

SPECIAL ISSUE

# SWAMINARAYAN BLISS

January–April 2024

Annual Subscription ₹ 80/-



**Swaminarayan Akshardham**

*A Landmark of Hindu Art, Architecture and Culture*

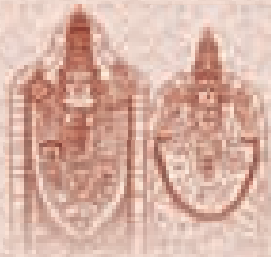
Recently Inaugurated in Robbinsville, New Jersey, USA



HH Mahant Swami Maharaj fulfils Pramukh Swami Maharaj's wish of creating Swaminarayan Akshardham in Robbinsville, USA. Swamiji is seated before the sanctum sanctorum and *murtis* of Bhagwan Swaminarayan and Aksharbrahma Gunatitanand Swami



# Dedication



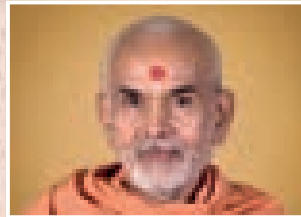
Bhagwan Swaminarayan, Aksharbrahma Gunatitanand Swami,  
revered divine avatars, seers and sages of Sanatan Dharma.

Brahmaswarup Pramukh Swami Maharaj,  
who envisioned Swaminarayan Akshardham, and  
Pragat Brahmaswarup Mahant Swami Maharaj who fulfilled his guru's vision.

BAPS swamis, volunteers and  
well-wishers who selflessly toiled in creating Akshardham for all humanity.



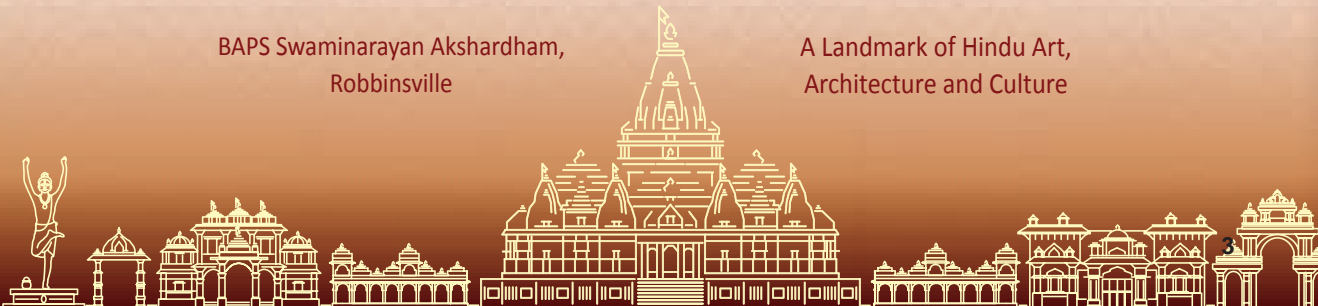
Pramukh Swami Maharaj



Mahant Swami Maharaj

BAPS Swaminarayan Akshardham,  
Robbinsville

A Landmark of Hindu Art,  
Architecture and Culture





# AKSHARDHAM *vandana*

*Jay Jay Akshardham...  
Jay Jay Akshardham...*

Glory to Akshardham Mandir...  
Glory to Akshardham Mandir...

*Hindu Sanatan Hraday Mandiram,  
Shashvat Atma-Viram  
Swaminarayan Akshardham,  
Bhavya Divya Dhanya Akshardham...*

The heart of Sanatan Hindu Dharma,  
Eternal – where souls forever reside,  
Abode of Bhagwan Swaminarayan  
– Akshardham,  
Splendid, divine and blessed.

*Sakal Ish Avatar Nivasam,  
Sapta Sindhu Nad Giri Van Tirtham  
Shanti Chirantan Koti Pranam,  
Swaminarayan Akshardham... 1*

There resides the supreme Godhead of all deities,  
The seven oceans, holy rivers, mountains,  
forests and pilgrim places,  
To the abode of everlasting peace,  
a million pranams,  
Swaminarayan Akshardham... 1

*Pramukh Swami Krut Shubh Arambham,  
Mahant Yuva Kar Seva Nirmitam  
Bhakta Samarjit Kalabhiram,  
Swaminarayan Akshardham... 2*

Auspiciously initiated by Pramukh Swami,  
Constructed in a labour of love by the  
young volunteers of Mahant Swami,  
Artistic masterpiece crafted with  
dedicated service by devotees,  
Swaminarayan Akshardham... 2

*Yatrik Jan Santap Vinasham,  
Paramanand May Divya Prakasham  
Mukta-Param Brahma Shashvat Dham,  
Swaminarayan Akshardham  
America Khand Akshardham... 3*

Dispelling the grief of pilgrims,  
Radiating the divine bliss of enlightenment,  
Ultimate and eternal abode for liberated souls,  
Swaminarayan Akshardham,  
Akshardham for the American continent... 3



*Lyric: Sadhu Aksharjivandas / Music: Parag Shastri  
Translation: Sadhu Jnanpurushdas and Sadhu Amrutvijaydas*

# Blessings and Reflections

A remarkable Akshardham is being  
built in North America to please  
Bhagwan and for all to experience peace,  
but not to garner fame.

*Brahmaswarup Pramukh Swami Maharaj*



O Bhagwan Swaminarayan!  
You are present in your divine Akshardham  
with your infinite powers, similarly, you are  
also present here in this Akshardham.  
I pray that all may experience the highest  
peace and joy in their lives.

*Pragat Brahmaswarup Mahant Swami Maharaj*



The inaugural celebrations of  
Akshardham Mahamandir showcases  
Indian architectural excellence and  
our glorious ancient culture and ethos.  
*Shri Narendra Modi, Prime Minister of India*



It's not the number of breaths you take  
in your life; it's the number of times your  
breath gets taken away. I feel this is the  
eighth wonder of the world, and not just  
because of the structure, but because of how  
it happened.

*Guy Chiarello, Chief Operating Officer, Fiserv*



The art of giving is what teaches you  
the art of living and this is living proof.

*Sunil Shetty, Bollywood Actor*



The message of Swaminarayan is clear.  
It is for everyone. It is for humanity.  
Many answers which you don't get in  
your life you will find here.

*Arif Aajakia, Human Rights Activist*



What is fascinating is just the attention to  
detail, the beauty of it, in some ways the  
simplicity of it, but also the complexity of it.  
*Mike Lawler, United States Congress Representative,  
New York's 17th Congressional District*



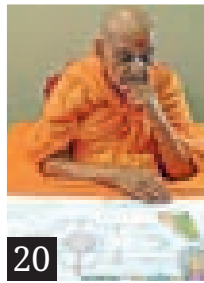
There are not enough adjectives in the  
English language to explain what  
I saw today. There will never be enough.

*Charles Tomaro, County Commissioner,  
Middlesex County, NJ*

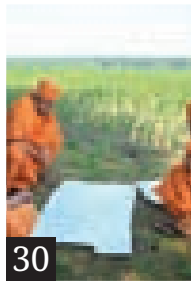
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20



30



100



72



170



34



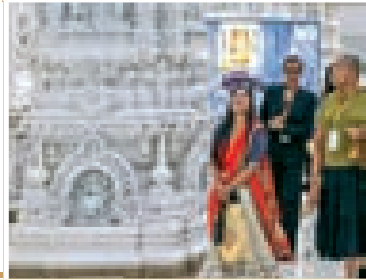
Akshar-Purushottam Maharaj



SPECIAL ISSUE

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3 Years	1900	27	42	220

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.



# BAPS North America Satsang Timeline

*For over four decades Pramukh Swami Maharaj's intense vicharan and works in North America resulted in the phenomenal growth of satsang. He sanctified the homes of countless devotees, addressed thousands of satsang and public assemblies and conventions, performed the foundation-stone laying and murti-pratishtha ceremonies of hundreds of mandirs, celebrated innumerable festivals and was honoured and received by local, regional and national leaders.*

*He met many religious leaders to foster interfaith harmony and inspired charity work in times of need and calamity. Mahant Swami Maharaj, prior to becoming the guru and thereafter, travelled extensively in North America and finally fulfilled Pramukh Swami Maharaj's dream of building Akshardham in Robbinsville in October 2023.*



## 1974

### NEW YORK

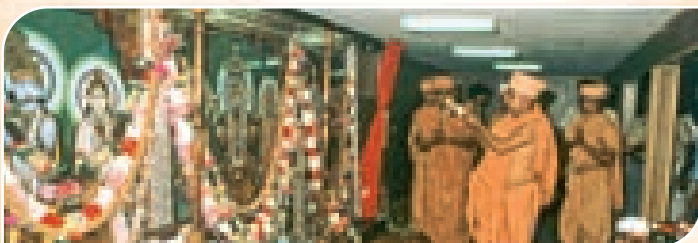
Pramukh Swami Maharaj arrives in North America for the first time at JFK Airport.



## 1974

### WASHINGTON D.C.

Pramukh Swami Maharaj during a visit to the U.S. Capitol.



## 1974

### NEW YORK

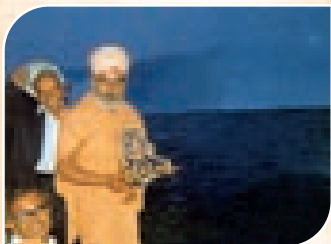
Pramukh Swami Maharaj performs the *murti-pratishtha arti* in the first BAPS mandir in America.



## 1974

### CINCINNATI

Pramukh Swami Maharaj is presented the Key to the City by Mayor Theodore M. Berry.



# 1974

## ONTARIO

Pramukh Swami Maharaj, with Shri Harikrishna Maharaj, visits Niagara Falls for the first time.



# 1977

## WASHINGTON D.C.

Pramukh Swami Maharaj converses with Mahant Swami by the White House.



# 1977

## LOS ANGELES

Pramukh Swami Maharaj and Mahant Swami during a *padhramani*.



# 1977

## HOUSTON

Pramukh Swami Maharaj visits NASA's Johnson Space Center.



# 1977

## ERIE

Pramukh Swami Maharaj bathes Shri Harikrishna Maharaj at Lake Erie during the Jal Jhilani Utsav.



# 1980

## ONTARIO

Pramukh Swami Maharaj with swamis at Niagara Park.



# 1980

## BOSTON

Pramukh Swami Maharaj listens to a sadhu reading a scripture after his cataract operation.

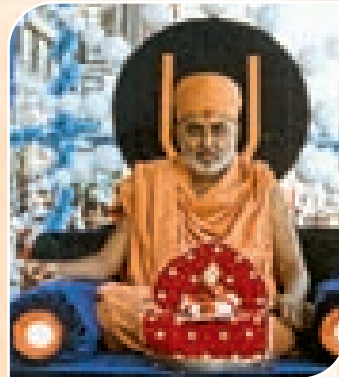




# 1980

**DALLAS**

Pramukh Swami Maharaj and devotees in a memorable spiritual procession.



# 1984

**CHICAGO**

Pramukh Swami Maharaj in a *nagar yatra* prior to performing the *murti-pratishtha* of a mandir.



# 1984

**SAN FRANCISCO**

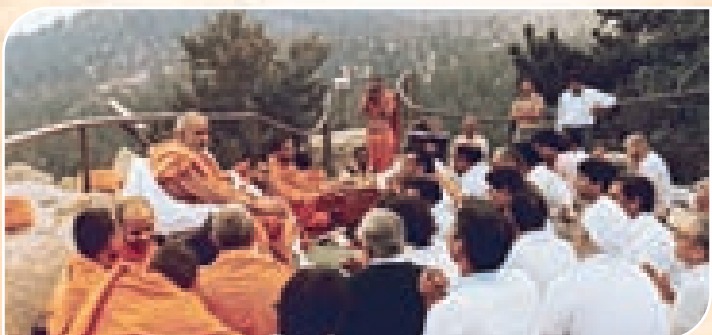
Pramukh Swami Maharaj during a *padhramani* at a devotee's home.



# 1984

**AUSTIN**

Pramukh Swami Maharaj engrossed in reading letters.



# 1984

**PALM SPRINGS, CA**

Pramukh Swami Maharaj addresses an assembly of devotees.



# 1986

**ORLANDO**

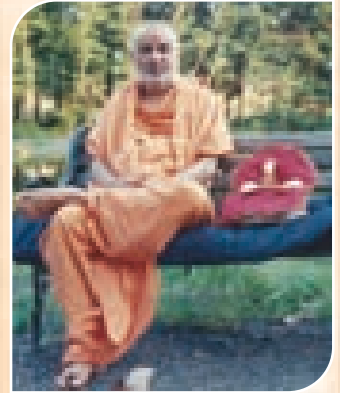
Mahant Swami engaged in a light conversation with sadhus.



# 1986

## HOUSTON

Mahant Swami performs the *bhumi puja* for a *hari* mandir in Houston.



# 1988

## PENNSYLVANIA

Pramukh Swami Maharaj with Shri Harikrishna Maharaj at the Vraj Hindu Temple.



# 1988

## OTTAWA, ONTARIO

Solicitor General of Canada Mr Bob Kaplan welcomes Pramukh Swami Maharaj in the Canadian Parliament.



# 1988

## TRINIDAD

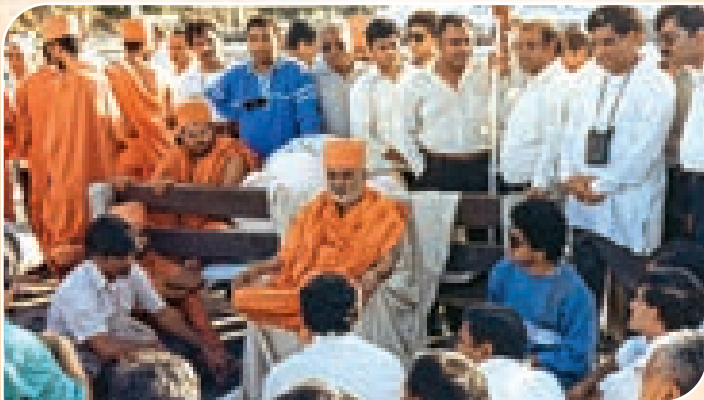
Pramukh Swami Maharaj with the Prime Minister of Trinidad Mr Robinson.



# 1990

## TORONTO

Pramukh Swami Maharaj converses with a devotee at the airport.



# 1988

## CATALINA ISLAND, CA

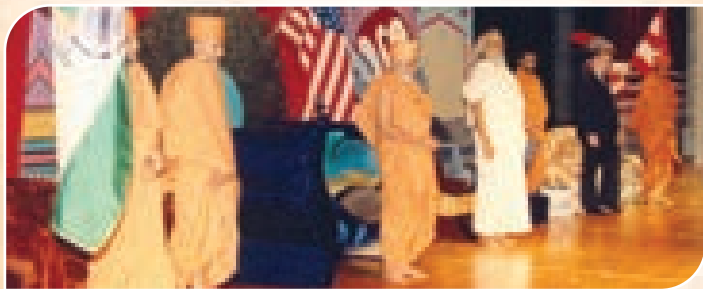
Pramukh Swami Maharaj delivers a discourse to devotees.



# 1990

## BOSTON

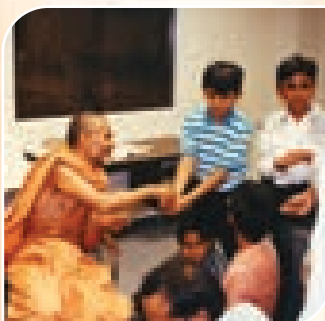
Pramukh Swami Maharaj performs the *murti-pratishtha* ceremony.



# 1990

## NEW YORK

Pramukh Swami Maharaj, Acharya Shri Shushilkumarji and Mahant Swami during the CFI Kickoff Ceremony at the Jacob K. Javits Convention Center.



# 1990

## HOUSTON

Mahant Swami gives *prasad* to children.



# 1991

## EDISON

Pramukh Swami Maharaj and Congressman Bill McCollum inaugurate the Cultural Festival of India.



# 1991

## LOS ANGELES

A devotee honours Thakorji and Pramukh Swami Maharaj.



# 1991

## EDISON

Pramukh Swami Maharaj is honoured during the Platinum Tula Mahotsav.



# 1991

## TORONTO

Pramukh Swami Maharaj meets Bob Kaplan, a member of the Canadian Parliament.



# 1994

## POCONOS

Pramukh Swami Maharaj signs a youth's cricket bat.



# 1994

## ORLANDO

Pramukh Swami Maharaj views the mandir grounds.



# 1994

## CHICAGO

Pramukh Swami Maharaj performs the *bhumi puja* for the *shikharbaddha* mandir in Chicago.



# 1995

## EDISON

Mahant Swami blesses devotees during a satsang assembly.



# 1995

## CHICAGO

Mahant Swami visits the mandir campus in Glen Ellyn.



# 1996

## CHARLOTTE

Pramukh Swami Maharaj performs the *murti-pratishtha*.



# 1996

## NEW YORK

Pramukh Swami Maharaj at the Radio City Music Hall celebration assembly.



# 1996

**EDISON**

Pramukh Swami Maharaj inaugurates the newly constructed mandir.



# 1997

**BIRMINGHAM, AL**

Mahant Swami performs the *murti-pratishtha* rituals at the newly repurposed mandir.



# 1997

**EDISON**

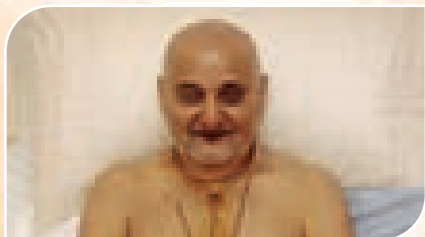
A devotee performs *pujan* of Mahant Swami upon his arrival at Edison mandir.



# 1998

**WESTCHESTER**

Pramukh Swami Maharaj performs the *shila puja* for the Chicago *shikharbaddha* mandir following his bypass surgery.



# 1998

**NEW YORK**

Pramukh Swami Maharaj rests after undergoing cardiac bypass surgery.



# 2000

**NEW YORK**

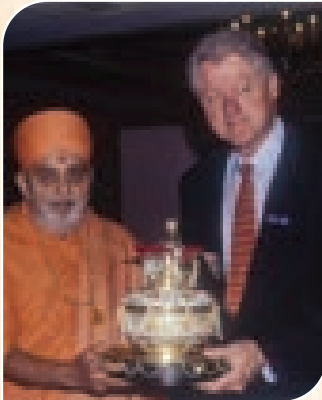
Pramukh Swami Maharaj humbly delivers his speech at the UN Millennium World Peace Summit.



# 2000

## HOUSTON

Pramukh Swami Maharaj performs the *shilanyas* rituals for the *shikharbaddha* mandir.



# 2000

## MIAMI

Pramukh Swami Maharaj presents an Amrut Kalash to President Bill Clinton.



# 2002

## HOUSTON

Mahant Swami performs *puja* of a sculpted stone for the *shikharbaddha* mandir.



# 2002

## EDISON

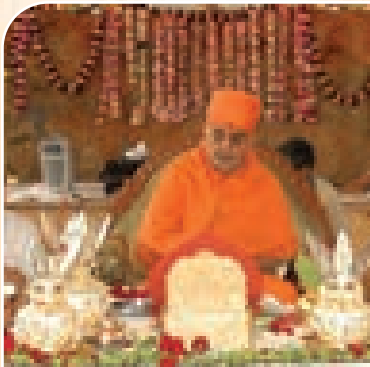
Mahant Swami views a stage programme during a summer *shibir*.



# 2002

## LOS ANGELES

Mahant Swami walks alongside children and youths during a BAPS charity event.



# 2004

## ATLANTA

Pramukh Swami Maharaj performs the *shilanyas* rituals for the *shikharbaddha* mandir.



# 2004

## CHICAGO

Pramukh Swami Maharaj performs the *murti-pratishtha* ceremony of the *shikharbaddha* mandir.



# 2007

## TORONTO

Pramukh Swami Maharaj performs the *murti-pratishtha* of Shri Akshar-Purushottam Maharaj in the new *shikharbaddha* mandir.



# 2007

## JACKSONVILLE

Pramukh Swami Maharaj in a divine, jovial mood during the National Youth Convention.



# 2007

## ATLANTA

Pramukh Swami Maharaj performs the *murti-pratishtha* in the new *shikharbaddha* mandir.





# 2007

## LOS ANGELES

Pramukh Swami Maharaj performs the *murti-pratishtha* of Shri Akshar-Purushottam Maharaj.



# 2007

## PISCATAWAY

Pramukh Swami Maharaj with swamis and staff of the National Satsang Headquarters.



# 2008

## ROBBINSVILLE

102.5 acres of land acquired for Akshardham in Robbinsville, New Jersey. Construction of the first phase began in 2011.



# 2011

## ROBBINSVILLE

Via telelink, Mahant Swami and Ishwarcharan Swami, in Robbinsville, honour Pramukh Swami Maharaj, in Mumbai, with a garland during the *shilanyas puja* ceremony.



# 2011

## LOS ANGELES

Mahant Swami performs *puja* of the *shikharbaddha* mandir *garbhagruha* base stone.



# 2013

## ATLANTA

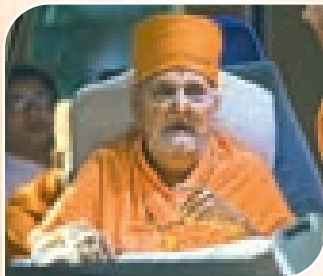
Mahant Swami gives *prasad* to a *karyakar* during the National Youth Convention.



# 2013

## ATLANTA

Mahant Swami blesses the National Youth Convention.



# 2014

## ROBBINSVILLE

Pramukh Swami Maharaj arrives at the Robbinsville Akshardham site.



# 2014

## ROBBINSVILLE

Pramukh Swami Maharaj performs the *murti-pratishtha* ceremony of the *shikharbaddha* mandir.



# 2014

## ROBBINSVILLE

Pramukh Swami Maharaj and Mahant Swami lower the *kalash* in the main *khand* of Akshardham.



# 2017

## ATLANTA

Mahant Swami Maharaj arrives in North America for the first time as guru.



# 2017

## CHICAGO

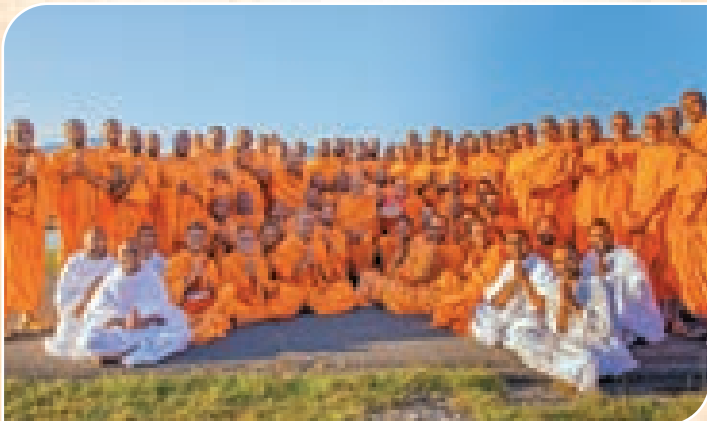
Mahant Swami Maharaj garlanded on the occasion of Guru Purnima.



# 2017

## ROBBINSVILLE

Mahant Swami Maharaj performs the *murti-pratishtha* of the *abhishek murti* of Shri Ghanshyam Maharaj.



# 2017

**CATSKILLS**

Mahant Swami Maharaj with swamis during a *sant shibir*.



# 2017

**ROBBINSVILLE**

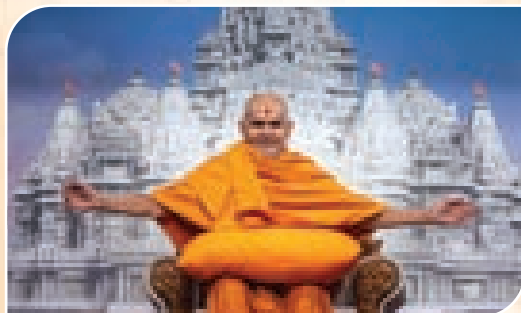
Mahant Swami Maharaj ritually performs the *stambh sthapan* at Swaminarayan Akshardham.



# 2023

**ROBBINSVILLE**

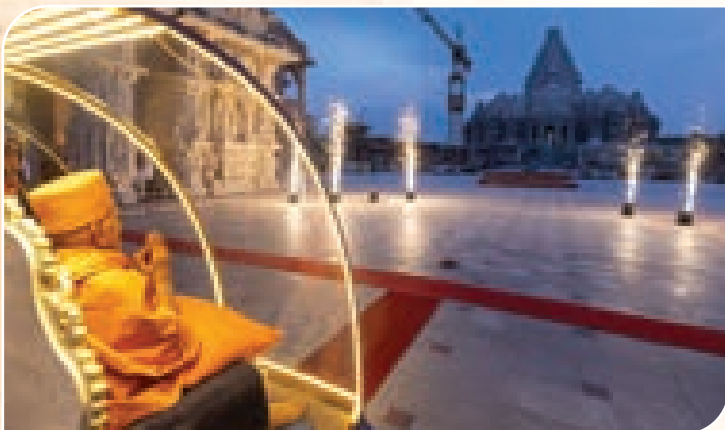
Mahant Swami Maharaj sanctifies the marble replica of the holy *charanavind* installed on a shrine by the entrance of Akshardham campus.



# 2023

**ROBBINSVILLE**

Mahant Swami Maharaj gives an air hug to an assembly of Akshardham volunteers.



# 2023

**ROBBINSVILLE**

Mahant Swami Maharaj exudes joy while gazing upon the majestic Akshardham Mahamandir.

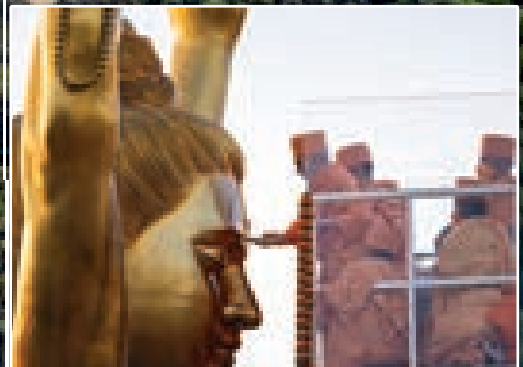
# Making of AKSHARDHAM

## TIMELINE



*This is the eighth wonder of the world; and not just because of the structure, but because of how it happened. I will go home tonight and scratch my head and say, how did they do this? How could this have happened in the way that it did? And I feel terrific; I mean, it's one of the best afternoons of my life.*

*- Guy Chiarello  
Chief Operating Officer, Fiserv*







## 2008

### LAND IN ROBBINSVILLE

DAPS acquired 102.5 acres of land for the Swaminarayan Akshardham project. Later, plans for the project were granted permission by Mayor David Fried and the planning board of Robbinsville.

## 2011

### SHILANYAS PUJAN

6 October, Dasher

Pramukh Swami Maharaj, in Mumbai, and Mahant Swami and Ishwarcharan Swami, in Robbinsville, performed the *shilanyas puja* rituals of Akshardham, Robbinsville. Swamis, devotees and well-wishers participated in the sacred foundation stone-laying ceremony of Akshardham in Robbinsville on 6, 8, and 9 October 2011. The historic occasion took place in six sacred Vedic ceremonies – two on each day – marking the start of Akshardham construction.



### INTRODUCTION

Yogiji Maharaj sowed the seeds of BAPS satsang in North America, in 1970, while in London. In 1970, Dr K.C. Patel, a pioneer devotee of satsang in the USA, came to London for Yogiji Maharaj's darshan. Yogiji Maharaj blessed Dr K.C. Patel and said that a mandir would be built near his house in Flushing, New York, and it would be consecrated by Pramukh Swami. The prophecy came true in 1974, and subsequently BAPS has flourished over the next five decades (see BAPS North America Satsang Timeline, p. 8). The high point of BAPS satsang history is the accomplishment of Pramukh

Swami Maharaj's dream of creating BAPS Swaminarayan Akshardham in New Jersey. On 8 October 2023, Mahant Swami Maharaj performed the *murti-pratishtha* rituals and Akshardham was declared open to all visitors on 18 October. The grand story of Akshardham, from concept to creation to consecration, is intriguing, inspiring and heartening. One of its many outstanding features is the epic effort and sacrifice of swamis and 12,500 volunteers, young and old. Some salient aspects of the creation of BAPS Swaminarayan Akshardham, Robbinsville, are as follows.



# 2014

## BHUMITAL PUJAN

15 August, Balrama Jayanti

Pramukh Swami Maharaj and Mahant Swami placed the *nidhi kumbh* in a pit above which the *murti* of Bhagwan Swaminarayan would be installed. Pramukh Swami Maharaj also blessed the Akshardham land by placing his feet on the ground.

