DIASPORIC COMMUNITY IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION, PROJECTION, AND MANIFESTATION: THE CASE OF BAPS SWAMINARAYAN MANDIR, NAIROBI

Kassim Mwamba Omar, Komal Thakran and Neeraja Chandra

Abstract

The Indian community has always been in flux in East Africa as traders, merchants, and financiers for centuries. With the expansion of trade, Indian settlement gradually extended along the East African coast and hinterland. Due to this, the Indian Diaspora became one of the oldest communities to settle in East Africa. As they settled over time, they also brought their cultural beliefs, traditions, and ideas with them. While gradually, their identity transformed from "South Asians in Africa to "Asian Africans." Like many diasporic communities, Indians faced the delicate challenge of preserving their cultural identities while gradually engaging with East African society. This balance between maintaining their heritage and adapting to local customs shaped their distinctive role in the region's history. This research, through the case study of the BAPS Swaminarayan Mandir in Nairobi, assesses the expression of' diasporic identity within the Indian-Kenyan community. Although diasporas often experience continuous pressure to assimilate, the BAPS Mandir stands as a deliberate cultural and architectural statement of identity, resilience, and continuity. Drawing on data from a Conservation Management Plan (CMP), field observations, and community interviews, the paper examines how sacred architecture serves not only as a religious site but also as a socio-political symbol, educational hub, and civic actor in Kenya. It highlights how the Indian community, particularly the Gujarati Swaminarayan sect, has constructed, projected, and sustained its cultural identity through spatial, ritual, and institutional frameworks over time. The paper argues that religious spaces, such as the BAPS Mandir, play a critical role in shaping collective memory, negotiating belonging, and stimulating civic engagement in postcolonial, multicultural African urban contexts.

Keywords: Indian Diaspora, BAPS Swaminarayan Mandir, Architecture, Religious identity, Community engagement.

Introductory Background

The Indian Ocean has, for millennia, been a zone of intense economic and cultural exchange, linking East Africa, Arabia, South Asia, and

Southeast Asia. These connections predate the rise of Islam and were initially driven not by empires but by small-scale entrepreneurs and coastal societies who moved plants, animals, and people across the sea (Fuller, 2011). These early interactions laid the groundwork for later, more systematic trade and migration, as Indian and African societies became increasingly interconnected through commerce and cultural exchanges.

As trade intensified, especially from the first millennium CE onward, Indian merchant communities began to settle in East African port cities. These settlements often took the form of *trading diasporas*, resident foreign communities that acted as cultural and economic intermediaries (Seland, 2013). These diasporas were organized along lines of geographical origin, ethnicity, and religion, providing the infrastructure of trust and social cohesion necessary for long-distance trade in environments where merchants were often far from home.

Seland also indicates that the *Periplus Maris Erythraei* (a 1st-century CE trade manual) and archaeological evidence from sites like Berenike (Egypt) and Muziris (India) attest to the presence of diverse, multi-ethnic merchant populations along the Indian Ocean rim, including Indians in East African ports such as Rhapta (Seland, 2013).

Port cities like Aden and later key Swahili coast cities served as crucial nodes in these networks, developing urban institutions and spatial arrangements to harness the commercial potential of their strategic locations (Margariti, 2008). These immigrants, Indian, Arab, and African traders in these ports, promoted cosmopolitan societies where each community had a distinct cultural, linguistic, and religious identity.

The arrival of imperial powers, from the Romans to the Portuguese and Dutch, altered but did not erase these older networks, For example, after Rome's conquest of Egypt, Indian emporia became the linchpin of the global economy, extracting surplus from Roman trade (Fitzpatrick, 2010) Vink notes that the Dutch and other European powers later intensified the movement of peoples which included Indians across the Indian Ocean, sometimes through forced migration and slavery, further entangling the destinies of East Africa and India. He further notes that the Dutch East India Company (VOC) and other colonial powers actively participated in the Indian Ocean slave trade, moving people from India (notably the Coromandel coast) and Madagascar to various parts of their empire, including East Africa and the Cape (Vink, 2003).

