

Pramukh Swami's Life

THE CHILDHOOD YEARS...

Pramukh Swami Maharaj was born in a very small village called Chansad on 7 December 1921 (Magshar sud 8, Vikram Samvat 1978). His father's name was Motilal Prabhudas Patel, and his mother's name was Diwaliba Patel, who came from the village of Menpur. Motibhai was in regular contact with Shastriji Maharaj, while Diwaliba's family had been satsangis since the time of Bhagatji Maharaj. Motibhai and Diwaliba decided to name their child Shantilal, meaning peace. Shantilal had nine siblings, of whom four passed away at a young age. Shantilal was the youngest. Shantilal started doing daily puja from the age of seven. His first puja was presented to him by Nana Akshar Swami.

As a child, young Shantilal excelled in his studies. When he began studying in Padra, a village 6 km from Chansad, he would insist on getting there early. His childhood friend, Ambalalbai, recalls, "I used to be lazy, but Shantilal would always insist that we left on time. We would both take a long time in cycling but when it came to hills I would stop cycling and let Shantilal pull me uphill. He would happily cycle away without a single complaint."

After some time Motibhai bought Shantilal a secondhand 'Hercules' cycle for Rs. 16. Shantilal daily cycled to school, carrying his lunchbox and water bottle. Shantilal's lunch was a humble one. Dhebra, vada, gadipuri and pickles was the daily menu. This simple menu meant that less time was spent in eating and thinking of food and more time was spent studying.

After school hours, Shantilal spent his free time at one of three mandirs: Hanuman Gadhi Mandir, Satyanarayan Mandir and Swaminarayan Mandir. It was at the Swaminarayan Mandir that Shantilal would sit and listen to Haridas Bawaji's tales of Haridwar and Rishikesh. Listening to these tales made Shantilal want to go to these places with his best friend, coincidentally also called Shantilal.

As well as studies, singing bhajans and offering bhakti, Shantilal loved sports. Cricket and swimming in particular were his favourite. Cricket was introduced to the village of Chansad by a government worker called Ramlal. He had bought a bat, ball and stumps and taught the children how to play. Roughly a year later, Ramlal was transferred elsewhere and he took the equipment with him. The children decided to get together and

raised Rs. 500, quite a substantial sum in those days, for new equipment. All the children appointed Shantilal and Shankarlal to go to Vadodara to buy the equipment.

As they were getting ready to leave, a youth from Bhaili, the neighbouring village, approached Shantilal with a letter from Shastriji Maharaj, addressed to his father, Motibhai. Shantilal showed the letter to his parents. In the letter Shastriji Maharaj had instructed that Shantilal be sent to become a sadhu. Motibhai was reminded of the time when Shastriji Maharaj gave the infant Shantilal vartman and said, "He is ours. Please make sure to give him to us when the time is right." That time had arrived. Without tears or anguish, his parents accepted guru Shastriji Maharaj's wish and Shantilal immediately left.

At the age of 18 Shantilal embarked on a new chapter in his life.

TRANSITION INTO SADHU LIFE

Shantilal joined Nilkanth Swami and Ghanshyam Swami, two of Shastriji Maharaj's sadhus, and accompanied them to the village of Sakarada and then to Bochasan. After a few days of travelling with Nirgundas Swami, Shantilal met Shastriji Maharaj in Ahmedabad.

Shastriji expressed his wish, "In the morning, I want to initiate you as a parshad." Thus, on the auspicious day of 22 November 1939 (Kartik sud 11, V.S. 1996) Shantilal became Shanti Bhagat.

Shanti Bhagat had one wish - to learn English. Initially, Shastriji Maharaj had said that he could learn from Khengarjibhai, a learned devotee in Ahmedabad. However, Shastriji Maharaj changed his mind and told Shanti Bhagat that for a sadhu it is better to learn Sanskrit rather than English. Shanti Bhagat accepted his guru's wish straight away and went to Bochasan to study.

One day, Shastriji Maharaj tested the newly initiated Hariswarup Swami and Shanti Bhagat. He asked them to recite the eight forms of the word 'Rama'. Shanti Bhagat recited them fluently, but Hariswarup Swami had trouble. Pleased by young Shanti Bhagat's performance, Shastriji Maharaj told Hariswarup Swami, "When he becomes a sadhu this Shanti will look after the Sampradaya."