# 2016

## STAMBH PUJAN IN SARANGPUR

26 March

In the presence of hundreds of swamis and devotees, Pramukh Swami Maharaj performed the Stambh Pujan Vidhi of the first carved, marble pillar of Akshardham in Sarangpur.



## IDEA OF AKSHARDHAM IN NEW JERSEY

1984, USA: Pramukh Swami Maharaj expressed his desire to build a large traditional mandir in New Jersey. He outlined that the land should be at least 100 acres, near a highway for easy access and in a region where a large Indian population resides.

Search for land commenced and eventually 162 acres of land was found in Independence Township/Hackettstown, New Jersey. Later, project approvals were not granted by the local township.

1995, London: After the inauguration of the *shikharbaddha* mandir in London, Dr K.C.

Patel and devotees requested Pramukh Swami Maharaj that a similar traditional stone mandir also be built in the USA. Swamishri replied that many mandirs will be built in the USA.

1997, Atladara: Pramukh Swami Maharaj gave a decision to restructure the USA satsang into five regions: Northeast, Southeast, Midwest, Southwest and West, with each having a regional committee of devotees and a *shikharbaddha* mandir. Dr Swami expressed the wish of Pramukh Swami Maharaj that there should be a large mandir like Akshardham in New Jersey.

1998, USA: After Pramukh Swami





# 2017

## STAMBH PUJAN IN ROBBINSVILLE

2 September

In the presence of Mahant Swami Maharaj, thousands of devotees from across North America gathered in Robbinsville for this momentous occasion. By applying mortar and lowering the stone himself, Swamishri installed the first marble pillar of Akshardham.

# 2020

## MANDOVAR COMPLETION

Summer

The grand *mandovar* is decorated with intricate sculptures and carvings that depict the magnificence and artistic heritage of Hindu culture. The *mandovar* showcases various Bharatnatyam poses and stone statues of important Hindu figures, sages and teachers.



Maharaj's heart bypass surgery he enquired about land for Akshardham. Subsequently, the volunteers intensified their search.

**2000, USA:** A proposal for land and project approval were submitted in Sayreville, NJ, but nothing materialized.

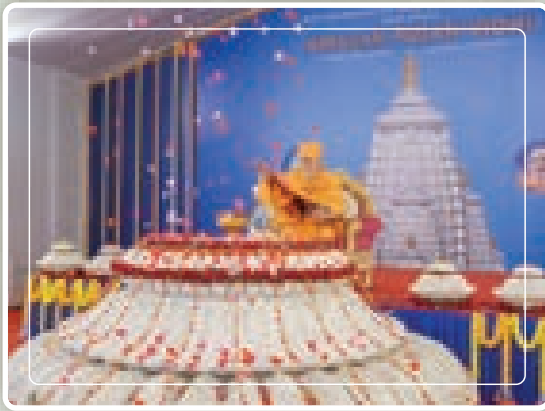
**2004, East Windsor:** Land was bought in East Windsor, but the local authority did not grant project approval.

**2006:** Pramukh Swami Maharaj instructed to search for another land for Akshardham. For the following 1½ years, Dipalbhai, with the assistance of Haribhai and Sunilbhai, explored and visited 320 lands in 30 towns in New Jersey.

Finally, they found 102.5 acres of farmland in Robbinsville.

**2008, Robbinsville:** Acquired 102.5 acres of land in Robbinsville and planning permission for building the Akshardham complex in five phases was granted by Mayor David Fried and the planning board. Work commenced for the *shikharbaddha* mandir in 2011 and the foundation of the Akshardham *mahamandir* was completed in 2013.

The creation of the Swaminarayan Akshardham complex in Robbinsville is a story of titanic voluntary effort and challenges. From its initial stages, where only a handful of



# 2020

## MAHASHIKAR AMALAK PUJAN IN NENPUR

25 October, Dashera

In Nenpur, Gujarat, Mahant Swami Maharaj ritually sanctified the topmost stone – *amalak* – of the *mahashikhar* of Akshardham. Swamishri was joined virtually by swamis and devotees of North America and worldwide.

# 2022

## PARABRAHMA MAHASAMARAN KEYSTONE PUJAN VIDHI

14 June, Jeth *sud* Punam

A keystone serves as the final piece of the dome and locks the rest of the pieces in place. On this day, the final keystone of the four *mandapams* – Parabrahma, Aksharbrahma, Mukta and Aishvarya – was placed, thus locking the four domes in place.



volunteers offered *seva*, to its peak, there were more than 1,200 volunteers in all types of *seva*.

Some glimpses of the humongous construction project over a span of 14 years is as follows.

## CONSTRUCTION OF AKSHARDHAM COMPLEX

**2011:** Construction work of the *shikharbaddha* mandir, which is enclosed in a building, commenced in 2011. The stone construction work was carried out by volunteer artisans from India and the civil construction by local contractors. Many devotees assisted them

and also performed other *seva* like cleaning, scaffolding, opening wooden crates of stones, hospitality, cooking and purchasing. A few devotees came every evening, some came on Saturdays and Sundays and male and female youths came on designated days during their summer college vacations.

**2014:** In 2014, Pramukh Swami Maharaj came to Robbinsville and performed the *pratishta* rituals of the *shikharbaddha* mandir. He also performed the *bhumital puja* ritual of Swaminarayan Akshardham by placing a small auspicious pot in the ground.

**2015:** Construction of Akshardham



# 2022

## COMPLETION OF JAGATI PEETH

25 July

The completion of the Akshardham *jagati peeth* (base of outer wall) occurred in the summer of 2022. With the efforts and dedication of many volunteers, swamis, *parshads* and *sadhaks*, the 13 layers of the *jagati peeth* were completed.

# 2022

## PUJAN OF AMALAKS OF UPASHIKHARS & UPASAMARANS

19 September

Mahant Swami Maharaj's Janma Jayanti

On the auspicious day of Mahant Swami Maharaj's 89th birthday celebration, a ritual to sanctify the topmost stones – *amalaks* – to be placed on the eight *upashikhars* and four *upasamarans* was performed in Robbinsville.



commenced. There were volunteer stone artisans on-site from India and some male devotees on weekends to help. A few devotees came to do *seva* for one or two months.

2017: In early 2017, devotees from the local region came in small batches to serve for three days. They did rebar and scaffolding *seva*. However, after every three days, a new batch had to be trained. As a result, the output of their *seva* was not substantial. During that time the women volunteers expressed their wish to serve in Akshardham for a day. Among them, the female youths said they wanted to do heavy *seva*. Thus, they were given the task

of tying stainless steel rods, 18 to 20 ft long, with wires to create three columns. Thereafter, concrete was poured into them to make pillars. The volunteer engineers thought it would take the 70 female youths the whole day to tie the steel rods. However, to their surprise, they completed the task in just three hours. Thereafter, they were tasked to complete eight more columns of steel rods, which they accomplished by the end of the day.

On another occasion, many youths were called from Robbinsville, New York, Edison and Washington D.C. to lay the steel rods for constructing the main floor of Akshardham.





# 2023

## AMALAK PUJAN OF PARABRAHMA MAHASAMARAN

30 March, Shri Hari Jayanti

On the auspicious day of Shri Hari Jayanti, the *pujan* rituals of the topmost stone for the Parabrahma Mahasamaran was performed.

# 2023

## MAHASHIKHAR AMALAK PUJAN

31 May, Bhim Ekadashi

The final stone for the *mahashikhar* was sanctified through a Vedic *pujan* ritual in the presence of *sadgurus* Doctor Swami, Kothari Swami and Ishwarcharan Swami. The final stone was then installed, thus completing the construction of Akshardham.



**June 2017:** Nilkanthseva Swami and Prashantdarshan Swami met Mahant Swami Maharaj in Atlanta during his satsang tour to USA. They informed Swamishri about the ongoing work in Akshardham and the *seva* done by the devotees. They also mentioned the difficulty of engaging the local regional devotees in *seva* because of their personal work and home responsibilities. In response, Mahant Swami Maharaj expressed, “Plan and organize so that all the volunteers [and devotees] in America can do *seva*.”

**2018:** Swamishri gave a video message for the devotees to join in *seva*, which was relayed

by local swamis in all the satsang centres. The devotees were motivated to do *seva* for three days. From April onwards, every three days, male volunteers came to Robbinsville for *seva*. A brief orientation about the type of *seva* and safety measures was given to all.

In his video blessings, Mahant Swami Maharaj inspired, “You have got the same *seva* that the swamis and devotees had in the time of Shastriji Maharaj.”

The foundation work for the Akshardham *parikrama* was completed by volunteers, and they also did rebar and operated vibrators during the concrete work. The volunteer



# 2023

## PUJAN OF NILKANTH VARNI

24 July

Mahant Swami Maharaj visited the Nilkanth Vatika (Plaza) for darshan. He raised an incense stick to honour and offer respect to the 49-foot-high *murti* of Nilkanth Varni. Then, Swamishri ascended by a lift to apply *chandan* on the *murti*'s forehead. Thereafter, Swamishri offered *thal*.

# 2023

## KALASH PUJAN AND MURTI STHAPAN

30 August, Rakshabandhan

Mahant Swami Maharaj and the *sadguru* swamis performed the *pujan* and *abhishek* rituals of 18 *kalashes* on the Akshardham podium and steps. The *kalashes* were later installed on the Akshardham *mahamandir shikhars* and *samarans*. Then, Swamishri entered the main *garbhagruha* where Bhagwan Swaminarayan and Gunatitanand Swami's *murtis* were to be installed. He first performed *pujan* of the *charanarvinds* of the *murtis* and then the *yantras*. Thereafter, Swamishri placed the *yantras*, sacred soil of all pilgrim places and other objects on the spot where the *murtis* were later installed.



devotees stayed in mobile homes on-site.

2019: Female volunteers expressed their wish to do *seva*. Thereafter, in addition to 30 males, 20 female volunteers joined for the three-day *seva*. With two batches every week, one batch would come on Saturday and do *seva* on Sunday, Monday and Tuesday. After they left on Wednesday, the second batch would come on Wednesday and do *seva* from Thursday to Saturday. The volunteer devotees came from all parts of America and Canada.

2021: Fifty swamis and *sadhaks* arrived from Sarangpur to do *seva*. From then onwards,

arrangements were made for 10-day and then 15-day slots for volunteer *seva*. Volunteers attended orientation classes for the *seva*. The practical aspects were taught by volunteer artisans. A few long-term volunteers took a certificate course on safety. A few more also enrolled in licenced courses on operating cranes and other heavy vehicles for site *seva*. They helped in the construction of the Nilkanth Vatika, Brahma Kund, Welcome Center (Haveli) and Akshardham domes.

In September, Ishwarcharan Swami performed the *pratishtha* of the 49 ft tall *murti* of Nilkanth Varni. Thereafter, Ishwarcharan



# 2023

## DHVAJA DAND PUJAN

13 September, 90th Birthday Celebration of Mahant Swami Maharaj (according to English date)

Mahant Swami Maharaj and *sadguru* swamis performed the *pujan* rituals of 22 *dhvaja dands* (flagstaffs) and flags by the Brahma Kund. The biggest flagstaff for the *mahashikhar* was 46 ft long. Swamishri circumambulated the flagstaffs

and seven small *kalashes*. Later, the flagstaffs were installed on the *shikhars* of Akshardham.

# 2023

## MURTI-PRATISHTHA OF AKSHARDHAM

8 October, 90th Birthday of Mahant Swami Maharaj

Mahant Swami Maharaj performed the *murti-pratishtha* of the *murtis* of Bhagwan Swaminarayan and Aksharbrahma Gunatitanand Swami. In the evening, a grand finale Akshardham assembly was held in the main marquee and thereafter, to honour Akshardham, a cultural celebration was held on its precincts. The event climaxed with fireworks.



Swami said that to accomplish the construction of Akshardham we need 400 youth volunteers committed for one year *seva*. Mahant Swami Maharaj was informed about it and gave a video blessing to inspire all. His blessings were screened in all satsang assemblies in North America. By May 2022, 600 volunteers joined for one year site *seva*. Soon after, the numbers increased to 1,000 and more.

**July 2023:** On 8 July, Mahant Swami Maharaj arrived in Robbinsville and launched the three-month long Akshardham Mahotsav – Festival of Inspirations. He praised and blessed the over 1,300 volunteers, who performed

exemplary *seva* for the next three months to complete the construction and interior work of the *mahamandir*, *parikrama* and courtyard. Swamishri's on-site visits also gave fillip to the volunteers.

**October 2023:** The grand finale of the Akshardham Mahotsav was held on 8 October, when Mahant Swami Maharaj performed the *murti-pratishtha* and ritually inaugurated Akshardham to fulfil the wish of Pramukh Swami Maharaj. On 18 October, Akshardham was opened to all visitors. ♦

# AKSHARDHAM: Concept to Creation

An interview with Shrijiswarup Swami, Robbinsville, 12 October 2023

Can you describe the initial stages of the Akshardham story?

In 2006, the year after the inauguration of Akshardham in New Delhi, Bhaktinandan Swami and I were called to garland Pramukh Swami Maharaj in a satsang assembly. At that time, Swamishri said, “We want to make a wonderful Akshardham in America.”

In 2006, when the negotiations for land in East Windsor were ongoing, we made a basic sketch of the Akshardham campus.

Once, when swamis from America came to meet Pramukh Swami Maharaj in Vidyanagar, they showed a sketch plan for Akshardham in East Windsor. We also showed our sketches. Pramukh Swami Maharaj preferred the traditional concept we presented. However, because we were unable to acquire the land in East Windsor the plans were cancelled.

In 2007, Ishwarcharan Swami and the Akshardham team came to Robbinsville and briefly saw the new Akshardham land.

In 2008, Bhaktinandan Swami, Aksharvatsal Swami and I again visited the Robbinsville land for planning. After seeing the site, ideas started flooding my mind and I spread the printed plan of the land on the ground. Then, I began marking the main buildings on it. Within 15 minutes, the locations of the Akshardham Mahamandir, *parikrama* and the adjoining parts were marked. I believe it was God-guided, because quite often plans of external mega-projects take months to finalize.

In 2008, the primary development of the site and civil work began. Then, along with the plans of Akshardham we discussed that the exhibition or museum should be themed on the culture, cuisine and celebrations of the different states of India, like Gujarat, Punjab and others. However, nothing was finalized at that time. At the same time, the designs for the Akshardham Mahamandir were in process with the *sompura* (traditional Indian temple architects) in India. We discussed the shapes and types of *shikhars* we should have, and many other things. Eventually, we decided to have a total of 12 *shikhars* and 46 *samarans* surrounding it. It took about two years to finalize the plans and content of the Akshardham complex. We decided to make a traditional *mahamandir* and complex, whose size would be between the Akshardhams in New Delhi and Gandhinagar.



## What guidelines did Pramukh Swami Maharaj give?

In 2008, after we acquired the land in Robbinsville, a meeting of senior swamis was convened at the mandir in Gandhinagar. They discussed and believed that only an Akshardham should be built, and there was no need to have a *shikharbaddha* mandir with it. However, Pramukh Swami Maharaj wished that a stone mandir be built in the northeast, New Jersey. Thereafter, Pramukh Swami Maharaj told me to include a prayer hall with pillars and *murtis* in the Akshardham campus.

In a second meeting, Pramukh Swami Maharaj asked whether we could have separate *garbhagruhas*, so that it looked like a mandir? We all realized that Bapa wanted to have a mandir.

Soon, we came up with the concept of having the mandir in a box building with glass ceilings. On showing its design to Bapa, he was very happy. Today, the *shikharbaddha* mandir is enveloped in an ornate building. This means that the devotees who come for darshan are insulated from the vagaries of the weather, be it rain, heat or snow. This also allowed for the symmetry required with the Akshardham Mahamandir and complex. Such a design has been done for the first time in the Swaminarayan Sampradaya.

In 2014, Pramukh Swami Maharaj came to Robbinsville, and he was extremely pleased to see the *shikharbaddha* mandir. He performed the *murti-pratishtha* and repeatedly said, “It is very good. I like it.” On one occasion, after seeing the small, carved elephants on the lower level of the mandir’s *mandovar*, he amusingly commented, “Will the elephants be able to bear the weight of the mandir?”

## How were the stones selected for Akshardham?

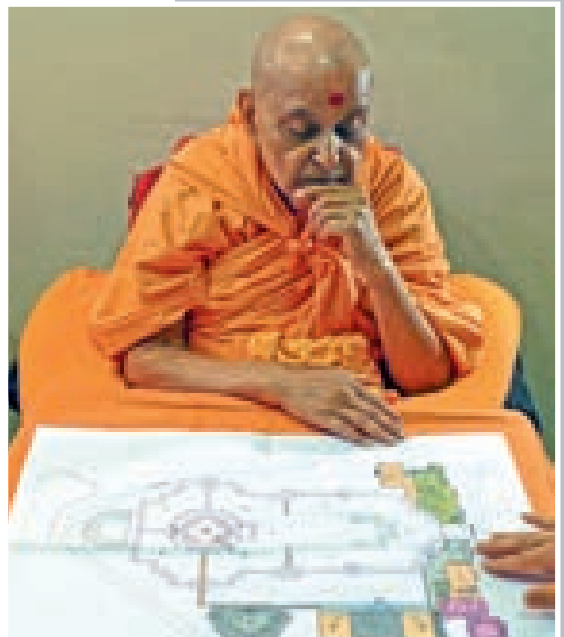
In 2006, we started exploring the types of marble to use for Akshardham. In that year, Bhaktinandan Swami, Harshadbhai Chavda and I went to Italy, Greece and Bulgaria to see the stone mines. Thereafter, we presented our



Reviewing the Akshardham plan on-site



Shrijiwarup Swami explains the site plan to Pramukh Swami Maharaj



Swamishri looks at the site plan



Pramukh Swami Maharaj with the Akshardham team



Ishwarcharan Swami explains the site plan

studies before Pramukh Swami Maharaj. He decided and instructed that we use Bulgarian stone for the exterior and Thasos (Greece) marble for the interior. The *parikrama* is made of pink stone from Rajasthan. Pramukh Swami Maharaj told Harshadbhai Chavda, who manages the stone workshops in Rajasthan, to intricately carve the designs, which he got accomplished with great effort and diligence.

### How did members of the Akshardham team collaborate?

Ishwarcharan Swami was the project leader. It was his idea to have the *murtis* of the *paramhansas* inside Akshardham. He always inspired everyone to do things and followed up the work assigned to each one of us. Many times, during the project, we realized that his suggestions or changes were most appropriate. He also resolved any minor hurdles or pending decisions. Subsequently, everyone worked hard, with enthusiasm and in a positive spirit.

In our team, we had free discussions in which inputs and opinions were voiced. Then, after things were decided, each one of us would take it forward towards fruition.

Briefly describe the components of the Akshardham complex and impact of the mahamandir.

Our *sompura* initially designed the different components of the mandir (*mandovar*, ceilings, *shikhars*, domes, etc.), and then discussions ensued with the team members before they were finalized.

The Akshardham *mahashikhar*'s height was first planned to be 125 feet; however, after getting further permission from the Robbinsville council it was raised to about 160 feet and finally to 191 feet.

Computer-rendered images of the *mahashikhar* and other elements were shown to Pramukh Swami Maharaj in Bochasan, and whatever suggestions he gave were immediately implemented and shown to him on a large screen.

In Akshardham, in consonance with Shriji Maharaj's words in Vachanamrut Gadhada I 71, we introduced the concept of four *mandapams*: Parabrahma, Aksharbrahma, Mukta and Aishwarya. The Paramhansa dome was included later. So, there was a clear theme or concept. Nothing was random or unplanned and non-conceptual.

Similarly, as part of the master plan, we

have a water body or Brahma Kund behind the Nilkanth Plaza. In the Welcome Center, we have created an ambience of Diwali with thousands of *diyas*, which symbolizes festivity, joy and welcome.

From the Nilkanth Plaza, one can see Akshardham in the backdrop, but it's a distant view. However, when one comes out of the Welcome Center and onto the *parikrama* podium, visitors experience a jaw-dropping view. It's an all-inclusive experience, where one feels as if one is transported into a new realm altogether.

### How did Mahant Swami Maharaj inspire and bless the project?

Once, in a meeting two years ago, there was a discussion that to complete Akshardham by 2023 we would require hundreds of volunteers. Mahant Swami Maharaj and Ishwarcharan Swami inspired the volunteers of North America to enroll for *seva*. Subsequently, a soul-stirring saga unfolded when thousands of swamis, *sadhaks*, male and female youths, and devotees came on-site to do *seva*.

Taking a round on the Akshardham site, one would observe volunteers listening to bhajans on their mobiles or speakers, doing *goshthis* during free time, and performing *seva* with enthusiasm and smiles. No one smoked or spat *paan*. It is rare to see such a pious scene elsewhere. One also observed youth volunteers operating lulls (similar to forklifts), trucks, cranes, drills and giant saws. None of them had ever done this before, but they did it to please Mahant Swami Maharaj. And that was why Mahant Swami Maharaj was greatly moved when he saw them and blessed them in a volunteer assembly, "There are no words for what you are doing."

Swamis and volunteers, who

served in the Akshardham project, gave up all comforts, other work and interests. This was possible because of the responsibility and trust placed upon them by Mahant Swami Maharaj. Whoever came here and saw the volunteers doing *seva* realized that they had paused their professional, academic and domestic lives to totally dedicate themselves in fulfilling Pramukh Swami Maharaj's dream and Mahant Swami Maharaj's *agna*.

Today, the designs and shapes of modern buildings have relevance for a certain number of years. Thereafter, they are pulled down to be replaced by edifices of new shapes and styles. However, traditional buildings like mandirs and others last for millennia or more. When mandirs are consecrated according to religious tradition, the guru infuses divinity in the *murtis*. Thereafter, they have a special charm and transformational power. So, the stones come to life through the guru and the devotion and voluntary efforts of his disciples. Akshardham, though it is an edifice in white stones, has turned into 'gold' through the guru's blessings and voluntary *seva* and sacrifice.

Anyone can design a mega-project, but only God and guru can inspire thousands to dedicate themselves for voluntary *seva* over a span of 15 years. ♦

Srijiswarup Swami (left) and Bhaktinandan Swami honour Mahant Swami Maharaj with a garland












# Swaminarayan Akshardham

A VISUAL INTRODUCTION



*Nestled in the heart of New Jersey, BAPS Swaminarayan Akshardham is a special place of tranquillity and spiritual reflection. It is a sacred Hindu place of worship and the abode of the Divine. It is an iconic testament to Hindu art, architecture and spirituality, offering profound insights into Hindu traditions and teachings. Visitors here are welcomed into a world with various forms of beauty, where the timeless teachings of Hinduism come to life. Each part of the campus, including the serene Nilkanth Plaza and Brahma Kund, the enchanting Welcome Center and the Akshardham Mahamandir, has its own purpose and meaning. Every corner of Akshardham invites individuals to embark on an educational and transformative journey. BAPS Swaminarayan Akshardham is a spiritual campus that was envisioned by Pramukh Swami Maharaj and fulfilled by Mahant Swami Maharaj and 12,500 volunteers. The main features of Akshardham campus are as follows.*



- |   |  |  |
|---|--|--|
|  1. Nilkanth Plaza |  4. Shikharbaddh Mandir   |  7. Museum           |
|  2. Brahma Kund    |  5. Akshardham Mahamandir |  8. Akshardham Store |
|  3. Welcome Center |  6. Parikrama             |  9. Shayona Café     |



### 1. NILKANTH PLAZA

The first open landmark spot for visitors at the Akshardham campus is an imposing 49 ft high sacred *panchdhatu* (golden-hued metallic) *murti* of Nilkanth Varni, the teenage-yogi form of Bhagwan Swaminarayan, in a meditative and austere pose. At the age of eleven, Nilkanth Varni embarked on an extraordinary 7-year, 8,000-mile (12,000 km) journey across India. There are 10 pink stone shrines, a map of Nilkanth's 7-year journey and 14 stone tablets describing his personality and the universal messages of faith, service, forgiveness, compassion. The *murti* of Nilkanth Varni is a tribute to his inspiring journey and serves as a place of profound peace and meditation.



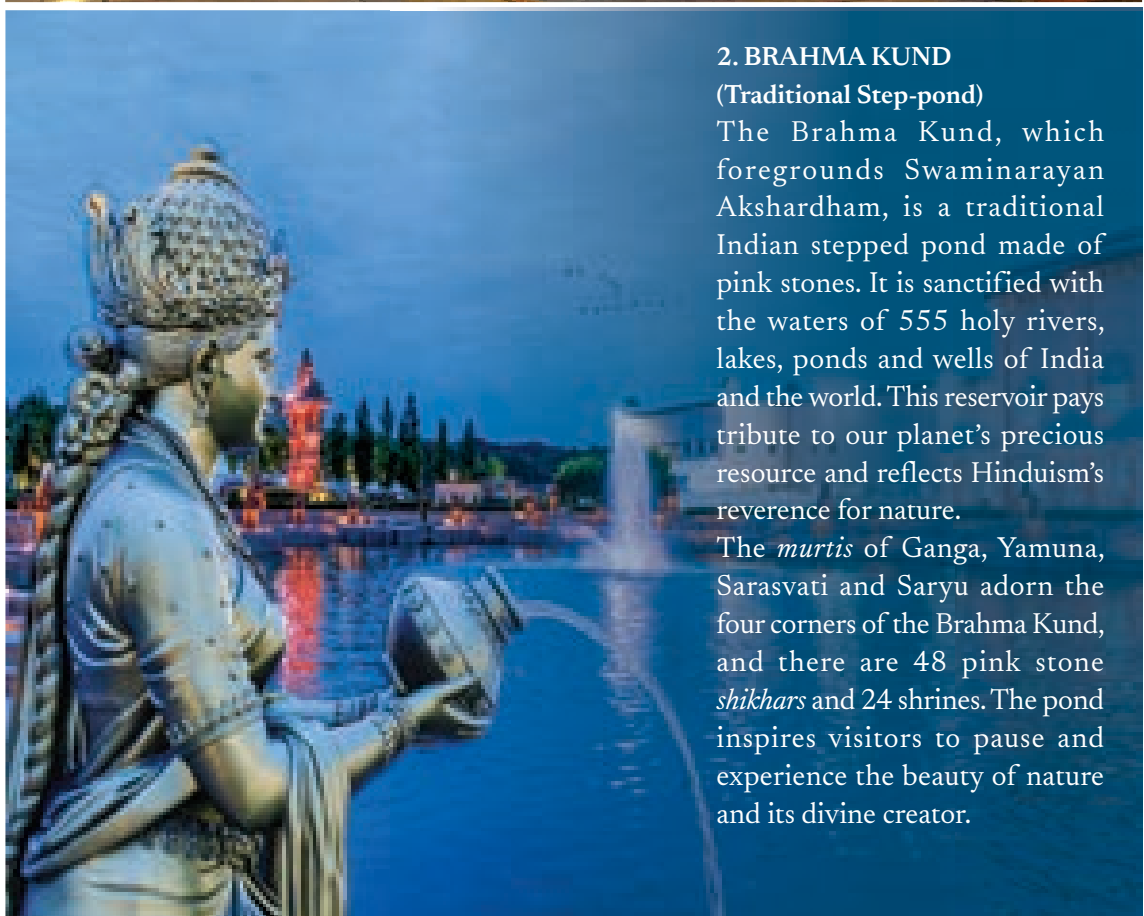


## 2. BRAHMA KUND

(Traditional Step-pond)

The Brahma Kund, which foregrounds Swaminarayan Akshardham, is a traditional Indian stepped pond made of pink stones. It is sanctified with the waters of 555 holy rivers, lakes, ponds and wells of India and the world. This reservoir pays tribute to our planet's precious resource and reflects Hinduism's reverence for nature.

The *murtis* of Ganga, Yamuna, Sarasvati and Saryu adorn the four corners of the Brahma Kund, and there are 48 pink stone *shikhars* and 24 shrines. The pond inspires visitors to pause and experience the beauty of nature and its divine creator.