Through such movements, there was an integration of Indian labourers and communities into East African societies, sometimes as slaves, but also as merchants, artisans, and intermediaries. The Indian Ocean world was not only a space of peaceful commerce but also of conflict, piracy, and competition among mercantile states, port cities, and so-called "pirate" states, which shaped the fortunes and movements of Indian communities in the region (Margariti, 2008)

Prange argues against the notion of a pacific Indian Ocean before European arrival, emphasizing the presence and significance of piracy in the region, such as the Malabari seamen in the sixteenth century engaged in a variety of roles, including trade, piracy, privateering, and naval warfare; and even how piracy became integrated into the political and economic structures of Calicut, a major port city, playing a vital role in its naval power and even its fiscal system. He goes on to further emphasize the importance of local communities, their maritime practices, and their responses to changing commercial environments (Prange, 2021). Prange's work gives insight into the intersections of trade, violence, and state formation, demonstrating that piracy was not just random acts of aggression but also a part of broader social and political dynamics.

The movement of Indians into East Africa and Kenya must be understood as part of a much broader, deep-rooted process of Indian Ocean connectivity. This involved not only trade and voluntary migration but also forced movement through slavery and colonial labor systems. Over centuries, Indian communities became integral to the economic, social, and cultural fabric of East African port cities, forming diasporas that facilitated exchange, navigated shifting imperial dynamics, and contributed to the cosmopolitan character of the Indian Ocean world

The formation of the East African Indian National Congress in 1914 marked a crucial moment when Indians in Kenya transitioned from seeking economic parity to championing broader political and social justice, including African land and labor rights. By urging Indians to see themselves as 'Kenyan first' and align with African struggles, leaders like U.K. Oza articulated a powerful anti-colonial ideology born from shared experiences of racial discrimination (Aiyar, 2015).

On the other hand, Makhan Singh, one of the notable Indian activists of the pre-independence period, advocated radical labour activism, which not only advanced the rights of Indian workers but also established a strong foundation for non-racial solidarity with African workers,

ushering in a new phase of cross-racial resistance to colonial rule. As a staunch advocate of both symbolic and practical alliances, Singh, among others, actively supported African demands in the Legislative Council and corresponded with Jomo Kenyatta, the presumed leader of the Mau Mau freedom movement. Through these efforts, he helped broaden the anti-colonial front and envisioned a more inclusive and united nationalist movement. Other notable Indian activists and leaders such as Alibhai Mulla Jeevanjee, Allidina Visram, and Pio Gama Pinto played a critical role in Kenya's national development.

These global migrations and postcolonial displacements and freedom agitation have given rise to vibrant diasporic communities, especially in East Africa and Kenya in particular. Among these, the Indian diaspora, particularly of Gujarati origin, stands out as it has significantly shaped Kenya's economic, cultural, and architectural landscapes. The BAPS Swaminarayan Mandir in Nairobi offers a unique lens through which to understand how diasporic identity is constructed, projected, and materially manifested across time. This paper uses the temple as a case study to analyse how the Indian-Kenyan community resists cultural erasure, maintains transnational ties, and asserts its place within the Kenyan national framework through architecture, rituals, and public engagement.

Conceptual Framework

The BAPS Swaminarayan Mandir in Nairobi is viewed as a cultural centre where the Indian diaspora builds, expresses, and maintains its identity. It fetches notions about diaspora, transnational connections, and holy spaces to depict how communities conserve their heritage while acclimating to a new society. The temple's architecture, rituals, and community activities create a sense of belonging and continuity. At the same time, public festivals and exhibitions project this identity to the wider Kenyan society. This approach helps to explain how faith, culture, and space come together in diasporic life. This framework draws on three connected ideas that show how identity, culture, and space interact at the BAPS Swaminarayan Mandir in Nairobi.

Cultural Resistance & Retention

The cultural identity of Indians has always been regarded as "Traditional Trade Diaspora." It used to be displayed as "Indian Identity" as they always did, projecting Indian customs of marriage, family values, and sharing

common culture (Oonk, 2013). Indians showed themselves as most persistent and resilient because they never bothered about who the ruler is, what the political and economic conditions are; they have always remained at the epicentre regarding their culture and its preservation (Ghai, 1965).

