

SWAMINARAYAN BLISS

May-June 2017

Annual Subscription ₹ 80/-



GURUHARI MAHANT SWAMI MAHARAJ

Festively Welcomed and
Honoured in East Africa and South Africa



MAHANT SWAMI MAHARAJ IN AFRICA

March–April 2017

1. A large gathering of devotees during the welcome assembly of Param Pujya Mahant Swami Maharaj at the BAPS Swaminarayan Mandir, Nairobi, Kenya.
2. The welcome assembly of Mahant Swami Maharaj held at the Julius Nyerere International Centre, Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania.
3. Mahant Swami Maharaj performs the celebration *arti* of Shri Hari Jayanti, Kampala, Uganda.
4. Over 2,500 devotees participate in the Shilanyas Ceremony for the new BAPS *shikharbaddha* mandir in Johannesburg, South Africa. (Inset) Swamishri places the *nidhikumbh* in the foundations of the mandir in Johannesburg.

SWAMINARAYAN BLISS

May-June 2017, Vol. 40, No. 3



Akshar-Purushottam Maharaj



CONTENTS

- | | | | |
|----|--|----|--|
| 4 | Amra Khachar and His Wife | 42 | Mahant Swami Maharaj's 'Akshar Yatra' in Africa |
| 7 | Adhyāy 3: True Karmayoga – Associating Karmas with Paramātmā Part 19 (continued) | 54 | Children with Mahant Swami Maharaj |
| 10 | Divine Impact of Shri Nilkanth Varni | 56 | Three Presidents Honour HH Mahant Swami Maharaj |
| 14 | The Story of Construction, BAPS Swaminarayan Mandir, Pune | 58 | Mahant Swami Maharaj's Vicharan |
| 20 | A Brief Darshan, BAPS Swaminarayan Mandir, Pune | 63 | Living with Swamishri |
| 24 | BAPS Swaminarayan Mandir Murti-Pratishtha Mahotsav, Pune | 64 | Answers and Revelations |
| 32 | Inauguration of BAPS Swaminarayan Mandir, Jalandhar, Punjab | 65 | Indian PM Narendra Modi and Australian PM Malcolm Turnbull Visit Swaminarayan Akshardham |
| 37 | A New Light on the African Continent | 66 | Launch of an Iconic Art Publication, Bhagwan Shri Swaminarayan: A Saga in Paintings |
| | | 68 | BAPS News |



HH Mahant Swami Maharaj, Kampala

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.

Founder: HDH Pramukh Swami Maharaj

Editor: Sadhu Swayamprakashdas

Contributors: Sadhu Vivekjiandas, Sadhu Amrutvijaydas

Designer: Sadhu Shrijiwarupdas

Published & Printed by: Swaminarayan Aksharpath, Shahibaug, Ahmedabad - 380004. India

SUBSCRIPTION RATES

	Outside India (By Air Mail)				India
	Rupees	Pounds	US Dollars		Rupees
1 Year	630	9	14		80
2 Years	1300	18	28		150
3 Years	1900	27	42		220

Amra Khachar and His Wife

*Shri Hari arrives in Sarangpur and asks Amra Khachar
to bring a bowl of buffalo milk to drink...*



SHRI HARI VISITS MULI

Shri Hari arrived in Muli via Jetpur, Gondal, Rajkot and Chotila. Maharaj's unexpected arrival surprised all. Shri Hari smiled and said, "Amabhai, had I not told you in Gadhada that I would drop by on my way to or return from Panchala to perform the *murti-pratishtha* of Radha-Krishna Dev?"

Amabhai, Jethabhai and their sister, Keshaba, were elated by Shri Hari's unscheduled visit. Maharaj told them, "Look, I cannot stay here for several days because I wish to go to Gadhada

and then to Bhuj to perform the *murti-pratishtha* of the newly built mandir. So, you start the preparations for the *pratishtha* of Radha-Krishna Dev. I'll depart from here on the day after tomorrow."

Amabhai and Jethabhai were disappointed on hearing this. But Shri Hari soothed them, "Make the most of my short stay here. Internalize the bliss of my form and you shall forever remain happy. If I stay here for more days your *vruttis* [mental inclinations] will become diffused, and you will be unable to savour the bliss of my *murti*. So, take the maximum benefit of my brief stay here." Shri Hari's words pacified all.

The next day, Shri Hari consecrated the *mur-tis* of Radha-Krishna Dev and then discoursed to the assembly. The following day, Maharaj departed from Muli and travelled to Sayla, Botad and finally arrived at Gadhpur in April 1823 (A.S. 1879).

Shri Hari stayed in Gadhpur for three days. Then he travelled to Kariyani and stayed at Vasta Khachar's *darbar*. Maharaj had a large entourage of sadhus and devotees with him. Here, he told the devotees to return to their villages and towns. From Kariyani Shri Hari went to Sarangpur and stayed at Vagha Khachar's *darbar*. The latter was believed to be an incarnation of the sun-god, and he had great love and respect for Muktanand Swami and Gopalanand Swami. Whenever he came to Gadhada he would go to the seat of Muktanand Swami to listen to his discourses. Vagha Khachar was greatly pleased with Shriji Maharaj's arrival.

THE MILK OF YOUR PARATH BUFFALO IS VERY SWEET

The next day Maharaj sat down for lunch. Amra Khachar was sitting before Maharaj. While eating, Shri Hari told Amra Khachar, “Bapu, the milk from your *parath* buffalo is very sweet. I had drank it once and its taste still lingers in my memory. If you bring some now I’ll drink it.”

Amra Khachar got up immediately, feeling elated that Maharaj had appreciated his buffalo’s milk. He went home and took a large bowl full of buffalo’s milk in his hands. In response, his wife gripped the bowl to stop him from taking it away. Amra Khachar bellowed, “Maharaj has asked for it, so let go of it!”

But his wife gritted her teeth and replied defiantly, “If Maharaj likes our buffalo’s milk I’ll give it to him when he comes to our home. How strange it would be to give our milk when Maharaj is having lunch at Vagha Khachar’s home!”

Amra Khachar was baffled. He barked, “Are you mad? Why are you being stubborn? Let go!” But his wife did not loosen her grip on the bowl. Subsequently, Amra Khachar succumbed, and he returned crestfallen to Shriji Maharaj and gave a false reason, “Maharaj, the milk has been fermented to make yogurt.”

Shri Hari smiled at Amra Khachar and replied, “Then bring the yogurt. The yogurt made from the milk of a *parath* buffalo will also be very sweet.”

YOU ARE NO LONGER MY WIFE

Amra Khachar got up again at Maharaj’s bidding. On entering his house his wife did not allow him to take the pot of yogurt. Amra Khachar turned red with fury and pushed his wife, who fell down with a loud thud. However, to Amra Khachar’s surprise, she sprang up more rebelliously and grabbed the bowl.

Amra Khachar retorted, “If I resort to my Kshatriya nature I will do the unthinkable.

Therefore, understand and give up your resolve.” But his wife did not relent and remained undaunted. Finally, Amra Khachar uttered in a fit of rage, “From now onwards I shall treat you like a mother and sister!” Then Amra Khachar stormed out and came to Maharaj empty-handed.

Shri Hari asked, “Amra what has happened?”

He replied, “Maharaj the yoghurt has been whisked into buttermilk.”

Maharaj had by then finished his lunch and was washing his hands. He commented, “The milk has not been made into yogurt and the latter has not been whisked to make buttermilk.” Amra Khachar realized that the all-knowing Maharaj knew of what had transpired between him and his wife. Shri Hari did not approve of her wanton harassment.

For quite some time Amra Khachar had been having a strained relationship with his wife. The reason was that she had been obstructing him from doing satsang and serving Maharaj. Amra Khachar had been tolerating her all the while so that he could do satsang. After uttering the pledge Amra Khachar married a *satsangi* woman, and he became happier and free to do satsang.

HIDE ME IMMEDIATELY

Shri Hari then moved to Jiva Khachar’s *darbar*. Once, Maharaj woke up in the middle of the night and frantically called Jiva Khachar, “Bapu, the Diwan of Vadodara is coming to capture me. Therefore, hide me immediately.”

Jiva Khachar was momentarily perplexed, not knowing what to do. Then he said, “Maharaj come and hide in this room.” But there was no chain to lock the door. So, Shri Hari asked, “Bapu, if someone pushes this door it will open easily. There is no chain to close it from inside. Call a blacksmith right now and get a chain fixed to it.”

Jiva Khachar woke the village blacksmith and

told him to fix a chain to the door¹. Shri Hari then locked the door from inside. Shortly thereafter, Maharaj came out. Jiva Khachar was sitting on his bed outside on the verandah, with armed Kathis and *parshads* sitting around him. On seeing Maharaj, Jiva Khachar enquired, “Maharaj, why have you come out so soon?”

Shri Hari confidently replied, “Bapu, I forgot that we are now under British rule and so the Gaekwad no longer collects taxes from us anymore.” Then, Shri Hari smiled.

GO AWAY IN THE MANNER YOU'D COME

When Shriji Maharaj was in Gadhpur he had instructed his sadhus to go for satsang *vicharan*, and that none of them should come for his darshan without his permission. Muktanand Swami also abided by Maharaj's order. The first village that came on his way was Sarangpur. Since Shri Hari was in Sarangpur he wished to have his darshan. So, he sent a message to Maharaj, “If you so permit we would like to come for your darshan.” Maharaj sent Bhaguji to Muktanand Swami with the reply, “Go away in the manner you had come.”

BAL SANEHI RE MOHAN MUJNE GAMTA...

Bhaguji conveyed Maharaj's message to Muktanand Swami. The latter became sad because his travels would take him to far off regions, not knowing when they would have Shri Hari's darshan again. He told Bhaguji, “I honour Maharaj's wish, but I would like you to take a message for him. Wait till I write it.”

Bhaguji knew that Shri Hari would never refuse a great *sadguru* like Muktanand Swami to come to him without a good reason. Bhaguji humbly replied, “I'll wait till you write your message. I'll surely give it to Maharaj and return to convey his response to you.” Muktanand Swami wrote ten kirtans in context to the occasion:

*Bāl sanehi re, Mohan mujne gamtā.
Mathurā jae monghā thai bethā,
Pe'lā to bhelā bhamtā
...Bāl sanehi re,
Āj to amane darshan durlabh,
Jode besine jamtā
...Bāl sanehi re,
Bai antedyā vānse āvine,
Rasiyo rang bhar ramtā
...Bāl sanehi re,
Je kehetā te kāmaj kartā,
Natvar rahetā namtā
...Bāl sanehi re,
Bāl jogi jevo vesh janāvi,
Deh prān ne damtā
...Bāl sanehi re,
Muktānand Mohan ni līlā,
Rākhtā shil ne shamtā
...Bāl sanehi re.*

Muktanand Swami gave the ten *pads* to Bhaguji. On receiving them Shri Hari gave them to Shukmuni. As Shukmuni sang the ten *pads* Shri Hari was deeply moved by Muktanand Swami's devotion for him. He instantly told Bhaguji, “Go and escort Swami here.”

When Muktanand Swami came, Shri Hari got up and embraced him. Then he asked, “Swami, where were you going with your group of sadhus?”

Swami replied, “As per your commands, to the villages for *vicharan*.”

“But the order was not for you. You have to accompany me to Bhuj for the *murti-pratishtha* of the new mandir.” Then Maharaj told Muktanand Swami to stay and travel with him. ♦

(Contd. in next issue)

Translated from Gujarati text of

Bhagwan Swaminarayan by Shri H.T. Dave

1. The same door and chain are still preserved in Jiva Khachar's *darbar* in Sarangpur.

ADHYĀY 3

TRUE KARMAYOGA – ASSOCIATING KARMAS WITH PARAMĀTMĀ

Part 19 (continued)



This secret of *karmayoga*, that has been described at length in the *Gītā*, has been presented very concisely by Bhagwan Swaminarayan in his discourses. He has described the karmas of a *karmayogi* as bhakti itself. His words are as follows, “After listening to all the scriptures, some people believe that they only deal with dharma, *arth* and *kām*. Thinking thus, they themselves also perform pious karmas such as sacrifices, observances, etc., only for the attainment of dharma, *arth* and *kām*. As a result, they enjoy the fruits of such karmas in Devlok, Brahmaloak or Mrutyulok. Then, they return to the cycle of births and deaths. Therefore, the pious karmas

that a person performs while harbouring a desire for dharma, *arth* and *kām*, all become *sāttvik*, *rājasik* and *tāmasik*; and the fruits of those karmas are enjoyed while staying in the realms of *swarg*, Mrutyulok and *pātāl*. However, they do not attain the *gunātī* abode of Paramātmā. As long as one does not attain liberation, the miseries of births, deaths and *narak* do not subside.

“So, if one abandons the desire for the fruits related to dharma, *arth* and *kām*, and if one performs pious karmas only to please Paramātmā, then those pious karmas become a form of bhakti and aid in the attainment of liberation. Thus the verses:

Āmayo yena bhootānām jāyate yash-
cha suvrata,
Tad-eva hyāmayam dravyam na punā-
ti chikitsitam.

Evam nrunām kriyā-yogāhā sarve
sansruti-hetavaha,

Ta evātma-vināshāya kalpante kalpitāhā pare.¹

“The essence of this verse is as I have described earlier.

“However, this fact is actually very intricate, and if it is not fully understood, then on seeing a devotee of Paramātmā behaving in the same way as all ignorant people do, one would perceive flaws in him. As a result, the person who perceives the flaws would be consigned to *narak*.

“But in fact, there is a vast difference between the activities of a devotee of Paramātmā and the activities of a non-believer. How? Well, all activities of a non-believer are for pampering his *indriyas*, whereas all activities of a devotee of Paramātmā are solely for serving Paramātmā and his devotee. As a result, the devotee’s activities are a form of bhakti.

“Moreover, bhakti is like *jñān* in the sense that both are a form of non-karma. Hence, all of a devotee’s activities are in a form of karmas that do not cause attachment. Thus the verse in the Bhagavad Gitā:

Karmanyakarma yaha pashyed-akarmani cha
karma yaha,

Sa buddhimān-manushyeshu sa yuktaha
krutsna-karma-krut.²

“The meaning of this verse is as follows: ‘If a person sees non-karma, i.e. *jñān*, in the karmas performed by the devotees of Paramātmā

for the purpose of pleasing Paramātmā; and he sees a non-believer who has adopted the path of *nivrutti* as drowned in karmas, then such a person is said to possess *jñān* and is the most intelligent amongst all people; he is a yogi; he is worthy to attain liberation and is ‘*krutsna-karma-krut*’ – i.e., he has performed all karmas” (Vachanāmrut Gadhadā II 11).

The Lifestyle of Karmayogi Gurus

Every karma of the *brahmaswarup* guru is no mere karma, but has attained the status of *karmayoga*. This is why those karmas have become bhakti. Alongside the words of the Gitā, let us take a look at the lives of such *karmayogi* gurus.

The *karmayoga* of the Gitā was weaved into the life of Brahmaswarup Pramukh Swami Maharaj. All his actions were according to the commands of Bhagwan Swaminarayan and his gurus, Shastriji Maharaj and Yogiji Maharaj, and were done without ego to please them. Hundreds of sadhus and devotees saw this firsthand in him.

On 8 August 1986, in Vidyanagar, the youths had arranged a question and answer session with Pramukh Swami Maharaj. One of the questions asked was, “When we are given any responsibility regarding some activity, we become tense; whereas you are engaged in many activities and have many responsibilities, yet you seem as light as a flower. What is your secret?” In reply, Swamishri said, “The only secret is that we do not do anything. It is Paramātmā who is doing it. It is Shastriji Maharaj and Yogiji Maharaj who are doing it. If we feel we are doing it, then the tension increases. We observe their commands. Whether the outcome is good or bad, Paramātmā is the all-doer. By understanding this one thing, no burdens are felt.”

On 4 January 2002, Swamishri gave a spiritual discourse in the assembly in Ahmedabad. In reference to that, Vivekjivandas Swami said to Swamishri, “You gave a great discourse today. You speak very well.” Swamishri replied, “I do

1 “O Observer of Pious Vows [Vyās]! Does not that same [food, e.g. ghee] which causes illness in beings, if purified and prescribed by a qualified doctor, cure that illness? Similarly, then, if all of ones *karmas* – which [normally] cause one to pass through births and deaths – are offered to Paramātmā instead, those same *karmas* are destroyed [i.e. are no longer capable of causing births and deaths, but instead, lead to one’s liberation]” (Shrimad Bhāgvat 1.5.33 & 34).

2 Bhagavad Gitā 4.18.

not know how to say anything. Whatever is said is by the inspiration of Paramātmā.”

In January 2001, a horrendous earthquake shook Gujarat. There was much damage in Bhuj and other areas of Kutch. At the command of Swamishri, the sadhus and devotees tirelessly helped in every way possible. Swamishri himself would be up till late night, busy making arrangements for the needs of the victims. A few months later, Swamishri went to Dubai. There, many admirers who were deeply impressed by the relief work carried out by BAPS by the inspiration of Swamishri were present. On 6 April 2001, orators in a special assembly greatly praised Swamishri’s work. In that assembly, Swamishri addressed the audience in reference to the relief work saying, “An earthquake is a natural disaster. We have to overcome such calamities. We have faith in Paramātmā that all will turn out well. At such a time, the work that BAPS has done is also according to the wishes of Paramātmā. Moreover, it is Paramātmā who inspired you to help too. The victims who have been helped, have also been helped by Paramātmā’s wish alone. In fact, the calamity itself is by Paramātmā’s wish. It is also by Paramātmā’s wish that Bill Clinton readily came to offer help.” The words of the Gitā, ‘*mayi sarvāni karmāni samnyasya*’ resonated in each and every sentence of Swamishri’s address.

On 8 August 2002, Swamishri was in Ahmedabad. He was ill and had a fever. Nevertheless, after breakfast, he took some medicine and engaged himself in meetings. At 12.45p.m., the sadhus requested that he rest due to his illness. Swamishri said, “I’ll be alright.” The sadhus replied, “If there are non-stop meetings, when will you get rest?” Swamishri said, “Is only sleeping on a bed counted as rest? Look, I am sitting comfortably at ease.” The sadhus said, “If you have meetings while you are ill, it causes both physical and mental fatigue. In such circumstances, to make considered decisions

seem like a burden to us.” Swamishri immediately replied, “One who takes the burden on his head would feel it. I take it from here and put it there.” Saying this, he picked up a towel on the table and put it down to one side. “I entrust everything to the care of Maharaj. Then where is the burden? No matter how many meetings occur and discussions take place, I present everything to him and am able to sleep immediately. Maharaj is the all-doer.”

This style of working, permeated by *karmayoga*, of the leader of a worldwide organization reveals the very secret of his success.

Bhagwan Swaminarayan insisted on such *karmayoga*. He gave the world true *karmayogis*. He adorned both householders and renunciates with *karmayoga*. He did not talk about fleeing society from fear, but he talked about staying in society and directing karmas in the right direction and in the right manner. In his followers, he firmly instilled the principle of how karmas become bhakti. The outcome has also been astounding. The *paramhansas* of Bhagwan Swaminarayan would spend eighteen to twenty hours a day engrossed in such karmas of bhakti and attain happiness in helping all. Hundreds of thousands of his devotees also learnt the secret of staying in society and practising *karmayoga* like King Janak did. Thus, their businesses or occupations could not impede them in any way. It is as though he inspired a movement towards *karmayoga*, and as a result, society made a spiritual turn.

Following in the footsteps of Pramukh Swami Maharaj, today, Mahant Swami Maharaj has continued to give society the gift of *karmayogis*. He is followed by a thousand *karmayogi* sadhus and hundreds of thousands of *karmayogi* devotees.

In this manner, the doctrine of *karmayoga* given in the Gitā has revealed the secret of making karmas the means to peace, happiness and liberation. ♦

Divine Impact of Shri Nilkanth Varni

*The history of the Swaminarayan
Sampradaya is full of countless
events that are relevant even
today, 200 years later.
Two such instances are the
historic meetings of Shri
Nilkanth Varni with Bajirao
Peshwa II in Pune and Punjab's
Maharaja Ranjitsingh*

SHRI NILKANTH VARNI IN PUNE

Pune is situated amid the Sahyadri Mountain Range (Western Ghats) in Western Maharashtra. It is an old, historic city, which, in the 8th century was known as 'Punyak'.

Renowned for its population of scholarly Marathi Brahmins, the city was one of Shivaji's main centres in the 17th century. In July 1798 (Ashadh, Samvat 1855), Bhagwan Swaminarayan, in the form of 17-year-old Nilkanth Varni, sanctified the famous city.

