bucket down and says: 'That's the last time I am doing that, otherwise I shall have an Ashram like Sai Baba's.'

(Warrier 2004: 81).

Neither are food multiplications confined to the Hindu world. In a notable example, an article in 2010 in the on-line publication 'Breaking Christian News' reported:

> We organized a feeding for 50 orphaned and desperately poor children in Kaliti Village, Uganda where our Field of Dreams project is located. Over 200 children showed up hungry! Several of our team members were crying because they knew there was not enough food for all of the kids and some would have to be sent away hungry. We began to pray that God would multiply the food. Every child ate and was full…over 200 were fed. (25th January 2010 http: //www.breakingchristiannews.com/articles/display_art.html?ID=7523)

As with the Mata Amritanandamayi Mission, in many of the Hindu traditions that I have worked directly with there was a degree of reluctance, particularly among religious authorities and spokespersons, to dwell too much upon the possibility of the miraculous occurring. For example, as mentioned in the introduction, many Swaminarayan *sadhu*s that I spoke to said that they were concerned that devotees would find themselves relying on the miraculous at the cost of more important worldly religious obligations. Accordingly, the notion of the miraculous is often played down by the religious authorities; as one of the Neasden *sadhu*s explained, 'It is not something that happens on such a regular basis, but once in a while, also it may happen more often, but it is not something that we would highlight' (Interview in Neasden, 2006).

Nevertheless, a substantial number of accounts in the various traditional religious and hagiographical literatures confirms the actual presence of the deity in special circumstances. Dave (1994: 23-4) reports the occasion when the founder of the Swaminarayan Sanstha, Sahajanand Swaminarayan, physically appeared in two villages at the same time to accept the offerings of the devotees. Dave also speaks of a later spiritual leader offering food to the *murti* of Sahajanand Swaminarayan, whereupon 'the devotees gasped in wonder; five *ladu*s, *dal* and some rice had been consumed along with half the cup of water' (2002: 31-2). Furthermore, whilst the subject of miracles tends to be something whose physical nature the religious authorities are keen to play down, another incident was related by one of the Neasden *sadhu*s that seemed to confirm at least the possibility of such events:

> 'Yogi Ji prepared the food and put it before the lord in the shape of the *murti* and closed the curtain and sang the *thal* for half an hour. When the curtain was removed four or five *ladoo*s

were gone, half a bowl of curry and some rice and some vegetables were gone and one whole glass of water and half a glass of milk.'

(Senior Sadhu, Neasden *mandir*, 2004).

Moreover, for many ordinary devotees the possibility that God can and may manifest himself in either a subtle or a physical manner to consume the food that is offered is very real: for them, *God is actually there, actually eating the food*. One devotee explained:

> At the [Swaminarayan] *mandir,* they did *arti* every half an hour and all the food was in whole blocks and decorated very well, and then they see that there is a bite from one of the meals that God prefers, a bite was taken from that meal, and God has taken that bite.
>
> (Female devotee, Bharatiya Mandir, Auckland 2005 quoted in Wood 2008: 345).

This was echoed by another devotee, in New Zealand, who stated: 'yes. It has happened, every *Annakut*[15] it has happened…When you put so much devotion into such an event God shows his acceptance by eating it' (Female devotee, Swaminarayan mandir, Auckland, 2005).

Among ISKCON devotees, similar miracles are also widely accepted as possible, but rarely spoken of in public. Such events are often seen as very personal indications of the relationship between the devotee and God, a sentiment summed up by a spokeswoman from Bhaktivedanta Manor:

> It is not that it does not happen in ISKCON, we just do not make a huge thing about it. We understand that every day in our temple Krishna eats and he chooses when he wants, sometimes physically eats it, it has happened to me in India and it blew my mind, but when you ask if it happens here, well probably, but people do not talk about it, not even within the community.

Again, however, caution concerning the role of the miraculous is exercised by some devotees, especially those in a position of authority, as the same spokeswoman suggested:

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[15] *Anna-kūṭa* 'mountain of food': a festival in which lavish food offerings are made, on the day of the new moon in October or November, the fourth day of Dīpāvali or Dīvāli; in Gujarati tradition it marks the beginning of the year. It is especially important for the BAPS Swaminarayan tradition, where the offerings are made to the *murti*s of the Swaminarayan *parampara.*

> The physicality of such events are not important to us here, the food is always eaten by Krishna, not necessarily in a physical way but consciously, there may be what you would refer to as a miraculous event but that is not the central idea.
>
> (Bhaktivedanta Manor, 2003).