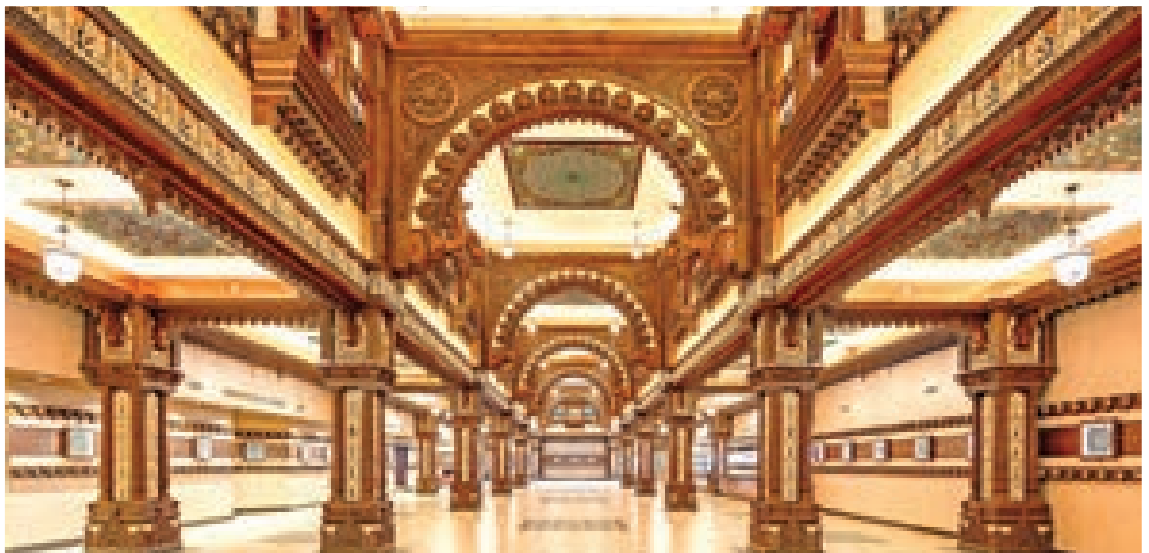




### 3. WELCOME CENTER

The Welcome Center comprises a traditional Indian haveli, made of wood, with intricately carved archways and pillars. It also includes 5,000 traditionally designed lamps, decorative motifs and vivid murals depicting a procession of Bhagwan Swaminarayan and traditional Indian rural life.

The haveli's ambience, with its wide main corridor and several enquiry counters, induce sentiments of warmth and welcome to all the visitors. Three orientation theatres screen a short video on Hinduism and Swaminarayan Akshardham.





#### 4. SHIKHARBADDHA MANDIR

The profusely carved marble mandir, enclosed in a rectangular building, hosts the daily bhakti rituals of *arti*, *thal*, darshan and prayers. The mandir enshrines the *murtis* of Akshar-Purushottam Maharaj, Ghanshyam Maharaj, Harikrishna Maharaj, Radha-Krishna Bhagwan, Sita-Ram Bhagwan, Parvati-Shankar Bhagwan, Ganapatiji, Kartikeyaji, Hanumanji, Lakshmanji and Guru Parampara.

Adjacent to the mandir lies the *abhishek mandap* where devotees offer *abhishek* to the small beautiful metallic *murti* of Ghanshyam Maharaj, the child-form of Bhagwan Swaminarayan.



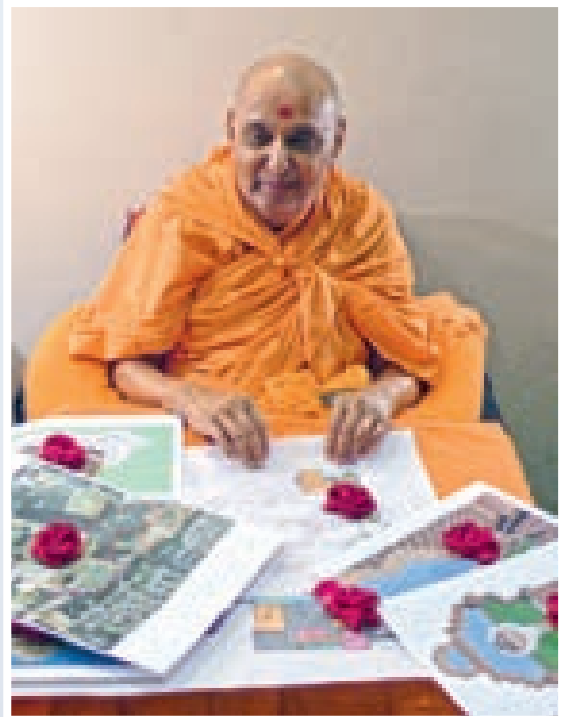
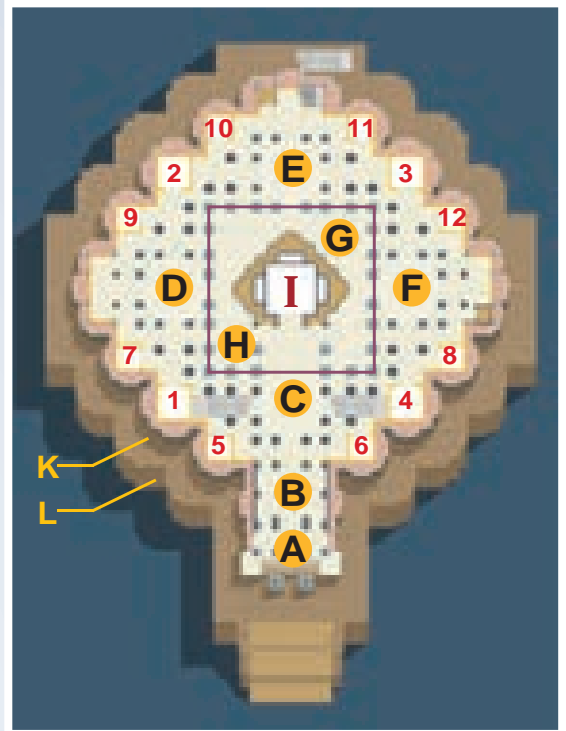


## 5. AKSHARDHAM MAHAMANDIR

At the heart of the 185-acre campus, the Swaminarayan Akshardham *mahamandir* is dedicated to Bhagwan Swaminarayan and the divine deities, rishis, acharyas and devotees of Sanatan Dharma. The various external features of the *mahamandir* include the *jagati* (*jnan peeth*), *mandovar* (outer mandir wall), 9 *shikhars* (including one main central *shikhar*), 9 *mahasamarans*, 12 ft high Amrut Kalash on top of the main *shikhar* and 22 *dhvaja dands* (flagstuffs) and a *parikrama*. The main Akshardham *shikhar* is 120 ft high and the total height of Akshardham Mahamandir is 191 ft.

## PLAN OF AKSHARDHAM MAHAMANDIR

- A. Tirth Mandapam
  - B. Swagat Mandapam
  - C. Parabrahma Mandapam
  - D. Aksharbrahma Mandapam
  - E. Mukta Mandapam
  - F. Aishwarya Mandapam
  - G. Paramhansa Mandapam
  - H. Mandovar of Akshardham Garbhagruha
  - I. Mahamandir Main Garbhagruha
  - J. Small Garbhagruhas
    1. Shri Ghanshyam Maharaj with his parents and friends
    2. Shri Nilkanth Varni absorbed in austerity
    3. Shri Sahajanand Swami offers a unique prayer to Ramanand Swami
    4. Bhagwan Swaminarayan applies a *tilak* to Gunatitanand Swami
    5. Shri Parvati-Shankar Bhagwan, Ganapatiji and Kartikeyaji
    6. Shri Sita-Ram Bhagwan, Lakshman and Hanumanji
    7. Shri Radha-Krishna Bhagwan
    8. Bhagwan Tirupati Balaji-Padmavati
    9. Brahmaswarup Shastriji Maharaj
    10. Brahmaswarup Bhagatji Maharaj
    11. Brahmaswarup Yogiji Maharaj
    12. Brahmaswarup Pramukh Swami Maharaj
  - K. Outside Mandovar: Expressions of Music & Art
  - L. Jnan Peeth (Wisdom Plinth)
- Brief descriptions of the above mentioned *mandapams* and *garbhagruhas* are as follows.





### A. Tirth Mandapam

Prior to entering the main doors of Akshardham, one finds the Tirth Mandapam with its large, robust ornately carved pillars and two inverted domes. The inverted octagonal domes include carved statues of Ganga, Yamuna, Saryu, Narmada and other holy rivers, and Badrinath Mandir, Kedarnath Mandir, Tirupati Mandir and other pilgrim places. The *mandapam* pillars are embellished with *murtis* of Ganapatiiji, Durga, Sarasvati, Lakshmi, Vasu, *gandharvas* and *akshar muktas*.



### B. Swagat Mandapam

After entering the doors of Akshardham, visitors are welcomed by the marble statues of divine beings in the ornately carved Swagat (Welcome) Mandapam.

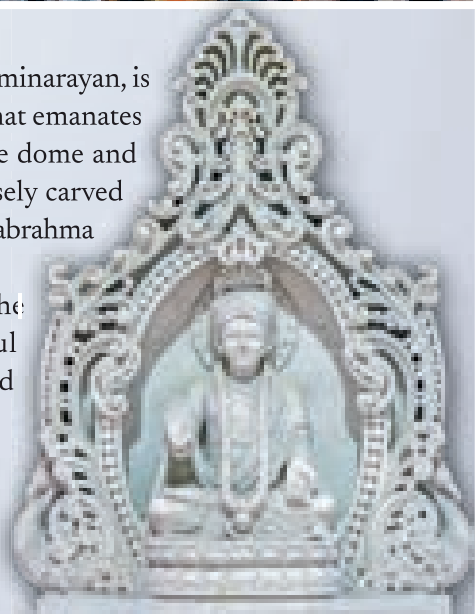


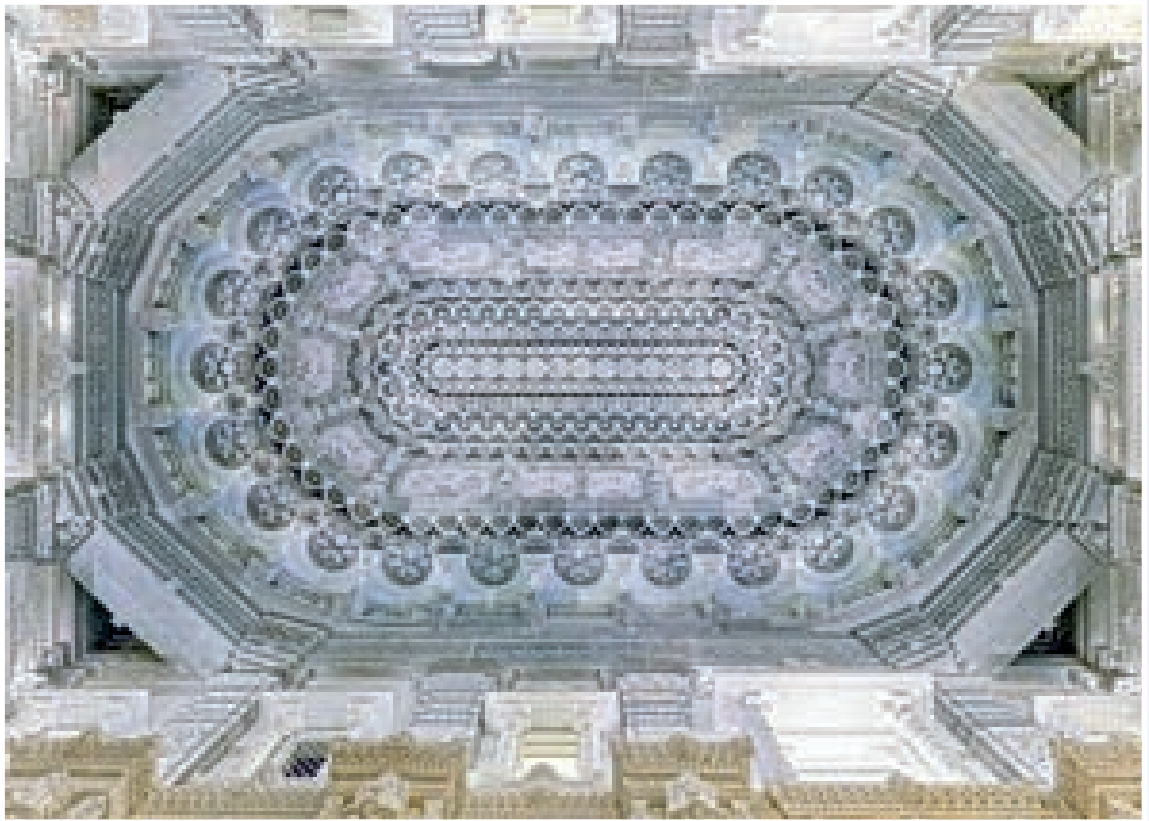


### C. Parabrahma Mandapam

The Parabrahma Mandapam, dedicated to Bhagwan Swaminarayan, is 65 ft high, 55 ft long and 36 ft wide. It is a sacred space that emanates the grandeur of the Divine. It has a large elliptical stone dome and 12 ornate marble pillars. Each pillar, 5 ft thick, is profusely carved with different figures of Bhagwan Swaminarayan. The Parabrahma Mandapam is a unique feature of modern architecture.

Installed in the sanctum sanctorum (*garbhagruha*) of the Akshardham Mahamandir are the sacred, beautiful *panchdhatu murtis* of Bhagwan Swaminarayan and Aksharbrahma Gunatitanand Swami.





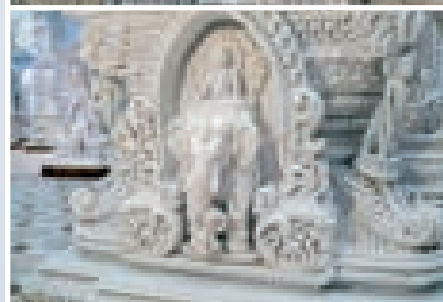
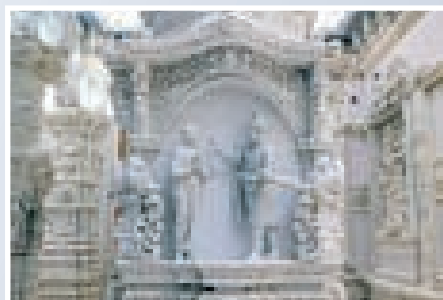
Elliptical stone dome (above) and ornate marble pillars in Parabrahma Mandapam (below)





#### D. Aksharbrahma Mandapam

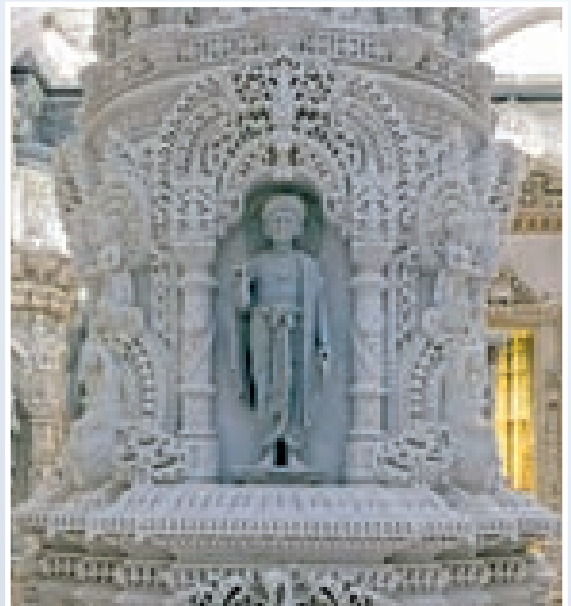
The sacred Hindu shastras reveal that when Bhagwan takes a human form to grant liberation, he is accompanied by his ideal devotee and divine abode, Aksharbrahma. This profound principle comes to life within this *mandapam*, where Aksharbrahma's essence is vividly captured through symbols and sacred imagery. For example, the aum symbol displayed here serves as a visual representation of the sound and identity of Aksharbrahma, while the lotus represents Aksharbrahma's everlasting purity. The intricate carvings of 27 constellations (*nakshatras*) and 12 zodiacal signs (*rashi*) on the inside part of the dome (above) reveal Aksharbrahma's transcendent glory. Carvings of the shrine dedicated to his final resting place, known as Akshar Deri, and several incidents from his life are also carved on the pillars of this exquisite *mandapam*.

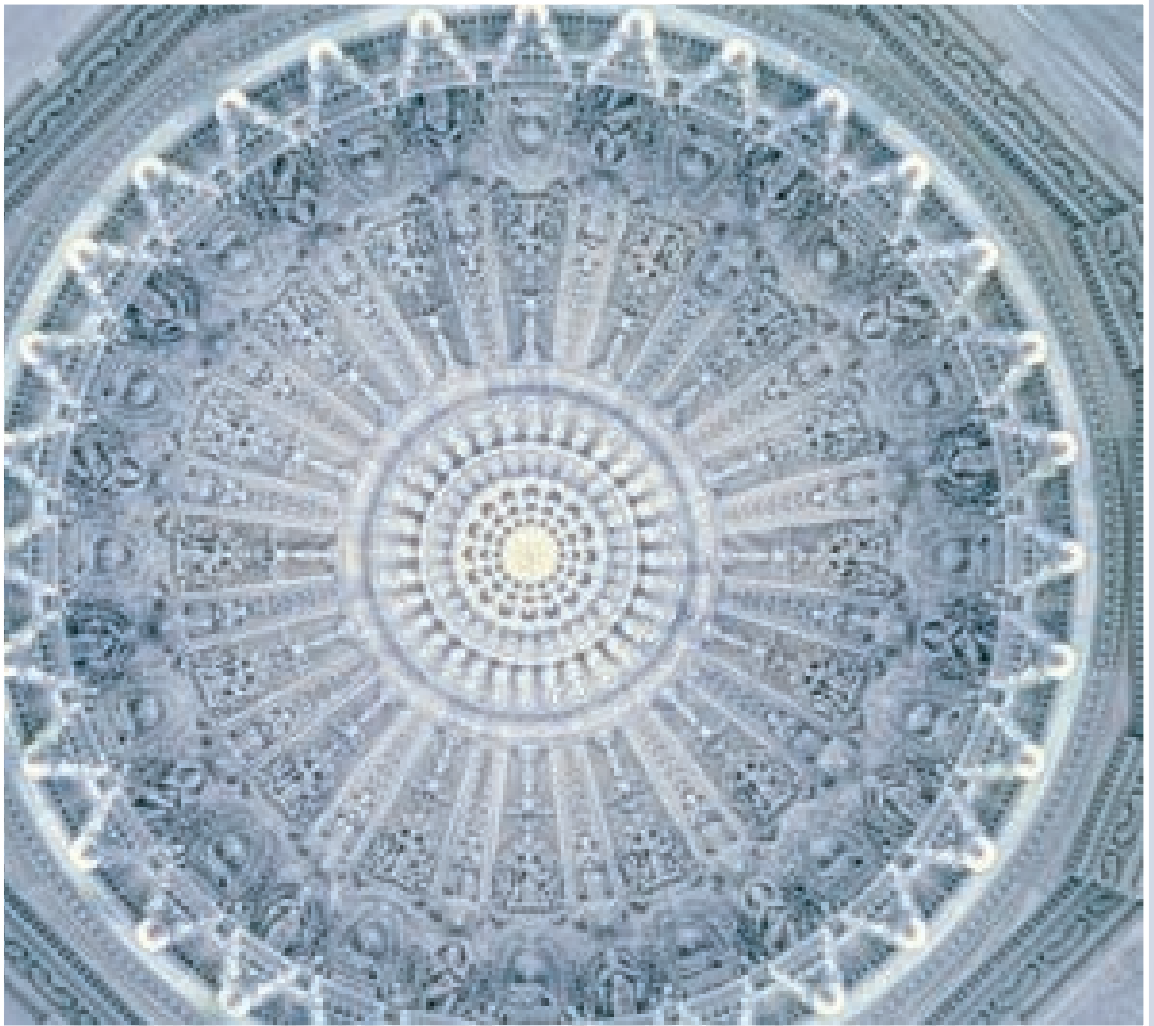




### E. Mukta Mandapam

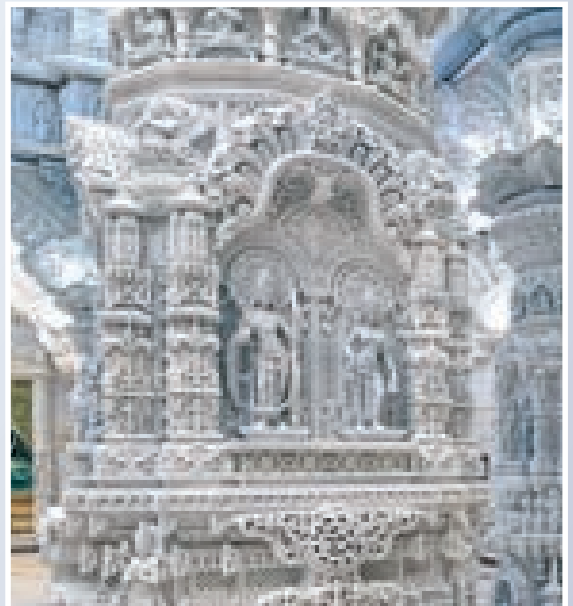
The Mukta Mandapam, located behind the central *garbhagruha* of Akshardham, is dedicated to the liberated souls or *muktas* who attain the divine abode of Akshardham. It comprises an ornately carved dome and several pillars. Marble *murtis* of *muktas*, installed on the pillars, are depicted in devotional worship and service of God. They serve as testaments to the principle that one can attain *moksha* or spiritual liberation. Among the 48 *murtis* of *muktas* installed are Dada Khachar, Sura Khachar, Parvatbhai, Tejabhai Vankar, Sagram (Devipujak), Laduba, Jivuba, Gangama and others.





#### F. Aishwarya Mandapam

*Aishwarya* means Bhagwan's splendour and divine powers. The large inverted dome is intricately carved. The pillars of this *mandapam* are embellished with delicately carved beautiful marble *murtis* of Hindu divine avatars, devas, rishis, acharyas, kings, saints and renowned poets, such as Suryadeva, Agnideva, Indradeva and others; divine avatars like Radha-Krishna, Sita-Ram, Shiv-Parvati and Nar-Narayan; devotees like Shabri, Vibhishan, Vidurji, Namdev and many more; rishis like Veda Vyasji, Tulsidas, Agastya and several others; acharyas like Shankaracharya, Ramanujacharya, Chaitanya Mahaprabhu and others; kings like Bhagirath, Shibi, Bharatji and many more; and saint-poets like Jaydev, Eknath, Mirabai, Narsinh Mehta, Guru Nanak and others.

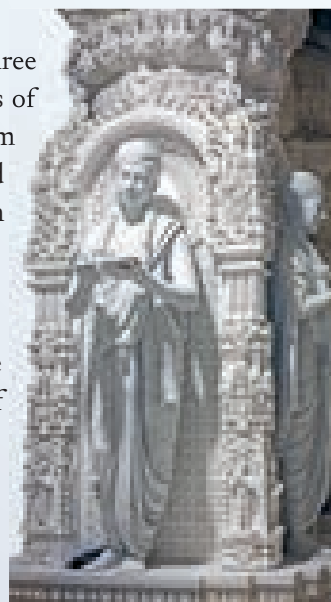




### G. Paramhansa Mandapam

The Paramhansa Mandapam is 90 ft by 90 ft and it is located on all three sides outside the main *garbhagruha*. It pays homage to the great saints of Bhagwan Swaminarayan. The 78 *murtis* of *paramhansas* (carved from single marble stones, each 7 ft tall) are installed on 28 intricately carved pillars. Their pure lives and profound teachings serve as inspiration and guidance on the spiritual path. One finds the impressive *murtis* of Gopalanand Swami, Nityanand Swami, Brahmanand Swami, Premanand Swami and others.

As part of the Paramhansa Mandapam, 34 artistic panels are installed on the stone pillars. Each panel has inspiring incidents of the *paramhansas*. One finds incidents of Premanand Swami singing before Bhagwan Swaminarayan in the presence of the singers from Gwalior, Adharanand Swami painting and Narayanji Suthar carving a *murti* of Bhagwan Swaminarayan, and many more.





## ■ Ornately Carved Pillars

In the three-storeyed Akshardham Mahamandir there are 548 ornate marble pillars, with over 200 pillars on the main floor of Akshardham carved in 12 different designs.

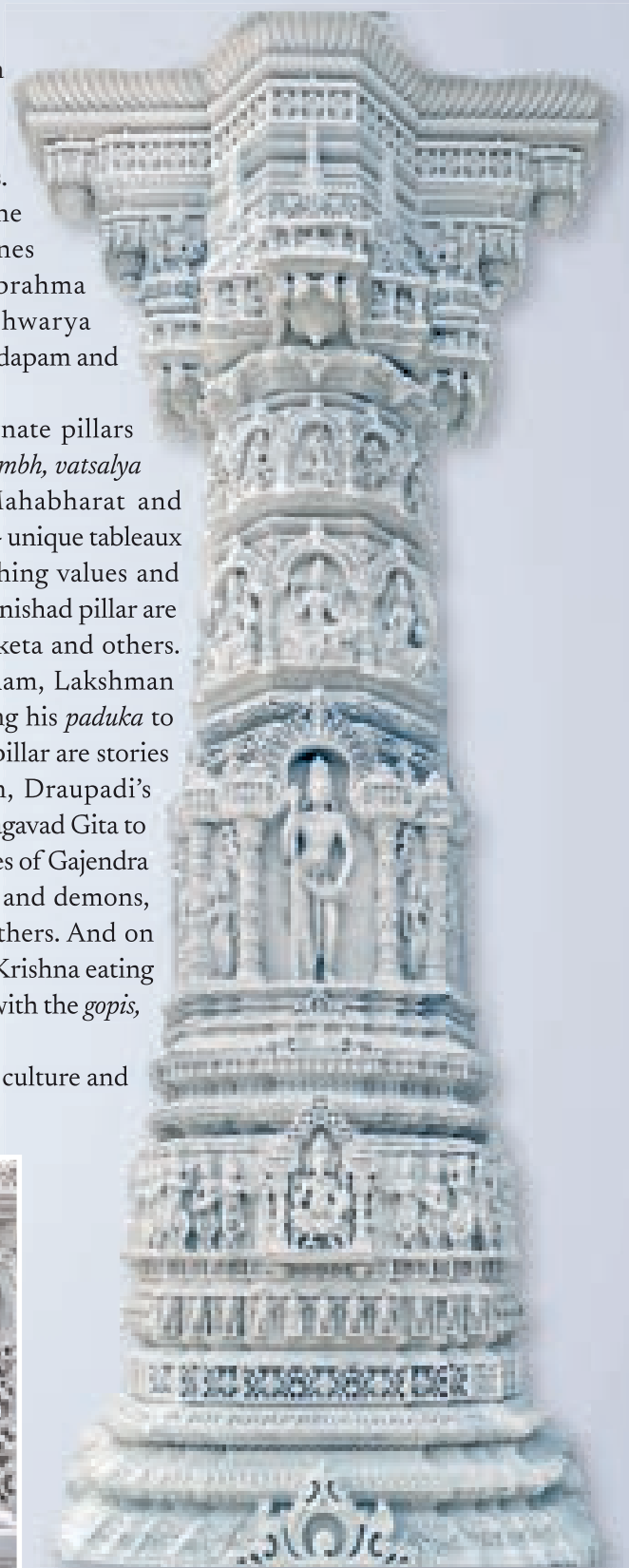
There are 9 *maha* (big) *mandapams* on the main floor. Of them, the four principle ones are the Parabrahma Mandapam, Aksharbrahma Mandapam, Mukta Mandapam and Aishwarya Mandapam. The rest include the Swagat Mandapam and four Paramhansa Mandapams.

In all the *mandapams*, one also finds ornate pillars like the *tirth stambh*, *archan stambh*, *mayur stambh*, *vatsalya stambh*, and the Upanishad, Ramayan, Mahabharat and Bhagvat *stambhs*. On the *vatsalya stambh* are 24 unique tableaux depicting Bhaktimata and Dharmadev teaching values and spiritual practices to Ghanshyam. On the Upanishad pillar are miniature stories of Satyakam Jabali, Nachiketa and others. The Ramayan pillar comprises stories of Ram, Lakshman and Sita being exiled to the forest, Ram giving his *paduka* to Bharat and many more. On the Mahabharat pillar are stories of Dronacharya teaching archery to Arjun, Draupadi's marriage, Bhagwan Krishna imparting the Bhagavad Gita to Arjun. On the Shrimad Bhagvat pillar are stories of Gajendra Moksha, churning of the ocean by the gods and demons, King Bali and Bhagwan Vaman and many others. And on the Krishna Lila pillar are stories of his birth, Krishna eating *makhan* with his friends, Krishna playing *raas* with the *gopis*, Krishna and Sudama and many more.

Each pillar is aesthetic and inspires values, culture and faith.



