

SWAMINARAYAN BLISS

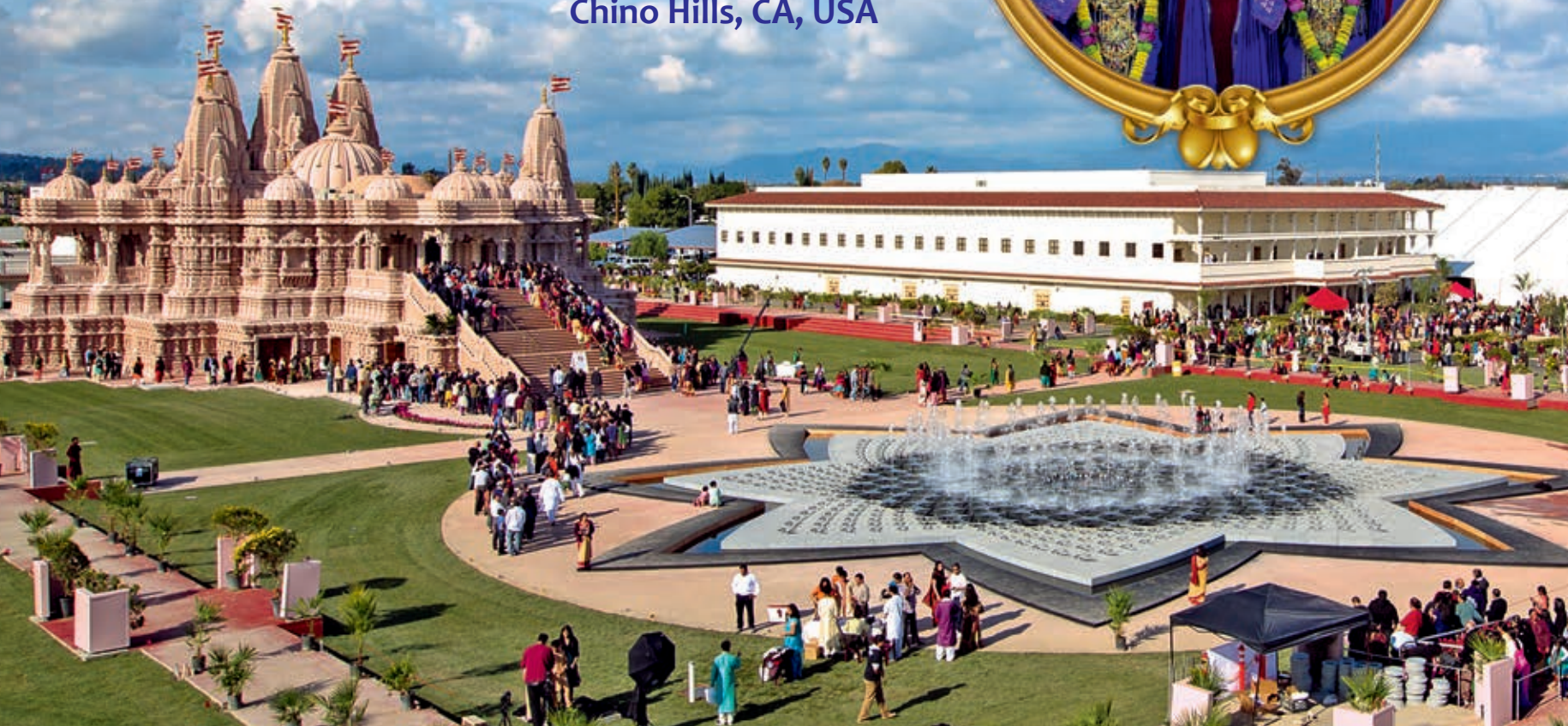
January-February 2013

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Pramukh Swami Maharaj Inspires

Grand BAPS Swaminarayan Mandir

Chino Hills, CA, USA





The exquisite interior of BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir, Chino Hills
Above: Shri Akshar-Purushottam Maharaj in the central shrine of the mandir.

Below: Shri Ghanshyam Maharaj.

Inset: Pramukh Swami Maharaj performs the *murti-pratishtha* of Shri Akshar-Purushottam Maharaj in 2007, Los Angeles.

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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.





Bhagwan Swaminarayan performs a *pratishtha* ritual



H.H. Pramukh Swami Maharaj performs a *pratishtha* ritual

First Word

The mandir is Sanatan Hindu Dharma's outstanding contribution to mankind. Its rich art and architecture reflect Hindu spirituality, skill, dedication and aestheticism. And it is due to the enduring message of spirituality that the mandir is eternal.

Bhagwan Swaminarayan continued this Hindu tradition of mandirs, identifying them as abodes of spiritual wisdom and worship. Based on Bhagwan Swaminarayan's vision, the Swaminarayan tradition of establishing Vedic mandirs worldwide has been furthered most by Pramukh Swami Maharaj.

Pramukh Swami Maharaj's life is the embodiment of dedication and sacrifice: with his every breath he lives by the principles of Bhagwan Swaminarayan, offers heartfelt devotion to him, showers his profound love on the whole of humanity and endeavours for the spiritual uplift of all.

Inspired by his divine personality and tireless efforts, sadhus and devotees also commit themselves to this noble cause. The result is that a worldwide network of mandirs to foster faith in devotees and serve society in a multitude of ways has been created.

Inspired by Pramukh Swami Maharaj, the newly inaugurated BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir in Chino Hills, CA is the latest addition to this distinguished network. Details of the struggles, sacrifices and eventual success of the project are presented in this issue of *Swaminarayan Bliss*.



Shakotsav in Loya

Maharaj announced a Shakotsav in Loya to honour the arrival of his eldest brother, Rampratapbhai. Shri Hari himself cooked the aubergines for the Shakotsav. At that time, on seeing his apparel and condition while cooking, an aspirant doubted his divinity...



RAMPRATAPBHAIR NARRATES HIS PAST

Rampratapbhai addressed the assembly of *paramhansas* and devotees about his past, “The king of Itar region gave the village of Itar as a prize to my grandfather. And since then he was known as Pande of Itar. Chhapaiya was the residence of my maternal uncle. We are Sama Vedi Brahmins, our class is known as Savarni and we belong to the Kauthmi branch. We have a very large family, possessing large swathes of land. Our principal occupation is farming. Our father, Dharmadev, had emphasized at the time of his death, ‘Ghanshyam is God. Take care of him for he will not remain at home for long.’ But we failed to take care of Ghanshyam. So, we lost him, and you all realized who he is.”¹

The Satsang community was happy with the arrival of Maharaj’s brothers – Ichchharam and Rampratapbhai. The next day Shri Hari called

Khengar, the son of Jiva Sindhav of Kholadiyad, and asked, “You had talked of sponsoring a meal. Tell me how many kilogrammes of ghee you have brought?”

“Maharaj, I have brought 180kg of ghee.”

“That will not suffice. I wish to order 1200kg of aubergines and cook them in 800kg of ghee.”

“Maharaj, we will order everything ourselves,” replied Sura Khachar and Jivuba. Shri Hari was pleased with them. Then Jivuba mused that the Shakotsav was being repeatedly held ever since she came to Loya. She was perplexed as to where the cartloads of soft aubergines came

1. A popular belief in the Swaminarayan Sampradaya transmitted through an oral tradition from *sadguru* sadhus, is that the Vama Brahmins opposed Shriji Maharaj, his *paramhansas* who had renounced women and wealth, and the pure Bhagvat Dharma he re-established. The Vama Brahmins, who indulged in meat-eating, liquor and adultery, believed that the spread of pure Bhagvat Dharma would curb their immoral practices. So they propagated that Swaminarayan was not Bhagwan but a tantrik (sorcerer) and he was not a Brahmin, but of a lower caste. These defamatory talks spread to such an extent that the *sadguru paramhansas* felt that Shriji Maharaj’s kin should be brought to Gujarat to prove the fact that he is a Brahmin. So, they requested Maharaj to allow them to bring his relatives (Dharmakul) to Gujarat. Maharaj did not respond to their wish. The *paramhansas* then prayed, saying, “Maharaj, you are beyond the ties of affection and attachment to family and clan. However, to rebut the statements of the Vama Brahmins and give momentum to the spread of Satsang it is necessary to bring them here.”

Shriji Maharaj relented to their requests and sent Mayajitanand Swami to North India. Maharaj informed him about the locations of Chhapaiya, Ayodhya, Targam, Lohganjri, Ambaliya and other places. Another *paramhansa*,

from each time. Sura Khachar, the chief of Loya and the host, who was supposed to make the arrangements, was always seated before Maharaj. So, Jivuba asked Sura Khachar, “Where do all the aubergines come from? They do not grow in this region.”

Sura Khachar smiled and replied, “Sister, ask Natha. He and his mother are purchasing them. You can understand that it is not possible for me to run around with my heavy body!”

Jivuba smiled, but she was looking for an answer to her query. She asked Natha Khachar, “Natha, where do you bring these aubergines from?”

“Mother, it is Maharaj who sends them. When we take empty wagons to purchase them we come across wagon loads on the way. Some of the owners sell them, while others donate them with reverence when we mention the name of Maharaj. They feel blessed that Maharaj will have them for lunch.”

Jivuba realized that Maharaj graces and helps those who are profoundly devoted to him.

IS HE REALLY GOD?

Preparations for the Shakotsav began in earnest in the precincts of Sura Khachar’s *darbar*. Forty fire pits were set up for cooking the aubergines. On each, a large pan was placed with ghee crackling as it melted inside it. Then the spice-stuffed aubergines were placed in each pan with a mixture of kneaded flour and yogurt added on top of them. Shri Hari added turmeric,

chillies and salt. Maharaj was wearing a short *dhoti*. He was sweating profusely because of the heat from the stoves. His hands were caked with turmeric and chilli powder. He mixed the aubergines in each of the pans with a large ladle. At that time Kandas of Buva village and Kashidas Mota of Bochasan arrived with a group of 150 devotees for Maharaj’s darshan. Kashidas started prostrating to Maharaj. Kandas asked him, “Mota, to whom are you prostrating?”

Kashidas replied, “To Maharaj!”

Kandas was surprised and asked sceptically, “Is the person we are seeing really God?” And with this doubt lingering in his mind he started to leave the precincts.

Shriji Maharaj asked Muktanand Swami, “Swami, what would you call someone who remains thirsty when he is by the banks of river Ganga?”

“Maharaj, he must be a fool,” Muktanand Swami replied.

Kandas heard these words as he was exiting the *darbar*. He turned around to see who had spoken. Instantly, he saw the divine form of Maharaj. Kandas could not bear the divine light emanating from Maharaj’s body. Immediately he experienced samadhi. A short while later when he woke up he found Muktanand Swami and Kashidas by his side. Kandas bowed at Swami’s feet. He asked about where Maharaj was. Then he was led to him. Again he saw the same divine form of Maharaj. Kandas felt exhilarated. Muktanand Swami explained, “Kandas, when God

Mota Sukhanand Swami (who was the first to meet Maharaj in Loj), decided to go with Mayajitanand Swami because he had earlier travelled in that region to inspire satsang. In addition, he was born and raised in a village of that region. But Maharaj refused him to go. In spite of that Mota Sukhanand Swami insisted. Eventually, Maharaj agreed and said, “You may go, but you will not return.”

The *paramhansas* went to Uttar Pradesh (in North India) and visited the village of Ambaliya, near Chhapaiya, where Ichchharam was staying with his in-laws. They first saw him on the outskirts of Ambaliya and recognized him from his facial features, which were very similar to those of Maharaj’s. Ichchharam bowed to the sadhus. Mayajitanand Swami asked, “Did you have a brother who had left home?” Ichchharam sat down in dismay and declared, “Yes. My brother Ghanshyam left us. We don’t know where he is. But if you know about him tell me.” Mayajitanand Swami was convinced that Ichchharam was Maharaj’s brother. He then talked about Shriji Maharaj and where he was. Ichchharam was overwhelmed with joy. He took the *paramhansas* to his house and prepared lunch for them. Then he took them to the village of Lohganjri and met Rampratapbhai, his eldest brother. From there both brothers accompanied the *paramhansas* on their journey to Gujarat. Mota Sukhanand Swami passed away on the way.

comes in a human form on earth he accepts and exhibits human traits. He veils his divinity to be like us. Those who are spiritually inclined perceive divinity in his human form. In fact, without his grace it is not possible to know him and realize him. Therefore one should never perceive him to be like other humans (*manushyabhav*)."

Kandas realized Maharaj to be God through his divine experience and the words of Muktanand Swami. Soon thereafter when Maharaj sat down to have lunch he told Kashidas and Kandas to join him. Maharaj gave them *prasad*. Subsequently, the *murti* of Maharaj became enshrined in the heart of Kandas. Maharaj served the cooked aubergines to the sadhus and devotees and made them happy.

After lunch, Shri Hari took a nap. On awakening, he sat before a few sadhus, *brahmacharis* and devotees in the premises of Sura Khachar's *darbar*. Then Maharaj spoke to them.

THE HOLY DAY OF POSHI PUNAM

Maharaj revealed, "Today is Poshhi Punam (full moon day in January). It is a very memorable and sacred day. On this day in Dabhan we had concluded the Maha Vishnu *yagna*, during which I had given the *bhagvati diksha* to Mulji Sharma of Bhadra, the incarnation of my Akshardham. I named him Gunatitanand Swami. One may not realize his importance now, but when the time comes the whole world will know who he is. Gunatitanand Swami is present here, so he will not like his glory to be sung in his presence. I have merely spoken a little about him for your knowledge."

Shri Hari also celebrated the festival of Vasant in Loya. Thereafter Dada Khachar prayed to him, "My Lord, will you come to Gadhada?" Maharaj was pleased by his courteousness and promised, "After the eclipse on the full moon day (Punam) I shall head for Gadhada."

ONLY THE TRANSITION WILL REMAIN, BUT THERE WILL BE NO MOKSHA

On the full moon night in Maha (February)

Shri Hari held a satsang assembly during the lunar eclipse. He told the sadhus to sing kirtans. At that time Maharaj saw a bania devotee from the village of Saring in the assembly. Shri Hari asked him, "Formerly you were a Vaishnav. Tell us about how the attainment of *moksha* is explained in the Vaishnav Sampradaya."

The devotee explained, "Shri Vallabhacharya and his son Shri Vithalnathji preached that *moksha* can be attained through devotion to Bhagwan Krishna. But an additional belief became a part of that principle: the descendants of Shri Vithalnathji come from the heavenly abode of Golak to liberate countless souls. That is why they are all called Purushottam or Lalji.

"Vithalnathji then prescribed the annual fasts and festivals to be observed and celebrated by his devotees. And that is how Lalji celebrates festivals like *ras*, by spraying coloured water for the liberation of souls. So the devotees believe him to be Shri Krishna and perceive all his actions to be faultless and pure. With this understanding they attain *moksha*."

Shri Hari felt pity for the errant understanding of ignorant souls. One desires to sit on the seat of God and take all liberties, whereas the seat of a guru is one of dharma (morality). Its sanctity must always be observed and maintained. The tradition of the (guru's) seat has been established for the guru to bless others with *moksha*. However, the moral rules attributed to the bona fide guru should be imbibed by and be visible in the guru. The seat is not a mere position nor a means to exercise power, but the one who sits on it represents God's form. When the form of God occupies that seat, the seat is said to be worthy. Dharma is spread by God. And one who has imbibed dharma is known as an *acharya*. The emphasis is on virtues and rapport with God, and not mere position or seat. Shri Hari felt these attributes are necessary to keep the path of *moksha* open in future and for

(Contd. on pg. 57)

HISTORY OF BAPS SATSANG

West Coast, USA



Three and a half decades ago, His Holiness Pramukh Swami Maharaj planted the seeds of Satsang in the western United States. With a few devotees and sadhus, Swamishri tirelessly travelled from Northern California to Southern California to Nevada. Through his efforts, blessings and guidance, Satsang began to flourish in Oregon, California, Arizona and Nevada.

In 1974, the first BAPS satsang assembly in the western United States was held in San Francisco, California.

Swamishri, first visited the western United States in the summer of 1977. Travelling more than three thousand miles by road from New York, he visited the homes of devotees throughout California and provided spiritual guidance.

In 1980, when Swamishri returned to California regular satsang assemblies had been established at several places in California. During this visit, Swamishri shared his vision to build a traditional *shikharbaddh* mandir. In an era when many devotees could not imagine building a small *hari* mandir, Swamishri envisioned the immense growth and development of Satsang

that would result in the construction of a *shikharbaddh* mandir.

In 1981, the first *bal* and *kishore* assemblies were held in San Francisco by Bipinbhai Shelat. In 1982, a group of BAPS sadhus led by Pujya Doctor Swami visited California and held inspiring assemblies for the devotees and well-wishers in San Francisco and Los Angeles. The devotees in Los Angeles were determined to find a place where they could establish a *hari* mandir. Eventually, in 1982, the devotees of Los Angeles were able to purchase a property in Whittier and convert it into a permanent place of worship.

In 1984, Swamishri visited California for the third time and inaugurated the Whittier mandir, the first BAPS *hari* mandir in the western United States. The dedication ceremony included a Vishwashanti Mahayagna and a *nagar yatra*.