The notion that the divine consumes what is offered, however, can be found in the Puranic literary traditions of ISKCON. For ISKCON and *Sanatana Dharma* devotees alike, the most popular example of the divine manifesting in order to consume offerings is that of *Govardhan līlā*. Krishna in human form has persuaded the villagers of Vrindavan to 'prepare various types of cooked food [and to] give many kinds of food offerings to the mountain (*Govardhan*).' Krishna then 'transformed himself into another body to gain the confidence of the *gopa*s [cowherds]. Saying I am the mountain, the huge form ate the lavish offering' (Bryant 2003, 111-118). This core narrative is celebrated every year as the *Govardhan Puja* festival at ISKCON and *Sanatan Dharma mandir*s throughout India and the diaspora; it also plays a substantial role in the annual Swaminarayan new year *Annakut* festivities (Wood 2010b), on the same date in the lunar calendar.

Among *Sanatan Dharma* devotees, despite the overarching tendency to rationalize belief and practice, there is less of a concern to privatize the experience of the miraculous. Whilst there is little by way of specific *mandir* literature, members of the several *Sanatan Dharma* communities that I spoke to were comfortable discussing the possibility of physical consumption, such as this member of the Bristol *mandir* congregation: 'Of course it depends on your devotion, if you have great devotion then definitely he will come to eat the food.' Other *Sanatan Dharma* devotees, however, say that such phenomena are rare and extremely special; for example:

> I see no reason to doubt that God would step out…and physically consume the food that has been offered to him or her, but it has to be extremely, monumentally intense.
>
> (Wood 2008: 344).

Furthermore, another devotee said that whilst they did not have any personal or direct experience of the divine consuming their offerings,

> it is all within individual belief. Perhaps you might start thinking that God has but …it is—it is not an illusion, perhaps it is the almighty's way of saying 'yes, I am here.'
>
> (Female devotee, Shri Sanatan Mandir, Leicester, 2004).

## Inclusive *Seva*: The Nature of Food Miracles in the Jalaram Tradition.

> You know Jalaram Bapa's *mandir* nobody knows where all the food comes from, and at the four o'clock puja people there can eat and eat and still there is so much food left, they don't know where it comes from. It happens everywhere that Jalaram Bapa is and it happens naturally.
>
> (Female devotee, Shri Sanatan Mandir, Leicester, 2003).

Although the central Jalaram Bapa hagiography contains accounts of miraculous healings, resurrections, visitations from mystic holy men and from the god Rāma disguised as a wandering mendicant, a sizeable portion of the narrative is dedicated to *parcha*s concerned with the multiplication of food. Often these *parcha*s take place in and around the saint's Virpur ashram where he and his wife Virbai established their charitable kitchen (known variously as a *sadavrat* or *annakshetra*[16]) in 1820. Here they enacted the core value of *seva* for all by feeding the local poor and the holy renunciates who passed through the (then) village of Virpur on their way to and from the sacred mountain of Girnor near Junagadh. Rajdev's abridged hagiography tells us that Jalaram acquired the power of 'inexhaustibility' and that 'whatever vessel he touched the vessel became inexhaustible and mendicants never lacked food' (1966: 21).

The hagiographies are replete with examples of Jalaram's food multiplication, and in an interesting echo of the *akṣaya pātra* story in the *Mahābhārata*, Jalaram asks to see the grain store of two local merchants who had suffered from the ravages of a local famine. They said the store was empty, but Jalaram merely touched one of the vessels with his stick and said, 'there is wheat in it;' he touched another and said 'there is jowar [sorghum] in it;' a third, 'there is bajra [millet] in it;' and a fourth, 'there is gram [chickpeas] in it.' The merchant returned to the store and opened the seal at the bottom of one of the vessels, and 'Wheat came pouring out of it! In the same way he found grains in all four of the vessels' (Soni 1984: 60).

Another account relates how Jalaram distributed food to a party of hundred and fifty policemen from two baskets. 'Though he served all, the baskets remained full' (Rajdev 1966: 22). Similarly, after the saint had miraculously healed a devotee from a fatal abdominal condition, food had been prepared for only fifty devotees but more than three hundred arrived. Jalaram advised the devotees present to 'cover up with a piece of

[16] *Anna-kṣetra* 'field of food'.

cloth the vessel which contains sweetmeat and sev [crisp noodles]. Then light a lamp with ghee and begin to serve to all…' Food began to be served and 300 men were fed…all ate with great ease (pp. 47-48).

