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150th Anniversary Celebrations of Akshar Deri

20–30 January 2018, Gondal



150TH ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATIONS OF AKSHAR DERI

22 January 2018, Gondal

1. After honouring the President, (L to R) Pujya Ishwarcharan Swami, Chief Minister Vijaybhai Rupani, Param Pujya Mahant Swami Maharaj, President Ram Nath Kovind, Governor O.P. Kohli, Deputy Chief Minister Nitinbhai Patel, Minister Bhupendrasinh Chudasama stand in front of the Akshar Mandir, Gondal
2. Swamishri performs *pujan* of a replica of the sacred *charanavind* of Bhagwan Swaminarayan in the Akshar Deri.
3. Swamishri and the President kindle the celebration lamp in the Akshar Deri.



BAPS Swaminarayan Mandir, Gondal

Akshar Deri

Yogi Smruti Mandir

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SPECIAL ISSUE
150th Anniversary Celebrations of the
Akshar Deri, Gondal



Akshar-Purushottam Maharaj



In April 1978, Pramukh Swami Maharaj inspired and inaugurated the first issue of *Swaminarayan Bliss* in Ahmedabad, Gujarat. The bi-monthly magazine serves to enlighten BAPS youths, seniors and well-wishers about the glory of Bhagwan Swaminarayan, the Akshar-Purushottam philosophy and the Gunatit guru *parampara*. It also seeks to inspire the universal values and traditions of Hinduism to pursue a happy and peaceful life by serving God and humankind.

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Amba Sheth's Downfall and Rise

For the pious, Bhagwan's divine lila is a source of joy and celebration. Whereas for those with little or no faith, it is a cause for faultfinding, resulting in their downfall. Amba Sheth's rickety faith resulted in a setback

MAKE A MANDIR IN JUNAGADH

A *parshad* came and stood outside the door of Akshar Ordi. Shri Hari called him in. He told Maharaj, “Jhinabhai Darbar and his sister, Adiba, have arrived from Panchala.”

Maharaj said, “Call the Darbar.”

Jhinabhai immediately came in, prostrated and sat down before Maharaj. Shri Hari asked, “Jhinabhai, I had recently stayed in Panchala for one-and-a-half months and given you divine bliss. Yet, you are not satisfied and fulfilled and have come for my darshan so soon.”

Jhinabhai replied, “Maharaj, by recalling your divine form, talks and *lila* I experience inner happiness, but I still pine for your manifest darshan. So, I could not stop my mind from coming here.”

Shri Hari smiled compassionately and replied, “This is called bhakti. The craving a devotee has for my manifest darshan and the opportunities he takes in doing so makes him remain steadfast in the face of worldly difficulties and challenges.”

“Maharaj, through your association my circumstances have become favourable and benign. And that is why I wish you build a mandir in Junagadh. The entire Sorath region will be blessed with your divine association.”

Shri Hari was pleased with his aspiration and responded, “If there is a mandir then *upasana* will be sustained. However, *upasana* and *ekantik* dharma can only be realized through a pure Sant who is wedded to *upasana*.” Thereafter, Maharaj got up to go out of Akshar Ordi.



MAHARAJ PLACES HIS HAND ON ADIBA'S SHOULDER

Shri Hari came to the room where the *murti* of Vasudev Narayan had been installed. Here, Laduba, Jivuba and other women devotees were listening to *katha*. Maharaj gave darshan to them and then proceeded towards the neem tree in the courtyard. At that time, Adiba came to Maharaj and stopped before him. Maharaj smiled at her and placed his hand on her shoulder for support while descending two steps. Adiba experienced overwhelming joy at Shriji Maharaj's touch.

Once, in Panchala, Maharaj had decided to get married, and Adiba accepted the proposal. But shortly thereafter, Shri Hari performed a divine *lila* by vehemently rejecting the idea of marrying her.

In reality, Maharaj perceived both men and women as *atmas*. His *lila* in Panchala was to test the devotees' faith in him.

The brief *lila* of Maharaj placing his hand on Adiba's shoulder made her feel that her unfulfilled wish of marrying Maharaj was fulfilled. At the same time, when Amba Sheth of Gadhadi saw Shriji Maharaj resting his hand on Adiba's shoulder he froze in his step at the entrance gate of Dada Khachar's *darbar*.

AMBA SHETH PERCEIVES MANUSHYABHAV IN MAHARAJ

Amba Sheth became upset. His mind was overwhelmed by a tide of critical thoughts about Maharaj. He thought, “How can Maharaj be Nyalkaran or God! How can he be Bhagwan,

when on one hand he preaches about not touching women, yet he himself placed his hand on a young woman?” Amba Sheth became entangled in a web of *manushyabhav*. He immediately turned around from the entrance to make an exit, and briskly took the road back to Gadhadi. Shri Hari saw him leave and smiled briefly.

A fickle mind obstructs one from realizing God’s human form to be divine. Thus, the most important sadhana for an aspirant is to cultivate divinity in God and his realized Sadhu. Only then can one attain divinity.

HAS AMBA FALLEN?

For the next five to six days, Amba Sheth stopped coming for Maharaj’s daily darshan. So, Shri Hari asked Muktanand Swami, “Swami, where is Amba Sheth? Has he withered away from Satsang?”

Muktanand Swami failed to comprehend Maharaj’s question. So, Maharaj clarified, “Swami, Amba Sheth used to come daily, in the early morning, from Gadhadi with a babul stick, chanting ‘Nyalkaran’. Why has he not appeared during the last five to six days?”

Muktanand Swami thought that Amba Sheth may have passed away to Dham. He thus asked, “Maharaj, is it possible that he may have gone to Dham?”

Shri Hari smiled and replied, “Swami, he will go to Dham only when I go to receive him. But I believe something has disturbed him. You go to Gadhadi and find out what has happened.”

Swami got ready to leave for Gadhadi. Maharaj instructed, “Swami, bring Amba Sheth with you when you return here.”

Muktanand Swami took two sadhus with him to Gadhadi. Amba Sheth was surprised to see Muktanand Swami. He tepidly welcomed Swami to his house. The *manushyabhav* he had perceived in Maharaj had tarnished his satsang. However, Amba Sheth was impressed by Muktanand Swami’s saintly personality. He

thought, “Why has my intellect become sceptical about Maharaj’s divinity whereas Muktanand Swami is wholeheartedly attached to him?”

I HAVE DOUBTS ABOUT MAHARAJ’S DIVINITY

Muktanand Swami unhesitatingly asked Amba Sheth, “Why have you stopped coming to Gadhada for the last five to six days? Maharaj asked me to enquire and has sent me to bring you back to him.”

On hearing this, Amba Sheth became a little emotional and realized that Maharaj truly cared for him. But then the scene of Maharaj placing his hand on Adiba’s shoulder appeared in his mind. This again triggered a storm of sceptical thoughts. He cleared his throat and spoke out, “Swami, shall I tell you the truth? A doubt about Maharaj being God has been haunting me. The reason being that Maharaj is young and so is Jhinabhai’s sister, Adiba. I saw Maharaj place his hand on Adiba’s shoulder and climb down two steps. Now tell me, how can one call him Bhagwan?”

Muktanand Swami pitied Amba Sheth’s fragile understanding. He asked, “Sheth, what was your criteria for believing Maharaj to be Bhagwan?”

The question plunged Sheth in deep thought. He was trying to search for a proper answer. Then, he recalled, “Once, I had heard a voice from the sky, ‘God has incarnated on earth. Therefore, go to Gadhada.’ So, I went for Maharaj’s darshan. On seeing him and hearing him I realized that the voice I had heard and the voice of Maharaj were one and the same. So, I believed him to be God.”

“Now, has his voice changed?” Muktanand Swami quizzed.

Amba Sheth became perplexed by the question. So, he confessed what was troubling his mind.

Muktanand Swami smiled and asked, “Sheth, it was the same Adiba to whom Maharaj had once expressed his aversion in Panchala. He told his devotees to take her away from him. Now, tell

me how could he be infatuated with her? Did he place his hand out of affection for her in Gadhada? Sheth, just think for a moment. In the eyes of Shriji Maharaj, all men and women are *atmas*. Still, Maharaj has incarnated to fulfil the wishes of his devotees. Thus, Adiba must have nursed a wish and Maharaj subsequently placed his hand on her shoulder to fulfil that wish. Shriji Maharaj's actions are like divine nectar. One who drinks it experiences divine joy." Amba Sheth became absorbed in Muktanand Swami's fluent discourse and felt his critical attitude dissolving.

Muktanand Swami continued, "Shukdevji paused his narration of Shri Krishna's divine *lila* with the *gopis* when King Parikshit became skeptical about them. While Shukdevji was enjoying his own narration of Shri Krishna's *lila* Parikshit doubted them. Thus, Shriji Maharaj is divine and all his actions are also divine. He has incarnated in a human form to bless all with joy and inner happiness. He displays human traits to test our spiritual faith."

Amba Sheth was listening to Swami's words with rapt attention. He sensed the transformation pervade his thoughts. In no time, Amba Sheth repented and broke down in Swami's lap. Muktanand Swami stroked his head to assuage his feelings of guilt. Soon, Amba Sheth composed himself and appreciated Muktanand Swami, "Swami, you have saved me. I had fallen from the path of *moksha*. I had pledged never to take the road to Gadhada. Today, you have enlightened me about the divine form of Shriji Maharaj."

Swami added, "Then come to Gadhada, Maharaj has remembered you."

Amba Sheth had lunch prepared for Muktanand Swami. After Swami took his meal Amba Sheth got ready to leave for Gadhada. Muktanand Swami told him to have lunch.

Amba Sheth refused, "No Swami. I will only eat after having Maharaj's darshan and asked for his forgiveness." Muktanand Swami did not insist further and thought it was Amba Sheth's way to atone

for his breach of faith. In the evening, Muktanand Swami and Amba Sheth left for Gadhada.

AMBA SHETH GETS A NEW SPIRITUAL LIFE

On seeing Amba Sheth, Shriji Maharaj happily declared, "Sheth, you have got a new life!"

Sheth responded, "Yes Maharaj. Muktanand Swami has saved me." Amba Sheth became emotional. Tears of repentance rolled copiously from his eyes. He beseeched, "Maharaj, forgive me. Bless me that I never have *manushyabhav* in your form."

Shri Hari placed his hands on Amba Sheth's head. The latter felt a profound inner peace cascade through his entire body. He requested Maharaj, "Come to Gadhadi."

Maharaj said, "I'll come. There is no need to hurry for now."

Amba Sheth said firmly, "Maharaj, till you do not come to Gadhadi I've pledged to abstain from eating food."

Shri Hari perceived the Sheth's fire of repentance and strong desire to patch things up. Maharaj said, "I'll come tomorrow."

"But not alone! Bring fifty sadhus with you," Amba Sheth insisted.

Shriji Maharaj smiled and agreed, "Fine, I'll come according to your wish." Amba Sheth left for Gadhadi to make the preparations.

The next morning, Maharaj announced in the satsang assembly, "Amba Sheth has invited everyone to Gadhadi today. Thus, all sadhus and *parshads* take your eating bowls and gourds and start walking towards Gadhadi. The members of Dharmakul will accompany me. I shall leave shortly."

Muktanand Swami was surprised at Maharaj's announcement because Amba Sheth had invited only fifty sadhus. In spite of this, Muktanand Swami got ready to leave believing that the true purport of Maharaj's *lila* would unfold and rightly reveal itself. ◆

(Contd. in next issue)

Translated from Gujarati text of
Bhagwan Swaminarayan by Shri H.T. Dave

THE STORY OF AKSHAR DERI



In 'Akshar Tirth', Yogiji Maharaj writes an account of Akshar Deri and how it was acquired. A translation of the interesting first-hand account is as follows...





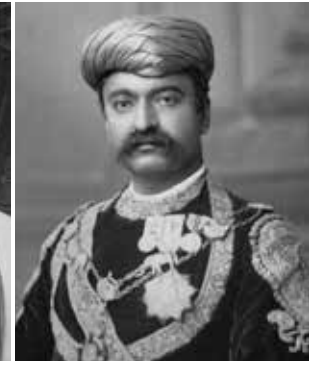
Gunatitanand Swami



Maharaja Rana Sangramji Bapu



Balmukunddas Swami



Maharaja Bhagvatsinhji of
Gondal

GUNATITANAND SWAMI DEPARTS FROM JUNAGADH

On 16 September 1867 (Bhadarva *vad* 3, A.S. 1924), Mul Akshar Swami Gunatitanand distributed sanctified cucumber pieces as *prasad* to sadhus and devotees and left the Junagadh Mandir for a satsang tour. The devotees accompanied him to the Khengar Vav (a stepwell on the outskirts) and then Swami travelled towards Vanthali village. He stayed the night at Vanthali Mandir. The next morning, he made a home visit to Kalyanbhai's home.

Kalyanbhai asked Swami, "Swami, what is Akshar like?" Swami revealed, "The one who is sitting in your house is Akshar."

LAST NIGHT IN GONDAL

Swami departed and, after visiting villages on the way, arrived in Gondal on 7 October 1867 (Aso *sud* 9, A.S. 1924). He celebrated the festival (of Dashera) on 8 October (Aso *sud* 10), which Maharaja Rana Sangramji Bapu and many sadhus and devotees attended. Swami discoursed profusely. On *ekadashi*, 9 October, he made many home visits in Gondal. On 10 October (Aso *sud* 12), Maharaja Sangramji Saheb (King of Gondal) invited Gunatitanand Swami at night to grace his home at the Navlakho bungalow. He also offered lavish gifts and donations to Swami.

Then, at 10 p.m., Abhaysinh Darbar of Ganod took Swami to his bungalow for *padhramani*

(home visit). The Darbar worshipped Swami with 16 puja items and garlanded him. Then the Darbar declared, "To please you, I have prepared a document for donating 500 *vighas*¹ of land for Thakorji in Junagadh. I shall give it to you tomorrow."

Swami replied, "There is no surety of tomorrow, so, bring it here right now." The Darbar thus brought the document and told his son to bow down and present it to Swami. Swami then said, "God has blessed you with this son, so he has been named Bhagvatsinhji." Thereafter, Swami placed both his hands on his head to bless him with inner joy.

Immediately thereafter, Swami returned to the mandir, where many sadhus and devotees were waiting for his darshan. Then, Swami developed a cold. A stove with coals was lit to provide warmth and Swami was treated with ayurvedic medicines. Then Swami replied, "I feel better now. It is about midnight, therefore, you all go to sleep." Swami Balmukunddasji was in Swami's service and so he remained awake. Madhavcharandas (of Bocharan), Yogeshwardas and other sadhus went to sleep. Two to three devotees were also awake.

Shortly after 12.45 a.m., on 11 October 1867 (Aso *sud* 12, A.S. 1924), Shriji Maharaj arrived with countless divine vehicles to take Swami away. Swami sat in a vehicle and independently departed for Akshardham. The news of Swami's

1. One *vigha* is 1.67 acres.

divine departure plunged the devotees in deep grief. However, Swami gave darshan to all in the waking and dream states and blessed them with peace.

SWAMI'S LAST RITES

A palanquin was made, wherein Swami's body was placed the next morning. Sadhus and devotees chanted the *dhun* while carrying the palanquin to the cremation spot on the outskirts of the village. A Muslim saw the small procession and had darshan of Swamishri's mortal body by the village gate. The Muslim revealed, "This sadhu had been doing *padhramanis* all night." A devotee informed him, "But, Swami has gone to Dham." The Muslim replied convincingly, "I had darshan of him doing *padhramanis* all night."

Swami had instructed beforehand that his body be cremated in an orchard (*vadi*) outside the village. His body was cremated in accordance to the scriptural rites. The next day, his *asthi* (holy bone relics) were placed in a copper pot and buried in the ground. The *vadi* was one mile away from the village entrance gate, where no one lived. Today, the town of Gondal has grown beyond this spot.

AKSHAR DERI: SWAMI'S MEMORIAL SHRINE

The cremation spot is renowned as Akshar Deri. Here, Abhesang Darbar of Ganod constructed a beautiful shrine, shaped similarly to the palanquin in which Swami's mortal body had been placed. In that marble shrine, Swami Balmukunddasji and all sadhus dear to Swami consecrated a stone replica of Shriji Maharaj's footprints. The Deri has existed from that day onwards. Everyone comes for darshan. Additionally, countless people make wishes (*manta*) here, believing it to be a divine and miraculous place due to its association with Gunatitanand Swami. This place gives happiness to all.

Abhesang Bapu used to stand on one leg before

this shrine and perform 200 *malas*. For ten years he would call Ajrambhai, the father of Shamalbhai, and celebrate the festival of Aso *vad* Amas here. On New Year's Day, he would have food items prepared for the *annakut*, and the whole village would come for darshan here. Whoever came for darshan, Bapu would give them *prasad* and provide lunch. I had seen Ajrambhai. My guru, Krishnacharandas Swami, would tell him to talk about the glory of the Akshar Deri. Krishnacharan Swami had fathomless glory for the Deri.

(Formerly), the Deri was the property of the old mandir (Vartal Sampradaya). Sadhus and devotees came for darshan every morning and evening. Large crowds came for darshan day and night. The *charanarvind*, made of black stone, became old and worn out. So, Balmukunddasji Swami asked for stone on which Shriji Maharaj had bathed many times in Panchala to be brought to him. Then he had (Maharaj's) *charanarvind* carved on that stone and installed it. It is still there. The *charanarvind* have the auspicious divine symbols on them. They are worshipped properly with sixteen items. They give bliss to all. Whenever I used to come from Junagadh to the old mandir in Gondal I performed a lot of *pradakshinas* of this Deri.

After many years, members of the old mandir gave the *vadi* to a Khoja tenant. The Khoja sowed and cultivated onions around the Deri and sometimes ate onions and *rotlo* there. A pious devotee did not like this. Whenever I came here, people would say it was not proper to eat such things in a holy place like this.

GUNATITANAND SWAMI GIVES DARSHAN

Param Pujya Swami Shastriji Maharaj had accomplished countless great works. He would accomplish the task of acquiring land for the mandir through his extraordinary divine powers.

One night, Mul Aksharmurti Gunatitanand Swami gave darshan to Naranji Maharaj in Jhadeshwar Mandir and said, "Have a



After deciding to acquire the Akshar Deri and the surrounding land in Gondal, Naranji Maharaj (to Shastriji Maharaj's left), Diwan Haribhai Amin (bottom row: second from left) and devotees meet Shastriji Maharaj in Sarangpur

three-*shikhar* mandir made in Gondal. Go to Gondal Akshar Deri with your beloved disciples on Guru Punam and acquire the land and build a mandir. Give the *niyams* there on the day of *ekadashi*.”

Naranji Maharaj and twenty devotees performed their morning ablutions and puja before going to the Akshar Deri. They felt profoundly peaceful on having the darshan of Akshar Deri. They offered *prasad* of fruits and turned the occasion into a celebration. *Thal* was sung and *arti* was also performed. Haribhai Amin requested Naranji Maharaj to give *niyams* to all. Naranji Maharaj said, “[Gunatitanand] Swami gave darshan to me in a dream and told me to give you the *niyam* of building a mandir above the Deri.” The devotees took the pledge to do so and Chandulalbhai was told to arrange an appointment to meet the Maharaja (King).

MEETING WITH MAHARAJA BHAGVATSINHJI OF GONDAL

Chandulalbhai (an administrator for Maharaja Bhagvatsinh) and seven devotees went to meet the Maharaja (Bhagvatsinhji) and told him, “You have been blessed by Gunatitanand Swami. He had come to Dhoraji and applied a *chandlo* on your forehead. When you were three years old Swami had come from Junagadh to Dhoraji with a coat, sword and other royal things for you. Then, he

applied a *chandlo* on your forehead and declared that you were the crown prince. Thus, you are very hallowed and are now sitting on the king's throne due to Gunatitanand Swami's grace. We would like to build a mandir above the Deri.”

Thereafter, Naranji Maharaj revealed, “Gunatitanand Swami came out of the Deri and gave me darshan in Jhadeshwar and said, ‘Build a mandir above the Deri.’ We have thus taken a pledge on the day of Ashadh *sud* Punam [full-moon day]. We request you to give us the land.”

Noor Muhammad Sheth of Dhoraji was ready to buy the same land at Rs. 2 per square yard. And the Maharaja had agreed to sell it to him at that price. But Naranji Maharaj said, “You are Gunatitanand Swami's disciple and so am I. Thus, we are guru-brothers. I had cooked *khichdi* at the Jetpur Mandir for Gunatitanand Swami and served him. Swami gave me the benefit of doing that *seva*. You, too, are Swami's disciple, therefore, please give the land to us at eight *annas* [half a rupee] per square yard and take the benefit of doing this *seva*.”

After several discussions on this matter the sum of Rs. 104,000 for 52,000 square yards of land was declared. Then the Maharaja was told, “We have to do the construction, so it will cost a lot! Therefore, give it to us at a cheaper rate.” Maharaja said, “The final price will be Rs. 50,000. However, I will meet Chandulalbhai and Virendra Mehta to decide upon it.” Then he got up and said, “Give me Rs. 35,000.” But everyone replied, “You are the owner, so your wish prevails. However, you can give it to us free of charge.” Thereafter, everyone returned to the mandir and sponsored a meal again the next day.