In 1986, Pujya Mahant Swami and Pujya Ishwarcharan Swami led a team of sadhus to guide the devotees. As a result of their hard work and dedication, coupled with the leadership of devotees such as Shantibhai Patel, weekly assemblies started regularly in San Jose, California.



Swamishri discourses to youths
at the BAPS Mandir in Whittier, Los Angeles

In 1987, a group of sadhus, led by Pujya Atmaswarup Swami, visited San Francisco, San Jose, Los Angeles and Portland, Oregon.

In 1988, Swamishri arrived in the West region for the fourth time in ten years. During this trip, Swamishri visited Portland, Tigard, Santa Rosa, Santa Cruz and Fresno, San Jose, Los Angeles and other places in the west.

In 1989, Pujya Tyagvallabh Swami and Pujya Doctor Swami led two groups of sadhus on Satsang Tours to the West region. In 1990, Pujya Mahant Swami and a group of sadhus toured the West region to motivate devotees to volunteer for the upcoming Cultural Festival of India. Also in 1990, devotees began the search for a suitable site for a new mandir in the San Jose area.

In the summer of 1991, during the Cultural Festival of India in New Jersey, devotees from Los Angeles, San Jose, San Francisco and Fresno served as volunteers at the month-long festival. The festival strengthened the unity among the devotees.

After the Cultural Festival of India ended, Swamishri inaugurated a *hari* mandir in Milipitas, San Jose.

In 1992, Pujya Bhaktavatsal Swami, and a group of sadhus, held satsang assemblies throughout the West coast. In 1993, Pujya Kothari (Bhaktipriya) Swami guided the growing satsang *mandals* on how to better imbibe the principles of satsang.

At the age of 73, despite numerous physical ailments, Swamishri paid his sixth visit to the western part of the United States in 1994. The satsang *mandal* in San Jose had grown exponentially in just a few years and the *hari* mandir required expansion. As such, Swamishri blessed the satsang *mandal* and consecrated the *murtis* of Akshar Purshottam Maharaj at the *hari* mandir in San Jose.

In Los Angeles, Swamishri presided over the Annual Pride of India ceremony at the Cerritos Centre of Performing Arts, wherein Swamishri felicitated Indian entrepreneurs for their contributions to society. Swamishri also celebrated the 10th anniversary of the inauguration of the *hari* mandir in Whittier. Also in 1994, recognizing that many of the congregations were more recently founded, Swamishri asked volunteers to motivate newly formed centres in Sacramento, Stockton, Fresno, Santa Cruz, San Diego, Bakersfield, Victorville, Indio and Las Vegas.

The year 1996 marked the 25th anniversary of the establishment of the first BAPS satsang *mandal* in North America. Swamishri and sadhus travelled throughout the United States. During this visit he told the devotees in LA to start searching for land to build a *shikarbaddh* mandir. Swamishri himself visited five potential sites for the mandir.

In 1997, two groups of sadhus led by Pujya Mahant Swami and Pujya Doctor Swami, toured the United States, inspiring BAPS devotees, young and old, through insightful spiritual discourses, satsang assemblies, and two-day satsang *shibirs*.

(Contd. on pg. 57)



INAUGURATION OF BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir

20-23 December 2012, Chino Hills, CA, USA



Four days of joyous celebrations were held to mark the inauguration of the new traditional *shikharbaddh* BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir in Chino Hills, California. Devotees from throughout USA and Canada were joined by devotees from England, East and South Africa, Australia, New Zealand, India and other BAPS centres around the world.

20 DECEMBER

VOLUNTEER APPRECIATION ASSEMBLY & 92ND BIRTHDAY CELEBRATION OF PRAMUKH SWAMI MAHARAJ

Tradition. This will be the 5th *shikharbaddh*

Mandir built under His Holiness Pramukh Swami Maharaj's guidance in North America. *Faith.* In his words that this Mandir would be completed despite the many challenges. *Sacrifice.* The thousands of hours dedicated by devotees to make Pramukh Swami Maharaj's vision a reality. This motto of "Inspiring Tradition, Faith, and Sacrifice" was the underlying theme during the volunteer appreciation assembly in the presence of Pujya Kothari (Bhaktipriya) Swami. In his speech, Kothari Swami spoke about the selfless service performed by Bhagwan Swaminarayan and Pramukh Swami Maharaj. It is through such service that they have inspired many people around the world to join in such projects like the Mandir in Chino Hills. He highlighted that the success of the project was due to the fact that the devotees were able to come together and work as a team.

The evening assembly celebrated Pramukh Swami Maharaj's 92nd birthday. Pujya Kothari Swami addressed the assembly, stressing the importance of listening to the positive messages and ignoring negative influences in the world. He also emphasized that our actions will speak louder than our words.

Following the speech, the assembly was taken through a retrospective look at the Chino Hills Mandir project through various skits depicting the history of satsang in southern California. The programme culminated in a traditional dance by over 50 youths from the West Coast. The youths dancing on stage had also played an integral part in the construction of the new Mandir and had sacrificed for the past four months by volunteering on the site during the day and practising the dances at night.

The celebration ended with *mantra pushpanjali* – a ritual offering of flowers to Bhagwan Swaminarayan and guru Pramukh Swami Maharaj.

21 DECEMBER

NAGAR YATRA & KIRTAN ARADHANA

Over 2,000 devotees participated in the *nagar yatra* which began from Pioneer Boulevard at



Shri Ghanshyam Maharaj is paraded on the Gaj Rath



A grand procession through the main streets of Artesia



The murtis on the yagna stage



Kothari Swami performs the yagna rituals

1.00 p.m. The colourful procession presented a beautiful tapestry of India's rich and vibrant culture and traditions. The sacred *murtis* to be consecrated were taken in eight gorgeously decorated chariots drawn by jubilant devotees through the streets of Artesia, so that all could have darshan.

The beautiful and elaborately designed floats were accompanied by dancing troupes in traditional Indian costumes. Several dignitaries attended the event, including Mayor Pro Tem Tony Lima, Councilman Miguel Canales (Artesia, CA) and Councilman Joseph Cho (Cerritos, CA).

In the evening, BAPS sadhus presented a melodious kirtan *aradhana* filling the atmosphere with great devotion. The joy of finally completing the mandir was evident on the faces of all devotees, young and old.

22 DECEMBER

YAGNA FOR WORLD PEACE

On 22 December, the grand Vedic Vishwa Shanti Mahayag was performed in which prayers for world peace were offered. The *yagna* began at 4.00 p.m. with about 3,000 couples seated around the six main and 151 other *yagna kunds*. Pujya Kothari Swami performed the main rituals on stage in the presence of all the *murtis* to be consecrated in the mandir.

A special Women's Conference was also held on the same day.

23 DECEMBER

MURTI-PRATISHTHA CEREMONY

On the morning of 23 December, after six years of unflinching dedication and thousands of hours of volunteer work, the mandir stood glistening under the sun as the much anticipated inauguration ceremony started. Pujya Kothari (Bhaktipriya) Swami performed the Vedic installation rituals of the sacred *murtis* which had previously been sanctified by *guruhari* Pramukh Swami Maharaj in 2007. Devotees and well-wishers from across North America and various countries around the world were present for this auspicious ceremony,

which was also webcast live.

In the early morning, the *murtis* were offered *abhishek* and the preliminary rituals were performed. Then, at 8.05 a.m., on the front podium, the mandir dedication ceremony was held, in which the mayor of Chino Hills, local government officers and staff, Chino Hills residents, mayors of several surrounding cities and others who had helped in the mandir project were present. They were all thanked for their wholehearted support. Other dignitaries present for the celebration included Assemblyman Curt Hagman, State Senator Bob Huff, Councilmember Art Bennett, Satguru Bodhinatha Veylanswami – Head of Kauai’s Hindu Monastery and publisher of *Hinduism Today* magazine, Councilwoman Cynthia Moran, Artesia Mayor Sally Flowers, Milipitas Mayor Pete McHugh and Stafford Mayor Leonard Scarcella.

Thereafter, 108 doves were released into the sky as a symbol of peace. Then Pujya Kothari Swami and the chief guests opened the main doors of the mandir. Subsequently, Pujya Kothari Swami completed the Vedic consecration rituals and performed the *arti* of the consecrated *murtis*. Then, he offered *abhishek* to the *murti* of Nilkanth Varni in the Abhishek Mandap.

Addressing the gathering on this occasion, Chino Hill’s Mayor Peter Rogers said, “The mandir is a beautiful testament to the hard work of your congregation who has spent several years to build this place of worship. The Mandir and Cultural Centre will indeed be a place that Chino Hills can be proud of for many, many generations.”

Pujya Kothari Swami said, “Even when there were only a few *satsangis* here, Pragat Brahmaswarup Pramukh Swami Maharaj had visualized a grand mandir here. The Satpuru-sh’s wish never remains unfulfilled. It is due to his wish that today we see this grand, artistic and unique *shikharbaddh* mandir.”

Thus, the memorable celebrations to commemorate the opening of the fifth BAPS *shikharbaddh* mandir in North America was concluded. ♦



Mandir Dedication Ceremony on the front steps



Devotees present during the consecration rituals



Murti-Pratishtha Assembly



The first *arti* of Thakorji in the new mandir



BAPS SHRI SWAMINARAYAN
MANDIR

Chino Hills, CA, USA



MANDIR STRUCTURE

Surrounded by lush green hills and mountainous peaks, Chino Hills is an elegant suburb of Los Angeles, California. It is regarded as one of the best and safest places in the United States. The exquisite new BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir in Chino Hills, built according to the traditions of the ancient Vastu shastras, adds to the breathtaking beauty of the vicinity.

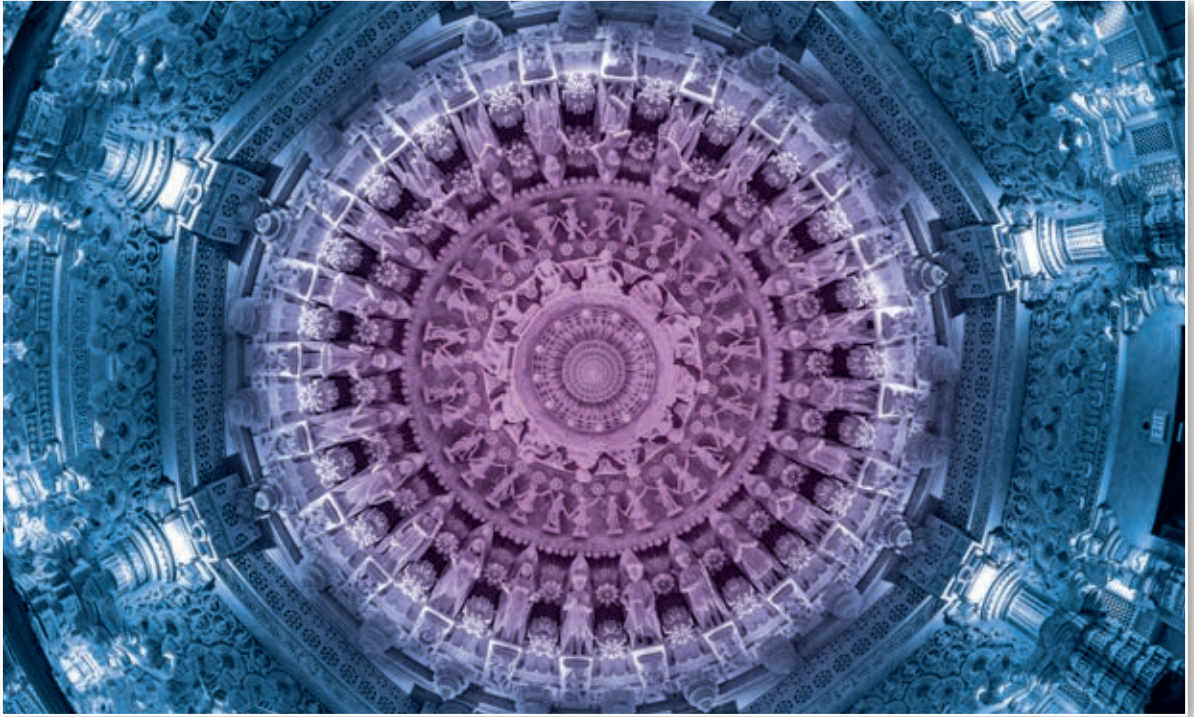
The mandir is embellished with 6,600 intricately carved *murtis* and motifs. The *murtis* of *devas* and sages in a variety of *mudras* cast their auspicious and gracious glance upon the visitors. There are sculptures of various birds and animals, many of which serve as vehicles for the *devas*, for example, *hansas*, elephants, peacocks and others. Other designs include the *kalash*, conch, sun, lotus and other revered symbols of Hindu Dharma.

The mandir structure is divided into three vertical sections: *jagati* (platform), *mandovar* (external mandir wall), and the *ghummats* and *shikhars* (domes and pinnacles). Horizontally it comprises of five sections: stairs, entrance platform, first *mandap*, main *mandap*, and the *garbhagruh* and *pradakshina*.

The *jagati* features 400 *murtis* of devotees, *acharyas* and sadhus. The *mandovar* is decorated with characters from the Mahabharat and Ramayan.

The majestic mandir is crowned by the *ghummats* and *shikhars*. There are three main and two subsidiary *shikhars*. Each of the two *ghummats* is surrounded by 12 smaller *ghummatis*. Atop the *ghummats* and *shikhars*, the golden *kalashas* and flagposts enhance the beauty and auspiciousness





One of the elaborate domes of the mandir, decorated with sculptures of Bhagwan Swaminarayan's divine *ras* and devotees

of the mandir.

The main *barsakh* (door frame) of the mandir is decorated with *murtis* of avatars. The pillars of the *rupchoki* (portal) feature the *murtis* of Shri Ganeshji in different *mudras*. Of the mandir's 122 pillars, the 88 inside the mandir are made of Italian Carrara marble, while the 34 external pillars are made of pinkstone.

There are two domes: one is hemispherical and the other is plate-shaped (tapered). The centre of the hemispherical dome is adorned with an elaborate stone chandelier. Around the centre are *murtis* of Bhagwan Swaminarayan performing various *lilas*; the middle circle of the dome is decorated with 32 *murtis* of Bhagwan Swaminarayan playing *ras* and the outer circle comprises 24 *murtis* of Bhagwan Swaminarayan's leading sadhus and devotees. The supporting pillars are also adorned with *murtis* of Bhagwan Swaminarayan's sadhus and devotees.

The door frames of the *garbagruh* are profusely decorated with intricate designs.

The central shrine houses the *murtis* of Bhagwan Swaminarayan and Aksharbrahman Gunatitanand Swami. The shrine to the right (while facing the *murtis*) houses the *murtis* of Shri Ghanshyam Maharaj and the left shrine houses the *murtis* of Shri Harikrishna Maharaj and Shri Radha-Krishna. The two subsidiary shrines at the front of the mandir house the *murtis* of Shri Sita-Ram-Hanumanji and Shri Shiv-Parvati-Ganeshji.

In front of the stairs leading to the mandir, is a lotus-shaped fountain.

HOW THE LAND WAS ACQUIRED

The following story describes the engaging saga behind the construction of the fifth BAPS *shikharbaddh* mandir in North America. It is a story of Swamishri's relentless efforts and inspiration, and the faith and perseverance of the West Coast *satsangis* as they endeavoured to fulfil Swamishri's vision of a beautiful *shikharbaddh* mandir in Southern California.



The impressive main dome of the mandir, its octagonal pillars and arches, decorated with stunning *murtis* and motifs

When Swamishri arrived in New York in 1996, Bharatsinh Zala, Jitubhai Mehta, and Kanubhai Parikh approached Swamishri to bless their renovation plans for the Whittier mandir. But, Swamishri stalled their plans. In that same year, when Amrutbhai went to meet Swamishri in Atlanta, Swamishri told him to call Bharatsinh Zala and the other devotees and instructed them to start looking for land for a new *shikharbaddh* mandir.

Inspired by Swamishri's words, over the next four years, Uttamcharan Swami and Kaivalya-murti Swami, together with Amrutbhai, Jitubhai, Govindbhai, Narendrabhai, Prakashbhai, Pareshbhai, Bharatsinh, Vinubhai, G.M. Patel and other devotees scouted more than 130 possible locations spread across multiple cities, including Diamond Bar, Pomona and Chino Hills.

From the start, there were constant challenges in the search for a suitable location. There were many factors that affected the decisions: scarcity of large undeveloped locations, high prices,

difficult entitlement procedures for religious use, proximity to Indian community, frontage to highway or major street, etc.

Despite repeated setbacks in their relentless search, the devotees and sadhus never gave up faith. They took Swamishri to see five different locations. At the first location they stopped, Swamishri came out of the car to shower flowers and chant the *dhun*. For the other locations, Swamishri merely looked at each from the car. Swamishri had decided to pursue the first location, the same land on which the mandir has now been constructed according to his vision.

Though the land had been chosen, the negotiation process was not straight forward. The land was owned by multiple family members, hence there was confusion during the purchasing of the land. Each party had different asking prices and conditions for selling the land. After nearly two years of intense negotiations the land was finally purchased. Applications and plans were submitted to the City for approval



Adjacent to the mandir is the Haveli, featuring wooden designs in the traditional Gujarati architectural style

in June 2002. It would not be an easy route as many challenges continued to appear.