Furthermore, Shah, in her translation of *Bhakta Shree Jalarām,* provides an account of an event in which Jalaram was invited to a gathering where there was only enough food for twenty-five devotees. When word got around that the saint was arriving, and great crowds assembled, Jalaram merely covered the available food with a cloth saying, 'place a *tulsi* [basil] leaf in God's name there within…and by God's grace from food for 10, 20, or 25, hundred, two hundred or even five hundred would eat, leaving surplus food' (2000: 24).

What is interesting here is that many of the themes and events spoken of in the hagiography are replicated in the contemporary context, both in Gujarat and throughout the diaspora. Thus, as I have suggested earlier, these events have become 'unfrozen', forming a fluid continuity of the miraculous beyond time, location and context. For example, on numerous visits to the Jalaram Prarthana Mandir in Leicester I noticed that just inside the door of the main shrine room a bowl containing *prasad* was half-covered with a cloth, and several devotees that I spoke to confirmed that it was always full, no matter how many people arrived for *darshan*.[17] On another occasion at the same *mandir,* an informant told me,

> We had a large ceremony and there were many devotees here, and beforehand we did not know how many people were going to come, perhaps 500-600, we ordered the food for that number and 2000 people turned up, but in all of my time of this happening there has never been a shortage of food.

Likewise, at the Greenford *mandir,*

> Every day we have the afternoon *sadavrat* which feeds 100-150 people, Saturday is maybe 300-500 people, but Thursday is anywhere between 600-1000 people. Now we do [not] know on what day there would be 600 people or what day would be 1000….I have never seen any food going short.
>
> (Male devotee, Greenford *mandir* 2014)

[17] *Darśana* 'seeing'): respectful worshipful beholding of a divine image (Klostermaier 1998: 55).

In another important example of the miraculous powers of multiplication associated with the saint, that of the 'ever-full granary', Soni's abridged translation of *Bhakta Shree Jalaram* tells us that after the saint's death a large meeting of devotees was interrupted by a mysterious visitor in the guise of a *sadhu*.

> He proceeded to spread the crumbs from a crushed sweet across those gathered and pronounced, 'This is the ever-full granary!'. Then he disappeared as suddenly as he had appeared and no one knew about his whereabouts.
>
> (Soni 1984: 64).

The account goes on to describe how even today the store-room of the tradition's main shrine and *annakshetra* in Virpur is always full. The belief that the Virpur storeroom remains full is irrespective of the fact that the temple authorities refuse to accept any donations from devotees, or the fact that many thousands of pilgrims will arrive on a weekly basis to partake of the free food. For many this is yet another indication of Jalaram's divine status. In 2014, an article in the New Zealand-based on-line publication 'Indian Newslink' stated that Jalaram is 'revered as God'. The article, entitled, 'Saint receives Divine status in Gujarat,' went on to interview a descendent of Jalaram, who explained that, despite the large numbers of people visiting the Virpur temple, it had

> stopped accepting donations since last 10 years. We only want to feed people whole-heartedly and with sincerity…There cannot be any reason for not accepting donations. We only want people to get blessings, have the prasad and return satisfied. Whoever offers money or any other charity is requested to take it back and instead use them to help the needy.
>
> (http: //www.indiannewslink.co.nz/saint-receives-divine-status-in-Gujarat/)

The Greenford *mandir* in London, which established its own *annakshetra* kitchen in 2010, also maintains that its storeroom is always full despite serving hundreds of devotees on a weekly basis; as one devotee explained:

> But it is Jalaram Bapa's temple and honestly I feel that he is present, he is here, you can go into the store, at any time and it is always full up, we never lack for food, this is his miracle.
>
> (Male devotee, Greenford *mandir,* 2013)

This phenomenon of food never running out was also replicated recently when the Greenford community was collecting food to distribute to homeless people in London.

The donations were kept in a warehouse in west London, and devotees had been very busy making up bags of food and other items. According to one devotee, the

> store is never empty even after they have filled the bags on a Monday it would still be half full and the next day when they open it it's almost full to the brim and they do not understand where and who brings that. There are even accounts of Jalaram Bapa himself appearing and leaving food.