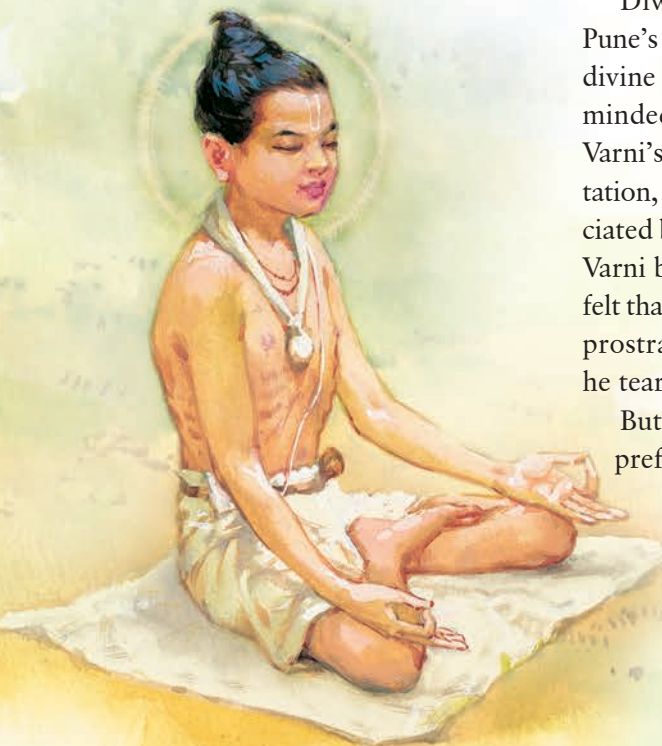
Between 1792 and 1799, Nilkanth Varni trekked from Mansarovar and the sacred sites in North India to Kanyakumari in the south. Constantly on the move, he arrived in Pune, Maharashtra, via Pandharpur. With the permission of the gardener Nilkanth Varni stayed in the garden owned by Pune's Diwan and main army chief, Sardar Shri Bapu Gokhale.¹

Diwan, Shri Bapu Gokhale is a prominent figure in Pune's history. Within a short time news of Nilkanth Varni's divine personality reached Bapu Gokhale. This religious-minded Maharashtrian Diwan wished to have Nilkanth Varni's darshan and so went to the garden. Seated in meditation, Nilkanth Varni's lustrous appearance and body emaciated by austerities radiated divinity. Darshan of Nilkanth Varni brought indescribable peace to Bapu Gokhale, who felt that Paramatma (God) himself had come. He reflexively prostrated to Nilkanth Varni. Overcome with emotion, he tearfully requested, "Maharaj! Please bless my home."

But Nilkanth Varni's reply was unexpected, "I do not prefer to stay among the masses."

However, due to Bapu Gokhale's insistence, Nilkanth Varni did sanctify his home on the days

¹ *Shri-Hari-Charitramrut-Sagar* (HCS) 2.49. Nilkanth Varni stayed in this garden in Pune for one month. At present it is known as Shukravar Peth Paranjape Wada and is located on Bapu Gokhale Marg. One historical account states that the Ramji Mandir built there by Bapu Gokhale still exists and is known at present as 'Bara Hanuman'. Here, next to the Ramji Mandir are 12 round *murtis* of Hanumanji.



of *sud* and *vad ekadashi*. The devotion of Bapu Gokhale's wife, Anandibai, too, was evident.

She daily prepared sandalwood paste in a golden bowl for Bapu Gokhale to worship Nilkanth Varni. She also prepared flower caps, garlands, armlets and wristlets to adorn Nilkanth Varni and also a decorative *hindolo* for him to sit on. At night, Bapu Gokhale played the *tamburo* and devoutly sang before Nilkanth Varni, who was pleased by his devotion (HCS 2.49.18).

Bapu Gokhale was so affected by Nilkanth Varni's divinity that he explained his glory to the Maratha Peshwa² leader Sarkar Shri Bajirao II. As a result, Bajirao II also desired to have Nilkanth Varni's darshan.

At Bajirao Peshwa's invitation, Shri Nilkanth Varni did visit his palace in Shanivar Wada, but Nilkanth Varni felt that his extravagant lifestyle would not fit his own detached demeanour. Yet, Nilkanth Varni still fulfilled the wish of Bajirao and his wife, Sunderbai. They prepared a variety of foods and served Nilkanth Varni. Then, Sunderbai told Nilkanth Varni that doing such intense austerities at this young age is not appropriate. To this, Adharanand Swami notes in the HCS, Nilkanth Varni replied, "Your views and mine are different. The fruits you attain and I attain are also different. You will receive in accordance to what you do, and I will receive in accordance with what I do." Then Nilkanth Varni added, "By conquering the ego of power, and surrendering to the Chintamani-like Satpurush, he will take you across the ocean of life."

Nilkanth Varni's forthright teachings made a

deep impact on Bajirao and his wife. With genuine affection, they requested him to remain with them forever. However, Nilkanth Varni had a clear vision of his path. After spending one month in Bapu Gokhale's garden, Nilkanth Varni departed, to the immense grief of Bajirao, the *diwan* and the local residents.

During his one-month stay in Pune, Nilkanth Varni inspired many onto the path of devotion, and gave them an experience of his divinity. He thus laid the foundations for the future development of Satsang here under the guidance of the Gunatit Satpurush.

Two hundred years later, Brahmaswarup Pramukh Swami Maharaj inspired a BAPS *shikharabaddha* mandir in Pune, providing a permanent residence for Bhagwan Swaminarayan and the *abhishek murti* of Nilkanth Varni. The loose thread of history had now been connected.³

MEETING WITH MAHARAJA RANJITSINGH

Another historic event during Nilkanth Varni's pilgrimage throughout India was his meeting with Ranjitsingh, the Maharaja of Punjab.

Maharaja Ranjitsingh is recognized by many Indian, British and European historians as one of 18th-century India's greatest warriors.

Maharaja Ranjitsingh was born on 2 November 1780. From a young age he was skillful in horse-riding and brave in battle. From the age of about 9, he fought alongside his father, Mahansinh, in many major and minor conflicts. His original name was Buddh Singh, but after he had defeated the Muslim chieftain Pir Muhammed at the age of 10, his father named him Ranjitsingh (meaning, 'victor in battle').

When Ranjitsingh was only 12 years old, his father, Mahansingh, passed away. Ranjitsingh

2 'Peshwa is a Parsi word, meaning prime minister. In 1674, Shivaji Maharaj appointed Moropant Pingale as his first prime minister, or Peshwa. That marked the beginning of the Peshwa dynasty. In 1749, the Peshwa became the main ruler of the region, not just the prime minister, and greatly expanded the territory under Maratha rule. From 1713, the Peshwa family of Konkani Bhatt and his descendants were the rulers. Of them, Bajirao I and Bajirao II are renowned. Bajirao II was the last of the Peshwa rulers, and he surrendered his region to the British East India Company in 1818. As noted in the HCS (2.49.12), Bajirao II met Nilkanth Varni in 1799.

3 Many years after Bhagwan Swaminarayan left Pune, his *paramhansa* disciples, Nirmananand Swami and others, visited Pune (HCS 15.34.35). Later, a Marathi devotee from Pune became a sadhu in Vartal and was named Keshavdas Swami (*Shri Vadtaldham Satsang*, September 2016). A devotee from Pune named Chunilalbai, also came in contact with Bhagatji Maharaj.



From left: Diwan of Pune, Shri Babu Gokhale; Ruler of Pune, Sarkar Shri Bajirao Peshwa II; Palace of Bajirao which Nilkanth Varni sanctified, Pune; Maharaja of Punjab, Shri Ranjitsingh

became the ruler, but due to his young age, his mother, Rajkaur, and Diwan Lokpathsingh helped in the administration. However, despite his young age, Ranjitsingh's maturity and courage beyond his years impressed everyone.⁴

On 13 May 1793, Ranjitsingh met Nilkanth Varni, in Badrinath. Although historical accounts of Ranjitsingh's life do not directly mention his visit to Badrinath, it seems likely he went there after performing his father's funeral rites at the famous holy Sikh sites of Govind Ghat and Hemkund Sahab.

He also attached great importance to bathing in the Ganga. So, in 1805, he took his entourage to Har-ki-Pauri in Haridwar to bathe in the Ganga.⁵

Ranjitsingh's devotion from a young age is demonstrated by his patronage of the gold and intricate marble work for the Harmandir Sahib (popularly known as the Golden Temple) in Amritsar. He also daily read scriptural texts, prayed, turned the rosary and made donations. Thus, it is possible such devotion took him to Badrinath.

The HCS notes Ranjitsingh's pilgrimage to Badrinath and Haridwar. Muktanand Swami

learnt the details of the meeting between Bhagwan Swaminarayan and Ranjitsingh as told to him by Bhagwan Swaminarayan himself, while Ranjitsingh was still alive. Then Muktanand Swami had his assistant Adharanand Swami write about it in the HCS. From this account of the meeting, the deep impact of 12-year-old Nilkanth Varni on the charismatic Ranjitsingh is revealed.

On 13 May 1793 (Vaishakh *sud* 3 [Akha Trij], Samvat 1849), Nilkanth Varni returned to Badrinath after visiting Badrivan, Badrikashram, Mansarovar and other places in the Himalayas. Closed during the six perilous months of winter, Badrinath had reopened today.

Coincidentally, Ranjitsingh, too, had come on this day for darshan. He saw the divine form of Nilkanth Varni and was instantly drawn to him. He prostrated at Nilkanth Varni's feet and holding his feet prayed, "I will not let you go. So, please do not leave me."

Nilkanth Varni appreciated Ranjitsingh's inner feelings, but since his external appearance was flamboyant, Nilkanth Varni replied, "I am a Yogi, whereas you indulge in worldly pleasures. I prefer to live in the forests, whereas you reside in palaces. I like to walk on foot and you like to ride on elephants. I do not have any addictions, whereas you indulge in them. So, how can our natures match? You are attached to women, while I am detached. So, how can we become attached? So, if you are prepared to live by my

⁴ In 1798, aged only 18, Ranjitsingh captured the whole of Punjab and was declared the *maharaja*. He continued to expand his kingdom. His dominion extended up to modern-day Pakistan, Jammu & Kashmir and Tibet.

⁵ He may have gone there to atone for and redeem himself from his improper association with mistress 'Morar'. - Diwan Amarnath, Jafarnama Ranjitsingh.

wishes and never become angry if I do not follow your wishes, then I will be with you.”

Nilkanth Varni’s truthful and forthright words inspired remorse in Ranjitsingh. He was a devout aspirant, so he tearfully prayed, “Maharaj! I will observe whatever you command. But, stay forever within me.”

Nilkanth Varni had perceived not only Ranjitsingh’s lavish lifestyle, but also his devotion.⁶

Due to his devout feelings, Nilkanth Varni said, “I am going on a pilgrimage to Gangotri and from there I will come to your city. I will inform you and meet you. So, if you do not forget me, I will certainly come. But, for now, you go.”

Ranjitsingh was saddened by this instruction from Nilkanth Varni. But, he departed. A fever gripped his body. Remembering Nilkanth Varni, he also began his pilgrimage. Nilkanth Varni arrived in Haridwar after visiting Gangotri. Ranjitsingh also reached there and wondered if Nilkanth Varni had also come there. When Ranjitsingh had his darshan at Har-ki-Pauri, he was overjoyed.

Nilkanth Varni was seated in meditation. Nilkanth Varni opened his eyes and gazed at Ranjitsingh. The king experienced profound inner peace. He felt that his kingdom and authority were insignificant and wished to surrender everything at Nilkanth Varni’s feet. Ranjitsingh instructed his servants, “In gold plates prepare a *thal* of sweets, nuts, fruits and whatever is available, quickly.” The *thal* was offered to Nilkanth Varni, who ate a small amount and returned the rest.

Ranjitsingh wished to have more darshan of Nilkanth Varni. He prayed, “Maharaj! Please bless me that I realize this kingdom and power

as perishable.”

Nilkanth Varni sensed his devotion and said, “Those who preserve dharma are praised everywhere. The scriptures describe the fame of righteous kings and the notoriety of unrighteous kings. So, adopt the way of the righteous. Recognize and associate with a *sant* who is detached from wealth and women, does not desire worldly pleasures and who can liberate you from material bondage.”

Nilkanth Varni then placed a hand on his head to bless him. This divine touch calmed Ranjitsingh’s senses. Nilkanth Varni said to him, “There is nothing superior to this *murti*. If you consolidate this understanding within, your kingdom will not bind you.” Ranjitsingh wanted to hand over his kingdom to Nilkanth Varni, but Nilkanth Varni’s task was different. He spent two days with Ranjitsingh, blessed him and proceeded on his journey.

Over 220 years have passed since Nilkanth Varni met Maharaj Ranjitsingh and Peshwa Bajirao II. These meetings reveal Nilkanth Varni’s divine impact, detachment, forthright speech, focus on his goal and many other virtues.

Both rulers wished to surrender their dominion to Nilkanth Varni. But, at the time, Nilkanth Varni was unable to fulfil their wishes, since he was focused on reaching Gujarat and establishing dharma. However, today their wishes have been fulfilled in the form of the BAPS mandirs in Pune and Jalandhar (Punjab) inspired by Pramukh Swami Maharaj and in which the *murtis* of Parabrahman Bhagwan Swaminarayan and Aksharbrahman Gunatitanand Swami were consecrated by Pragat Brahmaswarup Mahant Swami Maharaj. In both of these mandirs the *abhishek murti* of Shri Nilkanth Varni has also been consecrated.

Thus, through his Gunatit Satpurush, Bhagwan Swaminarayan has accepted the request of the two kings to forever reside in their kingdoms. ♦

*Translated by Sadhu Amrutvijaydas
from Swaminarayan Prakash, May 2017*

⁶ The renowned scholar of Punjab history, Sitaram Kohli, notes that although Ranjitsingh was devout, he was also very indulgent. He would go to the *gurudwara* in the morning, but would freely party at night. He had 16 wives, 8 of whom he married officially and the other 8 were *gandharva* marriages. Based on an interview given by Ranjitsingh’s son, Dulipsingh, in 1889 for a French journal, he said, “I am one of the sons of my father’s 46 wives” (Singh, Khushwant. *Ranjit Singh*, Penguin Books, 2008, pp. 300–301). At that time, it was legal in Punjab to have many wives.



The Story of Construction

BAPS Swaminarayan Mandir, Pune

In 1985, during the Aksharbrahman Gunatitanand Swami Bicentenary Celebrations in Ahmedabad, among the many lakhs of devotees who attended the celebrations from throughout India and abroad was Shri Rajnikantbhai Bhatt of Pune.

Despite the unrelenting schedule of programmes and the demands on his time by the visiting devotees, when Pramukh Swami Maharaj saw Rajnibhai, he asked, “Bhanabhai, what is the status of the weekly Sunday satsang assembly?” Rajnibhai was the nephew (sister’s son) of one of BAPS Sanstha’s senior and scholarly devotees, Shri Harshadbhai T. Dave, so Pramukh Swami Maharaj addressed him as ‘Bhanabhai’.

Rajnibhai replied, “Swami, the *sabha* does not take place.”

Pramukh Swami Maharaj said, “How is it

possible to do without the satsang *sabha*? The Sunday *sabha* must be held. That is a necessity. Now you must start a regular *sabha*.”

Rajnibhai countered, “But Bapa, there are only two *satsangis* in Pune. How can we run a *sabha*?”

“Make a start! It will run very well. Meet Kothari (Bhaktipriya) Swami in Mumbai. He will give you the names of other devotees.”

So, as instructed by Pramukh Swami Maharaj, Rajnibhai Bhatt met Kothari Swami, who put him in touch with Shri Ambalalbhai Patel – a businessman who had settled in Pune. Thus, with Pramukh Swami Maharaj’s blessings they started the Sunday assembly at Rajnibhai’s home on 3 November 1985 with only three devotees – Rajnibhai Bhatt, Chhaganbhai Chotalia and Ambalalbhai Patel.

Within a short time, Jashubhai Patel, Gatorbhai

Patel, Chandrakantbhai Suratwala, Harilal Suratwala, Natubhai Bhagat, Narsinhbhai Kadia, Jitubhai Patel (Master) and others also began to attend.

Back in 1938, during a *parayan* in the Akshar Deri in Gondal, Shastriji Maharaj, the founder of the BAPS Sanstha, had blessed Bhagwandas, an ardent devotee from Pune for a mandir there (*Brahmaswarup Shastriji Maharaj Jivancharitra*, Part 2, p. 30). Despite Bhagwandas's heartfelt invitations, Shastriji Maharaj was unable to visit Pune. But Yogiji Maharaj did sanctify the city in 1956 during the Special Train Yatra. At that time Pramukh Swami Maharaj and Vinubhai (Mahant Swami Maharaj) were with him as well.

Again, in 1966, Yogiji Maharaj visited Pune with a group of sadhus. They stayed at the home of Labhshankarbhai Pandya. In Yogiji Maharaj's presence, many people attended the assembly at Agrasen Bhavan. Also, Yogiji Maharaj formally established the BAPS Satsang *mandal* in Pune, comprising of 15 devotees. Initially, the *sabha* was held regularly, but over time it gradually stopped.

After his visits to Pune with Yogiji Maharaj, Pramukh Swami Maharaj continually provided spiritual inspiration by visiting it in 1972, 1973, 1974, 1977, 1979, 1987, 1989, 1992 and 2005.

In 1977, he accepted the devotion of Shravanbhai Patel (Ramkrishna Oil Mill) and Rajnibhai Bhatt by gracing their homes. He also blessed and spiritually guided 150 devotees.

In 1979, Pramukh Swami Maharaj stayed at the home of Nagjibhai Maru and in 1987 he stayed at the home of Hiralalbhai (Mala Sheth).

In 1989, Pramukh Swami Maharaj stayed at Chhotubhai Ajmera's bungalow in Koregaon and also inaugurated his factory. At that time, around 800 devotees attended the assembly in Nehru Hall.

In this way, due to the frequent visits by Pramukh Swami Maharaj and the *vicharan* of sadhus from Mumbai under the guidance of Kothari Bhaktipriya Swami, the satsang in Pune grew.

For 8 years, the Sunday *sabha* was held at Rajnibhai's home, where they also celebrated festivals like Hari Jayanti, Janmashtami and others on a small scale. But with the increase in devotees, Rajnibhai's house became too small for the *sabha*.

So, on behalf of the *mandal*, Gatorbhai and Jashubhai wrote to Pramukh Swami Maharaj seeking blessings that a hall be acquired to enable the Sunday *sabha* to continue properly. At the same time, the three brothers – Harilalbhai, Natubhai and Thakorbhai Suratwala – requested all the devotees that until a mandir is built in Pune, the Sunday *sabha* be held in their hall on the second floor in Rameshwar Chowk near Mandvi in the centre of Pune. Everyone accepted the idea, and with Pramukh Swami Maharaj's blessings, it became the venue for the weekly *sabha*. In 1993, this hall was renamed 'Yogi Sabha Mandap' and the Sunday *sabha* began there.

From time to time, Pujya Kothari Swami sent sadhus from Mumbai to Pune. Initially, Haribhushan Swami did a lot of *vicharan* in and around Pune. Thereafter, Anandkand Swami, Subodhsagar Swami, Divyanayan Swami, Shrutivallabh Swami and other sadhus also put in much effort to nurture the Satsang.

In addition, devotees of Pune frequently visited the mandir in Dadar, Mumbai, to benefit from the spiritual company of Pujya Kothari Swami. Param Pujya Mahant Swami Maharaj also went to Pune often and inspired the Satsang. As a result Pankajbhai Patel, Mukeshbhai Patel, Bharatbhai Modi, Kantibhai Patel, Yashvantbhai Patel, Muljibhai Patel, Premjibhai Patel and others also joined the Satsang.

Bal and *balika sabhas* were also started, in which Rupeshbhai Chotai and Jigneshbhai Shahpura served regularly.

In 2005, led by Kapilbhai Khute, a *yuvak sabha* was started at Rameshwar Chowk. And on every *ekadashi*, Jyotiben, wife of Rajnibhai Bhatt, organized a *mahila sabha*.

Satsang activities gradually spread to Sangvi,



Top: Pramukh Swami Maharaj and Mahant Swami Maharaj at the residence of Rajnibhai Bhatt, Pune, 13.1.1977

Bottom: Swamishri instructs devotees of Pune to build a mandir, Surat, 2000

Nigadi and other suburbs of the city. Festivals were routinely celebrated. Sadhus spoke in *parayans* and performed kirtan *aradhanas* and *padh-ramanis*. Due to all these efforts, the number of devotees increased and the hall in Rameshwar Chowk was not of sufficient size to accommodate everyone.

So, with the help of Jitubhai (Master), the weekly Sunday *sabha* was arranged at the RCM Gujarati School from 31 March 2007 for three years. Then, again, a larger space was required and devotees again requested Pramukh Swami Maharaj for a *hari* mandir. At first, Swamishri wished that an already built suitable premises be found. Soon, a 10,000 sq. ft. building was found. When Swamishri was informed, he advised, “See if some open land is available.”

When Pramukh Swami Maharaj was in Pune from 21 to 23 January 2005, he looked at about five available sites, but did not find any of them suitable for a mandir.

Then, over a period of four years, the devotees of Pune inspected 34 different sites in their search for suitable land. Among them was a 5-acre

plot between Sinhgadh and Satra Road which belonged to a trust. Everyone found this site appropriate, as did Pujya Kothari Swami from Mumbai.