The application process had to pass through three steps in the local government. First, it would be reviewed by the City staff, then by the Planning Commission and then presented to the City Council for the final decision. The mandir plans were reviewed by the City Staff then passed on to the Planning Commission. An hour before the hearing with the Planning Commission, a phone call was received by the devotees. They were told that there was a misunderstanding and that the City Staff had spotted an oversight about the height issue. The devotees decided that they should go ahead with the hearing despite the issue of the height. The building plans were approved by a unanimous 4-0 decision, but the height of mandir was limited to 42 feet.

During the second Planning Commission hearing, the staff proposed a solution to the height issue, a city wide code amendment; this was approved 4 to 1. The proposed code

amendment made it possible to build the mandir with the required height. The only hurdle left was approval from the City Council of the proposed code amendment.

The hearing for this was set for 12 August 2003. However, a few days before the hearing, a local resident questioned the mandir attendance figures in the application. The hearing was then postponed as the City wanted clarification. In order to protest the project, local residents organized an opposition campaign. The hearing date was set for a year later.

At that hearing, there were around 1,500 people present and the hearing lasted seven-and-a-half hours, until 1.30 a.m. The opposition was large and organized, voicing their opinions forcefully during the hearing. In fact, the opposition was so strong that the devotees feared they may not even receive approval for any part of the mandir plan. But, just before the time of the voting, Swamishri called and, by his divine intervention, all matters were approved,



The beautiful ceiling, pillars and arches at the mandir entrance

except for the height.

After this hearing, it was decided to inform the local residents about the project in order to clear their doubts. There were only a few *satsangi* families in Chino Hills, so the devotees reached out to local well-wishers. By doing this, support for the project began to solidify.

A reputed public relations firm was hired in 2003. Their efforts and guidance helped the mandir assemble support among the residents of Chino Hills. Simultaneously, in 2003 and 2004, the devotees began a home-to-home campaign. Youths and seniors visited homes to collect signatures of support and inform the residents about the mandir. It was a hard task. Often, the volunteers faced humiliation and insults from many of those opposed to the mandir. Yet, they performed their *seva* diligently and enthusiastically.

From 2004 to 2011, civil work and construction work started, despite the unresolved issue of the mandir's height. When Swamishri

visited Chino Hills in 2007, he reassured and motivated the devotees, saying, "The contractor will do his work, the artisans will do their work and Bhagwan will do Bhagwan's work." Furthermore, he added, "There will be a grand mandir here."

In 2007, together with the opening of the Haveli, assembly hall and classrooms, Swamishri also performed the *murti-pratishtha* of the *murtis* to be consecrated in the completed mandir. *Satsang sabhas* and activities began here in earnest.

Thereafter, as part of the continuing PR effort, open houses were held, inviting local residents to learn more about the mandir. About 15 open houses were held with an average of 40 attendees. Each open house included presentations, question-answer sessions, guided tours of the mandir site and one-on-one interactions with the guests.

The devotees made such an effort that even the main person who had been opposing since

2004 started to support the project. He gave the mandir access to his website so that mandir information could be uploaded.

The Chino Hills community was beginning to feel comfortable with the BAPS Mandir project because of the Sanstha's charitable activities, like walk-a-thons, food distribution drives, toy distribution, blood donation drives and educational fairs. They started trusting the devotees and their opposition started to melt.

In mid-2011, a hearing was set for the Planning Commission about the height. There was no opposition during this hearing and the Commission voted in favour of allowing the mandir's height to reach 78 feet. However, there was one final step in the process left: the hearing in front of the City Council. The date for this hearing was 9 August 2011.

The decision made on this night would either delay the project longer or allow the construction to proceed. There were only one or two city council members, of the total five, who were guaranteed supporters of the project, so there was great uncertainty as to what the outcome would be. The devotees called Swamishri to explain to him the situation. Three of the opposing members from 2004 were still

on the City Council, so the devotees knew that it was not going to be easy.

At the hearing, local residents spoke in front of the City Council, making statements in support of the mandir. At the very end, only one person came to speak in opposition of the mandir, but was overshadowed by the massive number in support. After the residents had spoken, the council members gave their thoughts. The Mayor of Chino Hills mentioned that he had spoken with the mayors of Chicago, Houston and Atlanta (where there are BAPS *shikharbaddh* mandirs already) about their mandir's effect on the city. Each mayor had nothing but wonderful things to say about the mandir in their city.

Then the council members began to deliberate. They emerged to declare their final decision: a resounding, unanimous 5 to 0 vote in favour of allowing the mandir's height to reach 78 feet. The news was greeted by everyone with extreme joy.

So, after facing years of obstacles, the final hurdle had been cleared. The efforts of the devotees and the support of the local community made this possible.

Swamishri had provided constant support, guidance and blessings to the devotees through all the trials and tribulations.





Base isolators being fitted



Blue solar panels in parking area for eco-friendly heating

HOW THE MANDIR WAS BUILT

A special team of architects and engineers surveyed the Chino Hills area before selecting the type of stone to use in constructing the mandir. The team chose pink sandstone from Rajasthan, India, for the exterior of the mandir.

The interior of the mandir is comprised of 2,250 tons of white Italian marble from the quarries of Carrara, Italy. To ensure continuity inside the mandir, each piece of marble was hand-selected, and closely analyzed before extraction. From Italy, each block of marble was shipped to India where it was transported by road to specialized artisan centres for carving.

Thereafter, skilled artisans and craftsmen hand-carved the stones. Once the carvings were complete, each stone was labelled, packed into tailor-made containers and shipped to the United States.

The Indian pink sandstone was excavated from mines in the city of Bansi Pahadhpur located in Rajasthan, India. From there, 3,000 tons of sandstone was delivered to artisans at sculpturing workshops throughout the city of Pindwada, where craftsmen hand-carved each piece using hammers and chisels. Upon completion, the sandstone pieces were labelled, packaged and shipped to the United States by ship. Both the sandstone and marble arrived at the Port of Long Beach and were then transported to Chino Hills.

The stonework for the mandir first began in 2005. Since 2007, when the first shipment of stones was received, hundreds of containers have been delivered to the mandir site in Chino Hills. Once received, each container of stone were strategically placed for eventual placement on the mandir. Once the containers were identified, sorted and marked, a highly skilled team of engineers, architects, artisans, and volunteers began placing each stone. Constructed like a three-dimensional jigsaw puzzle, the mandir was constructed by meticulously assembling one hand-carved piece at a time. Over 35,000 individual stone pieces were used to complete the mandir.

One of the most critical challenges of the construction was the necessity to make the mandir structure earthquake-resistant, since the entire area is in a high-risk earthquake zone. For this, 40 base isolators were used. Each is 3 feet in diameter and 2½ feet high and they separate the mandir structure at the *jagati* level from everything below. Each base isolator is made of strong steel plates with rubber in between. The central 6 inches of the isolator is filled with lead. The base isolators prevent or minimize damage to buildings during an earthquake. It is a tried and tested technology which has been widely used in New Zealand, India, Japan, Italy and the USA. The isolators decouple the building from the ground and will move only a little or not at all during an earthquake. ♦



INSPIRING STORIES OF
SERVICE AND SACRIFICE



Behind the launching of every new BAPS mandir there lies incredible stories of service and sacrifice of thousands of young and old devotees. The Swaminarayan Mandir in Chino Hills, inspired by Pramukh Swami Maharaj, is an illustrious testament. Some donated money, while some donated both money and engaged in physical *seva*. However, there were those who sacrificed everything.

The number of devotees in Los Angeles and the West Coast satsang centres are not substantial. In fact the majority are middle

class. Yet, they collaborated to serve in their own capacities to fulfil the vision of Pramukh Swami Maharaj. The stories of their services and sacrifices are inspiring and exemplary.

Nitinbhai Kariya lost his job two years ago. He managed his house on his wife's salary, who works in a bank. Nitinbhai is a good singer and also writes and composes kirtans. He sings bhajans during stage programmes, but never asks for remuneration. However, whatever people offered him he donated to the mandir project. Despite his money crises he never informed anyone of his financial donations.

Bhailalbhai became a *satsangi* in 1984. On Swamishri's word he gave donations at that time. Subsequently, by Swamishri's grace his dying motel business was rejuvenated and started booming. Ever since, he has not missed a single opportunity in doing *seva*. In 2007, he pledged to donate a big sum. At that time his son, Nilesh, promised Swamishri, "Bapa, I will do more *seva* than this in two years." He fulfilled his pledge the following year by donating his late mother's jewellery for the mandir project.

Babubhai Patel's (Tuscon, Arizona) financial condition was weak. Yet, he donated what he had pledged for the mandir project. Shortly thereafter, when Swamishri came to Los Angeles he agreed to fulfil the sum Swamishri told him. On informing his family about it they said, "Why didn't you pledge more. We should give more than what Swamishri has said." And to the surprise of all, the family worked hard and donated the sum.

Ashishbhai Modi of Phoenix lost his job during the mandir foundation-stone laying ceremony. His wife had a part-time job. Their financial condition was appalling. At that time they pledged to donate a certain sum. When the sadhus refused to accept their *seva*, Ashishbhai broke down and urged, "Bapa will take care of us, but I will not get such an opportunity to

serve again. Please accept my donation.” And he donated in spite of several refusals by sadhus.

Pramodbhai, Hiteshbhai and Maheshbhai are brothers. They hail from the village of Sampura, near Sankari. Due to satsang inculcated by their parents the brothers happily donate a large part of their earnings. They had dedicated the earnings of one of their motels for the LA mandir construction project. Their mother sponsored the mandir *kalashas*.

Umeshbhai Patel of Corona became a *satsangi* in 2007. Ever since, his faith and spirit of devotion has spiralled upwards. The economic recession of 2008 hit his business very hard. He made heavy losses and incurred debts. He was on the brink of becoming homeless. In spite of all this he did not ebb in continuing his services and donations to the mandir. Swamishri told him, “Your *seva* lies in talking to others and consolidating their satsang.” Despite this he continued with his monetary donations.

Ankit Brahmakshatriya is a youth volunteer of the *yuvak mandal* at Chino Hills. He donated the money he had saved to partly pay for his new house. The sadhus tried hard in persuading him not to do so. But Ankit showed them what he earned and spent and pleaded, “You will have to accept a certain amount as my *seva*.” The sadhus told him to go and ask his family. But Ankit was resolute. He explained, “My wife will be more pleased about my donation. It doesn’t matter if I cannot save for a house, but the mandir should not remain incomplete. My heart burns when the house of God is being built and I have money lying in my bank account.” Finally, when Ankit asked his wife, she hiked up the amount and said, “I will work overtime to donate the amount.” Everyone was awed by their faith and sacrifice.

Upenbhai J. Patel of Jharola had an ordinary job. His wife also worked and both of them earned a measely sum but their sacrifice was extraordinary. They regularly deposited their contributions in the mandir. In addition they

readily engaged themselves in various *seva* in the mandir. They had resolved not to buy a house till the mandir was completed. Upenbhai’s wife had donated all her jewellery for the mandir project.

The late Bhudarji Maru was blessed and graced by Yogiji Maharaj. His son, Navinbhai, since the last six years headed straight after work to the mandir for *seva*. In addition, he regularly donated a large part of his salary for the mandir project. When the sadhus exhorted him to get a new car and house he replied, “First the mandir and then I’ll think about the house.”

Indian culture is replete with great idols of sacrifice and charity like King Rantidev, King Bali, Karna and Dadhichi Muni. Today, Pramukh Swami Maharaj has inspired a galaxy of devotees whose sacrifice and dedication remind us of our past icons.

Pareshbhai Patel of Chino Hills launched a campaign to inform others about the mandir. To resolve the misunderstandings among the local Americans and others he personally visited 1,500 homes, explaining about the purpose and benefits of the mandir. All signed letters of approval for the mandir, which also helped in convincing the city council to grant permission for the mandir height. Swamishri expressed his joy upon Paresh and gave him his *mala* during his visit to Sarangpur.

Natubhai Patel and his son Pankajbhai of Rajpur gave their all for the mandir project. Despite the crippling recession that severely affected their business they fulfilled their donation pledge by getting a financial loan on high interest.

Rakeshbhai Patel of Nadiad did not pay attention to his business for the last two years. He sincerely and loyally abided by his duty as project manager of the mandir. He would repeatedly visit the local council to acquire permissions for the mandir project. He travelled three times to Italy at his own cost for acquiring

marble for the mandir. He also travelled to India and China several times for the project. He never flagged in his efforts in spite of health problems related to his heart and eyes. Rakeshbhai donated 80 percent of his earnings for the mandir project. He remained undeterred in the face of all adversities.

Manubhai Vaghasiya offered his services in the security department. He convinced others to offer security *seva* also, and thus avoid the need for employing security guards. In this way he saved the mandir from spending large sums on security. His wife contributed by working in a store and donating her entire wages. Manubhai hosted the skilled craftsmen and artisans who came from India in his own motel for two years.

Hemantbhai of Victorville ran a small motel that was not doing well. He could not manage to even pay its insurance and maintenance bills. Still, he donated beyond his capacity. Presently, he works at a petrol pump. In spite of this Hemantbhai's faith and joy has not ebbed one bit.

Ashokbhai Patel mortgaged his house and donated the sum to the mandir. Kaushal Dave donated a large part of his salary for five years for the mandir project.

Kalpeshbhai Solanki is a dedicated devotee. In 2008 he pledged a sum for the mandir project. When his wife came to know of it, she asked, "Why have you pledged a small sum? We have more money." Kalpeshbhai replied, "I've reserved it for a business." His wife told him to take the money and donate all of it for the mandir project.

Mansinh lives in Berkeley. During his last 14 years in America he has done four jobs in different cities. Wherever he stayed, there was a *hari* mandir under construction. He contributed to all the four mandir projects. Due to his passion for *seva* and sacrifice he has not saved a dollar for himself.

The day the LA mandir project was launched in 2004 Rathin Raval of Sacramento donated

a substantial sum. Then in 2008 when Kothari Bhaktipriya Swami came, he gave everything for the mandir project. When the sadhus tried to stop him, he replied, "I have decided that if I have even a little amount left at home, then I have not made a total sacrifice." He donated again for the third time.

Kirtanbhai and Mehulbhai are brothers, and they are always ready to do any *seva*. Kirtanbhai got married recently, and his wife donated all her jewellery for the mandir project. Mehul's wife also donated likewise.

Hiteshbhai Parmar of Gandhinagar settled in America two years ago. The earnings from his ordinary job merely allows him to make ends meet. Despite this, his wife donated all her jewellery for the mandir project. When they were told that their *seva* would not be accepted, Hiteshbhai became sad. He insisted and gave his donations. Their two children donated the money they had saved to see Disney World.

Eighty-year-old Shri V.C. Das did not feel the need to wear and keep his gold *kanthi* and rings. So he donated them and also pledged his social security allowance. In addition, he offers his *seva* all day at the mandir.

Children and youths too pitched in donating for the mandir project in their own way. Ankit Nikhilbhai Patel put his career on hold and got engaged in *seva*. Rushi H. Patel, instead of getting a job, offered his services in the mandir housekeeping and construction departments. So many students polished the stone pillars after school and college. During the winter vacation children and teenagers served from morning till evening each day. Sometimes they spent time as helpers to the artisans. The youths did heavy labour work like raising stone pillars and unloading wooden beams. Many drove more than six to seven hours from satsang centres like San Jose, Portland, Phoenix, San Diego, Fresno and Berksfield.

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PRAMUKH SWAMI MAHARAJ INSPIRER OF THE GRAND MANDIR





faith in God.

This is how Pramukh Swami Maharaj creates mandirs.

The BAPS Swaminarayan Mandir in Chino Hills is another feather in the cap of Swamishri's illustrious works. He had declared and blessed, "We want to build a towering mandir on this land in Los Angeles." The land and the mandir project faced harrowing legal issues and other problems. Because of these obstacles a few sadhus and devotees were skeptical about gaining the land and seeing the project through. Pramukh Swami Maharaj infused strength in all of them, saying, "A supreme mandir will be done, and the victory bells will toll."

In this context, the first experience happened in 2009. After nine straight years of intense struggle the local council gave their consent to build a 42 feet high mandir on *rath yatra* day. When the sadhus from LA gave the good news they were expecting Swamishri to be happy, but he remarked, "Tell them that instead of giving us permissions bit by bit they should give them all in one go!" The sadhus responded with confidence, "Since you have said so, we are sure we will get them. Today is the Rath Yatra festival, and the reins of our life is in your hands. Bless us that our life's chariot never gets stuck anywhere." Swamishri replied passionately, "O, how can our chariot get bogged down. The mandir project is the wish of Yogiji Maharaj and Shriji Maharaj. We wish to have Akshar Purushottam mandirs throughout the world. This 'chariot' (of *upasana*) is moving, and it will not stop anywhere. It will travel throughout the world. Thus, be strong and brave. Shriji Maharaj will inspire all..."

Many felt that the mandir project (chariot) in Chino Hills will be stopped. However, Pramukh Swami Maharaj's prophecy proved to be true. After his blessings the work progressed with momentum till its final completion.