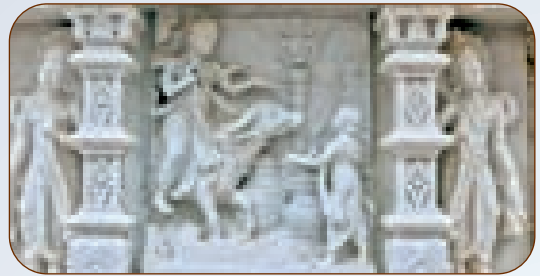
Bhaktimata plays with Ghanshyam Maharaj



# Incidents from the Upanishads, Ramayan, Mahabharat and Shrimad Bhagvat Displayed on the Pillars of Akshardham



Satyakam Jabali and his guru



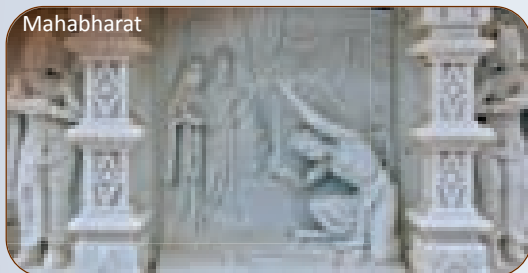
Nachiketa and Yama Raja



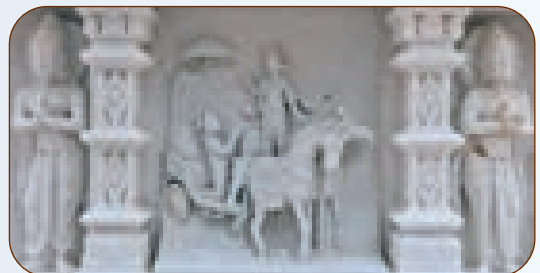
Shri Ram, Lakshman and Sita



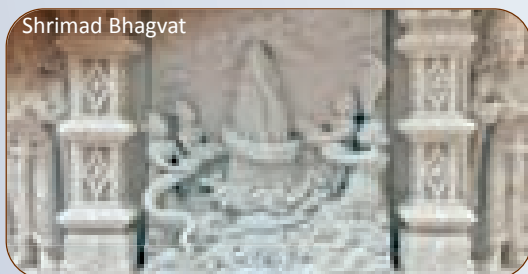
Shri Ram and Shabri



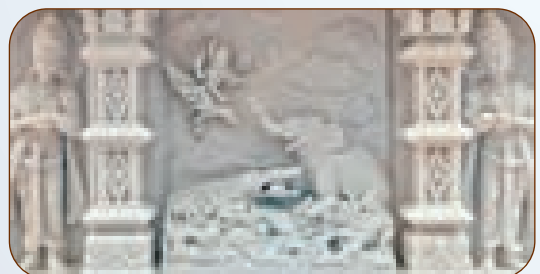
Arjun wins Draupadi's hand in marriage



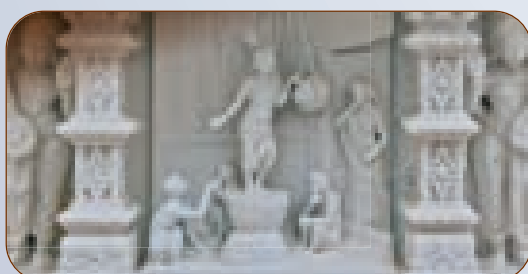
Shri Krishna discourses (Gita) to Arjun



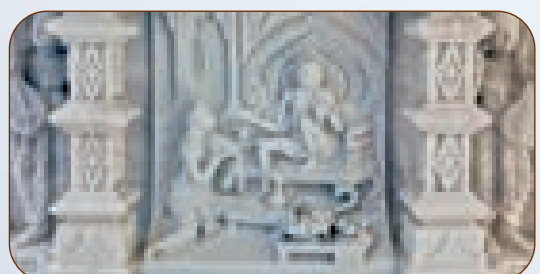
Samudra Manthan



Gajendra Moksha



Shri Krishna Lila (stealing butter)



Shri Krishna and Sudama



### H. Mandovar of Akshardham Garbhagruha

The 10-layered outer wall of Akshardham *garbhagruha* is 23 ft high and embellished with beautiful carvings of elephants, musical instruments and Bhagwan Swaminarayan's small *murtis*. On its sixth layer one finds sculptures portraying the life of Bhagwan Swaminarayan. There are 49 sculptures from his birth, forest travels as Nilkanth Varni, incidents as Sahajanand Swami and finally to his earthly departure.





## I. Mahamandir Main Garbhagruha

From the podium of the *parikrama*, by the Mayur Dwars, 400 ft away, one can see the 15½ ft high *murti* of Bhagwan Swaminarayan installed in the main *garbhagruha* of the Akshardham Mahamandir. The *murti* is the heart and soul of the *mahamandir* and the 185-acre Akshardham campus. The *garbhagruha* occupies an area of 25 ft by 25 ft. It includes designs in stained glass symbolizing the five elements of creation: earth, water, light, wind and space. The *garbhagruha* is decorated with colourful seashells, conches, carved archways and domes. The platform is layered with onyx.

The 15½ ft high *murti* of Bhagwan Swaminarayan is made of *panchdhatu* (five metals) and its *sinhasan* is decorated with two *hansas* (swans) and elephants. His compassionate face, divine eyes, beautiful smile and raised hand in blessing soothes and blesses the devotees. At his feet is the humble *murti* of Aksharbrahma Gunatitanand Swami, his divine abode and servant. On either side of the walls are two attractively framed *murtis* of Akshar-Purushottam Maharaj, handwoven with special threads.

The carved marble entrance (*barshakh*) of the *garbhagruha* is 18 ft high, 16 ft wide and 7 ft deep. While doing darshan, the devout become absorbed in the beauty and divinity of Bhagwan Swaminarayan and Gunatitanand Swami.



Shri Ghanshyam Maharaj





Shri Ghanshyam Maharaj with Dharmadev, Bhaktimata and friends

## J. Small Garbhgruhas

Besides the main *garbhagruha* of Bhagwan Swaminarayan, the Akshardham Mahamandir has 12 small *garbhagruhas* enshrined with deities and *murtis*. They all have ornate pillars, decorative ceilings, beautiful *sinhasans* and colourful stone backdrops.

In four of the 12 small *garbhagruhas*, one has darshan of four *lilas* (divine incidents) of Bhagwan Swaminarayan: Ghanshyam Maharaj with his parents and friends, Nilkanth Varni absorbed in austerity, Sahajanand Swami offering a unique prayer to Ramanand Swami and Bhagwan Swaminarayan applying a *tilak* to Gunatitanand Swami to signify him as his ideal Sant and successor.

In the other four *garbhagruhas* are enshrined the marble *murtis* of Hindu deities: Shri Parvati-Shiv Bhagwan, Ganapati and Kartikeyaji; Shri Sitaji-Ram Bhagwan, Hanumanji and Lakshmanji; Shri Radhaji-Krishna Bhagwan; Shri Padmavati and Bhagwan Tirupati Balaji.

In the final four *garbhagruhas*, one has darshan of the marble *murtis* of Shri Bhagatji Maharaj, Shri Shastriji Maharaj, Shri Yogiji Maharaj and Shri Pramukh Swami Maharaj. A canvas *murti* of Pragat Brahmaswarup Mahant Swami Maharaj is installed on an adjacent wall.



Nilkanth Varni performs austerities in Pulhashram



Sahajanand Swami offers a unique prayer to guru Ramanand Swami



Bhagwan Swaminarayan applies a *tilak* to Gunatitanand Swami and declares him as his spiritual successor



Shri Radhaji-Krishna Bhagwan



Shri Sitaji-Ram Bhagwan, Hanumanji and Lakshmanji



Shri Parvati-Shiv Bhagwan, Ganapatiji and Kartikeyaji



Shri Padmavatiji and Bhagwan Tirupati Balaji





Brahmaswarup Bhagatji Maharaj



Brahmaswarup Shastriji Maharaj



Brahmaswarup Yogiji Maharaj

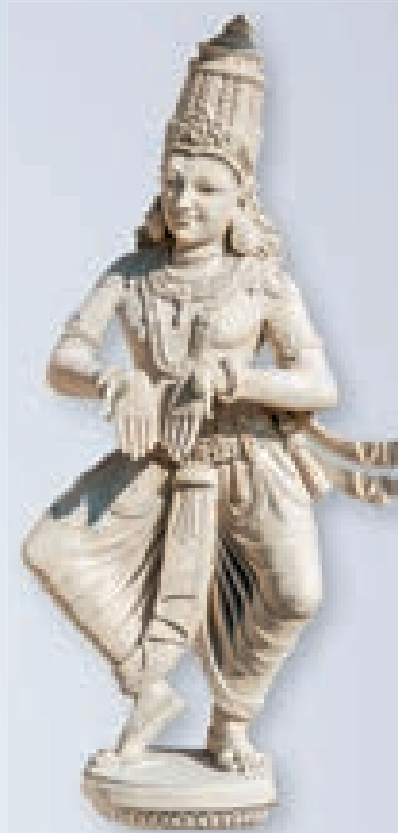


Pragat Brahmaswarup Mahant Swami Maharaj



Brahmaswarup Pramukh Swami Maharaj





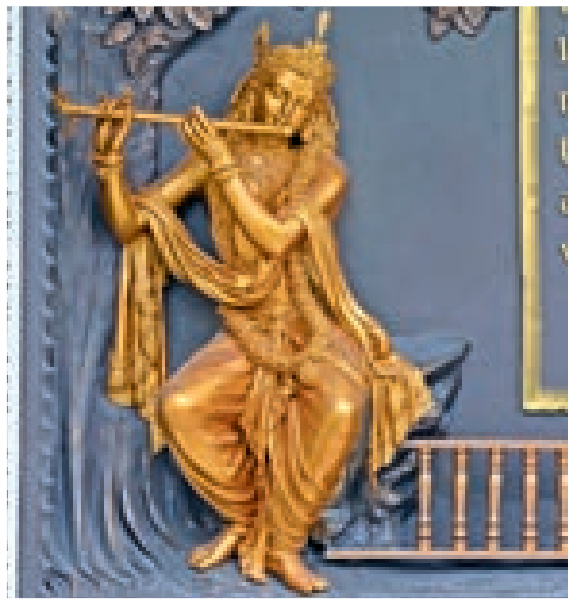
### K. Outside Mandovar: Expressions of Music & Art

The 23 ft high and 1,120 ft long ornately carved *mandovar* is the exterior wall of the *mahamandir*, decorated with various statues to honour the culture, art and heritage of Hinduism. The *mandovar* is made of Bulgarian and Turkish limestone. For the first time, 108 Bharatnatyam poses (traditional Indian dance form) embellish the *mandovar*. This highly expressive dance form combines music, rhythm, drama and storytelling to convey a wide range of emotions and cultural narratives.

The *mandovar* is also decorated with 151 statues with different musical instruments, all of which originate from India and are renowned for their distinctive tones and the high level of skill needed to play them. Throughout the *mandovar* one finds 131 statues of rishis, *acharyas* and saint- and devotee-poets who played a pivotal role in fostering Hinduism.



Jnan Peeth



Bhagwan Krishna



Bhagwan Buddha





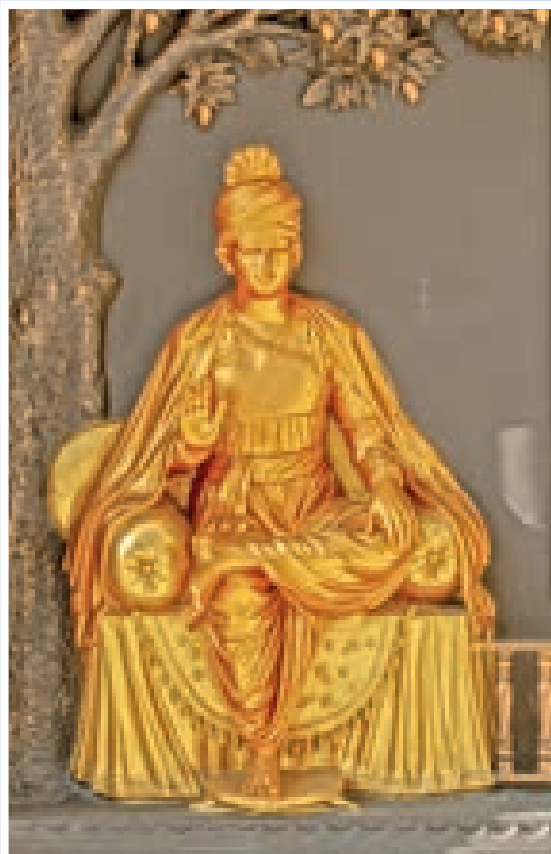
### L. Jnan Peeth (Wisdom Plinth)

The stone base plinth of Akshardham is known as the *jagati peeth*. It has 13 carved layers and is 20 ft high. This wonderful base plinth, named Jnan Peeth or Wisdom Plinth, celebrates the eternal wisdom of Hinduism, the teachings of Bhagwan Swaminarayan and his successors, great founders of the dharmic traditions of India and great thinkers of the world. Hinduism is based on the timeless universal truths revealed by Bhagwan to the enlightened rishis. BAPS Swaminarayan Akshardham stands on the foundation of these words of wisdom, inspiring peace, happiness, equality and service to God and humanity.

Visitors can savour the messages of Bhagwan Swaminarayan, Bhagwan Krishna, Gautam Buddha, Mahavir, Guru Nanak, Sant Ravidas, Mirabai, Sant Tiruvalluvar, Socrates, Albert Einstein, Martin Luther King Jr and many more.



Albert Einstein



Bhagwan Swaminarayan

## Shikhars, Samarans & Kalashes

Elegantly ascending into the sky are the ornate *shikhars* and *samarans* of the *mahamandir*. Their gleaming, ivory-white presence resembles towering mountain peaks and serves as a visual metaphor and aspiration to attain spiritual ascent towards spiritual enlightenment. Among the spires is the 120-foot-tall *mahashikhar*. This grand superstructure stands as a testament to our pursuit of a higher truth and connection to something greater than ourselves.

The number of *shikhars* and *samarans*:

### 1 Mahashikhar

- 35 layers ● 120 ft tall

### 8 Upashikhars

- 17 layers ● 35 ft tall

### 9 Mahasamarans

- 16 layers ● 50 ft tall

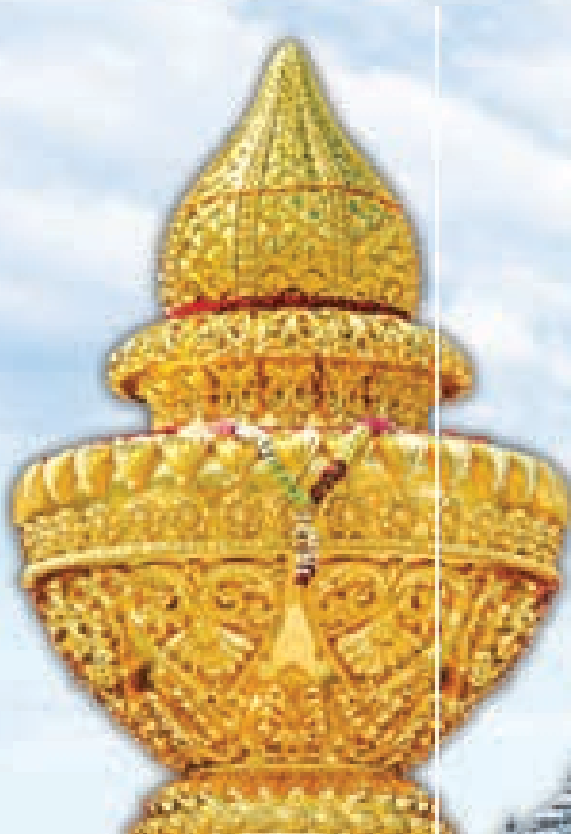
### 4 Upasamarans

- 13 layers ● 28 ft tall

### Amrut Kalash

- 12 ft high with ornate designs

### 22 Dhvaja Dands (flagstaffs)





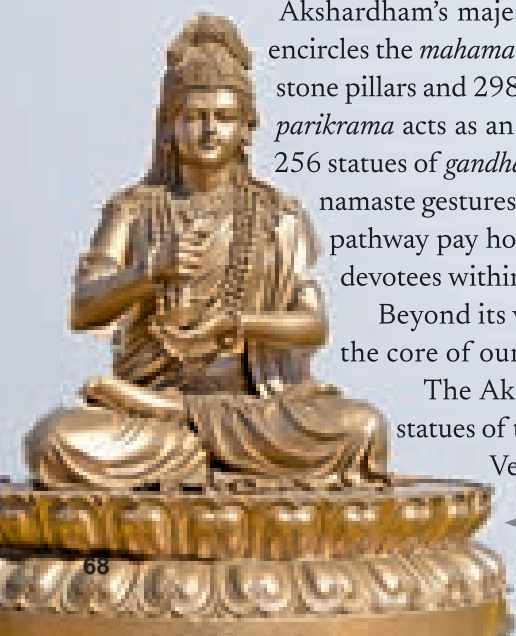


## 6. PARIKRAMA (COLONNADE)

Akshardham's majestic pink stone colonnade, known as *parikrama*, gracefully encircles the *mahamandir* for one kilometre. It is 42 ft high and 15 ft wide, has 540 stone pillars and 298 *samarans*. Like a garland that adorns an esteemed figure, the *parikrama* acts as an ornament, expressing a loving embrace of the *mahamandir*. 256 statues of *gandharvas* and *muktas*, each 4½ ft tall, with musical instruments in namaste gestures, decorate the stone pillars. Devotees who traverse this sacred pathway pay homage to the sacred *murtis* of God, divine avatars, rishes and devotees within the *mahamandir*.

Beyond its visual splendour, the colonnade imparts a profound lesson: the core of our pursuits and existence should revolve around the Divine.

The Akshardham courtyard has two large rectangular ponds with statues of the four Vedas on four corners: Rig Veda, Atharva Veda, Sama Veda and Yajur Veda.



◀ Statue of Atharva Veda





## 7. AKSHARDHAM MUSEUM

Still under preparation, the museum, will showcase the principles of Hinduism and the story of the making of Akshardham.



## 8. AKSHARDHAM STORE

The spacious Akshardham Store includes books in English, Gujarati and Hindi; ayurvedic medicines and toiletries; souvenirs like t-shirts, bracelets and drinkware; *murtis* of deities and mandirs, articles used for worship like *arti*, *mala*, incense sticks, dishes used for offering *thal* and other worship items.

In all there are over 1,000 items available in the gift shop.





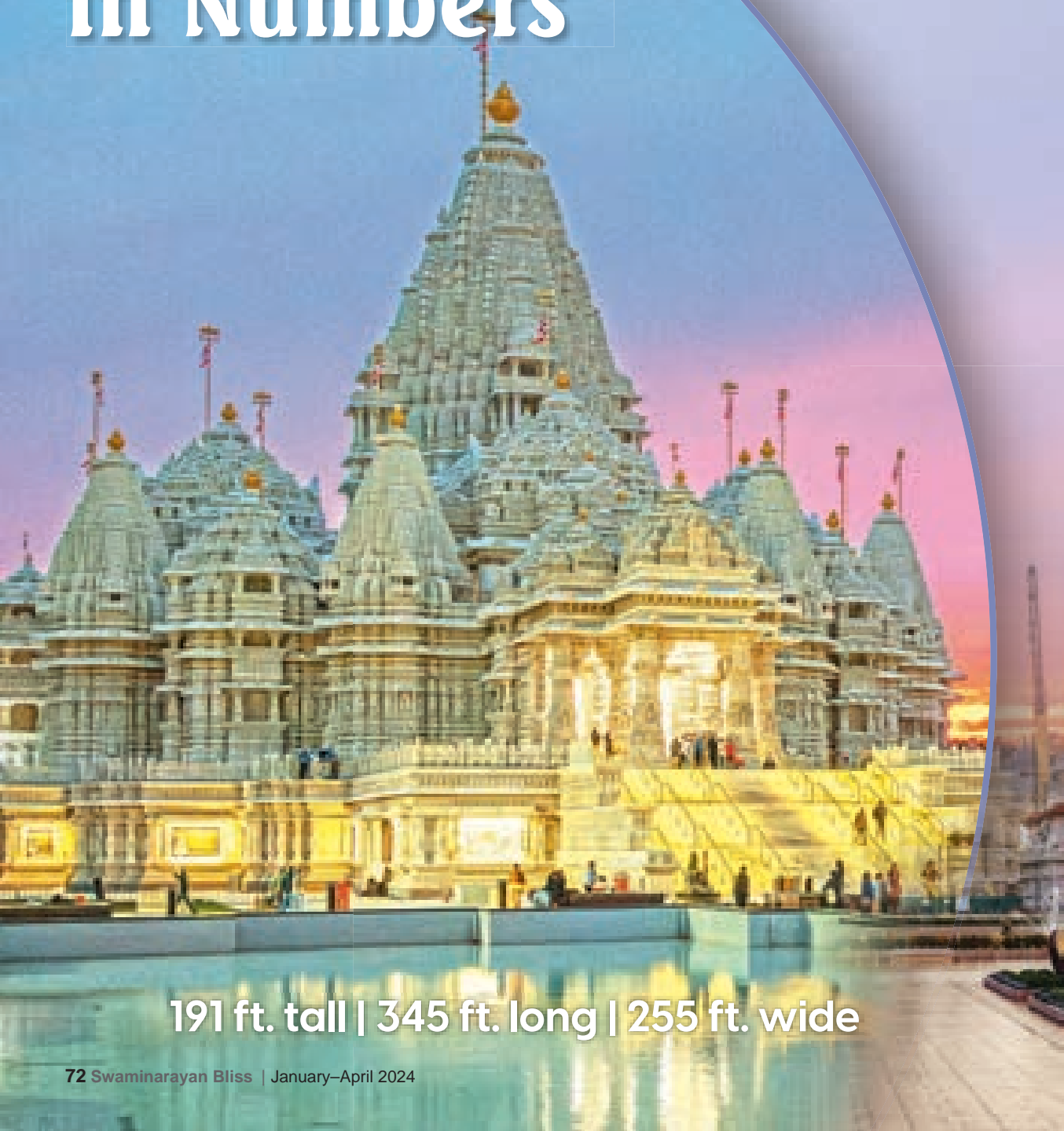
### 9. SHAYONA CAFÉ AND SHAYONA SHOP

Shayona Café serves a delightful ensemble of vegetarian Indian and Western cuisines. Here, culinary artistry melds with spiritual principles, creating a menu that not only tantalizes the taste buds but also resonates with the core ideas of non-violence and *sattvik* food. Each dish is made with mindfulness, aiming to nurture the mind, body and soul. Shayona Café provides an opportunity to experience a fusion of flavours, appreciate diverse dishes, and nourish one's palate and soul.

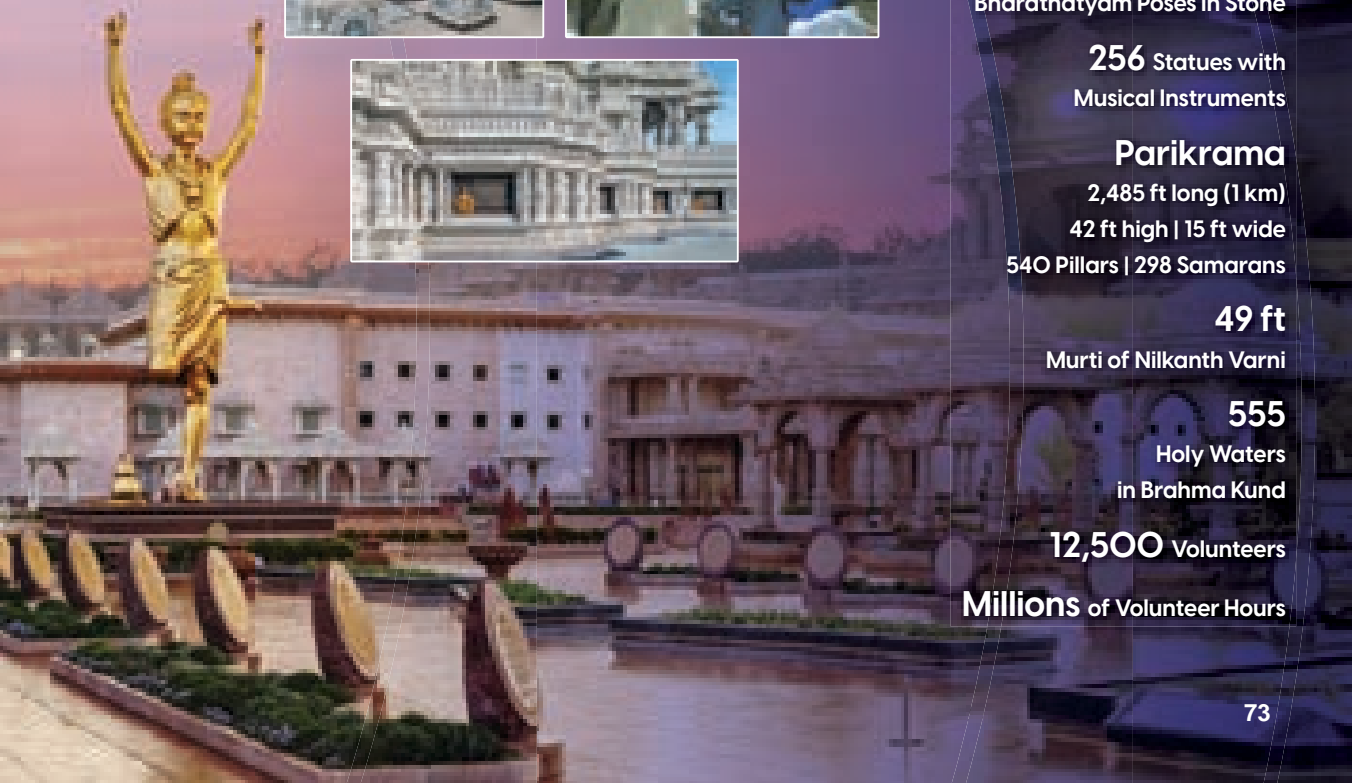
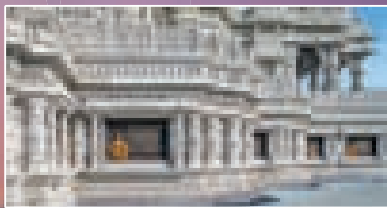
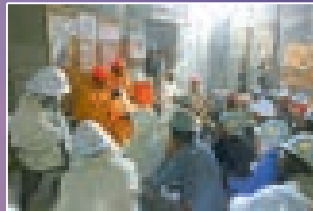
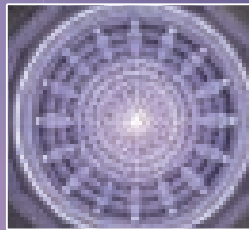
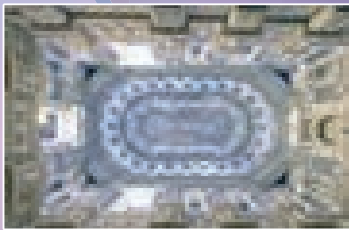
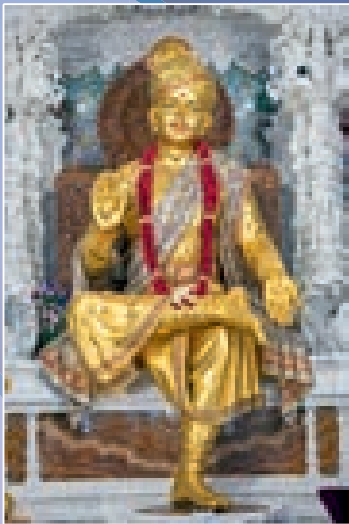
Shayona Shop (below) is a large store that provides packaged vegetarian snacks and food items. ♦



# Akshardham in Numbers



191 ft. tall | 345 ft. long | 255 ft. wide



**185 Acres**

**1.9 million cu. ft.**  
of Stone

**1.3 million sq. ft.**  
Construction Area

**9 Shikhars**

**9 Maha Mandapams**  
With Inverted Domes

**1 Main Garbhagruha**

**12 Small Garbhagruhas**

**235**

Decorative Stone Canopies  
and Carved Ceilings

**548 Stone Pillars**

**20,000**

Statues & Statuettes

**151**

Statues with Indian Musical  
Instruments on the Mandovar

**108**

Bharatnatyam Poses in Stone

**256 Statues with**  
Musical Instruments

**Parikrama**

2,485 ft long (1 km)

42 ft high | 15 ft wide

540 Pillars | 298 Samarans

**49 ft**

Murti of Nilkanth Varni

**555**

Holy Waters  
in Brahma Kund

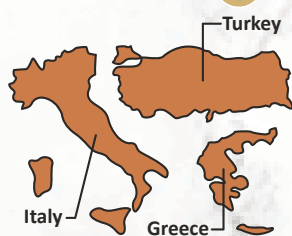
**12,500 Volunteers**

**Millions** of Volunteer Hours

# STONES *of* Akshardham

*Four types of stones have been used in the creation of Akshardham: The stones were mined in India, Italy, Greece, Turkey and Bulgaria and then sent to India to be carved. They were then shipped to the Akshardham site in North America for assembly like a giant jigsaw puzzle.*

## MARBLE



Marble is a metamorphic rock that forms when limestone or dolomite is subjected to high heat and pressure. This process, called metamorphism, causes the minerals in the rock to recrystallize, forming a dense, interlocking mass of crystals. Iron, magnesium or other elements can also get mixed in during the metamorphism process, which can give marble its unique colours and patterns.