So, Ashwinbhai Ajmera, Anandbhai Patel and others went to Bhadra to meet Pramukh Swami Maharaj. Swamishri patiently listened to their report and analyzed the maps, then smiled and said, “Five acres of land is too small. Bhagwan Swaminarayan is supreme – the *avatari* of all avatars. Not even his foot would fit in this land. So, look for a bigger plot of land.”

Again, the search for land continued. The following year, Swamishri was shown the map of a plot in the new and developing area around Ambe village on the Mumbai–Bangalore National Highway. Immediately, Swamishri’s face lit up and he said, “Now, this is OK. Shriji Maharaj will reside here. Try for this land.” The devotees were delighted to get Swamishri’s approval. However, the devotees explained their problem, “Bapa! This land is between 40 and 50 acres. Plots have been made and there are many different owners. To explain to them and acquire the land is a difficult and challenging task.”

Yet Swamishri said, “It is difficult, but Maharaj wants to reside here. He will make things easier. So, try.”

Next to this land was a beautiful high hill which was available, but, instead, Swamishri chose the plotted 28-acre land, already sold to different landowners. So, as it was Swamishri’s wish, everyone agreed to make efforts. To explain to so many owners would be challenging, but Ashwinbhai Ajmera and the youthful Anandbhai Patel were assigned this task. For six years, Anandbhai did not pay much attention to his business. Everyone, collectively, put in the required effort. On many occasions the devotees became frustrated by the excessive demands of the landowners and the complicated legal issues. But, every time, Swamishri’s blessings made their tasks easier.

Eventually, with Swamishri’s blessings 28 acres



Pramukh Swami Maharaj visited Pune on many occasions to inspire and strengthen satsang values among the devotees.



Pramukh Swami Maharaj offers respect to Shri Akraa (Agiyar) Hanuman sanctified by Shri Nilkanth Varni, Pune

of land was acquired. A team of devotees from Mumbai, who were experienced in construction and site development, was appointed to carry out the work. The team included Rajnibhai Ajmera, Jitubhai Barot, Jayendrabhai Patel, Maheshbhai Gajjar, Jayeshbhai Hingu, Dipakbhai Patel, Sunilbhai Parekh, Arunbhai and others. They frequently went to Pune for meetings to discuss the site development. Kothari Abhayswarup Swami from Mumbai also gave his wholehearted support.

In Mumbai, on 24 January 2011, Pramukh Swami Maharaj performed the *shilapujan* for the *shikharbaddha* mandir in Pune. Swamishri requested everyone's support, and the devotees of Pune resolved to serve financially and in whatever other ways required.

On 30 May 2014, the stones sanctified by Pramukh Swami Maharaj were ceremonially placed in the foundations in Pune and the mandir construction began in earnest, under the supervision of Tyaganand Swami and, later, Brahmaseva Swami.

On 30 November 2014, in Sarangpur, Pramukh Swami Maharaj performed the *pujan* of the mandir's first pillar. On this occasion, Swamishri blessed Shrirang Swami, who was then

overseeing the satsang activities in Pune, that the mandir would be built in two years.

Then, on 14 December 2014, Pujya Kothari Bhaktipriya Swami ceremonially placed the sanctified pillar in the mandir in Pune in the presence of over 8,000 dignitaries and devotees.

On 21 March 2015, the *bhumi-pujan* for the sadhus' residence and other buildings was performed. The construction proceeded rapidly and the mandir, circumambulatory path, gardens and ancillary buildings were completed within two years, as Swamishri had blessed.

Yogipriya Swami from Mumbai, who was responsible for the drainage, electrical and other aspects of the complex, said, "When the *khat-muhurt* took place in 2014 the soil was tested. The results revealed that the soil was too soft and that it had inadequate load-bearing capacity to support the mandir. Hence, 24-feet deep foundations were dug and filled with 18,000 bags of cement and 10,000 bags of flyash to strengthen the foundations so that they last for 1,000 years."

The mandir design and the stonework for the mandir were completed under the guidance of Akshaymuni Swami and Sanjaybhai Parikh of the BAPS Planning Cell in Ahmedabad. By the time



Pramukh Swami Maharaj performs *puja* of the *shilas* to be placed in the foundations of Pune mandir, Mumbai, 24.1.2011



Swamishri performs *puja* of the first pillar of the Pune mandir, Sarangpur, 30.11.2014

the foundation was prepared for construction to proceed, about 70% of the mandir's stones had been carved and were ready.

The mandir campus includes a $\frac{3}{4}$ -km *pradakshina* path circling the mandir, 1.25 km of roads, street lights, water storage, stormwater and gutter drainage lines, a compound wall and 7,000 sq. ft. of beautiful gardens.

DEDICATED SERVICE BY DEVOTEES

From the moment Pramukh Swami Maharaj launched the *shikharbaddha* mandir project in Pune, devotees, young and old, resolved to serve physically, mentally and financially. They readily participated in the site *seva*, *shila-seva*, paper collection for recycling, Nilkanth *abhishek*, Akshar Patrika and other activities.

In 2005, Pramukh Swami Maharaj instructed Ashwinbhai Ajmera, who was managing the Pune operations of 'Ajmera Builders', to search for suitable land for a *shikharbaddha* mandir. He prioritized this task over his own business-related duties and played a crucial role in acquiring the land.

Anandbhai Patel, son of Shravanbhai Patel – one of Pune's pioneering devotees, had a well-established edible oil business. He had little experience in land acquisitions, but he helped Ashwinbhai in the painstaking and difficult task

to process all the legal documentation required.

These volunteers tirelessly went to the government offices and landowners to ensure that all the paperwork was in order. They often had to make multiple visits during the week, waiting for hours at a time for their turn. Yet, they were not deterred and enthusiastically solved any problems that arose. One officer in particular was very resistant. However, when Anandbhai learnt that the officer was to be transferred elsewhere, he requested, "Sir, all this work is legal. So, before you move, please give your approval. God will bless you." The officer agreed, explaining, "I thought that you were doing all this to earn a sizeable commission; that is why I was reluctant to approve. But seeing your honesty and devotion, I realize this is a noble project." With this, he signed the necessary approvals.

Nischalaben Joshi, a 65-year-old advocate, also served in this process, often staying up till the early hours of the morning to complete the required paperwork.

The devotees also wholeheartedly contributed financially to the project. They minimized their personal and home expenses to donate for the mandir project. Some sold their properties and donated the proceeds, while others sold or leased their businesses to serve personally on site. Also,



With the use of technology and the committed services of the devotees, young and old, the mandir construction was completed in time

some donated all their savings and some regularly contributed the major part of their salary every month. Some even took early retirement to serve full time for the mandir project. Some who had donated the initial amount they had pledged increased their pledge and donated more. Some donated gold and many women devotees donated the gold and jewellery they had received for their marriage. In this way, many devotees – men and women, young and old – of modest means wholeheartedly made personal sacrifices and adjustments so that they could contribute to the building of the mandir.

The women devotees of the 11 *mahila mandals* in Pune raised donations by visiting 1,308 homes with the *murti* of Nilkanth Varni, so that devotees and well-wishers could perform *abhishek*.

In 2000, when Pramukh Swami Maharaj was in Surat, a large group of devotees went there to request Swamishri to build a *shikharbaddha* mandir in Pune. Swamishri smiled and said, “We can build the mandir, but we will need sadhus to run it.” Immediately, Nitinbhai Shah offered, “Bapa! I ask you to make my son a sadhu.” Swamishri was pleased by the devotees’ sentiments and blessed them that a grand mandir will be built. Later, Nitinbhai kept his word and his

son, a mechanical engineer, is now a sadhu – Naishthikswarup Swami.

Devotees also served physically on site, helping in the construction, kitchen, landscaping, electrical, plumbing, carpentry and other services. Whenever required they would work through the night as well.

Some devotees came daily to serve, despite having to change several buses to reach the mandir, since no direct transport was available.

On a personal level, many also observed austerities and engaged in extra devotion and prayers for the successful and timely completion of the mandir.

Balaks and *balikas* contributed by pledging to abstain from their favourite foods, such as, chocolates, cakes, cold drinks, biscuits, pizza, and others, and to not buy expensive designer or branded clothes. From their savings, the children contributed towards the *murti* of Shri Ghanshyam Maharaj. Children also pledged not to watch TV.

Around 120 *yuvaks* observed ‘chain fasting’ from 2011, in which one youth daily observed a *nirjala* (waterless) fast.

The children and youths also spread the glory of the mandir, the Sanstha, Bhagwan Swaminarayan, Pramukh Swami Maharaj and Mahant Swami Maharaj by talking to visitors and others.

ENVIRONMENT-FRIENDLY MANDIR

The water used in the 27.5 acre site is efficiently recycled. Water used in bathrooms and the kitchen is collected in a storage tank of 200,000 litres. An on-site water recycling plant purifies this water in five stages. This purified, recycled water is used in the gardens, toilets and other suitable locations. To enable such efficient reuse, extra pipelines have been laid to keep the clean and waste water separate. ♦

*Translated by Sadhu Amrutvijaydas
from Swaminarayan Prakash, May 2017*



A BRIEF DARSHAN

BAPS Swaminarayan Mandir, Pune



Pune is the second largest city of Maharashtra. It is 300 km from Mumbai and is the third largest software hub in India after Bangalore and Hyderabad. The city is popularly known by various epithets: ‘Oxford of the East’, ‘Pensioners’ Paradise’, ‘Cultural Capital of Maharashtra’ and ‘Queen of the Deccan.’ The city has picturesque surroundings, pleasant weather

and celebrates various faiths and cultures.

The newly built *shikharbaddha* BAPS Swaminarayan Mandir is nestled on 27.5 acres of prime land on the outskirts of Pune, near the Mumbai-Bangalore National Highway. The pink-stone mandir is surrounded by hills and mountains and exudes serenity and divinity. It was inspired by Brahmaswarup Pramukh Swami Maharaj, and



Ornate floor and pillars inside the mandir



after its consecration on 19 February 2017 it has become a spiritual attraction in Pune. A brief description of the mandir is as follows.

As devotees and pilgrims enter the ornate mandir gate they step onto the three-quarter km long *parikrama* (circumambulatory path), which is dotted with 23 ornate redstone *samrans*. The mandir gardens are lush with lawns, flowers and trees, creating a pleasant ambience.

Prior to climbing the central steps of the mandir devotees pay respect to the giant replica of Shriji Maharaj's *charnarvind* set in a lotus-shaped stone structure. After climbing the central steps of the mandir one is flanked by the shrines of Ganapatiji and Hanumanji. The entire mandir is supported by 140 intricately carved pillars and embellished by 107 *torans* (arches) and 1,269 exquisite stone *murtis*. Out of the 140 pillars 84 have 636 small *murtis* of sadhus and devotees. The pinkstone mandir includes a main dome, nine small domes and five towering *shikhars*. The mandir is 184.6 ft. long, 181.6 ft. wide and 74.6 ft.

high. Each *shikhar* and dome is crowned with golden *kalashes*, flagpoles and flags.

The central shrine of the mandir houses the marble *murtis* of Shri Akshar-Purushottam Maharaj, the left shrine has the *murtis* of Shri Harikrishna Maharaj and Shri Radha-Krishna Dev and the right shrine has the beautiful *murti* of Shri Ghanshyam Maharaj. The *garbhagruha* (inner shrine) also houses the Sukh Shaiyya and the *murtis* of the Guru Parampara.

On the *mandovar* (the outer wall of the mandir) are 35 *murtis*: the ten principal avatars of God, the *digpals* (guardian deities of the eight cardinal directions) and other deities.

In the Rang Mandap, below the mandir, lies the *abhishek murti* of Shri Nilkanth Varni. Behind it are installed the marble *murtis* of Bhagatiji Maharaj, Shastriji Maharaj, Yogiji Maharaj and Pramukh Swami Maharaj. Furthermore, one also has the darshan of Lakshmi-Narayan Dev, Tirupati-Balaji, Sita-Ram Dev, Shiv-Parvati, Vithoba-Rukmani, Sant Jnaneshwar, Tukaram,



HH Mahant Swami Maharaj with Shri Harikrishna Maharaj before the main entrance of mandir

Namdev and Eknath installed in decorative *sinhasans*. In all, there are 26 consecrated *murtis* in the mandir sanctums, which are worshipped daily by performing *arti* and offering *thal*. In the *abhishek mandap*, one finds beautiful carvings on 84 pillars and small impressive *murtis* of devas and devotees on 24 pillars.

The stone ceilings of the mandir are embellished with 66 different designs and carvings. There are five *garbhagruhas* and *dwarshakhs* (carved stone door frames).

Created by Pramukh Swami Maharaj and consecrated by Mahant Swami Maharaj, the BAPS Swaminarayan Mandir in Pune attracts thousands of devotees and visitors daily. All are left spellbound by the architecture, carvings, serenity, beauty and the divine ambience. The mandir inspires faith, tranquillity and inner joy. ♦

*Translated by Sadhu Vivekjiivandas
from Swaminarayan Prakash, April 2017*



A colonnade of ornate pillars



BAPS Swaminarayan Mandir MURTI-PRATISHTHA MAHOTSAV

16–19 February 2017, Pune

Maharashtra is synonymous, among other things, with the names of great devotees like Sant Jnaneshwar, Sant Tukaram, Namdev, Eknath and others. They had revived and given fillip to the bhakti movement through their devotional songs and verses, which are still exuberantly sung today. To add a fresh chapter to the vibrant devotion and spirituality celebrated in Maharashtra a shikharbaddha BAPS Swaminarayan Mandir, built by Brahmaswarup Pramukh Swami Maharaj, was consecrated in Pune by his spiritual successor, Pragat Brahmaswarup Mahant Swami Maharaj, on 19 February 2017.

The 4-day consecration ceremonies comprised of a maha-yagna, grand procession of the murtis, prasad pravesha, a cultural programme and finally the murti-pratishtha ceremonies. A brief report of the 4-day Mahotsav is as follows...

First Day: 16 February 2017

MAHA-YAGNA

On the morning of 16 February 2017 (Maha vad 5, V.S. 2073), as part of the *murti-pratishtha* ceremonies, a grand *maha-yagna* was held on the sprawling mandir grounds. Thousands of devotees from Pune and its neighbouring rural areas, and from all parts of India and abroad, had arrived to participate or witness the *maha-yagna*.

The canopied 370 ft. long and 240 ft. wide *yagnashala* had a main stage with three principal *yagna kunds* and 200 other *yagna kunds*. The entire *yagnashala* was traditionally decorated with festoons of *asopalav* and banana leaves and colourful buntings.

The beautiful marble *murtis* of Shri Akshar-Purushottam Maharaj, Shri Harikrishna Maharaj (*panchdhatu*), Shri Ghanshyam Maharaj, Shri Nilkanth Varni Maharaj (*panchdhatu*), Shri Radha-Krishna Dev, Shri Lakshmi-Narayan Dev, Shri Sita-Ram Dev, Shri Shiv-Parvati, Shri Vitthal-Rukmani, Shri Balaji, Shri Ganapatiji, Shri Hanumanji, the Gunatit Guru Parampara, Sant Jnaneshwar, Sant Namdev, Sant Tukaram, Sant Eknath and others were installed on the main *yagna* stage.

The *yagna* commenced at the auspicious hour of 8.00 a.m. with the sonorous Vedic chantings by 20 Brahmin pundits. At 11.00 a.m., Mahant Swami Maharaj and the *sadguru* sadhus arrived on to the main stage to perform the *yagna* rituals. Swamishri performed the 16 *pujan* rituals of Shri Harikrishna Maharaj. Thereafter, Swamishri and the *sadguru* sadhus performed *pujan* of the *murtis* by applying *chandan* and offering flowers and rice grains. Then they performed the *arti*. Following this the *yagna kund* was ignited and thereafter Mahant Swami Maharaj blessed the *yajmans*, “This mandir has been accomplished through Pramukh Swami Maharaj’s blessings. We have all taken countless human births, but never before have we had the association of God and his Sadhu. They graced us by taking human forms and showering their affection upon us. We



Devotees perform the *maha-yagna* rituals

can only attain them through their grace, but not through our spiritual endeavours.

“In this mandir we have four *murtis* of Shriji Maharaj [Bhagwan Swaminarayan, Ghanshyam Maharaj, Harikrishna Maharaj and Nilkanth Varni]. None of Maharaj’s forms have been left out. We have to abide by the *niyams* and engage in doing spiritual work. In obeying Maharaj’s *niyams* and talking about *upasana* our own satsang will become worthwhile.”

Thereafter, Swamishri and the sadhus left the *yagnashala* and the *yajman* couples sat around the *yagna kunds* to perform the remaining rituals. Once these rituals were over Shrutiprakash Swami guided senior sadhus to perform the *maha-nyas* rituals of the *murtis* from 1.30 to 2.30 p.m. using 300 different herbs and holy waters.

During the *maha-yagna* 2,092 *yajmans* performed the rituals around the 200 *yagna kunds*. The entire *yagna* was managed by 280 volunteers from Mumbai, Pune and Gandhinagar. The *yagna* was successfully accomplished through the efforts of Shrutiprakash Swami, sadhus, volunteers and Brahmin pundits.

WOMEN’S DAY

From 5.30 to 8.00 p.m., the Women’s Day programme was held in the canopied hall on the mandir grounds. The assembly commenced with the singing of *shlokas* and a traditional prayer dance by young girls. Thereafter, renowned

women personalities of Pune were felicitated. After *arti*, a series of performances themed on a *shloka* from the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, ‘Lead Us from Darkness to Light...’ were presented. The central idea of the need for a guru in life was portrayed in three parts through impressive traditional dances, dramas, mono-acting and videos.

The riveting two-and-a-half hour cultural programme was witnessed by 2,500 women. (For more details see *Premvati*, March–April 2017).

Second Day: 17 February GRAND NAGAR-YATRA (PROCESSION)

On Friday, 17 February 2017, a colourful *nagar-yatra* of the *murtis* to be consecrated in the mandir was festively carried out on the streets of Pune. According to Hindu tradition it is believed that during the procession the *murtis* shower their divine blessings upon the city and its citizens. More than 400 BAPS sadhus and thousands of devotees from all over India and abroad participated in the procession.

At 2.10 p.m., the *nagar-yatra* commenced with the *pujan* and *arti* of Thakorji by Narayanmunidas Swami and Kothari Abhayswarupdas Swami. The procession was flagged off from Swaar Gate in Ambegaon (Khurd), Pune, about 10 km from the BAPS Mandir. The entire procession included:

- Youths donned in traditional headgear waving BAPS flags.
- Youths on motorbikes.
- Four youths carrying Shri Harikrishna Maharaj in an ornate palanquin.
- A decorated Mayur Rath with the marble *murtis* of Shri Akshar-Purushottam Maharaj.
- A second Mayur Rath with the marble *murti* of Shri Ghanshyam Maharaj.
- The Arjun Rath with the *murtis* of Shri Vitthal and Rukmani.
- The Himalaya Rath with the *murti* of Shri Ganapatiji.
- The Muktinath Rath with the *abhishek murti* of Shri Nilkanth Varni.



Grand *nagar-yatra* on the streets of Pune

- The Peacock Rath with the *murtis* of Shri Radha-Krishna Dev.
- A decorative *rath* with the *panchdhatu murti* of Shri Harikrishna Maharaj.
- The Gajendra Rath with the *murtis* of Pramukh Swami Maharaj and Mahant Swami Maharaj.
- And a decorative *rath* with the *murtis* of Sant Jnaneshwar, Namdev, Tukaram and Eknath.

During the *nagar-yatra* sadhus sang *dhun* and bhajans, the Badalpur Bhungal Mandal sang bhajans, children and youths danced to the tune of music bands, tribal groups from Dahod and Selvas performed traditional dances and the Varkari Sangeet Mandali of Pune also attracted the attention of all. Various music bands, like the Pune Darbari Band, Pramukhraj Band of Dhuliya, Nasik Band and Pune’s Vision English Medium School Band played devotional tunes.

The procession also had youths carrying the *murti-pratishtha* banners, youths waving flags



Sadhus pull the Mayur Rath with the *murti* of Shri Ghanshyam Maharaj



Top: Volunteers pull the Arjun Rath.



Below: Sadguru sadhus perform the mandir *pravesha* rituals

while riding on motorbikes, students of Ukai Chhatralaya performing with lezims, children dressed in colourful costumes and finally devotees waving BAPS flags.

The women's section of the *nagar-yatra* included:

- Female youths carrying the mandir *murti-pratishtha* banners and waving flags.
- Women devotees carrying auspicious pots on their heads.
- Young girls dressed as famous historical personalities.
- Vision School Girls Band.
- Women dressed in Kutchi apparels spinning-plates with their fingers and hands.
- A Sanskar Rath with young girls.
- Female youths performing with lezims.
- And women devotees singing bhajans.

As the 1.5 km long colourful and devotional *nagar-yatra* passed through the main streets of Pune thousands of spectators were enthralled by

the beautiful *murtis*, displays and performances. The *sadguru* sadhus gave darshan from a fixed spot to all while the *nagar-yatra* passed by. The *nagar-yatra* concluded at 5.00 p.m.