Let us see another experience of Swamishri's

How does Pramukh Swami Maharaj build shikharbaddh mandirs? Swamishri gives his heart and soul in creating every mandir. He spends hours and days in searching for an appropriate site. Then he takes interest in acquiring the land and in getting the mandir plans ready. He inspires the devotees to contribute and sacrifice whatever they can for the mandir. He consecrates not only the murtis but every stone and inch of the mandir. And in addition to all this he remains equipoised in the midst of towering challenges, and resolves the problems with patience, expertise and absolute



BAPS Mandir, Whittier, consecrated by Swamishri in 1984



Grand procession through the streets of LA, 1984



Swamishri guides devotees for the mandir project



Swamishri encourages the youths

divinity. The issue about the height of the mandir *shikhars* was getting more and more difficult to solve. There was stiff opposition from the public and council members. At that time Swamishri was in Vadodara. For three days the *kothari* of Los Angeles, Sarvadarshan Swami, gave details about the issue to Swamishri. Swamishri listened attentively. Then Sarvadarshan Swami said, "Shall we make an announcement on the Fuldol festival?" Swamishri asked surprisingly, "What announcement?"

"That the permission for the mandir height has been passed." To this Swamishri replied, "This time the bells will toll (with success)."

The sadhus chorused, "This time you'll have to pervade the hearts of all and give the judgement." Swamishri replied, "Why? The judgement has already been given! By whose wishes will it be done! Yogiji Maharaj and Shriji Maharaj! We want to build mandirs worldwide. The bells (of success) will toll."

There have been many such incidents of Swamishri's prophecy of success. His divine words re-ignited the flames of hope and faith in all.

Swamishri's method of creating mandirs reflects his multi-faceted personality and skills. The mandirs he builds are ornate, beautiful and serve to inspire values, faith and service to society. They are clean and satisfy the needs of devotees and visitors. He accomplishes all this with hard work and profound devotion to Bhagwan Swaminarayan and his gurus. And that is why they have become gateways of peace and *moksha* for thousands of devotees and aspirants.

From 1974, his first visit to America, till today, his efforts in establishing mandirs in the hearts of devotees have preceded the building of stone mandirs. To realize this he has spent decades in contributing to their joys and sharing their sorrows. He has spent his whole life patiently listening to and unravelling their problems. To sanctify their homes (*padhramnis*)

he has travelled intensively, disregarding his health and comfort. He has made concentrated efforts in instilling values in children and youths.

Swamishri decided upon the LA mandir site after seeing or reviewing 235 places. Thus one can imagine the long and arduous journey in choosing the final site. Furthermore, Swamishri inspired the devotees to serve and donate for the mandir project. One cannot imagine the number of hours he has spent in accomplishing this. During the most challenging phase of the mandir project when everyone was disheartened Swamishri revealed, “You cannot see, but I can see that the mandir will come up in Chino Hills.” In 2007, Swamishri performed the *murti-pratishtha* of the *murtis* for the Chino Hills mandir at the Whittier mandir, LA, and blessed, “Our work is such that God’s sight has favoured the entire city and devotees will rise from all corners. By doing the *pratishtha* of the image of God I pray that there be peace in our hearts, and happiness and inner strength prevails in all. Both here and there (India) work will be done and the mandir will be ready. Everything will turn out to be supreme. I have faith that a mandir of five *shikhars* with flags fluttering atop will come up, and the council members and the people will be inspired. God will accomplish the work.”

When the height of the mandir *shikhar* was being debated by the council members, plans to be submitted for the 78-foot high *shikhars* were brought before Swamishri by Akshaymuni Swami, Sarvadarshan Swami and Sanjaybhai Parikh. Swamishri touched the entire plan with his hand. Then he asked for sanctified flowers to place on the plan. Sanjaybhai gave three roses and Swamishri placed one each on three *shikhars*. Then he added, “Why place them on three *shikhars* only? There are totally five. Give me two more roses.” And Swamishri placed the two

(Contd. on pg. 59)



Swamishri sanctifies the *shikharbaddh* mandir site



Swamishri looks at the mandir plan on site



Swamishri continually motivated the devotees



Performing rituals for the first pillar stone of the mandir, Chino Hills

A Personification of Vairagya



Sadguru Nishkulanand Swami

Gopalanand Swami rushed to him and tried to dissuade him from leaving. It had taken Gopalanand Swami long enough to convince him to even visit Vadodara. He disliked big cities because they offered too many temptations.

By no means would he stay now, and persuasion was out of the question. Gopalanand Swami was left with no choice but to take the container full of *dudhpak* (sweet milk with rice) and pour it all away! Then a simple meal was cooked for him.

With a sigh of relief on his face, he agreed to stay. He was Nishkulanand Swami (1766-1848 CE), the personification of true *vairagya* or detachment.

What triggered such a reaction? Could it possibly be fear? After all, Mul Aksharmurti Gunatitanand Swami has advised devotees to avoid the *panchvishays* or materialistic objects of temptation, but to become valiant as lions when confronted by them (Swamini Vato 2.113).

Nishkulanand Swami lived by Gunatitanand Swami's guidance. He feared first before resorting to combat against the *panchvishays* in unavoidable circumstances.

Shriji Maharaj once casually mentioned in an assembly that he wished to appoint Nishkulanand Swami as the *mahant*, or head, of Gadhadha mandir. Nishkulanand Swami received this message by word of mouth and became frustrated. He thought to himself that if he stayed any longer in Gadhadha, he would be forced into this seat of authority.

Authority in general provides easier access to the *panchvishays*. Maybe Nishkulanand Swami, distrustful of his mind, had the premonition that he may become susceptible to these temptations. He panicked and escaped to Gadhali, a neighbouring village.

Someone conveyed the news to Maharaj, who ordered Nishkulanand Swami to immediately return to Gadhadha. Maharaj then questioned Nishkulanand Swami about his sudden disappearance.

Nishkulanand Swami frankly stated, "If a 1000 *maund* (20,000 kg) beam were to fall on a tiny mouse, would it survive! It would be crushed to death! I simply wouldn't be able to

bear the responsibilities of this post.”

Maharaj reassured Nishkulanand Swami that no such action would be taken. He again expressed a sigh of relief on his face. Why this sudden mental ease?

Only when Nishkulanand Swami distanced himself from the *panchvishays* did he feel relaxed. He requested Maharaj for permission to go to Dholera, an isolated village near the shores of the Gulf of Khambhat. Dholera did not pose any appealing *panchvishays*. Even today it is still relatively desolate, so one can imagine what it was like 200 years ago! This is exactly what Nishkulanand Swami preferred.

Moreover, Adbhutanand Swami, the *mahant* of Dholera at the time, also had a natural inclination for *vairagya*. It made perfect sense that both got along very well because “such a devotee [with intense *vairagya*] only keeps the company of devotees who are renunciants [ascetic in nature]” (Vachanamrut, Gadhada I 47).

Running away, however, is not always an option. In certain situations, one must stand up and fight.

Maharaj once took Lalji Suthar¹ as a guide across the desert to Kutch. During their journey by foot, they eventually reached Adhoi village.

“I’m starving,” Maharaj exclaimed. “Bring me food from somewhere.”

“You made me give away all our food and money,” Lalji said in a complaining, but friendly tone. “What can I bring now?”

Maharaj asked him to beg for food in the village. “My in-laws live here,” Lalji objected. “Everyone knows me. How can I beg for food here?”

“What if you’re disguised?” Maharaj humorously suggested.

“Then... then that’s great,” Lalji replied, wondering to himself what Maharaj had in

mind.

Maharaj then made Lalji shave off his moustache and tuft of hair. After handing him a special cap and *alfi*, or long orange tunic, Maharaj initiated and renamed him Nishkulanand Swami, which means ‘one who has renounced his family and experiences God’s bliss’.

To further test his degree of faith and *vairagya*, Maharaj instructed Nishkulanand Swami to beg for food from his in-laws’ house.

He was cornered. Where would he run to now? He had to follow the *agna*, otherwise Maharaj would remain hungry. It was time for Nishkulanand Swami to become a lion.

He boldly stood in the front yard of his in-laws’ home and said aloud, “Narayan Hare! Sachidanand Prabho.”² His wife, Kanku, stepped out of the house to provide alms to the unknown man dressed in an *alfi*. She looked at his face and was taken aback to see her husband, transformed!

She scurried back inside and, while gasping for breath, notified her mother about what she had seen. Straightaway, the mother took her two grandsons (Nishkulanand Swami’s sons), Madhavji and Kanji, and brought them before Nishkulanand Swami with the intent of moving his heart.

But he stood there with a determined face, unaffected. They totally underestimated his *vairagya*. He declared, “Just as fire remains unassailed by termites, your temptations cannot stir me.” Continuing, he said, “Maharaj has graced this village. If you wish to be liberated, then serve Maharaj by feeding him some *rotla*.”

Without wasting a second, his wife prepared a delicious meal of fresh, hot *rotla* and pickles. Maharaj was pleased with the offering, and more importantly, with Nishkulanand Swami’s deep-rooted *vairagya*.

Some time later, his relatives tried hard to

1. Nishkulanand Swami’s name prior to initiation as sadhu.

2. Sadhus proclaim these words when they beg for alms.

persuade him to return to the householder fold, but to no avail. Nishkulanand Swami spoke to them about the never-ending, vicious cycle of births and deaths. He sang, “*Me hu ādi anādi, ā to sarve upādhi...*”³ Seeing such wisdom, his relatives stopped trying to convince him and went back home.

Words can significantly change a person’s thinking and emotions. Nishkulanand Swami’s extended family probably said a lot of things to discourage him; however, like a firm rock on the seashore frequently hit by strong waves, these words did not weaken his *vairagya*.

So, was he just some heartless person who showed no emotion? No, his *vairagya* meant fleeing the temptations of this world; but it also meant racing towards God.

Gunatitanand Swami has provided a unique definition of God’s *murti* in addition to the traditional type: *katha*, *kirtan*, *varta* and *dhyān* (Swamini Vato, 1.173). Nishkulanand Swami always connected himself to God’s *murti* in one of these forms throughout the day.

As a carpenter, he grabbed the opportunity to engage in any mode of devotion whenever he found free time during his working hours. Every night after work and dinner, he walked about 11 kilometres from his village, Shekhpāth, to a shrine dedicated to Bhagwan Shivji. There, he would meet Mulji Sharma⁴ who walked the same distance from Bhadra. They would spend the entire night discussing God’s greatness, and before the break of dawn, would walk back to their homes.

True *vairagya* is detachment from the world accompanied with spiritual wisdom and bhakti for God. Despite Nishkulanand Swami’s aversion for the materialistic pleasures, he never failed to offer gifts to Maharaj. How else could he have designed and constructed the

ornate 12-pillared *hindolo*, or swing, in Vartal for Maharaj?

Furthermore, shastras written by Nishkulanand Swami, such as the Bhaktachintamani and *Hari Smṛuti*⁵, explain Maharaj’s divine incidents in great detail. These narrations, amongst other things, include vivid descriptions of the delicious food items served by Maharaj, along with the elaborate garments and ornaments he wore. These sacred texts describe how to serve God throughout the day with different offerings.

All these writings seem to contrast his natural inclination for *vairagya*. Nishkulanand Swami avoided temptations; but if he was cornered by them, he fought courageously to avoid becoming attracted. Despite his detached state of mind, he expressed his devotion to Maharaj with various offerings.

Nishkulanand Swami had developed true *vairagya*. Today, the living example of true *vairagya* is the Ekantik Satpurush, Pramukh Swami Maharaj.

The only difference is that it is not a developed trait in him; it is an eternal quality. Whether Swamishri is near the *panchvishays* or far from them, he is always focused on Shriji Maharaj. The *panchvishays* have never tempted, cannot tempt, and will never tempt him. Moreover, those who truly connect themselves to Pramukh Swami Maharaj become free of all desires, and ultimately reach God. ♦

3. The *ātma* is eternal and existed before this body. This body exists only for a short period of time and is the cause of suffering.

4. Later initiated as Gunatitanand Swami.

5. A section of the Nishkulanand Kavya, Chapter 9

No Expectations

Brahmanand Swami's life reveals his array of talents, his towering spirit of seva and resolute faith in Bhagwan Swaminarayan. He was born on Vasant Panchami, nearly 240 years ago, and ever since he is remembered and celebrated for his saintliness and works.

THE BEGINNING

Born on 8 February 1772, Brahmanand Swami was a living legend whose extraordinary life and works are still remembered today. He was not an ordinary poet who had become prominent merely because of talent and quick wit. But Brahmanand Swami was divine and whose birth had been prophesied by Ramanand Swami, “*Sarvāvatāri Parabrahman Purushottam Nārāyan ā brahmāndmā pragat thai saddharmanu sthāpan karshe tyāre anek dhāmonā avatāri ishvariya shaktio ane vibhuti pan temni sāthe ā lokmā pragat thashe. Āvi j ek mahān vibhuti tamārā gāme bahu thodā samaymā pragat thashe.*” – “When the supreme Parabrahman Purushottam Narayan manifests in this *brahmand* to establish dharma, many divine entities and powers from other abodes will manifest with him in this world. Such a great entity will be born shortly in your village.”

Three months after Ramanand Swami's revelation, on a Saturday morning in the remote town of Khan, 45 km northwest of Mount Abu, a magical moment was experienced by everyone in the vicinity. Even people from afar had travelled on camels and horses, drawn by



Sadguru Brahmanand Swami

an unknown, yet strong attraction, to witness a divine incident. Ramanand Swami's prophecy was coming to life. A son was being born to the court poet, Shambhudanji, and his wife Laluba. The entire atmosphere was transformed. Everyone experienced unexplainable peace and divinity, feelings that were never experienced before. The newborn son was named Ladudanji.

Ladudanji mastered the skills of horse-riding, weaponry and yoga. Among other things, he grew fond of horses and excelled in being able to analyze the signs and qualities of different breeds. Simultaneously, he cradled a deep, inherent love for music. As a result, he began to study various instruments such as the *mrudang*, *nagara* and *dholak*.

By the age of 15, Ladudanji had travelled to Mount Abu, Jaipur, Udaipur and Jodhpur. He possessed a unique attraction to the mysteries of nature. Many times he would go to Mount

Abu and for days observe the wonders of the mountains, waterfalls and lakes. He would lose himself to the landscape and scenery. Worried by this repeated habit, his father was eager to engage Ladudanji in any type of activity in order to suppress his mind's affinity towards spirituality and nature. After his primary education, Shambhudanji attempted to divert his son's interests to farming. His efforts proved fruitless. Finally, a divine message conveyed to the family in their dreams encouraged Ladudanji's father to send him to Kutch in order to study Pingal and other sciences. This decision proved to be a turning point in Ladudanji's life. Later, Ladudanji would grow to be an unrivalled poet and a gem among Shriji Maharaj's *paramhansas*. This was beyond anything that Shambhudanji had envisioned.

A LUXURIOUS LIFE

Brahmanand Swami's life epitomizes the climax of renunciation – a fact that remains difficult to fathom even today. Because of his sharp intellect and mesmerizing ability to captivate audiences, Ladudanji's name, even before he had completed his studies, spread rapidly like wild fire. His qualities were praised throughout the nation. Riches shadowed him wherever he went as kings and ministers fell at his feet with melted hearts enchanted by the words that effortlessly flowed from his mouth.

When Ladudanji first performed in the court assembly in Kutch, the audience listened with pin-drop silence. Time itself had stopped. It was four o'clock in the morning and not a soul fluttered. The next day when Ladudanji was leaving, he was showered with gifts: 151 gold coins, embroidered garments, gold rings, an expensive warm Kashmiri shawl...along with an insistent invitation to return soon. This type of welcome and farewell became a convention for Ladudanji.

When he arrived at the palace in Bhuj,

Ladudanji was welcomed with a grandeur suitable for kings. The palace queens sat him on a seat plated with gold and silver and washed his hands with rosewater. Within moments, small bowls filled to the brim with expensive almonds, pistachios, cashews and other delicacies were offered in a gold plate as appetizers. Servants stood on either side steadily fanning him.

In Dhrangadhra, Ladudanji left the assembly awestruck when he unhesitatingly solved questions and riddles from a variety of academic fields (mathematics, astronomy, astrology, poetry, translations in seven different languages, etc.). One hundred different professionals had come to ask these questions. Ladudanji accomplished this impossible feat with surprising ease within only an hour and without a mistake. Astounded by his talent and intelligence, the king awarded Ladudanji 25,000 rupees. His performance in Dhrangadhra earned him the title 'Shatavdhani'. His prominence uncontrollably spread in all directions. Countless kings begged him to grace their palaces and assemblies. After personally witnessing his unparalleled skill, the courtiers in Jamnagar viewed Ladudanji as a divine incarnation from the heavens. Hence, Ladudanji's reputation became godly. He was worshipped wherever he went and his lifestyle rivalled even that of kings. He possessed countless priceless jewels and gems, exquisite jewellery, expensive garments and elegant shawls. In addition he had 16 horses, 7 camels, and 4 bulls. He was accompanied day and night by 50 servants, 25 guards and 25 riders. Ladudanji was drowned amid these unimaginable wealth and comforts.

However, it all faded away in a flash. Not only did they physically vanish, but all the luxurious comforts which Ladudanji had effortlessly obtained were erased from his mind and heart. This drastic transformation was the reason Ladudanji was able to become a priceless gem in Shriji Maharaj's eyes.

