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Consuming Envy: Food, Authority and the Continuity of "Vernacular" Traditions in the Gujarātī Hindu Diaspora

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Abstract

This paper examines the phenomenon of *najar*, the evil eye, in relation to beliefs and practices concerning food among Gujarātī Hindus in the United Kingdom and New Zealand. Certain Gujarātī Hindu traditions tend to publically dismiss *najar*, however, others engage with it and *najar* continues to play a substantial role in the day-to-day experience of Gujarātī Hindus in this context.

Drawing on extensive field research in the United Kingdom and complementary research in New Zealand, I provide an account of concepts and notions concerning *najar* and examine the extent to which wider considerations of belief and practice underpin belief or disbelief in *najar*, especially in relation to food. Finally, I examine *najar* in relation to the question of authority among Gujarātī Hindu traditions in the diaspora and the problem of privileging of what are referred to as "representative" versions of Hinduism over "vernacular" traditions when it comes to fieldwork and presenting our findings concerning Hinduism in the academy.

Keywords: diaspora, Gujarātī Hindu, najar, vernacular.

The eventual demise of what have been termed "popular" (Vertovec, 2000: 41) Hindu beliefs and practices in India has long been a source of speculation among scholars. Srinavas and Shah suggest that, "everywhere village deities are...losing

ground, while the prestigious *sanskrit*ic deities are becoming more popular... Moreover, there has been a growth in secularisation, egalitarianism and rationalism" (1968: 365). Jayawardena goes on to suggest that, "In general, trends have led from village and caste beliefs and practices to wider, more universalistic definitions of Hinduism that cut across local...differences" (Jayawadena cited in Vertovec, 2000: 27).

Furthermore, these universalizing processes of "rationalization" have spread beyond the confines of India. According to Vertovec, the apparent rationalization, and secularization of Hinduism has been at the expense of the more parochial or regional Hindu traditions and the same broad patterns have been in evidence throughout the diaspora (2000: 27). He concludes that this trend toward what he terms "ecumenical" Hinduism overseas, "usually involves a conscious separation of "official" and "popular" elements, with many of the latter being increasingly relegated to a rather disdained or periphery status" (2000: 28).

It is here that we encounter and expose the classical, anthropological hegemony: the positioning of that which is considered to be "official" Hinduism over that which is considered to be "popular" Hinduism (Vertovec, 2000: 41–42). This can be further witnessed when we consider that forms of Gujarātī Hinduism in the diaspora tend to be publically characterized by the "official" whilst the "popular" remains locked in to the realms of the domestic (Geaves, 1999: 37).

For Gujarātī Hindus in numerous diasporic contexts "official" elements will include specific aspects of Gujarātī culture, language, endogamy, behaviour and belief concerned with the aim of fulfilling specific *dharma*s, and is often expressed in public through *bhakti* devotional activity. "Popular" elements, however, include magico-religious, healing rites, possession, the pursuit of the miraculous, steps taken to ward off evil or inauspicious forces (Vertovec, 2000: 42) or as Ballard suggests, the immediate and pragmatic (1996: 18).

Whilst attention has been paid to "popular" Hindu traditions in India (notably Bannerjee, 2002; Dempsey and Raj, 2008; Dwyer, 2003; Foulston and Abbott, 2009; Fuller, 2004; MacDaniel, 2004; Michaels, 2004; Raj and Harman, 2006; Smith, 2006; Weiss, 2009) the paradigm of "official" over "popular" is still largely upheld in the academic study and presentation of Gujarātī Hinduism in the diaspora (with the exception of Knott, 1986; Michaelson in Burghart, 1987: 39–49; Wood, 2008and 2009). Research has tended to focus on "ecumenical" (Vertovec, 2000)[1] religious

1. These traditions are part of what Nye, and numerous other scholars, have considered to be illustrative of the ongoing development of a face of Hinduism underpinned by a strong *sanskrit*ic, rational basis, emphasizing devotion to God, usually in the form of an *avatāra*,and

expressions of Gujarātī *Vaiṣṇava* traditions such as the BAPS Swāmīnārāyan *Sanstha* or *Sanātana Dharma maṇḍir* (temple/place of devotional activity) communities (Ballard, 1996; Burghart, 1987; Jackson and Nesbitt, 1993; Kim, 2008; Knott, 1986; Nye, 1995; Williams, 2001; Vertovec, 2000).

The privileging of "official" Hinduism over "popular" Hinduism and the scholarly lacuna that exists when it comes to the study of "popular" traditions in the diaspora is bought into sharp focus when we consider the phenomenon of *najar* or the evil eye. Beliefs and practices concerning *najar* have received some attention when it comes to ethnographies on Hinduism in India, acknowledging that it is deeply rooted in Indian religious culture in general (Adler and Mukherji, 1994: 87–99; Bhasin, 2003: 79–80; Dwyer, 2003: 51–82; Fuller, 2004: 236–40; Maloney, 1976; Michaels, 2004: 230–32) and nowhere more so than Gujarāt (Crooke and Eindhoven, 1925; Pocock, 1973). Outside of these works, however, there have been few surveys or studies concerning the dynamics and direct experience of *najar*. [2]

As far as *najar* in a diasporic context, particularly in the United Kingdom and New Zealand (UK and NZ from here) is concerned I have found little published, scholarly work in the field of religious studies to date other than brief mention in Knott (1986: 173–74) and Wood (2009: 230–95). Research in the field of social studies and medical anthropology has, however, concerned itself with *najar* to an extent; Bhopal (1986: 103) makes mention of the belief in *najar* among Asians living in Glasgow and Spiro (2005) offers an interesting insight into the beliefs of Gujarātī Hindus in Harrow concerning *najar* and *bhut* (discussed later).

Likewise, the notion of *najar* is rarely touched upon publically among the Gujarātī Hindus; some claim that it does not exist, is not worth considering and that it is the remit of the unenlightened and uneducated. Others, as we shall see, maintain a different relationship with it. This paper will suggest, however, that such traditions are far from marginal. I contend that there is a symbiotic, but also competitive relationship between the "official" and the "popular" and this is particularly apparent when it comes to the ideas, practices and beliefs concerning food and *najar* among Gujarātī Hindus in the UK and NZ.