Later, Chandulalbhai and Virendrabhai (both worked for Maharaja Bhagvatsinhji) met Haribhai again. Haribhai said, “You convince Bapu [Maharaja] to give us the entire plot of 52,000 square yards for Rs. 25,000.” They said, “We'll meet Bapu and let you know.”

Chandulalbhai and Virendrabhai went to the

Maharaja's palace. They talked about the matter, saying, "The land is by the river, and it is full of pits and pockmarks. So, the land is of no use. However, when a mandir will be built on the Deri it will become a pilgrim place. Thousands of people will come to Gondal and our kingdom will gain prominence. Therefore, it would be appropriate to give them the land at a cost of eight *annas* per square yard."

The Maharaja Saheb replied, "I grant you permission to do whatever you think is appropriate." Thus, Bapu gave his permission.

Thereafter, they sat in three reserved second-class carriages from Junagadh and arrived at Jetalsar Junction at 2 a.m. Chandulalbai and Virendra Mehta had left Gondal by car to come to Jetalsar. Haribhai Amin was sleeping in his car at Jetalsar Camp Station. Prior to sleeping, he had doubts about how he would acquire Rs. 2 to 3 lakhs for the construction work of the mandir after paying Bapu (Maharaja) Rs. 25,000 for the land that he would give at the rate of eight *annas* per square yard? Then, Mul Aksharbrahman Gunatitanand Swami appeared in his dream and said, "Haribhai, why are you afraid? Rs. 20 lakhs will be spent on that site. Thus, be bold and courageous."

Haribhai woke up with courage and confidence. He described his dream to Naranji Maharaj and Shankarlalbai Solicitor Saheb. They were all happy about what he said. Oh, how wonderful Swami gave darshan in person and told him. Now we will not run short of money.

While all were talking, a car with both Chandulalbai Vidyadhikari and engineer *sahab*, Virendra Mehta, arrived in Jetalsar. They told Haribhai, "Bapu has agreed to sell the land at eight *annas* per square yard." Subsequently, Naranji Maharaj and others rejoiced. Then the officials said, "Come to Gondal, we will give you the land." But Naranji Maharaj replied, "Right now we are all going to Sarangpur or Gadhada Mandir. There, we shall meet all to get the money,

and after three months come to Gondal before Sharad Punam. You return to Gondal and inform Bapu that we have accepted the [deal for the] land."

The two (officials) returned to Gondal and informed the Maharaja Saheb, who was happy and said, "In our kingdom of Gondal, a grand mandir will be built and thousands of pilgrims will come."

In this way, Bapu (Maharaja Saheb) was in high spirits. In spite of Noor Muhammad's offer of Rs. 2 per square yard, it was appropriate to give the land away for eight *annas* per square yard because a holy place would be built. Thus, both met and made the decision and Bapu agreed as well.

NARANJI MAHARAJ MEETS SHASTRIJI MAHARAJ IN SARANGPUR

Haribhai Amin and Naranji Maharaj travelled from Junagadh on Ashadh *vad* 2 or 3 and stayed at Jetalsar Camp and then arrived at Botad station at 11 p.m. Thereafter, they hired three to four cars and headed towards Sarangpur. Because of the rains, the cars got stuck in the mud after crossing Senthali village, one mile away from Sarangpur. So, they all walked to Sarangpur. Swami Shastriji Maharaj was discoursing to an assembly. Haribhai Amin arrived at 11.30 p.m. Then Swami called Soma Bhagat and told him, "Go and free the cars stuck on the outskirts and take some bullock carts with you."

At Swami's behest, Soma Bhagat took three carts and ten men with him. On reaching there, he sent those who had remained there in carts back to Sarangpur. Thereafter, with the help of ten men, Soma Bhagat freed the cars stuck in the mud. Then, all of them returned to Sarangpur. Swami served them *dudhpak* and puri to eat. Since they (Haribhai Amin, Naranji Maharaj and others) had earlier informed (Swami) of their arrival by telegram, the boarding facilities for them were ready. Thereafter, they retired for the night.



BAPS Swaminarayan Mandir, Gondal



Shri Ghanshyam Maharaj, Gondal

At that time Swami Shastriji Maharaj, Naranji Maharaj, other sadhus and myself were present. Thus, I remember all of this clearly and always.

The next day, everyone got up and went for darshan of the *mangala arti*. Then they also did darshan of the *shangar arti*. Thereafter, they all met Shastriji Maharaj at 8.30 a.m., who was sitting in a lobby, and asked him about his wellbeing.

Haribhai Amin told Swami, “We have taken the bold step of acquiring the land at the Deri in Gondal at Rs. 104,000. We have talked about this with the Maharaja Saheb. He gave it to us at the cost of Rs. 2 per square yard.” Then he asked Swami, “What is a reasonable price for the land?” Swami replied through his all-knowing powers, “There’s a river nearby, an incline, and undulations, thus the price should be Rs. eight *annas* per square yard. There’s no problem in buying it for Rs. 25,000.” Then Haribhai said, “Swami, you have revealed [the price] through your all-knowing powers.” Then he added, “They had priced it at Rs. 2 per square yard, but Chandulalbhai Vidyadhikari and Virendra

Mehta met Maharaja Saheb and convinced him. Subsequently, the 52,000 square yard plot was priced at Rs. 25,000.” Swami was greatly pleased on hearing this.

Haribhai requested, “Swami, help us in this task.” Then Swami replied, “How can we help when we have two unfinished mandirs? However, after acquiring the land if you give us the documents we will build [the mandir]. We will not ask for your help in that. Therefore, all of you pay the Maharaja Rs. 25,000, fix pegs [to indicate the land area] and write the land to us so that we can start work.”

Then, Haribhai, Pujya Naranji Maharaj and Solicitor Shankarbhai discussed and concluded, “What Swami says is fine. Once we acquire the land we will hand it over to Swami, so that Swami can initiate the work.”

Thereafter, Haribhai asked Swamishri, “What if we give the money [to the Maharaja] in installments?” Swami replied, “If you want my advice, pay Rs. 25,000 in one go and don’t mention about giving it in installments. Because it is a royal

administration, when you are unable to pay one installment or you are late, you'll lose whatever you have paid. So, it doesn't matter if it takes two months to pay the entire sum."

AKSHAR DERI AND THE SURROUNDING LAND WAS ACQUIRED

Everyone was pleased with Swami's advice. They stayed for two days, during which Swami blessed and discoursed to them. Thereafter, everyone went to Gadhada for darshan and travelled to Bharuch and then to Jhadeshwar. Haribhai and Solicitor Saheb went to Mumbai, whereas Naranji Maharaj stayed in Jhadeshwar.

An assembly was held to collect funds, and a total of Rs. 15,000 was pledged. Then, a decision was made to pay all the money on Sharad Punam and take the ownership of the land. Now, they were short of Rs. 10,000. That amount was acquired by Shankarbhai Solicitor Saheb with interest. After collecting Rs. 25,000, a telegram was sent to Swami Shastriji Maharaj in Sarangpur, telling him to come to Rajkot, while they would also arrive in Rajkot. Then they would both go together (to Gondal). Swami received the telegram. Naranji Maharaj and his group arrived in Rajkot and Swami Shastriji Maharaj also came to Rajkot with two sadhus and one *bhagat*. (In Rajkot, there was a house in Kadiyavad belonging to Avalba, which she had donated to Krishnaji Ada.) Swami Shastriji Maharaj stayed at this house. Then Swami said, "I will stay here for the night, whereas all of you go to Gondal."

Haribhai went alone to Gondal and resided at Chandulalbbhai's home, along with Kevalchandbbhai, who owned a printing press. Thereafter, word was sent to the Maharaja, "We have arrived, so when can we come to meet you?" The Maharaja gave the appointment for 2.00 p.m. Then Chandulbbhai Vidyadhikari and Haribhai went to the palace and Haribhai told the Maharaja that he had brought the money, so he should call the official tomorrow to hand

over the land.

The next day, Maharaja Saheb said, "Give the 52,000 square yards of [Akshar Deri] land to Haribhai."

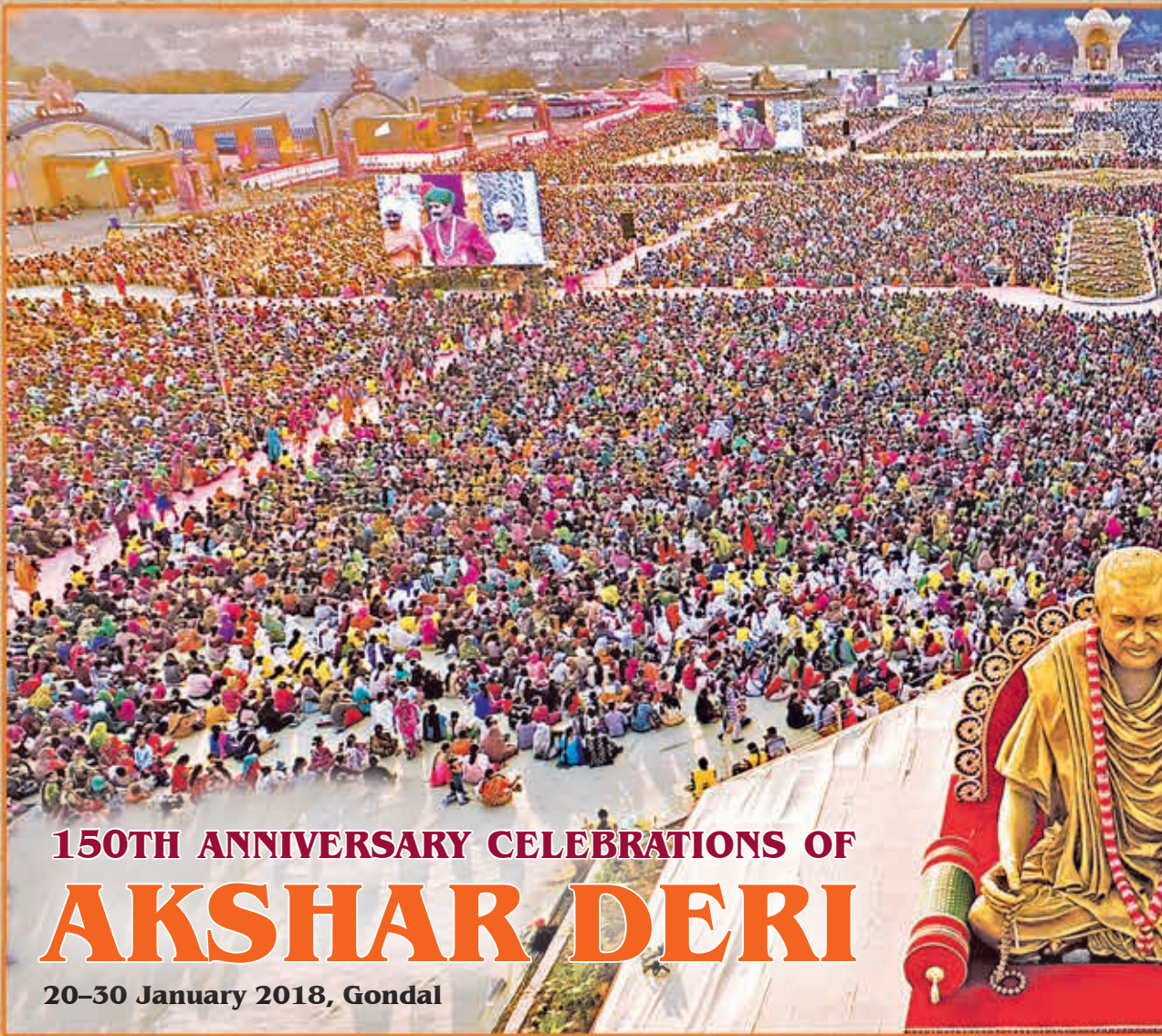
Then the officials took the plans, ten labourers and lime to hammer in the pegs on the land. It took till evening to measure 52,000 square yards. The Maharaja (Bapu) was sitting in his office and conveyed, "Bring the title deed [document of ownership] for me to sign." Then, Bapu telephoned Durlabhji, the treasurer. The treasurer had been given the payment (for the land) by cheque and not in cash. The treasurer came to know that the land was measured and the pegs for the boundary were fixed. At 8.00 p.m., the treasurer phoned and told the Maharaja, "I have received the money by cheque and not in cash."

Maharaja said, "Bring me the title deed to sign." Maharaja was about to leave his office, but he had decided to sign the title deed and leave thereafter. The treasurer realized it was Bapu's wish, so he deposited the cheque. He rang again to say that the servant was bringing the title deed. Bapu read the document for half-an-hour and then signed it. Then he said, "Give the title deed to Haribhai."

Haribhai received the document at 10 p.m. Immediately thereafter, he hired a car and went to Rajkot and met Shastriji Maharaj, saying, "Here's the title deed." Swami was very happy on seeing the document and profusely blessed Haribhai. Thereafter, Haribhai caught the night train to Bharuch and Swamishri got off at Botad to go to Sarangpur.

[In this way, the land for Akshar Deri and its precincts were acquired from the Maharaja of Gondal and handed over to Shastriji Maharaj to build a mandir over the Akshar Deri. In two-and-a-half years, Shastriji Maharaj inaugurated the mandir.] ♦

Translated by Sadhu Vivekjiandas



150TH ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATIONS OF AKSHAR DERI

20-30 January 2018, Gondal



The sacred Akshar Deri in Gondal is one of the holiest shrines of the Swaminarayan Sampradaya and marks the cremation spot of Aksharbrahman Gunatitanand Swami (1784-1867).

Directly over this revered sanctuary, Brahmaswarup Shastriji Maharaj built the Akshar Mandir and consecrated the *murtis* of Akshar-Purushottam in the central shrine in 1934. And for almost 40 years Brahmaswarup Yogiji Maharaj served as the first mahant of the Akshar Mandir and Akshar Deri, nurturing the spirituality of countless devotees.

For 150 years, the Akshar Deri has preserved the sacred memory of Aksharbrahman Gunatitanand Swami, and has



Grand celebration assembly, 22 January

been a focal point of prayer and pilgrimage for innumerable pilgrims from the world over. It is a continual source of spiritual rejuvenation that has brought peace, comfort and inspiration to the countless who have immersed themselves in its serene, soothing and soulful ambience.

The Akshar Deri is also especially remembered as the place where, in January 1940, Shastriji Maharaj initiated Pramukh Swami Maharaj into the sadhu-fold, and where, in February 1957, Yogiji Maharaj gave the *parshad diksha* to Mahant Swami Maharaj. Such is the glory of the Akshar Deri.

Launched in the presence of Brahmaswarup Pramukh Swami Maharaj, the grand 150th anniversary of the Akshar Deri had been commemorated in a multitude of ways, both individually and collectively, by devotees at BAPS centres globally for the past two years. The grand concluding celebrations were held in Gondal in the presence of Pragat Brahmaswarup Mahant Swami Maharaj. Thousands of devotees from all corners of the world flocked to Gondal to participate in the festivities. The following pages present vignettes of these memorable celebrations. ♦



Swamishri performs *pujan* of the *murti* of Gunatitanand Swami installed in the giant replica of the Akshar Deri

Sprawling Swaminarayan Nagar



Swamishri unties the *nada-chhadi* to inaugurate the Nagar

On 20 January 2017 (Maha *sud* 3, VS 2074), Mahant Swami Maharaj inaugurated the 200-acre Swaminarayan Nagar in the presence of senior saints, Gujarat State Assembly cabinet minister Shri Jayeshbhai Radadiya and thousands of devotees.

Around the beautiful and imposing three-sectioned entrance gate of Swaminarayan Nagar red carpets were laid to welcome the dignitaries and devotees. Giving darshan to all who entered, the *murtis* of Akshar-Purushottam Maharaj had been incorporated at the crest of the central arch

of the gate, and the *murtis* of Pramukh Swami Maharaj and Mahant Swami Maharaj adorned the peaks of the adjacent arches. Life-like caparisoned elephants and peacocks with colourful unfurled feathers also welcomed the guests.

The inauguration function began at 10.15 a.m. Amid the chanting of Vedic mantras, Mahant Swami Maharaj performed *pujan* of Shri Harikrishna Maharaj, then ceremonially split a coconut and untied the *nada-chhadi* to officially inaugurate the celebrations.

A short distance from the main gate was the giant *murti* of Pramukh Swami Maharaj on a high pedestal. Here, *mantra-pushpanjali* was offered while ‘*Shobho sādhu gune sadā saral ne...*’ was sung in honour of Pramukh Swami Maharaj. Then, cut-outs of the Akshar Deri tied to balloons were released into the sky to mark the opening.

Thereafter, Swamishri went by golf cart towards the main stage at the opposite end of Swaminarayan Nagar, passing the exhibition pavilions on the way and observing their ritual inaugurations by senior sadhus and dignitaries.

To the left of the main stage, Swamishri offered *mantra-pushpanjali* to the giant *murti* of

Brahmaswarup Shastriji Maharaj. Then, on the main stage, which was 170 ft long by 130 ft deep, Swamishri performed *pujan* of the *murtis* of Shri Akshar-Purushottam Maharaj housed in the larger-than-life replica of the Akshar Deri, which was 50 ft tall by 30 ft wide. He then offered *mantra-pushpanjali* to the giant *murti* of Brahmaswarup Yogiji Maharaj located to the right of the stage. After performing all the inauguration rituals, Swamishri departed from the Swaminarayan Nagar.

SWAMINARAYAN NAGAR

Travelling along the S.R.P. Road in Gondal, passers-by marvelled at the majestic entrance gate and their curiosity was naturally piqued to discover the attractions that lay beyond it. Once inside, visitors faced the stately *murti* of Pramukh Swami Maharaj and felt the vibrant spirituality of the Nagar.

Proceeding ahead, the central pathway was lined by the *murtis* of divinities and great devotees of the past: Shri Radha-Krishna, Shri Sita-Ram, Shri Lakshmi-Narayan, Shri Shiv-Parvati, Shri Jalaram Bapa, Shri Mahavir Swami, Shri

Aerial view of the Swaminarayan Nagar with the entrance gate in the foreground





Swamishri and *sadguru* sadhus with Shri Harikrishna Maharaj and the large *murti* of Pramukh Swami Maharaj

Shankaracharya, Shri Vallabhacharya, Shri Narsinh Mehta, Sant Kabir, Sant Tulsidas, Mirabai, Sant Rohidas and Sant Narad.

Circling the perimeter of the Nagar were the thematic exhibition marquees, each creatively presenting inspiring messages on a specific subject.

SAHAJANAND EXHIBITION HALL

This exhibition on the life and work of Bhagwan Swaminarayan featured an animation film on his *kalyan yatra* throughout India as the teenage yogi Nilkanth Varni.

AKSHARANAND EXHIBITION HALL

An impressive film on the inspiring life of Aksharbrahman Gunatitanand Swami vividly portrayed his devotion to Bhagwan Swaminarayan, saintliness, tolerance and other virtues.

YOGANAND EXHIBITION HALL

Everyone experiences some measure of happiness, but it does not last long because of human fickleness. However, Yogiji Maharaj was an exceptional case. He was always happy, whatever the circumstances. This was demonstrated using

animations of short scripted stories of imagined troublesome situations and showing how Yogiji Maharaj faced similar adverse circumstances with a smiling face and a positive attitude. The exhibition taught one how to face and overcome any difficulties.

PARAMANAND EXHIBITION HALL

Using dioramas, videos and other displays this exhibition depicted the life and work of Pramukh Swami Maharaj, revealing his concern for the common man, his commitment to alleviating the difficulties of the devotees through his letters and personal counselling, his tireless *vicharan* from village to village to encourage people of all backgrounds to lead addiction-free and pious lives, and his disregard for personal comforts.

NITYANAND EXHIBITION HALL

Family unrest arising from conflicts between parents and children, and husbands and wives, tensions due to disputes with neighbours and relatives deprive people of peace and happiness. But, what is the solution to these problems? Can amity be established? Yes, the principles of satsang



A light and sound show portrays the history and glory of Akshar Deri on the main stage



A sadhu and devotees offer devotion in the Bhajanand Hall

provide a remedy to all such discord. Pramukh Swami Maharaj prescribed a regular, preferably daily, *ghar sabha* (family assembly) as the ideal solution. Using an innovative interplay of live acting and recorded video, this exhibition portrayed a typical household and its problems, and how their family harmony was established through conducting regular *ghar sabha*.

MUKTANAND EXHIBITION HALL

Addictions are the bane of life. In India, 82 lives are lost every hour because of addictions. Annually, 18,000 crore rupees are spent on smoking alone. In addition, addictions are responsible for untold personal misery, family turmoil, and financial and social ruin. This exhibition gave guidance on how to tackle this menace. A specially scripted film emotionally demonstrated the woes and other consequences faced by a young smoker and his family. The heartrending scenes brought tears to the eyes of the viewers. Only after the addict had become freed (*mukta*) from his habits by his association with Pramukh Swami Maharaj, did he and his family finally experience joy (*anand*).

BHAJANANAND HALL

The Bhajanand Hall remained open day and night for the entire duration of the celebrations. Here, devotees, young and old, men and women, offered various forms of personal devotion – prostrations, circumambulations, turning rosaries, scriptural reading and others – and participated in the *mahapuja* ceremonies that were performed at regular intervals during the day.