(Greenford mandir, 2013)

The examples above fully illustrate the kind of events surrounding food and food offerings that permeate and inform the historical and contemporary Jalaram Bapa tradition, especially in the context of 'inexhaustibility'. The fluid nature of these kinds of events seems to indicate that there has, to an extent, been a re-working of the miraculous.

This of course has necessitated the Jalaram devotees, and indeed supporters of miracles from other traditions in the modern context, working much more imaginatively than their predecessors to give validity and respectability to their beliefs (Dempsey, 2008: 6). I would argue, however, that part of that work had already been completed by Jalaram himself when he made his miraculous works fully inclusive. The theme of inclusivity in relation to food miracles can be summed up in a few lines taken from the hagiography, stating that Jalaram

> never lacked food for poor. To him the great truth… 'pray to Almighty and feed the poor' was the guiding principle of his life. To feed the hungry irrespective of caste, creed or religion was his daily task…the Sikhs, Muslims, the sadhu.

(Rajdev 1966: 20).

Taking into consideration all the above, we can discern a diversity of approach to the notion of the miraculous, concerning food or otherwise, among the traditions discussed in this article. However, the theme of presence is to a greater or lesser degree central in all cases. I suggest that of all the traditions examined here, it is the Jalaram tradition that places the experience of the presence of the saint at the heart, not only of its belief system, but also of its ethical approach as instanced through *seva*. Furthermore, there is a direct continuity linking the presence of the saint, and the inclusive nature of the *seva*

that this presence inspires, to the millennia-deep cultural history of belief in food multiplication that exists among Hindus, and indeed in other religious traditions.

This key theme of inclusive *seva* and food miracles is reported in a central episode in the narrative of Jalaram's life: the opening of an *annakshetra* in Virpur in 1819. According to the narrative, the concerns over the number of those visiting the *annakshetra* were very real, but 'under some indescribable and inaccessible divine force, the daily alms giving continued and no want was actually experienced' (Rajdev 1966: 17). As word of the charitable kitchen spread,

> It came to be believed that Annapurna[18] was at his [Jalaram Bapa's] bidding and he never lacked for food for poor [*sic*]… He regarded all with the same kindness—[He] began to acquire all supernatural powers and he came to acquire the power of 'Inexhaustibility'.
>
> (Rajdev 1966: 20-21)

Some two hundred years later, in 2010, the Greenford mandir opened its own *annakshetra* in response to the financial crisis that unfolded in 2008, as many

> started feeling the pinch of global recession… The trustees were quick to respond and rise to the occasion. A word was spread for the newly started free daily kitchen (*sadavrat*), serving meals seven days a week to the attendees, irrespective of caste, colour and creed. It saw many families through very difficult times.
>
> (Shree Jalaram Greenford Newsletter No. 8, 2013).

The Mandir community also involved itself in a number of other independent food-related *seva* projects that involved serving food to the homeless in central London, since 'it jointly worked with the Sai *Seva* Sanstha for over two years. Each recipient gets a… bag packed with food items like crisp, biscuits, fruit, soft drink, chocolate/sweets and foil' (male devotee, Greenford *mandir* 2013). The community has also donated to several local food bank projects, all of which draw on the theme of the ever-full store-room which characterizes the miraculous nature of the Virpur *annakshetra* mentioned above.

This is not to say that the notion of *seva* through food is unique to the Jalaram tradition; indeed, many other Hindu and non-Hindu religious traditions engage with *seva* through

[18] *Annapūrṇā* 'full of food': a goddess whose iconography reflects her role as the provider of food.

food on a much bigger scale. For example, ISKCON has a substantial 'Food for Life' initiative which they claim is the 'largest vegan and vegetarian non-profit food relief organisation with projects in over 60 countries and serving more than 1,500,000 free meals daily' (King 2012: 460), all consisting of ISKCON *prasad*. As well as engaging with numerous international charity projects, the BAPS Swaminarayan *sampradaya* runs a substantial U.K. 'Sewa Day' project, that amongst other activities collects food for the homeless and makes large donations to U.K. food banks, as does the Sathya Sai Baba International U.K. group. Furthermore, as Warrier points out with reference to *seva*, for devotees of the Mata Amritanandayami Mission, 'Mata' is an 'exemplar in this respect, and her self-proclaimed mission of serving humanity as the ultimate expression of selfless service and compassion' (Warrier 2003 : 266).