Furthermore, "popular" traditions in general and in particular concerning food and *najar* are widespread and common throughout the Gujarātī Hindu diaspora.

detached from regional, rural and village forms of religious activity – in short "official" Hinduism.

2. In his case book, Dundes (1981) provides a comprehensive collection of essays that detail cross-cultural notions of the evil eye from a number of methodological approaches, however, as far as India and Gujarāt are concerned he only includes the works of Pocock (1973: 201–11) and Woodburne (1935: 237–47).

These "popular" beliefs and traditions continue to co-exist with the "official" versions of Hinduism and indeed flourish; in one respect they push apart and offer competing explanations of life's day-to-day misfortunes whilst at the same time they pull together and assimilate within each other to provide a way of apprehending more transcendental issues. What is crucial here is the understanding that if the academy and the research it conducts in the field neglects the "popular" in favour of the "official" we will be presenting a skewed and incomplete picture of Hinduism.

This article will attempt to provide a more complete picture of one aspect of Hinduism, *najar*, and tackle the issues that arise from it. I will give an account of related concepts and notions concerning *najar* generally and in particular concerning food, examining how these traditions, beliefs and practices have been translated into a diasporic context. Finally, I will examine the nature of *najar* in relation to the question of authority in the Gujarātī Hindu diaspora. I will focus specifically on the views of diverse Gujarātī Hindu traditions concerning *najar* and examine the question whether a tradition's authority in relation to its devotees depends upon how it engages with *najar* in this diaspora context.

1. The "Representative" and the "Vernacular" – an Inclusive Approach

Having set out the parameters of this article I would like to address the issue of appropriate, interpretive terminology when considering diaspora Hinduism. The argument for and against methodological terms such as "official" and "popular," "front stage" and "back door," "orthodox" and "folk," are well rehearsed (Geaves, 2007; Marriott, 1955; Vertovec, 2000; Weightman, 1978), however, I would like to offer an alternative set of terms that draw on Ballard's work (1996) when he suggests "*dharm*ic" and "*kismet*ic" dimensions.[3]

The *dharm*ic dimension concerns itself with the prescribed rules that govern the universe and determine how humans should behave within that universe (Ballard,

3. Taken from Ballard's "Panth, Kismet, Dharm te Qaum" (1996) referring to the fourfold classification of Punjabi religion as follows: *panth*ic, *dharm*ic, *kismet*ic and *qaum*ic. *Panth*ic refers to religious organization and is generally associated with *Sant/Bhakti* traditions, Sufism or to groups who follow and promote the teachings of a spiritual master, living or dead. In this case devotees are mostly concerned with getting closer to or directly experiencing the divine through mystical experience (1996: 16–17). *Qaum*ic describes more recent phenomena where religious ideas and activities are employed by a community in order to close ranks and advance common social, economic and political interests (1996: 25–28).

1996: 22–25) and equate to the "official" dimension in this instance. Ballard defines the term *kismet*ic as "those ideas, practices and behavioural strategies which are used to explain the otherwise inexplicable, and if possible to turn adversity in its tracks" (1996: 18) in short, those ideas which signify fate and correspond to the pragmatic (Geaves, 2007: 6), in other words, the "popular" dimension.

These terms are perfectly adequate in the context within which they were developed and are invaluable as classificatory ideals in the exploration of Panjabi religious identities. However, in the specific context of Gujarātī Hindu traditions in the diaspora I wish to take example from Ballard's terminology but would prefer to introduce the terms "'representative'" and "'vernacular'" in order to fully relate to the issues that I will examine in this paper.

"Representative" suggests that there is a commonality of belief and practice among all Gujarātī Hindus in the diaspora. "Representative" Hinduism is constructed around the classic Sanskrit texts and is maintained by *Brahman*ic authority. In this way it is similar to "official" Hinduism (Vertovec, 2000: 39–62). "Representative" Hinduism also recognizes the main Hindu deities and within it we can locate specific ritual prescriptions and proscriptions, central tenets and what could be described as core beliefs.

Furthermore, when it comes to publicly proclaiming their beliefs and practice the ideology of "representative" Hinduism has to an extent been defined and fully embraced by Gujarātī Hindus in the diaspora. For example, the literature of the *BAPS Swāmīnārāyan*[4] *Sanstha* (*Swāmīnārāyan Sanstha* from here) states that the ten major beliefs in Hinduism include the belief in one God, *parabrahman*, the scriptural authority of the *Vedas*, *Ved Pramāna*, the manifestation of God on earth, *Avatāvad*, and the divine law that sustains the universe, *dharma*.[5] A look through other Gujarātī Hindu organization and *maṇḍir* literature will reveal similar sets of beliefs; they are beliefs that are "representative" of the public face of Gujarātī Hinduism and the term "representative" encompasses the *dharm*ic, *Sanskrit*ic and official dimensions of Hinduism.

"Core" food beliefs and practices also play a major part in characterizing "representative" Gujarātī Hinduism, for example strict prohibitions on the consumption of beef, and all forms of meat as well as fish and eggs. "Representative" traditions

4. The *Bochasanwasī Akshar Purushotam Sanstha* a major institution of *Swāmīnārāyan* tradition, independent from other forms of the tradition and prominent in the diaspora.

5. Taken from the "Understanding Hinduism" information guide that accompanies visitors around the *Swāmīnārāyan* exhibition at their Neasden *maṇḍir*.

also categorize food such as onions and garlic according to *guṇic*[6] qualities and diet purity. Strict rituals of preparation and presentation surround the offering of food to the *mūrti*s of God or *guru* during regular congregational and domestic *pūjās*,[7] and the consequent consumption of sanctified food or *prasāda*[8] (Wood, 2009: 13).