OTHER FEATURES

Daily, in the mornings, schoolchildren from schools in the district visited the exhibitions and were inspired by their messages: a total of 60,000 students and 5,500 teachers from 561 schools visited Swaminarayan Nagar.

Every evening, after sunset, the 25-minute ‘Akshar Deri Mahatmyam’ light and sound show was presented on the main stage, depicting the history and glory of the Akshar Deri through live skits, traditional dances, enchanting light combinations and videos. The show revealed that the Vedas and Upanishads describe the glory of

(Contd. on pg. 33)



Mahant Swami Maharaj performs the Vedic rituals during the grand *mahapuja* in Swaminarayan Nagar

Grand Vedic Mahapuja

21 January 2018, Gondal



The *mahapuja* is an abbreviated form of the Vedic *yagna*. And the Akshar Deri is where the *mahapuja* is constantly performed. By the wish of Aksharbrahman Gunatitanand Swami, the *mahapuja* was first performed 175 years ago

in Junagadh by Gopalanand Swami. Gunatitanand Swami had a portable *panchdhatu murti* of Shri Harikrishna Maharaj made. In Junagadh, for many years, the daily *mahapuja* was offered to Shri Harikrishna Maharaj and the *muktas*. Gradually, the *mahapuja* ceremony became a regular custom in the Swaminarayan Sampradaya. In 1911, when Yogiji Maharaj joined Shastriji Maharaj from Junagadh, he brought this sacred *murti* of Shri Harikrishna Maharaj with him. Thereafter, during his time in Gondal, Yogiji Maharaj daily offered *mahapuja* to Shri Harikrishna Maharaj in the Akshar Deri to pray for the protection of all from the multiple woes that affect people's lives. This tradition of performing *mahapuja* in the Akshar Deri continues to the present day.

To honour this established tradition, a grand *mahapuja* ceremony was held as part of the Akshar Deri's 150th anniversary celebrations.



Devotees seated in groups perform the Vedic *mahapuja* rituals

On the vast open grounds of the Swaminarayan Nagar 8,500 devotees participated in this special *mahapuja* ceremony.

The grand *mahapuja* began at 4.15 p.m. amid the chanting of Vedic verses by sadhus. Pujya Mahant Swami Maharaj, Dr Swami, Bhaktipriyadas (Kothari) Swami, Tyagvallabhdas Swami, Ishwarcharandas Swami, Viveksagardas Swami and Ghanshyamcharandas Swami were seated on the main stage to perform the *mahapuja* rituals. With them on the dais were the Maharaja of Gondal, Shri Jyotindrasinhji; Mahant of Virpur Gadi, Pujya Shri Raghuram Bapa; Dharmaguru of Bilara in Rajasthan, Shri Madhavsinhji Diwan; scions of Abhaysinhji of Ganod who had devoutly helped to build the Akshar Deri, Shri Yogeshchandraji and Harpalsinhji; Shri Shaktisinh Gohil and other dignitaries.

After the rituals, a video was screened detailing the importance of the Akshar Deri and the *mahapuja* ceremony.

Thereafter, Shri Shaktisinh Gohil and Shri Madhavsinhji Diwan addressed the gathering, recalling the glory of Yogiji Maharaj, Pramukh

Swami Maharaj and the Akshar Deri.

In conclusion, Mahant Swami Maharaj blessed all, “The *murti* of Shri Harikrishna Maharaj which Gunatitanand Swami used to keep in his puja and *mahapuja* is with us even today. Yogi Bapa brought the *murti* with him. Since then, puja has been offered to Harikrishna Maharaj daily. Pramukh Swami Maharaj had great devotion for the *murti*. He always kept Harikrishna Maharaj at the forefront. Out of their compassion for us, Bhagwan Swaminarayan and Gunatitanand Swami manifested on this earth. Shastriji Maharaj convincingly explained the doctrine of Brahman and Parabrahman [Akshar-Purushottam Darshan] and he first had the *murtis* of Shri Akshar-Purushottam Maharaj installed in Vadhwan. Bhagwan Swaminarayan introduced Gunatitanand Swami as Aksharbrahman and it is that succession of Gunatitanand Swami that continues to this day. Shastriji Maharaj said that the Satpurush never leaves the earth. We should consider it our great fortune and joyfully lead our lives in accordance with dharma.”

Then, the ‘Akshar Deri Mahatmyam’ light and sound show was presented on the main stage. ♦

Yogi Smruti Mandir Murti-Pratishtha

20-21 January 2018, Gondal

Brahmaswarup Yogiji Maharaj was the first mahant of Akshar Mandir. Thus, every corner of Gondal is replete with profuse memories associated with him. In his honour, over the sacred spot where the final rites of Brahmaswarup Yogiji Maharaj were performed in January 1971, Pramukh Swami Maharaj inaugurated a memorial in 1975.

By the wish of Pramukh Swami Maharaj, a new Yogi Smruti Mandir was built in place of the original memorial. The new, single-shrine mandir is built of Jaisalmer stone and embellished with beautiful intricately carved designs and statues. The mandir is 120 ft long, 100 ft wide and 46 ft high.

On 20 January 2018, Mahant Swami Maharaj and senior swamis performed the Vastu Hom rituals as a prelude to the *murti-pratishtha*.

On 21 January, the *murtis* of Shri Akshar-Purushottam Maharaj and Brahmaswarup Yogiji Maharaj were consecrated in the shrine with full Vedic rites. Mahant Swami Maharaj performed

the Vedic consecration rituals of the new *murti* of Yogiji Maharaj. At the same time Bhaktipriyadas (Kothari) Swami performed the *pratishtha* rituals of the *murti* of Bhagwan Swaminarayan and Tyagvallabhdas Swami performed the *pratishtha* rituals of the *murti* of Gunatitanand Swami.

Thereafter, under the main dome of the mandir, Mahant Swami Maharaj placed a *kalash* containing the sacred ashes of Brahmaswarup Yogiji Maharaj in a decorative memorial pillar capped with the marble footprints of Bhagwan Swaminarayan. Here, he offered *mantra-pushpanjali* and performed *arti*.

In conclusion, Mahant Swami Maharaj blessed, “All who have darshan here in this Yogi Smruti Mandir will experience inner peace. Yogiji Maharaj’s life motto was ‘May God do good for all.’ As per his wish, may everyone’s life be enriched with devotion and observance of *niyams*, and may all progress spiritually. He also said that



to have *nirdosh-buddhi* towards all is our *seva*. By doing this, one will experience Akshardham here on earth.”

After the ceremony in the mandir, Swamishri presided over the consecration assembly in the adjacent Yogi Sabhagruh.

In the assembly, the *sadguru* sadhus recalled their experiences with and paid tributes to Yogiji Maharaj.

Ghanshyamcharandas Swami narrated his memories from the initial study period after his *diksha* while staying in the bungalow of Maneklal Sheth in Mumbai.

Viveksagar Swami sang, “*Dukhda dur karo, sankat sarve haro...*” before narrating his experiences.

Tyagvallabhdas Swami described Yogiji Maharaj’s steadfast devotion to Thakorji. Thereafter, Kothari Bhaktipriyadas Swami recalled his first meeting with Yogiji Maharaj in Ahmedabad and how Yogiji Maharaj’s words used to come true.

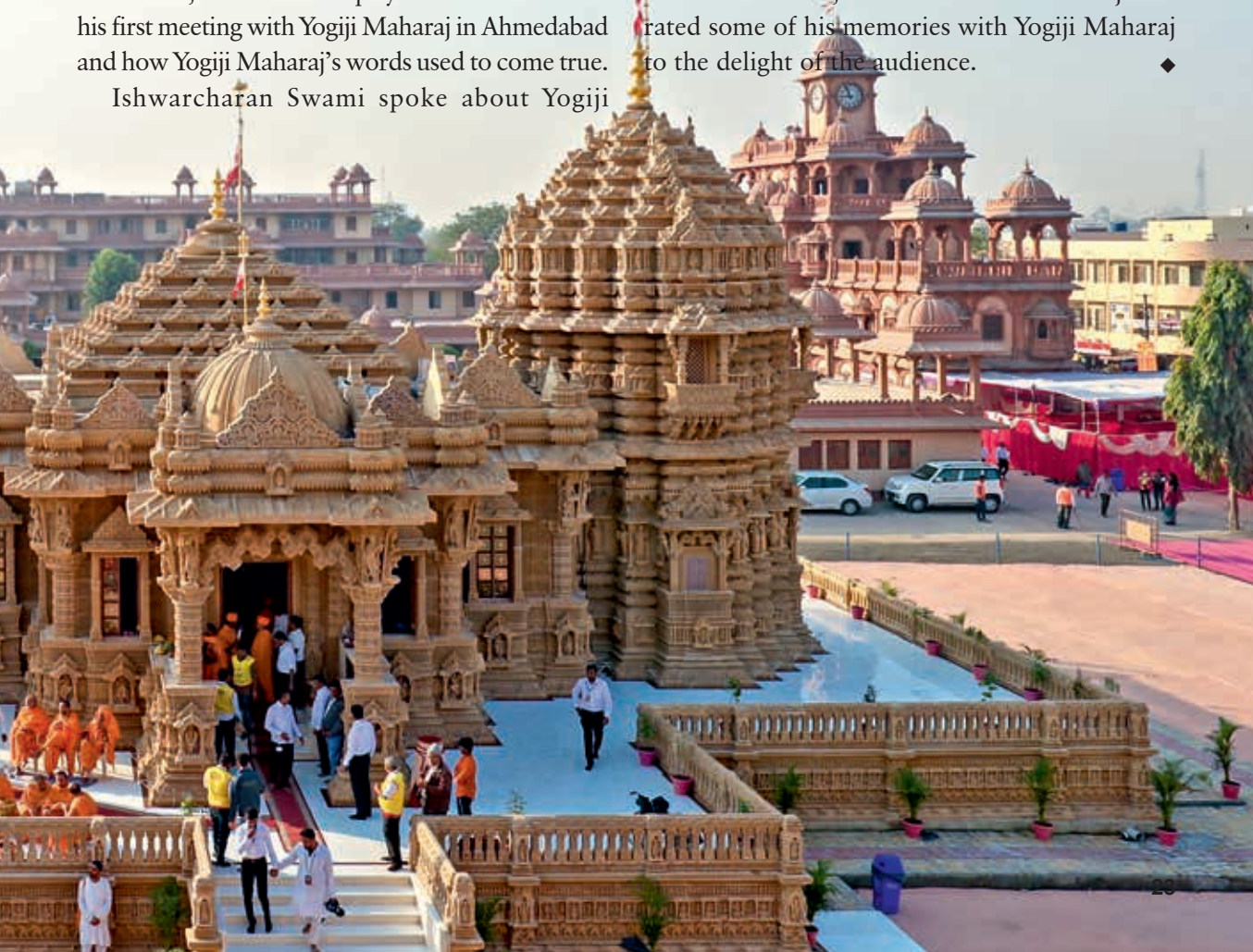
Ishwarcharan Swami spoke about Yogiji

Maharaj’s reverence for Gunatitanand Swami and then added, “With a financial balance of only three *annas*, Yogiji Maharaj had envisaged a mandir on top of Akshar Deri. He lived under difficult conditions, but his faith was such he wished to offer *annakut* to Akshar-Purushottam Maharaj in golden utensils here in Gondal. He never asked for any comforts for himself, but always cared for others. The wellbeing of others and devotion to Thakorji were everything to him.”

Doctor Swami narrated how Yogiji Maharaj treated everyone equally, “Big or small, rich or poor, educated or uneducated, villager or city-dweller, new or old, Yogiji Maharaj loved all.”

Swamishri then inaugurated a DVD titled *Tannu*, and blessed and felicitated the sadhus and devotees who had contributed to the construction of the new Yogi Smruti Mandir.

In conclusion, Mahant Swami Maharaj narrated some of his memories with Yogiji Maharaj to the delight of the audience. ♦





RENOVATION OF AKSHAR DERI

22 January 2018, Gondal

For the past 150 years, the Akshar Deri, the sacred memorial shrine of Aksharbrahman Gunatitanand Swami, has provided spiritual solace to countless devotees from throughout the world. It has become a prominent place of pilgrimage for followers of the Swaminarayan Sampradaya. Bhagatji Maharaj, Shastriji Maharaj, Yogiji Maharaj and Pramukh Swami Maharaj proclaimed the glory of the Akshar Deri worldwide.

In 2008, Pramukh Swami Maharaj initiated the renovation of the Akshar Deri, instructing Akshaymunidas Swami, head of the BAPS Planning Cell, and Sanjaybhai Parikh to acquire stone from Jaisalmer quarries for the enlarged plinth. Pramukh Swami Maharaj also instructed Bhaktinandandas Swami and Shrijiswarupdas Swami to oversee the intricate redesign of the Akshar Deri shrine and the interior of the surrounding *mandap*. The renovated Akshar Deri and *mandap* features beautifully decorated pillars, arches and ceilings.

In two enclosed niches behind the Akshar Deri, dioramas have been arranged showing the last meeting between Bhagwan Swaminarayan and Gunatitanand Swami in Gadhada, and Gunatitanand Swami leaning against a pillar in the final moments before he departed from this earth in Gondal. The actual pillar he was leaning against is also displayed in the scene. In addition, along the rear wall colourful vignettes from the lives of the guru *parampara* have been displayed.

On 22 January 2018 (Maha *sud* 5, Vasant Panchami, VS 2074), on the day of the 150th anniversary of the Akshar Deri, the renovated shrine was re-opened. In the morning, the *mahapuja* began in the presence of Doctor Swami, Kothari Bhaktipriyadas Swami, Tyagvallabhdas Swami, Ishwarcharandas Swami, Viveksagardas Swami, other senior sadhus and devotees.

The concluding Vedic *mahapuja* rituals were performed by Mahant Swami Maharaj. Swamishri performed *pujan* of the *murtis* of Bhagwan Swaminarayan, Aksharbrahman Gunatitanand Swami, the Gunatit gurus and footprints of Bhagwan Swaminarayan inside the Akshar Deri shrine and performed the *arti*. Swamishri then led the prayers for the wellbeing and prosperity of all. Finally, he blessed, “Shastriji Maharaj did a great favour to us by introducing us to Akshar-Purushottam. Every pore of his body echoed with the chant of ‘Maharaj-Swami, Akshar and Purushottam’. Each drop of his blood resonated with the worship of Akshar-Purushottam. He used to say that even being sold off for the sake of Akshar-Purusottam cannot repay our debt. Once, he said if someone were to sit on my head and talk about Akshar-Purushottam, it would be an honour for me! Shastriji always remained a lifelong servant of all and never sought to be revered. He said that his work would continue and that this Akshar Deri would fulfil everyone’s wishes. May everyone be happy in mind, body and materially, and may all develop stronger faith, glory and detachment.” ♦



Children perform *arti* of the Akshar Deri during the light and sound show in the celebration assembly

AKSHAR DERI

150th Celebration Assembly

22 January 2018, Gondal



Swamishri presents an Amrut Kalash to
President Ram Nath Kovind





Swamishri, President of India, Chief Minister of Gujarat, guests and *sadguru* sadhus on the celebration stage

On the afternoon of 22 January more than 75,000 devotees gathered in the Swaminarayan Nagar for the main assembly of the Akshar Deri's 150th anniversary celebrations. The President of India, His Excellency Shri Ram Nath Kovind, was the chief guest on this occasion.

A short distance from the east bank of the River Gondali, the main stage of the Swaminarayan Nagar was decorated with a large replica of the Akshar Deri housing the seated *murtis* of Bhagwan Swaminarayan and Aksharbrahman Gunatitanand Swami. On either side of Akshar Deri were the standing *murtis* of the Gunatit gurus, above which were *aksharmuktas* showering flowers.

The celebration began at 3.30 p.m., with sadhus singing kirtans in praise of the Akshar

Deri. Then, Viveksagar Swami spoke about the glory and principles of the Akshar-Purushottam Darshan. Meanwhile, at 3.45 p.m., President Ram Nath Kovind arrived at the Akshar Dwar of Akshar Mandir, where Mahant Swami Maharaj and Ishwarcharan Swami received him with garlands on behalf of the BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha. Before entering the Akshar Deri, Mahant Swami Maharaj and the President offered floral tributes to the marble footprints of Bhagwan Swaminarayan in the walkway. Inside the Akshar Deri, they both reverently lit wick-lamps and prayed for the peace, progress and prosperity of the nation and its people. Swamishri acknowledged the President's noble work to the nation and blessed him.

From here, both reached the celebration

assembly in progress in Swaminarayan Nagar. As they appeared on the dais they were warmly welcomed with a standing ovation. Already on the stage were the Governor of Gujarat, His Excellency O.P. Kohli; Chief Minister of Gujarat, Shri Vijaybhairu Rupani; and Deputy Chief Minister of Gujarat, Shri Nitinbhai Patel. After singing of the national anthem, Brahmavihari Swami delivered the welcome address. Thereafter, Mahant Swami Maharaj garlanded the President and welcomed him with an Amrut Kalash. He also presented a copy of the Swaminarayan Prasthanatrayi Bhashyas to the President as a memento. The other distinguished guests were garlanded by *sadguru* sadhus.

Anandswarup Swami gave a brief introduction of the BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha, following which a video was screened showing the multitude of services rendered by the Sanstha to society. To mark the occasion, the postal department issued a commemorative stamp in honour of Aksharbrahman Gunatitanand Swami and the Akshar Deri. The postmaster general of Gujarat, Shri Gautam Bhattacharya, presented the stamps to the President and Mahant Swami Maharaj to release.

Addressing the gathering, Chief Minister Rupani said, “The holy Akshar Deri represents the confluence of national strength, state strength and spiritual strength. The place has a distinct history of its own. Everyone’s wishes are fulfilled here. This place has been nurtured by Shastriji Maharaj, Yogiji Maharaj and Pramukh Swami Maharaj, and is today carrying on its saga of service under the guidance of Mahant Swami Maharaj. For 150 years this place has been a source of inspiration to devotees. The Akshar Deri is the identity of BAPS, is respected from the huts of *adivasis* to the hall of the United Nations. In his 82-year lifespan Gunatitanand Swami had freed the society from the shackles of casteism and uplifted thousands of people. In this celebration youth power has played its part. I consider it a great privilege to



The president inaugurates the commemorative stamps

be here.”

Then President Ram Nath Kovind addressed the celebration assembly (see box on next page).

Thereafter, Mahant Swami Maharaj thanked the President and other dignitaries for attending this special celebration. Then, President Kovind and other guests departed from the assembly. At the same time, Mahant Swami Maharaj and the *sadguru* sadhus took their seats among the audience to view the video and dance-drama presentations depicting the history and glory of the Akshar Deri.

First, children and youths performed a colourful dance in honour of the Akshar Deri to the lyrics ‘*Akshar Deri jaie re, hālo re hālo...*’. The presentation then began from the time Aksharbrahman Gunatitanand Swami shed his physical body at 12.45 a.m. on Aso *sud* 12, Samvat 1923 and enacted the efforts of Shastriji Maharaj, who overcame many hurdles and hardships, to acquire the land around the Akshar Deri and build the Akshar Mandir.

Shastriji Maharaj had appointed Yogiji Maharaj as the mahant. He was an ideal of service who inspired others to do likewise. He developed the Akshar Mandir and spread its glory.

After the presentations, Mahant Swami



Children perform a celebratory dance

Maharaj and the *sadguru* sadhus returned to their seats on the main stage. Then, Ishwarcharandas Swami spoke, “The Akshar Deri is that supreme place for which Shastriji Maharaj, Yogiji Maharaj and Pramukh Swami Maharaj dedicated their all. Yogiji Maharaj served here for many years. In fact, he was so inseparable from the Akshar Deri, that Yogiji Maharaj represented the Akshar Deri and the Akshar Deri represented Yogiji Maharaj. He was so much attached to it that he would remember it 24 hours a day. He performed multifarious tasks like *mahapuja*, *arti*, sweeping the compound, preparing Thakorji’s *thal*; preparing meals for everyone, and, washing utensils along with Daji Bapu. Even after doing all this there would not be the slightest trace of fatigue on his face. Till the end, his life was dedicated to the service of the Akshar Deri. Yogiji Maharaj would get up at 3.30 a.m., sing bhajans and circumambulate the Akshar Deri 51 times. This was his daily routine till the end.

“After sweeping the Akshar Deri, he would collect a portion of the dust in a small steel box and touch it to his eyes at night saying, ‘This is the dust of Akshar Deri. It is indeed auspicious, purifying dust.’

“Akshar Deri is the form of Gunatitanand Swami and the focal point of Akshar-Purushottam

worship. After becoming *aksharrup* one becomes eligible to offer worship to Parabrahman. May Gunatitanand Swami’s glory spread, may the Akshar Deri’s glory spread’, that was Yogi Bapa’s constant prayer.”

Compere Adarshjivan Swami narrated the story of the pinnacled Akshar Mandir built by Brahmaswarup Shastriji Maharaj, the unique service rendered by Yogiji Maharaj, his intense love for the Akshar Deri and solemn prayers, and gave a summary of the development of the mandir campus arranged by Brahmaswarup Pramukh Swami Maharaj.

It was in the Akshar Deri that Shastriji Maharaj had given Shanti Bhagat the *bhagwati diksha* and named him Narayanswarupdas. This was relived through a video of Pramukh Swami Maharaj narrating that memorable occasion.