THE TRANSFORMATION

When Ladudanji portrayed his skill in the court of King Vajesinha of Bhavnagar, the king summoned the state's goldsmith to measure the poet and then generously adorn him with gold. Seeing the *tilak-chandlo* on the goldsmith's forehead, Ladudanji was overwhelmed with curiosity. The king clarified, "In the village of Gadhada in my state, one by the name of Swaminarayan has come, whom the Kathis believe to be God incarnate. Please go there yourself and find out the truth." Eager to test Bhagwan Swaminarayan, Ladudanji set off for Gadhada making four wishes: to be called by his name, to be garlanded with roses worn by Bhagwan Swaminarayan, to see the Bhagvat wrapped in a black cloth and to see the sixteen divine signs of God on Maharaj's feet. The moment the poet stepped in the small village, he was submerged in a divine and peaceful experience. One by one, Ladudanji's wishes came to life right before his eyes. For the first time, the person who would naturally leave everyone else awestruck felt speechless. Ladudanji's heart stopped as he became hypnotized by Maharaj's divine attraction. He drowned himself in Maharaj's form, experiencing bliss that was beyond the materialistic comforts he was accustomed to. This experience, as well as the inspiration he received from other devotees, Ladudanji unhesitatingly and permanently renounced his luxuries and requested Maharaj to initiate him as a sadhu. Pleased by his spiritual eagerness, Maharaj initiated Ladudanji and initially named him Shrirangdas. He later became known as Brahmanand Swami. Ladudanji took his first step towards relinquishing a lush bed of roses to walk on a path of painful thorns.

A PATH OF THORNS

Maharaj's *paramhansas* led a life saturated

with constant hardships and inconceivable sufferings. Once, Maharaj was seated in an assembly in Sardhar. He asked two sadhus who had just arrived from *vicharan*, "What troubles do our sadhus face?" Tears flowed from the sadhus' eyes. Visions and memories of the ceaseless afflictions endured by their fellow *paramhansas* flashed across their minds as they described their ordeals, "Maharaj, the persecution is escalating. The *bawas* shatter our *pattars* and *tumbdis*. They break our *kanthis* and *janois*, cut our *chotlis*, steal flour and grains from our almshouses and maliciously curse us." After a moment's pause the disheartened sadhus finally stated, "Maharaj, there is no suffering on this entire planet which your sadhus have not suffered." Such were the dire circumstances that the *paramhansas* lived through and tolerated. Adversities that cannot even be imagined today were a daily occurrence for the *paramhansas*. Maharaj initiated 3,000 sadhus, but hundreds of them had died from severe torment. This was the life that Brahmanand Swami had willingly accepted.

Once, in a town in Saurashtra, a *bawa* caught and imprisoned Brahmanand Swami and Muktanand Swami. In front of them he sharpened his blade, preparing it to mutilate them by cutting off their ears and nose. Their prayers to Maharaj saved them at the last moment.

On another occasion during an evening assembly, Brahmanand Swami exclaimed, "If anyone can see, please give me my sitar. Today, I want to please Maharaj by singing kirtans." Confused, Maharaj questioned as to why Brahmanand Swami said this. At that time, a sadhu informed Maharaj, "Because of a lack of nutritious meals, many sadhus are suffering from night blindness." Tears welled up in Maharaj's eyes. The *paramhansas*' sacrifice was unheard of.

Brahmanand Swami, who was conditioned

to praises and being adorned with gold, was cruelly threatened with disability. The poet who used to have his hands washed with rosewater by queens and fanned by servants while eating pistachios from golden bowls was suffering from night blindness as a result of malnutrition. The Ladudanji who once travelled with an entourage of servants and bodyguards was being beaten and tortured by *bawas*. The vast difference in lifestyle is amazing even today. Yet, Brahmanand Swami had made a drastic transformation without an ounce of sorrow or regret. What was the motivating factor that constantly inspired Brahmanand Swami to lead such an arduous life with amazing mental ease? His *nishchay*. His firm conviction in Maharaj. In Vachanamrut Loya 3 Maharaj states, “What would a person who has faith in God and his Sadhu coupled with the knowledge of their greatness not do for the sake of God and his Sadhu? For them, he would renounce his family, renounce any fear of public ridicule, renounce a kingdom, renounce pleasures, renounce wealth, renounce his wife...” Brahmanand Swami’s life exactly depicts Maharaj’s words. In fact, this colossal difference in lifestyle actually became a much more rewarding experience for Brahmanand Swami.

ONLY ONE

Shriji Maharaj used to rigorously test his sadhus on a regular basis through various *prakrans* (chapters). One day, Maharaj proclaimed that every sadhu would be given only one metre of jute cloth to wear. One by one, each sadhu came to Maharaj and received his cloth. Brahmanand Swami also came. However, because of his considerably greater size, one metre of cloth would be too small to cover him. When he asked for a longer piece, Maharaj decisively said, “The rule shall not be changed. Reduce your body. Observe fasts.” It was impossible to reduce his physical size

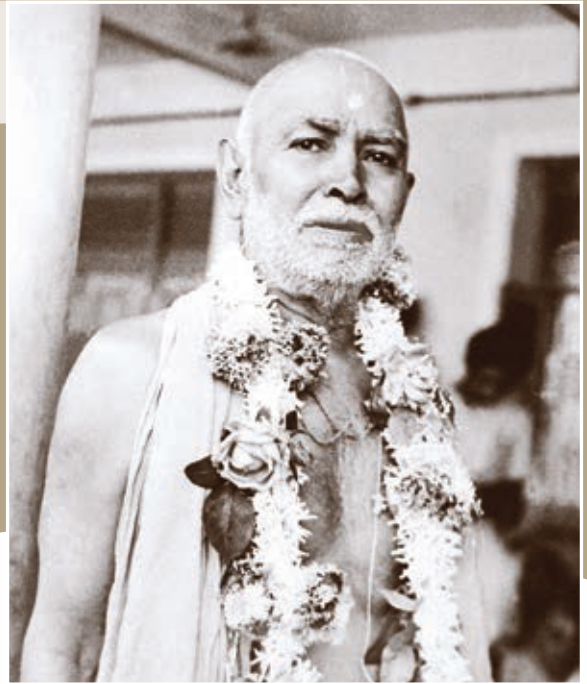
immediately. Pondering over his predicament, Brahmanand Swami began to look in all directions as if he was searching for something. “What are you looking for?” questioned Maharaj. Brahmanand Swami confidently replied, “Nowhere on this earth, even in a space as small as a fingernail, can I find any God other than you; so there is no other option but to stay here.” Pleased with Brahmanand Swami’s staunch faith, Maharaj gave him a longer piece of cloth.

Not only did Brahmanand Swami’s firm conviction easily allow him to surpass this one test, but he was able, without any doubt or fear, to abide by all 108 *prakrans* that Maharaj commanded. He not only physically renounced his materialistic luxuries, but was also able to mentally surrender his expectations and ambitions.

Despite a life of innumerable hardships, Brahmanand Swami’s inner happiness is reflected through the bhajans he composed. Even after suffering indescribable afflictions, Brahmanand Swami composed ‘*Rāj mārē din din Diwali re...*’, a bhajan describing the untold joy he experienced daily. What was the reason for such happiness? How was it possible for such a stark contrast between his outer arduous lifestyle and his inner bliss to exist? This contrast in lifestyle and emotion was based on his firm conviction. Hence, a person’s ultimate happiness is not dependant upon physical objects or surroundings. Rather, it is completely dependent upon one’s conviction in Maharaj and Swami – an essential and practical lesson that can be learned from Brahmanand Swami’s life. ♦

Built to Last

Despite encountering severe challenges Shastriji Maharaj remained resolute in enshrining the philosophy of Akshar-Purushottam in the central shrine of BAPS mandirs. He accomplished this phenomenal task by remaining wedded to agna, upasana, sadbhav and paksh. His birth on Vasant Panchmi is annually celebrated to pay tribute to the four principles he had imbibed and shared with the Satsang community.



“**S**hastriji Maharaj has built strong foundations that will remain so forever. No one will be able to sway them. There is no force in the world strong enough to shake them. No one is capable of stirring even a single brick from the foundation, nor even flick the tiniest pebble from its *shikhar*¹.”

These were the words triumphantly expressed by Pramukh Swami Maharaj during the Bicentenary Celebrations of Gunatitanand Swami in 1985. Why was Swamishri so confident in making such a valiant claim? He was not present when the Sanstha's first mandir was built in Bochasan. Nor was he present when the second in Sarangpur and the third in Gondal were built. Did Shastriji Maharaj build mandirs using unknown construction techniques that gave them unshakeable strength? It seems highly unlikely given the scarce resources at the time. Even still, any structure, whether it is made from stone, steel or concrete is susceptible to damage.

The answer becomes clear when we dig

deeper into Swamishri's words. The 'foundations of this Sanstha' he speaks of is not the physical cement poured into the ground, but something even stronger – the principles of *agna, upasana, sadbhav* and *paksh*.

SOLID FOUNDATIONS

Shastriji Maharaj stressed these four principles time and time again.

In a letter to the East Africa satsang *mandal*, dated 6 July 1937, he reveals the formula sought by us all, “Master the four principles of *agna, upasana, sadbhav* and *paksh*, thus making this your last birth, and you will attain Shriji Maharaj's *seva* in Akshardham.”

In 1938, Shastriji Maharaj wrote a letter of blessings in the *Swaminarayan Prakash*: “The purpose of this monthly [magazine] is solely to spread the word of satsang, and to reinforce the fundamentals of satsang – *agna, upasana, sadbhav* and *paksh*.”

The Sanstha is greater than the sum of its parts. No number of schools, hospitals, or even mandirs equate to the Sanstha. Sadhus and dev-

1. Tall spires of a mandir.

otees are the driving force behind the Sanstha's activities, yet there is something exponentially greater. As Shastriji Maharaj explains, the Sanstha is built on principles not on stone. Stone can be broken, principles cannot. That is why the Sanstha is built to last.

The first BAPS mandir was established in 1907 in the rural village of Bochasan, Gujarat. But the principles on which it was based had been present long before. On 2 April 1820, Shriji Maharaj, sitting in Gadhada revealed, "A devotee of God should realize that the form of God along with his Akshardham is present on this earth." Even though Shriji Maharaj had given the blueprint, it wasn't until Shastriji Maharaj, the architect, marched out of the gates of Vartal that the vision took shape.

When Shastriji Maharaj left, he didn't have much: just five sadhus and a few devotees. He had no money, no food and no place. He had none of the tools needed to build a Sanstha, but he did have with him Shriji Maharaj's principles of *agna*, *upasana*, *sadbhav* and *paksh*.

AGNA – THE BRICK

As a young sadhu in Vartal, Shastriji Maharaj delved deep into the shastras, displaying scholarliness and wisdom beyond his age. Equally, his saintliness was unmatched. Kothari Govardhanbhai proudly pointed out, "Among the two thousand sadhus of Vartal, none has renounced women and wealth as firmly as Shastri Yagnapurushdasji."

Once, Shastriji Maharaj arrived in Anand. It was the wedding season and so many devotees were out of town. Shastriji Maharaj changed his plans and decided to visit Sarangpur instead. Lifting his *potlu* onto his head, he made his way to the train station, hoping to meet a devotee who would pay for his ticket. Walking up and down the platform, he found no one. With no other option, he turned back and went into town. Again, not one familiar face was in sight. Only locked doors and windows greeted him. All

the while his *potlu* was not getting any lighter. Shastriji Maharaj trudged back and forth three to four times, until finally he met a devotee who paid for his train ticket.

This was only one such occasion among countless others. Yet, he refused to ever carry any money with him since it was against the commands of Shriji Maharaj.

At the age of 80, Shastriji Maharaj was visiting a devotee's house in Ahmedabad. Accidentally, an infant girl touched the far end of the carpet he was sitting on. In line with the *niyams* given by Shriji Maharaj, he fasted and refused to eat or drink anything that day. Given his age and frail body, the devotees pleaded, but Shastriji Maharaj was resolute, "Under no circumstance will I break Maharaj's *agna*."

UPASANA – THE STONE

Shastriji Maharaj was only a year old when Gunatitanand Swami graced Mahelav and blessed him. While placing his hand on Dungar Bhakta's head, Gunatitanand Swami revealed to his elder brother, "Your brother will become a sadhu and will spread Shriji Maharaj's supreme glory. Through his discourses [on *upasana*] he will elevate and strengthen the Sampradaya."

From childhood, it was evident that Dungar Bhakta was special. His hunger for spiritual discourses was impossible to satiate. At school, he built mandirs in the sand and performed *arti* and *thal*.

In his later years he stated, "The sole purpose of my life is to build mandirs." Indeed, that was exactly what he did.

Shastriji Maharaj's work ethic was different from that of most leaders. He wasn't one to sit in an ivory tower and bark orders. He would be on the ground, amid the whirlwind of action.

When the foundations for the Sarangpur mandir were being dug, devotees from Una, near Junagadh, came to meet Shastriji Maharaj. They remembered him from some thirty years previously when he had discoursed in their

town. Since so many years had passed, they were not sure if they would recognize him. On meeting Yogiji Maharaj, they asked where they might find him. A faint smile spread across Yogiji Maharaj's face, "The sadhu who just walked by was Shastriji Maharaj."

The devotees stood confused. Their forehead creased as they exclaimed, "But that sadhu had a spade in his hand!"

"Yes, that was Shastriji Maharaj," confirmed Yogiji Maharaj.

When they saw Shastriji Maharaj's ragged appearance, they were thrown off. Tied around his head was a tattered piece of cloth. His dhoti, brown with mud, was pulled up to his even muddier knees. Was this really the same Shastriji Maharaj from years ago? Then, a dashing young scholar, today, he resembled an ordinary labourer.

This is what set Shastriji Maharaj apart. No task was too shallow for him. Indeed, as he himself had said, "We are the oxen of Akshar-Purushottam." That is, in spreading *upasana*, he was willing to perform any *seva*, anytime, anywhere.

Travelling from village to village, his sole mission was to see people become eternally happy through the message of Akshar-Purushottam.

Getting off the train at Botad or Jadila station, he faced a 15 km walk to Sarangpur. With a *potlu* on his head, sometimes weighing 20-40 kg, he would trudge through marshy farmland, winding dirt tracks and uneven terrain; and during the monsoon months he would have to cross flooded rivers.

He suffered from arthritis, which caused his feet to swell and pain from the incessant *vicharan*. At night, devotees would apply balm to ease the pain, but instead of resting he would grab the opportunity to sing the glory of Akshar-Purushottam. Sometimes the oil in the lantern ran dry; sometimes it was turned off – because it was dawn.

Although physically he tolerated a great deal, mentally, the trials were no lighter.

Shastriji Maharaj's antagonists were looking

for any opportunity to bring him down. They tried to plant the idea into people's minds that Shastriji Maharaj had left Vartal to seek fame and glory. They were far from the truth. In Vartal, Shastriji Maharaj was admired by all. The *kothari*, senior and junior sadhus, and devotees all respected Shastriji Maharaj as they would a *sadguru*. He had everything. By leaving, he was giving it all up.

If he did in fact leave to be worshipped by others, then the devotees would have seen through the facade and left. Nevertheless, this was not the case. His only wish was to reveal the glory of Akshar and Purushottam as taught by Shriji Maharaj. One moving incident unfolds this truth.

Shastriji Maharaj was resting in the assembly hall in Sarangpur. Devotees from Africa approached him and asked for *prasadi*².

"What *prasadi*?" Shastriji Maharaj replied.

"The *kumkum*³ imprint of your *charanarvind*⁴."

Shastriji Maharaj suddenly sat upright. "Mine?!"

"Yes."

Shastriji Maharaj's reply didn't have the slightest air of any desire for honour, "If you want my *charanarvind* then cut off my feet! Apart from Shriji Maharaj's *charanarvind*, nobody else's can be worshipped."

The devotees were crestfallen. They didn't expect such a firm stance from Shastriji Maharaj.

SADBHAV – THE CEMENT

Shastriji Maharaj defined *sadbhav* as developing intense attachment towards Shriji Maharaj, his Param Ekantik Sadhu and his devotees.

Devotees from as far as Africa would flock for Shastriji Maharaj's darshan. He won their hearts not through a display of intelligence or show-

2. Sanctified food, flowers or relics.

3. Red vermilion powder, often applied to the forehead as a symbol of faith.

4. Sole of the feet, [chiefly those of God] considered holy.

manship, but by sacrificing himself for them.

It was one particular devotee's inner wish that Shastriji Maharaj have lunch at his house. Shastriji Maharaj agreed, and told him to go ahead and make all the arrangements. Overjoyed, the devotee invited almost everyone he knew. When Shastriji Maharaj arrived with Nirgundas Swami, they walked into the kitchen to cook the meal and were stunned by the sight before them – food provisions enough to feed one hundred people!

There was little time to waste. Shastriji Maharaj and Nirgundas Swami tied their upper garments into a knot and lit the stove. The kitchen was small. The fumes from the burning wood began to irritate Nirgundas Swami's eyes. His eyes turned red as tears trickled down his cheeks. Shastriji Maharaj couldn't bear seeing his discomfort and so he requested him to leave. The growing smoke made it difficult to breathe. Undeterred, Shastriji Maharaj single-handedly cooked lunch to feed one hundred people.