By employing the term "vernacular" to describe Hindu beliefs and practices I am employing what Primiano (1995) considers a methodological, theoretical and interpretative term. "Vernacular" indicates how religion is lived and how it is encountered, understood, interpreted and practised on a day-to-day basis. This approach involves looking at the religious lives of individuals and paying special attention to the process of religious belief; that is the verbal, behavioural and material expressions of religious belief and the ultimate objects of religious belief that these are directed to (Primiano, 1995: 44). In short, "vernacular" Hinduism could be said to be, "The totality of all those views and practices of [Hinduism] that exist among the people apart from and alongside the strictly theological and liturgical forms of ('Representative') [Hinduism]" (Yoder, 1974: 2).

In the "vernacular" dimension food takes on magico-religious, talismanic qualities and becomes a vehicle for spirit possession. Moreover, foods with specific qualities are offered to parochial deities or saints in order to secure certain boons or favourable outcomes. Food becomes central in the pursuit and experience of miraculous events (Wood, 2008) and is offered to the spirits of deceased ancestors and hungry ghosts to sate their hunger or placate their rancour.

"Vernacular" Hinduism interacts with "representative" Hinduism on a constant basis. Despite their apparent marginalization, "vernacular" traditions often provide the foundations upon which certain "representative" Hindu identities, beliefs and practices establish and distinguish themselves. "Vernacular" Hinduism, when disengaged from "representative" Hinduism, is the total of all those practices and beliefs that remain largely unsanctioned and largely unrepresented in the reified and public versions of "representative" Hinduism. "Vernacular" Hindu traditions employ their own lexicon and are articulated in "vernacular" terms.[9]

6. *Guṇas* – qualities inherent in food, *sattva* (light – pulses, rice, dairy products), *rajas* (excitement – chilies, onions, garlic), *tamas* (darkness – meat, mushrooms).

7. Worship, primarily directed towards the *mūrti*, usually involving the offering of food, discussed at length throughout this study.

8. Food that has been offered to the deity and is shared among devotees (Klostermaier, 1998: 141).

9. They are all interpreted in a specifically Gujarātī fashion spoken about in Gujarātī language (with regional variations or direct translation from) by Gujarātī Hindus and are based on specifically Gujarātī experiences, indeed they are by definition vernacular.

2. Diversity in the Diaspora – Methodological Considerations

This study examines the diversity of belief and practice within the religion referred to as diaspora Hinduism[10] and many of my informants migrated from East Africa to the UK whereas many of my NZ informants were third or fourth generation residents or recently arrived from Fiji. Much has been written on the migration of Gujarātīs to the UK and NZ (see Mattausch,1993 and1998; Mawani and Anjoom, 2007) and as Vertovec (2000: 15) points out Gujarātī migration to and settlement in the UK and to an extent NZ, can be divided into two main periods following two distinct migratory trajectories.

The nineteenth and early twentieth centuries witnessed Indians migrating under indentured labour contracts and settling in East Africa and Fiji, although a number of Gujarātīs migrated directly to NZ in the early twentieth century (Leckie, 1998: 165). Gujarātī merchant families extended their commercial enterprises and began to have a major political, economic and social impact on their host countries (Vertovec, 2000: 15; Kotecha cited in in Mattausch, 1998: 128; Williams, 2001: 207).

For East African Gujarātī Hindus the second period of migration, this time to the UK, began in the shadow of Idi Amin's "Africanization"[11] policy in the late 1960s when, "tens of thousands of Ugandan Asians...were expelled" (Jackson and Nesbitt, 1993: 5). Gujarātī Hindus arrived *en masse*, their passports permitting entry for whole families.

After independence in 1970 the situation for Fijian Gujarātī Hindus also began to change. Widespread poverty brought about racial tensions and indigenous Fijians began to suspect their Indian neighbours (Norton cited in in Khan *et al.*, 2005: 5). The situation became increasingly untenable, thus in the late 1980s a second wave of Gujarātī Hindu families arrived in NZ.

10. I employ the term diaspora generically; referring specifically to Gujarātī Hindus who have left their homeland in west India and settled in the UK and NZ, in many cases via an interim location such as east Africa or Fiji; or who have migrated directly or were born to parents of Gujarātī origin in the UK or NZ.

11. The often violent reassertion of economic and cultural authority of indigenous Africans over the Asian population in East Africa leading to mass migration out of East Africa of the latter.

Of the four diaspora Hindu traditions included in this study two, the *Swāmīnārāyan Sanstha*[12] and the devotees of *Jalarām Bāpā*,[13] originated in Gujarāt. The other two are *Sanātana Dharma*[14] and the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON from here on),[15] both of whom attract and interact with large numbers of Gujarātī Hindus in this diaspora context.

I worked closely with devotees from a number of related places of worship. In the UK these were The Shri Swaminarayan Mandir, Neasden, Bhaktivedanta Manor, Aldenham, The Sanatan Devuja Mandir, Bristol, The Shree Sanatan Mandir, Leicester and The Jalarama Prarthana Mandir, Leicester. For the complementary research in NZ I worked, over a four-week period, with devotees from The Shri Radha Krishna Mandir, Mt Eden, The Shri Swaminarayan Mandir, Avondale, The Bharatiya Mandir, Balmoral and The Kumeu ISKCON Temple, all in Auckland, the Bay of Plenty Indian Association, Rotorua and The Wellington Indian Association.

Field work for this research in the UK and NZ was underpinned by the same methodological approaches. I chose to draw on phenomenological (Bowman, 1992; Geaves, 2007; Jackson and Nesbitt, 1993; Kim, 2008; Knott, 1986; Leckie, 2007; Leslie, 2003; Nye, 1995; Primiano, 1995) and reflexive ethnographic methodologies (Aull Davies, 1999; Bakshar cited in Leslie, 2003; Gardiner and Bell cited in Leslie, 2003) in my efforts to accurately understand, analyse and articulate the social reality presented to me by my informants.

12. The *Swāmīnārāyan Sanstha* is a modern form of *Vaiṣṇavism* based on the life and teachings of Sahajanand (1781–1830), a Gujarātī religious reformer. The last of the "medieval saints" (Williams cited in in Waghorne and Cutler, 1985: 144) he represented early neo-Hinduism and was viewed by his devotees as an *avatāra* of God. Within his lifetime, however, devotees came to believe that he was the highest manifestation of God superior to *Kṛṣṇa* and all other deities (Williams, 2001: 77).