Drawing on Stuart Hall's theory of cultural identity, Indians in East Africa have worked to resist cultural dilution by holding onto practices that keep their heritage alive (Hall, Slack, & Grossberg, 2021). Delf (1963) describes Indians, because of their religious prosperity, found subtle expression of poetic insight and began primitive animism and which the West sees as gross superstition, for mature tolerance as well as tough modernism. They have done this through rituals, gatherings, and creating spaces since first arriving on the Swahili Coast before moving into the cities. Like performing worship with traditions as followed in India.

Wearing clothes like those worn in India, such as sarees. Also, worshiping the deity in the same way as it is done in India, for instance, in India, Krishna idols are offered milk in a copper pot; similarly, in East Africa, too (Ghai, 1965). Building temples, running community halls, and celebrating festivals like Diwali and Holi have helped them pass down their values and history to younger generations. Even as they adapt to life in East Africa and form new ties with local societies, these practices help them maintain a strong and distinctive cultural identity.

Sacred Architecture as Identity Marker

Sacred architecture acts as an influential identity marker for diasporic communities. Inspired by the work of Rapoport (1990) and Dovey (1999), the BAPS Swaminarayan Mandir in Nairobi is seen as an active agent in cultural expression and urban symbolism rather than a passive heritage. Hindu temples in the Indian diaspora are as diverse as those in South Asia. They reflect different regions, traditions, and religious paths (Baumann & Wilke, 2023).

In studying diaspora, it is important to see how people bring and practice their culture in new places (Jayram, 2004). The BAPS Mandir in Nairobi shows this clearly. It is the first traditional stone and marble Hindu temple in Africa, opened in 1999. The Mandir is also a community hub, which offers youth activities, language classes, and cultural programs. They are inspired by the Indian temple, Māru-Gurjara (Solanki) style craftsmanship with Shilpa-Shastra guidelines, which proportioned parts like the shikhara, garbhagriha, mandapa, kalasha, and dvarapalas, each full of meaning (Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan

Sanstha, 2000). These are not just structures; they represent spiritual ideas and stories from Hindu beliefs (Michell, 1988). For the BAPS community, the temple is both a place to pray and a strong symbol of their identity in a diverse society.

Projected Belonging

Arjun Appadurai's (1996) ideas of *ethnoscapes* and *ideoscapes* help to explain how Indians in East Africa created a sense of belonging over time. The *ethnoscape* began with centuries of dhow trade linking Indian merchants to the Swahili coast (Sheriff, 2010). Until the 18th century, most Indians stayed near coastal towns. When the Omani sultans took control, they made it easier for Indians to settle inland (Wahab, 2022). Later, many came as indentured labourers for railway construction and stayed in nearby areas. By the 20th century, respected coastal families also moved further inland, forming larger communities.

The *ideoscape* can be seen in how Hindu families slowly overcame taboos against migration overseas. Earlier, a few Hindu families lived openly, and mostly men arrived alone. Over time, as Indian businesses and estates grew, more families came and settled in cities. They kept their customs alive by domesticating cows, displaying religious images, fasting, and marrying within the community (Christie, 1867). Over time, these practices evolved into more organized and visible forms of cultural expression. The BAPS Mandir became a pioneer for such a living cultural continuum.

The Mandir became Africa's first traditional Hindu temple built from Italian marble and Indian sandstone. It anchors the Indian diaspora by replicating sacred architectural forms and hosting major Hindu festivals like Diwali and Annakut. As a spatial artefact, it recreates cultural familiarity through its garbhagriha and shikhara. The civic outreach programs and interfaith visits surround it in Kenyan public life. The Mandir negotiates diaspora identity by maintaining Indian religious traditions. But it also promotes its Kenyan belonging as the BAPS Mandir has hosted notable visits, including India's High Commissioner Namgya C. Khampa in 2023 (BAPS, 2023) and Pramukh Swami Maharaj in 2004 (BAPS, 2004). It emphasises its cultural and diplomatic significance in Kenya.