Such was his love for the devotees that he did all this without uttering a single word of complaint. Just as an incense stick burns to ash so we can enjoy its fragrance, Shastriji Maharaj toiled and withered to leave us the fragrance of *sadbhav*.

PAKSH – THE STEEL

Shastriji Maharaj did not eat *khichdi* made in used kerosene cans because it tasted nice. Shastriji Maharaj did not listen to insults because they spurred him on. Nor did Shastriji Maharaj tolerate his adversaries poking needles into his back to gain pity. He did all this and more, for the sake of Akshar-Purushottam.

Keeping *paksh* doesn't only mean taking the side of devotees, it also includes being loyal to your faith and principles.

Shastriji Maharaj was definitely loyal to his faith. On the other hand, his followers were sometimes not as convinced. A devotee once confided, "Swami! I've joined the Akshar-Purushottam cause, but I feel that I will lose my prestige."

Radiating confidence, Shastriji Maharaj replied, "No one's honour is at stake, because the purpose of our struggle is to please Swami-Shriji. Therefore, should anyone suffer dishonour, I will cease to be a Swaminarayan sadhu and burn my *janoi*!"⁵

Only someone who truly believed in his cause could make such a brave statement.

Shastriji Maharaj had a bold and courageous personality. He was never one to mince his words. He often said that to keep Maharaj-Swami's *paksh* was the highest form of bhakti. He never tolerated those who spoke ill of Maharaj-Swami and always boldly explained the truth to them.

He would write letters to sadhus encouraging them to speak fearlessly about Akshar-Purushottam. He would not forget to mention that Maharaj praises a courageous devotee,⁶ that "a devotee of God should not become suppressed by evil people; he should be courageous,"⁷ and how "if a person does speak derogatorily [of God or His great Sadhu], one should retaliate with words as sharp as an arrow, but in no way should one become humble before a non-believer."⁸

FOLLOW #SHASTRIJI MAHARAJ

Shastriji Maharaj followed these four principles religiously. We should too. When we stray from these principles problems arise.

Since Shriji Maharaj's time there have been many people that have fallen out of Satsang. Why? Because they did not follow these principles. A person who travels abroad to visit another country is only an outsider. Until he starts to live in that country, follows its rules, blends with its people and customs, he will never be accepted. Similarly, we might be members of the Sanstha, wear a *kanthi* around our neck, and even do puja, but unless we follow *agna*, uphold *upasana*, keep *sadbhav* and *paksh*, we are mere outsiders.

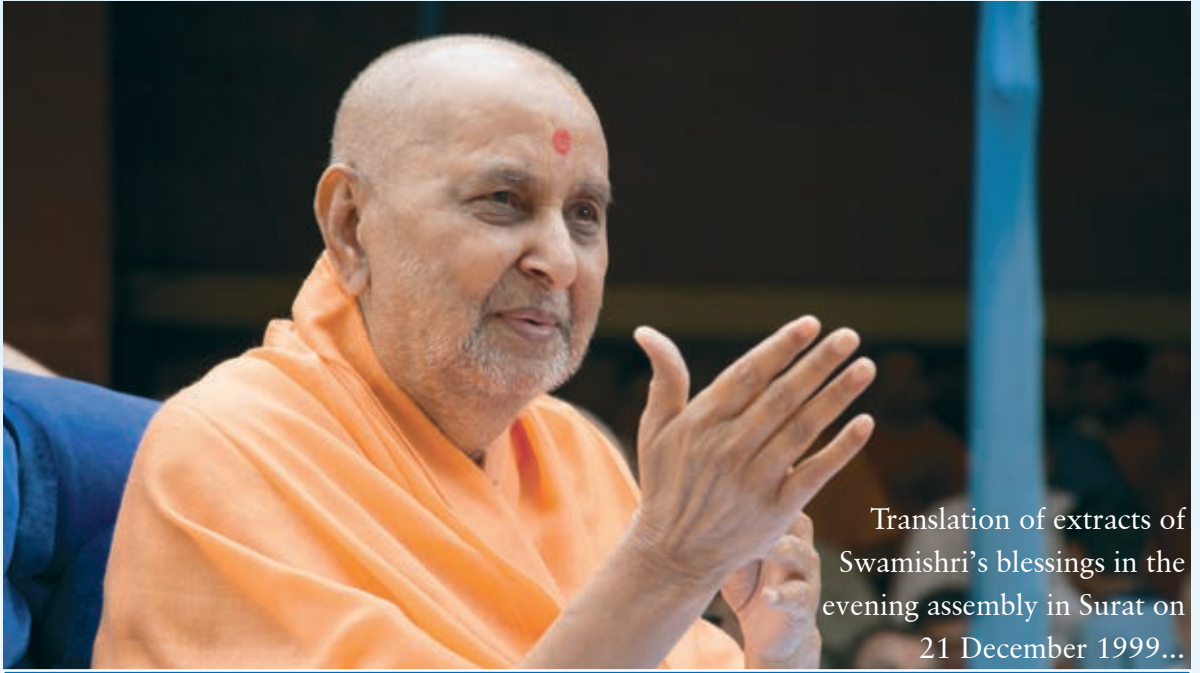
(Contd. on pg. 59)

5. Sacred-thread worn by sadhus and Brahmins.

6. Vachanamrut, Loya 2

7. Vachanamrut, Gadhada II-5

8. Vachanamrut, Panchala 5



Translation of extracts of
Swamishri's blessings in the
evening assembly in Surat on
21 December 1999...

KNOWLEDGE OF SANKHYA

In the kirtan it is said that one day the *jiva* will suddenly depart from this body. It is very important that this understanding is established and strengthened within. We see people dying every day, know it and understand it, yet such awareness does not remain in our life. Maharaj has said that one should do everything in life, but with the understanding that one day we will suddenly have to leave it all. In the Vachanamrut, Shriji Maharaj illustrates the point by revealing that he, too, lives with this constant awareness (Vachanamrut, Gadhada III 30).

Who wants to leave this body? But Maharaj himself is warning us. He explains that the body is perishable, so we should offer devotion from morning. Even when going to sleep this thought must be recalled. But the ways of the world are such that we forget this. We listen to these words in discourses, but we fail to grasp them and act on them. We easily engage in worldly thoughts and pleasures. People watch movies, go to parties and indulge in other such enjoyments.

It does not take long to attach to worldly talks, but it takes time to accept the talks of God and spirituality; that is why they have to be repeated.

Nothing will remain of the physical body that we see. That is why such talks of wisdom have to be engrained in the *jiva*, so that one experiences happiness, peace and joy in life. Otherwise, one will encounter miseries.

King Janak was a great king. He ruled his kingdom, but he had understood this message and had a constant awareness of it. He tended to all his responsibilities as a ruler, but also knew well that the body will one day die. All our material possessions will also perish one day; that is a fact. Spiritual discourses help to maintain this awareness. Worldly talks are readily remembered as worldly desires are latent within us since eternity. So it is difficult to uproot them, but if proper awareness is kept, they can be removed.

Gunatitanand Swami explained that if berry trees are only superficially removed, without removing the deep roots, they will regrow. It is

the same for worldly desires. If the opportunity arises to indulge in worldly pleasures, then one readily indulges.

This talk is repeated day and night to engrain it in the *jiva*. The life of King Janak exemplifies how one should fulfil one's worldly duties while also worshipping God.

So, if one maintains such awareness in one's worldly activities, then there will be no attachment. These discourses are repeated so all inner desires are removed and awareness of this knowledge is consolidated.

Gunatitanand Swami says that there is no alternative but to understand these talks – whether one understands them today or after thousands of years. Just as birds' nests are destroyed, our houses and cars will also perish. Swami stresses that we will have to leave everything one day, so worship God sincerely.

Whenever you get time, morning or evening, engage in devotion and discourses. In your free time, think of God and satsang. Shivalal Sheth of Botad was a successful, wealthy trader, but whenever he got time he would read the shastras. He would read the Vachanamrut and explain it to even his customers. If the words of satsang are accepted by others then they will progress spiritually.

Maganbhai of Africa was a railway station-master. He carried out his duties sincerely, but would talk to all who came – cleaners, engineers and even the ticket checkers. They would come to Maganbhai's office, even if the halt was only for 5 to 10 minutes. During that time, Maganbhai would talk to them until they got the signal to proceed. He would explain to them the glory of God and wish them well. If a trader had a wagon to fill, then he would ask, "Do you want to fill your wagon with goods today or next week?" If the trader was willing to listen to his talks, he would get his wagon filled sooner. So, even if you meet someone only briefly, talk to them.

Maganbhai had grasped this message, otherwise previously he had many vices. He became a *satsangi* through Harmanbhai and

by Shastriji Maharaj's grace he developed such a liking for discourses that he would sit down for satsang at night, after dinner, and continue talking throughout the night until dawn the following morning. Due to his discourses, many Gujarati people joined the Satsang. So, even though he fulfilled his worldly duties, he remained constantly aware of this message.

In contrast, we are so entangled in worldly chores. It is fine to carry out one's worldly works, but do not become attached to them. Satsang should be at the forefront of life. You can engage in spiritual talks anywhere – at home or even while travelling. Nowadays there are audio cassettes so you can listen to bhajans and discourses. And if you carry a book you can read it wherever you are.

Bring relatives and others to the mandir. In reality, when they visit one's home, people use their arrival as an excuse to skip the *sabha*. They say that the guests will be offended if they do not stay with them at home. But, they do not think about whether God will be displeased. He has given this birth, intellect, money, strength and everything else. Will he not feel offended?

However, if this message is constantly recalled, then the goal will be achieved. Devotees who have engrained this in their *jiva* have become *muktas* and are now happy in the service of Maharaj. All should tread that path. You have all left other work and come to the mandir for that. If this talk is understood, then you will experience inner fulfilment.

You all have such determination and enthusiasm; that is why you have all come here. Otherwise, there are so many temptations all around.

By worshipping God, nobody has ever lost out; in fact, even their worldly standing has improved. God takes care of everything. So, if one engages in satsang with conviction then there will be no problems. If constant awareness of this is maintained, then the *jiva* becomes pure, free of worldly attachments and God becomes predominant in one's life. ♦

INDIA

Dream



I am a child. I am filled with wonderment, the kind only a child has. I see a mask of pure gold. It has hypnotically decorated eyes. I stare and stare. A sense of mystery stirs inside me. It is the mask of the ancient Egyptian King Tutankhamun, and the world is mystified. I know this is a beacon; this mask is setting the direction of my life of which I am not yet aware.

What kind of people had such a deep artistic value to have produced such a masterpiece? I want to know. So in middle school, I do research on the great ancient Egyptian civilization. I find out about their society of pharaohs. I am dazzled by their elaborate spirituality of Gods and Goddesses, and gaze with growing inspiration at the ancient paintings of these deities. I go on to do a comparative research paper on the Great Pyramids of Egypt and the lesser known Pyramids of Aztecs and Mayan cultures in what is now Mexico. I also learn about the latter's spiritual culture. The pyramids of the Aztecs served as altars to their prevalent Sun-god. I am realizing that ancient cultures have a deep connection to Nature and Spirituality, and in many cases, these are interwoven.

I grow up in America, the world's leader in technological advancement which provides the most stimulating material pleasures. But I am hankering. I am hankering for that deep spiritual culture which has seemed to have gone extinct from the world. In high school,

I develop a deep concern for protecting the Earth from environmental destruction, the consequence of the technological and material advancement. I come into contact with Native American groups who still preserve their spirituality of holding the Earth as sacred. I am led on a nature hike by a Native American elder. He is pointing out specific plants and their importance, and emphasizes that all of them are sacred, and pulling them out by their roots is considered a form of murder. I go on to take courses on Native American Cultures at the University of California at Berkeley. I learn of such diverse cultures and subcultures which all had a common thread: the Earth was considered a sacred being to be respected and revered. This confirms to me again that ancient cultures held a deep spirituality that was integral to their lives. Again, I am hankering for such a cultural connection.

My hankering leads me to travel to ancient sites held sacred by Native American cultures. I visit Painted Rock in Carrizo Plains, California, a natural rock formation with paintings from thousands of years ago depicting life of deep connections to the Earth. I also visit Taos, New Mexico, meditating on the Great Spirit which pervades all life, taught by Native Americans. I am a devotee of mysticism.

I am now in Cuzco, Peru, the ancient capital of the ancient Incan Empire, also known as the Empire of the Sun. The chief of the Incans was considered a direct descendant of the Sun,

or Inti. Every year, tourists and locals throng to a festival called Inti Raymi. It is devoted to the Sun God, Inti, and is full of ancient Incan dance and music. Indigenous actors reenact this ancient ritual on the grounds of Incan ruins. It traditionally involved the sacrifice of a llama. In present times, the llama sacrifice does not occur, but is simulated. Although predominantly Catholic, the Peruvians stay in touch with their ancient past through this vibrant festival and are fulfilled with a sense of pride in their ancient heritage. However, it is just a reenactment after all. Incan temples have been replaced by Catholic cathedrals. I also visit Machhu Picchu in Peru. The experience is bittersweet. I marvel at the stone architecture and sacred altars, yet feel a deep sadness that European Imperialism wiped out entire civilizations.

A tragedy of history is that so many of such ancient cultures have become extinct, and only relics remain, reduced to tourist attractions. But people throng to such wonders of the ancient world. Such places instil a sense of wonder and longing for the ancient ways.

So I am drawn to what is a modern hybrid, the New Age movement. This is a conglomerate of Native American reverence of the Earth, ancient Pagan European nature worship, as well as elements of Eastern religions like Hinduism and Buddhism. This is my first exposure to aspects of Hinduism like yoga and kirtan, and Buddhist practices like meditation. Though it points me in the right direction, I am finding that the New Age movement misinterprets and adapts traditions of these cultures to fit in with modern comforts of America.

Then, India calls, and I answer. I spend years studying this great culture and the profound spirituality of Hinduism and realize this is providing me the fulfillment I have been hankering for. In the San Francisco Bay Area where I live, Hindu culture has taken root. I first

see the form of Lord Balaji, the famous ancient form of Lord Vishnu from Tirupati, India, in a temple here in California. I sit in awe at this temple as Brahmins in unison recite in traditional metre the ancient Divya Prabandham verses in front of Lord Balaji. They are dressed in white robes with broad *tilak* on their foreheads. I am absorbed in an otherworldly spiritually charged atmosphere. Although not understanding Tamil, I could feel the profound spiritual devotion to the Hindu God Vishnu, ancient devotion which remains alive through these dedicated Brahmins.

Being a *tabla* player, I also become very involved with Indian Classical Music. Many compositions devoted to the pantheon of Hindu deities that have been written by musician-saints 400 years ago or more are still sung today. Thus my sense of connection is becoming stronger.

As I enter Hindu temples in India, I feel that desire for the ancient I have had since childhood fulfilled. My fantasies and imaginings inspired by Egyptian and Aztec cultures are becoming reality. When I come to India and visit centuries-old Hindu temples, I feel that I am part of an unbroken ancient tradition. The longing for ancient ways is replaced by direct spiritual experiences in the present tense.

I experience first-hand this alive and vibrant ancient culture during my visit to Tirupati, the seat of Lord Balaji. I had spent hours meditating on this form of God in local temples in the Bay Area and knew I had to visit the original. As I travel on the highway towards Tirupati, what strikes me first is the constant stream of pilgrims walking sometimes hundreds of miles barefoot along the highway. As the bus enters Tirupati, we are greeted by a large statue of Hanuman. I become so excited that I am entering a spiritual city. As the bus climbs the hill towards the temple, I have a breathtaking view of the natural splendour of India, with its lush jungles and towering green peaks. I

enter the temple, and I am crammed into a mass of humanity, inching its way forward. My free will has been compromised. I could not leave the mass if I tried. I am pushed and squeezed, and sometimes cannot breathe. I am sweating, and sticky. I hear devotees repeatedly chant “Govinda!” There is the sound of the *nadhaswaram* and *thavil*. I am thrilled to hear the music I have seen performed on stage numerous times, actually being performed at its sacred source. There are paintings of God’s *lila* all around. Still being pushed, here I am. I stand in front of Lord Balaji. My darshan lasts seconds, but the *murti* is now permanently installed in my memory. Amidst the massive crowd, the *murti* gives me sublime serenity. I exit the temple with a huge sense of satisfaction. My pilgrimage I had dreamed of for years has come true.

My spiritual proclivity includes nature as being sacred. In Sanatan Dharma, the Earth is considered sacred. She is Goddess Bhumi. The river Ganga and others are also sacred. The tulsi plant is sacred, as are many mountains in India, such as Arunachala, Govardhan, Kailash and of course, the Himalayas. And Sanatan Dharma teaches that all living beings have souls, so are to be treated with respect and reverence. Thus, many Hindus are vegetarian. Since I have been a vegetarian before I became Hindu, and also an environmental activist, Hinduism becomes very appealing to me.

I learn that Sanatan Dharma, the Sanskrit term for Hinduism, means ‘eternal religion’. It has been ongoing since ancient times, and will continue. By essence of being eternal, it cannot be destroyed. My guru of the Bochasanwasi Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha, Pramukh Swami Maharaj, preserves the ancient, is the most ever-present, and ensures the future. He preserves the ancient Vedic rituals, traditions and scriptures of Hinduism. By being Pragat

Brahmaswarup, the eternal God of Sanatan Dharma is guaranteed to be always present. And by building magnificent mandirs, Pramukh Swami ensures that Sanatan Dharma will continue for generations to come. Temples of Hinduism will continue to be living and vibrant spiritual and cultural centres. They will not fall to the way of ancient relics, nor will they be reduced to tourist attractions of an antiquated culture.