13. Devotees of the saint *Jalarām Bāpā* (1799–1881) often refer to themselves as *Sanātana Dharma*. Narratives tell of remarkable incidents throughout *Jalarām Bāpā*'s life including a visitation from *Rāma*,[13] recollections of past lives and his performance of numerous miracles and healings throughout his life. It should be noted, however, that *Jalarām Bāpā* is fully human and in no way referred to as God and Rama takes the position as the main focus of devotion towards the divine at the Jalarama Prarthana Mandir.

14. Whilst *Sanātana Dharma* has no single founder or central text, devotees tend to regard the Vedas as authoritative. It could also be suggested that *Sanātana Dharma* is normative Hinduism and in common with many *saṃpradaya*s recognizes certain, common beliefs. It should, however, be pointed out these ideas are not universal throughout the Gujarātī Hindu diaspora, particularly among some *bhakti* traditions (Flood in Bowen, 1998: 30–55).

15. ISKCON is considered by its devotees to be a contemporary continuation of the *Gauḍīya Math* established by *Caitanya Mahāprabhu* (1485–1533). Its founder, *Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupad* (1896–, introduced deity worship to the west [Deadwyler in Waghorne and Cutler, 1985: 70]) and is seen as the most recent in an uninterrupted chain (*paraṁpāra*) of spiritual masters extending back to *Caitanya* himself.

The work draws upon 98 qualitative interviews conducted between 2003 and 2007. Contact with the individuals who took part in this research program was established through numerous participant observation sessions at a number of relevant places of worship during this period. It was important to stress the tradition that each informant belonged to, however, I chose to maintain personal informant anonymity as a means of facilitating an ongoing negotiation of information. Often informants would speak about aspects of their religion that did not necessarily accord with the accepted, textual or "representative" position of their tradition. As a consequence, a reassurance of anonymity was required, especially when it came to divulging insightful but sensitive information.

In each case, individuals or small groups of devotees, male and female, were interviewed for between thirty and ninety minutes, the interviews taking place in the locations mentioned below or at the devotee's home or place of work. The interviews were formatted and structured beforehand, but spontaneous discussion was always allowed for.

As an ethnographic enterprise concerning the phenomenon of *najar* and the practices that are employed to deal with it this research has attempted to overcome the apparent tensions between objective and subjective perspectives, between the academic and the informant, the researcher and the studied.

This involved drawing on Bakhtin's ideas of dialogics or culture as dialogue (in Leslie, 2003: 22) whereby all "socio cultural phenomena" are formed by means of an, "ongoing, dialogical relationship between individuals and groups, involving a multiplicity of different languages, discourses and practices" (Gardiner and Bell cited in Leslie, 2003: 23). The implication is, therefore, that there can be no such thing as an objective truth, rather that truth is constituted through dialogue between subjective understandings of the truth (Leslie, 2003: 22). The attractiveness of this approach is in its attempt to re-balance power inequalities in order to create a, "more just and equitable relation" (Gardiner and Bell in Leslie, 2003: 23) between the researcher and the researched.

According to Bell the research process should be a dialogue that allows for mutual surprises, mistakes and criticism (Leslie, 2003: 23) and he has provided me with basic guidelines to employ: "care (precision in the collection and analysis of data), consideration (openness to others, although not uncritical), honesty, straightforwardness and a sense of responsibility" (Bell cited in Leslie, 2003: 23). In essence Bell suggests that we study dialogics with dialogue (Bell cited in Leslie, 2003: 23).

As far as the reflexive ethnographic pursuit is concerned Bell's approach of dialogic with dialogue is important to this study. I have attempted to avoid the unreflexive approach that marks both structuralist functionalist and cultural

complex ethnographic perspectives and their attempts to reconstruct pure social structures (Aull Davies, 1999: 11). Neither have I literally handed over the presentation of the "other" to the "other," drawing on field research interviews but offering no commentary or analysis (Aull Davies, 1999: 16).

Throughout I have remained cognizant of the, "researcher's awareness of their necessary connection to the research situation and hence their effect upon it" (Aull Davies, 1999: 7) and have allowed for interpretation and explanation not just description. Such an interpretive position and perspective, as Aull Davies points out, may be applied "beyond the confines of their specific research subjects and sites, without sacrificing the hermeneutic insights into the pre-interpreted nature of their subject matter and the reflexive implications of their research practices" (1999: 18).

I agree with Bhaskar when he suggests that qualitative forms of research practice should be favoured along with the recognition of the importance of understanding based on language and dialogue (cited in Aull Davis, 1999: 21). Through this, ethnography can provide an explanation that is not strictly based on any regular or constant position, something that would be almost impossible to achieve in a study of this nature. This position also allows the researcher to avoid becoming frozen in any one theoretical framework or being left operating on a single phenomenological level; in short it allows us to provide an explanation without denying what our informants are doing and saying on the ground level.

3. *Najar* in the Diaspora

So when you have food in front of you and you are near someone who has no food, maybe through jealousy or spite, perhaps with no intention at all they may look at the food, there will be a passing thought in their mind, that thought will pass into the food and on to you, depending on how jealous or spiteful they are will determine how severe your illness is.[16]

The notion that the eye emits as well as receives is known among Gujarātī Hindus as *najar* and in its strictest sense *najar* is a neutral phenomenon. What transforms *najar* from a neutral state, however, to an active one are the thoughts, emotions or the intentions of the seer. Such thoughts and intentions may be far from auspicious and have the potential to cause suffering, illness and in some cases the severe physical debilitation of the person looked upon. To see is to touch and auspiciousness or inauspiciousness can result from either.

16. Anonymous informant: 21–30, male, unmarried, *Sanātana Dharma* devotee, Bristol, UK-born student, *Brāhmaṇa* (August 2004).