Many social organizations, businessmen and citizens of Pune displayed welcome banners along the route and also offered garlands to honour the *nagar-yatra*. Many citizens distributed drinking water, lemon water and buttermilk to the devotees during the procession. BAPS volunteers managed the entire procession under the guidance of sadhus. Brahmacharandas Swami and Divyananddas Swami had made the ornate and beautiful *raths*. Finally, the housekeeping volunteers at the rear of the procession collected litter.

The three-hour long *nagar-yatra*, the first of its kind in Pune, left an indelible mark on its citizens.

Third Day: 18 February 2017 PRASAD PRAVESH

A day prior to the *murti-pratishtha*, the Vedic

ritual of entering the mandir, called *prasad praves*h, was performed beneath the mandir dome at 7.45 a.m. This ritual is performed before the *murtis* are installed in the shrines, to invite them to the mandir.

The ritual was performed by Pujya Kothari Bhaktipriya Swami, Pujya Tyagvallabh Swami, Pujya Ishwarcharan Swami and Pujya Ghanshyamcharan Swami in the presence of sadhus and devotees who had contributed to the making of the mandir. The final oblations were offered into the *yagna* fire by Mahant Swami Maharaj. He also blessed all.

CULTURAL PROGRAMME AND FELICITATION ASSEMBLY

At 5.15 p.m., the evening assembly commenced in the mandir precincts with the singing of *dhun* and prayer. The cultural programme was themed on the benefits of mandirs to society. It included dramas and traditional dances performed by children and youths, revealing how mandirs inspire an addiction-free society, instil character in children and youths and nourish spiritual faith in people. Two dramas about incidents from the lives of Yashwant Jethwa (IPS officer) and Parvatsinh Solanki (teacher in Samera village) depicted how the mandir contributes to the welfare of society. Thereafter, a video was shown about the creation and development of the mandir and satsang in Pune.

Then Adarshjivan Swami, who had written the script of the cultural programme, elaborated upon the theme of the mandir's contributions to society. Mahant Swami Maharaj blessed all the children and youths who had performed in the cultural programme. Thereafter, all those who had contributed to the making of the mandir were felicitated by Mahant Swami Maharaj and the senior sadhus. Finally, Mahant Swami Maharaj blessed the assembly. Thereafter, Pujya Kantanandji Maharaj, head of the Ramakrishna Mission in Pune, honoured Mahant Swami



Top: Sadguru and senior sadhus perform the *prasad praves*h *yagna* rituals. Middle: Devotees participate in the *prasad praves*h rituals. Below: Viveksagar Swami addresses the *pratishtha* assembly

Maharaj with a garland.

Fourth Day: Sunday, 19 February 2017 MURTI-PRATISHTHA DAY

On Sunday, 19 February 2017, the *mangala arti* of the *murtis* in the sanctum sanctorum was performed. Thereafter, at 6.00 a.m., the *sadguru* sadhus performed the *abhishek* rituals of the *murtis* by pouring saffron water.

At 7.10 a.m., Pujya Kothari Bhaktipriya Swami and Pujya Ishwarcharan Swami ritually inaugurated the mandir by opening its entrance



HH Mahant Swami Maharaj offers oblations into the *yagna* fire during the *prasad pravesh* rituals

door. Thereafter, the initial *pratishtha* rituals were performed with Vedic chantings by pundits Rakeshbhai Shastri (Ahmedabad) and Kanubhai (Vasad). At 8.20 a.m. Mahant Swami Maharaj entered the mandir with Shri Harikrishna Maharaj. After becoming the guru of BAPS it was his first *murti-pratishtha* of a *shikharbaddha* mandir. Mahant Swami Maharaj performed the *pran pratishtha* of Shri Akshar-Purushottam Maharaj in the central shrine. The consecration was celebrated with loud hails of 'Akshar-Purushottam Maharaj *ni jai*'. Simultaneously, the *pratishtha* rituals for the other *murtis* were performed by

Kothari Bhaktipriya Swami, Ishwarcharan Swami, Viveksagar Swami, Ghanshyamcharan Swami and senior sadhus. Swamishri performed *pujan* of all the *murtis* in the three main sanctums as well as of the *murtis* of Shri Hanumanji and Shri Ganapatiji. Then Swamishri performed the *pujan*, *arti* and *abhishek* of the *murti* of Shri Nilkanth Varni and the *pujan* and *arti* of the Guru Parampara and other *murtis* in the *abhishek mandapam*. During this time the *annakut* was arranged in the three mandir sanctums. Thereafter, Swamishri performed the *pratishtha arti* and *mantra-pushpanjali* at 9.15 a.m.

On this occasion Mahant Swami Maharaj honoured Shri Sudhir Mungantivar, the Finance Minister of Maharashtra, with a garland. Finally, Swamishri blessed all the devotees present.

MURTI-PRATISHTHA ASSEMBLY

The mandir consecration rituals were relayed live in the assembly hall, where thousands of devotees had assembled. Brahadarshan Swami and Viveksagar Swami addressed the assembly about the need for mandirs and their benefits.

After the *pratishtha* rituals were over Mahant Swami Maharaj and the *sadguru* sadhus presided over the *pratishtha* assembly. Pujya Shri Dada J.P. Vaswani, 99 years old, was the chief guest of the assembly. Out of his great love and respect for Pramukh Swami Maharaj he had come to attend the occasion. Mahant Swami Maharaj got up from his seat and came to Shri Dada Vaswani and bowed to him, garlanded him and honoured him with a shawl. Dada Vaswani also honoured Mahant Swami Maharaj by offering a shawl.

Shri Vaswaniji addressed the assembly in Hindi, "I regret that I do not know the sweet Gujarati language of Mahatma Gandhi, Sant Dadu and Narsinh Mehta. In spite of the different regions, religions and traditions we have, we are all one. This mandir has been beautifully made. I believe that people from all over India will come here for darshan and will be blessed. I feel that Pramukh



Mahant Swami Maharaj presides over the *murti-pratishtha* assembly while Kothari Bhaktipriya Swami addresses the gathering

Swami Maharaj is also present here today.

“Pramukh Swami Maharaj had taught us how to live our life, how to love others, how to care for each other and how to live happily. Today, I see God’s form and Pramukh Swami’s form in everyone. May you all bless me.”

Then, Mahant Swami Maharaj honoured Shri Dada Vaswani with a memento and offered his appreciations for gracing the occasion. Thereafter, Shri Dada Vaswaniji departed.

Then Shri Madhavsinhji Diwan, the royal head of Bilada State, ex-minister and a spiritual guru, spoke to the assembly, “I was three years old when my father passed away. My mother was a staunch devotee of Akshar-Purushottam. I have been coming to satsang since I was a child. I had the association of Shastriji Maharaj and Yogiji Maharaj. My mother used to send me to Yogiji Maharaj during my vacation. Once, I asked Yogiji Maharaj, ‘Bapa, countless people respect me by touching my feet, but I am nothing.’ Then Bapa said, ‘Once in a year come to Akshar Deri for darshan. You will get spiritually charged.’ Since then, I’ve been following that routine for the last 75 years. Today, I have 14 organizations under the name of Ai Mata, and the credit for that goes to Yogiji Maharaj. Yogiji Maharaj inspired me a lot. Pramukh Swami Maharaj’s grace upon me was

boundless. Today I am in the presence and benefit of his successor, Mahant Swami Maharaj. For me he is my fourth guru in the BAPS. I pray to him to have a long life and that I keep on receiving his blessings and inspirations.”

Dr Vijay Bhatkar, the father of India’s super-computer and renowned scientist, said, “Many civilizations of the world have vanished through the passage of time. However, India’s culture has survived and endured. Among many of the reasons behind this is spiritual faith and the fact that God comes to earth in a human form. Even today Bhagwan Swaminarayan is here before us. I believe myself to be abundantly fortunate to have had the darshan of Pramukh Swami Maharaj. For years I was in search of a turning point in my life and I experienced it with his darshan. I have had many experiences of Swamishri. On one occasion Pramukh Swami Maharaj gave me *diksha*. Today, we are seeing his living divinity before us.”

Pujya Kothari Swami and Pujya Ishwarcharan Swami also addressed the *pratishtha* assembly. Thereafter, BAPS children and teenagers of Pune performed a cultural dance. Then senior sadhus offered garlands made by the women devotees of Pune to Mahant Swami Maharaj.

In conclusion, Mahant Swami Maharaj blessed the assembly, “For several years so many people



Mahant Swami Maharaj blesses the *pratishta* assembly

were associated with the creation of this mandir in Pune. Pramukh Swami Maharaj had been here several times. He came to see the land. The grand mandir has been made because of his wish, instructions and inspiration. Bhagwan Swaminarayan, Shastriji Maharaj, Yogiji Maharaj, Pramukh Swami Maharaj and all wish that the more people become attached to the mandir the better it will be for them. All those who are attached to the mandir, from children to seniors, feel that the mandir is theirs. Even one who has donated ₹1 for the mandir feels attached to the mandir. Whoever becomes attached to the mandir will also be liberated.

“With the opening of one mandir many activities begin to flourish: satsang *sabhas* for children and youths, etc. The anti-addiction projects launched by the mandir also brings peace to so many families and homes.

“A mandir also instils the spiritual understanding that joys and miseries in life are due to God’s wish, and that he also gives one the spiritual strength to remain happy. A unique aspect of wherever BAPS mandirs have been established is that one sees good outcomes, and everyone becomes happy. This is because of the internal transformation that takes place in people. They become spiritually knowledgeable, understanding

and tolerant.

“The devotees of Pune have sacrificed everything for the sake of making the mandir. On seeing each one of them one thinks they are like miracles. Their lives have been transformed. Many have given up bad habits and feel honoured and make others feel honoured too.

“There are no limits to doing satsang. One has to do satsang till one becomes *brahmarup*. All our other sadhanas are over, but our satsang sadhanas have not come to an end. By understanding the glory of others one experiences peace, happiness and *jnan samadhi*. Swami Bapa’s blessings are upon all and I pray that all become happy and keep on doing *seva* and bhakti.”

The entire *pratishta* celebrations were accomplished successfully due to Swamishri’s grace and the efforts of volunteers from many cities and villages of Maharashtra. In all, 1,200 male and 800 female volunteers offered their services in 48 departments, out of which 1,100 volunteers came from Mumbai. The rest came from Barshi, Nasik, Nanded, Kolhapur, Bhojdhari, Aurangabad, Dhuliya, Dhanu and Gujarat. ♦

Source: Translated by Sadhu Vivekjiandas
from Gujarati report written by
Sadhu Aksharjiandas and Sadhu Mangalshlokdas

Inauguration of BAPS Swaminarayan Mandir

1 March 2017, Jalandhar, Punjab



HH Mahant Swami Maharaj ritually
opens the mandir

Punjab is one of the hallowed states of India where Prishis chanted mantras in the Vedic era. It is also the land of the Saptasindhu where seven rivers flow. Jalandhar is one of Punjab's prominent cities where the Satlej and Vyas (Vipasha) rivers flow. More than 200 years ago the renowned Maharaja Ranjitsingh of Punjab was impressed on meeting Nilkanth Varni in Badrinath and Haridwar.

Over 200 years ago Sadguru Swarupanand Swami, who had hailed from Punjab, got the *paramhansa diksha* from Bhagwan Swaminarayan. Thereafter, there is no known record of any BAPS satsang activity in Punjab.

About 90 years ago, Guljharilal Nanda of Punjab was impressed on meeting Shastriji Maharaj in Ahmedabad, and he later became his disciple. Thereafter, BAPS satsang activities occurred occasionally in Punjab. Some references of how the satsang activities developed are as follows.

- In 1956, during a special train pilgrimage Yogiji Maharaj went to Bhakra Nangal on 14 December and sanctified Punjab.
- Yogiji Maharaj visited East Africa for satsang *vicharan* in 1959–60. During his visit to Tororo, Firozchand Jain, a young teacher born in Firozpur, Punjab, and later a resident of Ludhiana, was touched by Yogiji Maharaj's darshan and blessings, and became his disciple. He was the first person to invite Swamishri to Punjab and establish satsang.
- In 1968, Chandrakantbhai Trivedi, a staunch devotee in Mumbai, was promoted as a regional manager of Dena Bank in north India. As part of his responsibilities he had to establish a branch of Dena Bank in Jalandhar. There, a local businessman, Shri Subhash Agrawal, helped him. Then, through Chandrakantbhai, Shri Subhash Agrawal came into the contact of Yogiji Maharaj. He took *vartman* from Yogiji Maharaj and became a *satsangi*. Thereafter, Subhashbhai invited the BAPS sadhus for satsang in Jalandhar.
- In 1970, Pramukh Swami Maharaj went to Punjab. He visited Ludhiana, Jalandhar and Amritsar to nourish aspirants with satsang.
- In 1973, during the special Nilkanth Yatra by train Pramukh Swami Maharaj sanctified Bhakra Nangal in Punjab.
- In 1994, Pramukh Swami Maharaj consecrated a *hari* mandir in Gujarat Vihar, New Delhi. Thereafter, he instructed Dharmavatsal Swami, Munivatsal Swami and Anandmangal Swami to stay there and foster satsang in Delhi. The three sadhus also visited other cities in north India for satsang activities. In 2005, Pramukh Swami Maharaj inaugurated Swaminarayan Akshardham in New Delhi. Then, as per the wishes of Pramukh Swami Maharaj and the guidance of Ishwarcharan Swami and Atmaswarup Swami, satsang *vicharan* was started by Munivatsal Swami in Punjab, Hariyana, Himachal Pradesh, Uttranchal and other states. Then Jnanmangal Swami joined him for *vicharan*. Ishwarcharan Swami also did *vicharan* in some cities of north India. Mahant Swami Maharaj had visited Punjab six times to inspire and bless all. Gradually, satsang in Punjab flourished and the need for a *hari* mandir arose. Jalandhar was the first centre where the mandir was proposed.
- In 2013, with Pramukh Swami Maharaj's blessings and instructions, Atmaswarup Swami made efforts to look for land for the proposed mandir in Jalandhar. On 24 February 2013 the foundation-stone





Sadhus pull the *murtis* of Shri Akshar-Purushottam in the Mayur Rath



HH Mahant Swami Maharaj joyfully gives darshan as the grand *nagar-yatra* passes by

ceremony for the mandir was performed in Jalandhar by Ishwarcharan Swami by using the bricks sanctified by Pramukh Swami Maharaj. Thereafter, the construction of the mandir began. The Sunday satsang assembly was launched in Jalandhar, and sadhus travelled from Delhi to address the devotees and aspirants every week. Shri Subhash Agrawal, Shri Jnanbhushanji Agrawal, Shri Dineshbhai Patel, Shri Sanjeev Bhatia, Shri Sachin Mittal and others actively participated in satsang and *seva*. Subsequently, the *bal-balika*, *kishore-kishori* and satsang *mandals* were established.

The entire 1.25 acre mandir was planned by Prashantbhai Parmar, a *satsangi* architect, under the guidance of Ishwarcharan Swami. The mandir was beautifully built through the supervision and efforts of Kirtisagar Swami and others.

The mandir *pratishtha* day was decided to coincide with the *tithi* of the first mandir built and consecrated in Ahmedabad by Bhagwan Swaminarayan in 1822. The *pratishtha* ceremony was performed by Mahant Swami Maharaj on 1 March 2017 (Fagan *sud* 3, V.S. 2073). The three-day celebration programme comprised of a *nagar-yatra* of the *murtis*, *maha-yagna* and *pratishtha* rituals.

GRAND NAGAR-YATRA

On 26 February, a festive *nagar-yatra* of the

deities was organized in Jalandhar. It commenced with the *pujan* of Shri Harikrishna Maharaj by Ishwarcharan Swami, Viveksagar Swami, Jnaneshwar Swami, Anandswarup Swami and a few dignitaries of Jalandhar. The procession started from Guru Govindsinh Avenue, which is off the renowned Grand Trunk Road.

The procession comprised of:

- Youths on motorbikes donned in traditional headgear and holding aloft the celebration banner.
- *Murti* of Pramukh Swami Maharaj honoured on a decorated elephant.
- Shri Harikrishna Maharaj in a decorative palanquin carried by sadhus.
- Senior sadhus and other sadhus singing bhajans in a decorated *rath*.
- Youths pulling the Mayur Rath with the *murtis* of Shri Akshar-Purushottam Maharaj.
- Children and teenagers hauling the Nilkanth Varni and Guru Parampara *rath*.
- Youths performing the traditional Bhangra dance.
- *Murtis* of Shri Ram and family, Radha-Krishna Dev, Shiv and family in a decorated *rath*.
- Women devotees carrying holy texts and *kalashes* on their heads and singing kirtans. Female youths performing the traditional *ras garba* and local Bhangra dance.
- Pious aspirants showering flower petals to welcome the deities and the procession.



HH Mahant Swami Maharaj performs the initial rituals of the *maha-yagna*



Devotees participate in the *yagna* rituals

They also served all with fruits, fruit juices and dry fruits.

- Mahant Swami Maharaj doing darshan of and blessing the entire *nagar-yatra* as it passed by.

The entire *nagar-yatra* was organized by Devendra Sharma and Balraj Sahni. Thereafter, an evening assembly was held to felicitate and acknowledge the services of all who had assisted in the mandir building project. Finally, Mahant Swami Maharaj blessed everyone.

MAHA-YAGNA

On 28 February, the initial rituals for the Shri Swaminarayan Yagna for World Peace were conducted by Shrutiprakash Swami and Brahmin pundits. Thereafter, 600 *yajmans*, sitting around 51 *yagna kunds*, participated in the *yagna*. Mahant Swami Maharaj performed the *mahapuja* rituals of the deities and ignited the *yagna* fire. Thereafter, he addressed the *yajmans*.

The *yagnashala* and the *yagna kunds* were prepared by Sanjeev Bhatia, Subhash Thakur, Suraj Vadera and volunteers from Jalandhar and Jaipur. In the evening assembly, a kirtan bhakti concert was presented by sadhus.

MURTI-PRATISHTHA DAY

On Wednesday, 1 March 2017 (Fagan *sud* 3, V.S. 2073), the *murti-pratishtha* of the BAPS *hari* mandir in Jalandhar took place. At 6.30 a.m. the *murtis* were ritually bathed (*snapan* ritual)

by Ishwarcharan Swami, Viveksagar Swami and sadhus. At 7.30 a.m. the *murti-pratishtha* rituals commenced at the holy hands of Mahant Swami Maharaj. The *murtis* had been sanctified by Pramukh Swami Maharaj on 18 July 2015 in Sarangpur. Mahant Swami Maharaj performed the *pratishtha* rituals of Shri Akshar-Purushottam Maharaj. Ishwarcharan Swami, Viveksagar Swami and senior sadhus performed the *pratishtha* rituals of Shri Nilkanth Varni, Shri Radha-Krishna Dev, Shri Sita-Ram Dev, Shri Shiv-Parvati and Guru Parampara. The chanting of Vedic mantras charged the atmosphere with divinity. Later, Mahant Swami Maharaj expressed, “At the time of the *pratishtha* I had the darshan of Bhagwan Swaminarayan himself doing the *pratishtha* ceremony of his own *murti* and thereafter his form merging with the *murti*.” Swamishri’s words confirmed the divinity of the occasion.

Thereafter, the *pratishtha* assembly was held in a marquee on the grounds of Keshav Kala Niketan. Among the dignitaries present on this occasion were Shri Tarun Vijayji (Former MP), Shri Vijay Samplaji (President of BJP, Punjab), Shri Sunil Jyoti (Mayor of Jalandhar), Shri Kakavirji, representative of Baba Iqbalsinghji of Badu Saheb Gurudwara, representative of Namadhari Shikh guru Udaysinghji, prominent citizens, BAPS devotees and over 125 BAPS sadhus.

The assembly commenced with a welcome dance by children and youths. Then Anandswarup Swami spoke about the need for mandirs in society.



Mahant Swami Maharaj performs the *pratishtha* rituals of Shri Akshar-Purushottam Maharaj



Ishwarcharan Swami performs the *pratishtha* rituals of Shri Nilkanth Varni Maharaj

A traditional dance to honour the mandir was performed by BAPS youths. Ishwarcharan Swami explained the importance of satsang through mandirs. Then youths performed a thrilling Bhangra dance to the joy of all. Finally, Mahant Swami Maharaj blessed the congregation of devotees and well-wishers from Ludhiana, Moga, Hoshiyarpur, Kapurthala, Amritsar, Batala, Abohar, Kartarpur, Chandigarh, Jawalamukhi, Dharmashala, Simla, Jammu, Udhampur, Shrinagar, Delhi, America, UK, Africa, Bahrain, Dubai and Canada.

The *murti-pratishtha* celebrations were accomplished through the voluntary efforts of Dineshbhai Patel, Yogeshwar Sharma, Rajesh Panchal, Rajkumarji, Hiteshbhai, Sachin Mittal, Rajendra Mohanji, Tilakprasadji, Sanjeev Goswamiji, Vijaybhai and Narendraji. The

committee members of Shri Ram Mandir (small Ayodhya), Gurudwara Saheb (Guru Govindsingh Avenue) and Bharti Seva Sangh generously helped in the celebrations. The neighbouring residents provided accommodations for 125 sadhus. The entire event was made possible through the efforts of Kothari Munivatsal Swami, Jaytirth Swami, Jnanmangal Swami, Kirtisagar Swami, Dharmamurti Swami, Shubhchintan Swami, Haricharan Swami and BAPS volunteers.