Neither is the theme of presence exclusive to the Jalaram tradition. For Swaminarayan devotees, as we have seen, the founding saint Sahajanand, who is considered fully divine, is present as he steps out of his *murti* representation and consumes that which is offered, though this presence is more commonly understood to be confined to the *murti* itself. As one sadhu explained:

> He is present everywhere, but there are different degrees of presence, he is believed to be much more present here [in the *murti* in the *mandir*] because the Guru has done the rituals.
>
> (Neasden *mandir,* 2008).

This idea of the presence of the divine in the *murti* was echoed by a senior member of ISKCON at Bhaktivedanta Manor:

> What really makes this place sacred is the presence of Krishna in the murtis that are installed accordingly…Krishna is always present at Bhakti Vedanta Manor but at Govardhan Puja his presence is felt by many more people who come here on pilgrimage and the atmosphere created by his presence is amplified.
>
> (Bhaktivedanta Manor, 2004).

For the Jalaram tradition, however, food multiplication miracles in the historical and contemporary contexts take this idea of presence further, and this presence fully provides the foundation for the tradition's own approach to *seva.* Here, the Jalaram tradition promotes a dual but interdependent understanding of *seva*: it can be directed to God and to man. When one serves the divine (*pran seva*), one is serving humankind,

and when one serves humankind (*jan seva*) one is serving the divine; in the words of one of the Greenford priests,

> In many [other Hindu traditions] the devotees believe the responsibility is meant to serve the God, but in Jalaram's philosophy you have to first serve the poor people; if you are helping the people, feeding the people, you are feeding the God because in every human being there is God.
>
> (Greenford *mandir* 2014).

For devotees, to an extent, the possibility of Jalaram being God is thus explained: God is in all, and to serve Jalaram is to serve God, as much as to serve ordinary people in need is likewise to serve God. I suggest that this is the core of the Jalaram philosophy: that the food multiplications of Jalaram Bapa are, for want of a better expression, bi-located: they are not just in the purely divine realm, as is the case with ISKCON and the Swaminarayan tradition, but also in the immediate human realm for the benefit of all. In short, his ethical example and principle become actualised by his presence in the here and now.

Furthermore, when we consider Jalaram *seva* and the practice of feeding the poor, as underpinned by the experience of Jalaram's presence and his 'powers of inexhaustibility', we find that the idea of inclusivity, one that transcends religious and social barriers, is fully enacted in the here and now through food miracles illustrated in the hagiographies. As Shah's translation states, 'all are equal. Only by religion they call us Hindus and Muslims' (2000: 30). Further,

> He took great care to relieve the hunger and fatigues of all around him. He understood the essence of charity and put it into practice…distribution of food to the poor and hungry is the highest noblest form of charity.
>
> (Rajdev 1966: 20-21)

Such commitment to this inclusive ethic is echoed by a male devotee at the Greenford *mandir* today:

> [We] are getting Nepalis here, Punjabis here, we have Sikh families… [the] Jalaram *mandir* is open to everybody of all faith, whether Nepalis… Tamils, even Africans believe in Jalaram. In fact there is a Jalaram temple just outside Nairobi and that is mainly visited by Africans, and this feeds over a thousand people. In fact, this Jalaram sanstha or group is feeding every day and 80% of them are Africans and 20% Indians; Muslim, Hindu Sikh they will not be asked.

(Greenford *mandir,* 2013)

## Concluding Remarks

Robert Orsi says that the 'realness of the holy is extensive: it moves out to transform objects, persons (beginning with the persons most immediate to the experience) places and categories of person (rulers, saints, healers)' (Orsi 2012: 102). In the light of this discussion, it seems clear that Jalaram Bapa and the extent of his presence are indeed a reality for devotees, a reality that is translated into—among other things—food multiplication miracles, and that illustrates the fluid nature of a historical time that the devotees are experiencing; a time that is, as Chakrabarty might claim, 'out of joint with itself', allowing devotees of the saint to recognise that 'Gods and spirits (and saints) are existentially coeval with the human' (in Orsi 2012: 101). The same, of course, could also be understood in the lives of the devotees from the other traditions that have been discussed in this paper. What is very important here, however, is the ultimate effect that the presence of the saint, the divine, or both, have upon the wider contemporary society in terms of *seva*—a society that on both a global and local level, is increasingly concerned with issues of food poverty and reliant upon religious institutions to address these concerns.