Najar is intimately connected with food; foodstuffs are employed to get rid of *najar*, food can be directly affected by *najar,* and food is used in order to prevent it. Protection from *najar* in the Gujarātī kitchen is extremely important. The negative effect of a malign glance cast across food is easily passed on to the consumer in the same way that pollution is transmitted by the touch of an unclean person, illness and misfortune may well ensue. All living creatures, businesses and economic concerns, men, women and in particular children are susceptible to the effects of *najar* (Michaels, 2004: 230).

For Pocock, *najar* in rural Gujarāt is indicative of concerns of status in a society where inequality manifests itself between those who should be equal but are in fact not (1973: 205). The fear of *najar* also ensures that wealth is employed modestly and generously. Pocock suggests that *najar* usually comes from, "one whom is, in most other respects, equal or has reason to expect to be" (1973: 206), hence, *najar* is based on the envy of someone who is socially equal but less fortunate.

Dwyer, in his research in Rajasthan contends that there is often an economic or social disparity between the individual casting the *najar* and the victim (2003: 77). His informants often claimed to be sick as a result of the evil eye from a person of a lower caste or a less affluent individual, presumably from the same caste. In the three cases that Dwyer mentions, evidence suggests considerable economic inequality between the one who has cast the malign glance and the victim (2003: 77).

Pocock, on the other hand, suggests there is rarely any social disparity between the caster of the *najar* and the victim. He contends that whether the *najar* is intentional or not, the glance usually comes from "one whom is, in most other respects, equal or has reason to expect to be" (1973: 28). Hence, *najar* is based more on the envy of someone who is socially equal but marginally less fortunate.

In the diasporic context, however, trajectories have been determined by economic concerns to a very large extent. This, coupled with a growing tendency toward egalitarian and ecumenical *bhakti* ideology, appears to have contributed to the erosion of specific caste affiliation. In these circumstances the manifestation of *najar* appears to have become more subtle in the same way that caste distinction has become less apparent.

Spiro (2005) takes the argument that *najar* is dependent upon economic and material conditions whilst further examining gender considerations in a diaspora context. Her paper indicates that *najar* "continue(s) to be the concern of women in most Gujarātī families in Britain today and across all socio economic groups, not confined to those on the 'bread line,' as have been previously suggested" (2005: abstract). This research agrees that the above play a part in the continued belief in and engagement with *najar* among Gujarātī Hindus in the diaspora. My contention

here is, however, that it is more the tradition to which the individual belongs and the approach of that tradition when it comes to questions of religious identity and authority that determines how *najar* is apprehended and dealt with.

Neither is *najar* solely the concern of Gujarātī women or specifically a household or domestic concern. This research establishes that Gujarātī men are just as concerned with *najar* on a day-to-day basis as well as the *purhits*, *pundits, swāmīs* and religious specialists. They are fully aware of its potential and are actively involved in explaining to devotees why it should be of no concern or how to deal with it. Religious identity and practice determines the degree of belief in relation to *najar* in the Gujarātī Hindu diaspora. Belief in *najar*, however, has to be seen as distinct from an understanding of *najar*.

Gujarātī Hindus living in the UK and NZ understand the mechanics of *najar* in similar ways, but approaches and attitudes towards it vary greatly. The idea of envy being central to *najar* was almost universal and informants spoke of material possessions being one of the common causes of *najar*.

It is also understood that the malign gaze can affect food and, by extension, the person consuming it. In an example of a direct transference of the belief in *najar* and associated practices, a *Jalarām Bāpā* informant explained that if you offer a little of your own food to a poor or hungry person then it will prevent the rest of your food becoming victim of their *najar*. And again an informant from Bristol elaborated,

So when you have food in front of you and you are near someone who has no food, maybe through jealousy or spite, perhaps with no intention at all they may look at the food, there will be a passing thought in their mind, that thought will pass into the food and on to you.[17]

Swāmīnārāyan devotees expanded upon the connection between the malign gaze of the poor and *najar*. They explained it in terms of the fact that one will always feel uncomfortable eating good food in the presence of someone who has none. Interestingly enough the issue of poverty was not even mentioned in the NZ context.[18]

In light of this, the transference of the notion of *najar* into a diaspora context

17. Anonymous informant: 31–50, male, unmarried, *Sanātana Dharma* devotee, Bristol, East African-born, priest, *Brāhmaṇa* (August 2004).

18. It is, however, worth mentioning that such qualities of generosity in the face of poverty receive some mention in the *Dharmasūtras* of *Gautama* (in Ollivelle, 1996) where we find "compassion to all creatures...lack of envy...having an auspicious disposition and lack of greed" (*Gautama* 8.23–33 in Olivelle, 1999: 90) and "Through good conduct flourishes righteousness (and) wealth...even if he lacks auspicious marks, a man of good conduct, full of generosity and free from envy will live a hundred years" (*Vasiṣṭha* 6.8 in Olivelle, 1999: 266).

becomes all the more interesting. One might expect poverty to present itself as a real issue in India on a day-to-day basis. The degree of comparative poverty to be found in parts of India, however, far outweighs anything that might occur in most parts of urban UK and NZ. On the whole most informants agreed that in their present circumstances people enjoyed a relatively high standard of living and could at least take advantage of the welfare state. The occurrence of *najar* in this context was regarded as rare, something more restricted to India.

Many informants in the UK and NZ were of the belief that *najar* could be physically consumed, giving numerous examples of the malign effect that it can have upon food. An NZ *Kṛṣṇa* devotee, though not a member of ISKCON, explained, "The belief that if someone looks at your food and they are doing it in a certain way then it can affect the food and spoil it, it goes wrong [*sic*]."[19] Similarly, a UK *Sanātana Dharma* informant spoke of food being the easiest method of transmitting *najar*, explaining it was also a lot more effective as it would pass into the blood stream and be carried through the body.[20] Another informant at the same location explained that it could even happen when preparing offerings of the most pure *sattvic*[21] food, "if [there is] just a split of a bad thought, that food will affect you in a bad way."