The BAPS Swaminarayan Mandir in Jalandhar became a reality through the divine wish and blessings of Pramukh Swami Maharaj and also the blessings and presence of Mahant Swami Maharaj. ◆

*Translated by Sadhu Vivekji vandas
from Swaminarayan Prakash, April 2017*



Mahant Swami Maharaj and senior sadhus during the *pratishtha* assembly



The *murti-pratishtha* assembly in Jalandhar

A New Light on the African Continent

The dynamic story of how Satsang developed in Africa

The history of the growth of Satsang in Africa from a small seed to a giant banyan is an exciting saga of struggle, danger and divine grace.

The first devout immigrants of the Swaminarayan Sampradaya were the Kutchis. At the beginning of the 20th century they set sail and landed in East Africa for the purpose of trade and business. Despite the indigenous culture and customs they remained resolute in their morals and daily rituals of puja and worship. Shortly thereafter, the Luhana devotees from Saurashtra and the Patels of Charotar also emigrated for commerce and trade.

With the blessings of Shastriji Maharaj, Shri Harmanbhai Makandas Patel of Gana (dist. Kheda) went to East Africa. On returning to India in 1927, he met Purushottam Swami (Mota) at Bochasan mandir. Through his talks Harmanbhai realized the glory and greatness of Shastriji Maharaj. And before Harmanbhai's return to East Africa, Purushottam Swami gave him five small printed *murtis* of Akshar and Purushottam for daily worship. Harmanbhai argued that he needed only one for himself, and not five. But Purushottam Swami told him that all five would come to good use and Satsang in Africa would spread.

Harmanbhai returned to East Africa and the five sets of *murtis* were immediately adopted by new devotees for daily worship and thus the seeds of Satsang were sown. In 1928, the Kutchi devotees in Nairobi arranged a discourse on the Satsangijivan scripture and carried out a grand procession in which 1,200 devotees participated. Soon, the need for a small mandir arose. So a

canvas *murti* of Bhagwan Swaminarayan was installed in a room at Messrs Karsan Mulji Co. on Canal Road in Nairobi. This small shrine of worship became a profound source of inspiration and devotion for many devotees. Soon, Manibhai Umedbhai Patel and Tribhovandas Muljibhai Patel of Bhadran, Manibhai Purushottamdas Amin of Tarapur, Manibhai Ashabhai Patel of Sojitra and others formed a group that followed the Akshar-Purushottam doctrine in the Swaminarayan Sampradaya. It wasn't long before an organized form of Satsang crystallized. The 'East Africa Satsang Mandal' was born and Manibhai Ashabhai Patel was appointed as its first President.

As more and more aspirants thronged to the congregations, the Satsang fellowship started taking a more concrete form. In 1929 Harmanbhai was transferred to Kibweji railway station. There, as a stationmaster, he met





Brahmaswarup Shastriji Maharaj inspired the establishment of 'The East Africa Satsang Mandal' in 1928

Maganbhai Motibhai Patel of Vaso. The latter was inspired by the talks on Satsang and, giving up addictions and vices, became a staunch adherent of the Akshar-Purushottam Swaminarayan doctrine. His exposure to the Vachanamrut from Harmanbhai consolidated his faith and commitment. In 1932, after an evening volleyball match in Kibweji, Maganbhai proposed to Harmanbhai, Atmasinh and Hajarisinh, "All the members of other faiths pray at their own places of worship, then we too should pray to our Lord." And with this suggestion they began regular evening prayers and discourses. Though the beginning seemed small and trifle, it was a significant and potent step.

That same year, in 1932, Harmanbhai came to India. Out of his deep love and reverence for Shastriji Maharaj, Harmanbhai had come specially to take the benefit of Swami's spiritual association. Nirgundas Swami, a great, ardent exponent of the Akshar-Purushottam philosophy, specially came to receive him at Mumbai. Harmanbhai was touched by the profound talks of Nirgundas Swami. On arriving at Nagasar, Harmanbhai was overwhelmed on meeting Shastriji Maharaj. During the days that followed, Harmanbhai was impressed by the divinity of Shastriji Maharaj and

the buoyant joy of the devotees. He thus felt there was no point in returning to Africa for the sake of earning a living. How could he give up this priceless, divine company of Shastriji Maharaj? Harmanbhai then travelled with Shastriji Maharaj to Rajpur. There, he revealed his reluctance to return, "Swami, I do not wish to go back to Africa. There is no Satsang there and people are not inclined towards spirituality."

Shastriji Maharaj placed his hand on Harmanbhai's head, blessed him and said, "Go back and persevere. Satsang will flourish; it is a blessing of Maharaj. The Satsang fold will multiply through your efforts." And so Harmanbhai obeyed Shastriji Maharaj and resolved to strive for the growth of Satsang in Africa.

Nirgundas Swami's zeal was a great additional factor. He provided spiritual nourishment to the devotees through his correspondence of long letters, sometimes up to 100 pages. The letters elaborated upon the Akshar-Purushottam doctrine, devotion and glory. Every word instilled enthusiasm and commitment. The letters from Shastriji Maharaj and Yogiji Maharaj were similarly immensely inspiring, and like the soma juice rejuvenated and strengthened them.

Soon, the blessings and prophesy of Shastriji

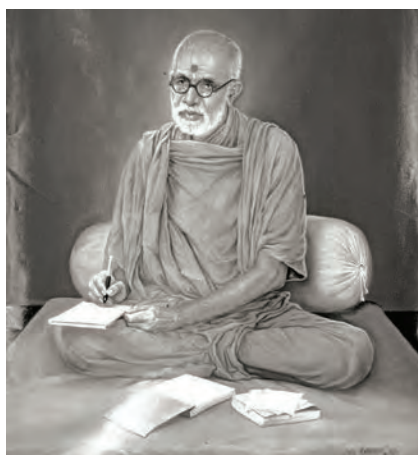


The pioneering devotees of The East Africa Satsang Mandal in 1938

Maharaj began to take shape. Maganbhai and Harmanbhai had committed themselves fully towards the mission of promoting Satsang. They started by searching and contacting Swaminarayan devotees in East Africa. Many Patels from the Charotar area of Gujarat were working in the railway. Both Harmanbhai and Maganbhai sent news of Shastriji Maharaj's blessings and copies of Nirgundas Swami's enlightening letters through the railway staff or telegraphy. Even to Indian railway guards they talked about Shastriji Maharaj. Wherever Maganbhai was transferred to he kindled the lamp of satsang. Soon Satsang centres were started in Mombasa, Nairobi, Tororo, Jinja, Eldoret, Makindu, Gilgil, Kisumu, Namasagli and other towns and villages. The wave of satsang gradually picked up momentum. Festivals were celebrated with great fanfare and enthusiasm. Manibhai Umedbhai Patel of Bhadran, a spirited devotee, was the first to arrange a festival in Makindu. This festival became a springboard for

the Akshar-Purushottam Satsang community. Thereafter, many more followed at Simba, Athi River, Kijabe, Nakuru, Machakosh, Mombasa, Nairobi and other places. The festival assemblies reverberated with the glory of Akshar and Purushottam and new aspirants joined.

Purushottambhai Makanbhai Patel (Gana), Ambalal Purushottamdas Patel (Dharmaj), Tribhovandas Muljibhai Patel (Bhadran) and other gems enrolled in the satsang activities and offered their time and energy in inspiring others. By the grace of Shastriji Maharaj, Satsang mushroomed throughout East Africa.



Sadguru Nirgundas Swami, whose inspiring letters nurtured the Satsang in Africa

Through the efforts of prominent devotees like Girdharbhai D. Patel, Prabhudas Lalaji (Gana), Himabhai Umedbhai (Sojitra), Mithabhai Chhotabhai Patel (Gajera), Ranchhodbhai (Umreth), Chunibhai L. Patel (Adas), G.K. Swami (Mbale), Gordhanbhai Bhattesa, C.M. Patel and Motibhai Patel (Tororo), Morzariya, Kashibhai Patel, Manibhai Patel (Cycle), Mohanlal Odhavji Devani, Ramjibhai Chotaliya, Harmanbhai



Devotees of Africa in spiritual discussions with Brahmaswarup Shastriji Maharaj in Sarangpur, 1951



Brahmaswarup Yogiji Maharaj performs the *murti-pratishtha arti* in the BAPS Mandir in Mombasa, Kenya, 1955

Patel (Tarapur), Maganbhai Patel (Kisumu), Motilal Chag, Premjibhai Pabari and many others, the Satsang community grew in leaps and bounds. Picnics, festivals, conventions and 7-day discourses, accelerated the progress of Satsang. Maganbhai gave marathon discourses on the greatness of Shastriji Maharaj, and the glory of devotion and spiritual association. Sometimes he talked all night and the power of his magnetic talks mesmerized the listeners, who became oblivious of time and space.

As the following increased rapidly, the intelligent and sharp Chhotabhai T. Patel, a member of the Theosophical Society, was impressed by the talks on Shastriji Maharaj. He was initiated into the Satsang and became an active member. With the dramatic growth of Satsang the necessity of a mandir became an urgent priority. In December 1945 a canvas painting of the *murtis* of Bhagwan Swaminarayan, Gunatitanand Swami and Gopalanand Swami, sanctified by Shastriji Maharaj in India, was installed in a small mandir in Nairobi. It was the first ever Akshar-Purushottam Mandir on foreign soul. The next five decades saw the abundant blessings and efforts of Shastriji Maharaj, Yogiji Maharaj and

Pramukh Swami Maharaj take an extraordinary shape and form.

For the first time, Yogiji Maharaj blessed the land of East Africa with his holy presence in 1955. Yogiji Maharaj established mandirs in Mombasa (1955), Tororo, Kampala and Jinja (1959-60) and in Nairobi (1970). He sanctified the interior villages of East Africa and inspired aspirants on the path of morality and spirituality. His work was continued by Pramukh Swami Maharaj, who visited Africa a total of 14 times. His gigantic efforts saw the establishment of children's forums, youth forums, women's forums and more mandirs. His relentless and unflagging efforts through the decades led to the opening of a beautiful *shikharbaddha* mandir in Nairobi in 1999. The mandir echoes the glorious spiritual heritage of India and stands as a beacon of inspiration for all. The story of sacrifice and service by generations of devotees is amply reflected by the mandir. The mandir is a symbol of the effort and devotion of devotees in East Africa: Shri Mahendrabhai Mithabhai Patel (Barrister), the late Shri Maganbhai Patel (Raja), the late Shri Nagjibhai Patel (Siswa), Shri Bhaskerbhai Patel, Shri Harshadbhai Rana, Shri Chandubhai S. Patel,



Yogiji Maharaj, Pramukh Swami Maharaj and Vinu Bhagat (Mahant Swami Maharaj) in Africa in 1960



Stalwart devotees of Africa – Maganbhai (sitting), Harmanbhai (left), Tribhovanbhai (behind), A.P. Patel (behind left) and others, c. December 1951

Shri Shantubhai Patel, Shri Kiranbhai Patel, Shri Rameshbhai Patel (Eldoret), Shri Kanubhai Patel (Nakuru), Shri Ghanshyambhai P. Patel (Nakuru), Dr Chimanbhai Patel (Kisumu) and many other devotees.

In 1972, the sudden expulsion of Asians from Uganda created a drastic void in the mandirs. The deities in the four mandirs were left unattended and bereft of daily worship and rituals. Shri C.M. Patel, Shri Mahendrabhai M. Patel, Shri Mohanbhai Patel (Colorama), Shri Bhaskerbhai H. Patel, Shri Sureshbhai Patel (Marshal) and Ghanshyambhai Nagibhai Patel planned to bring back the *murtis* from the mandirs in Kampala, Jinja, Gulu and Tororo. It was a daunting task. The prevailing civil war had unleashed a reign of terror, looting and murder in Uganda. They were even warned by the border police that it would be unwise to risk their lives because no one would return alive. But regardless of any thoughts of death and danger the devotees returned to Nairobi with all the *murtis* and utensils of the mandirs. Pramukh Swami Maharaj was extremely pleased and blessed the devotees for their bold services and in demonstrating their deep allegiance to the Satsang.

As the East Africa Satsang fellowship multiplied under the guidance and endeavour of prominent devotees, West and South Africa also pulsated with the enthusiasm of a handful of devotees. Their attraction for Satsang was astonishing. Yogiji Maharaj visited Rhodesia and Nyasaland in 1959-60 but was unable to enter South Africa because of political unrest. To satisfy the wishes of the devotees of South Africa, Swami met them at the border by the River Limpopo near Beit bridge. Swami blessed them and thus sowed the seeds of Satsang in South Africa.

Since then, through the mammoth efforts of Pramukh Swami Maharaj, Satsang blossomed not only in East Africa but also in Zambia, Zimbabwe, Malawi, Mozambique, South Africa, Botswana, Madagascar and Mauritius.

Over the past six decades, Pragat Brahmaswarup Mahant Swami Maharaj has also visited Africa many times and has inspired the Satsang.

The dramatic story of Satsang in Africa from a handful of dedicated and enterprising devotees to a flourishing, dynamic fellowship is a stupendous example of what faith, perseverance, and the blessings of God and guru can achieve. ♦



Mahant Swami Maharaj's 'AKSHAR YATRA' IN AFRICA

March–April 2017

The first place Shastriji Maharaj spread the BAPS Satsang outside of India was East Africa.

In 1955, Yogiji Maharaj's first overseas satsang visit was to East Africa.

And, in 1974, Pramukh Swami Maharaj's first overseas satsang tour as guru was to East Africa.

So, fittingly, in 2017, Mahant Swami Maharaj's first overseas satsang journey as the guru of BAPS was also to East Africa and South Africa. His recent travels in Africa during March and April gave everyone the divine experience that Bhagwan Swaminarayan and Pramukh Swami Maharaj are still present among us. The following is a brief overview of his 27-day satsang tour to Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania and South Africa.



MARCH

17, Ahmedabad, Nairobi

In the morning, Swamishri flew from Ahmedabad and arrived in Nairobi, Kenya. Devotees had gathered to give him a rousing reception.

19, Nairobi; Pushpadolotsav

The *murtis* in the mandir had been adorned in accordance with the festive occasion. Several pots containing coloured water had been placed in front of Thakorji, from which Swamishri sprayed some on the *murti* of Shri Akshar-Purushottam Maharaj.

In the evening assembly, Pushpadolotsav was celebrated. After some festive speeches and bhajans, youths held up a large map of Africa



Pushpadolotsav celebration, Nairobi, 19 March 2017

and requested Swamishri to colour it with sanctified coloured water to symbolize the growth of Satsang throughout Africa.

Thereafter, Swamishri blessed the assembly, “To spread Satsang throughout Africa, sacrifice is necessary. *‘Ame sau Swāminā bālak, marishu Swāmine mātē.’* By living like this, all will be coloured by satsang. Seeing the devotees’ observance of *niyams*, all the sadhus are pleased. There are many devotees like this. This is the true colour. It does not fade at all throughout life.”

Then, after narrating the stories of Ashabhai, Ishwarbhai and Motibhai [stalwart devotees during the time of Shastriji Maharaj], Swamishri added, “Even when God tested them, these devotees did not waver. That is true colour. Celebrate festivals, but keep *divyabhav* and serve. Without *divyabhav*, the colour will fade. Maharaj says, “To see everyone as divine is *brahmavidya*.”

Then the flower Pushpadolotsav celebration began. Swamishri performed *pujan* of Shri Harikrishna Maharaj and showered flower petals upon him. Ishwarcharan Swami, Atmaswarup Swami and other sadhus also showered flower petals upon Shri Harikrishna Maharaj, and then on Swamishri as well.



BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir, Nairobi

Thereafter, as the devotees passed by the stage, they were showered with flower petals. To the background of festive bhajans, the devotees joyously had Swamishri's darshan, as he became covered with flower petals.

21, Nairobi; New School Dedication & Pramukh Swami Avenue Naming Ceremony

In the evening assembly, the public dedication of Tarakwa High School, located 225 km from Nairobi in Bomet County, took place. BAPS Charities had sponsored the building of three new classrooms and new halls for a multi-use library in the school.

Swamishri unveiled the dedication plaque in the presence of Milton M. Mokah (Director of Education, Curriculum Development and Teachers' Education), Micah Tonui (Chairman, Board of Governors, Tarakwa High School) and other invited dignitaries.

Also, in the evening assembly, Hon. Jonathan Mueke (Deputy Governor of Nairobi County) declared that Masari Road, from Parklands Road to Iregi Road, will now be known as 'Pramukh Swami Avenue' in honour of the outstanding life and works of Pramukh Swami Maharaj.

Mr Mueke addressed the assembly, "It is my

pleasure to be here tonight, in this spiritual gathering in front of His Divine Holiness Mahant Swami Maharaj. The governor of Nairobi Dr Evans Kidero sends his greetings to you, His Holiness, and your entourage.

"While I never met His Holiness Pramukh Swami Maharaj, I know that he blessed Nairobi and its people on his various visits to Kenya. It is because of him that we have this temple – a monument of peace, love and unity.

"Just your presence, Your Holiness, has already blessed us with renewed vigour as we look to the positive future that awaits us all.

"Tonight, we find ourselves making history once again. As a token of the appreciation from the people of this wonderful city we would like to acknowledge the life and work of His Holiness Pramukh Swami Maharaj, and as a gift to you, Your Holiness, Mahant Swami Maharaj. The Governor, myself and our team are proud to announce that from this day forth Masari Road, which stretches from Parklands Road all the way to Iregi Road, here in Parklands will now be known as 'Pramukh Swami Avenue'."

Also present for this ceremony were Christopher Khaembe (Urban and Planning Minister) and Mohamed Abdullahi (Minister of



'Pramukh Swami Avenue' Naming Ceremony, Nairobi, 21 March 2017

Road and Infrastructure). Swamishri then uncovered the name plaque in the presence of government officials.

This was the first time that a major road in Nairobi had been named after a prominent Hindu guru. The new name will be displayed at all the 16 junctions along this road.

At the conclusion of the assembly Swamishri blessed the gathering in English, "Pramukh Swami Maharaj's motto was, 'In the joy of others lies our own, in the good of others lies our own, in the progress of others lies our own.' He actually lived every second of his life according to this. He did not merely quote this just once in a while, but he lived according to it every second of his life, night and day. Every second he lived according to this; that is an extraordinary thing.

"He met everyone, right from the poor man to the rich man with the same attitude. Pramukh Swami Maharaj did not differentiate. He looked upon everyone as human beings."

22, Nairobi; Guru-roon Smruti Din

Today was a special day for all to remember their personal debt and gratitude to Pramukh Swami Maharaj for enriching their lives with faith, devotion, *swarupnishtha* and other values.

But, the greatest and most valuable gift he has given is that he remains forever *pragat* (manifest).

Speeches reflecting these sentiments were delivered. In conclusion, Swamishri blessed, "We have a remarkable attainment. Shastriji Maharaj consolidated the knowledge of Akshar-Purushottam, otherwise we would be roaming aimlessly elsewhere! Because of our love for Shastriji Maharaj, Yogiji Maharaj and Pramukh Swami Maharaj, we have benefitted and our work has been accomplished. We are extremely fortunate. For so many births we have been wandering around, but by having attained Shastriji Maharaj, Yogiji Maharaj and Pramukh Swami Maharaj we have become fulfilled. Remain firm in this conviction. Shriji Maharaj has said that he is displeased if there is laxity in *nishtha*. If *nishtha* is firm then everything is fine. Akshardham!"

Thereafter, in tribute to Pramukh Swami Maharaj, Ishwarcharan Swami brought a *kalash* containing the sacred *asthi* of Pramukh Swami Maharaj and Swamishri performed *pujan* of the *kalash* with sandalwood paste and flowers. Then, the devotees also performed *pujan* of the *kalash*.

23, Lenasia (South Africa)

In honour of Swamishri's visit to South Africa,



Welcome assembly, Lenasia, South Africa, 24 March 2017

70 *yuvaks*, *yuvatis*, *kishores* and *kishoris* had prepared a special welcome. For the preceding 35 days, they had performed various austerities as their welcome for Swamishri. Swamishri was truly pleased by their unique devotion and placed flower petals in all the 70 cups of juice to be given to the fasting youngsters to break their fasts.

As part of the special welcome, Swamishri was led into the mandir by Mukeshbhai, Niranjanbhai, Nitinbhai, Harnishbhai (Rishibhai) and other senior devotees of South Africa, with each devotee symbolically clearing Swamishri's path with a golden *savarni* (small hand-held boom). Young children welcomed Swamishri by showering flower petals at his feet and youths lightly showered sanctified water using auspicious *asopalav* leaves.

Swamishri sat in the middle of the assembly hall with Shri Harikrishna Maharaj. Here, to the accompaniment of Vedic mantras, Shri Harikrishna Maharaj and Swamishri were honoured in various ways.