Some weeks later, Shastriji Maharaj decided to give Shanti Bhagat the bhagvati diksha. On the morning of 10 January 1940 (Poush sud 1, V.S. 1996) Yogiji Maharaj performed the mahapuja in the Akshar Deri in Gondal. Shastriji Maharaj performed the initiation rites

and decided that Shanti Bhagat be named Narayanswarupdas, explaining, "He is the very form of Narayan." He then told Yogiji Maharaj to bless Narayanswarup Swami so that he acquires virtues like his.

Narayanswarup Swami then continued his studies first in Gondal and then in Bhadran with a group of other sadhus. While studying Sanskrit, they would also beg for alms in the streets of the village and serve in the mandir.

Impressed by his sharp intellect, management skills and saintliness, Shastriji Maharaj appointed Narayanswarup Swami as the Kothari of Sarangpur Mandir in 1946. He fulfilled this responsibility until 1950.

Shastriji Maharaj had a special affection for Narayanswarup Swami and fondly called him 'Naranda'. Once, Shastriji Maharaj fell ill in Sarangpur and casually remarked that if Naranda were there he would get better. Receiving this news in Atladra, young Naranda immediately left for Sarangpur, despite the heavy rains. Hanging off a train in the pouring rain for 100 km and then walking another 11 km from Botad station in the mud, potholes and flooded terrain, Narayanswarup Swami arrived in Sarangpur to the delight of guru Shastriji Maharaj.

APPOINTED PRESIDENT OF BAPS

As the years passed, under the guidance of Shastriji Maharaj, Narayanswarup Swami earned the respect of all through his saintliness and skills. His adherence to niyams was par excellence.

Thus, Shastriji Maharaj decided to appoint the 28-year-old Narayanswarup Swami as President of BAPS in his place.

However, Narayanswarup Swami did not wish for such honour, but, because it was his guru's wish he reluctantly accepted the responsibility. Others felt that he was too young for such a post, but Shastriji Maharaj boldly stated, "I have never taken a decision in my life that I have regretted." So, on 21 May 1950, at Amli Vali Pol in Ahmedabad, Shastriji Maharaj draped Narayanswarup Swami in a chadar - a symbol of his appointment as President (Pramukh) of BAPS.

On this occasion Pramukh Swami pledged, "Today, before my guru and this whole gathering, I promise that I will fulfil my responsibility properly. Without caring for myself, I will remain loyal to this Sanstha and fulfil my duty to you."

IN THE PRESENCE OF YOGIJI MAHARAJ

On Vaishakh sud 4, V.S. 2007 (1951 CE) at 10.50 a.m., Shastriji Maharaj shed his mortal frame having handed over all responsibilities to Yogiji Maharaj. Shastriji Maharaj had left all administrative dealings to Pramukh Swami Maharaj who wholeheartedly accepted Yogiji Maharaj as his guru and did not take any decision without his consent.

Hence, because of Yogiji Maharaj's love and Pramukh Swami's hard work, the future of BAPS was bright.

For Pramukh Swami, being president also meant pulling carts full of stones, washing dishes, serving meals to devotees, and looking after farmlands and cowsheds. Night or day, bad weather or good, ill or well, Pramukh Swami relentlessly continued his duties with one goal: to please his guru. He often says, "My thoughts never differed from Yogi Bapa's."

Yogi Bapa personally arranged the celebration of Pramukh Swami's 48th birthday in Mumbai. During this celebration Yogiji Maharaj revealed Pramukh Swami's greatness to all, "Shastriji Maharaj has appointed him as president, so everyone should follow Pramukh Swami's agna. He is the form of Shastriji Maharaj - there is no difference between the two..."

Yogiji Maharaj often spoke of Pramukh Swami's glory and said that his wish of making 700 sadhus would be fulfilled by Pramukh Swami. (This came true in 2003 on Yogiji Maharaj's 111th birthday when the 700th sadhu was initiated.)

Once, Harshadbhai Dave, a senior devotee from the time of Shastriji Maharaj, asked Yogiji Maharaj what would happen to them in his absence. Yogiji Maharaj smiled and said, "Look to Pramukh Swami now. He will give you much more happiness than I have.

Pramukh Swami is my everything."

Then, on 23 January 1971 Yogiji Maharaj shed his mortal frame. Thereafter, the presence of Pramukh Swami Maharaj gave everyone great strength.