Methodology

This paper is grounded in a qualitative, document-based research approach with triangulated inputs, namely: **Document Analysis,**

Thematic Coding, Visual and Spatial Analysis, and Discourse Analysis. This methodology provides a layered understanding of the meanings of BAPS Swaminarayan Mandir, Nairobi, not only as a religious site but also as a social project of identity reproduction. By triangulating and cross-referencing data from various sources and analytical perspectives, the study seeks to offer a nuanced understanding of the temple as both a religious and socio-cultural project that embodies identity construction, projection, and manifestation. The methodology is carefully chosen to align with the research aim: to explore how the Indian diaspora in Kenya has resisted acculturation pressures while actively contributing to national development through the symbolic and practical functions of the temple.

Document Analysis

The principal source for this study is the 2025 Conservation Management Plan (CMP) for BAPS Swaminarayan Mandir. The CMP offers an authoritative and comprehensive compilation of historical records, architectural descriptions, socio-cultural contexts, and conservation strategies. This document was selected as it not only provides factual details but also encapsulates the values and meanings attributed to the temple by its community custodians and the wider public. Through a close reading of the CMP, the research identifies specific elements that reveal the intentional design and management choices reflecting community identity.

Document analysis was selected principally. It is suitable for heritage studies because it allows for the examination of how official narratives are constructed and institutionalised. In this case, the CMP acts as a living document that represents both past and evolving community aspirations. It provides a critical window into the temple's development phases, ritual practices, governance structures, and engagement with the broader Kenyan society. This analysis is supplemented by secondary literature, including local newspaper articles, published interviews, and official BAPS publications, to provide a richer contextual backdrop.

Thematic Coding

The second layer of analysis employs thematic coding to systematically identify and extract recurrent themes related to “identity”, “cultural continuity”, “diaspora”, and “resistance” within the CMP and supplementary documents. This method allows this research to distil large

volumes of qualitative data into key analytical categories, thereby making explicit the implicit messages that might otherwise be overlooked.

The decision to use thematic coding is justified by the paper's focus on intangible aspects of heritage and identity. Unlike purely architectural analyses that prioritise form and material, this study seeks to understand the social meanings and symbolic gestures embedded in architectural and ritual practices. Braun and Clarke argue that thematic analysis enables researchers to identify, analyse, and report patterns or themes within data. It minimally organises and describes your data set in rich detail and interprets various aspects of the research topic, helping to uncover how meanings and identities are constructed and maintained (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic coding in this case enabled the research to map out and highlight the discursive terrain through which the community negotiates belonging and distinctiveness, both internally (among the Indian diaspora) and externally (within the Kenyan socio-political context). By systematically tagging segments of text that relate to these themes, the research illuminates the strategies employed by the community to maintain cohesion and transmit cultural values across generations.

Visual and Spatial Analysis

Given the highly visual and spatial nature of architectural heritage, the study integrates visual and spatial analysis to interpret photographs, elevation sketches, and documented temple rituals as both material and symbolic evidence. The photographs and architectural drawings serve as concrete representations of design intentions, spatial hierarchies, and aesthetic codes that reflect cultural identity.

Visual analysis is crucial in understanding how architecture transcends its physical boundaries to become a vessel for cultural memory and identity projection. Till notes that architecture is not merely a backdrop for social life but an active agent in shaping cultural identities, representing collective memory, and materialising social values. Through its spatial configurations and symbolic language, architecture participates in the ongoing negotiation of identity and belonging (Till, 2009).

Moreover, Rapoport further emphasizes that the environment, especially the built environment, is a major means of communication, of transmitting meaning and culture. It is not just a backdrop for action, but part of the action itself, encoding cultural values and social relationships (Rapoport, 1982). The foregoing elevates the meanings of the Mandir's elaborate carvings, symmetrical layouts, and adherence to Vastu Shastra

principles, which are cosmological principles that Indians abide by when laying out a dwelling, as not merely stylistic choices but deliberate affirmations of continuity with Indian values, traditions, and cosmology. Moreover, the analysis of ritual use of space, such as the processional routes, congregational halls, and ritual sanctums, highlights how spatial organisation reinforces collective identity and religious experience.