Once the metamorphism is complete, the result is a beautiful, hard and durable stone that's been used in buildings and sculptures for thousands of years. Marble embodies purity.

The interior of Akshardham is adorned with marble from quarries in Greece, Turkey and Italy. Majestic pillars are crafted from Greek Thasos marble, while Turkish marble with its blueish hue is employed for the beams and domes. Italian Carrara marble, renowned for its elegance, graces the various meticulously carved *murtis* within Akshardham, adding to the awe-inspiring ambience.

## LIMESTONE

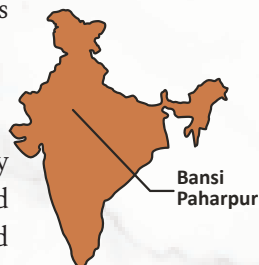


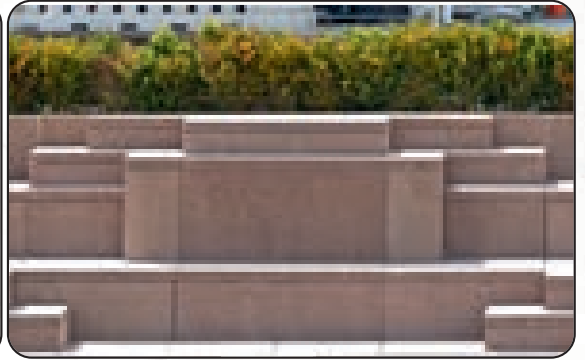
Limestone is a sedimentary rock formed from tiny particles of rocks and stones that have been compacted over thousands of years. Its beauty does not come at the cost of its durability, as it is naturally water-resistant. It is the first widely used building material in the world. It has been used in buildings and memorials in America's capital, like the Lincoln Memorial, as well as for ancient structures like the Pyramids and the Sphinx.

Akshardham uses Bulgarian and Turkish limestone for its exterior portions, imparting a timeless charm to the structure. From the towering *shikhars* and *samarans* to the intricately carved *mandovar* and the sprawling *jagati peeth*, limestone's ability to withstand the diverse climate of New Jersey adds natural strength and elegance to Akshardham's architectural grandeur.

## SANDSTONE

Sandstone is a sedimentary rock formed when sand grains are compacted and





(Above) Sandstone or pink stone in *parikrama*.  
(Below) Inside pillars of Greek marble

(Above) Granite in Brahma Kund  
(Below) Bulgarian and Turkish limestone

cemented over millions of years. It has been a prominent material in Hindu mandir architecture across various regions in India due to its availability, durability and suitability for intricate carvings. Sandstone's natural variations in colour and texture add visual interest and depth to the architectural elements. Its rugged charm creates a connection to the earth, invoking a sense of grounding and tranquillity.

Akshardham showcases the exquisite use of sandstone sourced from Bansi Paharpur in Rajasthan, India. This naturally red-hued stone adds beauty and splendour to the one kilometre long *parikrama* and forms the foundation of the *mahamandir*'s basement. Its versatility and inherent charm leaves an indelible mark on the timeless grandeur of Akshardham.



## GRANITE

Granite is a type of

intrusive igneous rock composed primarily of quartz, feldspar and mica minerals and formed by the slow crystallization of molten magma deep within the Earth's crust.

It is renowned for its durability, hardness and diverse range of colours and textures. Due to its durability and aesthetic appeal, granite is extensively used in construction for building materials, countertops, flooring, monuments, sculptures and decorative elements.

Granite, due its durability and versatility, takes centre stage throughout Akshardham, shaping the walking surfaces from the grand Nilkanth Plaza to the sweeping *parikrama* and the magnificent *jagati peeth*. Granite ensures a slip-proof and scratch-resistant experience, providing both safety and longevity. Moreover, granite adorns the basement of the *mahamandir*, serving as a protective shield against the elements, safeguarding the structure with its proven strength and resilience. ♦



# The 21,500-mile Journey of a Stone

## 1. BIRTH OF A STONE

The story of a stone begins at a quarry, where machines, drills and saws meticulously carve deep into the face of a mountain, shaping massive blocks in the process. These carefully crafted blocks are then transported and deposited at the bottom of the quarry, where they undergo thorough assessments based on their size, colour, strength and integrity.

## 2. HANDLE WITH CARE

The stones are loaded into trucks/containers using telehandlers, ready for their voyage across the ocean on a cargo ship from Europe to India. Upon arrival in India they undergo the initial process of being cut into rectangular blocks in stone workshops.

## 3. STONE CANVAS

Skilled volunteer artisans apply their expertise, transforming these raw blocks into magnificent, intricately carved and awe-inspiring works of art. Each stone is assigned a unique code, meticulously arranged and pre-fitted to ensure flawless reassembly upon its arrival in Robbinsville.

## 4. VEDIC BEGINNINGS

Before the stones embark on their final journey, a sacred *pujan vidhi* is conducted, sanctifying each sculpted stone. On 25 October 2020, Mahant Swami Maharaj personally performed the *pujan vidhi* for the *amalak*, the top-most stone of the *maha-shikhar* (main pinnacle).

## 5. THE JOURNEY COMMENCES

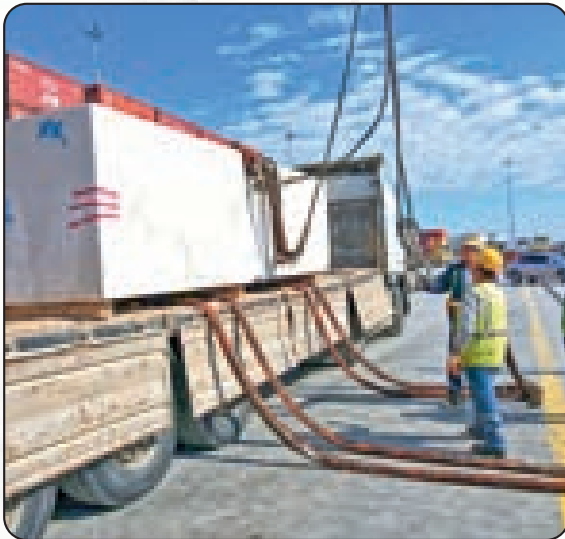
Meticulously packed to avoid damage, the sculpted and coded stones embark on a long journey by ship across the world. In Robbinsville, the containers are carefully unpacked, and an extensive inventory process begins, accounting for each stone.

## 6. PREPARING FOR THE ASCENT

The stones receive systematic treatment, as they are washed and treated with a waterproof sealant. After their preparations are complete, the stones are transported to the designated location on-site, where they await to be fitted in their final position.

## 7. FROM QUARRY TO MAJESTY

With utmost care, each stone is rigged and hoisted with the assistance of a crane. Finally, the stone is gently placed in its designated position, marking a significant milestone and etching a momentous occasion in history, destined to inspire generations for millennia to come.



# Harshadbhai Chavda and His TEAM



Since his teen years, 74-year-old Harshadbhai Chavda was trained and moulded in various *seva* by Pramukh Swami Maharaj. Later, he started a stone workshop in Pindwara, Rajasthan, to make pillars, *kumbhi*, *bhetasaro*, *khadsal* and other parts of a mandir. He employs hundreds of artisans from Rajasthan, who use hand tools to

intricately carve *murtis*, pillars and other pieces of stones.

The stones for Akshardham, New Delhi, were carved in his workshops. Recently, the stones for Akshardham, Robbinsville, were carved in Pindwara and at several of his workshops.

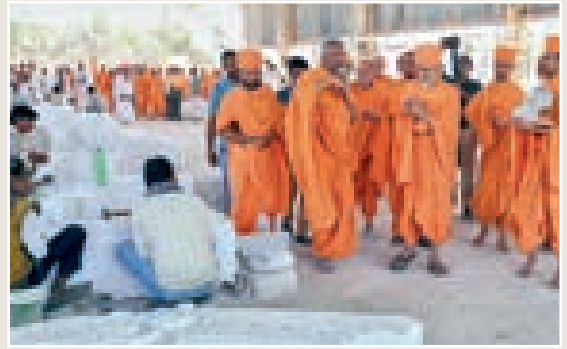
Harshadbhai oversaw his supervisors and took care of all his employees personally. Working on such massive projects like Delhi and Robbinsville Akshardham, where timing and logistics were essential, he worked hard and meticulously.

## ROBBINSVILLE AKSHARDHAM PROJECT

The project started around mid-2011. Many volunteers and swamis stayed in Pindwara to help coordinate and execute the work. During its peak period, 8,000 artisans worked at all his workshops. Every week, 20 to 25 containers of carved stones and *murtis* were completed and transported for shipment to Mundra port and then to Robbinsville.

During the project the carved stones and pillars of the *mahamandir* were assembled in Pindwara without using cement and mortar. It is called ‘dry setting.’ This enabled swamis and the *sompura* to know beforehand how it would look prior to placement and to also rectify any errors. For example, the *mahamandir’s* outer wall or *mandovar* is made of 3,364 pieces of carved stones and a dry setting of this wall was made in Parli village. Thereafter, the pieces were dismantled, coded and shipped to Robbinsville.

Expert drivers were hired to transport the



containers to Mundra and return with the supply of uncut marble stones from Greece. Harshadbhai and his team completed the entire project in time in spite of managing several parallel projects. ♦

### Akshardham’s World-travelling Stone Serves as Ambassadors to the West

The painstaking logistics of acquiring and transporting more than 200,000 heavy carved pieces of stone by trucks and ships were made possible by the incredible enthusiasm of volunteers who worked tirelessly, day and night. The stone used in the Mahamandir was quarried in Italy, Greece, Bulgaria, Turkey and India.

Quarrying and transporting blocks weighing over 100,000 tons by ship to Gujarat’s Mundra Port was not an easy feat.

Thereafter, each stone was transported

more than 400 miles by road to remote villages in Rajasthan.

Then, it underwent a rigorous process of carving, polishing and packing.

The carved stone pieces were then transported by trucks to Mundra Port and shipped to Robbinsville.

At the end of its journey, the stone had travelled over 12,500 miles!

These pieces of carved stones serve as ambassadors of the East in the West. ♦





# Unsung HEROES of AKSHARDHAM

*The soul-stirring stories of 12,500 Akshardham volunteers reflect their phenomenal seva, sacrifice and guru bhakti. Hundreds of swamis spent thousands of hours and thousands of devotees, young and old, paused their daily lives, studies and responsibilities to fulfil Pramukh Swami Maharaj's wish and Mahant Swami Maharaj's agna of making Akshardham.*

*From its inception to completion, Ishwarcharan Swami, Anandswarup Swami, Shrijiwarup Swami, Bhaktinandan Swami, Aksharvatsal Swami, Yagnavallabh Swami, Nilkanthseva Swami, Vivekmurti Swami, Atmakirti Swami, Haridarshan Swami and many more swamis played pivotal roles in the creation of Akshardham. Similarly, the leading devotees of North America sacrificed everything for the Akshardham project. A small cross section of the thousands of volunteer stories will provide an inkling into their selfless seva, devotion and sacrifice.*

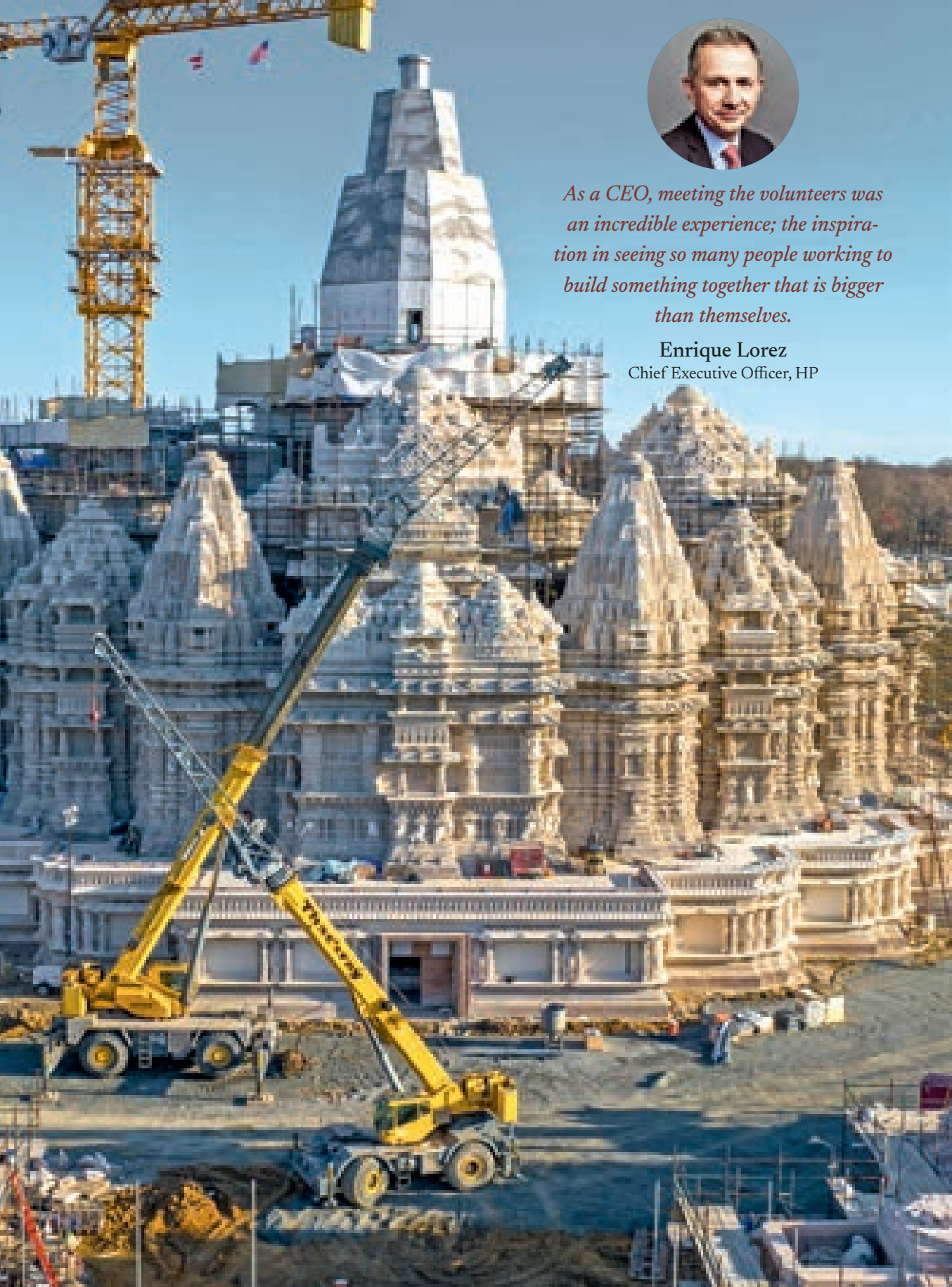
*For more stories, 'People of Akshardham', a BAPS print publication, reveals vivid and inspiring accounts.*





*As a CEO, meeting the volunteers was an incredible experience; the inspiration in seeing so many people working to build something together that is bigger than themselves.*

**Enrique Lorez**  
Chief Executive Officer, HP







*This is a miracle of human cooperation and determination.*

*It's really remarkable. This magnificent temple was created by the hands of volunteers that came here from all over the country. The magnificence of what human beings can create when they work together, treating each other with love in a spirit of equality.*

**Richard Porter**

Republican National Committee



A stone being placed in position

## ATMAKIRTI SWAMI

For the last two years he worked hard and guided the artisans and volunteers on the Akshardham site. Sixty-two years old, Atmakirti Swami had climbed to the *mahashikhar* more than 200 times! Every day, he would go up two to three times to make sure everything was going well. He was present on-site despite rain, heat, snow or hail and encouraged everyone to serve. On multiple occasions he talked to senior swamis about how impressed he was with the level of dedication and quality of craftsmanship of the youth volunteers on-site. He never let anyone get complacent or lazy in *seva*, and saw incredible potential in everyone. In fact, he often inducted volunteers to help with tasks so that they could have enduring memories of their *seva*.

## HARIDARSHAN SWAMI

Despite having many responsibilities on the Akshardham site, he made it a point to come up to different levels of the *mahashikhar* at least two to

three times a day to encourage the volunteers. He knew everyone's name and ensured they were enjoying their *seva*. Even with so much on his plate, he was never unapproachable or difficult to speak with. He cared a lot about the safety of volunteers. Many times he was seen during break times fixing the scaffolding himself. He was optimistic and saw the potential in everyone. His motivation enabled volunteers to accomplish tasks in time that many thought were simply not possible.

## PRIESHMUNI SWAMI

Very caring. When a team member was not feeling well, Prieshmuni Swami made sure they got the care they needed. After a day or two, he would follow up with them and ask about their health. Once, Jaibhai had a persistent cough and runny nose. Prieshmuni Swami got him cough drops and medicine until he felt better. In many ways, he made sure everyone was enjoying while still staying focused on their *seva*. He brought snacks for the entire team and naturally shared *prasangs*



Giving final touches to a *paramhansa murti* in the *mahamandir*

of Swami Bapa. His expertise was in clamping the stones moments after they were placed. When there were no other stones to clamp, he would start planning and marking the next layer.

#### YOGVARDHAN SWAMI

Silent and determined in doing site *seva*. He arrived early for *seva* as needed and remained till late to ensure everything was completed on time, as per the deadlines. He remained unflagging during the concrete pours. He never complained about what happened on-site and one never heard him take *abhav-avgun* of others.

#### BABUKAKA (ARTISAN VOLUNTEER)

A true teacher, expert guide and volunteer artisan. One day, the *seva* was cancelled due to poor weather. No other teams were out for *seva*, but it was important that work on the *mahashikhar* continued in order to meet the goals. On this day, Babukaka was asked what preference he had. He was upset for being asked such a question because

he wanted to do *seva*. Babukaka, with years of experience in sculpting and stone work, worked with amateur *kishores* with the same camaraderie and respect he has for other expert artisans. In the process, he taught many stonework skills while expressing the *mahima* of *seva*.

#### SATISHKAKA (ARTISAN VOLUNTEER)

Forever smiling, everyone liked to be around Satishkaka because he loved to teach others and never got mad or told anyone off. For example, if the clamps weren't fixed, he would help the team remove them and fix the issue without even a hint of frustration. Once, one of the L clamps wasn't completely in position, so he cut small slithers of *pati* to use as wedges and then helped put the clamp in further. He was also very caring, and when he saw volunteers come back late from *seva*, he always made sure that everyone ate lunch or dinner. He also practised *bhakti* regularly by attending *mangala arti* at 6 a.m. and also the evening *arti* at the Akshardham ground floor.



Volunteers work on the *parikrama*

#### SANJAYBHAI (Edison)

*In 2016, Sanjaybhai was one of five volunteers instructed to train as a tower crane operator. All of them had apprehensions because they had never operated even a simple crane. Still, they all prepared and first passed the online theory paper in Robbinsville. Thereafter, for practical training and assessment, they travelled to Phoenix, Arizona. Here, they met an elderly American who shared that he had been a crane operator for the past 15 years and had come to train as a tower crane operator. He revealed that the practical test was very difficult to pass. The five volunteers became perplexed and thought that as they had never operated a crane before, how would they be able to learn and qualify! In spite of self-doubt and apprehensions, they endeavoured because they had come at the behest of a senior swami. With robust faith and the will to obey they went through the rigours of practical training. After two-and-a-half weeks they all passed and returned to Robbinsville as licensed tower crane operators.*

Sanjaybhai narrated that on seeing the

220 ft high tower crane at the Akshardham site brought him the shivers. The reason being that the cranes they had trained on in Phoenix were much smaller and the tasks they executed were very minor. Sanjaybhai and the other volunteers were thus anxious about how they would operate and lift stones that weighed over 12 tonnes. However, after several practice trials in lifting and manoeuvring the stones with the support and guidance of swamis they became experts.

In 1990, Sanjaybhai graduated in electrical engineering from BVM College, Vidyanagar, Gujarat, and in 1997 he settled in the USA. He worked in an industry for two years and then managed a chain of pharma stores for 12 years. In 2012, he joined as a full-time volunteer in BAPS. In 2013, Sanjaybhai was inducted in the admin duties, purchase and supervision of Akshardham construction work.

For seven years (2016–2023), Sanjaybhai daily operated the tower crane from 5.30 a.m. to 1 p.m. Then, he would go home for lunch



Artisan educates youth volunteers



*You guys are sacrificing your time. You come out here, volunteer, and do work to build something special. I want to be a part of something special, and I don't think you can get any more special than this. To have something of this nature, this stature right here in America, in our backyard; it's pretty cool!*

**Mario Chalmers**

Two-Time NBA Champion

and return at 5 p.m. to train other volunteers to operate cranes and acquire licenses.

#### **RAJUBHAI (Edison)**

*Rajubhai, now 54 years old, daily operated the tower crane in Akshardham from 1 to 8 p.m. He did this seva for seven consecutive years, from 2015 to 2022. He commented that operating a tower crane was very risky and required alertness and focus, because of the artisans and volunteers working on the ground and several other cranes being operated simultaneously. Perched in a cabin at a height of over 200 feet, Rajubhai followed the instructions given by a volunteer signal person on the ground. By God's grace and their personal focus not a single accident had occurred during seva.*

In 2010 and 2011, Rajubhai started serving at the Akshardham site every weekend. From 2012, he started doing site seva daily. He operated a forklift and also took care of the volunteer artisans' needs. He made arrangements for their food, laundry, sightseeing tours and shopping.

Rajubhai explained that his wife and son, Nirmal, supported him and never complained about his long hours of seva. In fact, they never raised an issue for not taking them on a single vacation during the seven years of seva. In addition, his wife attended marriages and other social occasions on his behalf, and his son managed their stores.

Besides seva he daily listened to katha for three hours.

#### **ASHOKBHAI (Lilburn, Atlanta, GA)**

*Ashokbhai passionately shared his observations and experiences during his seva at Akshardham, "Daily, as I arrived at the Akshardham site I thought this wasn't here yesterday and yet it's done. I believed Pramukh Swami Maharaj and Mahant Swami Maharaj did it. I experienced the aura of the volunteers' hard work and faith. They tolerated the extremes of cold and heat to serve. Truly, their aura of seva was palpable.*

*"I have seen women volunteers bend rebars and*



*Fabulous. I would say it's mesmerizing. It's a great feeling.*

*Commitment is the most important factor to do anything or to create anything. I mean, the volunteers are so committed.*

*The way they have been working together for a cause I think it's really fabulous.*

*Hats off to them.*

**Krishna Rao Venkatesh Prasad**  
Former Cricketer, Indian National Team



Volunteers came to serve from all parts of North America

*digging land here. Many of them are from rich and wealthy families, yet they did seva. I simply cannot believe how they did it. Volunteer students deferred their studies in universities and many devotees gave up their jobs. All this happened due to Pramukh Swami Maharaj's wish and on Mahant Swami Maharaj's command."*

In 1991, Ashokbhai, now 62 years old, arrived in the USA with an MSc Agriculture degree from Anand. He has resided in Atlanta for the past 30 years and runs a successful construction business.

In 2014, a franchise company offered him a contract to build a motel, but his wife underscored that he join the construction *seva* at Akshardham to fulfil Pramukh Swami Maharaj's dream. Ashokbhai gave up the lucrative offer and headed to Robbinsville. From his plush large bungalow in Atlanta he started living in an on-site mobile home. Initially, he found it difficult to adapt, but the thought that he would never get the *seva* of Akshardham gave him the impetus to stay and serve.

In the beginning, his *seva* was to sell on-site scrap material and purchase diesel and petrol from an agency. He also looked after the purchase of construction tools and materials.

He served as a project manager for the construction of Nilkanth Plaza and the parking lots. In fact, he applied all his construction skills and experience during his eight-year *seva*.

In March 2022, Ashokbhai returned to Atlanta to appear for the Pragna, Part 1 satsang exam. After giving the exam he returned home. That evening, he suffered a cardiac arrest. Subsequently, he stayed home to recuperate for six months, during which he learnt how to cut hair from online videos. On returning to Robbinsville, Ashokbhai, besides serving in the purchasing department, started cutting the hair of volunteers as part of his extra *seva*.

He said, "I am indeed very proud that Swami Bapa gave me *seva* at Akshardham. Though I am a graduate in agriculture, Bapa gave me this enormous *seva* and so I am greatly blessed





Volunteer searches for stones packed in wooden boxes

and happy.”

After eight years of *seva*, Ashokbhai still offers his voluntary services at Akshardham.

#### **SOMAKAKA (Robbinsville)**

*In 2008, 102.5 acres of soya farmland was acquired for the Akshardham project. In 2009, swamis visited and addressed satsang assemblies in various centres of North America to recruit volunteers for the mega project. Somakaka, in his late sixties, and his wife lived in Hartford, Connecticut. They became inspired after attending their local assembly and thus sold their house to relocate to Robbinsville in 2009.*

He was the first *satsangi* to buy a house in Robbinsville. He and his wife daily prepared tea at home in the morning and again at 4 p.m. for the site volunteers. With only a couple of pots and pans, it took his wife an hour to make tea. Then, they would both load it into their jeep and drive to the Akshardham site to serve the volunteers and artisans.

In 2012, when the mandir kitchen was ready

they helped in preparing breakfast, lunch and dinner. Somakaka also served the volunteer artisans with medicines and other needs.

In 2022, due to old age, Somakaka was told to retire from *seva*, but he fervently replied that both he and his wife had pledged to serve till the *kalashes* were installed on the *mahamandir*.

Somakaka’s youthful zeal for *seva* was exemplary and inspiring.

#### **BHARATBHAI (Mineola, Long Island)**

*Ever since Pramukh Swami Maharaj phoned and blessed him in 2014 from Sarangpur, Bharatbhai said that from then onwards he has never experienced fatigue and cold during seva. He daily served from 7 a.m. to 9 p.m. and spiritedly encouraged others to serve.*

From 2009, Bharatbhai Patel, now 67 years old, offered exemplary *seva* at Akshardham. He has a robust physique and a determined mind. For over 14 years, he served in Akshardham with alacrity and a spirit of ownership.





On-site discussion during seva

In 2007, Pramukh Swami Maharaj had told Bharatbhai in New York mandir to join in *seva* once the land for Akshardham was acquired.

From 2009 to 2015, Bharatbhai stayed in a motel in Robbinsville to serve 135 volunteer artisans working at the Akshardham site. He helped in making tea for them and started his daily site *seva* at 7 a.m. As part of his multiple on-site duties, Bharatbhai operated a heavy vehicle, ran a general store for the volunteers, handled the purchase department, and disposed of garbage and waste materials.

He has a comfortable home in Mineola, Long Island, and a booming business of several convenient stores run by his wife and son, Nirmal, yet he did hard physical *seva* for more than a decade.

Other than his daily on-site *seva*, Bharatbhai is also an avid reader of satsang books and *jivan charitras*. He daily read for half-an-hour after finishing site work.

#### BHAVINBHAI (Franklin Park, NJ)

*Bhavinbhai shared a valuable experience from his eight years of seva at Akshardham, "I faced many challenges and obstacles during seva, but I learnt that every challenge has a solution. One has to think from a different perspective, find the solution and move on." He elucidated that the Robbinsville township required a 3D presentation of a particular plan of Akshardham. Bhavin did not know how to do it. At that time, another volunteer came to learn of Bhavinbhai's dilemma and pointed out, "There's a volunteer boy called Kirtan, who serves in the landscape department. He is adept at creating 3D plans."*

*Bhavinbhai contacted him and soon enough the 3D plan was ready and submitted to the township council. They studied it, became convinced and satisfied, and sanctioned it for construction.*

In 2014, Bhavinbhai graduated with a Bachelor's degree in architecture from New Jersey Institute of Technology (NJIT). From mid-2015 he started doing *seva* in the under-construction *abhishek mandap* in Akshardham. He did *seva*



Using an electric tool to level a stone



*I'm just blown away by what I've seen in this incredible location. I really had no idea of the scope and scale of the undertaking here, and the fact that volunteers came from all over the country to be a part of something truly special and meaningful. I think all of that effort has made it pretty clear that the values of Hinduism are being lived here and the shared values of love, compassion, unity and peace.*

**Kevin Mullin**

U.S. Congress Representative (CA-15)

from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. and thereafter drove 45 minutes to Newark to study for his master's degree in construction management till 9 p.m. He completed his master's degree in 2016 and joined full-time *seva*. He was involved in making drawings of the electrical work, and as a design coordinator, resident architect and site supervisor. He drew plans for an extension to the Welcome Center, designs for the Akshardham museum, Nilkanth Vatika (Plaza) and Brahma Kund. He worked with swamis, devotees, Robbinsville township architects, engineers and consultants.