Then, Brahnavihari Swami recalled some of the memorable moments of Pramukh Swami Maharaj connected with the Akshar Deri. This was followed by a video show which depicted how the Akshar Deri has found a place in the hearts of countless ordinary individuals.

Thereafter, senior representatives of the Kashi Vidvat Parishad presented a citation written in gold letters recognizing that the Akshar-Purushottam Darshan revealed by Bhagwan Swaminarayan is a



Youths and devotees perform a skit



Youths honour the celebration with lighted torches

distinct Darshan. Shri Shivji Upadhyay, the general secretary, read the citation in Sanskrit which was then rendered in Hindi by the secretary of the Parishad, Shri Ramnarayan Dwivedi.

Then, new publications by Swaminarayan Aksharpith were released: *Akshar-Purushottam Darshan – Ek Parichay* and *Brahmaghosh* by Bhadrash Swami; the *Swamini Vato* mobile phone application developed by a team of sadhus and youths led by Brahmadarshan Swami and Paramvivek Swami; *Netrutvano Shreshth Adarsh – Pramukh Swami Maharaj* by Dr A.C. Brahmabhatt; and *Sadhutana Shikhar: Mahant Swami Maharaj* by Aksharvatsal Swami.

Then Doctor Swami guided, “Today, we are witnessing the 150th anniversary celebration of the Akshar Deri. Now what should we do? Param Pujya Mahant Swami Maharaj often talks about keeping unity. It is a short, but highly significant word. We have to become fully united and defeat disunity. This is the message we must take home from the Akshar Deri celebrations. We have to march forward from where we are standing today and progress. Then only will Bhagwan Swaminarayan and the guru *parampara* award 100 per cent marks.”

Then children and youths performed a cultural dance to the lyrics, ‘*Jay Ho Akshar Deri...*’.

MAHANT SWAMI MAHARAJ’S BLESSINGS



Blessing the assembly, Mahant Swami Maharaj said, “The work that Shastriji Maharaj did was outstanding. What he did is beyond the realm of possibility. The Akshar-Purushottam principle would have been consigned to a corner but for Shastriji Maharaj, who gave it a concrete shape by consecrating the *murtis* of Akshar-Purushottam Maharaj. Shastriji Maharaj graced us by coming from Akshardham to do this work. He built mandirs after toiling through endless difficulties. These mandirs are monuments to his faith in Akshar-Purushottam. The nerve centre of that faith is the Akshar Deri. Pramukh Swami Maharaj was also dedicated to the Akshar Deri.

“It is a divine, unique atmosphere here today. Now whatever work we do, we must do with unity. We have to tread the path of unity and goodwill. Yogi Bapa used to say often, if we maintain

unity and goodwill then our victory drum will be sounded all over the world. For unity, we have to change our attitude. With the right attitude we can achieve everything. This should extend to the family so that all quarrels are resolved.

“One noble quality of Pramukh Swami Maharaj was his helpful nature. He would selflessly endeavour to help others fulfil any task.

“Akshar Deri is our lifeforce. We must offer devotion there and benefit from it. Yogi Bapa used to circumambulate the Akshar Deri. Even when he was not well he would do 51 rounds. I have seen Pramukh Swami Maharaj performing 300–400 *pradakshinas* between *sandhya* and *shayan artis*. So, take the fullest benefit of the Akshar Deri. Perform *pradakshinas*, take pledges and perform *mahapujas*. May all derive benefit in this way.”

Then, the *sadguru* and other senior sadhus

garlanded Mahant Swami Maharaj with decorative garlands. In honour of this celebration, youths from Bhadra – the birthplace of Gunatitanand Swami, Junagadh – where Gunatitanand Swami was mahant for 40 years, and Chansad – the birthplace of Pramukh Swami Maharaj – came on stage carrying *mashals* (lighted torches) singing ‘*Akshar Deri sārḍh shatābdi āvo, umange ujavie...*’. Swamishri and the *sadguru* sadhus also joined by holding *mashals*.

The vast concourse of 75,000 devotees then performed *samuh arti*. Afterwards, to conclude the celebration assembly, the ‘Akshar Deri Mahatmyam’ sound-and-light show depicting the glory of the Akshar Deri was presented on the main stage.

The entire celebration was relayed live through the BAPS website and Aastha channel. ♦

PRESIDENT RAM NATH KOVIND’S SPEECH



“When I was the Governor of Bihar, I had visited the Akshar Deri. When I received the invitation to attend this function, I felt that now I have become the President, this sacred place must have had a hand in my elevation. I feel extremely happy to be here today.

It is the good fortune of the country that time and again many *sants* have made human welfare a part of dharma and spirituality. They have set up organizations that work for the wellbeing of

society. BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha is one such organization. I consider every devotee who has come here to participate in the 150th anniversary of the Akshar Deri as a soldier in the army striving for human welfare.

I have been an admirer of [Pramukh] Swamiji’s progressive views and works. By uprooting superstitions and blind faith, and by setting aside caste and class distinctions, he served humanity. The main aim of this organization is the welfare of humanity. Dr APJ Abdul Kalam was greatly influenced by this organization’s commitment to spiritual and human advancement. In the Rashtrapati Bhavan, I have seen several of his books and photos. He was greatly influenced by Pramukh Swami Maharaj from whom he learnt a lot.

Gujarat presents many examples of people endowed with good conduct coupled with spiritual values. Mahatma Gandhi is an example of this combination of public service and

spirituality. I have been told that Mahatma's liking for the song '*Vaishnava jan to tene re kahiye...*' sprang from his association with this organization! Another example is that of the 'Iron Man of India', Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, who gave the country its present shape.

Combining human welfare with spirituality, this organization has built hundreds of mandirs all over the world. The main feature of these mandirs is that they play a vital role in the development of man and society. They lay stress on character-building and selfless social service. Normally we don't find a high degree of cleanliness in Hindu places of worship. But BAPS mandirs are very clean. Cleanliness leads to purity, honesty and divinity. In that respect, I highly praise this Sanstha. I hope this Sanstha and its volunteers will lend a helping hand in keeping the mandirs and other places of worship belonging to the other *sampradayas* neat. I hope this cleanliness campaign when carried out by your volunteers will serve as an unparalleled example.

I have learnt that BAPS devotees number about 10 lakhs throughout the world, and that there are more than 55,000 dedicated volunteers. They give their valuable time to promote our culture and ideals to lakhs of people in the world.

Individuals constitute a family, families make up a society and groups of societies make a nation. Character is the building block of the individual. BAPS Sanstha provides guidance based on purity, sincerity and social service and helps people in shaping their character. It encourages them to undertake welfare programmes. Poorer sections of society lack proper educational facilities. The Sanstha helps them in overcoming this lacuna; same is the case with their health needs. BAPS makes efforts to awaken environmental consciousness among the people. It plays a valuable role in empowering them through social uplift projects. Its role in providing support to people in times of natural calamities is equally commendable.

In these times filled with uncertainty and tension, your resolve to promote world peace is highly praiseworthy. In these celebrations, you have organized an exhibition on the *Swaccha Bharat Abhiyan* (India Cleanliness Drive) and I congratulate you for participating in such an important campaign.

I am sure this organization will ever be in the forefront of human welfare campaigns. May you succeed in all your efforts aimed at spiritual progress and social uplift. With that prayer to God, I extend my good wishes to you.

Thank you and Jai Hind!" ♦

(Contd. from pg. 19)

Aksharbrahman and that Bhagwan Swaminarayan introduced Gunatitanand Swami as the manifest form of Aksharbrahman. The show also highlighted the words of Brahmaswarup Yogiji Maharaj, the first mahant of Akshar Mandir, "The Akshar Deri is like Akshardham, a great place of pilgrimage. It is an abode of peace. It is full of miraculous powers."

On 20 January, the first performance of the 25-minute show took place in the presence of Mahant Swami Maharaj. During the 11-day celebrations, the show became so popular that every

evening three performances were presented for the crowds who flocked to see it. After seeing it, everyone left with greater reverence for the Akshar Deri.

Also in the Nagar, a gifts and books pavilion, Premvati food stalls, a dispensary and other facilities were provided for the convenience of visitors.

A special blood donation camp was conducted throughout the celebrations in which 750,000cc of blood was collected and donated to local medical units. ♦

Translated from Swaminarayan Prakash
by Rama Murthy & Sadhu Amrutvijaydas



Sadguru sadhus and distinguished scholars

Akshar-Purushottam Darshan Assembly

21 January 2018, Gondal

Based on the *bhashyas* and *vada-granth* written by Bhadreswami, at the behest and with the blessings of Pramukh Swami Maharaj, on the Prashthanatrayi – the Brahmasutras, Upanishads and Bhagavad Gita – the Akshar-Purushottam Darshan has been formally accepted as a distinct Darshan, or school of philosophy, by expert pandits of the Kashi Vidvat Parishad.

In the evening assembly, a delegation of distinguished Sanskrit scholars, including Acharya Ramyatna Shukla (President, Shri Kashi Vidvat Parishad), Acharya Varishtha Tripathiji (Vice-President, Shri Kashi Vidvat Parishad), Acharya Ramkishoreji (Vice-President, Shri Kashi Vidvat Parishad), Shri Shivji Upadhyaya (General Secretary, Kashi Vidvat Parishad), Shri Ramnarayan Dwivedi (Secretary, Kashi Vidvat Parishad), Shri Ramesh Kumar Pandeji (Vice-Chancellor, Lal Bahadur Shastri Sanskrit Vishva Vidyalaya), Shri Dinesh Garg, (Spokesperson, Kashi Vidvat Parishad) and others spoke about

the Akshar-Purushottam Darshan.

In conclusion, Acharya Ramyatna Shukla said, “I know philosophy and grammar and teach both subjects. After studying the *Swaminarayan Siddhanta Sudha*, I came to the conclusion that the work has convincingly described *jiva*, *ishwar*, *maya*, Brahman and Parabrahman. So, I and other scholars of the Kashi Vidvat Parishad decided that Bhadreswami deserves to be honoured for his scholarly work. And as the president of the Kashi Vidvat Parishad I am delighted to present our approval citation.”

Also, in recognition of this accomplishment, Kashi Vidvat Parishad representatives presented a citation in Sanskrit written in gold letters to Mahant Swami Maharaj during the main Akshar Deri 150th anniversary celebration assembly on 22 January. ♦

Pre-Celebration Events and Activities

Prior to the grand finale 150th anniversary celebrations of the Akshar Deri, a variety of events and activities were organized over a period of 18 months. The programmes were coordinated by Kothari Divyapurush Swami and the resident sadhus of Akshar Mandir, Gondal, with the assistance of Shri Nirmalsinh Rana and other senior devotees of Gondal. With the support of hundreds of men and women devotees and volunteers, guided pilgrimages of Gondal, blood donation camps, tree planting, cleanliness drives, de-addiction campaigns by children, *kalash yatras* by women devotees and public assemblies in surrounding villages to publicize the celebrations were some of the programmes organized. The following is a summary:

- Number of Pilgrims to Gondal: 90,916 people, of whom 27,831 vowed to perform daily personal puja and 14,634 pledged to quit addictions.
- Blood Donated: 219,450 cc.
- Trees Planted: 17,000 fruit tree saplings, 400 neem tree saplings, and other saplings in urban and rural areas.
- School Project: Liaison with 561 educational institutions from 116 villages in four Saurashtra districts.
- Cleanliness Campaign: More than 450 devotees of Gondal divided into 12 teams took part.
- Celebrations Awareness Campaign: From 15 December 2017 to 15 January 2018, 26 teams of volunteers contacted over 30,000 villagers in 423 villages.
- Kalash Yatra: From February 2017, on every Sunday, *ekadashi* and *punam*, circumambulations around Akshar Mandir with *kalashes* of sanctified water from the Akshar Deri *mahapuja* were performed with great fanfare.
- Invitations to the celebrations personally delivered by 12,414 women volunteers to 900,000 families in 11 districts of Saurashtra.
- De-Addiction Campaign: 45 groups of *balaks* visited 5,133 houses in 19 days; over 6,000 people freed of addictions. ♦



Blood donation



Mahapuja in the Akshar Deri



Cleanliness campaign



Kalash yatra

A Millennial Moment: MANDIR IN THE MIDDLE EAST



Pramukh Swami Maharaj in the UAE, 5 April 1997



Pramukh Swami Maharaj with Sheikh Isa bin Salman Al Khalifa, Emir of Bahrain, 1997



Pramukh Swami Maharaj and Mahant Swami with Arab dignitaries, 2001

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is a federation of seven emirates – Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah, Ras al-Khaimah, Fujairah, Ajman and Umm-al-Quwain.

Today, the UAE, and Dubai and Abu Dhabi in particular, is an economically flourishing country. Blessed with abundant oil and gas reserves, the UAE rulers have utilized this wealth with great wisdom. They have transformed, and continue to develop, their vast swathes of deserts into modern, state-of-the-art facilities for the benefit of their citizens.

The UAE assumed independence from British rule on 2 December 1971 and, led by the Emir of Abu Dhabi, Sheikh Zayed, the rulers of the other six emirates agreed to join the federation. Sheikh

Zayed is regarded as “the man who turned the desert green” by investing oil income to transform the harsh desert environment into more habitable and usable terrain. He also promoted interfaith tolerance and was a firm advocate for freedom of worship.

Fittingly, in tune with his guiding vision of religious harmony, his third son, the present Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed al Nahyan, has generously and graciously gifted a 13.7-acre plot of land at Abu Mureikheh, mid-way between Abu Dhabi and Dubai, to enable the building of the BAPS Hindu Temple and complex. This magnanimous gesture by the Crown Prince has been lauded and appreciated by the Prime Minister of India, Shri

Narendra Modi and the resident Indian communities of the UAE. In fact, it was during his first visit to the UAE in 2015 that Prime Minister Narendra Modi had first expressed his gratitude to the Crown Prince by tweeting: “I am very grateful to the UAE Govt. for their decision to allot land in order to build a Temple in Abu Dhabi. This is a great step.”

It is also a matter of great honour, that due to the decades of effort in building such temples under the guidance of Pramukh Swami Maharaj, the BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha has been entrusted and invited by both the Crown Prince and Government of India to design, construct and manage this temple.

Pramukh Swami Maharaj had himself visited the UAE on four occasions to spiritually nourish devotees living there: in 1982, 1985, 1997 and 2001. Notably, on 5 April 1997, before the days of the oil-funded boom, the devotees took Swamishri to a desert area in Sharjah. There, Swamishri prayed: 1. May peace prevail here and everywhere. 2. May all religions of all countries grow greater love for one other. 3. May all countries be free of internal enmity and prejudice towards each other and may they all progress in their own unique way. He also gave his blessings that a mandir be built in Abu Dhabi.

Throughout his life, Pramukh Swami Maharaj was the epitome of interfaith harmony – showing compassion, restraint and tolerance in the aftermath of the Gandhinagar Akshardham terrorist attack in 2002 and calling for interfaith dialogue between religions leaders in his speech during the inaugural session of the Millennium World Peace Summit of Spiritual Leaders at the United Nations in August 2000.

Thus, it is apt that this confluence of the sentiments of such like-minded leaders will gift the world an iconic temple that captures their far-sighted and benevolent vision.

With the personal approval of the Crown

Prince, all the legal documents were drawn up and the land was officially gifted for the temple. Now, the process of designing and building the temple could begin in earnest.

Shortly after the announcement of the land donation, the Prime Minister of India was scheduled to visit the UAE as part of his West Asia and Gulf tour in February 2018. So, it was thought fitting that the temple project be commenced by him during this visit.

To enable this, two events were planned to take place concurrently on 11 February 2018: the Shila Pujan (foundation-stone sanctification) ceremony to be performed by Pujya Ishwarcharan Swami at the temple site, and the unveiling of the temple model and project announcement by the Honourable Prime Minister of India, Shri Narendrabhai Modi, at the acclaimed Dubai Opera. Thus, began many weeks of dedicated effort by hundreds of volunteers, who donated their time and energy for the success of both events.

PREPARATION OF THE TEMPLE SITE

The 13.7-acre temple site was a sand dune. No entry into the site existed, and no road into or around the site existed. A six-metre height difference separated the highest and lowest points. However, by the voluntary efforts of Mayankbhai Patel and his staff of the Al Shola construction company, the required portion of land for the ceremony was levelled. They began their work on 16 January 2018 and under the guidance of Bhaveshbhai Patel the ground was levelled and an access road was built within 10 days.

At the same time, Anil Gopinathan Pillai, CEO of Airolink Construction, instructed his team of workers to erect a fence around the entire site. His donation of nearly 1.3km of saffron-coloured fencing was completed in a week.

As work on the site continued day and night, there was a need for security personnel at all times. Tejraj Lohia, Managing Director and



Mahant Swami Maharaj performs *pujan* of *shila* for Abu Dhabi mandir in Akshar Deri, Gondal, 26 January 2018



Ishwarcharan Swami, sadhus and devotees on the mandir site in Abu Dhabi

CEO of Eagle Hunters Security, undertook the responsibility of providing security for the site. Right from the first day, he has provided 24-hour security services for the site. When another volunteer mentioned to him, “This is your second home...”, he instantly responded, “No, this is my first home. This is the greatest thing to happen in my life in years... I have the chance to help support the land of Prabhu.”

For the *shila puja* itself, a large tent was needed to accommodate the over 1,000 people who would attend. Anilbhai of Airolink continued his service by sponsoring the 30 x 50m marquee, fitted with six air-conditioning units and

interior decorations.

The initial designs and digital drawings for the stage were created by youths, including Jayeshbhai Maniyar, Hasitbhai Soni, Mithilbhai Dhorajiya, Haribhai Kava and others. Afterwards, the Adnani family of Costra Advertising and Vimesh Bhimani of the Kimoha group helped to bring all of those designs to life by facilitating the printing, fabrication and installation of the designs.

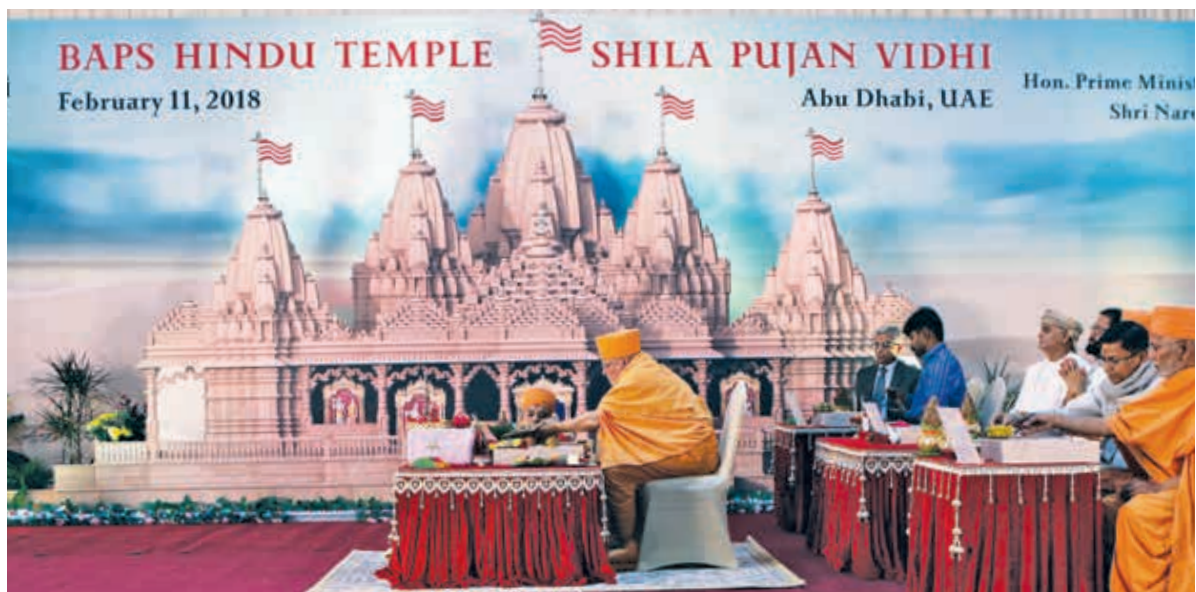
As the site was being prepared, many things such as generators, portable lights and barriers were needed to facilitate construction. Yogeshbhai Chotaliya worked tirelessly with the support of Ghanshyambhai Pagrani and his family to provide those services at a moment’s notice.

In this way, the site was readied for the auspicious occasion.

PREPARATION FOR THE DUBAI OPERA EVENT

Created and developed by Emaar Properties, the Dubai Opera was inaugurated in 2016. Its exterior is designed to resemble a dhow, or a traditional sailing ship.

In honour of the Prime Minister’s visit to the UAE, the Indian Embassy in Abu Dhabi and the



Ishwarcharan Swami performs the Shila Pujan rituals on the mandir site in Abu Dhabi, 11 February 2018



Indian Consulate in Dubai, in association with the BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha, organized an Indian Community gathering at the prestigious Dubai Opera. In the three-tier, 2,000-capacity hall, the front of the stage was extended and the seating was adjusted to accommodate 1,700 distinguished members of the Indian and Emirati communities for the Prime Minister's address.