This methodological choice also recognises the power of visual culture in diasporic settings. For communities situated outside their ancestral homelands, architecture often becomes a primary medium through which identity is communicated to both community members and the host society. By dissecting these visual and spatial elements, the study uncovers the subtle relationship between visibility, representation, and resistance to cultural assimilation.

Discourse Analysis

Finally, discourse analysis is employed to examine statements made by community leaders, temple trustees, and visiting dignitaries. These texts include speeches during temple anniversaries, opening ceremonies, and community outreach events, as well as published interviews and media coverage. This method allows the researcher to interpret how language constructs social realities and frame's collective identity.

Discourse analysis is particularly justified in this context because it helps reveal the intentional narratives that community leaders use to articulate the Mandir's role within both the diaspora and the Kenyan national fabric. Brah argued that diasporic spaces are not simply sites of cultural reproduction but also cultural re-articulation, where identities are negotiated, contested, and redefined concerning both the homeland and the host society (Brah, 1996). Therefore, by scrutinising these discourses, the study explores how the community asserts its place in Kenya, negotiates hybrid identities, and frames its contributions to national development. It also helps highlight the dual function of the Mandir as a religious sanctuary and a socio-political statement of belonging and contribution.

Triangulation and Justification

The integration of document analysis, thematic coding, visual and spatial analysis, and discourse analysis embodies a robust triangulation strategy. This ensures that the findings are not limited to any single dimension of inquiry but instead reflect a holistic understanding of the temple's role as a

dynamic cultural artefact. Each method is selected to illuminate different facets of the same phenomenon, identity construction and projection, hence providing methodological depth and interpretative richness.

In sum, this multi-method qualitative approach offers a comprehensive, layered understanding of BAPS Swaminarayan Mandir as an active agent in the reproduction and projection of diasporic identity. It situates the temple not merely as a static monument but as a living site where social, cultural, and political narratives intersect and evolve. Through this approach, the paper underscores the central thesis that heritage sites can be critical instruments in shaping, sustaining, and negotiating community identities in transnational contexts.

Nairobi, Kenya's vibrant capital, is home to a remarkable tapestry of Hindu temples that exemplify the cultural, spiritual, and social journeys of the Indian diaspora in East Africa. These temples are more than places of worship; they are living testaments to migration histories, communal resilience, and the creative adaptation of traditional architectural forms in a modern urban context. From the pioneering Arya Samaj, established in 1903 as the first formal Hindu institution in East Africa, to the grand BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir inaugurated in 1999, each temple reflects a distinct phase of the community's evolution. They have served as crucial hubs for religious practice, education, social reform, and cultural exchange, bridging generations and forwarding intercultural dialogue. The temples' diverse architectural styles, ranging from minimalist modernist expressions to involvedly carved traditional structures, demonstrate a profound commitment to heritage and identity. Together, these sacred spaces illustrate how Nairobi's Hindu temples have contributed to shaping the city's cosmopolitan character while safeguarding ancestral values. They continue to play an essential role in uniting Indian communities and enriching Kenya's multicultural urban landscape, offering both spiritual refuge and vibrant cultural engagement.

The BAPS Swaminarayan Mandir, Nairobi: A Living Testament of Faith, Craftsmanship, and Cultural Harmony

The BAPS Swaminarayan Mandir in Nairobi stands as a powerful symbol of faith, community, and cultural identity in East Africa. Completed in 1999, it embodies the spiritual and artistic aspirations of the Indian-Kenyan diaspora, particularly the Gujarati community, whose presence in Kenya dates back to the late 19th century. Situated along Forest Road, near Ngara and Parklands, this Mandir is not only a place of

worship but also a beacon of architectural brilliance and cultural integration.

The roots of the Swaminarayan faith in East Africa can be traced back to 1927, when early devotees established a spiritual foundation that would eventually blossom into a vibrant community. In 1970, Yogiji Maharaj inaugurated the Hari Mandir on Ngara Road, foreseeing the future establishment of a grand temple. This vision materialized decades later through the blessings and support of Pramukh Swami Maharaj, culminating in the construction of the current Mandir, which was consecrated with sacred images brought from India, further strengthening spiritual ties across continents.