After completing one year of *seva*, his father told him to look for a job and prepare for marriage. However, due to his deep wish to continue doing *seva* his father agreed and said that he should help in completing Pramukh Swami Maharaj's vision of Akshardham.

Bhavinbhai often reflects, "When I consider from my life's perspective, working here with all the volunteer devotees and coordinating with the agencies gives me more in terms

of experience compared to my friends who have moved on in life. Working at a job often leaves you with tunnel vision, whereas the responsibility I've got here is much more.

"A lot of people told me that you are quite young and have just come out of school, but deep down I knew that Swamishri would take care of my future."

From his *seva* at Akshardham, Bhavin's experience that taking the lines and drawings [i.e. plans] to coordinating with all the stakeholders was unique, because it was not possible to get so much exposure early on in a career. He developed many skills during *seva*, and consequently several construction companies and engineers told him they were eager to employ him once he had finished his services at Akshardham.

Another experience he shared, "In satsang, I had attended the local weekly *bal sabha*, *kishore sabha* and also did *seva* in *sabha* every weekend. However, after coming here and doing *seva* every day, working with swamis and volunteer



*What I've seen today is really mind-blowing. This is the first place I've seen where everything is done by sheer volunteers. I've seen doctors, I've seen engineers, I've seen ordinary people. It is where class and your station really doesn't matter. What matters is what you can give as a human being to a good cause.*

**Ndileka Mandela**

Head, Thembekile Mandela Foundation



Volunteers in shikhar-construction seva

devotees, I get a different level of satisfaction. I have come to realize how Shastriji Maharaj managed to build mandirs with limited, and sometimes, no resources.”

Bhavin, now 31 years, is working, married and still offers *seva* at Akshardham. Eight years of *seva* at Akshardham enriched his professional knowledge, experience and confidence. He also feels contented and spiritually blessed.

**RAKESHBHAI (La Pama, Los Angeles)**

*Rakeshbhai was smart, steadfast, bold and indefatigable in his seva at Akshardham. He shouldered tough responsibilities, like making major purchases, negotiating contracts, managing professional contractors and volunteer supervisors, overseeing the construction of the welcome and exhibition centres and much more.*

On Pramukh Swami Maharaj's word, from 2007 to 2013, Rakeshbhai managed the construction of the BAPS mandir in Los Angeles. Thereafter, he started running his four

pharmacy businesses. In October 2016, while he was managing the construction of his new house, Mahant Swami Maharaj spoke to him that he should join full-time *seva*. Rakeshbhai was perplexed as to where he was supposed to go for *seva*. He personally met and asked Mahant Swami Maharaj in Australia to clarify about his instruction for full-time *seva*. Swamishri said that he should start doing *seva* in Akshardham, Robbinsville. When Rakeshbhai phoned and informed his wife about Swamishri's wish, she responded affirmatively, “Of course you must go. There's no reason to think otherwise.” However, Rakeshbhai argued, “It's easy for you to say that, but I have to manage 60 employees in my business.”

Swamishri had advised Rakeshbhai to go for *seva* after handing over his business to his son. But because his son had no experience in the pharmacy business, he hesitated in handing it over to him and thus remained in LA.

Three months elapsed and Swamishri's



Moving a stone for placement

attendant swami rang Rakeshbhai and asked him where he was. The latter replied that he was in Los Angeles. The attendant asked, “Haven’t you gone?” Rakeshbhai replied, “I want to tell Swamishri that I’ll go once my situation is set here.” The attendant swami replied that Swamishri was listening to what he said. Then, Swamishri pressed, “You leave [at the earliest] and Shriji Maharaj will take care of everything.”

Three days later, in August 2016, Rakeshbhai flew to New Jersey and joined in *seva* at Akshardham. He was given the responsibility of purchasing, construction management and contract negotiations with the mechanical, electrical and plumbing agencies. Daily, Rakeshbhai arrived on-site at 7.30 a.m. and returned home at 9 p.m. He elaborated about his daily schedule, “At 9 a.m., we would have a meeting with the contractors and our volunteer supervisors. We discussed about: 1. Work schedules for the contractors and how much work was completed. 2. Costing and finding

the right people for the work. 3. Quality of work done. 4. Payments for the tasks completed. 5. Handing over the construction to the maintenance team.”

To facilitate his *seva*, Rakeshbhai bought a house near the Akshardham site and also accommodated 12 volunteer devotees. He avoided eating in the mandir because he was unable to eat food with chillies. His wife thus prepared *bhakri*, *shaak* and *khichdi* in LA, froze it and sent it to him by Fedex. Every two or three months, when his wife came to Robbinsville she would prepare food and freeze it for him. During his last six years of *seva*, Rakeshbhai had eaten only three times in the mandir.

Rakeshbhai effusively praised the *seva* of youth volunteers and devotees, “Many were doctors, engineers and professionals, yet they did whatever *seva* was assigned to them. They humbly did housekeeping *seva* and also assembled wooden cabinets. A youth pilot of a commercial airline swept floors.”



Marble stone mine in Thasos, Greece

Rakeshbhai added that the *seva* blessed him with a transformation of his innate nature and enabled him to understand the glory (*mahima*) of Mahant Swami Maharaj and the volunteers. He also experienced the truth of Mahant Swami Maharaj's blessings that Shriji Maharaj would take care of his business. He revealed that what he had not earned in the last 15 years in his pharmacy business, he earned during his last six years of *seva*.

Rakeshbhai's meticulous and smart purchasing abilities saved significant amounts of money for the Akshardham project.

#### VINODBHAI (East Windsor)

*Vinodbhai's quest for acquiring marble and limestone in Greece, Bulgaria, Turkey and Italy was riddled with problems and challenges:*

- *He stayed alone for 6½ years in Greece and other places.*
- *He ate only one meal, i.e. cooked khichdi or mung. In spite of this, Vinodbhai never weakened or resigned from his seva.*

- *He faced difficulties in communicating with the local people because of the language barrier.*
- *He travelled to distant stone mine locations: 650 km from Athens to Thasos island, Greece. From Greece he often drove seven hours to Turkey and six hours to Bulgaria.*
- *He tolerated the severe dust and heat in the open mines.*
- *He single-handedly arranged the packing, transportation and shipment of stones to India.*

Vinodbhai Patel is 63 years old. He has served the BAPS in various mandir projects in India and abroad for the past 40 years. Dedicated, determined, hardworking and intelligent, Vinodbhai always remained unremitting in whatever was assigned to him for the Robbinsville Akshardham project.

Settled in USA since 2003, Vinodbhai served for 1½ years on the Akshardham site, from June 2011 to December 2012. Then, in January 2013, he was instructed to travel to Greece to acquire marble for Akshardham.



Saying a prayer prior to seva



*There are not enough adjectives in the English language to explain what I saw today. There will never be enough. And I want to thank you from the bottom of my heart for what you've done and the difference you made in our community. Winston Churchill said, "You make a living by what you earn; you make a life by what you give." Keep up the great work because it is a beautiful facility.*

**Charles Tomaro**

County Commissioner, Middlesex County, NJ

He faced challenges of language, food, culture and people. Yet, Vinodbhai strived by visiting the marble mines in Kavala, Xanthi, Thasos and other places. In 15 days, he visited 12 mines in a rented jeep. He found the best quality marble on Thasos Island, 650 km from Athens, and sent samples to India for approval. Thereafter, he acquired stones from the local mines of Babis Philipedes and John Papagiannoulis. The latter had initially refused to sell marble, but with Vinodbhai's humble and persistent requests he finally agreed.

Vinodbhai often drove six hours to Bulgaria to acquire limestone and seven hours to Turkey and Italy for more marble. Before purchasing the stones he would keenly examine each of them while encircling them five times.

1. In his first round, Vinodbhai would wash each stone and thoroughly check it. He then marked any holes, cracks or other defects on the stone with a red crayon. Thereafter, he would decide whether

it was eligible for carving into a pillar (*stambh*), beam, base stone of a pillar (*kumbhi*) or the top base upon which beams rest (*bhetasar*).

2. In his second circumambulation, he would measure the stone's maximum length, width and depth.
3. In his third round, he would mark the stone for cutting.
4. In his fourth round, Vinodbhai would mark the direction of the stone extracted from the mountain. This indicated its strength.
5. In the final round, Vinodbhai would colour-spray a serial number on the stone to indicate the quantity and the quarry from where it was extracted.

After this procedure, Vinodbhai would arrange for transportation to the local port for shipping to Gujarat. Once the insurance and clearing and forwarding documents were done, the stones were packed and loaded into





*Everybody comes with a different set of backgrounds, but everyone still comes together with a shared sense of community, family and religion, hoping for something better, hoping to inspire others and to work hard to accomplish great things. I think you see that here with the volunteers.*

**Matthew Moench**  
Mayor of Bridgewater, NJ



Frame of iron rods (rebars) lifted for on-site construction

containers. Every Saturday, Vinodbhai would make sure that 20 to 25 containers of stones were shipped from Greece to Mundra Port, Gujarat.

As part of his daily morning spiritual rituals, Vinodbhai performed puja, *arti*, *thal* and then ate a meagre breakfast of *khakhra* and puffed baked rice (*mamra*). For lunch, he had salad or sometimes a couple of oranges, apples or bananas. In the evening, he cooked *khichdi* or mung for dinner.

During the annual 15-day Christmas holidays he would either visit USA or India. Each year, Vinodbhai gifted 185 boxes of savoury baked sweets as Christmas gifts to the quarry owners, managers and labourers to express his respect and appreciation.

#### **JAYBHAI (Atlanta)**

Very focused on the task at hand. He would find things to do in his team like ordering clamps, moving clamps, or chiselling out the grooves. Once, he went to Atlanta to attend a *kishore's* graduation

day. When asked why he went for only a day, he answered that he didn't want to miss *seva*. During the *mahashikhar seva* his phone fell out from his pocket about six to seven times down multiple levels of scaffolding, but he never got frustrated or worried. He silently went down and got it and continued his *seva* as if nothing had happened. Throughout his time on the *mahashikhar*, he never took a day off regardless of the circumstances. Once, he came for *seva* even though he wasn't feeling well and in spite of the rain.

#### **JILBHAI (Nashville)**

Always willing to do *seva* and finish anything he was told to do even if he was tired. Multiple times, Jilbhai carried tools from the general store all the way up to the *shikhars*. He also worked very hard on the *jari* and quickly picked up the skills for such a delicate project. Using the four-inch core bit continuously would get exhausting, but Jilbhai was eager to do *seva* and learned to handle the large machines with ease.



Placing an *amalaka* on one of the *shikhars*

#### JITUBHAI (Tampa)

Jitubhai was one of the eldest members of the site teams, so naturally one would think he'd go at his own pace or take longer breaks. This couldn't be further from the truth. He went above and beyond in his *seva*, and motivated others by actively seeking out something to do. When young *kishores* were tired and encouraged him to also take a break, he would pick up a grinder, drill, or even make *maal* (mortar) to fill up any of the old *gulla* holes. One day, when it was really hot and everyone was exhausted, Jitubhai took the opportunity to show volunteers who had come for two weeks how to make *gullas*. These volunteers hadn't been on-site for long, so everything was new to them. To ensure that the volunteers got practice using the tools, Jitubhai taught them how to use the machines and ensured they used them safely with proper guards. He could have easily asked anybody else on the team to show them, but he saw this as an opportunity to make *seva* a rewarding experience for others as well.

#### KIRTANBHAI (Nashville)

He was always helping other volunteer teams when clamping was done. He went to India for five days from 19 to 24 May 2023. When he returned to JFK Airport, he took the train to Princeton, NJ, and came to the mandir site to resume *seva*. He was an all-rounder (*saat sameliya*) and able to join in any task, like placing stones, signalling, clamping and scaffolding; he became an expert at whatever *seva* he was given.

#### PARTHBHAI (Atlanta)

Parthbhai was primarily in charge of ensuring the *gulla* holes were at the proper depths, angles, and width so that stones could safely be placed. Although this task was often repetitive, he was always full of enthusiasm for the *seva*. When he completed his own task he was quick to help wherever he was needed, including rigging stones, cutting, picking up rebar orders or cleaning the concrete plant.

When Parthbhai first heard about *seva* at the



Seva on the mahashikhar

Akshardham site, he was not very eager to join. However, when his brother decided to go, he too resolved to give it a try. When he left home he was nervous and unsure if he had made the right decision. After coming on-site, the transition was hard at first, but he revealed that he found it a lot more comforting after attending *arti* in the mandir. Although Parth was never one to regularly attend mandir or go to *arti* when at home in Atlanta, he found peace in *ahnika* and began enjoying *seva* as per Swamishri's wish.

#### PRAGNESHBHAI (Robbinsville)

Pragneshbhai would be ready to operate any of the cranes at 6.30 a.m. This was in addition to his other *seva* for the rest of the day. Many times he would skip lunch to replace another operator so that the latter could go for lunch. Other than that, he always made sure that both cranes were ready so that time was not wasted when the stone teams came. There were some days when Pragneshbhai operated a crane in one quadrant

to get one stone team started, and then moved to the next quadrant to operate another crane to help the other team. On Saturdays, Pragneshbhai had many responsibilities for the Robbinsville *mandal*. Despite of all this, he would be on-site to operate the crane before and after *sabha*.

#### RAHULBHAI (Atlanta)

He patiently taught new volunteers how to make *maal* (mortar) and clean the tools. Layers 1 to 10 of the *mahashikhar* required a lot of *maal*. Every time he was asked for *maal*, he always replied with a smile and said, "I'll get it to you soon!" Within five minutes he would fulfil the request. He was very enthusiastic and gave *seva* the highest priority. He always did the hard tasks so that others wouldn't have to do them. While doing *seva* he applied for medical school and interviews in such a way that he never had to come late or leave early from *seva*. He was accepted at a med school, and he also helped other *kishores* with their applications.



Housekeeping *seva* in a mobile home



*Everything that is being done here will last hundreds of years. I think Akshardham is an incredible asset, not just for our community, but for all Americans. Everybody can gain from the peace and energy of this place. Thousands of people have contributed and they have gone through their own life journey in bringing this dream into reality.*

**Sandipan Gangopadhyay**

Owner, GalaxE.Solutions

#### **SANDEEPBHAI (Toronto)**

He started with two weeks of *seva*, and then continued. He did *seva* in a focused manner and so didn't skip a bit. He paid great attention to detail and always gave 100%. One day, he had a conference call at around 8 p.m. and was told to go home, but he resumed *seva* because there was a concrete pour going on. On that day, Sandeepbhai climbed up to the *mahashikhar* five times! As a *karyakar* from Toronto, he was busy planning for Swamishri's visit, but still made time for site *seva*. His sacrifice was such that he quit his job at an airport and came to serve as a volunteer.

#### **TAPASBHAI (Hartford)**

Even after long hours of operating a crane, he never complained about being hungry or wanting to take a break. There were times he ate lunch in the crane just so that he wouldn't have to stop his *seva*. There was never an instance where he got frustrated or complained.

He also had to coordinate with all the other

crane volunteers and make sure they started their *seva* on time. When a crane volunteer wasn't available during breaks he would operate the crane.

#### **VANDANBHAI (Cleveland)**

Vandanbhai was straightforward and easy-going in his ground team *seva*. When given the stone order in the morning, he'd have those stones prepped, but if the plans changed he would get new stones ready at short notice. His care for others was reflected when he brought snacks and coffee, or filled up the crane operators' water bottles throughout the day.

There were times when the stones were difficult to rig or their orientation needed to be changed with a forklift. One day this was the case, and Vandanbhai was asked why things were taking so long. Without getting upset or discouraged, he calmly apologized and fixed the mistake.

Once, Vandanbhai was told to send up the stone he was standing next to. Subsequently, he



Erecting a scaffold on-site

rigged the stone and sent it up as requested, but it turned out that the stone was not required. In such a situation, anyone else would have been quick to point out the opposite person's mistake, but Vandambhai moved on to the next task without any complaint or criticism.

## TRAILER HOUSEKEEPING AND MAINTENANCE VOLUNTEERS

### ■ Housekeeping

There were 34 mobile homes on-site for the volunteers. Every Sunday, from 2016, about 40 volunteers drove from Jersey City (90 km), Edison (50 km), and Cherry Hill (57 km) to Robbinsville for housekeeping *seva* of the trailers. They removed blankets, pillow covers and bedsheets for the weekly wash. They also swept and mopped the floors, cleaned the toilets, bathrooms and window panes, and emptied the garbage bins. The volunteers also cleaned the office trailers and refilled all of them with the required toiletries.

The ages of the volunteers ranged between 50 and 60 years. Every week, Mahasukhbhai of Delaware drove 1½ hours from Delaware to Robbinsville to collect blankets, pillows and bedsheets for washing at a dry cleaners in Delaware. Thereafter, during the following week, he would return the washed linen and blankets.

In the last six years of *seva*, none of the volunteers missed a Sunday to serve despite the severe winters, storms or other adverse conditions.

Some of the volunteers who consistently served in this department were: Edison: Vinubhai Sarkar, Hareshbhai, Kiritbhai, Devendrabhai; Cherry Hill: Virendrabhai, Naginbhai; Jersey City: Pankaj Rai, Jaiprakashbhai, Dharmeshbhai; Satyen Bakhi (Robbinsville), Laljibhai (East Windsor) and others.

### ■ Maintenance

From 2019, a team of seven devotees from Long Island carried out minor repairs in the 34 home trailers. They drove about two hours to Robbinsville every Wednesday and then, from 9 a.m. to 7 p.m., they visited each trailer for maintenance. The group members, all of whom are in their 60s, changed locks, repaired curtains, replaced damaged taps, toilet commodes and sink units, sealed water leakages, changed light bulbs and fitted racks. They also cut grass and removed weeds outside the trailers.

Govindbhai, Rasikbhai, Rameshbhai, Jayantibhai, Hirenabhai, Sharadbhai and Ghanshyambhai revelled in doing this niche *seva*. They also contributed in buying taps, paint, screws, racks, pipe joints, light bulbs for maintenance. The privilege and enthusiasm of doing *seva* at Akshardham was glowingly evident on their faces.

## VOLUNTEER SCAFFOLDING TEAM

Sureshbhai, Alpeshbhai, Jigneshbhai, Bhavinbhai, Vinodbhai, Dineshbhai and many more volunteer devotees from Philadelphia were part of the on-site Akshardham scaffolding team. All the members were from prosperous backgrounds. Their scope of *seva* covered all areas of the Akshardham campus. Moreover, not once did any one of them get injured or sick during their *seva* period.

They started *seva* in 2010 and came every Monday and Wednesday and sometimes on Saturdays and Sundays. Each scaffolding pipe was 10 ft long and very heavy. In spite of not having any previous experience in building scaffolds, they learnt to execute the strenuous task through guidance and practice. For the first three years, since there was no on-site kitchen facility, they brought food from home and did *seva* from 5 to 9 p.m. For the last 13 years, all of them regularly attended for *seva*.

The volunteers shared their responsibilities and duties of gathering and supplying the pipes and other materials, constructing, coordinating and arranging the volunteer transportation. Throughout the last 13 years, the team's enthusiasm and exhaustive efforts were relentless and praiseworthy.

By doing *seva* they said, "We got an opportunity to serve, understand the virtues of others, develop new skill sets and gain confidence. And above all, we got the opportunity to please Pramukh Swami Maharaj and Mahant Swami Maharaj."

## RECEIVING AND LOGISTICS DEPARTMENTS

All materials and hardware required for the Akshardham site work and Mahotsav were ordered, acquired and received by the Receiving and Logistics Department. The volunteers worked intensely hard from early morning

till late night, seven days a week. Pankajbhai Patel (Robbinsville), Kiritbhai Akshar (Atlanta), Mahendrabhai Patel (Seattle), Narendrabhai (Robbinsville), Kaushikbhai Mistry, Pankajbhai Patel (Surat), Atit Patel (Tampa), Reshmaben (Atlanta) and others.

## KITCHEN SEVA

Hitesh Patel (Contact) of Washington DC, 62 years old, bought a two-bedroom flat in Robbinsville to stay and do *seva* at Akshardham. He coordinated and served in the kitchen department. Daily, he would arrive at the mandir at 5 a.m. and along with his team of 35 male and 10 women volunteers prepared breakfast for 500 volunteers and served them from 6 a.m. to 8 a.m.

Thereafter, they daily prepared different types of soups, and at 11 a.m. served them on-site to the volunteers. After preparing lunch, they served it till 2 p.m. At 4 p.m., they served fruits, coffee, tea and other items. And finally, after preparing dinner they served it from 8 to 10 p.m.

Daily, the kitchen lady volunteers also washed the utensils before heading home to return early next morning.

Natu Dada, 84 years old, daily made tea at 4 p.m. for all the volunteers. He resided in an on-site mobile home. Dinesh Parmar of Atlanta, a cancer surgeon, served food every morning. The tireless efforts and love of the kitchen volunteers enthused and evoked the respect of all the site volunteers. Once, the on-site volunteers had peaked to 1,500, yet the kitchen volunteers served with *mahima* and joy.

These are just a few of the thousands of volunteer stories of epic sacrifice, devotion and hard work. For more stories refer to *People of Akshardham, Stories Beyond the Stones* published by Swaminarayan Aksharpith. ♦



# WOMEN VOLUNTEERS

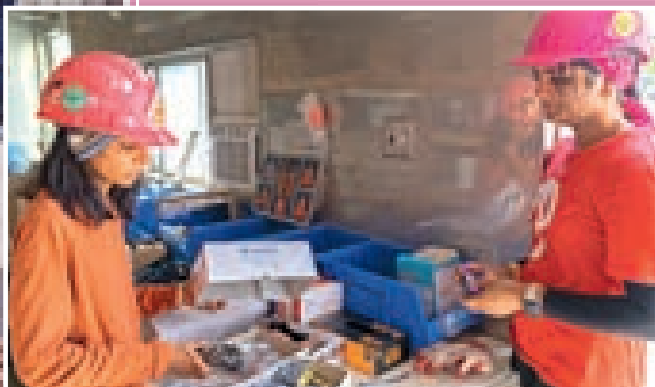




*My highlight from today's view was the women in the pink hard hats. It's amazing to see all the young people who are taking part in the activities. They are part of this history. They're giving back each and every day. It is a part of their fabric and it's in their hearts, minds, and souls.*

**Tennille McCoy**

Chief Human Capital Officer  
Covenant House Internationals





*The enormous selfless services of BAPS women volunteers from North America during the construction of Akshardham are historic and noteworthy. Out of 12,500 volunteers who offered seva at Akshardham 3,300 were women volunteers. From 18 years to middle-aged and elderly women, they offered exemplary seva for upto three days, 15 days, three months, six months and even more than one year in the many on-site departments. An average of 170 women volunteered for 15-day seva slots and during the summer vacations the number increased to around 250 youths.*



*The women volunteers who served took leave from jobs and some even quit, some sold their shops or businesses, and some even sold their homes and relocated to Robbinsville. Many women volunteers encouraged their husbands to do seva while they looked after their children, parents and businesses. From 2019 to 2023, teenage girls and youths took either a semester's or year's leave from university to do seva. An appreciative note of their various seva is as follows.*



■ For more than three years, from 2010 to 2012, during which work on the Akshardham site was in its primary stage of clearing, levelling, planning and construction, there was no kitchen facility for the volunteers. Lunch was prepared by women volunteers at the mandirs in Piscataway (57 km), Philadelphia (67 km) and Edison (50 km); three days from Piscataway, three days from Philadelphia and one day from Edison.



■ For more than two years (2010–2012) the morning snacks for breakfast were prepared by Suryakant Brahmabhatt's mother and five female devotees, who lived two miles away from the Robbinsville site. They daily made either *bateta pauva*, *upma*, *mung* or *muthiya* and other items for about 60 to 70 volunteers.

■ In 2012, the kitchen facility became

operational at the Robbinsville site. Since there were no hired cooks, 10 to 20 women devotees came daily to prepare breakfast, lunch and dinner for about 100 volunteers, which later peaked to 1,200 volunteers. They also cleaned the large cooking utensils and served unremittingly even during heavy snowfall and rains.

■ The women volunteers performed the on-site housekeeping *seva*. They also cut open the wooden crates containing stones from India and unpacked the plastic coverings and foam used for packing. They polished the stones and weather-proofed them with special chemicals.

■ Many female youths did rebar work (bending steel rods manually or with the aid of machines), and sculpted designs on stones. They also sculpted *murtis* of Bhagwan Swaminarayan and restored the damaged parts of *murtis*. The stone railing of the Akshardham *mahamandir* was constructed entirely by female youths.

■ In 2022 and 2023, during the three-month summer vacation, over 250 female volunteer students came from all parts of North America to do *seva*. They gave up the comforts of home to live in mobile homes and performed rigorous *seva*.

They served on-site from 8.30 a.m. to 12.30 p.m. and 2 to 6 p.m, with lunch and tea breaks from 12.30 to 2 p.m. and 4 to 4.30 p.m. respectively.

■ Hundreds of volunteer female university students either did *seva* during their summer vacations or took one or two semesters or even a year's leave. Many senior female volunteers were practising doctors, dentists, engineers, lawyers, physical therapists and other professionals. They unhesitatingly did *seva* in the scorching summers and freezing winters.

■ From January 2022, women volunteers





maintained the stone inventory management system (SIMS) of carved stones that arrived from India. They also operated electric saws to cut open wooden crates containing carved stones and *murtis* of *paramhansas*. On one single day, they cut open 78 large crates, some of which were over 7 ft long. They then pressure-washed the stones, let them dry and transported them with forklifts to the IPP building (a warehouse near the Akshardham grounds). Thereafter, they dipped the stones in large vessels to weatherproof them with special chemicals for 48 hours. Subsequently, they removed the stones and allowed them to cure. Till the stones were required on-site, the women volunteers kept them covered with tarpaulins to prevent damage from the extremes of weather.

- The housekeeping women volunteers collected trash in garbage bags, loaded them into trucks and collected them in dumpsters.

- The rebar station, a tin shed, was located on the open ground by the *parikrama*. In the winter season, they wore two jackets, warm clothes and hand warmers inside their gloves.

- Women volunteers cleaned 75 tonnes of lime-coated steel rebars (rods) with acid. After allowing them to dry, they brought them to the rebar station to cut.

- The women volunteers did the rebar and shuttering (*padkha*) *seva* with patience, hard work, unity and *mahima*. They tolerated the extremes of weather and never complained about the difficult tasks assigned to them.

- Two authorized female safety volunteers inspected the scaffolding on-site to ensure that safety and compliance standards were followed. They made sure that the female volunteers wore safety glasses, masks or respirators, hard hats, steel-toe boots, gloves and protective equipment.

- The women volunteers also offered *seva* in the low voltage department in the Akshardham *mahamandir*.

- With guidance from the artisan volunteers the women volunteers fitted the domes of the 10 shrines at the Nilkanth Plaza. Each dome comprised 16 pieces of pink stone and weighed 16 tonnes. They also fixed the small carved shrines and *shikhars* in the Brahma Kund.

- The volunteers helped in making concrete mix on-site for pouring to make slabs. They also smoothened slabs in order to fix them in the Brahma Kund.

- In the Welcome Center, the women volunteers cleaned wooden pillars and archways and thereafter varnished them.

- The volunteers worked hard to remove cement, plaster or paint on the *murtis* installed on the *mandovar* (outside wall) of the main sanctum of Bhagwan Swaminarayan and also whatever was stuck on the floor.

- Once their daily *seva* was over, the volunteers of one group or department would help the female volunteers of another group. Additionally, they served each other in sickness and fatigue.

- The women volunteers installed all the three-foot-high *murtis* with musical instruments on the *parikrama* pedestals.

- The marble shrine (*chhatra*) by the main entrance of Akshardham commemorates the spot where Pramukh Swami Maharaj

and Mahant Swami Maharaj were honoured during their first visits. The shrine was entirely constructed by the women volunteers.

■ In the final months of construction (July to September 2023), there were over 200 women volunteers aged between 18 to 60 years offering *seva* at the Akshadham site.

■ During *seva* they listened to bhajans and discourses and in their free time engaged in *goshtis* (spiritual discussions). They practised bhakti along with their *seva* by daily attending the mandir morning *arti* and performing the evening *arti* on-site.

■ During the three months of the Akshardham Mahotsav: Festival of Inspirations, the women volunteers daily made breakfast and meals for over 3,000 devotees and volunteers at the Robbinsville mandir. In addition, women volunteers made chapatis, puri, *parathas* and other items at the Edison mandir. Because of their off-site *seva* they were unable to attend Swamishri's puja darshan and the evening assemblies.

Women volunteers at the Philadelphia mandir (35 minutes away) cooked breakfast and meals three times a day for swamis for more than three months.

■ From early morning till late night, teenage



(*kishoris*) women volunteers helped in various departments of the Akshardham Mahotsav: kitchen, satsang assembly, flow control of visitors, guest services, Akshardham tours, decoration and housekeeping.