Under the guidance of the Indian Ambassador, His Excellency Navdeep Singh Suri, the Consul General of India, His Excellency Vipulji and their staff members, a team of six female BAPS volunteers led by Sonaliben Patel telephoned about 2,000 selected guests to invite them to the special event. Over a dozen BAPS youths, lead by Bhadreshbhai Patel and Yagneshbhai Shahpura

with expertise in computer programming and website design created, developed, and executed a secure online registration database which allowed attendees to register for the event and receive their confirmations digitally. Each individual invitation pass was then printed with the name of the guest and personally hand-delivered by a group of around 45 volunteers.

On the day of the event, over 160 BAPS volunteers joined volunteers from the Friends of India and the Indian People's Forum to offer their services in parking, receiving guests, scanning passes and ushering guests to their seats. Volunteers from the UK, USA, Africa and India also provided integral help, as the event compere, programme directors, guest management volunteers and audio-video coordinators.

With the guidance of Shri Rahul Srinivasan from the Indian Consulate and Shri Ashokbhai Kotecha of BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha, assisted by Dhru Bhatt, the entire programme was executed smoothly.

Connecting the Opera and the temple site was a live satellite link. While the Opera staff provided the light and sound support, Punitbhai Jagada, Tejasbhai Haria and their team at Prince



Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the guests watch a special video about the mandir in the Dubai Opera auditorium

AV provided projection services at the Opera and audio, light and LED screens at the temple site. Yaseenji and Elite Films provided valuable services for the satellite live link and video recording.

SHILA PUJAN CEREMONY

In the specially erected marquee, a 10m x 5m x 1m stage was set up on the east side. The backdrop was beautifully embellished with a large elegant cut-out of the mandir model, flanked on each side by decorative pillars.

Led by Shri Mukeshbhai Shastri, the Shila Pujan ceremony commenced at 9.30 a.m. in the presence of Pujan Ishwarcharan Swami, who performed the rituals for the main *shila* on the stage. Param Pujya Mahant Swami Maharaj had previously performed the *pujan* of this main *shila* on 26 January 2018 in the sacred Akshar Deri during the 150th anniversary celebrations of the Akshar Deri in Gondal.

Also on the stage, performing the *pujan* of the six other *shilas* were Pujya Gurudev Shri Rakeshbhai Jhaveri, a respected Jain guru and founder of the Shrimad Rajchandra Mission in Dharampur, India, Shrijiwarup Swami, Akshaymuni Swami and leading devotees from the UAE, Bahrain, Oman, Kuwait, UK, USA and Africa.

On the floor over 350 devotees participated in the Shila Pujan ceremony. At around 10.00 a.m., the Shila Pujan rituals were relayed live for a few minutes to the assembly in progress at the Dubai Opera in the presence of Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

The Vedic Shila Pujan ceremony concluded at about 11.00 a.m., after which a brief assembly was held. Following the *dhun* and a bhajan, Shri Rakeshbhai addressed the assembly, “A mandir has such energy that peace, love, friendship, harmony and compassion are emitted. It binds not only the community together, but also humanity.”

Thereafter, Pujya Ishwarcharan Swami blessed the gathering, “The mandir is for all Indians living in the UAE. This mandir, like all the mandirs built by Pramukh Swami Maharaj, will be a centre where *navdha* bhakti can be offered, traditional festivals will be celebrated, everyone can benefit from satsang, and children and youths can learn about devotion, spirituality, dharma and *niyams*. On this occasion, I thank the Crown Prince and the people of the UAE for generously gifting this land and for their open-mindedness in permitting and endorsing this traditional mandir. I pray to God to bless the Crown Prince, his family and all



Around 1,700 Indian and Emirati dignitaries seated in the assembly, Dubai Opera

the people of the UAE with lasting inner peace and happiness.”

At the conclusion of the assembly, Brahmavihari Swami delivered a vote of thanks.

Then, all the devotees approached the stage, showered flower petals on the *shilas* which had been arranged in a decorative display at the base of the stage, and bowed to Pujya Ishwarcharan Swami and the sadhus.

At the same time, in the women’s section, a sanctified *shila* had been placed, on which the women devotees showered flower petals.

Meanwhile, the assembly at the Dubai Opera had concluded and so the volunteers on duty there, as well as some dignitaries, rushed to the temple site to offer *pujan* to the *shilas*. Thus, in total around 1,200 devotees and well-wishers showered flower petals on the *shilas*.

As the devotees and well-wishers departed, they were served a pre-packed lunch prepared by Arvindbhai Dasaram of Akshar Restaurant.

ASSEMBLY AT THE DUBAI OPERA

The volunteers were in position by 6.30 a.m. to receive the 1,700 guests. Due to the prime minister’s security protocol everyone had to be

seated by 8.00 a.m. The assembly began at 8.30, with a *tabla* performance by renowned maestro Vikram Ghosh. Thereafter, Sucheta Satish, a 7th grade student of The Indian High School in Dubai who had recently set a world record by singing in around 100 languages, sang in the eight most common languages used in the UAE.

Thereafter, a series of videos were shown depicting modern India’s valuable contributions to the world and India’s flourishing relationship with the UAE.

Meanwhile, the Prime Minister had arrived at the venue and was meeting selected eminent Indian and Emirati dignitaries.

Then, at about 10.00 a.m., Prime Minister Modi appeared on stage to a rapturous standing ovation from the audience. After the national anthems of the UAE and the Republic of India he took his seat on stage.

Then, the Indian Ambassador gave a brief welcome speech, after which the master of ceremonies, Kamlesh Patel, introduced the video ‘A Millennial Moment,’ which depicted that the Crown Prince’s generous gift of land was in keeping with the vision of the founding fathers of the UAE, what the BAPS Hindu Temple and complex



Prime Minister Narendra Modi addresses the assembly at the Dubai Opera, with the mandir model in the foreground

will include, and how the mandir will contribute to the UAE and its people.

When the video concluded, the audience of 1,700 Indian and Emirati guests were shown live visuals of the Shila Pujan ceremony taking place on the temple site.

Then the highlight of the assembly occurred: the unveiling of the temple model by Prime

Minister Shri Narendra Modi.

Volunteers wheeled in the model concealed by palm leaves and resting on a base decorated as the trunk of a palm tree. Then, as the prime minister pressed a button to remotely unfold the palm leaves and reveal the model, the entire audience erupted with applause.

Finally, Prime Minister Modi addressed the august assembly. He expressed his gratitude to the Crown Prince for graciously gifting the land and described how the temple

will foster harmony in the region and the world.

After the assembly, once the Prime Minister and all the guests had departed, the volunteers and some of the guests headed towards the temple site to perform *pujan* of the *shilas*.

Thus, both simultaneous events were admirably managed by the volunteers. ♦

OPINIONS

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Prominent Businessman



It's a great feeling. A dream come true.

Never imagined that in this part of the world one day we'll have a temple. It's only because of the benevolence of the rulers. And their respect for Modi. They share the same concept that the whole world is one family.

This is the only institution, a good Sanstha, which has 1,200 temples, and they are selflessly doing this for the sake of the people and the next generation. So, I am very happy it is in their

hands. They will manage it and we will give our full support to make it successful.

MR GOPINATHA

Businessman



We have been waiting for this kind of occasion in this part of the world. We are so lucky. I'm very glad to see the very disciplined volunteers.

MR WANG XIANG



It is overwhelming. I'm blown away by the passion and the energy that you feel

throughout the event. The key takeaway is that people can live together. By coming to this kind of event, you see the world from a different angle, which I believe should be the right angle, rather than what we read in newspapers. This will contribute to the harmony of the world.

MR DILIP JOSHI

Renowned Actor



It's a millennial moment in a true sense. The mandir inspires noble virtues in people. People of all backgrounds will be inspired.

DR ADEL AL ALI



I would like to thank our rulers for giving us a chance to engage with different cultures and nations. They have a vision. This is a fantastic milestone and we now have a big responsibility towards it. This is a great achievement for us and for India.

SHRI RAMKRISHNA

Community Leader, Dubai



It is amazing. No words. We have been longing for this for many years. So, I thank the rulers and the BAPS Hindu Temple committee. We are immensely delighted to have this kind of temple in this part of the world. We will all benefit – the whole Indian community.

MR BHARAT SHAH

Prominent Philanthropist



I have been in this country for 70 years. It brings tears of joy to my eyes, that something which was beyond

imagination will take shape. I don't have words to express my deep inner joy. Seeing the work of BAPS, I am confident that future generations will benefit fully from this. They will be inspired by the traditions and values of India and the BAPS.

MR VIJAY KARIA

Prominent Businessman



Today will remain very very special in my heart throughout my life. In the context of the world today, I think that the development of this mandir is perhaps a world-changing event for the better. It provides a fresh scent of positivity, love, affection and spirituality. This mandir is a first step towards harmony.

MR KULVANT SINGH

Founder, Lama Group of Hospitality



Religion is something that bonds nations together. The announcement that a mandir will be built signifies

the importance of Indians in the UAE. It is a step forward for a stronger relationship between the two nations. It conveys the message to the entire globe that the UAE is a place of peace and harmony.

DR MUSTAFA

Prominent Businessman



This mandir symbolizes a millennial moment because it portrays to the world how different religions, creeds and communities can come together for the benefit of humanity.

MR ASHOK ODHVANI

Prominent Businessman



This is a great moment. Something is changing in a big way. It will change our whole life.



SWAMINARAYAN BLISS INFORMATION STATEMENT

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I, Sadhu Swayamprakashdas, hereby declare that the above mentioned information is true to my knowledge.

(Signed) Sadhu Swayamprakashdas. Date: 5-3-2018



Pujya Ishwarcharan Swami shows the commemorative book on the BAPS Hindu Temple to Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Brahmavihari Swami presents the Amrut Kalash to Crown Prince Sheikh Al Nahyan

Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi Welcomes BAPS Sadhus and Temple Committee

The Presidential Palace, Abu Dhabi, UAE

10 February 2018

It was the first time ever that the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, HH Sheikh Mohamed Bin Zayed Al Nahyan, had used his majestic Presidential Palace to receive any head of state or visitors. Following his meeting with the Prime Minister of India, Shri Narendra Modi, and the formal signing of eight MoUs between the UAE and India, announcements in Arabic and English invited the BAPS delegation to approach the two leaders. The Crown Prince and the Prime Minister both stood up to warmly welcome sadhus of the BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha – Pujya Ishwarcharan Swami and Brahmavihari Swami, and the members of the BAPS Hindu Temple Committee – Dr B.R. Shetty, Sudhir Shetty, Rohitbhai Patel, Ashok Kotecha and Yogeshbhai Maheta.

The audience of more than 300 Arab dignitaries, which included royal family members, the whole Cabinet, all ministers, military personnel, officers, and other leading personalities of Abu Dhabi and UAE also rose to applaud this historic meeting. Simultaneously, while, Pujya Ishwarcharan Swami presented a golden *kalash* and a beautiful commemorative book on the BAPS Hindu Temple to the Prime Minister. Brahmavihari Swami presented both items to the Crown Prince. It was truly a special moment that a Hindu Temple was being received in the court of the Crown Prince with open arms.

Then, Brahmavihari Swami conversed with the Crown Prince. While presenting the golden *kalash*, he said, “Your Highness, this is the vessel of immortality. In truth, no man is immortal



The Presidential Palace where the temple project was declared

on this earth, but may your legacy be immortal. May your generosity be immortal and may it be transmitted to your children and grandchildren.” The Crown Prince genuinely appreciated the sentiments, saying, “Please continue to pray for me, my children and grandchildren.”

Continuing, Brahmavihari Swami said, “This temple is a result of the friendship of two great leaders – yourself and our Prime Minister – and of two great countries – the UAE and India. It is a coming together of two cultures and two communities.”

The Crown Prince was reminded that in 2015 Prime Minister Modi, during his visit to the UAE, had personally thanked the Crown Prince for the promise of land to build a temple.

The Crown Prince was shown the pictures of Akshardham and other temples, and was informed that BAPS has built and manages 1,200 temples around the world, which have generated harmony and peace all around.

Showing the 3D computer model of the temple, Brahmavihari Swami said, “Your Highness, when we presented two options for the temple – one covered and the other open – you graciously

selected the grand, open temple.” And when he saw the computer image, the Crown Prince said, “Yes, it’s beautiful. We want the whole world to see it.”

While showing photos of the Akshar Deri and Guruhari Mahant Swami Maharaj, Brahmavihari Swami remarked, “The whole world talks about harmony and tolerance... every country and every culture. But, you don’t just believe in it, you live it.” And then he concluded, “We have come here to express three things: our gratitude for your generosity, since without it nothing would have been possible; to thank our Prime Minister for his integrity... he does what he says; and to assure you of our sincerity. We will sincerely honour the trust you have placed upon us and shall accomplish what you expect. This gesture of yours will send a global signal to the world that cultural and spiritual inclusiveness is the way forward for world harmony.”

Thus, in the presence of hundreds of Emiratis and international delegates, and with the whole world watching, the temple project had been publicly declared in a royal setting. ♦

MEDIA COVERAGE

BAPS activities in the Middle East began with the blessings of Pramukh Swami Maharaj and have continued to flourish. The recent announcement that a BAPS Hindu Mandir will be built in Abu Dhabi is the result of his efforts and encouragement over the years.

The news was greeted with great delight throughout the world and widely reported in the print and electronic media. Reports of the declaration of the mandir project at the Dubai Opera, the Shila Pujan ceremony at the mandir site, and the meeting at the Presidential Palace between the Crown Prince, Prime Minister Modi, BAPS sadhus and the BAPS mandir committee were published in the leading newspapers of the UAE, such as, *Khaleej Times*, *Gulf News* and others, and also in India. TV channels and internet news agencies also featured stories of these events.

It is truly a milestone that a traditional *shikharbaddha* mandir will be built in the UAE, demonstrating that interfaith harmony is the way forward for global peace. ♦



'Uphold principles of tolerance'

ADDRESSING COMMUNITY OF FAITHS SPEECH, INDIA'S PRIME MINISTER HAD A MESSAGE: UPHOLDING AND ENHANCING RELATIONSHIP WITH THE UAE



Modi's second visit in three years has enthused us, experts say



Temple work to start after three months

THOUSANDS ATTENDING RECEPTION; CONSTRUCTION APPROVED BY ABU DHABI GOVT

The construction of the Hindu temple in Abu Dhabi is set to begin after a three-month period. The project, which is a landmark for the UAE, has been approved by the Abu Dhabi government. The temple is expected to be completed within a year. The construction will be a significant step towards the realization of the temple's vision. The project is being managed by a team of experts, and the construction will be carried out in a professional and efficient manner. The temple is expected to be a place of worship and a symbol of the UAE's commitment to religious freedom and tolerance.



Modi's second visit in three years has enthused us, experts say

Top chef: Modi is not a feisty eater

Hindu temple to have 7 towers representing each emirate

ABU DHABI GROUND-BREAKING CEREMONY TO BE LIVE STREAMED AT PM'S RECEPTION IN DUBAI



BY SUDHA, ABHINAV KASER
SUDHA KASER
ABHINAV KASER

The Hindu temple in Abu Dhabi is set to have seven towers, one for each of the seven emirates of the UAE. The temple is a landmark for the UAE and a symbol of the country's commitment to religious freedom and tolerance. The construction of the temple is a significant step towards the realization of the temple's vision. The project is being managed by a team of experts, and the construction will be carried out in a professional and efficient manner. The temple is expected to be a place of worship and a symbol of the UAE's commitment to religious freedom and tolerance.

Use tech for growth, not destruction: PM

Says govt saved ₹56,000 crore through DBT | Cautions against radicalisation of cyberspace



Modi's second visit in three years has enthused us, experts say

Stone laid for temple of friendship bigger than that of buyer-seller

Vicharan

MAHANT SWAMI MAHARAJ'S

August–October 2017

Los Angeles, Houston, Dallas, Robbinsville, London,
Leicester, Paris, London, New Delhi, Gandhinagar



AUGUST

LOS ANGELES: 1–10

1, Tuesday; San Jose, LA

In San Jose, Jeff Weiner, CEO of Linked In, came for Swamishri's darshan and received his blessings.

Swamishri landed at Chino Airport at 6.30 p.m. and was fervently welcomed after his arrival in the mandir.

6, Sunday

Swamishri ignited the lamp to inaugurate the satsang *shibir* themed on “*Bhāgya jāgyā re...*” In the evening session, Swamishri was asked during a skit, “Do you want to convey anything to Maharaj and Bapa in Akshardham?” Swamishri

replied, “Their work is continuing.”

Today, according to the Indian calendar (Shravan *sud* 10), marked the first year of Pramukh Swami Maharaj's earthly departure. Mahant Swami Maharaj performed *pujan* of two *asthi kumbhs* containing Swamishri's holy ashes. The holy ashes in the first *kumbh* would be immersed in the Colorado River flowing through the Grand Canyon and the second *kumbh* in the Pacific Ocean.

8, Tuesday

In the evening Children's Day assembly, children asked questions to Swamishri:

Q. What do you pray in your puja?

A. I thank Swami-Shriji.

Q. What is your favourite food item?

A. *Kankoda* (a vegetable).

Q. What do you do in your free time?

A. Write letters.

Q. Where are you from?

A. Akshardham.

Q. What is the key to Akshardham like, and what should one do to get it?

A. To have *divyabhav*. Everyone has got that key.

Q. How far away is Akshardham?

A. You are all in Akshardham.

Q. What is it that you have that we do not know?

A. I have Maharaj, Swami and Pramukh Swami.

Q. Who is your best friend?

A. If one observes *niyam*-dharma, he is my best friend. All children (here) follow *niyam*-dharma.



Children's Day, Houston



Kishore Din assembly, Los Angeles



Youth Day, Houston

9, Wednesday

In the evening, Swamishri attended the Kishore Din assembly. Thereafter, Holi was celebrated by showering flower petals.

10, Thursday, Los Angeles, Houston

About 12 noon, Swamishri departed by flight from Los Angeles and landed in Houston at 4.40 p.m.

HOUSTON: 10-20

11, Friday; Children's Day

During the Children's Day celebration in the evening assembly Swamishri was asked some questions:

Q. How can we become ideal children?

A. [Follow] *niyams*.

Q. When we close our eyes we see darkness. What do you see when you close your eyes?

A. I see Yogi Bapa.

12, Saturday; Youth Day

During the morning session of Youth Day (Yuva Din) Swamishri answered the following questions:

Q. What is your favourite sport?

A. Football.

Q. If you have 15 minutes what book would you read?

A. Vachanamrut.

Q. Out of the five *artis* during the day which is your favourite one?

A. *Mangala*.

Q. When you wake up in the morning what is the first thing you think of?

A. Yogiji Maharaj and Pramukh Swami Maharaj.

Q. What do you pray for at Pramukh Swami Maharaj's memorial shrine?



Pramukh Swami Maharaj's earthly departure exactly one year ago, a commemorative assembly, Houston

A. May you always grace and bless me.

Q. Write one message you wish to give us?

A. *Divyabhav*.

13, Sunday

To mark Pramukh Swami Maharaj's earthly departure exactly one year ago, a commemorative assembly was held in the evening at the Smart Finance Center in Houston. The evening programme was themed on 'Eternally with Us'. Narayanmuni Swami talked about Pramukh Swami Maharaj's eternal love. Brahmavihari Swami elaborated upon Swami Bapa's eternal inspiration. And, Atmaswarup Swami talked about Swami's eternal presence through Mahant Swami Maharaj. Thereafter, at 7.00 p.m., the stage curtains were drawn and Mahant Swami Maharaj was seen engrossed in darshan of a replica of the memorial shrine constructed in Sarangpur. Swamishri performed *pradakshinas* and then *arti*, along with 6,000 devotees and well-wishers.

Several dignitaries were also present: Senator Cornyn, video message of the Governor of Texas Hon. Abot, Allen Owen (Mayor of Missouri City, Texas), Pete Hallisey (Mayor of League City, Tx), Troy Nehis (Fort Bend County Sheriff) and Anupam Ray (Consul General of India). They all honoured Mahant Swami Maharaj with garlands.

On this occasion Mayors Allen Owen and Pete

Hallisey honoured Swamishri with a Key to the City and a proclamation, respectively. Thereafter, youths performed a traditional welcome dance.

In conclusion, Swamishri blessed the assembly, "I wish to meet you all, young and old. I'm eager to meet everyone, but it is not possible because it will take years to do so. Shriji Maharaj has taught that to stay near one needs to have an understanding. One who obeys the instructions of God is near to him, otherwise he is very far away. One who sings the glory of devotees is near to God.

"Through unity and harmony (*samp*) people have succeeded in this world. However, with the slightest entry of *kusamp* (disunity) everything collapses. The whole world needs harmony. Firstly, it is important to cultivate *samp* in one's house. Thereafter, one will enjoy doing satsang."

11, Monday; Kishore Din

In the evening Kishore Din assembly, Swamishri was honoured with a garland and a Key to the City by the Mayor of Stafford Mr Leonard Scarcella. He also declared that the road (Brand Lane 1100) before the BAPS Mandir would be prefixed with Pramukh Swami Maharaj.

Then, Swamishri gave the following answers to questions posed to him:

Q.1. What is the means to *moksha*?

A. Satpurush.

Q.2. What is the meaning of profound love (*dradh priti*)?

A. To do what the guru likes.

Q.3. Which action did you like most of Pramukh Swami Maharaj?

A. His laughter.

Q.4. How did you prepare for your school exams?