Architecturally, the Mandir is a masterpiece of traditional Hindu temple design guided by the ancient Shilpa Shastras and Vastu Shastra. Its construction utilized 350 tonnes of yellow sandstone from Jaisalmer, India, and 13,200 square feet of Carrara marble from Italy. These materials were meticulously carved by 150 skilled artisans in India before being shipped to Nairobi, where they were assembled like a complex three-dimensional puzzle. The use of local East African hardwoods, including camphor, mahogany, mvule, Mt. Elgon teak, and Meru oak, for the interior woodwork further symbolizes a harmonious blend of Indian artistry and African resources.

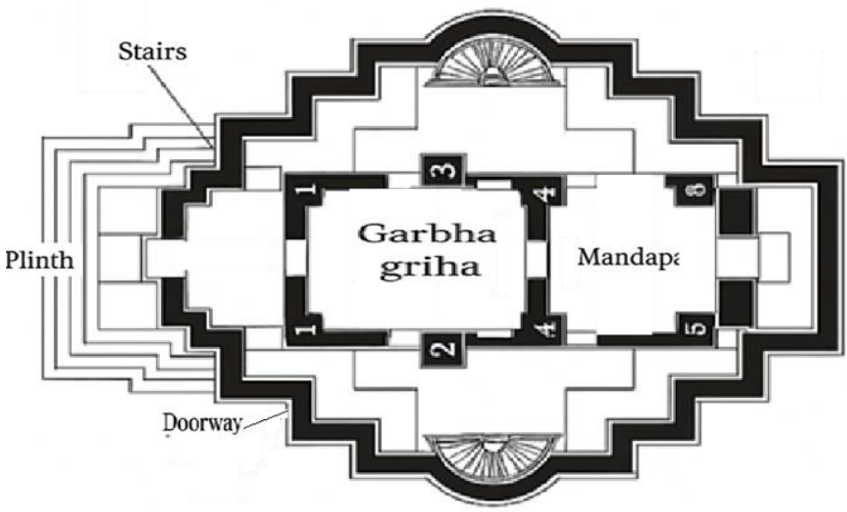

Figure 1: Garbhagriha and Mandapa (Adapted from BAPS Swaminarayan Santha)

The Mandir's striking dimensions, spanning 140 feet in length, 99 feet in width, and 69 feet in height, make it an architectural landmark in Nairobi. It features five shikharas (pinnacles), seven domes, sixty-six carved pillars, and over 6,000 floral wooden motifs. The interplay of light and shadow on its sculpted surfaces creates a dynamic and ethereal atmosphere that enhances its spiritual aura, particularly during sunrise and evening rituals.

Beyond its architectural grandeur, the Mandir serves as a vital centre for cultural preservation and community life. It hosts vibrant celebrations of Hindu festivals such as Diwali and Janmashtami, as well as daily rituals including aarti and Satsang sessions. These practices sustain intangible cultural heritage, encouraging intergenerational transmission of traditions and values among the diaspora. The Mandir also offers language, dance, and music classes, promoting cultural literacy and providing a space where young people can connect with their roots while developing life skills and ethical grounding.

Socially, the Mandir functions as a communal anchor, nurturing a sense of belonging and unity among its devotees. Its activities extend beyond religious functions to include community service initiatives such as food drives, health camps, and disaster relief efforts, expressing the principle of seva (selfless service) central to Swaminarayan philosophy. During times of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the Mandir played a pivotal role in supporting vulnerable communities, reaffirming its commitment to public welfare. (BAPS, 2020)

Politically and diplomatically, the Mandir symbolizes the multicultural inclusivity of Kenyan society. It stands as a testament to religious freedom and minority rights in Kenya, representing the Indian-Kenyan community's integration and contribution to the country's socio-cultural fabric. Over the years, it has welcomed dignitaries, including Indian and Israeli ambassadors, reflecting its role as a hub of soft diplomacy and intercultural dialogue.