■ Daily, before commencing *seva*, all the women and male volunteers would say a prayer or pledge to Maharaj and Swami that they would do their *seva* carefully, meticulously, with all efforts and glory and to please them.

■ Construction tools that the women volunteers operated were: forklifts, grinders,



### REBAR STATION

Robbinsville Township, like all towns, stipulated that prior to building a stone structure a concrete construction was required. To do this innumerable frames of stainless steel rods were made and concrete poured into them to form pillars, floors and walls. The steel rods enhanced the strength of the structure. To fulfil this requirement a rebar station was operated by female youth volunteers, who cut steel rods and strips and bent them to make the required framework.

In all, the women volunteers prepared 5,000 steel rod frames during the construction work.





chop saws, high power drills, bench press hall machines, scissor lifts, dremels, electric saws stone buffers, hammers, mitre saws, caulking guns and tools for making *murtis*.

\* \* \*

#### **KINJALBEN (Cincinnati)**

Kinjalben and her husband were inspired to serve at Robbinsville after seeing the *First of Its Kind* webseries, about how the devotee volunteers of London had served in creating the BAPS mandir.

In March 2022, both of them came to serve for three months. Soon, the joy of doing *seva* was so overwhelming that Kinjalben decided to stay till the end. She did full-time *seva* and studied for her MBA degree in the evenings. Initially she became tired, because she had not done

physically demanding *seva* of breaking open the wooden crates containing carved stones. She was also apprehensive about using sharp-edged tools. In spite of all this, she persisted with the motive of pleasing Mahant Swami Maharaj and overcame her fatigue and fear. Then, with training, she learnt how to operate a forklift and obtained a certified driver's license. Soon, she started transporting stones to the on-site locations.

Out of her wish to please Swamishri, Kinjalben grasped the opportunity of *seva* and thus experienced inner joy and confidence.

#### **NIKITABEN (Cleveland)**

Nikitaben is an optometrist. She was the team leader responsible for washing and



*The art of giving is what teaches you the art of living, and this is a living proof of it. I met this girl, married, from Miami, who had done seva for a year, and the satisfaction I saw on her face was absolutely amazing. That's what people eventually look for – that satisfaction. This is what success is all about.*

**Suniel Shetty**  
Bollywood Actor

weatherproofing the carved stones. In the beginning, she and her team washed about 10 stones daily. Then, she was told to wash 25 stones every day. Nikitaben thought, with only a few women volunteers and limited machines, it would be difficult to fulfil the daily goal. So, she and another volunteer, Kaveriben, thought of an efficient way to accelerate their work. They used a forklift to form a line of two stones arranged together and thus washed them at the same time. Once the stones were washed another line was arranged. In this manner, the women volunteers achieved their goal in spite of shortage of machinery and volunteers.

### NISHABEN (Robbinsville)

From January 2022, Nishaben and her husband joined full-time site *seva* till October 2023. Her husband offered *seva* in the electrical department and assembled the Akshardham lights and other fittings. Nishaben was the leader of the on-site *padkha* (shuttering) *seva*. Daily, she travelled with her husband to the site. At the end of the day, she would often have to wait for her husband to finish. Nishaben utilized the waiting time to read satsang books, sing *cheshta* and do *mala* for Swamishri's health. On some days, when her husband finished *seva* at 2 a.m., Nishaben slept in the car.

In spite of an exhausting day in *seva*, Nishaben always practised her routine bhakti.

### DHRUVIKABEN (Robbinsville)

A dentist by profession, Dhruvikaben did site *seva* for about 1½ years. She served in the



medical department but also contributed in doing various *seva* like *padkha*, *jagati peeth* and handling stones in the open field (*khetar*).

Once, after hearing about the opportunity of sculpting stones, she felt the work was quite similar to what she does as a dentist. She was given a small piece of marble and told to carve a *murti* of a deva from the drawing provided to her. She ordered sculpting tools and took three hours to sculpt her first *murti*. When swamis were shown the small sculpture they were astonished by the detailed carving and beauty of the *murti*. Thereafter, Dhruvikaben became part of the women's sculpturing team. She also sculpted small *murtis* of Shriji Maharaj.

It is amazing what one can accomplish with devotion and finesse.

*It was just so overwhelming that on each square inch you could spend an hour. It's hard to get past the visual beauty of it. The wonderful structure that everybody participated in building together is exactly the kind of thing that the world needs right now. To me, this is just an incredible feat.*

Heidi Campbell  
State Senator, Tennessee



*This summer, I was here visiting,  
They were three medical students,  
When I asked them their story,  
that females could lay stones, and  
thought to myself, “You know how*



*and I got to see three young women.  
and they were here to lay stones.  
they said, “Well, this is the first time  
we wanted to be the first.” And I  
incredible that is to*

*get our young people out of TikTok and off Instagram and put their phones  
down to actually volunteer and to be part of the community.”*

*What you are teaching our youth is something that is so important because the  
next generation needs to become a part of our community, and for that,  
it is something that you should be very proud of.*

David Fried, Mayor, Robbinsville

### ARTIBEN (Edison)

Artiben did *seva* in the public flow department for the entire Akshardham Mahotsav. Every day, from July to October, she woke up at 2.15 a.m., cooked food for her family and was the first to arrive in Robbinsville mandir at around 4 a.m. She did her *seva* sincerely and happily, in rain or shine. Once, she became sick, so her department lead told her to leave early and take rest. However, she finished her *seva* and only left thereafter.

On another occasion, another volunteer, Varshaben, was very tired after doing *seva* continuously for several hours. Artiben approached her and told her to take a break while she performed her *seva*. All were impressed by her spirit of *seva*.

### SEVA WITH UNITY

■ During the Akshardham Mahotsav: Festival of Inspirations, a large marquee, Yagnapurush Sabhagruh, was erected on the Akshardham grounds. Swamishri's morning puja and evening assemblies were often held in the *sabhagruh*. The marquee had over 8,000 chairs for the audience. In the beginning, the entire floor of the marquee was covered with large pieces of stone gravel. To make the floor comfortable the task of spreading a plastic

tarpaulin over the gravel was assigned to 40 women volunteers. This meant they would have to remove and stack the 8,000 chairs on one side and then spread the tarpaulin. Since the women's force was short in numbers, 100 more women volunteers joined them from other departments and together they accomplished the task in one hour.

■ Once, during late evening, the Yogiraj Dining Hall, adjacent to the Yagnapurush Sabhagruh, was flooded by a sudden heavy downpour. The water had to be urgently pumped out and the floor dried for the next morning's breakfast arrangements. The women volunteers of the dining facilities, visitors' flow and *yagna* departments joined hands to pump out the water and prepared the dining hall for the following morning.

■ On the evening of 24 July 2022, Swamishri expressed his wish to do *pujan* of Tapomurti Nilkanth Varni. Many devotees had assembled for darshan of this momentous occasion. However, two women volunteers of the security department had not done Swamishri's darshan since the day he arrived. When Anjuben, the kitchen lead, came to know of this, she told them to go for darshan while she took care of their duty.

Anjuben's spirit of *samp* is commendable. ♦

# Voices of Volunteers

*BAPS Swaminarayan Akshardham is a testament to the love,  
dedication and skill of over 12,500 volunteers,  
who came together from all corners of North America to build this  
architectural wonder that aims to last thousands of years.*



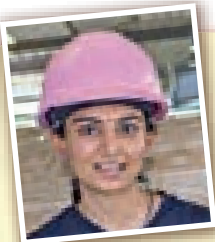
It will be a great  
memory for me, a  
lifetime of memories.  
**Babu, Boston, MA**



One thing I've  
learned from other  
volunteers  
is selflessness.  
**Jenni, Minneapolis, MN**



Volunteering here  
was a no brainer. An  
opportunity like this  
has never been before  
and will never come  
after this.  
**Manav, Tampa, FL**



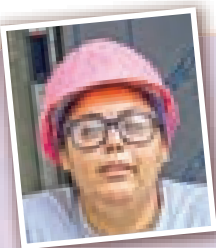
I know that this  
mandir is going to  
stand for thousands  
of years and I  
wanted to be a part  
of a legacy that was  
greater than me.  
**Nidhi, San Jose, CA**



Everything that I've  
done with volunteer  
work here is gonna  
stick with me for the  
rest of my life.  
**Upal, San Jose, CA**



Something that I  
have learned while  
I have volunteered  
here for so long is that  
everybody here treats  
and respects each  
other like a family.  
**Yesha, Chicago, IL**



We've all come together for such a beautiful cause, and so many people have sacrificed so much. I have so much more respect for this generation.

**Nilam**  
Westborough, MA



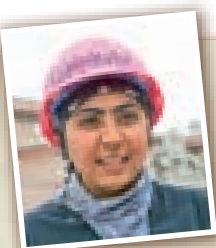
Site seva has made a big impact on my life. Being here every day for three months, it truly has become my home.

**Upasna, San Diego, CA**  
Student (Biology)



This opportunity would never come again. I'm a first-year student studying artificial intelligence at King's College, London. I am here for *seva* for a month.

**Vatsal, Harrow, UK**  
Student



I learned unity as well as patience here. I work as an ER nurse. I am used to fast-paced environments, and something that I live by is always being on the go.

**Devanshi, Gainesville, FL**  
ER Nurse



I'm a resident at Rutgers NJMS. I think being here, I've learned how to be a better leader, how to be a better team player and give my best effort.

**Prit, Flushing, NY**  
Medical Resident



I feel like I'm getting stronger because I'm doing things I've never done before. But I'm also learning new things by meeting new people.

**Vandana**  
Charlotte, NC



I do what needs to be done: as a project manager, a site superintendent, a labourer, or simply getting my hands dirty setting up a water pump because we all believe in the idea of Akshardham.

**Bhaarat Patel**  
Bensalem, Pennsylvania



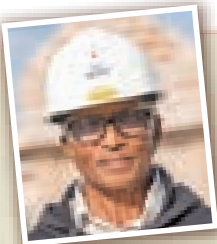
I had used an angle grinder, a cutter, a crowbar, and that my experiences taught me I could learn beyond my limits.

**Roshni Panchal**  
Missouri City, Texas



I'm not just building something external by volunteering here; I'm also working on myself. I'm helping build my own Akshardham – an Akshardham within me.

**Bhagwat Parekh**  
East Windsor, New Jersey



We had hundreds of women volunteers on-site. Once the volunteer artisans and experienced builders like me had trained them, the women volunteers worked in women-led teams.

**Dinesh Patel**  
Memphis, Tennessee



Every stone, every part of this mandir is touched by God, and so are the people building it. Volunteering in Akshardham has expanded the ways I can connect with others.

**Harmiksha Patel**  
Brampton, Ontario



With the right sentiments, there is no real difference between physical service on-site and devotion we offer in the mandir. Every stone we place, every stone we dip, is an offering to God.

**Nilkanth Rao**  
Rosedale, Maryland







# Murti of Bhagwan Swaminarayan

*Arriving at the footsteps of Swaminarayan Akshardham,  
the devout feel a divine surge of awe and reverence.*

*Every step takes one closer to the divine murtis enshrined in the inner sanctums.*

*The sight of the entrance is a sheer delight for connoisseurs of art and architecture.*

*The first view of the divine majestic murti of Bhagwan Swaminarayan is mesmerizing.*

## **GARBHAGRUHA (SANCTUM SANCTORUM)**

The oval-shaped Parabrahma Mandapam before the *garbhagruha* is 65 feet high, 55 feet long and 36 feet wide. It is a place where devotees stand, kneel or squat on the marble floor to do darshan, pray and meditate.

This oval-shaped dome is replete with ornate marble carvings of small and big *murtis*. It stands on gigantic snow-white marble pillars, with intricate carvings and seven-foot-high *murtis*. The four massive carved pillars in the foreground of the sanctum sanctorum have four seven-foot-tall *murtis* of Dharmadev, Bhaktimata, Jnan and Vairagya.

The central shrine or the main *garbhagruha* is 25 by 25 feet and houses the beautiful *panchdhatu* 15½ ft high golden *murti* of Bhagwan Swaminarayan. By his feet is the sitting or *sevakbhav*-postured *panchdhatu murti* of Gunatitanand Swami, with folded hands and eyes solely fixed on him. The expression of devotional service oozes from Gunatitanand Swami's face and posture.



Mahant Swami Maharaj gives instructions for making the *murtis*

## DIVINE MURTI OF BHAGWAN SWAMINARAYAN

Bhagwan Swaminarayan's face is slightly tilted to the left and exudes a compassionate smile and grace. The *murti* is installed on an intricately carved *sinhasan* decorated with two elephants at its base and two *hansas* (swans) by his sides. The entire bronze *sinhasan* is ornately carved and adorned with peacocks. The *murti* is adorned with a traditional *pagh* or *feto*, his right hand is raised in the *abhay mudra* (symbolizing protection) and left hand in the *varad mudra* (granting a request or favour). His left foot rests on a small decorated pedestal and his right foot rests on his left knee. The golden *panchdhatu murti* is draped in a traditional *angarkhu* (upper cloth), *khes* (stole) that runs around his left shoulder, waistband (*reto*) and *jamo* or *surwal* (lower garment). The three inner walls of the *garbhagruha* are decorated with stained glass with floral and cosmic etchings, symbolizing the five elements of earth, water, light, wind and space. There are two beautifully framed *murtis* of Akshar-Purushottam Maharaj on the two side walls of the *garbhagruha*.

## GUIDELINES FOR MAKING THE MURTIS

During the planning stage of Akshardham, Pramukh Swami Maharaj had specifically

instructed that the *murtis* of Shri Akshar-Purushottam Maharaj be installed in the main sanctum sanctorum (*garbhagruha*). Initially, the *murtis*' design was planned as per the images consecrated in Akshardham, New Delhi.

On 26 April 2018, in Akshardham, New Delhi, an informal meeting of senior swamis was held in the presence of Mahant Swami Maharaj to discuss about the *murtis* of Akshardham in Robbinsville. Mahant Swami Maharaj gave important instructions for making the *murtis* of Bhagwan Swaminarayan and Gunatitanand Swami:

1. Maharaj should look like a 16-year-old teenager.
2. The *murti* should appear serene and luminous.
3. Bhagwan Swaminarayan's face be slightly tilted towards the left and his lips should have a sweet smile, inviting and acknowledging the devotees and aspirants before him.
4. His eyes should ooze with love for all.
5. His ear should lobes be a little longer than all the other *murtis*.
6. Maharaj's left foot should rest on a small decorated pedestal with his right leg bent at the knee, resting on the left knee.



Mahant Swami Maharaj visits the mandir workshop and gives important instructions about Nilkanth Varni's and Bhagwan Swaminarayan's *murtis*



About Gunatitanand Swami's *murti*, Mahant Swami Maharaj suggested:

It should be similar to the one in Akshardham, New Delhi, kneeling, and praying with folded hands to Maharaj. He should appear, from head to toe, in a posture of absolute *dasbhav* and *sevakbhav*.

Swamishri then instructed the swamis to prepare sketches and make a model of Bhagwan Swaminarayan's *murti*.

Once the sketches were ready, they were shown to Mahant Swami Maharaj in Rajkot. There were two drawings: 1. Bhagwan Swaminarayan's drawing from head to toe and 2. Bhagwan Swaminarayan's detailed face as suggested by Mahant Swami Maharaj.

Swamishri studied these sketches for over an hour. Thereafter, using a pencil he made slight changes by elongating the edges of the eyes, extending the earlobes a little and trimming the cheeks. Subsequently, the sketch was finalized and ready for making a clay model and then into a *panchdhatu murti*.

### CLAY MODEL

On 6 September 2018, when the clay model of Bhagwan Swaminarayan's *murti* was ready, Mahant Swami Maharaj personally visited

the workshop in Gandhinagar. With utmost patience and attention, he keenly observed the model's facial expressions, headdress and attire. He made minor, yet important suggestions, and then personally took a scalpel to carve the arch of Bhagwan Swaminarayan's feet more deeply. The suggestions he gave were as follows:

1. Slightly lower the eyes so that Maharaj looks straight at and welcomes the devotees.
2. Make the *kanthi* sharp and finely long.
3. Make the earlobes finer and longer.
4. Lower the *pagh* or the headdress slightly over the forehead.



Observing the fine changes being made





Discussing about the *murti*



Swamishri points out the slight changes required

5. Show all the 16 holy signs on the soles of Maharaj's feet.
6. Straighten the toes and make them slender.
7. Make the *murti* 15½ feet tall.
8. Have the right hand raised in the *abhay mudra* and the left hand lowered in the *varad mudra*.

## SHANGAR (DRESS AND ORNAMENTS)

In 2019, the casting of the *murtis* of Bhagwan Swaminarayan and Gunatitanand Swami was done and its pictures were shown to Mahant Swami Maharaj in Bochasan. The swamis involved in making the *murtis* mentioned that the attire of Maharaj's *murti* could be coloured. Swamishri suggested that the designs on the *khes* (stole) be of light purple with a red border, and the hem of the upper dress (*angarkhu*) and *pagh* (traditional headdress) be in red.

## SINHASAN

A king's throne (*sinhasan*) is normally decorated with lions and peacocks, however, swamis involved in making Bhagwan Swaminarayan's *murti* took inspiration from a letter, written in 1970, by Mahant Swami Maharaj. Swamishri had drawn a beautiful swan (*hansa*) on an inland letter (with a *mala* in its mouth as a symbol of devotion) to represent a *paramhansa*. So, the throne has swans which symbolize Bhagwan Swaminarayan's *paramhansas*, who had sacrificed their lives for him.

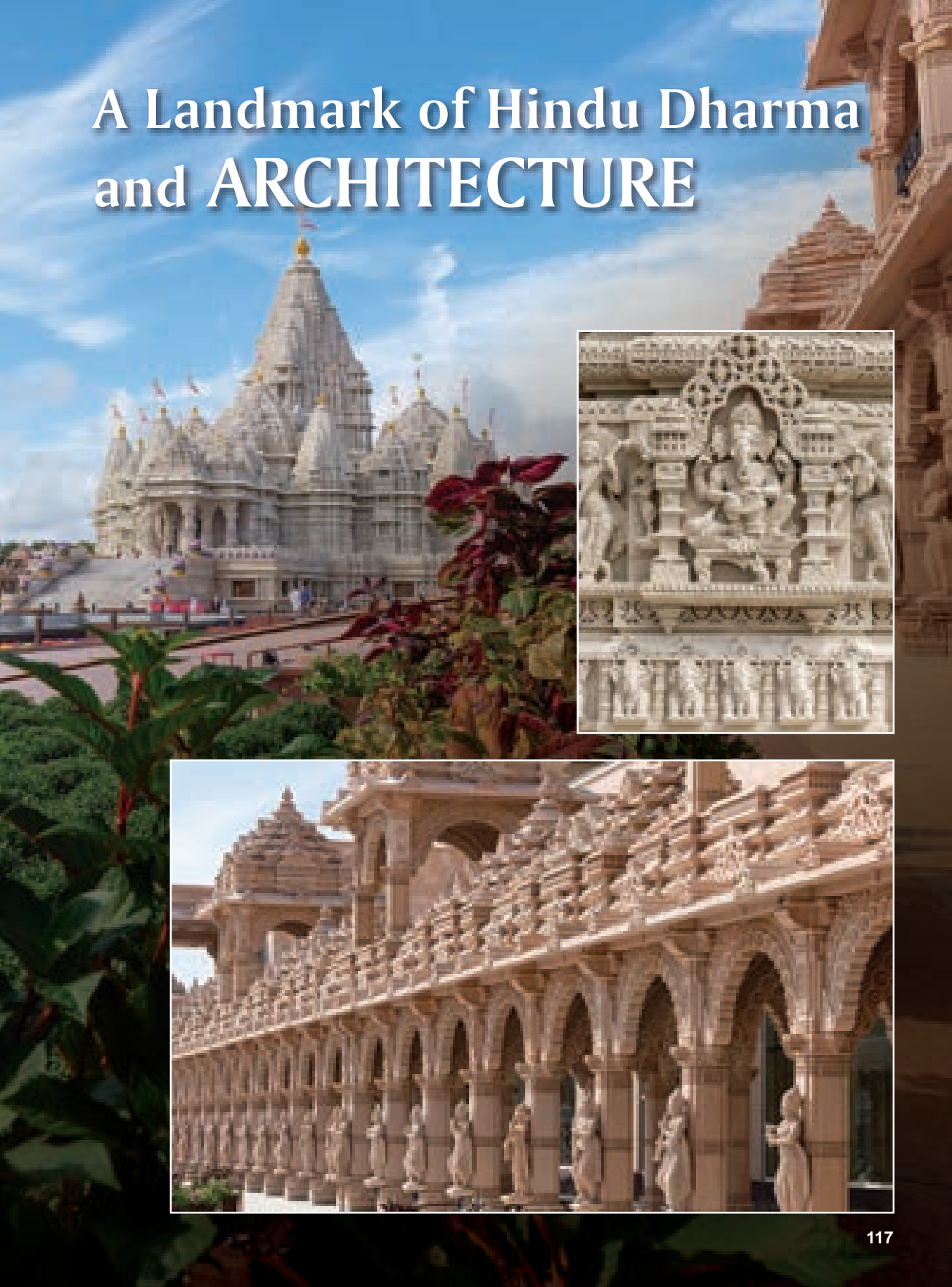
The beautifully intricate carved *sinhasan* is made of bronze with two swans on both sides and elephants below it. The huge *sinhasan* with Bhagwan Swaminarayan's *murti* has a smaller *murti* of Gunatitanand Swami kneeling on the floor.

Mahant Swami Maharaj selected the special stone used for the eyes of Bhagwan Swaminarayan's *murti*.

## CONSECRATION OF MURTIS

On 8 October 2023, around 10.30 a.m., Mahant Swami Maharaj performed the *pran-pratishtha* of the *murtis* of Bhagwan Swaminarayan and Gunatitanand Swami. During the consecration ceremony he ritually touched various parts of the *murtis* to *infuse the divinities*. Thereafter, the *murtis* were ready for darshan, worship and devotional offerings. ♦

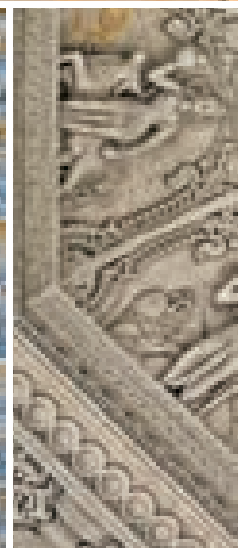
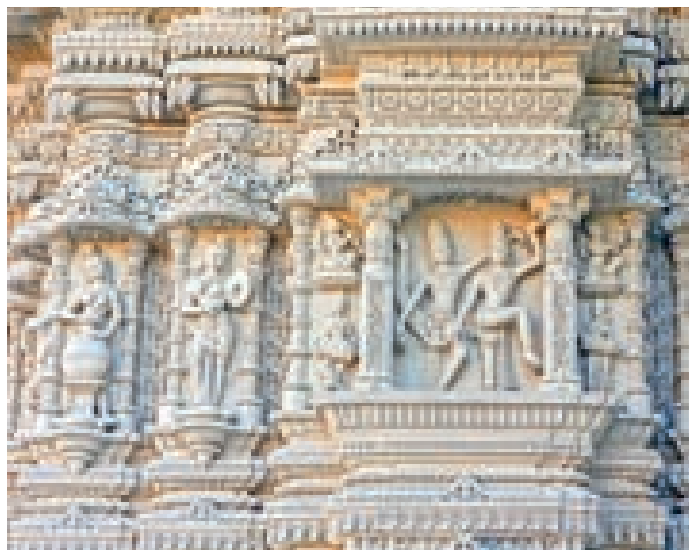
# A Landmark of Hindu Dharma and ARCHITECTURE

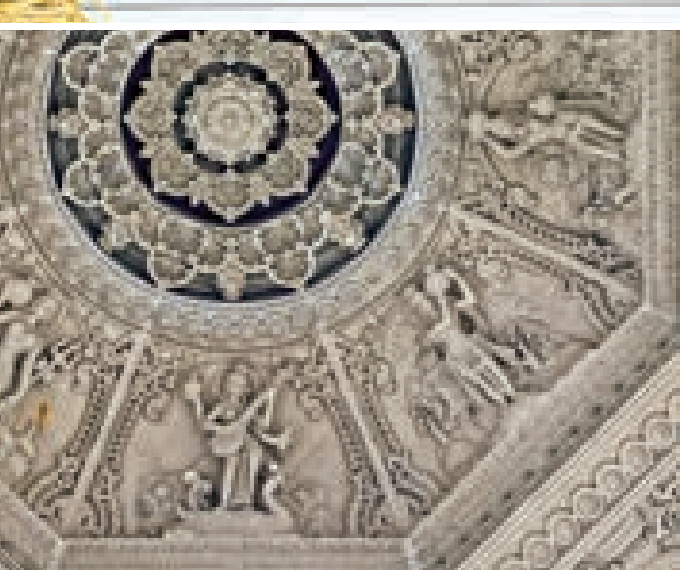
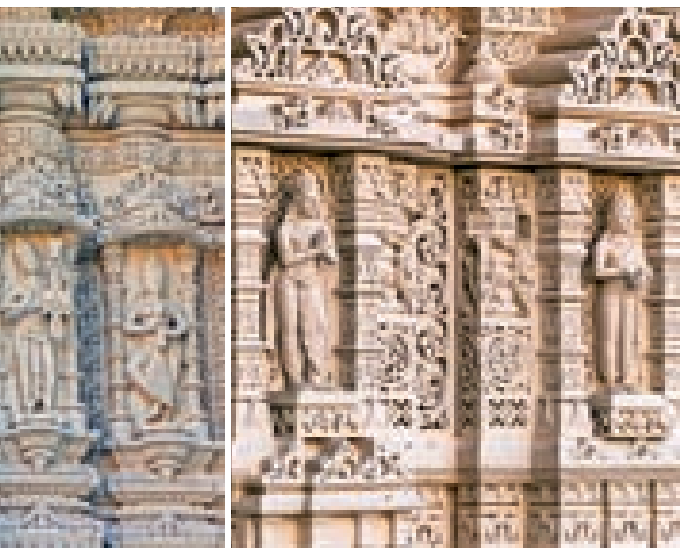




Akshardham, Robbinsville, is an architectural wonder coupled with the universal wisdom of Sanatan Dharma. It is a *mahamandir* or mega-temple of Sanatan Dharma, depicting faith and values on every stone and corner of the entire complex. Some highlights of the various aspects of Sanatan Dharma included, from the early Vedic period to our modern era, are as follows.

- ♦ After entering the complex, one sees a huge rectangular pond (Brahma Kund), designed in the ancient step-well tradition of India. It has statues of our four principal sacred rivers, 48 *shikhars* and 24 small shrines. This pond contains sanctified water and traces of holy soil from 555 sacred places in India and the world, thus making it a modern pilgrimage place for devotees and spiritual aspirants.
- ♦ In the foreground of Brahma Kund, is a 49-foot-tall metallic *murti* of Shri Nilkanth Varni in an austere, yogic pose.
- ♦ When one enters the central complex of Swaminarayan Akshardham and walks towards the *mahamandir*, the wide boulevard, known as the Vedic Path, is flanked by rectangular ponds on either side. On the four corners of the ponds are unique statues of the Rig Veda, Yajur Veda, Sama Veda and Atharva Veda – the earliest fundamental shastras of Sanatan Dharma.
- ♦ The main *mahamandir* and *parikrama* are designed according to the ancient *shilpashastras*. The *mahamandir* is built on the guidelines of the Pushya *nakshatra* (constellation) and the *parikrama* is adorned with statues of *gandharvas* (celestial beings) and *muktas* playing various musical instruments.
- ♦ The *mahamandir*'s 20-foot-high base plinth or *jagati*, also known as the Wisdom Plinth, showcases panels of inspiring messages from the Vedas, Upanishads, Bhagavad Gita, Purans and other shastras. The Wisdom





Plinth also displays the messages of Bhagwan Swaminarayan, Bhagwan Krishna, Bhagwan Buddha, Bhagwan Mahavir, and renowned devotees like Mirabai, Sant Rohidas, Sant Tiruvalluvar and others.