A. I never studied after class. When the exams came I simply wrote the answers and got first or second rank. (Because of Swamishri's sharp memory he remembered whatever he saw or heard in class.)

Q.5. How can we stop wasting our time and

never forget to do our satsang rituals?

A. Read satsang books.

15, Tuesday; Janmashtami

Swamishri celebrated Janmashtami in the BAPS Mandir, Houston. (For details refer to *Swaminarayan Bliss*, November–December 2017.)

16, Wednesday

Swamishri inaugurated the *shibir* ‘*Bhāgya jāgyā re...*’ by lighting the inaugural lamp. The Mayor of Sugar Land, Joe Zimmerman, presented a proclamation and honoured Swamishri.

In the evening *shibir* session, Swamishri was asked the following questions:

Q.1. As the head of the BAPS do you experience any burden or tension?

A. Maharaj and Swami are taking care of everything. Because of the connection with them I do not have any tension at all.

Q.2. What do you pray for while doing darshan of Thakorji?

A. I thank him because he has given this wonderful Satsang and great sadhus and devotees. The Satsang community is divine, therefore I’m happy.

Q.3. While folding your palms you bow to all after your puja. What thought do you have while doing this?

A. Because you have patience to sit I, too, bow to you all with patience. By doing this I fulfil my wish to meet you all. I can see those who are seated near, however, I’m unable to see those who are far. So, I bow to them with inner feelings and it makes me feel happy.

Q.4. What is it that you like most about Yogi Bapa and Swami Bapa?

A. One could see they were candid and without any pretence. They never harboured any feelings to promote themselves or to suppress others.

17, Thursday

In the evening *shibir* session ‘Iti Vachanamrutam’, Swamishri was asked several questions:



Janmashtami celebration, Houston

Q.1 How did you perceive Yogiji Maharaj and Pramukh Swami Maharaj?

A. Swamishri replied, “Yogiji Maharaj and Pramukh Swami Maharaj were the incarnate form of Shriji Maharaj.”

Q.2. Show us one means so that all the sadhanas of satsang are included.

A. Perceive *divyabhav* in all. Yogiji Maharaj and Shriji Maharaj have said, ‘Sadhus and devotees are divine. One who understands, bears and thinks about this essence will become blissful. And this bliss never ebbs but remains for 24 hours a day.’ So, have *divyabhav* in all. This is difficult, but this is the only way – the key to Akshardham.

Q.3. Maharaj will come to liberate us at the time of death, but we have not seen him. How can we recognize him?

A. By having firm refuge (*dradh ashro*) in Shriji Maharaj with no lapses, and staunchly abiding by his *niyams* – one will have no problems in reaching Akshardham.

Q.4. Will you come with Maharaj to liberate us?

A. I will definitely have to come.

Q.5. When we do *mansi* (meditation) we see you and worldly things also. Guide us so that we see only Maharaj, Pramukh Swami Maharaj and you.

A. All are one – whether you meditate on Swami Bapa or Shriji Maharaj. Pramukh Swami

Maharaj was the incarnate form of Shriji Maharaj. Meditate on him. In so doing, one's meditation on Maharaj is included. They are not different. They seem different to us, but they are one.

Q.6. We know so much about the world but nothing about Bhagwan. Guide us about this.

A. Know and understand about Maharaj, Swami and the Satpurush; other than them do not wish to know about anything else. In that are included *jnan*, dhyana, four Vedas and everything. By knowing everything else but not the essence, one's life is worthless. And once you have known and realized this, nothing else remains to be known.

DALLAS: 20–24

20, Sunday; Houston, Dallas

At 11.00 a.m. Swamishri took a flight from Houston and landed in Dallas at 11.50 a.m. (For details refer to *Swaminarayan Bliss*, November–December 2017.)

On 21, Monday, Swamishri observed the solar eclipse.

On 22, Tuesday, Swamishri celebrated the Dallas Mandir *patotsav* and the symbolic Janmashtami festival.

ROBBINSVILLE: 24–30

24, Thursday; Dallas, Robbinsville

Swamishri flew from Dallas at 11.45 a.m. and landed in New Jersey at 3.30 p.m.

27, Sunday

After receiving Swamishri's blessings, Dr Subramaniam addressed the satsang assembly, "It will be 19 years ago that I first met Pramukh Swami Maharaj. He did change my life. He did touch my heart just like he touched all of your hearts.

"Then, later on, I came to see the current guru, Mahant Swami Maharaj in Delhi, when I was visiting Akshardham. When I saw him, I thought he is just like Pramukh Maharaj. And he is very



After consecrating the *abhishek murti* of Shri Ghanshyam Maharaj, Swamishri performs the first *abhishek*, Robbinsville

simple and looks like a person who respects every individual on the earth.

"And also, when he speaks, it is sort of humble in a very kind, low tone and really he never raises his voice.

"So now you have a current leader who exemplifies all what Pramukh Swami Maharaj stood for. That is, simplicity, humility, selflessness.

"He is a perfect leader because, as I said, he will pursue the vision of his late guru without any question. Already he is doing it."

PHILADELPHIA: 30 August–1 September

For three days, senior volunteers of all the departments of Satsang centres in North America gathered for a national seminar in Philadelphia. (For details refer to *Swaminarayan Bliss*, November–December 2017.)

SEPTEMBER

ROBBINSVILLE: 2–5

2, Saturday; Jal Jhilani Festival

At 10.00 a.m., Swamishri performed the *murti-pratishtha* rituals of the *abhishek murti* of Ghanshyam Maharaj and celebrated the Jal Jhilani Festival from 4.30 p.m. (For details refer to *Swaminarayan Bliss*, November–December 2017, pp.74–77.)

3–4, Sunday & Monday; Shila Puja and Placement of the First Pillar in Swaminarayan Akshardham

Swamishri performed the *shila puja* and placement of the first pillar in the Paramhansa Mandam in Swaminarayan Akshardham. To include all the devotees who had enrolled in the *puja* rituals the *mahapuja* was performed four times: Morning and evening and the following morning and evening. (For details refer to *Swaminarayan Bliss*, November–December 2017, pp. 77–79.)

5, Tuesday; Washington DC, Robbinsville

On the evening of 4 September, Swamishri, Ishwarcharan Swami and other sadhus travelled by flight to Washington DC.

At 12 noon on 5 September, Swamishri, Ishwarcharan Swami and Viratswarup Swami met former president Barack Obama at the World Wildlife Fund building. Viratswarup Swami informed Mr Obama about the BAPS and Swamishri's *vicharan* in USA. (For details refer to *Swaminarayan Bliss*, September–October 2017, pp. 65 & 70.)

6, Wednesday

In the evening, Swamishri inaugurated a Cambridge University publication, *An Introduction to Swaminarayan Hindu Theology*, by Sadhu Paramtattvadas of BAPS. The event was attended by several distinguished scholars and professors who spoke about the publication: Prof. Raymond Williams, Prof. Francis Clooney and Prof. Ravi Gupta. (For details refer to *Swaminarayan Bliss*, November–December 2017, pp. 52–53.)

In conclusion, Swamishri blessed the assembly, “John F. Kennedy said, ‘United we stand, divided we fall.’ No matter which deity or God we believe in we can unite on the basis of our common values. Let us forget the differences and unite on the basis of values that are common to all. The distinguished guests have come here with good sentiments, so it was a joy for all. In the religious



Pramukh Swami Maharaj's Asthipushpa Visarjan in the Hudson River

realm it is foundational to have harmony, brotherliness, unity, humility and mutual understanding of each other's greatness. This is called satsang. And where there is negativity, it is not satsang.”

7, Thursday; Robbinsville, New Jersey, Edison; Pramukh Swami Maharaj's Asthipushpa Visarjan

At 6.10 p.m. Swamishri and sadhus arrived at the Liberty State Park in New Jersey for the *asthipushpa* immersion ceremony. Pramukh Swami Maharaj's life and work was eulogized by sadhus in a special assembly. In conclusion, Mahant Swami Maharaj blessed, “Even after Pramukh Swami Maharaj's departure he has left a profound impact. So many streets and other places have been named after him. In fact, he has not gone, even though it may seem so. If he has departed then everything would collapse. So, we must be strong and proud. In this world, whether one attains something or nothing; it is all trifle. So, we should incline towards the attainment of Maharaj and Swami. Do bhajan and everything is included in that.”

Thereafter, Swamishri performed the *puja*, *arti* and *mantra-pushpanjali* of the sacred ashes (*asthipushpa*) of Pramukh Swami Maharaj placed in eight *kalashes*. Then Swamishri, Ishwarcharan Swami and sadhus travelled in a boat on the Hudson River to scatter the holy *asthipushpa* into

the river. Devotees witnessed this divine occasion from the grounds of Liberty Park.

Thereafter, Swamishri arrived at the Edison BAPS Mandir at 9.00 p.m.

EDISON: 8–13

8, Friday; Youth Day

At 11.00 p.m., Swamishri attended the Youth Day assembly. With reference to Shastriji Maharaj the youths enacted a skit and requested Swamishri to play the *dilruba*, *kartals*, drums, keyboard and violin. Over 1,040 youths clapped energetically at the divine darshan.

The evening Youth Day celebration was held at the New Jersey Exposition Center. The youths presented five skits related to *seva* and satsang: *kusang*, *abhav-avgun*, satsang *sabha*, good satsang habits, bad habits and *niyam*-dharma. After each skit Swamishri spoke about his views and blessed the audience.

9, Saturday; Shastriji Maharaj Smruti Parva

Swamishri performed the *murti-pratishtha* rituals of *pujan*, *arti* and *mantra-pushpanjali* of the *murtis* for BAPS *hari* mandirs in Fresno (California), New Haven (Connecticut), Scranton (Pennsylvania), Westborough (Massachusetts), Crystal Lake (Illinois) and Guru Parampara *murtis* for Beaumont (Texas).

The evening celebration assembly was held at the Expo Center. The theme was “*Yagnapurush Chhe Sāthe*”. Youths presented a traditional dance and thereafter the volunteers played the role of devotees in the time of Shastriji Maharaj and praised his life and work: Galbhai, Gordhandas Kothari, Soma Bhagat, Motibhai, Ashabhai, Maganbhai, Prabhudas Lalaji and Manibhai of Salad village. In conclusion, Swamishri blessed, “Shastriji Maharaj’s devotees were brave and abided by his difficult *agnas*. They tolerated immense hardships to provide the happier times for us. However, they never felt the extreme challenges and hardships due to their pride in having attained Maharaj and Swami. The

reason why we are all joyful today is because of Shastriji Maharaj.”

10, Sunday

Swamishri performed the *murti-pratishtha* *arti* of the *murtis* for the BAPS *hari* mandir in Northern Virginia. The evening satsang assembly was themed on guru bhakti.

ROBBINSVILLE: 13–18

14, Thursday; Mahant Swami Maharaj’s 84th Birthday Celebration

Today, according to the Indian Calendar (Bhadarva *vad* 9), was Mahant Swami Maharaj’s 84th birthday. A grand *annakut* had been arranged before Thakorji.

After completing his morning puja Swamishri gave *diksha* to Nilkanthbhai, Shyambhai and Roshan Bhagat. They were named Apurva Bhagat, Virag Bhagat and Sadhu Gurumanandas respectively. Thereafter, Swamishri blessed the assembly, “We travelled as youths with Yogi Bapa. We were totally new to the traditions of Satsang. But Yogi Bapa’s love pulled us all and whatever he instructed, we naturally accepted and followed. Today, we realize that nothing is going to come with us from this world. By following the wishes and instructions of Maharaj, Swami and the Guru Parampara and keeping one’s focus on them will be beneficial and useful in one’s life. All of you are dedicated in body, mind and wealth. You have renounced and are doing a lot of other *seva*. You are all *muktas* of Akshardham, otherwise it is not possible to dedicate yourself in this way.”

Thereafter, Swamishri was honoured on his birthday with decorative garlands by senior sadhus.

The evening celebration assembly was themed ‘Pramukh Swami Maharaj is present in Mahant Swami Maharaj’. The entire programme was interlaced with speeches, videos and traditional dances by youths. Bhadrash Swami talked about the glory of the Satpurush as Aksharbrahman, Anandswarup



Mahant Swami Maharaj's 84th Birthday Celebration, Robbinsville

Swami elaborated upon the fact that the Satpurush never leaves the earth. Brahnavihari Swami expounded on how Pramukh Swami Maharaj and Mahant Swami Maharaj have resolved our problems through phone calls. Aksharvatsal Swami threw light on how Swami Bapa and Swamishri have read and solved our problems and prayers through letters. Vivekmurti Swami expressed how both gurus have showered their love and compassion through their eyes. Atmaswarup Swami described the *vicharans* of both the gurus. Pujya Ishwarcharan Swami explained that we have attained the same spiritual power of Pramukh Swami Maharaj in Mahant Swami Maharaj.

In conclusion, Mahant Swami Maharaj blessed the assembly, "One who understands another's greatness and realizes one's own faults is *das*. Shriji Maharaj had said that the underlying purpose in whatever actions he performed was *ekantik* dharma. Also, the reason behind whatever Pramukh Swami Maharaj did was to make us *ekantik*. You are in Akshardham if you have *dasbhav* and glory for Maharaj and Swami. The bottom line is to adhere to God and the guru." Thereafter, Swamishri was honoured with garlands.

15, Friday

Swamishri inaugurated a Bengali version of 'Yug Vibhuti Pramukh Swami Maharaj' translated by Ashokbhai Dave.

During the evening *shibir* session, themed, 'Iti Vachanamrutam', Swamishri was asked the following questions:

Q.1. In the evening satsang assembly Swamishri was asked, "With what understanding and glory should we appear for the satsang exams."

A. Yogi Bapa had talked often to Ishwarcharan Swami about setting up an infrastructure for Satsang exams. Shriji Maharaj values this a lot, but we do not value it because the Satsang exam certificate is of no use, unlike the academic certificates we attain. So, we do not prepare and make efforts to read. We simply give the Satsang exams for the sake of it. But one attains *moksha*, which no one can give. Thus, the Satsang exams are very important, and by appearing for them Shriji Maharaj, Gunatitanand Swami, Bhagatji Maharaj, Shastriji Maharaj, Yogiji Maharaj and Pramukh Swami Maharaj become very pleased.

Q.2. When we do not follow all the *niyams* of satsang it looks bad upon the Sanstha by doing *tilak-chandlo*, and it also impedes our job promotion.

A. By doing *tilak-chandlo* Maharaj is pleased. You mentioned that others would not be pleased on seeing the *tilak-chandlo*, but should you think what pleases Maharaj or what pleases others?

Q.3. Swami, inspire us to come in time for the Sunday satsang assembly.

A. Yogi Bapa's injunction of giving up Rs.

25,000 for the sake of attending the Sunday Satsang assembly was of his time. Today, Rs. 25,000 would amount to \$ 250,000. Yogi Bapa used to come to the *sabha* five minutes early. Whereas, we need to introspect about ourselves. When you arrive five minutes late at work you are fired.

“Do you think the satsang *sabha* is ordinary? Do you believe it is child’s play? We do not value the Sunday Satsang *sabha*. And when we do attend the Sunday *sabha* our thoughts are elsewhere. A devotee once said that one hears the same things in Sunday *sabha*. Then aren’t your family members and your shop the same? But one always finds them new and interesting. But you must think who has instructed to attend the *sabha*. It was Yogi Bapa and Pramukh Swami Maharaj. If one has glory for them then one will understand the glory of the Sunday *sabha*.”

17, Sunday

An eventful evening assembly was held on the precincts of Robbinsville BAPS Mandir for the inauguration of the Sanskrit text, *Swaminarayan-Siddhanta-sudha*, written by Sadhu Bhadreshdas. Several scholars shared their views on the *vada grantha* and contributions of Bhadresh Swami. (For details refer to *Swaminarayan Bliss*, November–December 2017, pp. 44–50).

The occasion climaxed with Swamishri’s blessings, “From Bhagwan Swaminarayan to Shastriji Maharaj, Yogiji Maharaj and Pramukh Swami Maharaj, all have done the work of spreading *brahmavidya* [the highest spiritual knowledge]. Because of *brahmavidya*, countless devotees in the time of Bhagwan Swaminarayan had attained the spiritual state of *ekantik*. They never wavered and remained equipoised in the face of difficult times and problems.

“Whether you understand this philosophy or not you are all eligible for this divine knowledge. So, you must all remain strong and steadfast. The name of our philosophy is

‘Akshar- Purushottam Darshan’.”

21, Thursday; Robbinsville, London (UK)

Swamishri performed the *pujan* of the *kalashes* to be placed in the foundation pit of the proposed *parikrama*, offices and entry plaza of Akshardham. Puja Ishwarcharan Swami and senior sadhus ritually placed the *kalashes* in the foundation pit. Thereafter, Swamishri ritually poured cement in the pit.

After his three month’s *vicharan* in North America, Swamishri departed by flight in the evening from Newark Airport to London.

LONDON: 22–30

22, Friday

At 6.00 a.m., Swamishri and his entourage of sadhus landed at Heathrow Airport. After reaching the London Mandir he performed his puja at 8.30 a.m.

23, Saturday

In the evening assembly, Swamishri was accorded a warm welcome and honoured on his symbolic birthday celebration. The assembly was themed upon Swamishri’s virtues according to the verse, “*Shobhe saumya mukhārvind hastu...*” Speeches by sadhus described Swamishri’s virtues of calmness, compassion, polite speech and beholding God in his heart; the blessings of Yogiji Maharaj and Pramukh Swami Maharaj upon him; and Swamishri as a guru and liberator of all. Children and youths performed a traditional dance to welcome Swamishri.

In conclusion, Swamishri blessed the assembly, “I have entrusted everything to Maharaj and Swami, and am not worried in the least. Devotees and sadhus are very good. They are dear to Akshar-Purushottam Maharaj and Pramukh Swami Maharaj. They all belong to them and are their personal property. Thus, the more we become theirs the more our work [of spiritual liberation] will be attained.

“We should have *dasbhav* and *mahima*. There should be no *abhav-avgun*, no negativity.”

24, Sunday; Spiritual Camp on Akshar-Purushottam Darshan

A day-long spiritual camp (*chhavani*) on the Akshar-Purushottam Darshan was held at the BAPS Mandir, London. (For details refer to *Swaminarayan Bliss*, November–December 2017, pp. 84–85).

25, Monday

In the evening, an inauguration assembly in the mandir auditorium of a publication by Cambridge University and authored by Sadhu Paramtattvadas, *An Introduction to Swaminarayan Hindu Theology*, was attended by Swamishri, scholars and devotees. (For details refer to *Swaminarayan Bliss*, November–December 2017, pp. 53–55.)

In his blessings Swamishri praised the work authored by Paramtattva Swami. He said, “It is fine that we praise this publication, but scholars here and those in Robbinsville have praised this work immensely. They are all very happy about this publication.”

27, Thursday

At 12 noon, Thakorji and Swamishri sanctified the mandir land in Purley, South London. He showered flower petals on the land and prayed for its development for satsang activities.

In the evening, Swamishri blessed the satsang assembly at the Beddington Conference Centre in Croydon, South London.

30, Saturday; Children’s Day

After his morning puja, Swamishri inaugurated a game, *Destination Akshardham*, produced by UK children’s activities volunteers, and an audio CD, “*Murti Manohar Tāri...*” published by Swaminarayan Aksharpath.

The evening Children’s Day celebration was themed ‘Ocean’. The programme included



Children’s Day, London

speeches by children, and games like tug-of-war, Shriji Says and Hot Potato.

Finally, Swamishri blessed the assembly of children and devotees, “Shriji Maharaj is genuine, Gunatitanand Swami is genuine and Pramukh Swami Maharaj is also genuine. Thus, we too must become genuine [devotees]. Only then will we experience the joys of Akshardham. Touch the feet of your parents and offer respects to them. Because of their blessings you’ll attain virtues in your life.”

OCTOBER

LONDON: 1–12

1, Sunday; Kishore-Kishori Din

At 11.05 a.m. Swamishri went to the morning Kishore-Kishori Din assembly. The youths had written letters to Swamishri seeking forgiveness for their mistakes. Swamishri blessed, “This is the first time so all are forgiven. But now, do not repeat them. Be careful. Since, our bond with Maharaj and Swami is true and forever. So, have faith in them.”

The youths then requested Swamishri, “What can we do that will increase our attachment with you.” Swamishri wrote in Gujarati: “Keep *divy-abhav* and observe all *niyams*.”

2, Tuesday

At 11.15 a.m., Swamishri blessed the assembly of students of The Swaminarayan School in



Swamishri blessed the assembly of students of The Swaminarayan School, London



Swamishri with senior devotees on Vadil Din, London

English, “You come here for studies, so you must do that properly. You must study well. However clever you may be, but you must also work hard. This is a thumb rule. If you study only once you may forget. But if you repeatedly study and work hard then you will succeed.”

4, Wednesday; Vadil Din

In the special morning assembly, Yogvivek Swami informed Swamishri, “All these devotees are over 60 and, at Bapa’s command, contributed in many ways to build the mandir. Even today, over a hundred of them are involved actively in various duties in the mandir.” The senior devotees posed several questions to Swamishri.

Q. Now that we are over 65 years old, what should we do ?

A. You are all *satsangis*, so you should focus on bhajan and bhakti. Connect to God. Now that you have retired, offer devotion.