What this demonstrates is the very real and immediate impact that hagiography, narrative and presence have upon the wider contemporary social context. This is especially the case when we consider the current social problems facing the U.K.—'Social exclusion, "moral decline" [and] economic stagnation' (Harvie 2017: 2), as well as the increasing food poverty that is seen as a direct result of cuts in public spending and state welfare. Evidence suggests that governments, in this case the U.K. government, are becoming increasingly reliant upon religious (and non-religious) organizations and charities, to engage with 'Socially reproductive activities…many of them involving voluntary, unwaged labour, that take place in communities up and down the country' (Harvie 2017: 2). Much of this has been framed by the so-called, and much ridiculed, 'Big Society' which was launched in 2009 and was aimed at tackling such issues as food poverty by encouraging a 'more inclusive view of society in which communities are part of the solution to health and social problems' (Blond in Wells and Caraher 2014: 2). Despite its absence in the general discourse, the notion of the Big Society has become firmly established in political economy, and there is now a

recognition that such social sector organizations, like many of those traditions mentioned in this paper, 'play a critical role in our communities and society' (Harvie 2017: 2). Indeed, in line with this, the Jalaram community in Greenford has recently begun on a major *mandir* building project that will expand considerably on its older *mandir* building, with the aim of providing 'about 6000 square feet of community centre and a purpose built kitchen with dining area,' that would allow the community to continue and expand upon 'its functions and services for the community [which] are far reaching with its charitable work, which extends beyond the Hindu faith to the community at large' (Shree Jalaram Mandir, Greenford 15th Anniversary Souvenir Magazine 2015: 63). Furthermore, the Shree Jalaram Mandir in Leicester has recently constructed a substantial community centre with *sadavrat* kitchen, claiming that 'This will be a place whereby members of any community can come, have lunch and understand the teachings of Bapa' (Shree Jalaram Mandir, Leicester, Commemorative Souvenir 2016: 49).

This is obviously an area for further discussion and research, but I suggest that the examples of miraculous food multiplications, food miracles, and the *seva* that they motivate and underpin and which is bound up with these religious narratives, are very much part of this bigger picture of social activity and reproduction. This is true for all of the traditions discussed in this paper; but when taking the specific case of the Jalaram tradition, we can see that narrative and the notion of presence reflect the example of ethical behaviour and action that can be and is replicated in the contemporary milieu. More than that, the life and the example of the saint and his articulation of *seva* through food miracles are, to use Ricœur's phrase, 'truths of manifestation', in that they function as 'vehicles for prefiguring, configuring and refiguring religious social and cultural life' (Monge, San Chirico & Smith 2016: 1). Indeed, the narrative is far from limited to the saint's life; his life has become a reality in the lives of his devotees.

The narrative of Jalaram Bapa is an excellent example of the need for new and innovative ways of viewing religious narrative in respect of 'truth of manifestation' or presence. The themes of food multiplication miracles that run through the narrative are enacted again and again in multiple social, historical and contemporary milieux. For devotees of Jalaram Bapa, then, neither the presence of the saint nor his hagiography is sealed in a certain time and place, namely nineteenth-century Gujarat, particularly in

regard to food miracles. As the Jalaram community has developed from a parochial, localized saint movement to a transnational expression of Hinduism in India and throughout the Hindu diaspora, the hagiography of Jalaram has provided the means for consolidating community identity. Furthermore, it has allowed devotees to develop a real and personal relationship with their saint, a relationship that has enabled them to deal with needs and concerns that have changed over time, and to maintain its core identity based upon a firm ethical commitment to others.

In this way, the narrative determines the nature of the community, as the central personality, Jalaram Bapa, emerges from what Monge terms the immanent space of the narrative and exists both within and without the story, and the past is re-enacted in relation to the contemporary (Monge, San Chirico and Smith 2016: 35). If wider society is to continue looking for ways to alleviate increasing food poverty, it might do well to consider more seriously the example of devotees of Jalaram Bapa and other Hindu saints and gurus, reading religious narratives not just as mere myths and legends but more as sophisticated and legitimate forms of experience which provide the model for, underpin and motivate social action in the form *seva* for all.

## ABBREVIATIONS

BAPS Bochasanwasi Akshar Purushottam Sanstha

ISKCON International Society for Krishna Consciousness

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