The practice of offering food to God and thus transforming it from a mundane substance into sanctified *prasāda* is widespread. There is a general belief in this context that you should not taste the food being prepared or allow anyone else to do so prior to offering it to God. Informants also spoke of the necessity of preventing anyone from looking at the food prior to offering, hence minimizing the chances of food ruination before being offered to God.[22]

Informants from all traditions were of the belief that food could not be affected by *najar* once it had been transformed into *prasāda*. One Auckland informant explained, "when people are negative, having bad thoughts, from the eyes they can hurt you...that is why we offer the food to God, you understand?"[23] An Auckland ISKCON devotee confirmed this when he explained that food offered to *Kṛṣṇa* could

19. Anonymous informant: 21–30, male, unmarried, *Sanātana Dharma*, Auckland, Fijian-born, restaurant owner, caste undisclosed (August 2005).

20. Anonymous informants: 51–70, female, married, *Sanātana Dharma*, Leicester, East African-born, Lohana (April 2004).

21. One of the three *guṇa*s or qualities of all material things. *Sattva* is the lightest, purest*guṇa* and hence most desirable.

22. Anonymous informants: 31–50, female, married, *Sanātana Dharma*, Auckland, Fijian born, restaurant owner, *Koli* (July 2005).

23. Anonymous informant: 51–70, female, married, *Sanātana Dharma*, Auckland, NZ-born, housewife, *Koli* (August 2005).

in no way be affected by *najar* even if it existed in NZ, of which this particular individual was convinced that it did not.[24]

The ritual of offering food to God was commonly employed to protect it against the possibility of *najar*. A Gujarātī-born Fijian Hindu now running a vegetarian restaurant in the heart of Auckland and a devotee of *Kṛṣṇa* (not a member of ISKCON) went to great lengths to protect his customers against any possibility of *najar*. He explained that as each dish is prepared for the daily buffet a little was taken and placed before the restaurant's *Kṛṣṇa mūrti*. The *prasāda* was then placed into the larger batches thus rendering the food for the potential customers immune to any inauspicious glances. The same ritual took place in a number of other Gujarātī owned vegetarian restaurants in that area of the city.

As well as acting as an antidote for *najar,* food also has divinatory and talismanic qualities. Acidic and saline food substances are efficacious in curing the malign effects of *najar,* with frequent mention of lemons, mustard seeds and salt. One *Swāmīnārāyan* devotee explained at length,

> there are a lot of ways to get rid of it, like for minor *najar* we usually get rid of it by saying prayers, or taking a dried red chilli, some mustard seeds, salt and lemon juice, which is very bitter for evil people and they don't like it. This goes seven times around the head and is thrown outside without looking at it as you throw it, this takes the evil with it.[25]

The food most employed in the curing and divining of *najar* is dry red chillies. The waving of chillies around the heads of newly-born children and infants was deemed particularly effective by a number of *Sanātana Dharma* informants,

> My son was having nightmares regularly so my mother-in-law waved chilies around his head and did something with oil. She went round and round with it then she threw it outside and honestly, after that he stopped crying completely and he never had another nightmare.

Another *Jalarām Bāpā* informant explained that they had waved dry red chillies around the head of their son when he was ill, and despite having no real knowledge or interest in the process the son suggested, "if it gets rid of what is wrong with me, if it is going to work then good, I am not complaining."[26]

24. Anonymous informant: 51–70, male, married, *Sanātana Dharma*, Auckland, NZ-born, shop owner, *Koli* (August 2005 Auckland).

25. Anonymous informant: 70+, female, widower, *Swāmīnārāyan* devotee, Neasden *maṇḍir*, East African-born, *Patel* (August 2004).

26. Anonymous informants: 15–20, male, unmarried, *Jalarām Bāpā* devotee, Jalarama Prarthana Mandir Leicester, UK-born, student, *Lohana* (April 2004).

ISKCON devotees asserted that *najar* was not part of either their religious or cultural worldview. They did not, however, deny the possibility of *najar* affecting the everyday lives of other diaspora Hindus, "*Najar* is not something that is necessarily denied, it does exist, but it is down to the question as to whether you become affected by it, the protection comes from the degree of spirituality and devotion (one maintains)."[27]

Becoming affected by *najar* through the consumption of food was, however, simply not possible for ISKCON devotees. ISKCON devotees are extremely cautious when it comes to the preparation and consumption of food and the approaches outlined above concerning *prasāda* are strictly adhered to within the tradition; the food prepared for *Kṛṣṇa* and his devotees is so spiritually charged so as to be immune to potential ruination.

This relationship with *najar* was not seen as a rationalization of beliefs into a more representative belief system over a period of time. There was no mention that informants used to believe in *najar* prior to their becoming ISKCON devotees or that belief in *najar* would eventually die out with in consequent generations. The majority of the ISKCON devotees that I spoke to were non-Indian and *najar* was simply incongruent with the cultural milieu within which they grew up, a modern European milieu.

Furthermore, for many senior ISCKON devotees *najar* results from *Tantric* practice[28] and as *Tantric* practice is not something devotees indulge in it follows that *najar* plays no part in their religious worldview.[29] They did not involve themselves with it or consider it worthy of consideration, its existence was not, however, denied, as one devotee explained, "this is very much part of the Tantric

27. Anonymous informants: 31–50, male, unmarried ISKCON, Bhaktivedanta Manor, Gujarātī-born, ISKCON spokesperson (December 2006).

28. This is an interesting perspective on Tantric practice. As Flood points out *Tantr*ism has long been an affront to orthodox or *Brahmani*cal Hinduism (Flood in Bowen, 1998: 30–55). "Left-handed" *Tantra* (*vāmācāra*), which recognizes no caste distinction, involves the practice of highly polluting ritual, sexual and otherwise, the consumption of meat, fish and alcohol and the worship of deities outside the Vedic pantheon. In contrast, the "right-handed" *Tantr*ic tradition(*dakṣināācāra*) is based on purity. "Left-handed" Tantric practice, as Flood points out, "throws up challenging ethical questions for orthoprax Hinduism" (Flood 1996: 190). With inherent preoccupation concerning ritual purity among *bhakti* devotees, especially those traditions that consider themselves to represent a more orthopraxic version of Hinduism, it might seem natural to associate the phenomenon of *najar* with the practice of "left-handed" *Tantra*, even if informants were unaware of the distinctions within *Tantr*ism. For a further breakdown of Tantric traditions see Flood (1998: 189–92).