How fortunate Hinduism is to have Pramukh Swami Maharaj as its torchbearer. His grand Akshardham Temple in New Delhi is the greatest example. Not only do BAPS temples use ancient codes from the shastras for their architecture, ensuring that the tradition remains unbroken, but also add modern elements which appeal to people today. Akshardham includes a giant screen movie of the life of Bhagwan Swaminarayan, and a boat ride depicting the ancient history of India. Akshardham in Gandhinagar includes a water-laser-light show telling the ancient story of Nachiketa from the Upanishads. Pramukh Swami ensures that Hinduism will continue to thrive internationally by building magnificent temples which are beacons of the vibrant tradition of Hinduism.

When Pramukh Swami Maharaj initiated me into BAPS, he connected me directly to Sanatan Dharma. I am filled with gratitude. I can visit the ancient relics of civilizations past and feel inspired. But now I can look into Pramukh Swami’s eyes and know my life is eternally complete.

(Jerry Barr is a primary school teacher and tabla performer. He resides in Berkeley, California.) ♦

FAQs On Hinduism

From *Hinduism, An Introduction* by Sadhu Vivekjiandas and Consultant Editor Dr Janak Dave,
published by Swaminarayan Aksharpith

1. How important are rituals for spiritual elevation?

Rituals are associated with God's *murti*, mandir, guru, festival and auspicious occasions or ceremonies. They have deep spiritual meaning and scriptural sanction. Rituals create spiritual vibrations that purify and calm the mind. They also enable people to participate, thus conditioning their senses and minds from the mundane to the sacred. In fact, rituals take one nearer to God.

The root cause of man's problems lies in ego, attachment, lust, anger, greed and other base instincts. Rituals, like *arati*, offering puja to God, etc. can penetrate the inner core to purge the mind and self of its impurities.

The worship rituals performed before God's *murti* in mandirs or home-shrines enable one to think of him and exclude the mind from mundane thoughts. Rituals thus facilitate the process of transforming one's self from the mundane to the divine.

The devotional aspect in rituals includes rhythm, singing, dancing, and offering decoration to please the Divine. They reduce the monotony of daily life and add joy and happiness.

2. What is the significance of having darshan of God's murti?

Darshan is derived from the Sanskrit root word *dhrush* which means 'to see'. To see the *murti* of God, guru and holy places with reverence and devotion is called darshan. By doing such darshan the devotee develops love and glory for them. Then God or the guru graces and confers his blessings upon the

devotee. Pilgrims travel hundreds and thousands of kilometres for the darshan of deities, gurus and sacred places.

3. What is the purpose of arti and how is it performed?

Arti is a ritual prayer offered by a priest or devotee before the *murti* of God in mandirs and home shrines. The devotee prays, sings the glory of God and asks for his divine blessings. *Arti* is also performed at the conclusion of every ritualistic puja (worship), bhajan programme or spiritual discourse.

Arti is one of the sixteen steps (*shodasha upachara*) of the puja ritual. It is referred to as the auspicious light (*mangala nirajanam*). It is performed by circling the lighted lamp with the right hand in a clockwise direction before the deity. During the ritual in mandirs, devotees sing a prayer describing God's glory; clap their hands with the rhythmic beating of a drum, ringing of bell and gong and the blowing of a conch shell. After the *arti* is over devotees place their palms over the holy flame and then touch them over their eyes and head to be blessed by God's divinity.

Arti is generally performed daily: twice in home shrines and *hari* (small) mandirs, and five



A Brahmin priest performs arti



Pujaris performing arti of River Ganga, Varanasi

times in *shikharabaddh* (traditional) mandirs. The daily evening *arati* of River Ganga in pilgrim places like Haridwar and Varanasi is very famous.

4. What is the significance in blowing the conch shell?

The conch (*shankha*) is usually blown before and during *arti*, to mark an auspicious occasion, and before starting a ritualistic worship (*puja*). In ancient times it was blown before a battle began or to proclaim victory in war. Bhagwan Krishna and the five Pandavas blew their own *shankhas* prior to the Mahabharata War.

Bhagwan Vishnu always holds the conch in one of his four hands, symbolizing dharma or righteousness – one of the four endeavours (*purusharthas*).

The conch is blown in mandirs, prior to and during *arti*, to drown all other disturbances and thoughts, and to elevate the mind to a prayerful mood.

The conch is also placed on the altar of mandirs and homes as a symbol of *nada* Brahman (Om), the Vedas, dharma, victory and auspiciousness.

5. Why is the bell rung in mandirs and also during worship rituals?

Ringling a bell produces an auspicious sound. By doing so before darshan of a deity it makes the mind and heart auspicious and holy.



A youth blowing a conch during *arti*



Ringling a bell in the mandir



Swaminarayan youth performing his daily *puja*

Also, during *arati* the bell, drum and conch are sounded to drown other worldly disturbances, calm one's thoughts and to facilitate one's senses and mind to focus on God.

Before starting a ritualistic worship (*mahapuja*) a small bell (*ghanta*, or *ghantadi* in Gujarati) is rung with the chanting of the following *shloka*:

*Āgamārtham tu devānām
gamanārtham tu rakshasām,
Kurve ghantaravam tatra
devatāhvāhna lakshanam.*

“I ring this bell in indication of the invocation of God, so that virtuous and auspicious forces enter (my home and heart) and the evil forces from within and without depart.”

6. What is the daily puja ritual?

Devout Hindus perform this ritual every morning after bathing and dressing, and prior to taking any food and drink. Daily *puja* rituals vary from one *sampradaya* to another, but they generally include meditation, chanting God's name with the aid of a *mala*, doing *pradakshina* and *dandavat*, and offering prayer before the *murtis* of God and guru. For those who worship a small *murti* of God (called *Lalaji*), they bathe the *murti*, dress him, apply sandalwood paste, offer flowers, chant his name, pray, perform *arti* and finally offer food and water. Some perform *puja* in mandirs in which a priest chants prayers on their behalf in the regional language or Sanskrit. ♦

Vicharan

PRAMUKH SWAMI MAHARAJ'S

1 October to 7 November 2012, Ahmedabad



Swamishri on Shastriji Maharaj's Memorial Day



Swamishri performs the *pratishtha* rituals of 14 BAPS *hari* mandirs

OCTOBER: AHMEDABAD

4, Thursday; Shastriji Maharaj's Memorial Day

Swamishri came out in the morning from his residential quarters attired in a *pagh* akin to what Shastriji Maharaj used to wear. The devotees were enthused and applauded for having a unique darshan of Swamishri.

Beneath the neem tree in the mandir compound a large backdrop of the Sarangpur Mandir in flex was set up to commemorate the occasion. To its left was a *murti* of Shastriji Maharaj. Swamishri was wheeled onto a platform before the flex backdrop. To his right was the *murti* of Shri Harikrishna Maharaj. Dr Swami, Tyagvallabh Swami, Ishwarcharan Swami, Viveksagar Swami, Kothari Satsangijivan Swami and Shrihari Swami were seated on the platform wearing the traditional *pagh*. Tyagvallabh Swami performed puja of Thakorji, *murti* of Shastriji Maharaj and Swamishri. During the *puja* ritual the *shlokas* written by Shastriji Maharaj “*Shri-*

matsadguna shālinam...”, the *shloka* on Shastriji Maharaj “*Jenunām ratyā...*” and the *shloka* on Swamishri “*Shobho sādhubhugune...*” were recited by all. The senior sadhus honoured Swamishri with garlands while the bhajan “*Āje Yagnapurushne dwār...*” was being sung by sadhus. Swamishri responded by clapping and showering his grace upon all. Thereafter Swamishri sanctified a bowl of *dudhpak* with rose petals; which was then emptied in a large vessel of *dudhpak* to be served to all.

Swamishri went to the mandir for Thakorji's darshan. On entering the middle sanctum of the mandir, an ambience akin to Dada Khachar's *darbar* had been set up. A wooden cutout of a *paramhansa* seated with a *pattar* had been arranged before the *murti* of Shriji Maharaj. When Swamishri pressed a remote controlled switch, *dudhpak* flowed from a *kalash* in Maharaj's hand into the *pattar* of the *paramhansa*.

On his way back to his quarters the devotees clapped and sang in praise of Shastriji Maharaj and Swamishri. Thereafter Swamishri performed his puja in his room and took lunch.

In all, 12,000 devotees took *mahaprasad* in the mandir on the memorial day celebration.

16, Tuesday

Swamishri inaugurated two DVDs, *Tirtha Jyoti*, published by Swaminarayan Aksharpith, before the main sanctum of the mandir. The DVDs are about places sanctified by Bhagwan Swaminarayan in the Dandhavya (north Gujarat) and Sorath (Junagadh) regions.

17, Wednesday

This morning Swamishri performed the *murti-pratishtha* rituals of *arti* and *pujan* of the *murtis* for BAPS *hari* mandirs of Oklahoma (USA), Bhathena (Surat), Dihen (Surat), Vankal (Surat) and Nardipur. The initial *pratishtha* rituals were performed by Dr Swami, Ishwarcharan Swami and Viveksagar Swami.

26, Friday

Swamishri performed the *murti-pratishtha* rituals of *arti* and *pujan* of the *murtis* for BAPS *hari* mandirs of Kantharia (Chuda region), Simri (Karjan region), Sigaam (Jambusar region) and Vavli (Vadodara region) and also sanctified the foundation bricks for *hari* mandirs of Tundaj and Latipura. Swamishri blessed from far the large number of devotees who had come from the respective villages. The senior sadhus honoured Swamishri with garlands prepared by devotees.

29, Monday; Sharad Punam Festival

The sanctification and pre-*pratishtha* rituals of the flagstaffs and *kalashas* for the BAPS *shikharbaddh* mandir LA and *murtis* of BAPS *hari* mandirs of Phoenix, Sacramento and Seattle were performed by senior sadhus. When

Swamishri arrived in the mandir compound he performed the *pratishtha* rituals of *arti* and *pujan*. He also sanctified the *yantras* to be placed beneath the *murtis* prior to their installation in the mandir sanctum. Swamishri showered flower petals on the flagstaffs and *kalashas* of LA Mandir. He also blessed the devotees with joy. Today's *prasad* of *dudh-pauva* for the devotees of all BAPS mandirs was sponsored by LA Satsang *mandal*.

30, Tuesday

After Thakorji's darshan Swamishri came to the rear *pradakshina* of the mandir. Here, an *utsav murti* of Maharaj presided over the function. Several sadhus had *ras* sticks in hand. Swamishri was given a pair of *ras* sticks and a *bhajan* describing the *ras* played by Shriji Maharaj with his *paramhansas* in Panchala was relayed on an audio system. Ishwarcharan Swami started the *dandiya ras* with Swamishri seated in his wheelchair. Then sadhus and *parshads* followed, each striking their *ras* sticks with that of Swamishri's. The wonderful *ras* with Swamishri continued for ten minutes. When Swamishri came down to the mandir compound senior sadhus, Ishwarcharan Swami, Viveksagar Swami and Shri Hari Swami, played *ras* with Swamishri. The divine darshan stirred the devotees with euphoria. Swamishri blessed all with his divine happiness.

NOVEMBER: AHMEDABAD

2, Friday

Swamishri performed the *pratishtha* rituals of 14 BAPS *hari* mandirs and the *murti* of Shastriji Maharaj for the BAPS Shastriji Maharaj Hospital in Atladra. The 14 *hari* mandirs were Jacksonville (Florida), Knoxville, Paneli (Dhoraji), Tejgadh, Raisingpura (Tejgadh), Vijhol (Tejgadh), Padarvat (Tejgadh), Gungaa-vada (Tejgadh), Melaan (Vallbhipur), Kurali

(Dhavat), Saring (Dhavat), Maroli (Bhinar-Navsari), Pratapnagar (Jetpur-Bodeli), Susakal (Jetpur-Bodeli) and BAPS Shastriji Maharaj Hospital (Atladra). Swamishri also sanctified the bricks for the proposed BAPS *hari* mandirs in Anjesar, Vasnakotariya and Vaghai (Dang).

Hall for the Sunday evening satsang assembly. Swamishri gave darshan to all from the stage. During this time the sadhus sang “*Harivar hiralo re...*” Swamishri remained on stage for some time while more bhajans were sung. After blessing all he left the assembly hall. ♦

Translation from Gujarati text

4, Sunday

Swamishri arrived at the Yagnapurush

SWAMISHRI'S INSPIRING WORDS

Some selections of Swamishri's inspiring answers to questions asked to him.

AHMEDABAD

3 October

Q. What should one do to maintain good health?

A. Do bhajan of God. Have one common thought and maintain harmony (with all). These are Yogiji Maharaj's principles.

11 October

Q. Who do you have in your heart?

A. Bhagwan. Who else could there be!

12 October

Q. It is true that you are Gunatit. But we forget it once we get engrossed in our work or business. What should we do to remember this?

A. If you have really known (the glory), you will never forget.

19 October

Q. You are eternally conscious that you are *atma*. How can we attain this awareness?

A. Through *katha-varta* and bhajan. Shastriji Maharaj and Yogiji Maharaj gave us the knowledge of *atma* and Paramatma, therefore we should engage our mind in that. If we remain

alert then there will be no problems. May God give all good intellect and inner strength.

31 October

Q. How can we attain the enthusiasm and energy you have while doing *seva*!

A. Yogiji Maharaj used to always emphasize in doing and listening to *katha-varta* and having unity and harmony among ourselves.

1 November

Q. What is the medicine to cure us of the infections of *swabhav* and *maya*?

A. To imbibe *katha-varta*, kirtan and bhajan in one's life. Yogiji Maharaj used to say that one should always look at one's own faults but not of others. By looking critically at others one becomes a vessel (of faults). Blessings to you for your all-round happiness.

6 November

Q. It is difficult to give up one's bad nature (*swabhav*), so what should we do to get rid of it?

A. By obeying the commands of the guru one's *swabhavs* get dissolved. ♦

Translation from Gujarati text



DIWALI AND ANNAKUT

Celebrations with Pramukh Swami Maharaj

13-14 November 2012, Ahmedabad, India

This year, Pramukh Swami Maharaj was in Ahmedabad for Diwali and Annakut for the first time in twenty years. The Diwali celebrations began in the early morning with *mangala arti*, followed by *abhishek* of Bhagwan Swaminarayan performed by senior sadhus. The *shangar arti* was followed by Chopda Pujan. Thakorji was worshipped by senior sadhus during the *mahapuja*. Prayers were offered for everyone's good health, happiness, prosperity and spiritual progress. Thereafter, Pramukh Swami Maharaj arrived and showered rose petals on the accounting books. Swamishri was honoured with a garland by senior sadhus.

Swamishri then proceeded for Thakorji's darshan in the mandir, after which he also gave darshan to the sadhus and devotees. He held a *divo* in his hands, signifying for devotees that the guru leads them from darkness of spiritual ignorance towards enlightenment.

The day after Diwali marks the start of the Hindu New Year, and it is celebrated in mandirs by offering an Annakut of various savoury food to the deities.

On New Year's Day the *mangala arti* at Ahmedabad mandir was performed at 5.30 a.m. Following *abhishek* of Bhagwan Swaminarayan, the traditional New Year's *mahapuja* was performed by senior sadhus with hundreds of devotees also participating. Pujya Viveksagar Swami

and Pujya Doctor Swami then addressed the assembly.

Sadhus and volunteers had served for many



Swamishri sanctifies the mandir account books during Chopda Pujan, Diwali



days to prepare the food and decorations, which were artistically arranged in the mandir. A total of 1,252 different varieties of sweet, savoury, baked and other food delicacies were offered to the deities.

Swamishri performed the Annakut *arti* in the main mandir and then graced the New Year's assembly, where thousands of devotees sang the prayer, '*Mahābalvant māyā tamāri...*' in unison. Swamishri blessed all devotees for peace and happiness in the new year. ♦

Swamishri performs *arti* of the grand *annakut* of 1,252 savoury items, Ahmedabad



92ND BIRTHDAY CELEBRATIONS of Pramukh Swami Maharaj

20 December 2012, Ahmedabad, India



His Holiness Pramukh Swami Maharaj completed 91 years and entered into his 92nd year. His birthday was celebrated in his presence with great devotion at the BAPS Shri Swaminarayan

Mandir in Ahmedabad, India.

The mandir compound was colourfully decorated. A large cake, 22 feet long and 8 feet wide was displayed in the mandir compound. It was decorated with scenes and symbols to depict some aspects of Swamishri's life: his tireless *vicharan*, personal counselling to devotees and well-wishers, the sadhu *diksha* he has given to youths and the mandirs he has inaugurated. Senior sadhus garlanded Swamishri on his arrival in the mandir compound, while the BAPS youth band from Nadiad played various bhajan tunes. The famous percussionist, Shivamani, also performed with upbeat rhythms.