Educationally, the Mandir promotes spiritual and moral learning through structured programs like Bal Mandal (children's groups) and Yuvak Mandal (youth groups). These programs teach Hindu philosophy, ethics, leadership, and community responsibility, equipping young members with both religious and practical life skills. The Mandir also engages visitors through guided tours and cultural exhibitions, advancing greater understanding and appreciation of Hindu traditions among broader Kenyan society.

Environmentally, the Mandir exemplifies harmonious integration with nature. Its landscaped gardens, water features, and green open spaces provide a tranquil sanctuary within the bustling urban environment of Nairobi. This design reflects the Hindu principle of living in balance with nature (Prakriti), and the use of eco-friendly gardening practices reinforces a commitment to environmental stewardship.

Spiritually, the Mandir offers a sacred space for personal devotion, meditation, and community worship. Its daily routines, from morning aarti to evening prayers, establish a spiritual rhythm that centres the lives of devotees. The presence of consecrated murtis (sacred images) offers worshippers a profound connection to the divine, transforming the Mandir into a living embodiment of Swaminarayan philosophy.

Symbolically, every architectural element of the Mandir is infused with deeper meanings, representing cosmic order, moral values, and the unity of the earthly and divine realms. The five shikhars, for instance, point towards the heavens, signifying spiritual ascent, while the tangled carved pillars and domes tell stories from Hindu epics, offering both aesthetic beauty and moral lessons.

Despite its relatively recent construction, the Mandir is already recognized as a significant heritage site, receiving awards such as the Millennium Award for Excellence in Architecture from the Architectural Association of Kenya and inclusion in the Guinness World Records for its role in consecrating Hindu temples globally (BAPS, 2000). However, it faces challenges typical of heritage sites, including material deterioration, environmental stress, and the need for sensitive modernization to accommodate growing congregations.

A comprehensive Conservation Management Plan (CMP) has been developed to safeguard the Mandir's architectural and spiritual legacy. This plan includes proactive maintenance strategies, community engagement initiatives, and policies to preserve both tangible and intangible heritage elements. The Mandir's stewardship model, grounded in community participation and guided by religious principles, serves as a pioneering example for heritage conservation in contemporary religious contexts.

In conclusion, the BAPS Swaminarayan Mandir in Nairobi is more than just a temple; it is a vibrant living heritage site, a centre for cultural transmission, a symbol of diaspora identity, and a beacon of interfaith and intercultural understanding. Its complicated architecture, rich spiritual life, and commitment to service make it a unique landmark in

Kenya and a vital link in the global Swaminarayan movement. By seamlessly weaving together artistry, spirituality, community service, and cultural diplomacy, the Mandir continues to inspire devotion, cultivating harmony, and symbolizing timeless values in the heart of Nairobi.

Construction and Resistance to Acculturation

The construction of the BAPS Mandir in Nairobi was an intentional move to showcase cultural identity. According to BAPS (2000), over 1,900 tonnes of Jaisalmer sandstone were mined in Rajasthan and carved in Pindwada by more than 1,500 artisans. The temple also incorporated Italian Carrara marble to replicate craftsmanship rather than local or colonial design influences (BAPS, 2000). The site was accumulated by volunteers and local craftsmen. This process took meticulous planning to transport and reassemble the carved pieces imported from India in Nairobi over five years (BAPS, 2000). The project was first proposed by Yogiji Maharaj during his visit to Nairobi in the 1970s. It was later realized under the leadership of Pramukh Swami Maharaj, who was the spiritual successor of Yogiji Maharaj and the fifth guru of the BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha. He sanctified the Mandir in 1999 (BAPS, 2000). Final construction officially began in 1994 and was completed five years later. It became a significant landmark for the Hindu community in East Africa (BAPS, 2000).

The Mandir's architectural plan followed the Shilpa Shastra and Vastu Shastra. Such planning holds massive importance in ancient Indian treatises (Michell, 1988). The Mandir kept to ancient Indian styles by following traditional design principles. This choice was different from the modern buildings usually seen in East Africa after colonial times (Michell, 1988). The building's shikhara, mandapa, garbhagriha, and complex jalis create a visible momentous of Hindu presence in Nairobi (BAPS, 2000). The pran pratishta ceremonies were performed in 1999, with murtis specially brought from Gujarat, India (BAPS, 2000). Spiritual lawfulness was validated by the blessings and involvement of Yogiji Maharaj and Pramukh Swami Maharaj (Williams, 2001). The Mandir functions as a cultural and ritualistic centre. As Baumann and Wilke (2023) note, Hindu temples among diaspora often serve as cultural anchors. It is seen as a resistance to assimilation and making community identity visible in multicultural societies.