29. Anonymous informant: 30–40, female, married ISKCON devotee, Bhaktivedanta Manor, Gujarātī-born (December 2003).

world and we in ISKCON being *Vaiṣṇava* do not practice this, we believe that it can happen but we do not involve ourselves with it."[30]

The position of *Swāmīnārāyan* devotees concerning *najar* is more complex. Informants took the position that *najar* was reserved for other Hindus, remit of their parents, grandparents or that it belonged to a time prior to their joining the *Swāmīnārāyan Sanstha. Najar* simply does not happen to *Swāmīnārāyan* devotees, "personally I did not believe in all of that. I was devoted to lord *Swāmīnārāyan* from childhood and we understand that there are no superstitions, nothing like (*najar*)."[31]

Another devotee considered that belief in *najar* has no credibility and to believe in it is to be less "Hindu" by comparison,

> Most *Swāmīnārāyan*s will not have any belief in this kind of black magic, you will find this thing in many other communities but not in *Swāmīnārāyan.* It comes in the teachings of *Swāmīnārāyan* that God is the all doer and no one else in this world, accept God, can harass a devotee.[32]

Interestingly, however, there are still members of the *saṁpradāya* who engage with *najar* both directly and indirectly in the diaspora.

Informants who regularly attended the main Neasden or Avondale *maṇḍirs* claimed to have no direct experience of *najar*. One reason for this may be that these *maṇḍir*s are also administration centres for the *saṁpradāya* and maintain a more rigid, "representative" spiritual framework within which the notion of *najar* is dealt with accordingly. Both locations run regular lectures, discourses, and host visits from significant spiritual personalities within the *saṁpradāya.* The buildings themselves harbour atmospheres of collective religious identity and cohesion emphasizing the "representative" teachings of *Sāhajanand Swāmīnārāyan.* Concerns about *najar* or other "vernacular" beliefs and practices, as one devotee explained, are dismissed, "Since I have been coming to this temple and meeting the Santos here, they say... if I relate it to god then it can counteract the affect and nothing will touch (me)."[33]

This is in comparison to the experience of devotees from smaller parochial temples or for devotees where there is no local *saṁpradāya*n *maṇḍir* at all. In such instances the spiritual administration is possibly less rigid and there is less access

30. Anonymous informants: 31–50, male, single, ISKCON, Bhaktivedanta Manor, British born, ISKCON spokesperson (December 2006).

31. Anonymous informant: 30–40, female, married *Swāmīnārāyan* devotee, Neasden *maṇḍir*: *Patel*. East African-born (December 2004).

32. Anonymous informant: 40–50, female, married *Swāmīnārāyan* devotee, Neasden *maṇḍir*: *Patel*. East African-born (December 2004).

33. Anonymous informant: 40–50, female, married *Swāmīnārāyan* devotee, Neasden *maṇḍir*: *Patel*. East African-born (December 2004).

to guidance from the ordained spiritual body. For example a Loughborough-based devotee suggested that, "Yes, some people, if you are eating food near them, their *najar* may go bad and it will transfer to your food," followed with a reassurance, "So we say any food that you eat, think of God and that will stop the *najar*." Another devotee explained, "The evil now sometimes happens, but if someone discovers that they are with someone with the evil eye they will not eat any food near them. They will not eat."[34] Some devotees may find themselves having to worship in non-*Swāmīnārāyan maṇḍir*s where differing approaches to such matters are adopted both by the officiating spiritual body and the local Hindu community.

I would, therefore, suggest that in essence, in the Swāmīnārāyan tradition, the non-belief in *najar* is employed as a vehicle to elevate the *saṁpradāya* above other forms of Hinduism who still entertain the notion and practice the rituals associated with it. Sāhajanand Swāmīnārāyan, with which seems a similar preoccupation with *Tantric* practice to ISKCON, exhorted devotees to overcome what he regarded as superstitions, such as *najar* and similar beliefs, encouraging his followers to lead a pure and spiritually fulfilled life,

> In Gujarāt every village had a *bhuwo* (sorcerer). He practiced Tantra... On those who defied him he hurled lentil seeds on which he cast evil *mantras*. The resulting effects would vary from illness to death... Lord Swaminarayan battled massive opposition and malice from...tantrics and *bhuwas* in society...he exhorted them (devotees) never to be frightened..of superstition and tantrics under any circumstances...the Lord released the devotees from the shackles of ignorance and superstition, infusing them with immense spiritual fortitude (Mukundcharandas, 1999: 34–35).

The *Swāmīnārāyan* tradition makes no attempt to rationalize the "vernacular" belief in *najar* and offers no philosophical, theological or scientific explanation of *najar*. Neither do *Swāmīnārāyan* devotees deny that *najar* actually exists, indeed throughout the *saṁpradāya*'s literature we find many examples of such phenomena existing and being used against devotees. What we do find, however, is that discarding the belief in *najar* is an important part of the transition to a more devotional and purer life.

Many devotees, not born into the *saṁpradāya*, have spoken about the times when they personally believed in *najar*. Such times are referred to as dark, spiritually ignorant and are laden with negative connotations. Prior to becoming a devotee, life involved a great deal of negative experiences, put into sharp focus when

34. Anonymous informants: 40–50, females, married Swāmīnārāyan devotees, Loughborough *maṇḍir*: *Patel*s. East African-born (December 2004).

compared with their experience of the world after becoming a member of the *Swāmīnārāyan Sanstha.*

This theme of darkness before the light can be summed up in a passage to be found in the *Sāhajanand Chatira*,

> The people were caught in the clutches of the exorcists, cheats, fakers and those Brahmins who gave talismans and magical threads. People lived constantly under the fear of superstition... In order to make the people free from evils...he addressed...all the *satsangis*... "I *Swami Shri Sāhajanand* send *Narayan* to all men and women devotees...therefore there is only one supreme power" (Dave, 1994: 45).