After Thakorji's darshan in the mandir, Swamishri proceeded to the assembly hall, where thousands of devotees devoutly welcomed him to the celebration assembly. Swamishri was honoured by senior sadhus with garlands and shawls made by different satsang centres. A short skit by children was followed by a kirtan, after which *mantra-pushpanjali* was offered by all the sadhus and devotees for Swamishri's continued good health. ♦

UK & Europe

DIWALI CELEBRATIONS AT HOUSES OF PARLIAMENT 31 October 2012, London, UK



This year, marked the 11th Diwali celebration held in the Members Dining Room in the House of Commons at the Houses of Parliament in London. BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir, London, managed the event at the request of the hosts.

In addition to the many leading MPs, the celebration was attended by representatives of a wide range of Hindu, Sikh and Jain organizations, including Hindu Forum of Britain, Hindu Council of UK, National Council of Hindu Temples, ISKCON, Art of Living, Oshwal Association, Sai School, Arya Samaj, Brahma Kumaris, Jalaram Temple (Leicester), Shree Wanza Community (Leicester), and many other organizations.

The festivities included the traditional lighting of lamps and singing of Vedic prayers for peace. The highlight of the event was the beautifully decorated *annakut* of vegetarian delicacies.

The Chairman of the Board of Trustees for the Mandir, Shri Jitubhai Patel, addressed the gathering and thanked all the parties in the House of Commons for allowing the Hindu community to celebrate Diwali.

Among the MPs who attended were Dr Vince Cable MP (Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills; Liberal Democrats), Eric Pickles MP (Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government; Conservative) and Leader of the Opposition, Ed Miliband MP.

BAPS PARTICIPATES IN NATIONAL INTERFAITH WEEK

24-25 November 2012, London, UK

BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir, London, participated in the National Interfaith Week by partnering with St Mary's Church in Willesden to raise money for local charities on Saturday 24 November 2012 and also by holding an interfaith seminar at The Swaminarayan School, situated opposite the Mandir, on Sunday 25 November 2012.

Interfaith Week is an annual event that takes place across the UK in November to help foster understanding, good relationships and working partnerships between people and organizations of different faiths and beliefs.

Representatives from the Mandir and St Mary's Church teamed up to welcome Mayor of Brent Cllr Michael Adeyeye to the Christmas bazaar, held to help raise funds for local charities.

A seminar, titled 'The Role of Hindu Women in Ancient and Contemporary Times', was held in which Anuradha Dooney (Fellow of the Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies) and Binal Somani (graduate student of History at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London) presented talks describing devout Hindu women of the past and a discussion on how British Hindu women practise their faith in the twenty-first century.

Representatives from various faith communities were invited to the seminar and enjoyed learning about the important and inspiring role that Hindu women have played in ancient times and continue to play today.

BAPS CHARITIES

BLUE LIGHTS FOR WORLD DIABETES DAY AT BAPS MANDIRS

7 & 14 November 2012

BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandirs in London, UK, and Atlanta, Georgia, USA, were illuminated



in blue on the evening of 14 November 2012 in support of World Diabetes Day.

The Mandirs joined iconic landmarks, monuments and buildings all over the world in the official blue colour as part of the international campaign to raise awareness about diabetes.

Held annually on 14 November – the birthday of Frederick Banting, who discovered insulin in 1922 – the official United Nations observance coincided this year with the beginning of the Hindu New Year.

In India, World Diabetes Day was celebrated on 7 November 2012, where the lighting of BAPS Swaminarayan Akshardham in New Delhi kicked off India's participation for the third time in the Blue Monument Lighting Challenge.

Support for World Diabetes Day was also registered at other BAPS mandirs around the world.

BAPS ASSISTS MACMILLAN CANCER SUPPORT 13 November 2012



A cheque for £25,000 was presented to

Macmillan Cancer Support, one of the largest cancer charities in the UK, during the Diwali celebrations at BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir, London on 13 November 2012.

The money had been raised by 3,400 devotees and well-wishers by participating in the BAPS Charities 10k Challenge, in which they walked, jogged or ran 10 kilometres, or cycled 30 kilometres.

In his address during the presentation ceremony at the Mandir, Mr Stephen Richards, the Charity's Director for England, said, "Your extremely generous donation will pay for the mobile information support centres to carry out more than 40 visits across England and Wales reaching over 3,000 people. Everyone that took part [in the Challenge] or sponsored those that did has helped to make an enormous difference to the lives of those affected by cancer."

Asia Pacific

YOUTH VOLUNTEERS HOST EDUCATION SEMINAR, ADELAIDE, AUSTRALIA 2 November 2012

BAPS youth volunteers of Adelaide, Australia, organized an Education Seminar for the community at Klemzig Primary School on Saturday, 2 November 2012.

The seminar was well attended by 234 parents and students. Representatives from universities in South Australia spoke about university lifestyle, subject choices and points requirements for different degree courses.

In the Question and Answer session, youths in high school spoke openly about the pressure to perform academically. This gave parents a real understanding of the desire their children have to succeed and the pressures children feel.

The panel discussion featured university graduates with successful careers, who spoke about their career choices and study-life balance.

In addition, students and parents jointly ac-

quired more information from professionals in accounting, engineering, IT and various other careers. The Education Seminar also focused on how to achieve and maintain a work-study balance.

The Education Expo was a successful and worthwhile event that attracted the interests of many sections of the community.

India

PINK ILLUMINATION AT BAPS MANDIRS FOR BREAST CANCER AWARENESS

20-21 October 2012



Swaminarayan Akshardham, New Delhi, India (20 Oct.) and the BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir, Atlanta, Georgia, USA (21 Oct.), were illuminated in pink in support of the Breast Cancer Awareness Month, an annual international health campaign organized by major breast cancer charities every October to increase awareness of the disease and to raise funds for research into its cause, prevention, diagnosis, treatment and cure. The campaign also offers information and support to those affected by breast cancer.

DIGNITARIES VISIT SWAMINARAYAN AKSHARDHAM

2 November 2012: Premier of New South Wales, Australia

The Premier of the State of New South Wales, Australia, Hon. Barry O'Farrell visited Swaminarayan Akshardham, accompanied by



leading members of his trade delegation to India.

After the three-hour visit, Mr O'Farrell wrote, "A truly moving and remarkable experience. A tribute to the vision and effort of all the devotees. I can't wait to return."

25 November 2012: Mayor of London



Mayor of London, Boris Johnson, visited Swaminarayan Akshardham in New Delhi with a 25-member delegation that included the Deputy Mayor of London. During the visit the Mayor admired the Mayur Dwar (Peacock Gate) and the Gajendra Pithika (Elephant Plinth). The delegation also experienced the Sanskruti Vihar (cultural boat ride) exhibition and *Neelkanth Darshan* large screen film.

Captivated by the Akshardham Mandir, the Mayor of London expressed, "I am truly touched and inspired by Akshardham's message of unity in diversity and peace and the spirit of volunteerism and dedication." He also prayed for world peace and harmony by performing *abhishek* on the sacred *murti* of Shri Neelkanth Varni.

Delighted with his experience, Mayor Johnson wrote, “I would like to thank everyone at Akshardham for a wonderful tour of this temple. The Neasden temple (BAPS Swaminarayan Mandir in London) is one of the great landmarks of London – but this is truly astonishing.”

MURTI-PRATISHTHA CELEBRATIONS 5-7 December 2012, Sankari, Gujarat

A grand three-day celebration was held to commemorate the *murti-pratishtha* of the *murtis* of Shri Nilkanth Varni and the Guru Parampara at the BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir in Sankari, near Surat, Gujarat.

On 5 December, 5,400 couples participated in the Vishwashanti Mahayagna to pray for World Peace.

On the afternoon of 6 December, the *murtis*



to be consecrated were taken around the city of Bardoli (Surat district), in a grand *nagaryatra*.

On the morning of 7 December, the *murtis* of Shri Nilkanth Varni and the Guru Parampara, which had previously been sanctified by Pramukh Swami Maharaj in Ahmedabad on 18 November were installed in the mandir with full Vedic rites by Pujya Mahant Swami. Thereafter, over 30,000 devotees attended the special *murti-pratishtha* assembly. ♦

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all times. And if these fundamental aspects are missing, then a tradition only in name will remain but *moksha* will not be attainable.

When the eclipse was over Shri Hari called Sura Khachar and said, “Call the bullock carts and let us go and bathe (as is the custom) in the river Bhadravati. Let children, women and the aged bathe here.

Shriji Maharaj mounted his horse, while the sadhus and devotees climbed into oxen carts. Torches fuelled by oil were lit to illuminate the way. It was about midnight and chilly. The group

started singing kirtans and the Swaminarayan *dhun*. When they reached the river, Maharaj and the sadhus bathed first, and then the devotees followed. Then Shri Hari dried himself and put on white clothes. The *parshads* lit fires, using dry bundles of grass and sticks, by the banks to provide warmth to all. Shri Hari and the devotees sat around the fires. Maharaj instructed that all should leave together and care should be taken that no one was left behind. ♦

(Contd. in next issue)

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

(Contd. from pg. 9)

In 1997, BAPS sadhus were, for the first time, permanently assigned by Swamishri to reside in the West region. Led by Pujya Shantmurti Swami, the sadhus regularly travelled to each congregation to offer spiritual guidance and counselling to devotees. In 1998, with the blessings of Swamishri, and the guidance of Pujya Uttamcharan Swami and Pujya Kaivalyamurti Swami,

regular satsang assemblies started in Fresno, California. In 1999, sadhus from across the United States held a three-day satsang *shibir* in San Diego, California. The satsang *shibir* provided significant spiritual guidance to the children and teenagers of the various congregations in the West region, including San Jose, San Francisco, Phoenix, Portland, Fresno and Los Angeles.

In 2000, Swamishri travelled to the West coast

for the ninth time, during which he blessed the future site of the BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir and Cultural Centre. Swamishri consecrated the land and prayed to Bhagwan Swaminarayan by doing *dhun* at the edge of the property.

In 2001, Pujya Doctor Swami inaugurated the Fresno *hari* mandir. In 2002, Pujya Mahant Swami guided the devotees of the West region in a satsang *shibir* in Fresno, California. In 2004, new BAPS *hari* mandirs were inaugurated in San Francisco, Victorville and Portland.

In 2005, satsang in Sacramento began to grow and a satsang assembly was started in Seattle, Washington.

In 2007, Swamishri consecrated the new *hari* mandir in San Jose. From San Jose, Swamishri arrived in Chino Hills to bless the devotees of Los Angeles. During this visit, Swamishri performed the *murti-pratisthta* rituals for the *murtis* to be placed inside the *shikharbaddh* mandir.

In 2008, Pujya Kothari Swami visited each centre in the West region. During this trip, Pujya Kothari Swami officially opened the *haveli* and assembly hall in Chino Hills.

In 2010, Pujya Doctor Swami led a group of sadhus throughout the West region. Then in 2011, Pujya Mahant Swami visited the West region, celebrated Diwali in Los Angeles and inau-

gurated the *hari* mandir in San Diego, California.

In 2012, Pujya Kothari Swami performed Vedic rituals to begin construction of *hari* mandirs at the newly acquired sites in Phoenix and Mather, near Sacramento.

After two decades of sacrifice and perseverance through dozens of obstacles, the completion of the *shikharbaddh* mandir required one final breakthrough to reach seventy-eight feet. With love in their hearts and passion in their voices, the community of Chino Hills displayed their support for the completion of the Mandir in unanimous fashion. On 9 August 2011 the City of Chino Hills granted the final permission necessary to complete Swamishri's vision.

Now, after four decades of inspiration from Swamishri, a *shikharbaddh* mandir has opened in Chino Hills, California. Swamishri's vision finally became a reality. Through his arduous *vi-charan*, relentless *katha* and encouraging words Swamishri inspired the West Coast devotees to overcome all kinds of obstacles and persevere in the completion of the *shikharbaddh* mandir in Chino Hills. This mandir will forever stand as a symbol of their faith in and dedication to Bhagwan Swaminarayan and guru Pramukh Swami Maharaj. ♦

(Contd. from pg. 25)

Viraj Patel, Sahil Patel and other youths regularly drove from San Jose to Chino Hills to do *seva*. Navinbhai Maru and his son Ravin learnt masonry and offered their services, saving the mandir thousands of dollars.

Kirtan Kanubhai Patel observed that many students in his school were bored waiting in line to buy chips at the school shop. Kirtan saw this as an opportunity to serve the mandir project. He decided to wait on their behalf and charged them 25 cents each. In this way he collected \$500 and donated to the mandir.

Vandan Nimesh Patel helped customers at a petrol station, and donated his earnings to the mandir.

In 2004, members of LA *bal mandal* decided to sponsor the *murti* of Ghanshyam Maharaj for the mandir and three other mandir projects. Many did odd jobs like vacuum cleaning at homes, washing dishes, picking up trash cans and emptying them into trucks. Others refrained from taking birthday gifts and donated their worth in money. Many gave up eating out and saved money. In this way both boys and girls contributed significantly towards the mandir project.

The monumental service, sacrifice and faith of thousands of devotees culminated in the completion and inauguration of the beautiful BAPS Swaminarayan Mandir. Everyone persevered with one motive – to please guru

Pramukh Swami Maharaj. They have been blessed by Swamishri's invaluable grace and joy. Swamishri expressed his joy upon their

incalculable sacrifice and devotion, saying, "Shriji Maharaj and Yogiji Maharaj are pleased by your *seva*. We congratulate you a million times!" ♦

(Contd. from pg. 29)

roses on the other *shikhars*. Then he placed his hand on the heads of the sadhus and proclaimed, "Go, your *shikhars* have been done." And truly, amidst all the challenges, the permission for the proposed height of the *shikhars* was granted and the mandir was done. Swamishri's grace pervaded throughout the whole project.

On 15 and 16 September 2007, Swamishri performed the *pratishta* rituals of Shri Akshar Purushottam Maharaj and the rituals of placing the first pillar stone of the mandir, respectively. Having a 103°F fever he was not scheduled to come and perform the ritual, but he came without informing his attendants. There were no arrangements for his seat, so he sat on an ordinary chair and enthusiastically performed the ritual placing of the first pillar stone. The doctors had advised him not to speak, but he spoke, saying, "The council will help us generously. More will be accomplished than what has happened till now. So all of you remain in good spirits. Now God has been installed here, so Shriji Maharaj

will liberate all. May the work progress from the present stage and no more difficulties and obstacles arise. Blessings to all."

The blessings of Swamishri became a reality in 2012. The Mayor of Chino Hills, council members and the citizens expressed their accolades for the mandir. The years of austerities, hard work and peaceful efforts of devotees paid off. The joy and fulfilment that beamed on their faces was indescribable. They all proclaimed unanimously, "It was all possible due to Swami Bapa's divine powers."

In 1970, Brahaswarup Yogiji Maharaj blessed Dr K.C. Patel, saying, "Pramukh Swami will come to America and consecrate mandirs." At that time the Satsang had a membership of only three devotees. Today it has grown into thousands of devotees and scores of mandirs that have become oases of peace, values, service and faith. A thousand prostrations to Yogiji Maharaj and *guruhari* Pramukh Swami Maharaj for gifting the West Coast of America with a landmark traditional mandir. ♦

(Contd. from pg. 40)

Shriji Maharaj himself excommunicated Ragunathdas who tried to be worshipped as Ramanand Swami. He even expelled Harbai and Valbai who wanted to change the essential *niyams* being followed in Satsang. His stance was firm then and so it is today.

Sometimes it doesn't matter how long you've been in Satsang. If you have not been following the rules, success will not last for long. Imagine an athlete running the 100m sprint. He is out of the blocks in time and by the half-way point he is yards ahead of the other competitors. So sure of victory, that even before he reaches the finish line, he throws his arms in the air in celebration. The race is over and he is on the podium, seconds away from receiving his gold medal. Suddenly,

he's asked by an official to step down because he has been disqualified. Why? The video replay shows he crossed over onto another athlete's lane. But he broke the world record! It doesn't matter; he broke the rules.

Shastriji Maharaj built this Sanstha on solid foundations. *Agna* and *upasana* are the stones and bricks that are buried deep. *Sadbhav* is the cement holding everything together. And if any external force tries to compromise this structure, *paksh*, the steel, is there standing strong.

It is built to last. If we wish to be a part of it and be happy, we must follow the architect's guidelines; otherwise we're just building on sand. We need to follow the principles of *agna*, *upasana*, *sadbhav* and *paksh*. ♦

Annakut Celebrations Worldwide

Diwali and Annakut celebrations were held in 2012 at all BAPS mandirs and centres throughout India, UK, USA, Canada, Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Australia, New Zealand and in many other countries. The following are photographs of the *annakuts* offered to Thakorji at some of the BAPS mandirs.



Gandhinagar, India



Anand, India



Atladra (Vadodara), India



Cherry Hill, USA



Houston, USA



Toronto, Canada



Brisbane, Australia



Auckland, New Zealand



Perth, Australia



Nairobi, Kenya



Johannesburg, South Africa



Chicago, USA



New Delhi, India



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2 3



4

INAUGURATION CELEBRATIONS
BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir, Chino Hills, CA, USA
20-23 December 2012

1. Thousands of devotees participated in the Vedic Yagna for World Peace. 2. Grand procession on the streets of Artesia 3. Kirtan aradhana in the Haveli 4. Pratishtha Celebration assembly in the marquee.