**The Spectacle of Theme Park Temples**

**Architecture, Religion, and Tourism in 21st century India**

For the first time in their millennia of existence, the form and function of Hindu temples in India are being fundamentally altered as contemporary temples embrace modernity in unprecedented ways. As Hindu temples espouse a new architectural identity, religious theme parks and showcase temples raise the architectural ante as tools of ideological propaganda and enfranchisement among prosperous sects. Religious experience is transformed to capture the attention of a youthful and rapidly modernizing Indian society. Several factors are aiding the untethering of Hindu religious architecture from its former spatial traditions: increased pilgrimage tourism, growing affluence, an amplified focus on the religious consumer, social secularization, and a demystification of religious practices. To understand the processes through which Indian cultural expressions and Hindu religious ethos become consumer commodities, I study touristic pilgrimages to extravagant Hindu temple complexes that I call “theme park temples” – a novel synthesis of religion and entertainment including animatronic robots and IMAX theatres.

In this paper, I focus upon the *Swaminarayan Akshardham* temple complex built by *Bochasanwasi Shri Aksharpurshottam Swaminarayan Sanstha* (BAPS) in 2005 at New Delhi. This temple, I argue, represents an ideal case to understand how contemporary Hindu temples historicize, monumentalize, and commoditize the realm of religious spaces, thus turning it into a ‘spectacle’. Being situated in the blurry boundaries between a tourist attraction, a pilgrimage center, and a cultural museum, Akshardham uniquely places itself as a religious complex inside a nationalist framework. Here, while traditional sculptures and simulated boat rides showcase Hindu culture, life-size statues of Indian national heroes instill patriotism, and animated robots deliver religious and moral sermons. It simultaneously and consciously performs as site of spectacle, patriotism, religion, and pilgrimage. It is both an architectural catalyst supporting an ‘experience economy’ of religious pilgrimage, and an ‘exhibitionary complex’ educating a society of aspiring world-class citizens. Just how India’s infatuation with such theme park temples will transform the fundamental experience of Hindu faith, while still is a matter of speculation, constitutes a question at the core of this paper.

Bio:

Swetha Vijayakumar is a PhD candidate in the department of Architecture at University of California, Berkeley with a concentration in History of Architecture and Urbanism. She studies the socio-political histories of 20th and 21st century architecture, with a focus on postcolonial India. For her Master's degree in Environmental Design, she studied the impact of globalization and socio-cultural practices of the "western world" on contemporary Indian religious architecture.

She is currently working on her dissertation which examines the role of architecture, specifically that of religious architecture, in constructing new narratives of identity and nationalism. Primary strands of her research include cultural ecologies of Hindu pilgrimage sites in South Asia, patronage and production of contemporary Hindu sites in postcolonial India, politics of memory in the built environment, colonial historiographies of Hindu temples, and anthropological perspectives on urban tourism. Her dissertation examining religious theme parks and everyday places of urban sacrality in India is an historical analysis of postcolonial temple building.