The *Swāmīnārāyan Sanstha* has employed the "vernacular" understanding of *najar* to underpin its identity but also to strengthen its position of spiritual authority in the wider Gujarātī Hindu diaspora.

This is emphasized in the recitation of the *vartanam* or initiation *mantra* and the taking and wearing of the *kanthi* as one becomes a devotee of *Swāmīnārāyan*, passing from spiritual darkness into spiritual light. The *Swāmīnārāyan Sanstha* associate *najar* with dark times, ignorance and inferiority, this is especially so when compared with the spiritual benefits resulting from complete devotion to *Sāhajanand Swāmīnārāyan* and the pure religious life that guides the devotee as a consequence.

The *Swāmīnārāyan Sanstha* provides an example of the absorption and employment of "vernacular" beliefs within and by a distinctive "representative" religious framework. Furthermore, the *Swāmīnārāyan Sanstha* has not only re-presented *najar* but has assumed a position of supreme responsibility and authority in doing so. For the *Swāmīnārāyan Sanstha*, *najar* is no longer a valid explanation for life's day-to-day suffering.

4. Authority, Continuity and the Academy

Religious identity is to a large degree highlighted by belief or disbelief in *najar* as is the question of spiritual authority within the UK and NZ Gujarātī Hindu diaspora. *Najar* is considered by the *Swāmīnārāyan Sanstha* to belong to the world of the largely uneducated or those lacking in devotion who erroneously entertain beliefs and practice rituals revolving around a moribund superstition.

The *Swāmīnārāyan Sanstha* appears to categorically dismiss "vernacular" beliefs such as *najar* at the same time as upholding their own "representative" theology.... should one engage with *najar* or incorporate beliefs and rituals concerning *najar* in to ones religious life then one may be endangering one's chances of a spiritual fulfilment in this life and perhaps in the next.

The *saṁpradāya*'s approach to the concept also raises the question of authority in this diasporic context. The question of authority in relation to *najar* is indicative

of the program of religious or spiritual reform undertaken by Sahājanand Swāmīnārāyan to lead Gujarātī Hindus out of spiritual darkness.[35] It also explicitly gives direction as to how to approach such dark ideologies and practices. Importantly, when it comes to addressing Hindu belief and practice concerning *najar*, the location of authority in Sahājanand and his teachings is echoed throughout the *saṁpradāya*'s literature and the words of the informants that I have encountered.

Other traditions are, however, engaged either intellectually or philosophically with the notion that *najar* can affect food and the individual eating the food in a similarly negative way. For these traditions, the realms of the "vernacular" and the "representative" co-exist and inform whilst challenging each other, but above all they recognize the valid role that "vernacular" traditions play in their day-to-day lives in the UK and NZ

The question of the continuity of belief in *najar* in a diaspora milieu received mixed responses among the informants but there was an open willingness to at least engage with the idea of *najar* in relation to food on an intellectual level. Informants in NZ, for example, suggested that among the current, NZ-born generations the idea might fade, but in the long term it might remain prevalent due to Gujarātīs recently arriving directly from India. Among these Gujarātīs there are those who still maintained a belief in *najar* and viewed it as a day-to-day concern.[36] It was also suggested that Fijian-born Hindus arriving in NZ would also ensure that the belief in *najar* and related rituals would continue within the community.

Najar is not just a lay belief, a household or domestic concern in suburban Auckland or Leicester; it is also the remit of the *paṇḍit* on Eden Terrace, the *sādhu*s in Neasden and the *swāmī*s in Avondale. They are all fully aware of its potential and are actively involved in explaining to devotees why it should not concern them. This ambiguity may, however, be indicative of the ongoing development of Gujarātī Hindu identity as it attempts to reconcile the demands and expectations of maintaining a public, "representative" profile with the experiences of devotees on a day-to-day basis.

Despite speculation that belief in *najar* will simply disappear in time and have no role to play when it comes to the expression of Gujarātī Hinduism in the diaspora, it could be suggested that Gujarātī Hindus have entered what Geaves refers to as the

35. The term *guru* is widely understood to refer to a teacher of religious knowledge or conveyor of spiritual insight and liberation (Bowker, 1997: 394). Swāmīnārāyan literature refers to the *guru* as the spiritual master, "one who leads the aspirant from darkness to enlightenment" (Jnaneshwardas and Mukundcharandas, 2001: 5).

36. Anonymous informant: 20–30, male, unmarried, *Sanātana Dharma* devotee, Radha Krishna mandir, Auckland, *Lohana*, Fijian-born (August 2005).

fifth stage of religious transformation (2007: 87). This stage suggests that "vernacular" traditions such as *najar* are challenging Hindu orthodoxies when it comes to explaining everyday misfortune or illness. Geaves argues that Punjabi Śaivites in the UK have been enjoying this stage of development for a number of years, and local "vernacular" religious traditions have flourished in the face of Sikh orthodoxy and ecumenical temple institutions.

I would like to suggest that many Gujarātī Hindus have been continually engaging with *najar* in the face of "representative" Hindu traditions who likewise promote the idea of orthodoxy. Those Gujarātī Hindus who do so have the confidence to engage and deal with *najar* whilst maintaining a fluid relationship with but at the same time challenging largely rationalized "representative" forms of Hindu in a diaspora milieu.

The problem faced by academic researchers and non-Hindus alike is that *najar*, despite its presence in the day-to-day lives of Gujarātī Hindus in the UK and NZ, is not publicly visible. *Najar* is a phenomenon that occurs beyond the temple and the festival, it is a private affair, rarely talked about in the public domain and has no part to play in the representation of Hinduism promoted in this diasporic context (also see Wood 2010: 252).

The promoted and rationalized, homogenous and ecumenical representation of Hinduism in this context is merely a part of the larger picture. The effects of rationalization, reform and absorption have been varied, especially as regards to that which relates to Hinduism outside India. What should interest us most is how belief and disbelief in *najar* have been woven into distinct religious identities in the Gujarātī Hindu diaspora and further how such beliefs and practices both challenge assumptions of authority but are central in efforts to maintain it.

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