Q. With what understanding can we all experience Akshardham here?

A. By firmly observing all the *agnas*, especially that of *nishkam* dharma.

Q. Due to our life-long attachment we remain concerned about our family. What understanding should we keep?

A. Maharaj has said that we do not remember the relatives of our countless part births. Who

were our mothers, fathers and family members? Apply that understanding here. Then one can overcome attachments.

Q. What should we do when there is a clash of *swabhavs* between family members?

A. Tolerate! Since, we cannot change our own *swabhavs*, how can we change those of others? If we overcome our *swabhavs*, then we will be at peace; if not, then there will be problems. The root of all problems is *swabhavs*.

Q. What should we do daily so that we understand the glory of God?

A. That is due to Maharaj’s grace. But, we should act in a way that earns Maharaj’s grace.

After the assembly, as Swamishri was leaving, he added, “You should also read satsang texts daily. If you have difficulty reading, then listen to the audio recordings of discourses or watch the videos of Bapa. This will give you much joy.”

5, Thursday; Sharad Purnima

In the morning, after puja, Swamishri performed *pujan* of Pramukh Swami Maharaj’s *asthi* to be placed at the Akshar Deri in Wellingborough.

Thereafter, Swamishri gave *parshad diksha* to Deveshbhai *sadhak*, a youth from Wellingborough.

In the evening, Swamishri presided over the Sharad Purnima (Gunatitanand Swami’s birthday) celebration assembly.

6, Friday; Yuva Din

On the way to his morning puja, Swamishri observed and appreciated the decorative displays prepared by the *yuvatis* on the theme, ‘Sahajanandi: Attachment with the Satpurush.’

After puja, youths presented a skit and asked, “How can we become Sahajanandi?”

Swamishri blessed, “We have to attach to God and his Sadhu, but we become attached elsewhere. We are plagued by our numerous *swabhavs* and, due to lack of introspection, they continue to trouble us. Many years pass in satsang, yet we remain the same. Without clarity of our goal, our *swabhavs* remain. So, without attachment to God and his Sadhu, we will remain engrossed in worldly pleasures and suffer.

“If you can overcome ego, then satsang will be sustained. Most problems are due to ego. That is why Maharaj stresses the need to become humble and serve as the servant of servants. But we make others our servants and we become the boss!

“Maharaj has said that we should treat our *swabhavs* as our enemies. But instead, we treat satsang as our enemy! So, understand the glory of our attainment – that we belong to Sahajanand Swami.”

8, Sunday; East London Mandir Murti-Pratishtha

At 10.20 a.m., Swamishri arrived at the new BAPS Mandir in Chigwell, East London, and performed the Vedic *murti-pratishtha* rituals and *arti*.

Thereafter, Swamishri went to Chigwell Hall, where the *murti-pratishtha* assembly was in progress. After a skit presentation by *balaks*, Swamishri blessed the assembly.

In the evening Pramukh Swami Maharaj Smruti Assembly, Swamishri blessed, “Pramukh Swami Maharaj was the supreme saint of Supreme God. What great works he did! Everyone remembers him. There are many saints, but to have constant rapport with God is rare. Many offer devotion, but he was immersed continuously in God. He was



East London Mandir murti-pratishtha, London

in unison with God. Bapa gave much joy and we should repeatedly remember it and internalize it.”

9, Monday; Jnan Din

After puja, Swamishri blessed, “Today is Jnan Din. True *jnan* is to focus on attaining *kalyan*. Satsang is 99% introspection. Without it, one is diverted. Gunatitanand Swami says, ‘I only know how to remove the disease of birth and death. In fact, he knew everything, but he manifested solely to grant *moksha*. In this birth, we have attained God and his Sadhu. So, to detach from everything except God is *jnan*. That which is useful for attaining *moksha* is *jnan*.’

At 10.10 a.m. Swamishri arrived at the ISKCON mandir in Watford for darshan. The mandir head, Shrutidharmadasji Swami, warmly welcomed Swamishri.

11, Wednesday; Samp Din

In the morning, Swamishri visited the house of Arvindbhai Guru at 65 Dollis Hill, where in 1970, with Yogiji Maharaj, Pramukh Swami Maharaj and other sadhus, Mahant Swami Maharaj had stayed during their first visit to England.

In the evening Samp Din assembly, Swamishri blessed, “To establish *samp*, the main thing is that we should strive to maintain unity, regardless of whether others do so or not. Remember, charity begins at home: How should I think to strengthen



Swamishri blesses a satsang assembly, Leicester



Swamishri blesses the evening *annakut* assembly, Paris

samp? How should I behave to strengthen *samp*? How should I speak to strengthen *samp*? By becoming *dasna das* and seeing the good in others we should serve selflessly. These values will consolidate *samp*.”

LEICESTER: 12–15

13, Friday

The evening assembly was, titled ‘Vachanamrut Leicester Prakaran 1’, in which several questions were asked to Swamishri.

Q. What is the true glory of the Satpurush?

A. He is in constant rapport with God. This is his greatest strength.

Q. We are like balloons. When you come or when we attend festivals and other events we become inflated. But afterwards, we become deflated. Please guide us on how our enthusiasm can continually increase.

A. If one firmly develops *upasana* and observes *agna*, then there will be no problem. Then, even if you are here and we are in India, we are still together and cannot separate even if we want to. With understanding, proximity develops.

14, Saturday

After puja, Swamishri was asked, “Please reveal to us your favourite kirtan.”

Swamishri replied, “I really like four or five kirtans.” Then he sang and explained, “*Mohanne*

gamavāne ichchho mānni, tyāgo sarve juthi manni tek jo...” Thereafter, Swamishri sang and explained the essence of each verse of this bhajan.

PARIS: 15–18

16, Monday

In Swamishri’s morning puja, *balaks* from BAPS centres throughout Europe presented *mukhpath* in Gujarati, Swiss, German, French, Irish and other European languages. Swamishri was pleased and blessed them all.

17, Tuesday; Dhanteras

After puja, Swamishri blessed, “We should pray to God, ‘Please grant me unshakeable faith in you.’ You will experience joy and misery, but do not waver as a result. Our attainment is like the Himalayas, and our social, financial and other difficulties are like a clod of mud in comparison. So, remain firm and attached to Maharaj and Swami. Never forsake satsang.”

In the evening satsang assembly, a grand *annakut* was offered to Thakorji.

LONDON: 18–21

19, Thursday; Diwali

In the evening, Swamishri performed the Chopda Pujan rituals in the haveli and then blessed the devotees, “You are all dedicated devotees. There is no doubt in this. You serve



Annakut on New Year's Day, London

beyond your means, but may you all remain attached and devoted to God. Remove your focus from everywhere else and concentrate on God. Countless births have passed, and now in this birth, God has been attained. This is a great thing. So, continually strengthen your bond with God. No matter what difficulties you face, never leave God. Remember God and he will protect you.”

20, Friday; Annakut, New Year's Day

After puja, Swamishri gave New Year's Day blessings to all. “Shriji Maharaj has told us to have *divyabhav* for all. And Yogi Bapa has said, ‘Keep *nirdosh buddhi* towards all.’ Maharaj and our gurus have all done this. That is why we have survived [in satsang].”

Later in the morning, Swamishri visited the various facilities set up to cater for the thousands of devotees and wellwishers expected to come for darshan of the *annakut*.

Then, Swamishri went for darshan to the main mandir, where beautiful *annakut* displays had been offered in front of all the shrines. After the singing of various *thals*, Swamishri performed the Annakut *arti*.

At 11.25 a.m., Swamishri went for darshan of the grand *annakut* offered in the haveli. Here also, Swamishri performed the *arti*.

Blessing the devotees, Swamishri said, “To arrange all this in a short time is possible only

because of *samp*. *Samp* also brings great delight.

“May all be blessed with good health, sound mind and ample wealth.

“This satsang is absolutely true, so never leave it. This has to be repeated thousands of times since it hasn't settled properly in our minds. Further, many engage in satsang, but satsang of the *pragat* (manifest), of Maharaj and Swami is different. There is nothing comparable to it. If one engages sincerely then everything is achieved. By associating with Maharaj, Swami and the Satpurush, they will place us in Akshardham. So, practice this satsang with faith and determination.”

From 4.00 to 5.00 p.m. GMT (9.30 to 10.30 p.m. IST) Swamishri blessed the sadhus in 60 mandirs throughout India via a video conference.

When Swamishri retired for night, he was informed that 34,800 people had visited the mandir for darshan of the *annakut*.

NEW DELHI: 21–23

21, Saturday; London, New Delhi

Swamishri's flight from London took off at 11.04 a.m. (GMT) and landed in New Delhi at 11.29 p.m. IST (6.59 p.m. GMT). After reaching the mandir, Swamishri retired for rest at 1.25 a.m.

GANDHINAGAR: 23–31

23, Monday; New Delhi, Gandhinagar

In the morning, Swamishri went for



Swamishri performs the *murti-pratishtha* rituals of Bhagatji Maharaj in Akshardham, Gandhinagar

Akshardham darshan. First, he performed *abhishek* of Shri Neelkanth Varni and then went for darshan in Akshardham mandir and performed *arti*.

At 7.25 p.m., Swamishri flew from New Delhi and landed in Ahmedabad at 8.33 p.m. From the airport, Swamishri went directly to Gandhinagar.

25, Wednesday (Labh Pancham, Kartak sud 5); 25th Patotsav of Akshardham Mandir

To commemorate the 25th *patotsav* of Gandhinagar Akshardham, the new *murtis* of the guru *parampara* and other deities were to be consecrated in the main Akshardham mandir.

In the morning, Swamishri performed the *murti-pratishtha puja* and *arti* of the new *murtis* of the guru *parampara*, Shri Radha-Krishna, Shri Sita-Ram, Shri Shiv-Parvati and Shri Lakshmi-Narayan in the main Akshardham Mandir.

Thereafter, in the assembly held inside the main mandir, Ishwarcharan Swami narrated the history of the building of Akshardham and the exhibitions.

Then, Swamishri also blessed the devotees.

26, Thursday

After puja, Swamishri blessed, “Introspection is a must – to see one’s own faults. By doing this one will experience peace, peace, peace. We unnecessarily go around carrying other people’s loads. Seeing the faults in others is, in fact, a big load and deprives us of peace.

“One who bows to all becomes free of all faults. So, to remove one’s faults do this. Bow sincerely and with *mahima*. This is like a diamond in the hands of a child. He doesn’t know its value at present, but will realize it later. And to impart such satsang *sanskars* to our children, one has to practice them first – humility, service, *divyabhav* and others.”

27, Friday

After puja, Swamishri performed the *puja* and *arti* of the new *murtis* for the new BAPS *hari* mandir in Unjha in Siddhpur district.

28, Saturday

After puja, Swamishri performed the *puja* and *arti* of the new *murtis* for the existing BAPS *hari* mandir in Bhavpura in Kalol district.

29, Sunday

Today, in the presence of distinguished scholars from throughout India, a conference on Akshar-Purushottam Darshan was organized in AARSH. The conference concluded in the evening assembly in Swamishri’s presence. (See *Swaminarayan Bliss*, November–December 2017, pp. 30–36.)

In the late morning, a special session was held with Swamishri. At this time, the vice-chancellor of Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) presented Swamishri an MoU confirming the university will be offering various certificate and degree courses on the Swaminarayan Sampradaya.

30, Monday; Gramya Din

In the morning, Swamishri performed the Vedic *murti-pratishtha puja* and *arti* of the *murtis* for the new BAPS *hari* mandir in Karjisan in Kalol district.

Before his afternoon walk, Swamishri sanctified the AARSH building and inaugurated the new exhibition that had been set up.

Swamishri blessed the evening Gramya Din

assembly by replying to a series of questions:

Q. We don't have knowledge of the shastras and have trouble studying for and passing the Satsang Exams, so, without *jnan*, how will we attain *kalyan*?

A. Bhagwan only desires your sincerity. Even if you know nothing, but if you sincerely sit for the Satsang Exams, Bhagwan will be pleased. So if you resolve in your mind, you can accomplish it.

Q. How can we develop family unity?

A. Speak politely. Improper speech causes the most trouble and disrupts unity. So, be careful of what you say and how.

Children should obey their parents. And parents should care for their children. The husband should resolve to be a good husband and the wife should resolve to be a good wife. Each family member should wish for the good of the others and should think about what they must do personally as individuals to keep unity.

After dinner, Swamishri went to Akshardham to see the Akshardham Sanatanam show, which was projected using lasers and videos on the Akshardham Mandir itself.

31, Tuesday; Dev-Prabodhini Ekadashi

When Swamishri arrived for the evening assembly, the traditional *hatadi* – offering of vegetables on Prabodhini Ekadashi – had been placed before the *murtis*. Swamishri performed the *arti* made using a wick placed in half a coconut shell attached to a stick of sugarcane.

In the assembly, Swamishri was shown potatoes and asked, “Swami, in cooking, just as potatoes set well with other vegetables, what must we do to set well with others and enable others to set with us?”

Swamishri replied, “*Sant samagam*. Engage sincerely in *sant samagam*. Also, Pramukh Swami Maharaj had given the formula for unity: *khamvu* (tolerate), *ghasavu* (endure for others), *mangamtu mukvu* (forsake one's own wishes) and *anukul thavu* (be cooperative). For countless past births, we have done as we pleased. This time, do according to the guru's wishes. If done in this way, there will be benefit.” ♦

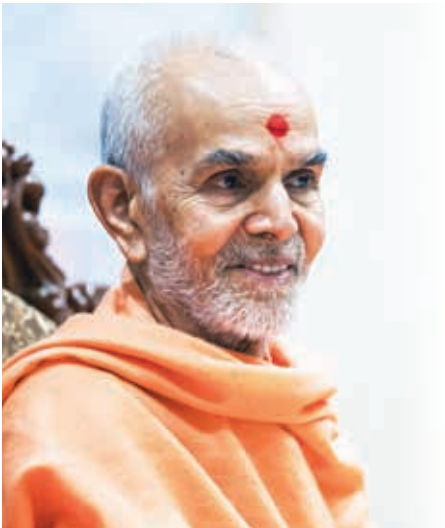
(From Swamishri's daily report in Gujarati by Sadhu Brahmavatsaldas.

Translation of excerpts by Sadhu Vivekjiandas and Sadhu Amrutvijaydas)

LIVING WITH SWAMISHRI

August–October 2017

Inspiring incidents from the life of Mahant Swami Maharaj



AUGUST

GURU DISLIKES ILL TALKS

4, Los Angeles

Mahant Swami Maharaj narrated an incident when he was travelling by train with Yogiji Maharaj.

“I was a *parshad*. I and a devotee from the time of Shastriji Maharaj were seated together in a service carriage. The train was jam-packed with passengers. Instead of 10 persons 20 had crowded [our compartment seats]. There was not even an inch of space left to move. The devotee started talking about the faults of others. He was a senior devotee, and there was no way I could get up and leave. I did not like what he was saying. So, I started chanting ‘Swaminarayan’ in my mind, but I had to listen to

what he was saying. On reaching the mandir in Ahmedabad, the first question Yogi Bapa asked, ‘What conversation did you have while sitting in the carriage?’ Never before had he asked such a question. I replied, ‘About others’ faults.’ He instantly told me, ‘Observe two fasts.’ Then, he told the devotee to observe one fast. I don’t know whether he did it or not, but I had to do two. So, no matter what, one will have to stop this [talking ill of others] or else one will not be able to enter [in Akshardham].”

INCLINATION TO OBSERVE THE FIVE GREAT FASTS

14, Houston

Swamishri was asked about a request from Munidarshan Swami, *kothari* of Nagpur Mandir. The request was, “More than 25,000 well-wishers and devout people visit the Nagpur Mandir for darshan on Janmashtami celebration. On that day, all the volunteers of Nagpur and some from Gujarat also come to manage the arrangements for the visitors. Can the volunteer devotees do *faral* on that day?” Janmashtami is one of the five mandatory waterless fasts that sadhus and devotees of the BAPS observe due to Shastriji Maharaj’s instruction.

Swamishri did not say anything. It was apparent that he wished them to observe the fast. A sadhu then asked, “Swami, they will do whatever you say.”

Swamishri spoke fervently, “They should observe the five big fasts [ordained by Shastriji Maharaj].”

The guru remains steadfast in observing the wishes and instructions of his gurus and in promoting them.

THE GURU IS PRESENT AND ALIVE

16, Houston

Rushil, a youth, had drawn a nice picture of Pramukh Swami Maharaj. A few sadhus pointed out some unique aspects about the picture to Swamishri, “In this Swami Bapa is laughing

beautifully, but his eyes are closed. It is difficult to draw a good picture with the eyes closed, and that is why people don’t draw it.”

Brahmavatsal Swami showed Swamishri a photo of Pramukh Swami Maharaj laughing with his eyes closed. Also, in that photo, Mahant Swami Maharaj is laughing, but his eyes are open. Then Brahmavatsal Swami pointed out, “Here the eyes are closed and here they are open.”

Swamishri smiled softly and added, “The closed and opened eyes are one and the same.” Swamishri authenticated the presence of Pramukh Swami Maharaj in him.

The guru is always present and alive.

OCTOBER

HOUSE ON THE MAIN ROAD

11, London

During the morning personal counselling session, Yogeshbhai Maheshbhai Patel, a native of Limbasi now residing in London, came to meet Swamishri. He said, “You have stayed at our house. It is next to Magan Dada’s.”

Swamishri responded, “Yes, it’s on the main road.” Yogeshbhai was surprised by Swamishri’s instant recall, since Swamishri had spent only one night at his home in around 1996–97.

WE WERE TOGETHER!

14, Leicester

A well-wisher came to meet Swamishri. Swamishri immediately said to him, “We were together!” On enquiry, the well-wisher revealed, ‘My name is Inayat Fativala. In 1982 we used to live in Valsad. Pramukh Swami Maharaj’s car had broken down and my father was repairing it. Mahant Swami Maharaj was in the car at that time. I was 12 years old at the time and Mahant Swami Maharaj was sitting in the back.”

Swamishri’s recall after almost 36 years astonished everyone.

ONLY GUNATIT CAN

17, Paris

After lunch, Anandanand Swami showed Swamishri the phrase to be printed on mementos for the 2018 North American National Convention: ‘The Gunatit Sant can grant *moksha*’. Instantly, Swamishri pointed out, “Only the Gunatit Sant. That is the key message.”

ATTAINING STABILITY IN LIFE

18, Paris

On the way to the Espace Venise hall for Swamishri’s morning puja, the car driver, Nainesh Patel, asked Swamishri, “We keep experiencing ups and downs in satsang. How can we remain stable?”

Swamishri guided, “You have to do a little more. More *samagam*, more reading, more listening to discourses and other things.”

Swamishri thus revealed the technique of how

to attain stability in life.

INDEPENDENT OF THE INDRIYAS

19, London

Swamishri was to depart from London for India on 21 October, the day after *annakut*. In reference to this, so that Swamishri could rest properly, Anandpriya Swami requested, “Why don’t you stay two more days and rest before you go.”

Swamishri replied, “I have to follow the arrangements made.”

Anandpriya Swami said, “But, you are *svatantra* (independent).”

Unexpectedly, Swamishri naturally and instantly responded, “Independent of the *indriyas*!” ♦

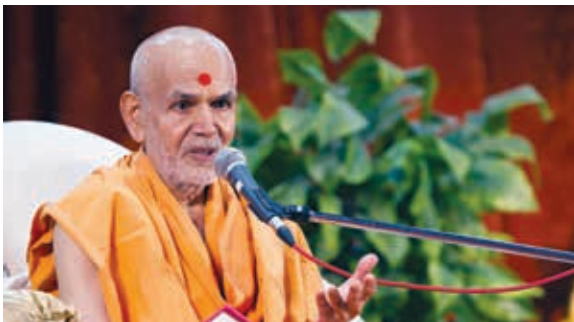
(From Swamishri’s daily report in Gujarati by Sadhu Brahnavatsaldas.

Translation of excerpts by Sadhu Vivekjiandas and Sadhu Amrutvijaydas)

ANSWERS AND REVELATIONS

August to October 2017

When questions are posed to Mahant Swami Maharaj, he reveals his spiritual understanding, perspective and, sometimes, his own spiritual state. Let us see some of his fascinating answers and revelations...



■ Youths in Los Angeles asked Swamishri some questions in the evening satsang assembly:

Q. What will you give us as a gift?

A. Akshardham.

Q. According to you what is the meaning of trust (*vishwas*)?

A. To have profound love for the Satpurush.

Q. One’s rational reasoning obstructs one from sustaining *divyabhav* in all. What should one do?

A. Hard effort.

(4 August, Los Angeles)

Q. What should we do to protect ourselves from *maya* forever?

A. *Divyabhav* (perceive divinity in all). Sadhus and devotees – all are divine. If one does not have *divyabhav* one remains on a very low (spiritual) level and struggles.

(7 August, Los Angeles)

■ With the flood of *samp*, *suhruddhav* and

ekta the base instincts of lust, greed and others get washed away.

(10 August, Los Angeles)

Q. A devotee asked, “By placing a piece of ice on one’s head the latter becomes cool, but my heart is still hot and disturbed. What should I do?”