On seeing the beautifully designed welcome *rangoli* prepared by the devotees using flower petals, Swamishri commented, "This is the first time I have seen a *rangoli* made of flowers."

In this way, during Swamishri's six-day stay at the BAPS Mandir in Lenasia, the devotees of all

BAPS centres in South Africa daily devoutly presented new programmes with unity and pleased Swamishri. Each presentation was creative, based on the true *upasana* and full of affection.

24, Lenasia; Welcome Assembly

Swamishri entered the assembly carrying Shri Harikrishna Maharaj in his hands.

On the performing stage, in front of the main stage, 40 youths singing and playing 20 different musical instruments warmly welcomed Swamishri and Shri Harikrishna Maharaj in an innovative, yet traditional manner.

Thereafter, as Swamishri would not be able to visit all the BAPS centres in South Africa during his short stay, soil from each of the centres was brought to Swamishri in separate *kalashes*. He sanctified each with flower petals to symbolize his visit to the various centres.

Blessing the assembly, Swamishri said, "Wherever there is a welcome assembly, I remember Yogiji Maharaj's words: 'This honour is not for me, but this honour is for Dada Khachar and Bhagwan Swaminarayan.' Your welcome has been delightful, but it is in honour of Maharaj and Swami.

"The youths here are of high quality. Quality



Children and youths sing and play during the welcome assembly, Lenasia, 25 March 2017

refers to firm observance of dharma, *niyams* and satsang. So, the future is bright. The numbers may be small, but they have given much joy. Practising satsang in this way will please Maharaj-Swami, Pramukh Swami Maharaj and all. In Satsang, *nishtha* is the main necessity, ‘Gunātitoksharam Brahma....’ If this form is realized, everything is achieved. Whether one realizes it or not, recognizes him or not, but Maharaj is manifest. So, always remain joyful and strong. Remain firm in *niyams* and dharma. Maharaj has said, ‘If one has *nishchay* and observes *niyams* one will go all the way to Akshardham. Nothing else remains to be done.’”

25, Lenasia; New Shikharbaddha Mandir Shilanyas Ceremony

On the 17-acre site in the North Riding suburb, located on the Johannesburg to Lenasia highway, a large marquee had been set up. In one portion a stage had been erected and in front of it a foundation pit had been dug for the *shilanyas* ceremony, and was decorated with rows of flowers and colourful pictures of the mandir model.

Within the foundation pit, Swamishri, Ishwarcharan Swami and senior devotees performed the *mahapuja* rituals. At the same time,

2,500 devotees seated in the marquee also participated in the memorable *shilanyas* ceremony. Together with the *shilas* for this mandir, the bricks for the new mandir in Botswana were also worshipped.

After the initial rituals, Swamishri sat at the edge of a smaller, deeper pit within the main foundation pit. From here, as the Vedic mantras continued to be recited, he placed the *nidhikumbh* and then, together with Ishwarcharan Swami, put the worshipped *shilas* (stones) in place.

After the *shilanyas* ceremony had concluded, the assembly took place. Ishwarcharan Swami said, “In 1927, Shastriji Maharaj gave profuse blessings that satsang will develop in Africa. Then Yogiji Maharaj and Pramukh Swami Maharaj greatly nurtured the satsang here. In 1999, Pramukh Swami Maharaj consecrated the *shikharbaddha* mandir in Nairobi.

“Today, the ceremony to begin Africa’s second, and South Africa’s first, BAPS *shikharbaddha* mandir has been performed. Prayers that the mandir is quickly completed and is consecrated by Mahant Swami Maharaj, and that all attain ultimate liberation.”

Then, the dignitaries present – Shri Ashwinbhai Trikamjee (President, South Africa Hindu

Mahasabha), Shri Omie Singh MP, Shri Thulani (Former Chairman, BHP, Bilton), Shri Harishbhai Gohil (CEO, Zee TV, Africa) and others – were honoured.

Blessing the assembly, Swamishri said, “Yogiji Maharaj has said, ‘The whole of Africa will be coloured [with satsang].’ It may take time, but his words always come true because our message is true. Shriji Maharaj, Gunatitanand Swami are true. Our message has substance. Understand this firmly and offer devotion. We have seen the pure lives of Yogiji Maharaj and Pramukh Swami Maharaj. There is no doubting them. But now, what must we do? Now we have to continue the work of satsang. Firmly understand the principles of Brahman, Parabrahman and the Satpurush. This is the straight-line understanding. It is for this understanding that a mandir will be built here.”

Finally, all the devotees got the opportunity to place a brick in the foundation pit. Also, on this occasion, Mahant Swami Maharaj performed the *murti-pratishtha* rituals for the *murtis* of the new BAPS *hari* mandir in Benoni.

27, Mayfair; Special Annakut

During Swamishri’s visit to the BAPS Mandir in Mayfair, Johannesburg, a grand, decorative *annakut* was offered to Thakorji, in which 30 specially designed cakes were offered. Each cake was creatively decorated with an incident of Mahant Swami Maharaj with Yogiji Maharaj or Pramukh Swami Maharaj, which was researched by Mehulbhai, Vishalbhai, Jigneshbhai, Raseshbhai, Yogeshbhai and others. Mehulbhai had also composed special poems describing each story. Swamishri blessed them all for their devotion.

28, Lenasia; Pushpadolotsav

In the evening assembly, children and youths presented a cultural programme, in which they described the significance of each of the colours in the South African flag. After each description, a pot of that colour was brought before



Swamishri performs the *shilanyas* ceremony of BAPS *shikhar-baddha* mandir, Johannesburg, South Africa, 25 March 2017

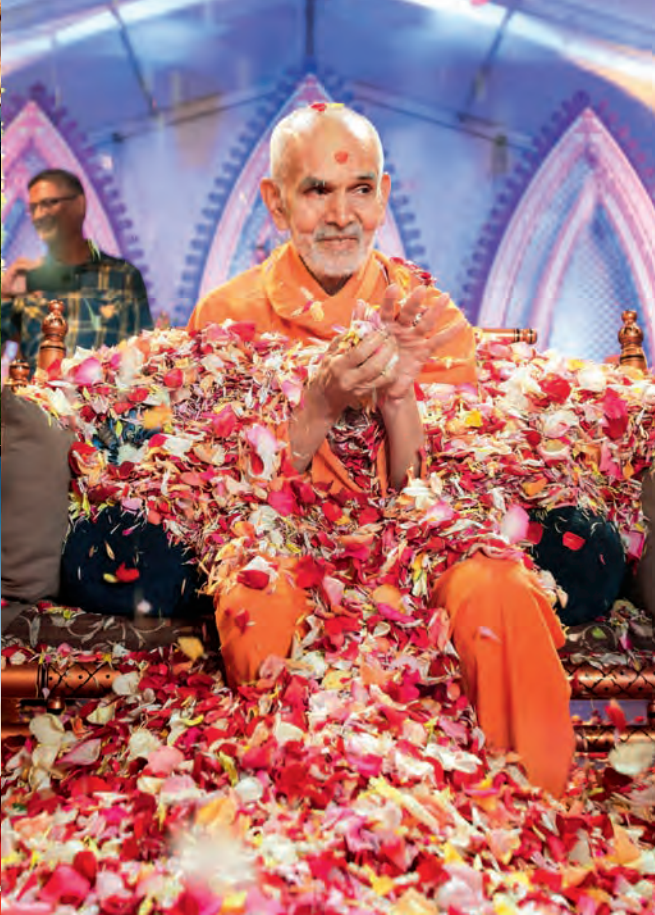
Swamishri and a prayer recited. Swamishri then placed flower petals in the pot as blessings. At the end, everyone prayed to Swamishri, “May peace and purity spread throughout the country.”

Thereafter, in the traditional time-honoured way, young children in traditional dress recited Vedic mantras for unity. Swamishri then waved the South African flag.

Next, while one group of *yuvaks* sang the bhajan ‘*Swāmi amāre ang tam rang dholi do...*’, another group performed a traditional *raas* dance.

Then, Swamishri sat with Shri Harikrishna Maharaj on the florally decorated swing at the front of the stage. Swamishri performed *pujan* of Shri Harikrishna Maharaj and youths sang the prayer, ‘*Mahābalvant māyā tamāri...*’

Swamishri blessed the assembly, “This *fagva* prayer is from chapter 64 of the Bhaktachintamani.



Pushpadolotsav celebration, Lenasia, 28 March 2017

The prayer requests for the things that one must do and also for things not to be done. We pray that everyone's circumstances improve. To do *seva* is our objective. Here, everyone strictly observes *niyams* and dharma. I feel that if we had not come to South Africa, we would have missed a lot. The affection of the devotees is magnificent. Now, work to finish this mandir. Serve in this way to especially please Maharaj and Swami."

Then the Pushpadolotsav celebrations started. As devotees passed by, they showered flower petals towards Swamishri's feet. At the same time, the sadhus showered flower petals on the devotees. Swamishri smiled at the devotees, and occasionally, threw flower petals onto the devotees himself.

The flower petals piled up around Swamishri and gradually reached his lap. Swamishri started showering flower petals on the sadhus. Such joyous scenes were etched in everyone's memories.

29, Lenasia (South Africa) to Dar-es-Salaam (Tanzania)

Swamishri flew from South Africa to Dar-es-Salaam, the capital of Tanzania.

30, Dar-es-Salaam; Welcome Assembly

The welcome assembly was held at the Julius Nyerere International Conference Centre.

The *balaks* welcomed Shri Harikrishna Maharaj and Swamishri by singing Vedic mantras.

The former Tanzanian president, Ali Hassan Mwinyi, also welcomed Swamishri. He said, "His Holiness Mahant Swami Maharaj, I feel not only happy but also proud to welcome you to Tanzania. I ask you to pray for us. We need peace in this country. Please pray for peace, unity and growth of this country..."

Then, the youths performed a traditional welcome dance. And after speeches by senior sadhus, Swamishri blessed, "We are the messengers of peace. Yogiji Maharaj and Pramukh Swami Maharaj wished that wherever we go, peace is established. God is the giver of peace. Peace resides at the feet of God and his holy Sadhu, but not elsewhere. Elsewhere, there may be money, but not peace. They are begging for peace.

"You may have luxuries which appear to give happiness and peace. But that is not peace. Pramukh Swami Maharaj was peaceful in every situation. Others may get upset, but he was always set. Yogiji Maharaj was also an abode of the highest peace. He enjoyed the divine bliss of God. May such peace prevail everywhere. Where is the need to quarrel? It causes us and everyone else unrest. May there be peace in this country and continent and throughout the world."

31, Dar-es-Salaam

The theme of the evening assembly was 'Niyam and Nishchay'. First, youths presented a drama titled 'Abhaysinhni Tek' to demonstrate resoluteness in the observance of *niyams*.



Swamishri sprays coloured water on the devotees during the Pushpadolotsav celebration, Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania, 1 April 2017

After a delightful dance by *shishus* (infants), the youths presented a drama based on the story of Himraj Shah to depict the ideal of staunch faith.

Blessing the assembly Swamishri said, “Since Maharaj’s time, lakhs of devotees have developed *niyams* and *nishchay*. Today, also, there are many, and new ones continue to develop. Nobody can stop those who observe *niyams* and have *nishchay* from going to Akshardham. We are so fortunate that Shriji Maharaj came to this *brahmand* and we have attained him. Wherever Yogiji Maharaj and Pramukh Swami Maharaj went, they emphasized these two things. They gave *niyams* and strengthened *nishchay*. They removed our addictions and installed God – they gave satsang. Pride in observing *niyams* is generated. Satsang remains pure due to two things – *niyams* and *nishchay*.

“Essentially, we have to attach to God. That is what *niyams* and *nishchay* are for. Today, Shriji Maharaj is manifest. Without that, this is not possible. So, we should remain forever joyful. For countless births we have been trying. And in this birth we have attained God, so make the most of it.”

APRIL

1, Dar-es-Salaam; Pushpadolotsav

The Pushpadolotsav assembly was held on the grounds of Kisutu School. The stage was appropriately decorated with colourful flowers. In the centre of the stage Swamishri was seated with Shri Harikrishna Maharaj. At the front of the stage were water sprays decorated with flowers.

Festive bhajans were sung, followed by speeches. Thereafter, Swamishri blessed, “Shriji Maharaj really liked this celebration. And Pramukh Swami Maharaj has given so much joy. Every year he celebrated this festival and sprayed sanctified colour on everyone. In 2015, Bapa’s health was delicate, yet he still stayed till the end.

“We all have to be coloured by the divine. Bhagwan Swaminarayan himself says, ‘See everyone as divine. That is *brahmavidya*.’ All who have the association of Shriji Maharaj are divine. Do not ever doubt that. This is not mere talk. But they are truly divine. To coat a wall with new paint, old paint has to be removed. Similarly, we have to remove the paint of the *panchvishays* and apply the paint of divinity. Then only one will experience joy. Truly, everyone is divine.



Pujya Ishwarcharan Swami performs the 40th *patotsav arti* of BAPS Mandir, Dar-es-Salaam, 2 April 2017

Because it is not believed, it has to be told. So believe it.”

Then the Pushpadolotsav celebration started. First, Swamshri performed *pujan* of Shri Hari-krishna Maharaj with sandalwood paste, flowers and rice and then sprayed him with saffron-scented water using a small golden spray. Thereafter, Swamishri sprayed everyone with sanctified saffron-scented water. As the festive bhajans echoed in the background, it was as if Sarangpur had been created in Dar-es-Salaam.

2, Dar-es-Salaam; Patotsav

The 40th *patotsav* of the mandir consecrated by Pramukh Swami Maharaj was celebrated today. On this occasion, a grand *annakut* of 1,525 items was offered to Thakorji.

In the *patotsav* assembly, the youths presented a traditional dance and then a drama imparting the message of *ghar sabha*, and in which memories of Yogiji Maharaj and Pramukh Swami Maharaj in Dar-es-Salaam and Mwanza were depicted. At the end of the drama, the youths requested Swamishri, “Just as Yogiji Maharaj and Pramukh Swami Maharaj showered their affection on us, write us a sentence to reflect your love.” So, Swamishri wrote in

English, “We will always love everyone. - Sadhu Keshavjivandas.”

3, Dar-es-Salaam

In the evening assembly, the youths presented a drama on the story of Hira Mukhi, which reveals the ideal of *paksh* (allegiance) towards God and his devotees.

Then, Swamishri honoured Shri Subhashbhai Patel, whom Pramukh Swami Maharaj had appointed as chairman of the BAPS Satsang in Tanzania. For the past 18 years he has given outstanding service with great dedication, selflessness and faith. With the blessings and guidance of Pramukh Swami Maharaj, and under the leadership of Subhashbhai, the Satsang in Tanzania has grown manifold. In his place, Shri Kumarbhai Pujara was appointed as chairman.

Swamishri blessed the assembly, “We just saw the drama of Hira Mukhi. Subhashbhai is from Bochasan and is a descendent of Hira Mukhi. Subhashbhai’s life was also previously [wayward and disruptive] like that of Hira Mukhi. Whenever I see the drama of Hira Mukhi I am emboldened. We cannot thank Subhashbhai enough for his *seva*.

“Our motto is *samp, subhradbhav* and *ekta*. We



Swamishri disperses the sacred *asthi* of Brahmaswarup Pramukh Swami Maharaj at Bismarck Rock, Lake Victoria, Mwanza, Tanzania, 4 April 2017

have been to Nairobi, South Africa and here. I have seen unity everywhere. Bapa is truly pleased by unity. Yogiji Maharaj and Pramukh Swami Maharaj would be so pleased to see such unity that their chests would swell with pride. Yogiji Maharaj said, ‘To manifest God within requires *nishtha* with unity.’ Unity consolidates everything. We experience that we are seated in Dham. Like Ram’s arrow, Yogiji Maharaj had released the arrow of *samp*, *suhradbhav* and *ekta*. Whoever has caught this arrow has become happy. Shriji Maharaj said, ‘God resides where there is *samp* (unity), *suhradbhav* (friendship), compassion and good conduct.’ Yogiji Maharaj used to highlight unity in all his talks. We should develop unity, friendship and *upasana*. Hira Mukhi had all these qualities. Subhashbhai also has them. He even knows the names of all the young children. He knows the young and old, because he has friendship with them. May such devotion continue to flourish in all.”

4, Dar-es-Salaam, Mwanza, Kampala (Uganda)

From Dar-es-Salaam Swamishri travelled to Mwanza and ritually dispersed Pramukh

Swami Maharaj’s holy ashes into Lake Victoria. Thereafter, he flew to Kampala for a 7-day visit.

5, Kampala; Shri Hari Jayanti

The evening celebration assembly to commemorate Bhagwan Swaminarayan’s 236th birthday was held in the large hall of the Imperial Royale Hotel. At the conclusion of the assembly, Swamishri blessed, “Bhagwan Swaminarayan is the Lord of infinite *brahmands*. But out of compassion for us he manifested on this earth. It is not possible to describe such an attainment. Maharaj manifested. Shastriji Maharaj manifested. All our work is done. Our *moksha* is guaranteed. Keep *niyam*, *nishchay* and *samp*. Through unity there is progress. So, keep unity in the home and in Satsang. Bow to all. To earn God’s blessings is the principle of all shastras. If this is understood, everything is accomplished, if not then nothing is attained.”

The deputy prime minister of Uganda, Shri Kivejinja was also present in the assembly. He addressed the gathering, “Mahant Swami Maharaj! Namaste. When I see you I am delighted. We are happy that you are here. Give us blessings for better living. I am here to represent our president.” Then, he read President Y.K. Museveni’s letter: “Your Divine Holiness Mahant Swami Maharaj, you are most welcome to Uganda and I pray that your stay will be a blessing to all of us and memorable to you.

“You are here to celebrate the birth of Lord Swaminarayan. I applaud your good gesture of coming to Uganda to celebrate with the Indian community and I wish you happy celebrations. I pray that His Divine Holiness Mahant Swami Maharaj continues to visit Uganda.”

Finally, Swamishri and guests performed the birthday celebration *arti* and rocked Shri Harikrishna Maharaj in a decorated swing as the bhajan ‘*Dharma gher ānand bhayo jay bolo Ghanshyāmkī....*’ was sung.

6, Kampala, Jinja; Immersion of Pramukh Swami Maharaj's Sacred Ashes

Regarded as the lifeline of Africa, the River Nile is one of the world's longest rivers. Yogiji Maharaj and Pramukh Swami Maharaj have both sanctified the famous river. Today, the sacred ashes of Brahmaswarup Pramukh Swami Maharaj were to be dispersed in the river by Pragat Brahmaswarup Mahant Swami Maharaj.

Between 3.00 and 4.00 p.m. a devotional procession of the sacred ashes was held through the main streets of Jinja. Swamishri travelled from Kampala to Jinja by helicopter, landing at Kakindu Stadium at 4.50 p.m. Chairman of Jinja Satsang *mandal*, Shri Babubhai Patel, welcomed Swamishri with a garland. From here, Swamishri went to the banks of the River Nile and reached the source of the Nile on Lake Victoria by boat. Here, Swamishri joined the *mahapuja* rituals taking place on a large boat. At 5.35 p.m., Swamishri ritually dispersed *guruhari* Pramukh Swami Maharaj's sacred ashes in the River Nile.

Also, in 1951 the sacred ashes of Brahmaswarup Shastriji Maharaj and in 1971 the sacred ashes of Brahmaswarup Yogiji Maharaj had been dispersed here.

Thousands of devotees and well-wishers from throughout Africa and government officials of Uganda were present to offer their tributes to Pramukh Swami Maharaj.

From here, Swamishri went to the BAPS Mandir in Jinja for the evening assembly.

7, Kampala

The evening assembly was based on the theme 'Gurave Namaha' in which the glory of the manifest guru as described in the Vedas and the Vachanamrut was presented.

8, Kampala; Pushpadolotsav

In the evening Pushpadolotsav assembly Shri Harikrishna Maharaj and Swamishri here seated on a swing decorated with flowers.



Swamishri ritually disperses *guruhari* Pramukh Swami Maharaj's sacred *asthi* in the River Nile, Jinja, 6 April 2017

The youths presented a drama depicting the necessity of observing *niyams* and dharma. This was followed by festive bhajans, speeches by senior sadhus and Swamishri's blessings. Thereafter, Swamishri performed *pujan* of Shri Harikrishna Maharaj and showered rose flower petals on him. Then, as the devotees passed by for Swamishri's darshan, they showered flower petals at his feet, while he too showered flower petals on them.

Thus, after spending 27 days in East and South Africa, Mahant Swami Maharaj returned to Ahmedabad on 14 April 2017.

Throughout this 'Akshar Yatra', devotees – young and old – revelled in his divine presence and expressed their devotion in a multitude of creative and inspiring ways.