PRAMUKH SWAMI MAHARAJ - PRAGAT BRAHMASWARUP

From the time he had become a sadhu, till the passing away of Yogiji Maharaj, Pramukh Swami had always lived in the footsteps of his gurus and served under them devotedly. Yogiji Maharaj had often indicated that Pramukh Swami would be his successor as guru of BAPS. Sadguru Santvallabh Swami, a loyal disciple of Shastriji Maharaj and beloved of

Yogiji Maharaj, was the first to proclaim Pramukh Swami Maharaj as the new guru. To please his gurus and continue the work they had begun, he engaged in intense, tireless vicharan. So intense, that just reading about it makes one breathless. For ten years, Swamishri, as everyone respectfully called him, followed a schedule full of exertion and difficulties. There were problems with transportation, and other logistics, yet he still travelled to see every devotee he could and sanctify their home. The following was the typical daily schedule for Swamishri:

5.30 a.m. - wake up, bathe, etc.

6.30 a.m. - puja, daily reading, arti, katha

7.30 a.m. - breakfast

8.00 a.m. - padhramanis begin

Lunch would be at anytime after 12.30 p.m.

3.00 p.m. - rest and bathe

3.30 p.m. - move to a new village

4.00 p.m. - welcome sabha

5.00 p.m. - padhramanis

7.00 p.m. - evening arti

9.00 p.m. - sabha

12.00 midnight - chesta, meet devotees

12.30 to 1.00 a.m. - sleep

This was the schedule he followed for 10 years, during which he made a total of 6,464 village, town and city visits - an average of 2 villages a day. He accomplished such hectic vicharan in bullock-carts, rickety cars and hazardous rickshaws! Even when observing a nirjala fast or suffering from fever, he would complete the padhramanis arranged.

Upto 2007, Pramukh Swami Maharaj has travelled all through India and completed 27 overseas satsang tours (including three with Yogiji Maharaj, in 1955, 1960 and 1970).

Swamishri has visited over 45 countries, including: UK, USA, Canada, Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, South Africa, Australia, New Zealand, Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia, Dubai, Abu Dabhi, Japan, France, Germany, Italy, Portugal, Israel, Egypt and others.

As a result of his constant travels there has been a tremendous increase in the number of BAPS satsang centres and mandirs. Since 1971, Swamishri has consecrated 30

shikharbaddh mandirs and over 1000 hari mandirs in India, England, USA, Canada, East Africa, South Africa and other countries.

PRAMUKH SWAMI MAHARAJ IS FOR ALL

Amid all his hectic vicharan, building mandirs and hosting huge celebrations, Pramukh Swami Maharaj has still reached out to thousands of individuals. He has taken an active role in resolving the problems of devotees.

Swamishri has also immediately responded to the needs of society during famines, floods, earthquakes and other natural disasters by arranging for necessary relief aid. Swamishri's compassion is matchless and reaches all regardless of age, gender, status, caste or creed. His selfless love for all devotees, young and old, has won their hearts such that they dedicate themselves by observing his wishes. Thousands avoid TV, movies and all vices. Many youths are inspired to renounce this world, and today, there are over 900 BAPS sadhus who have dedicated their lives in the service of God, guru and society.

SWAMISHRI'S TRUE IDENTITY

Pramukh Swami Maharaj isn't like us, although he may seem so. He isn't human, but divine. He guides us on how to thoroughly practice satsang into our lives. Swamishri's life is an example of how an ideal devotee of God should live. Pramukh Swami Maharaj has built more than 1,100 mandirs, initiated over 900 sadhus, made over 17,000 city, town and village visits in India and overseas, replied to over 760,000 letters and personally counselled over 810,000 people. His social work is extensive, yet there is more to Pramukh Swami Maharaj. The more one realizes his works, the more one discovers that his true identity is still beyond that. Swamishri has a constant rapport with Bhagwan Swaminarayan, and he can free us of all faults and worldly attachments and bless us with the divine happiness of Akshardham.

So, who is Pramukh Swami Maharaj? Pramukh Swami Maharaj is the Ekantik Satpurush, the manifest form of Aksharbrahman and a key to attaining liberation.

No human language can do the fullest justice while praising the greatness of this divine entity. The more one tries to describe his immensely noble character the more one feels that it is not enough.