A. Spiritual understanding.

■ Vivekmurti Swami asked Swamishri, “Don’t you ever get stressed?” Swamishri candidly replied, “No.” Then Vivekmurti Swami asked, “How?” Swamishri replied, “[I believe] Bhagwan to be the all-doer.”

(10 August, from Los Angeles to Houston)

■ Greatness is of no importance when it is devoid of humility. One who is not humble cannot be great. The fruits of innumerable types of knowledge is humility. With humility knowledge shines. Everyone wants greatness, but Shriji Maharaj says that greatness is attained when one becomes humble.

(8 September, Robbinsville)

Q. Raj Patel of Richmond, Virginia, asked Swamishri, “What should I do to progress in Satsang and never get diverted?”

A. Swamishri replied, “Observe all the *niyams*. Never look at anyone’s faults and perceive divinity in all. Then Maharaj will be happy.”

(10 September, Edison)

Q. “What is total success?”

A. Swamishri answered, “To experience highest peace within.”

Q. “What should we do to maintain harmony (*samp*)?”

A. Swamishri answered, “To understand each other.”

(12 September, Edison)

Q. Scott Reddie, a director of Flight Centre,

an Australian Company, asked Swamishri, “You wake up so early and you do a lot of work. Where do you get the energy from?”

A. Swamishri replied, “God.”

(13 September, Edison)

Q. As a *satsangi*, member of a family and an individual what should I do?

A. Swamishri replied, “One should have *divyabhav* for all. By so doing, one will progress and attain the highest spiritual (level). One should have *samp* [harmony] at home, in the family, Satsang and in the entire BAPS family. If one does not have *divyabhav* for others then it becomes difficult to sustain *samp*. Shriji Maharaj has said, ‘When one perceives mundane feelings for the Divine I instantly become miserable.’”

Q. To maintain *samp* what one main thing should we bear in mind?

A. One important point is that we should not see whether the other person maintains *samp* or not; we should show *samp*. However, by displaying *samp* only when the other person does, there will be no end to conflict and spats. This [attitude] results in our ruin. So, we should think what we can do. What type of thoughts we should have. What words should we say. Do not look at what the other person does or does not. We should cultivate *samp* from our side.

(20 Wednesday, Robbinsville)

Q. Nilkanth Kara, a *satsangi* child, asked Swamishri, “What is the purpose of my life?”

A. Swamishri said, “To attain God.”

(26 Tuesday, London)

Q. “How can one increase one’s attachment with the Satpuruṣh?”

A. Swamishri replied, “*Nirdosh buddhi* [perceive all to be faultless].”

(29, Friday, London)



40 Universities Honour Mahamahopadhyaya Swami Bhadreshdasji

15 February 2018, Bengaluru



H.E. Vajubhai Vala honours Bhadreshdas Swami with a proclamation

The Governor of Karnataka, His Excellency Vajubhai Vala, together with the vice-chancellors of 35 universities and representatives of 5 universities felicitated Mahamahopadhyaya Bhadreshdas Swami at the Raj Bhavan in Bengaluru, for authoring two unique contemporary Sanskrit texts: ‘Swaminarayan Bhashyam’ and ‘Swaminarayan-Siddhant-Sudha’.

Inspired by Pramukh Swami Maharaj and blessed by Mahant Swami Maharaj, Bhadreshdas Swami has written a commentary on the Prasthantrayi to elaborate upon the doctrine of Bhagwan Swaminarayan, known as the Akshar-Purushottam Darshan. This is not only the first novel *bhashya* written after 150 years, but is also the first time in 1,200 years that a *bhashya* has been written by one author on all three texts of the Prasthantrayi.

Furthermore, Bhadreshdas Swami has written the ‘Swaminarayan-Siddhant-Sudha’ – a *vada-granth*

that offers an exposition, justification and defence of the philosophical principles. This is the first time in the history of Vedantic literature that a *vada-granth* has been written by the Prasthantrayi-commentator (*bhashyakar*) himself. Thus, the creation of these texts by Bhadreshdas Swami is considered by many scholars to be this century’s most important work in Vedanta philosophy. Hence, he has been honoured for his work by numerous educational institutes with awards such as Mahamahopadhyaya, Vedanta Martand, Darshan Kesari and Abhinav Bhashyakar.

Addressing today’s assembly, Principal of the Purna Pragna Sanskrit College and a reputed scholar of Nyaya and Vedanta shastras, Shri Haridas Bhattji said, “Bhadreshdas Swamiji is the contemporary *acharya* of this age. Akshar-Purushottam Darshan is a Vedic darshan independent of and distinct to the darshans known to date, such as Advaita, Vishishtadvaita, Dvaita, and others. The *Swaminarayan Bhashyam* written on the basis of Prasthantrayi, and the *Swaminarayan-Siddhant-Sudha* are both traditional and authentic scriptures.”

Swami Bhadreshdasji addressed the audience and stated, “All this work has only been possible due to the grace of Bhagwan Swaminarayan, Guru

(Contd. on pg. 71)

PM of Canada Rt. Hon. Justin Trudeau Visits Swaminarayan Akshardham

19 February 2018, Gandhinagar



Upon arriving at Akshardham at 12 noon, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau was traditionally welcomed and garlanded by Pujya Ishwarcharandas Swami and Pujya Anandswarupdas Swami on behalf of HH Mahant Swami Maharaj and the BAPS at the ornately carved stone Mayur Dwar. The Prime Minister was extremely happy when reminded of the special relationship Pramukh Swami Maharaj had with his father, Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau. He also remembered meeting Pujya Mahant Swami Maharaj during the 10th anniversary celebrations of the Toronto BAPS Mandir on 22 July 2017. The Prime Minister was led to the model room of Akshardham and was given an introduction to the entire complex.

The Prime Minister and his family posed for the media on the mandir *parikrama* podium and then proceeded to the main mandir of the Akshardham complex. They were welcomed by a traditional dance by children dressed in the Indian tricolour, waving the Indian and Canadian national flags. Inside the Akshardham Mandir, he paid respects to the *murti* of Bhagwan Swaminarayan by offering flowers amidst the chanting of peace

prayers. He admired the art and architecture of the Mandir and learned how Pramukh Swami Maharaj had inspired thousands of volunteers and artisans to create the Mandir to share the message of love, peace, tolerance, non-violence, co-existence and global harmony.

Ms. Sophie Grégoire Trudeau, the first lady, was deeply touched and moved by learning about the spirit of forgiveness and compassion Pujya Pramukh Swami Maharaj showed at the time of the terrorist attack in 2002. The Prime Minister and his family sat on the steps of Akshardham Mandir for a while and then visited the exhibitions. Thereafter, they offered prayers for peace and harmony for the people of India, Canada and the entire world by offering *abhishek* to the *murti* of Neelkanth Varni in the Abhishek Mandap

Sharing his sentiments about Akshardham, the Canadian Prime Minister wrote, “What an extraordinary place of peace. Thank you for sharing with me, with my family, with the world.” The Prime Minister and his family left at 1 pm after spending a memorable and enriching time at Swaminarayan Akshardham. ◆



INDIA

SATSANG ACTIVITIES KARYAKAR SHIBIRS 8 December 2017 to 11 February 2018, Gujarat



Around 16,000 men and women volunteers who coordinate the youth and satsang activities in Gujarat attended the 21 Annual Karyakar Shibirs held at Sarangpur, Gondal, Bocharan, Ahmedabad, Atladara, Sankari and Tithal.

Organized and conducted by the Satsang Activities Central Office, this year's *shibirs* were based on the theme 'Smaran ane Sangath', in which the volunteers enjoyed the divine memories of Pramukh Swami Maharaj with the understanding that such joy is presently available in the company of Mahant Swami Maharaj.

The *shibir* theme was presented through speeches by the *sadguru* sadhus and other learned swamis, video shows, workshops, involvement activities and the video blessings of guruhari Mahant Swami Maharaj.

FOUNDATION-STONE LAYING CEREMONY FOR SHIKHARBADDHA MANDIR COMPLEX 5 February 2018, Jodhpur

In the Akshar Deri at Gondal, on 27 January 2018, Mahant Swami Maharaj performed the Vedic *pujan* of bricks to be placed in the



foundation of the new BAPS *shikharbaddha* mandir and complex to be built in Jodhpur.

On 5 February, Pujya Doctor Swami and Pujya Ishwarcharan Swami performed the foundation-stone laying rituals on the site of the new buildings. About 500 *yajmans* participated in the *mahapuja* rituals, and 2,500 devotees and well-wishers witnessed the proceedings.

Present on this auspicious occasion were Shri Ashokji Gehlot (former Chief Minister of Rajasthan), Shri Gajendra Singh Shekhawat (Central Minister of Agriculture & Farmers Welfare) and other dignitaries.

NATIONAL MEDICO-SPIRITUAL CONFERENCE 10–12 February 2018, Sarangpur



Around 360 doctors and their families from throughout India attended this year's conference, which was based on the theme 'Sadhana: My Duty, My Devotion'. Among the attendees

were Dr. Navin Thakkar (President of Asia-Pacific Pediatric Association), Dr. S.P. Rathod (Dean, G.M.E.R.S. Medical College, Junagadh), super-specialists, specialists, general practitioners and doctors of other grades.

The *shibir*'s theme was effectively conveyed through speeches by Pujya Doctor Swami, other senior BAPS swamis, experienced devotees, enlightening videos, workshops and panel discussions. The delegates learnt how to balance their personal, spiritual and professional lives, the role of sadhana (spiritual endeavour) in life and practical ways to apply these ideas in their daily lives.

In one morning practical session, the delegates also performed *samuh* puja. In addition, the doctors and their families were inspired and blessed by a video message from Param Pujya Mahant Swami Maharaj.

Since 1994, more than 32,000 doctors and their families have benefitted from the medico-spiritual conferences organized in various locations by BAPS Pramukh Swami Health Services.

UK

NATIONAL GUJARATI TEACHERS' CONFERENCE

17 February 2018, London



A total of 108 senior management representatives from 38 different supplementary schools, mandirs and community groups across England attended this conference, based on the theme 'Treasure, Innovate and Inspire', to learn first-hand about the new exam specifications for GCSE and A-Level Gujarati and how to motivate

the young to learn Gujarati.

Key speakers for this Conference included Gareth Thomas MP, Alistair Drewery (Languages Subject Advisor for Pearson – the examination board that conducts the exam); Pascale Vassie OBE, Executive Director for the National Resource Centre for Secondary Education; Bernadette Holmes MBE, from the language campaign group Speak to the Future; and Anju Bhatt, from CVS Brent, who provided guidance on acquiring grants and funding support for Gujarati teaching.

Viveksagar Swami shared motivational messages of Gujarati learning and teaching via a recorded video presentation. The video blessings of Mahant Swami Maharaj stressed on the value of Gujarati schools working together.

The delegates were enriched by the expert guidance and the opportunity to network with schools from around the country.

BAPS Charities

BONE MARROW APPEAL

27 January 2018, London



BAPS Charities has long supported the British Bone Marrow Registry. There are 2,000 people in need of a blood stem cell donor every year in the UK and unfortunately 70% of UK patients do not find a matching donor in their families. Finding a matching tissue type is much more difficult for patients of Asian, Black and Ethnic minority backgrounds.

BAPS Charities therefore strives to undertake bone marrow donor recruitment drives to increase the number of Asian donors on the national register.

The most recent drive, performed together

with DKMS, was a huge success with 215 new registrants. The challenge of matching the need of bone marrow donors in the Asian community continues and we encourage others to register.

BAPS CHARITIES DONATES \$10,000 TO SONOMA VALLEY FIRE RESCUE ASSOCIATION
30 January 2018



In response to the California wildfires that blew through Sonoma Valley and nearby towns, BAPS Charities volunteers contributed \$10,000 to the Sonoma Valley Fire Rescue Association (SVFRA) and presented the cheque at their January Board meeting. Board President Tom Deely explained that volunteer firefighters spent 12 days straight responding to the fire, away from their families, to ensure that homes were protected and the fire could be contained. During times of natural disasters, fire departments rely on trained volunteers to join them in response efforts. BAPS Charities' contribution will be used

towards firefighter training and supplies for volunteers in preparation for the future.

FOOD AND CLOTHES FOR THE HOMELESS
December 2017, UK



BAPS Charities volunteers in Preston, Luton and London arranged a clothes collection drive in which they collected scarves, hats, jackets, socks, coats, jumpers, blankets and many other items of warm clothing. These were then delivered to local charities for distribution to the homeless and needy: In Preston, 20 large bags were given to The Foxton Centre; in Luton over 150 items of clothing were given to Noah Enterprise (a charity which was recently awarded the 2017 Queen's Award for Voluntary Service); in London, more than 150 large bags of clothing were given to Crisis, The Passage and Glass Door. Volunteers in London also collected and donated 180kg of food to Harrow Foodbank. ♦

(Contd. from pg. 67)

Pramukh Swami Maharaj and Guru Mahant Swami Maharaj. I offer all the acclams at their lotus feet.”

Governor Shri Vajubhai Vala felicitated Swami Bhadreshdasji and declared, “I am pleased to announce that Bhagwan Swaminarayan’s philosophy is the Akshar-Purushottam Darshanam.”

Then, Pujya Ishwarcharan Swami addressed the gathering, “This ceremony is historical as 35 vice-chancellors, representatives of 5 universities and the governor himself have gathered to felicitate one person. This shows their love and respect towards educational accomplishments.”

Thereafter, Jnanvatsal Swami delivered the vote of thanks to the vice-chancellors and guests for arranging and attending the special event.

On this occasion, ‘Atindriyatva’, a Kannada translation by Smt. Girija Sastry of ‘Transcendence’ – a book written by India’s former president, the late Dr APJ Abdul Kalam, on his divine experiences with Pramukh Swami Maharaj – was also inaugurated by the governor and the vice-chancellors present.

The event concluded with the singing of the national anthem. ♦



Walkathon



Health fair

BAPS Charities, North America

2017 Summary

COMMUNITY SUPPORT

BAPS Charities provides philanthropic support to community organizations around the country working to address global challenges with local populations, and improving cornerstones of society from education to health. Additionally, partnering with non-profits helps BAPS Charities volunteers better understand the needs and efforts of important organizations in their local communities so they can join together in cultivating a deeper spirit of service.

WALKATHONS

70 cities throughout North America

23,000 walkers

100,000 trees planted in 2017 in collaboration with The Nature Conservancy

Through the funds raised, BAPS Charities supported educational, health, police, fire and other service organizations in cities throughout North America.

HEALTH

BAPS Charities arranges programmes, such as health awareness lectures and health fairs, which focus on prevention as a valuable resource for healthier living. Many costly and life-threatening diseases like cardiovascular diseases, cancer,

diabetes and chronic respiratory diseases can be prevented.

HEALTH FAIRS

54 cities throughout North America

10,000 participants

1,600 volunteers (healthcare professionals & volunteers)

265 health fairs organized since 2011 benefiting over 61,000 participants

HEALTH AWARENESS LECTURES

76 cities throughout North America

193 lectures in 2017 (Over 800 lectures since 2011)

7 topics: Environmental Awareness, Healthy Eating, Get vaccinated, Healthy Sleep Habits,

Hurricane Harvey





Bone marrow drive



Blood donation

Protein sources for a Vegetarian Diet, Practicing Yoga, Regular Health Checkups

BLOOD DONATION DRIVES

43 drives throughout North America

2,000 donors

1,459 pints donated (Over 8,000 pints donated since 2011)

FLU VACCINATION DRIVES

34 drives throughout North America

1,454 participants benefitted

Bone Marrow Drives

7 drives throughout North America

120 new individuals registered

4,380 individuals added to registry since 2006

Donating bone marrow enables treatment of many diseases, including leukemia, lymphoma, and inherited immune and metabolic disorders. While the search for the cure for many of these

Health fair



diseases continues, currently one of the most effective forms of treatment is through bone marrow transplantation. Only 30% of patients in need of a bone marrow transplant are able to find a suitable donor within their own family. Patients needing a bone marrow transplant are most likely to find a match with someone from their own ethnic group. BAPS Charities is determined to help increase the donor registry nationwide to help anyone who needs this potentially lifesaving treatment.

SOCIAL & RELIEF WORK

FOOD DRIVES

6 cities throughout North America

National statistics estimate that 1 in 6 Americans cannot afford to place a meal on their tables on a daily basis.

BAPS Charities holds annual food drives across the United States in an effort to address hunger across all communities. Volunteers of all ages and community partners collectively donate hundreds of canned and dried food items which are then delivered to local food banks.

HURRICANE HARVEY RELIEF EFFORTS

100 volunteers

8,000 volunteer hours

4,500 hot meals served

3,000 drywall sheets provided to 50 damaged homes





Translation by Sadhu Vivekjiandas

GLORY OF AKSHAR DERI AND MANDIR

History of Gondal Akshar Deri and Mandir
by Yogiji Maharaj

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Story of Akshar Deri

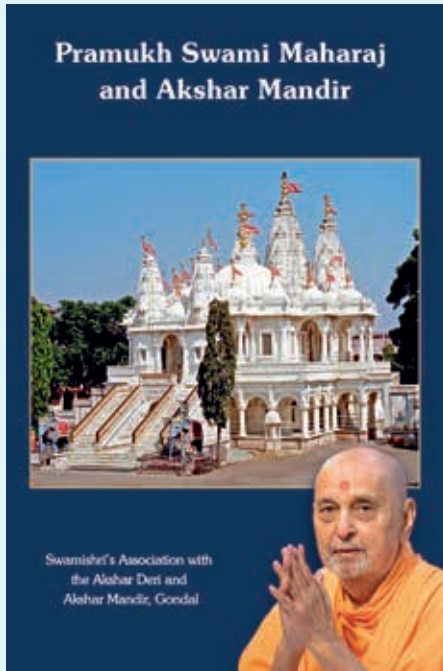
Akshar Mandir's Extraordinary Founda-
tion-Stone Laying Ceremony

Murti-Pratishtha Festival

Murti of Ghanshyam Maharaj

Beautifying Akshar Mandir

Divinity in Akshar Deri and Mandir...



Translation by Sadhu Amrutvijaydas

Pramukh Swami Maharaj and Akshar Mandir

Incidents of Pramukh Swami Maharaj with
Akshar Deri and Mandir, Gondal

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Divine Darshan of God and Guru

Guru Bhakti in Amrut Mahotsav

Akshar Mandir: Centre for Drought
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Daily Routine in Akshar Mandir

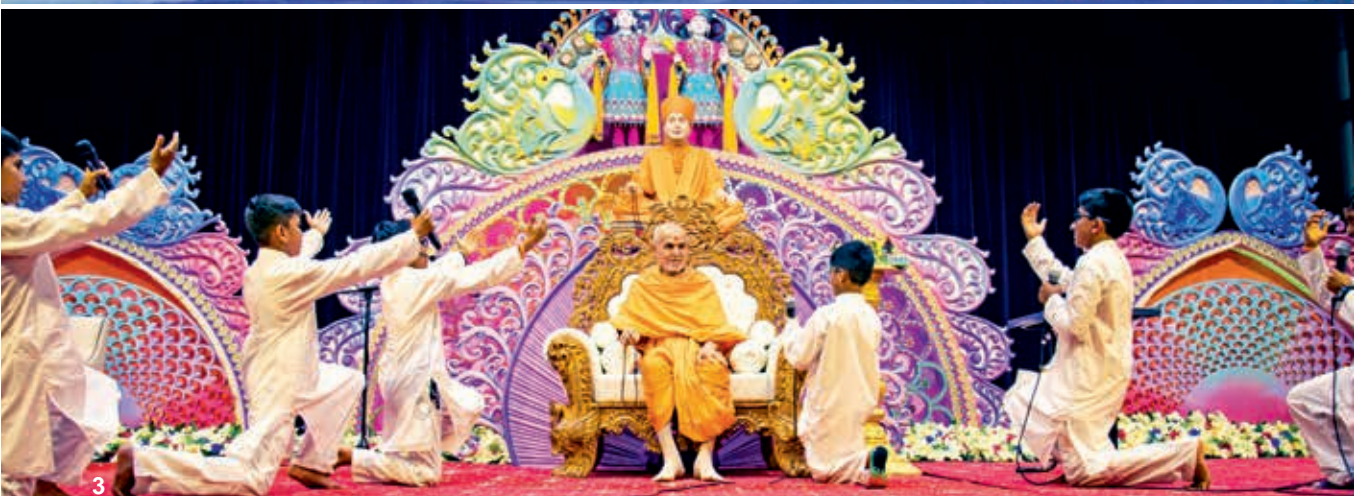
Truth of the Akshar Principle...



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MAHANT SWAMI MAHARAJ'S VICHARAN IN ASIA-PACIFIC

February 2018

1. Youths sing *kirtans* during Swamishri's morning puja, Melbourne, Australia (7 February).
2. Youths perform a traditional dance, Melbourne, Australia (11 February).
3. Children present a programme before Swamishri, Auckland, New Zealand (14 February).



Pujya Ishwarcharan Swami and Brahnavihari Swami present details of the BAPS Hindu Temple project to HH Crown Prince Mohamed bin Zayed al Nahyan and Prime Minister Narendra Modi at the Presidential Palace, Abu Dhabi, 10 February 2018



Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and his sons offer *abhishek* to Neelkanth Varni during their visit to Swaminarayan Akshardham, Gandhinagar, 19 February 2018.