Everyone felt in their hearts that Pramukh Swami Maharaj is still present today in the form of Mahant Swami Maharaj. ♦

*Translated by Sadhu Amrutvijaydas
from Swaminarayan Prakash, May 2017*



Bal Din, Nairobi, 20 March 2017

Children with Mahant Swami Maharaj

March–April 2017

Whether in India or abroad, children are drawn like magnets to *guruhari* Mahant Swami Maharaj. Whenever Swamishri sees young children, he invariably stops to acknowledge their presence, listen to their recitals and questions, and bless them. Wherever Swamishri is, his affection towards children flows naturally like the Ganga. Even when pressed for time, Swamishri still takes time out for children to bless them by tapping them on their head and by holding their hand. It is indeed a joyous spectacle to see Swamishri interact with the youngsters, where the difference in age is no barrier. The following selection of incidents reflects just how eager the children are to interact with Swamishri and how genuinely comfortable they feel in his presence.

WISH FULFILLED

Seated in a golf cart, Swamishri was on his way to the *abhishek mandap* in Nairobi mandir. As he got out, Arav Dave and Nilkanth Parekh, two young *balaks*, were standing nearby. Swamishri spontaneously held the hands of both *balaks*

and began to walk. The children were elated. As Swamishri entered the *mandap*, he revealed, “It was the wish of both these *balaks*.” Everyone was intrigued and so called the boys to ask them. And, indeed, they both had wished that Swamishri hold their hand and walk.

HEART TO HEART

Swamishri was walking towards his quarters in Nairobi. A *balak* was standing on the side holding a heart-shaped cut-out. As Swamishri passed by, the child extended his hands to offer the heart to Swamishri, saying, “Will you accept?” Instantly, Swamishri took the heart and placed it to his chest. Then he placed his hand on the boy’s head and blessed him. The *balak* jumped with great joy.

RECITAL RECEIVED AND APPRECIATED

Swamishri wakes up daily between 3.30 and 4.00 a.m. So, between 9.30 and 10.30 a.m., he takes a short nap. In Nairobi, on 23 March 2017, when Swamishri was resting, 10-year-old Tilak Dave was seated outside his room. He wished to



Young *balaks* present a dance, Dar-es-Salaam, 31 March 2017

recite some passages of the shastras he had memorized. Everyone told him that it would be unlikely for him to get the chance. But, Tilak patiently waited. Suddenly, Swamishri opened the door of his room and came out. He wanted to go for a bath, so someone went to call Swamishri's attendant sadhu. Taking this unexpected opportunity, Tilak enthusiastically began to recite and present what he had memorized. Swamishri listened to Tilak with great attention, and when he had finished, Swamishri blessed him and gave him a chocolate as *prasad*. But the climax for Tilak was when Swamishri called him close and embraced him.

HAND RAISED FOR EACH DEPARTMENT

One day, the volunteers serving in the various departments were being introduced to Swamishri. After the duties of each department had been described, the volunteers serving in that department would raise their hands and Swamishri would look at them to convey his blessings. Seated among them was Sharad, the young son of Rajubhai. Unexpectedly, Swamishri called him close, blessed him and then revealed, "This *balak* raised his hand for all the departments. He has raised his hand five times so far."

Everyone was stunned that even amid the large gathering of volunteers, Swamishri had spotted and noted in detail the actions of a young child.

CHAIN OF BALAKS

On 25 March 2017, in Lenasia, after completing his morning puja Swamishri was walking towards the Sant ashram. Along his path, on both sides, one by one *balaks* held Swamishri's hands and walked with him. By the time he had reached the Sant ashram, Swamishri brought great joy to many *balaks*. The sight of Swamishri and children delighted the devotees.

DANDVATS TO ALL

One day, in Lenasia, during Swamishri's morning puja, children and youths sang kirtans so heartfully and melodiously that Swamishri said to them, "Today during puja I felt so much joy that I mentally offered *dandvats* to all the sadhus and devotees!"

Swamishri sees *ishtadev* Bhagwan Swaminarayan and the gurus in all. Such is his divine perception of all. ♦

*Translated by Sadhu Amrutvijaydas
from Swaminarayan Prakash, May 2017*

Three Presidents Honour HH Mahant Swami Maharaj

*During Mahant Swami Maharaj's visit to Africa, the presidents of Kenya,
Uganda and Tanzania honoured him*



Swamishri with HE Yoweri Museveni of Uganda

MEETING WITH PRESIDENT OF KENYA

On 20 March 2017, Param Pujya Mahant Swami Maharaj, along with Shri Harikrishna Maharaj and sadhus, visited the State House to meet HE Uhuru Kenyatta, the President of Kenya.

Atmaswarup Swami gave a brief introduction of the BAPS, Param Pujya Pramukh Swami Maharaj and Param Pujya Mahant Swami Maharaj, and then shared Swamishri's three messages of humility, respect and service towards all with the president.

Swamishri prayed for Kenya, "May God bless the whole country with peace, progress and prosperity," and presented the president with a decorative silver *khumb*, 'Transcendence' and other mementos.

Many years ago, Param Pujya Pramukh Swami Maharaj had presented a rosary (*mala*) to the president's father, Mr. Jomo Kenyatta (when he was the president). Remembering this, Swamishri also presented a rosary to the president by putting the rosary around his neck, and then tied a *nada-chhadi* on his wrist.

After the meeting, the president came all the way to the porch to bid farewell to Swamishri and the sadhus.

HONOUR BY PRESIDENT OF TANZANIA

On 1 April 2017, HE John Magufuli, President of Tanzania, received Swamishri. On meeting Swamishri, the president said, "First of all, I thank His Holiness for visiting Tanzania. I feel blessed. When I heard His Holiness is here, I decided I should meet him." He then took a special photo with Swamishri and requested him to visit Tanzania every year. The president was very touched by the three messages of humility, respect and service towards all that Swamishri shared with him.

On 3 April, former president of Tanzania



(Top left, clockwise) Swamishri with HE Uhuru Kenyatta of Kenya, Swamishri greets HE John Magufuli of Tanzania, Swamishri presents a photo and *kalash* to HE Yoweri Museveni of Uganda

(from 2005 to 2015), Jakaya Mrisho Kikwete, also met Swamishri and received blessings. He had previously met Pramukh Swami Maharaj twice, in 2004 and 2007. He said to Swamishri, “We are truly delighted to welcome you here. Your community of devotees are great indeed. They are very good citizens.”

WELCOME BY PRESIDENT OF UGANDA

On 8 April 2017 HE Yoweri Museveni, the President of Uganda, sincerely thanked Param Pujya Mahant Swami Maharaj for gracing and blessing Uganda and also took the opportunity to hold Shri Harikrishna Maharaj in his hands and take a picture.

Since the meeting at the State House took place around 2.30 p.m., Param Pujya Mahant Swami Maharaj very innocently and with a motherly concern asked the president, “When will you have lunch?” The president was touched by

Swamishri’s affection and exclaimed emotionally, “Swamishri is worrying about me and my lunch!”

He was also delighted to receive Swamishri’s three messages of humility, respect and service towards all.

At the end of the meeting, Swamishri prayed that may Uganda develop quickly and peace prevail in the country. As Swamishri and his entourage departed, the president stood at the doorway with his hands folded until the last car left the premises.

Prior to this meeting, on 5 April, Swamishri had been received and honoured by the deputy prime minister of Uganda Hon. Kirunda Kivejinja, the Indian High Commissioner to Uganda HE Ravi Shankarji and former Sri Lankan High Commissioner to Uganda HE Velupillai Kananathan. ♦

*Translated by Sadhu Amrutvijaydas
from Swaminarayan Prakash, May 2017*

Vicharan

MAHANT SWAMI MAHARAJ'S

December 2016–January 2017

Surat, Sankari, Vyara, Selvas, Navsari, Ukai, Dhuliya, Nagpur,
Ahmedabad, Anand, Ahmedabad, Sarangpur, Gadhada



A cultural programme portrays the satsang history of Vyara



A welcome dance by students of Selvas Vidyamandir

DECEMBER

SURAT: 1–8

For a detailed report of Pramukh Swami Maharaj's 96th birthday and Surat BAPS Mandir's 20th anniversary celebrations see *Swaminarayan Bliss*, January–February 2017.

SANKARI: 8–13

8, Friday

At 11.22 a.m., Mahant Swami Maharaj arrived at the BAPS Mandir in Sankari amidst a festive welcome by sadhus and devotees. Swamishri walked with Thakorji in hand on the flower-laden path and with balloon archways decorating the sides. After performing *abhishek* of Shri Nilkanth Varni and doing Thakorji's darshan he retired to his residence.

10, Saturday; Sankari, Vyara, Sankari

Mahant Swami Maharaj departed from Sankari at 5.18 p.m. to celebrate the 40th anniversary celebrations of the *hari* mandir in Vyara, which was consecrated by Pramukh Swami Maharaj in 1976. At 6.00 p.m., Swamishri arrived at the celebration venue. A cultural programme, 'Birudni Balihari', beautifully portrayed the satsang history of Vyara. In

conclusion, Swamishri blessed the assembly, "One can understand [from the cultural programme] how glorious our satsang truly is. Formerly people here lived like animals, steeped in addictions and conflicts. There was no way anyone could enter this village, but now we find *ekantik* devotees here. Swami Bapa lovingly transformed everyone. Thus, one should abide by dharma and do satsang."

Swamishri returned to Sankari at about 8.40 p.m. and had dinner.

11, Sunday

Swamishri performed the *murti-pratishtha* rituals of Shri Akshar-Purushottam Maharaj for the BAPS *hari* mandir in Lingad (Palsana region), re-*pratishtha* of Shri Akshar-Purushottam Maharaj for the *hari* mandirs in Kosadi (Unn region) and Areth and Shri Radha-Krishna Dev for the *hari* mandirs in Kamrej (Kamrej region) and Mandvi (Mandvi region).

SELVAS: 13–18

13, Tuesday

At 6.55 p.m. Swamishri was welcomed with a traditional tribal dance as he entered Selvas

mandir. After Thakorji's darshan Swamishri attended the welcome assembly. Students of BAPS Vidyamandir performed a traditional dance and thereafter Swamishri was welcomed with flower garlands. Finally, Swamishri blessed the assembly.

NAVSARI: 18-22

18, Sunday

At 6.00 p.m. Swamishri offered *pujan* to Shri Harikrishna Maharaj. Then he applied *chandan* to a *murti* belonging to the *mandavor*, a pillar, base of pillar and a beam. This was followed by the weighing of Shri Harikrishna Maharaj with sugar crystals (*sakar tula*). Thereafter, a drama portrayed the story of King Bali's sacrifice and also about the services and sacrifices offered by the devotees of Navsari for the mandir-making project. Finally, Swamishri blessed the assembly, "The *murti* of Shri Harikrishna Maharaj (God) cannot be weighed by placing infinite universes on the other pan of the weighing balance. But he can be weighed by the slightest amount of a devotee's devotion. Through love God can be weighed. There is nothing else that he requires." This was followed by Thakorji's second *tula*.

19, Monday

In the evening satsang assembly, representatives of 40 organizations honoured Mahant Swami Maharaj with bouquets, garlands and shawls. Then children and youths performed a traditional welcome dance.

20, Tuesday

At 7.00 p.m., Swamishri attended the annual day celebration of BAPS Rambhas School. Tribal students sang Vedic and Pauranic *shlokas*, a video of their daily routine was shown, a traditional dance and drama was performed by them and a tribal student gave a speech in English. In conclusion, Swamishri blessed the assembly, "The village of Rambhas lies in a remote corner. No one would care to notice it, but because of Pramukh

Swami Maharaj's blessings these students have progressed. A sculptor sculpts a stone once he decides to do so, otherwise, it remains a stone. Sadhus sculpt the lives of people with love, faith and diligence. We strive to instil values and so there is a transformation and the person is elevated. Formerly, the students here gathered twigs, sold them to earn money and cook their meals. But because of the efforts of sadhus these students have progressed a lot. They have also come to understand about Maharaj and Swami, and have thus progressed on the path of *moksha*."

21, Wednesday; Children's Day Programme

In the evening assembly, Swamishri was led by infants onto the stage. They gave a presentation themed on the four ways to benefit from the Satpurush, namely, *darshanam*, *milanam*, *prasadam* and *vachanam*. In the case of *darshanam* children narrated incidents about how Pramukh Swami Maharaj's darshan gave inner peace to all. Then infants danced with balloons and Swamishri was asked to burst the balloons with a pointed stick. In *milanam*, *bal karyakars* and children held Swamishri's and each other's hands to display unity. In *prasadam*, devotees of Navsari brought things sanctified by Pramukh Swami Maharaj before Mahant Swami Maharaj, who touched them with glory. And in *vachanam*, the announcer requested Swamishri to bless them with words. Thereafter, Mahant Swami Maharaj talked about the glory of our spiritual attainment and the importance of abiding by *niyams*.



Mahant Swami Maharaj with performers on Children's Day programme, Navsari



Performs *pratishtha* of murtis for *kutir* mandir in Ukai region

DHULIYA: 22–29

22, Thursday; Navsari, Ukai, Dhuliya

At 10.40 a.m., Swamishri departed from Navsari and arrived in Ukai at 11.50 a.m. Swamishri performed the *murti-pratishtha* rituals for the BAPS *hari* mandir in Songadh and *kutir* mandirs in Tokarval, Maiyasi, Ghodchit, Sadadvel, Temka, Malangdev, Langad, Mal, Khapatiya, Keshbandh and Hiravadi.

At about 4.00 p.m., Swamishri departed from Ukai by car and arrived in Dhuliya at 7.30 p.m. He was welcomed with fire torches and tunes played by the Pramukh Raj Band, and by horse riders displaying their skills and devotees dancing with joy. On arriving at the mandir Swamishri was welcomed with a rose garland by Kothari Anandjivan Swami.

25, Sunday

At 11.15 a.m., Swamishri performed the *murti-pratishtha* rituals by applying *chandan* and performing *arti* and *mantra-pushpanjali* of the *murtis* for the BAPS *hari* mandir in Chopda and six *kutir* mandirs in Kodde, Haated, Dharangaav, Saakare and Hisaabe.

In the evening assembly, a drama about the history of satsang in Khandesh was performed by children and youths. Thereafter, Shri Harikrishna Maharaj was honoured.

NAGPUR: 29–31.12. 2016 & 1–2.1.2017

29, Thursday

At 6.30 p.m., Swamishri landed at Nagpur airport and Premprakash Swami welcomed him

with a garland. At 8.10 p.m., Swamishri entered the BAPS Mandir and was welcomed with fireworks, a lezim dance by children and teenagers, and children dressed as devas showering flower petals on his pathway. Swamishri did Thakorji's darshan and *abhishek* of Shri Nilkanth Varni.

31, Saturday

The last day of the year concluded with Swamishri's blessings for the New Year, which he had uttered on 28 December in Dhuliya: "In the New Year of 2017, may all the devotees be happy in body, mind and wealth, and be bestowed with the power of bhakti and to do *seva*. For us Shriji Maharaj is the supreme Bhagwan, Gunatitanand Swami is Mul Aksharbrahman and the Satpurush [Guru] is the gateway to *moksha*. My prayer is that may all consolidate these three points and develop firm love for them."

January 1, Sunday

At 1.12 p.m., the Union Transport Minister, Shri Nitin Gadkari, and Chief Minister of Maharashtra, Shri Devendra Fadnavis, came for Mahant Swami Maharaj's darshan and blessings. Swamishri garlanded them and tied *nada-chhaddis* on their wrists and blessed them.

In the evening assembly, Swamishri celebrated a symbolic *jholi utsav*. Swamishri and senior sadhus were given *jholis* and thereafter they proclaimed the *jholi* call 'Narayan Hare, Sacchidanand Prabho'.

AHMEDABAD: 2–16

2, Monday

At about 4 p.m., Swamishri departed by flight from Nagpur and landed at Ahmedabad airport at 5.20 p.m.

12, Thursday; Gunatit Diksha Day

In the evening assembly, Gunatitanand Swami's 208th *diksha* anniversary was celebrated. Swamishri arrived at 7.25 p.m. and saw the drama depicting the *diksha* of Gunatitanand Swami. Finally,



A drama depicts the *diksha* of Gunatitanand Swami in Dabhan, Ahmedabad

Swamishri blessed the assembly, “After giving *diksha* to Mulji Bhakta, Shriji Maharaj declared, ‘Gunatit is my divine abode.’ But people failed to understand what Maharaj had said. It was Shastriji Maharaj who explored this truth. Akshar plays a very important role in our philosophy. During the *pratishtha* of Bochasan mandir, Gunatitanand Swami’s *murti* was lighter than Maharaj’s and still it could not be lifted from the *yagnashala* to install in the mandir shrine. Kashikaka was present at that time and he had narrated the incident to me. Then Shastriji Maharaj came and prayed to Swami, ‘We have left for you, and you do not wish to be lifted.’ Immediately thereafter, all were able to lift the *murti*. Gunatitanand Swami had said, ‘One who knows Maharaj has one foot in Akshardham, and one who also knows this (Gunatit) Sadhu has both his feet in Akshardham.’”

14, Saturday; Makar Sankranti Festival

At 9.00 p.m. Swamishri arrived in the special *jholi* celebration assembly. He blessed the assembly, “Is it possible for the President of America to come to your home to beg for *jholi*? This seems beyond one’s imagination. Shriji Maharaj is supreme and yet he came in a human form on earth. By giving up one’s base nature (*swabhavs*) one can attain Akshardham. Thus, one should firmly have his refuge. Cultivate faith, trust and purity. Whatever you donate is deposited in your *ekantik* bank account. Shriji Maharaj believes whatever little you offer to be of Himalayan size.”

Thereafter, saffron *jholis* were placed around

Swamishri’s shoulders. To his sides stood Ishwarcharan Swami, Viveksagar Swami and Ghanshyamcharan Swami. Swamishri hailed the *jholi* call, ‘Narayan Hare Sacchidanand Prabho.’ Then the senior sadhus also hailed the *jholi* call. Thereafter, devotees came forward to deposit their *jholi* cards into the giant *jholi* and availed of Swamishri’s *samip* darshan. Swamishri remained seated for more than one hour, giving darshan till the last devotee passed by. When Swamishri got up he was asked why he had sat for so long. He replied, “Where can I go to have the darshan of countless *muktas*! I saw the devotees, who are *muktas*, coming towards me.”

Then, while Swamishri was on his way to his room, he saw Shri Harikrishna Maharaj was being offered *thal*. So, he sat down for darshan. Then he looked at all the food items being offered and finally performed six *dandvats* to Thakorji.

15, Sunday, Children-Youth Day

In the evening assembly, children and youths presented a drama themed ‘Jholi-Tula Utsav’ before Mahant Swami Maharaj. The drama elaborated on four virtues: tolerance (*khamvu*), conductiveness (*anukul thavu*), serving others (*ghasavu*) and giving up one’s resolves (*mannu mukvu*). Finally, Swamishri blessed the assembly.

ANAND: 16–20

18, Wednesday

The Anand Agriculture University had organized a programme at Akshar Farm, which lies between Anand and Vidyanagar, to honour Mahant Swami Maharaj as its alumnus and best student.

Shri N.C. Patel Chancellor of Anand Agriculture University, Shri C.L. Patel (Chairman, Charutar Vidya Mandal), Dr A.G. Patel (Swamishri’s professor), Shri Bhikhubhai Patel (President, Shri Sardar Patel Education Trust) and others were present in the assembly. Prior to Swamishri’s arrival sadhus and guests addressed the assembly. When Swamishri arrived children



Mahant Swami Maharaj is honoured by chancellors and principals of universities in Anand and Vidyanaagar

and teenagers performed a traditional welcome dance. Thereafter, a short video of Swamishri's visits to the Agriculture University was shown. Shri N.C. Patel, Chancellor of Anand Agriculture University, read the proclamation letter of honour in the assembly and thereafter presented it to Swamishri. He also honoured Swamishri with a shawl, a sandalwood sapling and a garland. Shri K.P. Patel (Principal of B.A.C.) offered a letter of honour, shawl and a sandalwood plant to Swamishri on behalf of the Alumni Association.

In conclusion, Swamishri blessed the assembly, "I am a servant of servants. You have all honoured me out of your bonds of love for me. I had enrolled to study in the Agriculture College due to Yogiji Maharaj's wish.

"From its inception the college has been like a big family. It has been doing commendable research ever since it was inaugurated. I pray for its progress and development."

19, Thursday

Today, the evening assembly was held to launch the year-long Pramukh Swami Maharaj's 97th birthday celebrations, which will culminate in Anand on 27 November 2017. The assembly was addressed by Gunnidhi Swami and Vedagna Swami, who spoke about Pramukh Swami Maharaj's life and work. On Swamishri's arrival the youths welcomed him with a traditional dance. Thereafter, at 7.30 p.m., Swamishri, Tyagvallabh Swami and senior sadhus lighted the celebration lamp amidst a display of fireworks and waving of BAPS flags.

Finally, Mahant Swami Maharaj blessed the assembly, "On looking at Pramukh Swami Maharaj's entire life one finds that he spent every second of it for the good of others. He lived for the liberation of others. Whoever sings Bapa's virtues and remembers them will be liberated. We should imbibe virtues that please Maharaj and Swami. We do have qualities of bhakti and faith, but we should focus on purifying or refining them further."