Identity Projection and Symbolism

The BAPS Swaminarayan Mandir depicts a distinct community identity across social, civic, and diplomatic dimensions. Socially, the Mandir

runs regular education programs such as Bal Mandal (children's groups) and Yuvak Mandal (youth groups). These activities teach children and teenagers the Gujarati language, devotional songs, values, and rituals from the Swaminarayan tradition (Williams, 2001).

There are regular weekly classes, cultural events, and annual camps that help young people feel connected to their heritage and community. In civic life, the Mandir is active in community service. It organizes seva projects like medical camps, food distributions, and disaster relief. For example, in 2017, BAPS volunteers gave food and supplies to families that were affected by drought in Kenya's northeastern regions (BAPS, 2017). Similarly, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Mandir arranged mask distribution and awareness drives in Nairobi's Eastlands area (BAPS, 2020).

Diplomatically, the Mandir is also a place for cultural exchange. In July 2023, Indian High Commissioner Namgya C. Khampa visited the temple. He performed rituals like abhishek and opened new facilities for women's programs (BAPS, 2023). Also, the Mandir received the Millennium Award for Excellence in Architecture. It was presented by Kenyan officials and international guests (BAPS, 2000). Such instances made the Mandir a centre of cultural preservation, social service, and diplomatic engagement.

Manifestation of Community Values and Hybrid Belonging

The Mandir acts as a lively centre for the Indian diaspora, a place where rituals, festivals, and volunteer work keep cultural memory alive. This active involvement helps pass down traditions through generations and builds a strong sense of identity within the community (Cohen, 1985). Major cultural events, like Diwali or Janmashtami, go beyond their religious roots, attracting people from different faiths and backgrounds. This welcoming attitude shows that the Indian community is both open and culturally secure, proudly sharing its heritage while inviting others in (Putnam, 2000).

A clear example of this adaptable identity can be seen in the temple's design and materials. The careful choice of local materials, such as camphor and mvule, along with its thoughtful response to Nairobi's climate, illustrates a blend of identities. This is not simply assimilation but a complex integration that is neither purely Indian nor entirely Kenyan, but something that combines both (Bhabha, 1994). This blend strikes a careful balance, staying true to origins by honouring customs

and beliefs while also responding deeply to the local context. This duality allows the Mandir to symbolize cultural strength and innovation, reflecting a community rooted in its past and actively engaged with the present. The ability to combine different influences highlights a well-rounded and secure cultural identity that manages both preservation and change (Hall, 1990).

Conclusion

The BAPS Swaminarayan Mandir in Nairobi is a testament to the resilience, creativity, and adaptability of the Indian diaspora in Kenya. The Mandir is not just a place of worship since it has a multilayered account of cultural continuity, identity assertion, and civic engagement. Throughout the years, the temple has served as a commemoration of the community's willpower to cling to their culture while establishing a meaningfully integrated place in Kenyan society. As a result, it has involved architecture, adherence to ancient design, and a vibrant ritual culture. The acculturation pressures to which the Mandir is subjected are purposefully resisted, if not completely avoided. Materials such as sandstones and soft stones from India are coupled with local hardwoods to construct the Mandir, which demonstrates ancestral ties as well as responsiveness to the Kenyan setting. Nairobi's climate is certainly respected, but trust is placed on local hardwoods, which creates a hybrid embrace, a blend honouring both the community's origins and the host environment. This synthesis illustrates effectively what Homi Bhabha calls "third space." In contrast to what is deemed conventional, this describes a space where cultures and identities are newly constructed through negotiation instead of assimilation. Additionally, the Mandir's functions have expanded beyond that of a place of worship. The community centre is also active alongside the Mandir and includes community development programs, educational classes, and other related initiatives for members of all age groups.

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