AHMEDABAD: 20-22

21, Saturday

This afternoon from 4.00 p.m. to 6.30 p.m., a public event was held on the Sabarmati Riverfront grounds to commemorate the naming of an 11.5-km stretch of the western Sabarmati riverfront road in Ahmedabad as 'Pujya Pramukh Swami Maharaj Marg'. For details refer to *Swaminarayan Bliss*, March-April 2017, pp 49-50.

SARANGPUR: 22-31

23, Monday

At 3.45 p.m., the initial *parshad diksha* rituals for *sadhaks* commenced on the stage of Yagnapurush Mandapam. Thereafter, senior sadhus addressed the satsang assembly. On Swamishri's arrival at about 5.30 p.m. the final *diksha* rituals began. In the beginning two *parshads* were given the *bhagwati* (saffron) *diksha* and then 35 *sadhaks* were given the *parshad diksha*. Today, the number of sadhus and *parshads* in the BAPS totalled 1,017.

In conclusion, Mahant Swami Maharaj blessed the special congregation, "Today is a day of great joy. All the *sadhaks* were eager to take *diksha* and their parents were also eager to see them take *diksha*. All the *parshads* will advance the work of Shastriji Maharaj. We may not realize it but a great work has been accomplished.

"Pramukh Swami Maharaj, Yogiji Maharaj and Shastriji Maharaj are very pleased today. Congratulations and salutations to the parents who have permitted their sons to take *diksha*, because people may sacrifice anything except their sons."



Mahant Swami Maharaj with the newly initiated *parshads*, Sarangpur



Mahant Swami Maharaj engaged in puja during his 60th *diksha* anniversary celebration, Sarangpur

29, Sunday; Mahant Swami Maharaj's 60th Diksha Celebration

To honour Swamishri on his 60th *diksha* celebration *mantra pushpanjali* was offered by all after his morning puja. Thereafter, the *sadguru* sadhus garlanded Swamishri and honoured him.

GADHADA: 30–31

30, Monday

Swamishri arrived in Gadhada at 11.15 a.m. On the day of Vasant Panchmi (1 February) Mahant Swami Maharaj was going to perform the *murti-pratishtha* of the *abhishek murti* of Bhagwan Swaminarayan in the *rang mandap*, and also of the *murtis* of Pragji Bhakta, Yogiji

Maharaj and Pramukh Swami Maharaj in the guru *shikhars*, behind the mandir *pradakshina*. In addition, Swamishri was going to inaugurate the Yagnapurush Dwar (ornate entrance gate) and a modern exhibition on Bhagwan Swaminarayan's life and work – 'Gadhpur Jota Shriji Sambhare'. For details refer to the special issue of *Swaminarayan Bliss*, March–April 2017.

On 31 January Swamishri performed the *mur-ti-pratishtha* rituals for the BAPS *hari* mandir in Windsor, Canada, during the *yagna* for world peace. ◆

(From Swamishri's daily report in Gujarati by Sadhu Brahmavatsaldas.
Translation of excerpts by Sadhu Vivekjiandas)

LIVING WITH SWAMISHRI

December 2016–January 2017

DECEMBER

SHORT CUT TO AKSHARDHAM

3, Surat

Mahant Swami Maharaj took a shortcut while entering his residence through a large open window. A devotee, Bharatbhai Narola, was waiting near the main entrance of the house. On seeing Swamishri he asked, "You have taken a shortcut to enter the house, similarly, can you tell us the shortest way to Akshardham."

Swamishri replied in one word, "Satpurush."

Taking the refuge of a true guru is the easiest and shortest way to attain *moksha*.

FROM AKSHARDHAM

17, Selvas

Three youths had come from abroad to avail of Mahant Swami Maharaj's spiritual association. One of them said, "I'm from Australia," the second youth announced, "I'm from America," and the third one stated, "I'm from Canada." Then one of them asked Swamishri, "Where are you from?" Instantly Swamishri raised his hand and replied, "Akshardham."

NIRDOSH BUDDHI IN ALL

14 January, Ahmedabad

Swamishri was on his way out of the *abhishek*

mandap when a child, Harsh Mamtora, was dressed in a kite costume. He asked Swamishri, “I am a kite. Some fly me higher and higher in the sky. Some also fly me to the right side and sometimes to the left, and some even cut my string.

However, I want to soar to the highest point, Akshardham. For that what should I do?”

Swamishri replied, “To have *nirdoshbuddhi* [perceive all the devotees to be faultless and pure].” ♦

ANSWERS AND REVELATIONS

December 2016–January 2017

When questions were posed to Mahant Swami Maharaj he revealed his spiritual understanding, perspective and sometimes his own spiritual state.

Let us see some of his fascinating answers and revelations

Mahant Swami Maharaj gave answers to a devotee’s questions:

Q. What is the means to please God?

A. Satsang.

Q. How can one courageously observe all *niyams* and *dharma*?

A. Have pride [for Satsang].

Q. How can one achieve success in one’s business?

A. Be honest.

Q. How should one behave with customers and staff so they are satisfied?

A. By having good behaviour.

(22 December, on the way to Dhuliya)

Q. Roshan Bhagat asked, “What do you think about when doing Thakorji’s darshan?”

A. That God has showered his abundant grace upon us. He has given us a great spiritual association. So, I offer my thanks to him. I do darshan of him with the fullest concentration and eye contact.

(24 December, Dhuliya)

Q. Hun Kop asked, “What is the best thing I can do for you?”

A. Have *nirdosh buddhi* (perceive purity) in all.

(6 January 2017, Ahmedabad)

Q. For physical illnesses one needs to take herbal medicines, however, for spiritual troubles

what should we do?

A. One needs *gnan* (spiritual knowledge).

(9 January 2017, Ahmedabad)

Q. A youth asked, “Swami, will our ego be dissolved?”

A. If you want to, it will be dissolved.

(10 January 2017, Ahmedabad)

Q. Today you are departing from Ahmedabad. Give us your parting message.

A. Yogi Bapa used to say, “To have *nirdosh buddhi* in all is our *seva*.”

Q. To make various arrangements during your stay we sometimes have to tell someone off. Though that is wrong, should we reproach others?

A. Tell others with *vivek* [politeness], *nam-rata* [humility], *potana mani ne* [believe all to be yours] *ane tena jiva nu na bagade* [and that his soul does not fall from the path of satsang]. Bearing these four conditions in mind you can say what you want.

(22 January 2017, Ahmedabad)

■ “If one has *nishtha* [faith], *niyam* [morality] and refrains from taking *abhav* and *avgun* [faults of others] one attains Akshardham directly. Then no one can stop you on the way.”

(29 January 2017, Sarangpur) ♦

*(From Swamishri’s daily report in Gujarati by Sadhu Brahnavatsaldas.
Translation of excerpts by Sadhu Vivekjiandas)*



Indian PM Narendra Modi and Australian PM Malcolm Turnbull Visit Swaminarayan Akshardham

10 April 2017, New Delhi

On 10 April 2017, the Prime Minister of India Narendra Modi and the Prime Minister of Australia Malcolm Turnbull visited the Swaminarayan Akshardham in New Delhi.

On behalf of His Holiness Mahant Swami Maharaj, senior sadhus traditionally welcomed the leaders of Australia and India at the Mayur Dwar (Peacock Gate) with a garland of flowers and by tying the *nada-chhadi* on their wrists.

First, both dignitaries visited the Swaminarayan Akshardham Mandir, where they paid respects to Bhagwan Swaminarayan by offering flowers and admired the mandir's art and architecture. They also learned how His Holiness 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.

Sitting on the steps of the Akshardham Mandir, both leaders experienced the mandir's serenity and peaceful vibrations.

The prime ministers marvelled at the Gajendra

Pithika (Elephant Plinth), depicting messages of social harmony, peace and spirituality.

Then, they offered prayers for world peace and harmony by offering *abhishek* on the sacred *murti* of Shri Neelkanth Varni.

Thereafter, on visiting the Sanskruti Vihar boat ride exhibition, Prime Minister Turnbull was fascinated by the cultural history and contributions of India to the world.

Completing the visit, Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull wrote in the visitor's book, "This has been a very special insight into India's history, but above all its future. Thank you so much, PM Modi."

He also tweeted, "Having a quiet chat with @narendramodi on the steps of the amazing Akshardham Temple today." Prime Minister Modi tweeted, "Visited the magnificent Akshardham Temple with PM @Turnbull Malcolm."

Before the two prime ministers departed, they were presented with special mementos of their visit.

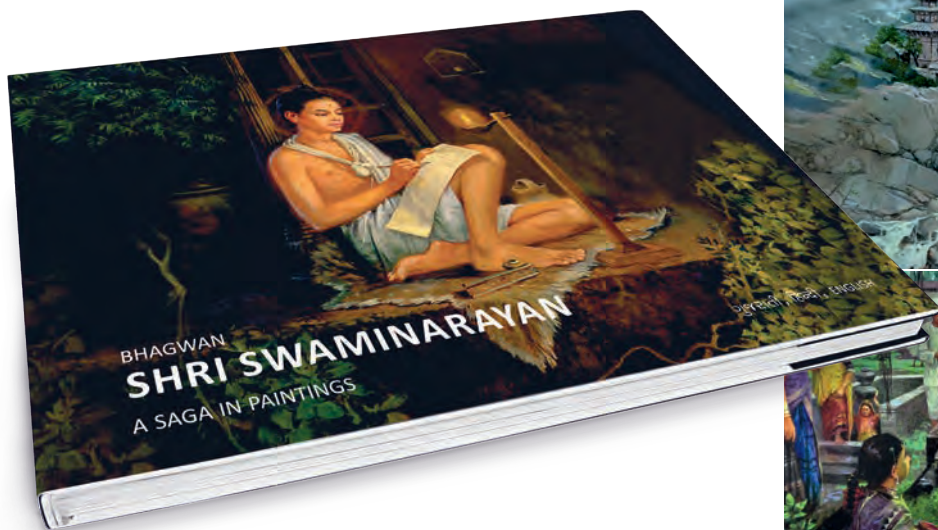


LAUNCH OF AN ICONIC ART PUBLICATION

BHAGWAN SHRI SWAMINARAYAN

A SAGA IN PAINTINGS

21 April 2017, Ahmedabad



A special evening event to inaugurate an iconic art publication depicting Bhagwan Swaminarayan's divine life and work was held at the BAPS Swaminarayan Mandir, Ahmedabad, in the divine presence of HH Mahant Swami Maharaj, acclaimed artists, invited dignitaries and thousands of devotees.

The event started with the chanting of *dhun* and singing of a prayer. This was followed by a short tributary video featuring divine memories of HH Pramukh Swami Maharaj.

Thereafter, Pujya Ishwarcharan Swami welcomed and garlanded HH Mahant Swami Maharaj and all invited dignitaries on the stage.

Shri Vasudeo Kamath, an internationally acclaimed artist, worked for over 15 years to recreate the era and aura of Bhagwan Swaminarayan through his paintings. He expressed, "In these paintings, the way the canvass, paints and brushes are used, similarly a person, an artist named Vasudeo Kamath, is used here; but the actual artist is Pramukh Swami Bapa himself. It is my

supreme fortune that I could be a small part of such an art by being a recipient of his blessings." Shri Baba Yogendranath, Founder of Sanskar Bharti, extolled, "The one who bestowed us with such an occasion, who incarnated for elevating humanity, who led a divine life and created such a generation that has provided direction to millions of lives and exuding effulgence in the society today; His life is presented in paintings by honoured Shri Kamath. What a great boon He bestowed to Vasudeoji that his every single stroke and line will strengthen the coming generations with inspirations. Reverence to Bhagwan Swaminarayan, Pramukh Swami Maharaj and devotees."

Shri Ravi Paranjape, a renowned artist from Pune, expressed, "I am content on seeing this iconic publication of paintings on the saga of Bhagwan Swaminarayan. Shri Kamath is a rare artist in the 21st century, who has not only preserved our art by this unique creation, but also awakened the new generation of artists by his inspiring works."

Shri Advait Gadnayakji, Director General of the National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi, expressed, “Vasudeo Kamath’s immersive canvases are of utmost importance in today’s time to kindle spiritual awakening with art.”

Shri Bhagyesh Jha, renowned poet and a former IAS officer of Gujarat, expressed, “I can feel the divine presence of HH Pramukh Swami Maharaj in this spiritually charged event. I congratulate Shri Kamath for fulfilling HH Pramukh Swami Maharaj’s wishes through his great work in paintings.” Shri Sachchidanand Joshi, Member Secretary of Indira Gandhi National Centre of Arts, New Delhi, expressed, “Creating such paintings was indeed a great artistic challenge that honourable Kamathji fulfilled. We all know that when Bhagwan Shri Swaminarayan departed, it was 1830, while photography was invented seven years later, i.e. in 1837. We are thankful to all those sadhus and devotees of his time, who narrated his personality so vividly, that Kamathji has enlivened him through this collection of paintings. The very first painting depicts the time of his birth. The portrayal is so beautiful: the expressions on the faces of the mother, the women around and the little kids on trees.”

Shri C.S. Krishna Shetty, renowned artist, expressed, “This publication is a revolutionary



Mahant Swami Maharaj presents a copy of the publication to Shri Vasudeo Kamath

artwork that has elevated Indian art by the masterly work of Shri Kamath. I congratulate BAPS for undertaking such a laudatory project to revive art and infuse spirituality through such phenomenal paintings.”

Shri Samveg Lalbhai, renowned industrialist and art enthusiast, reminisced his fond memories with HH Pramukh Swami Maharaj and congratulated Shri Kamath saying, “Shri Kamath has fulfilled the wishes of HH Pramukh Swami Maharaj by creating such an unprecedented work of art.”

Shri Pradyumna Vyas, Director of NID, Ahmedabad, congratulated Shri Kamath saying, “He has portrayed his genius through his extraordinary paintings of the time, place and emotions of the divine incidents from

(Contd. on pg. 70)





India

TORONTO MAYOR JOHN TORY VISITS SWAMINARAYAN AKSHARDHAM 18 March 2017, New Delhi



Mayor of Toronto, Mr. John Tory, visited Swaminarayan Akshardham in New Delhi. With him were Economic Development Committee Chair and Toronto City Councillor Michael Thompson and newly elected Toronto City Councillor Neethan Shan. Senior sadhus traditionally welcomed Mayor Tory and his delegation with flower garlands, by applying *chandlo* of vermillion powder to their foreheads and by tying the *nada-chhadi* on their wrists.

After admiring the Mayur Dwar (Peacock Gate), the delegation visited the Swaminarayan Akshardham Mandir where they offered their respects and admired the mandir's art and architecture.

Mayor Tory visited the Gajendra Pithika (Elephant Plinth) that includes 148 realistic carved stone elephants depicting the messages of social harmony, peace and spirituality.

The delegation offered prayers for world peace and harmony by offering *abhishek* on the sacred *murti* of Shri Neelkanth Varni.

Thereafter, the delegation experienced the

educational Sanskruti Vihar boat ride exhibition. Sharing his sentiments of his visit to Akshardham, Mayor John Tory wrote, "I am honoured once again to visit the Akshardham in Delhi and to offer my respects and affection to the BAPS Swaminarayan friends with thanks for your message of peace and humility and for the great contributions you make in Toronto and around the world. The Akshardham is as magnificent as ever."

ANTAR JAGRUTI PARVA 2017 7–13 April 2017, Gujarat and Rajasthan



As part of the six-month Yuva Talim Kendra course, the current batch of 56 youths undertook satsang *vicharan* to villages in Gujarat and Rajasthan. A total of 14 groups, each consisting of 4 youths, visited 97 villages. They contacted 1,208 households, encouraging families to attend their local weekly satsang assembly, perform daily personal puja, visit the mandir for darshan, daily read from the Vachanamrut and Swamini Vatu, conduct a *ghar sabha*, observe a fast on *ekadashi* and engage in other spiritual activities. The youths held a total of 97 satsang assemblies attended by over 6,250 devotees and 44 children's assemblies in which over 12,000 children took part. In the early evening, the youths also organized a Bhakti Feri in each village. By

their efforts, over 420 people pledged to shun their addictions.

BRAHMASATRA SHIBIRS **March–April 2017**



As part of this year's 150th anniversary celebrations of the sacred Akshar Deri in Gondal, over 150,000 devotees attended the one-day 'Brahmasatra' *shibirs* elaborating on the history and glory of the Akshar Deri. The *shibirs* were held in a total of 50 BAPS centres throughout Gujarat, Mumbai, Kolkata, Pune and Chennai, and at each location, one or two sadhus spoke from 8.00 a.m. to 5.00 p.m. on various aspects of the *shibir* theme.

UK

BAL-BALIKA MANDAL RESIDENTIAL TRIP **14–17 April 2017, Conover Hall, Shropshire**



More than 300 children and 70 volunteers from across the UK participated in a three-day residential trip to Conover Hall in Shropshire. The trip was designed to build self-confidence and leadership skills in children.

During their stay, the delegates were challenged with more than 10 different activities, all devised to help the children harness their abilities and overcome personal fears. The activities included the zip wire, Jacob's Ladder, the gladiator wall, abseiling, the aerial trek, climbing, archery and low ropes.

Morning sessions began with *samuh* puja. Evening activities after dinner included a camp fire, nocturnal safari and run-around quiz. Sadhus also conducted a short evening *sabha* for the *balaks* wherein everyone performed *arti* and *cheshta* together.

The trip proved both extremely formative and enjoyable for the children, providing them invaluable learning and lasting memories.

NORTH AMERICA

ANNUAL YOUTH SEMINAR **25 March 2017, Toronto, Ontario, Canada**

Over 600 international students from various colleges and universities in the Greater Toronto Area and beyond attended the 6th Annual BAPS Charities Youth Seminar.

The seminar was organized to introduce the delegates to career planning, personal health, and financial planning, balancing wants with needs, guidance from immigration professionals and provide them an opportunity to network with each other to create a welcoming environment.

The students also participated in a Q&A session with the professionals.

Special guests and speakers included: Dr. Chris Evans, Provost and Vice President Academic, Ryerson University; Professor Jit Shalin, Centennial College; Ravi Jain, Partner at Green and Spiegel LLP and Yogesh Patel, Entrepreneur.

The event was followed by a networking session where the youths could meet with professionals and also network with each other to share ideas and information.

ASIA-PACIFIC

BAPS WALKATHON

1 April 2017, Adelaide, Australia

Over 250 people aged between 2 and 80 years participated in the 7-km BAPS Walkathon around the scenic River Torrens at Bonython Park



in Adelaide.

The walk raised around \$10,300 for Diabetes South Australia, a non-governmental organization promoting diabetes awareness and education in the South Australian community.

Peter Crouch, president of Diabetes SA, thanked BAPS for the contribution. Also present were representatives of all the corporate sponsors and South Australian Indian community leaders.

(Contd. from pg. 67)

Bhagwan Swaminarayan's life. Such an art publication is much needed today to infuse morality and spirituality in our society."

Shri Madhav Ramanuj, renowned poet, extolled Shri Kamath's work, "Creation is the most important aspect of our life. In these paintings, those sacred moments have been frozen forever. We can see them as often we want. We have very few people remaining in India to work on such a scale. Shri Kamath is one of those who has ardently completed this work."

Pujya Ishwarcharan Swami, who had been instrumental in coordinating this project, expressed that the art publication was a result of the divine

WORLDWIDE

BAPS MANDIRS OBSERVE EARTH HOUR

25 March 2017



BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandirs in New Delhi, London and North America joined iconic landmarks as well as communities and organizations in over 7,000 cities from 187 countries by switching off their non-essential lights to observe Earth Hour on Saturday 25 March 2017.

Earth Hour – the world's largest environmental event – helps to raise awareness about protecting the future of our planet.

More than 3,100 landmarks and monuments participated around the world, including the Eiffel Tower, the Empire State Building, the Sydney Opera House, the Acropolis, Big Ben, the Houses of Parliament, Buckingham Palace, Tower Bridge and Piccadilly Circus. ♦

blessings of Bhagwan Swaminarayan and HH Pramukh Swami Maharaj. He congratulated Shri Kamath for undertaking the gigantic task.

The climax of the event was the inauguration of the iconic publication by HH Mahant Swami Maharaj.

Thereafter, HH Mahant Swami Maharaj blessed the assembly, "This publication has finally fulfilled the wish of portraying Bhagwan Swaminarayan's life vividly. I congratulate Shri Kamath for his Herculean efforts and dedication. I pray for peace and happiness for all. I thank all dignitaries for their heartfelt wishes and speeches." ♦



Brahmaswarup Bhagatji Maharaj



Brahmaswarup Yogiji Maharaj



Shri Akshar-Purushottam Maharaj



Brahmaswarup Shastriji Maharaj



Brahmaswarup
Pramukh Swami Maharaj



Shri Sita-Ram Dev



Shri Lakshmi-Narayan Dev



Shri Ghanshyam Maharaj



Shri Shiv-Parvati Dev



Shri Vithoba-Rukmani Dev

MURTIS CONSECRATED IN THE BAPS SWAMINARAYAN MANDIR, PUNE



BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir, Pune:

Inspired by

Brahmaswarup Pramukh Swami Maharaj and

inaugurated by

Pragat Brahmaswarup Mahant Swami Maharaj