- ◆ In the vestibule or *swagat mandapam* of the *mahamandir*, marble *murtis* of *muktas* welcome the visitors with *amrut kalashes* and flower garlands as per Indian tradition.
- ◆ According to the ancient Hindu tradition of music, dance and art, the outside walls of the Akshardham *mandovar* are embellished with statues of 108 different dance postures as mentioned by Bharat Muni in Bharatnatyam. Each statue is 4½ feet tall. Some of these statues are installed in traditional and ancient Hindu mandirs, but for the first time statues in all 108 postures have been installed in Akshardham. There are also more than 200 statues of devis, each 4½ feet tall, with various Indian musical instruments in remembrance of Sarasvati Devi.
- ◆ There are 131 *murtis* of Vedic rishis, Sanatan Dharma's great emperors and devotees, great acharyas, saint-poets, rishi-scientists like Aryabhata and Varahamihir, and surgeons and medical experts like Sushruta and Charaka.
- ◆ At the main entrance of Akshardham lies the Tirth Domes, on whose ceilings are portrayed the *murtis* of the sacred rivers and holy places

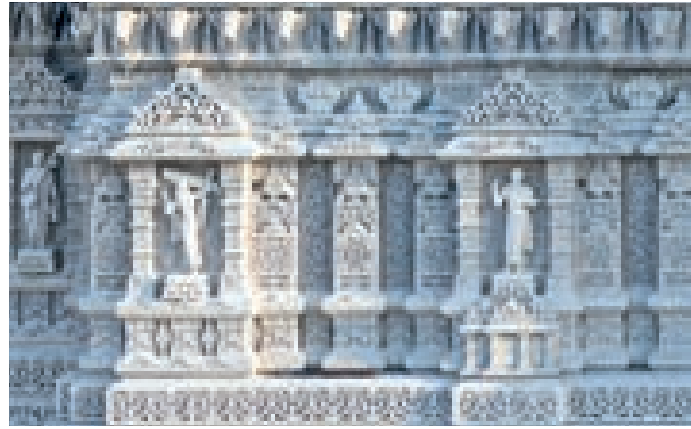
*“This is a first experience for me to be at a temple like this. It’s amazing to see the architecture, the time and effort that’s put into it. Everybody’s very humble and kind and I think that speaks well of the people and their beliefs. I’m just impressed by everyone that I’ve met here.”*

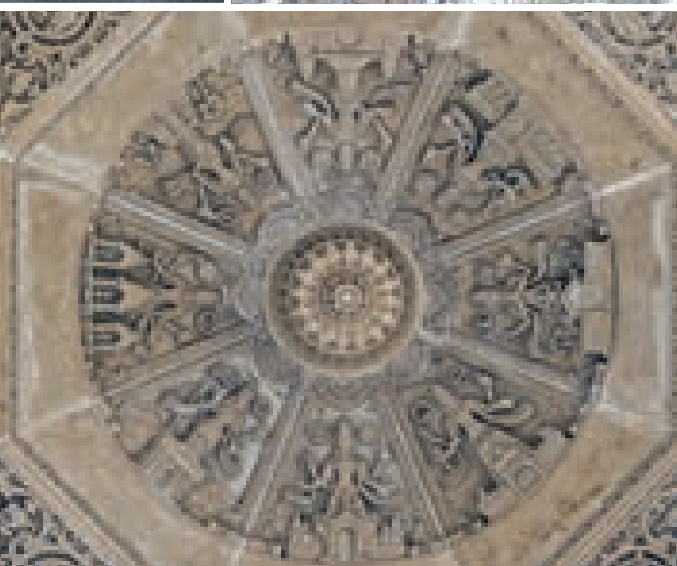
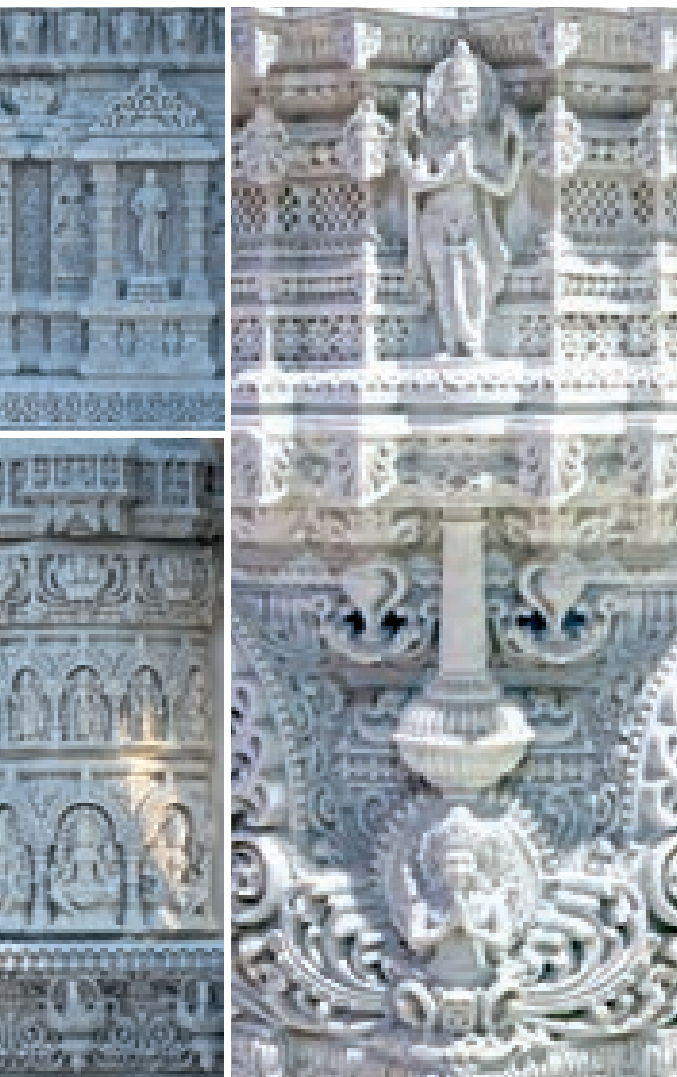
Josh Carnley

Alabama State Senator, District 31

of India like Ganga, Yamuna, Sarasvati, Saryu and others, and Badrinath, Kedarnath, Muktinath, Chhapaiya, Jagannathpuri. On the robust entrance pillars are 24 *murtis* of Shri Ganeshji and ornate *murtis* of Lakshmiji, Durga, Sarasvatiji, Vasu, Aditya, Gopis and 24 Keshavs.

- ◆ In the basement of the *mahamandir* lies the Devika Mandapam. Here, the stone windows in the walls have the *murtis* of Parvatiji, Lakshmiji, Radhaji, Savitriji, Rukminiji and other devis.
- ◆ On the main floor of Akshardham are the beautiful shrines (*garbhagruhas*) with larger-than-life *murtis* of Bhagwan Shiv-Parvatiji-Ganeshji and Kartikeyaji, Bhagwan Shri Krishna-Radhaji, Bhagwan Shri Ram-Sitaji-Laxmanji and Hanumanji, and Bhagwan Shri Tirupati-Padmavati. In the main central shrine, are the *murtis* of Bhagwan Swaminarayan and Aksharbrahma Gunatitanand Swami. The *murtis* of the Gunatit gurus are installed in separate shrines.
- ◆ On some pillars in Akshardham are 8-foot-high tableaux of Yagnavalkya Rishi engaged in a philosophical dialogue with Gargi, Shri Krishna and Arjun engaged in a dialogue, Bhagwan Veda Vyas absorbed in a dialogue with his disciples. Sanatan Dharma's Prasthantrayi is also displayed in various forms to portray India's philosophical legacy.
- ◆ On several pillars of Akshardham, 96 stories from the Upanishads, Ramayan, Mahabharat and Bhagvat are displayed in mini-tableaux form.
- ◆ There are 7-foot-high artistic carvings exhibiting Sanatan Dharma's legacy of Yoga, Ayurveda, the bhakti tradition, and the sanctity of cows and tulsi plants. There are marble carvings of venerable trees, such as the *ashwatha*, *vat*, *ashok*, *amra*, *shami*, neem and others. Thus, Sanatan Dharma's veneration for nature is idolized here.
- ◆ In the Aishwarya Mandapam, the statues of





Indra, Varun, Vayu and other Rig Vedic gods are installed on ornately carved pillars. In addition, *murtis* of Shiv-Parvati, Lakshmi-Narayan, Brahma-Savitri, Nar-Narayan, Radha-Krishna, Vithoba-Rukmai, Baldev-Revati, Akshar-Purushottam Maharaj are installed on many pillars. There are also 96 *murtis* of *sants*, devotees and noble souls from the ancient and medieval periods.

- ◆ In the Aksharbrahma Mandapam are beautiful ornate carvings of the Upanishadic principles of the cosmic time-cycle: 12 months, 24 *pakshas* (certain section of days), 27 *nakshatras* (constellations) and 12 zodiac signs.
- ◆ Akshardham pays homage to one of Sanatan Dharma's greatest proponents, Bhagwan Swaminarayan. His life, work and philosophy are displayed through sculptures on marble pillars and walls. Also, there are 78 seven-foot-tall *murtis* of Bhagwan Swaminarayan's *paramhansas*, who had devoted their lives in promoting the culture and values of Sanatan Dharma.
- ◆ In summary, Akshardham portrays the deities, shastras, philosophy, saints, holy places and traditions of Sanatan Dharma. ◆

—◆—

*“Really, truly I have no other word than awe-inspiring. The architecture and art that is contained here is beyond anything I've seen. I felt like I couldn't stop looking at what was around me and just a real appreciation for the artists and artisans and people who constructed this place and the logistics of putting that all together.”*

**Baninder Goomer**

Chief Academic Officer  
Edison Township Public Schools

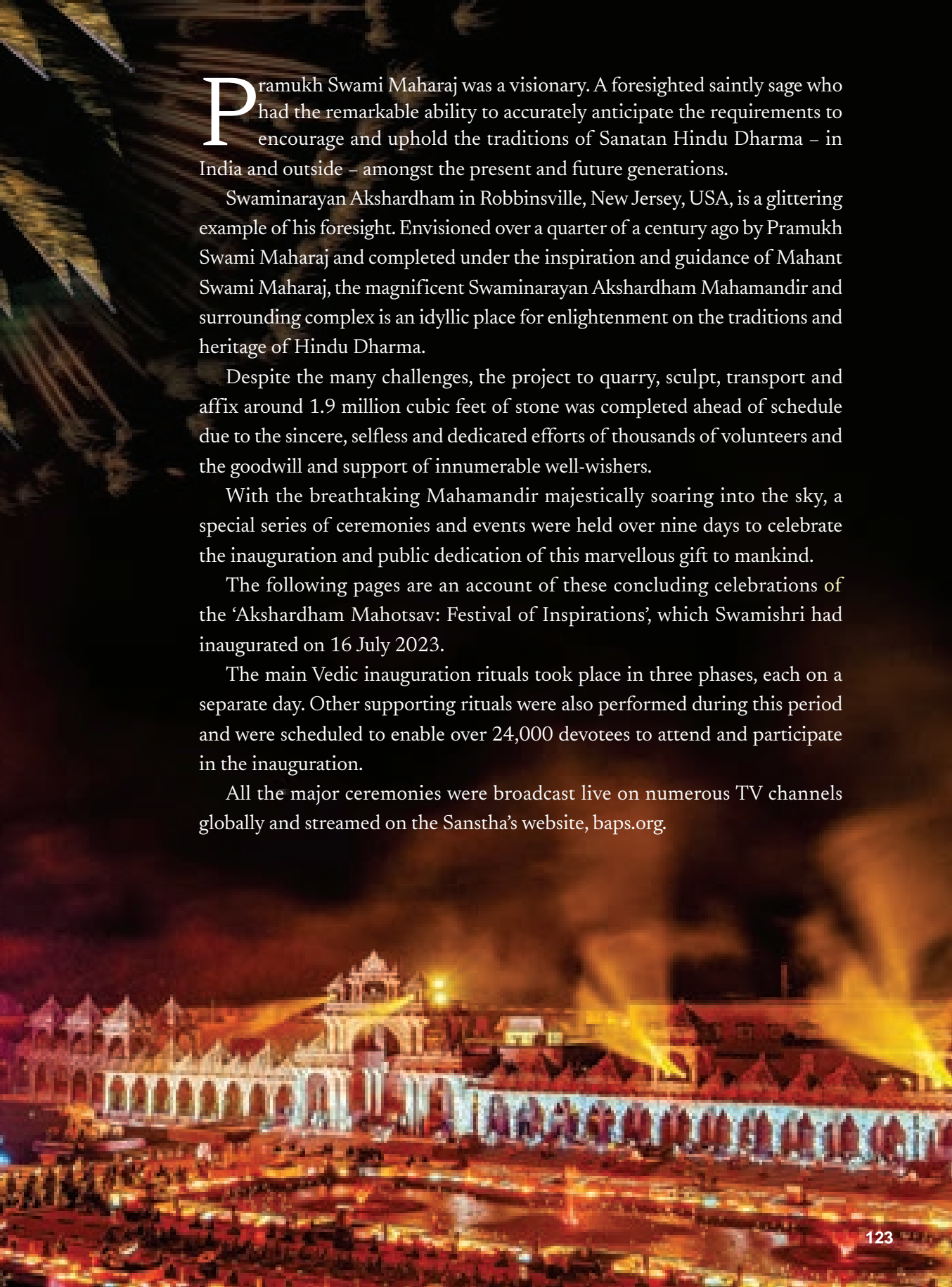




# Swaminarayan Akshardham INAUGURATION Ceremonies and Events

30 September to 8 October 2023





**P**ramukh Swami Maharaj was a visionary. A foresighted saintly sage who had the remarkable ability to accurately anticipate the requirements to encourage and uphold the traditions of Sanatan Hindu Dharma – in India and outside – amongst the present and future generations.

Swaminarayan Akshardham in Robbinsville, New Jersey, USA, is a glittering example of his foresight. Envisioned over a quarter of a century ago by Pramukh Swami Maharaj and completed under the inspiration and guidance of Mahant Swami Maharaj, the magnificent Swaminarayan Akshardham Mahamandir and surrounding complex is an idyllic place for enlightenment on the traditions and heritage of Hindu Dharma.

Despite the many challenges, the project to quarry, sculpt, transport and affix around 1.9 million cubic feet of stone was completed ahead of schedule due to the sincere, selfless and dedicated efforts of thousands of volunteers and the goodwill and support of innumerable well-wishers.

With the breathtaking Mahamandir majestically soaring into the sky, a special series of ceremonies and events were held over nine days to celebrate the inauguration and public dedication of this marvellous gift to mankind.

The following pages are an account of these concluding celebrations of the ‘Akshardham Mahotsav: Festival of Inspirations’, which Swamishri had inaugurated on 16 July 2023.

The main Vedic inauguration rituals took place in three phases, each on a separate day. Other supporting rituals were also performed during this period and were scheduled to enable over 24,000 devotees to attend and participate in the inauguration.

All the major ceremonies were broadcast live on numerous TV channels globally and streamed on the Sanstha’s website, [baps.org](http://baps.org).





# Prasad Pravesh and **MURTI-PRATISHTHA** of Shri Nilkanth Varni Maharaj Session 1

Day 1: 30 September 2023

In the morning, Mahant Swami Maharaj arrived at the *mahamandir*. First, he performed the Prasad Pravesh ceremony, which is traditionally performed when entering a new premise for the first time.

From early morning *sadgurus* and other swamis had commenced the Vasta Homa under the Welcome Dome (*swagat mandapam*) at the main entrance of



(Top, clockwise) Mahant Swami Maharaj offers *mantra-pushpanjali* while performing *pujan* of the water of sacred rivers. Devotees participate in the *mahapuja* ceremony. Swamishri performs *arti* during the Prasad Pravesh ritual

the Akshardham Mahamandir. Swamishri performed the concluding rituals and offered a *shrifal* (coconut) into the sacred *homa* flame.

Then, *sadguru* swamis split coconuts by the main entrance door and Swamishri entered the *mahamandir* with Shri Akshar-Purushottam Maharaj and thereafter performed the *arti*.

Inside, before the main *garbhagruha* in the Parabrahma Mandapam, Swamishri performed the *pujan* of 30 *kalashes* containing soil and water from 555 pilgrim places from throughout India and the world. This will enable all visitors to attain the fruits of pilgrimaging to all these sacred sites.

After the rituals here, Swamishri blessed the assembly, “Yogi Bapa often said, ‘*Nirdosh buddhi*

is the gateway to Akshardham.’ So, to reach Akshardham, we must all develop *nirdosh buddhi*. And since everyone is focused on *nirdosh buddhi*, you have gained entry into Akshardham. All the youths, *karyakars*, volunteers, *santo* and devotees have physically toiled to create this Akshardham. Everyone has played a part, without exception. Truly, so much effort. Through everyone’s *seva*, this divine Akshardham has been created. Pramukh Swami Maharaj had a grand vision and this Akshardham is the physical result.”

Then, placing his hand on his *pagh*, Swamishri gazed upwards at the towering dome and said, “This Akshardham is divine, heavenly, grand. It is not possible to describe it. It is beyond



Representatives light the inaugural lamp



one's intellect. Shriji Maharaj himself will reward everyone for their tremendous physical endeavours and wholehearted support. The glory of this Akshardham will be sung for countless years and will remain divine, divine, divine."

Thereafter, Swamishri inaugurated an English book titled *People of Akshardham*, prepared under the guidance of Mangalnidhi Swami, which documents the enormous efforts of and spiritual disciplines practised by volunteers while serving to create Akshardham.

From here, Swamishri went to the Nilkanth Varni Abhishek Mandap on the ground floor. Swamishri performed the *murti-pratishtha* rituals and performed the first *abhishek* of Shri Nilkanth Varni Maharaj.

Pujya Ishwarcharan Swami voiced numerous prayers and Swamishri joined everyone in chanting the Swaminarayan *dhun* to pray for their fulfilment.

## CELEBRATING SANATAN DHARMA

In the evening, leaders, organizers, trustees, and representatives of over 400 Hindu mandirs and organizations from throughout the USA

attended the 'Celebrating Sanatan Dharma' assembly to collectively honour the timeless values of peace, harmony and unity advocated by ancient Hindu shastras

Pujya Viveksagardas Swami spoke about how Sanatan Dharma has been the backbone of India, even through testing times. Thereafter, Pujya Ishwarcharandas Swami narrated how Bhagwan Swaminarayan and the *gunati* guru *parampara* have nurtured the practice of Sanatan Dharma through their spiritual travels and teachings based on the sacred Hindu texts.

After a melodious recital of Vedic verses by children, teenagers and youths, Bhadreshdas Swami emphasized how the wisdom imparted in the Vedas, Bhagavad Gita, and other Hindu shastras help individuals and families to progress spiritually and live a morally pure life. Aksharvatsaldas Swami spoke about the role mandirs continue to play in the daily life of Hindus and Anandswarupdas Swami highlighted the key role of *sants* in nurturing Sanatan Hindu Dharma.

Award-winning poet, author and founder of the Vedic Academy of Science and Arts, Mr Jeffrey Armstrong (Kavindra Rishi), said, "I am



Group photo of representatives of Hindu mandirs and organizations with Swamishri

convinced that this is the mothership of Vedic knowledge. This is the beginning of the next phase of the Vedic renaissance, of the Vedic Sanatan Dharma culture, worldwide.”

Padma Bhushan Ved Nanda, Chairman of the Hindu University of America, remarked, “When Hindu dharma talks about Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam it means not only am I tolerating you, but I am accepting you. Not only am I accepting you, I am respecting you. Not only am I respecting you, I celebrate you. That is Hindu dharma.”

Pujya Swami Mukundananda Ji, founder of Jagadguru Kripalu Ji Yog, said, “We are so happy to have 400 organizations of our Sanatan Dharma gather here to celebrate the accomplishment of one of our organizations, the BAPS Swaminarayan Sampradaya. We honour the devotion in their hearts. We take inspiration from their guru bhakti. This message of unity within diversity and diversity within unity is the special gift of our Hindu faith to the world.”

Swami Govinddev Giri, Treasurer of the Shri Ram Janmabhoomi Teerth Kshetra Trust, addressed the audience, “Through deep faith

and conviction this mandir has been built and will benefit all Hindus present here and beyond. I believe that one can gain a comprehensive understanding of Hindu culture just by visiting this place. By observing each sacred image in the mandir, your perspective on Bharat and Hindu dharma will transform.”

Thereafter, Swamishri inaugurated a new English publication about Akshardham, *If Stones Could Sing...*, by Yogi Trivedi, a professor at Columbia University.

In his blessings, His Holiness Mahant Swami Maharaj said, “The work of creating mandirs is an extension of Sanatan Dharma, especially when it is paired with dedication. With this sentiment, Pramukh Swami Maharaj often said the pillars of Sanatan Dharma are the divine *sant*, mandirs and ancient shastras. His divine vision was to build Swaminarayan Akshardham to strengthen Sanatan Dharma for generations to come.”

Also in attendance were Dr Tony Nader, Head of International Transcendental Meditation; Dr Jai Bansal, Vice President of Education for Vishwa Hindu Parishad of America; and Shradhay Swami Swatmananda. ♦





# CELEBRATING INDIAN CULTURE

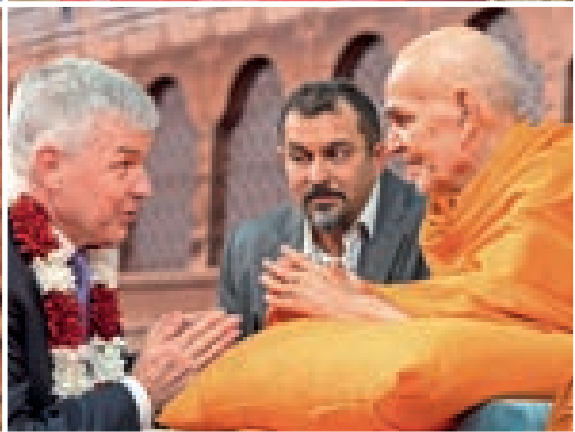
Day 2: 1 October 2023

In the morning, Pujya Kothari Bhaktipriyadas Swami and other senior swamis performed *pujan* in all the 12 *garbhagruhas* of the *mahamandir*. Devotees also participated in the *mahapuja* ceremony on this occasion. Also, in the *yagna* arena, Brahmins performed the *kutir homa*, as a prayer to seek forgiveness for any harm caused to insects and other life forms during the quarrying and construction process.

## CELEBRATING INDIA CULTURE

The evening ‘Celebrating Indian Culture’ assembly highlighted India’s rich and extensive history and heritage. Anandswarupdas Swami described how lifestyle, values and traditions define one’s culture and how Bhagwan Swaminarayan revived traditional arts, and improved the lifestyles of people in all strata of society by reinforcing the core values and practices of Hinduism.

Yogananddas Swami narrated a story from the Ramayan that revealed how character is rooted in the values and lessons passed down through the Hindu shastras and lives



(Top left clockwise) Ohio State Senator Niraj Antani. Illinois State Senator Seth Lewis. Rob Woodall, Former U.S. Representative, GA-07. Glenn Grothman, U.S. Representative, WI-06

of influential figures.

The practical application of how such cultural upbringing helps in personal and professional life was conveyed by two fathers. Mohak Shroff, senior VP and Head of Engineering at LinkedIn, and Dr Chirag Patel, an emergency physician and healthcare entrepreneur, shared how Hindu values have helped them to succeed in their careers and also establish a strong family rapport.

Illinois State Senator Seth Lewis said, “Akshardham here is an absolutely gorgeous place. It’s inspiring... the intricate details, the thousands of years of Hinduism that are permanently engraved in the stone.”

In his blessings, Mahant Swami Maharaj said, “Hindu culture teaches us to live with values, a primary one being to serve each other, and as a result, all problems will dissolve. Our culture teaches us

to see God in all and to live with pure intentions to see others flourish in their paths. Our culture inspires us to maintain family values, with unity and respect. It is a core reason why Pramukh Swami Maharaj has created Swaminarayan Akshardham, to encourage all to live by Indian values and carry them forward to future generations.”

Among the guests present were Representative Pete Sessions, Texas; State Senator Seth Lewis, Illinois; Don Tracy, Chairman of the Illinois Republican Party; State Senator Niraj Antani, Ohio; Hardha V. Agadi, CEO of Crawford & Company; Congressman/ Representative Glenn Grothman, Wisconsin; Dr Ravi Kapur, Co-Founder of BendBio; Austin Rabine, CEO of Rabine; Anu Mehta, Global Solutions Executive at Insight Technologies; and Joe Johal, CEO of Wendy’s of the Pacific. ♦





# DIKSHA MAHOTSAV

Day 3: 2 October 2023

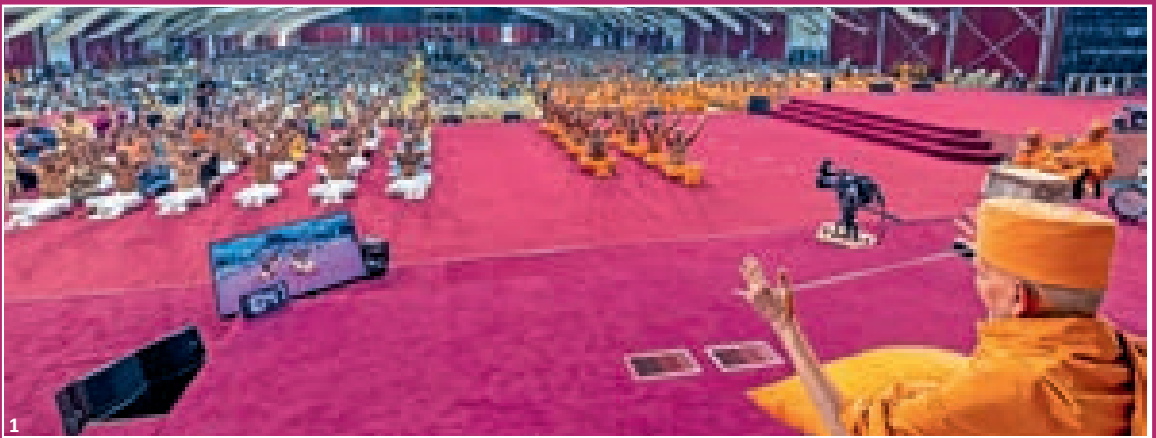
In the morning, Swamishri initiated 21 *sadhaks* into the *parshad* order and 9 *parshads* into the *sadhu* order. All these youths were American-born citizens, and had been serving on the Akshardham site for the past two years. Many possessed advanced degrees.

Prior to Swamishri's arrival, the *sadguru* swamis, new initiates and their close family members performed the preliminary *diksha mahapuja* rituals.

Swamishri then performed the concluding rituals and initiated the *parshads* and *sadhus* by giving each of them the guru mantra. The fathers and close male relatives of each *sadhak* were honoured and received Swamishri's blessings.

In the women's section, their mothers were honoured with garlands by senior women devotees.

Blessing the assembly, Swamishri expressed deep gratitude and appreciation for the parents of these young men who had selflessly raised and educated their sons with a desire for lifelong devotion. Speaking directly to the new *sadhus* Mahant Swami Maharaj said, "It is in your mind to serve God and society, otherwise you would not be sitting here today. There is much work to be done from here on. May you be successful on this spiritual path



1



2



3



4

1. Swamishri performs the *janoi* (*diksha*) ritual. 2. Congressman Ro Khanna, U.S. Representative, CA-17.

3. Congressman Shri Thanedar, U.S. Representative, MI-13. 4. Congressman Mark Takano, U.S. Representative, CA-39

of attaining God through your service.”

In the late afternoon, the *ghrutadhivas* and *jaladhivas* rituals of all *murtis* were performed in the *yagna* marquee. The *ghrutadhivas* ritual was performed by invoking the presence of each *murti* in specially prepared pictorial replicas which were then immersed in ghee. Thereafter, the pictorial *murtis* were then immersed in water (*jaladhivas*).

### CELEBRATING VALUES AND NON-VIOLENCE

The evening assembly celebrated the International Day of Non-Violence and the birth anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi by highlighting his advocacy of non-violence. The assembly also highlighted the values of faith, dedication and integrity exemplified by Brahmaswarup Shastriji Maharaj, the founding president of BAPS.

In his blessings, Mahant Swami Maharaj emphasized, “Non-violence is the path to

universal peace, from individuals to families to all of society. Bhagwan Swaminarayan established non-violence (*ahimsa*) as the highest form of our duty. Mahatma Gandhiji set a new measure to live in a non-violent manner. See God in all and believe that every person has a right to live. The path of *ahimsa* calls for each individual to live a pure life through thought, mind and action. Dr Martin Luther King Jr was inspired by the values and teachings of Mahatma Gandhiji. They both walked this path for us to continue. Guru Shastriji Maharaj, who was the founder of BAPS, also taught us tolerance, forgiveness and compassion.”

Swamishri inaugurated seven audiobooks produced by Swaminarayan Aksharpith; available on the Aksharamrutam app. ♦



# NAGAR YATRA

Day 4: 3 October 2023

Amid bright sunshine, a celebratory *nagar yatra* of replicas of all the *murtis* to be consecrated in the *mahamandir* was organized. At 11 a.m., the colourful procession began from the *yagna* arena. Swamis and devotees pulled the six decorated *raths* (chariots) carrying the 3D replica of Bhagwan Swaminarayan's *murti* and the pictorial *murtis* of the other divine forms to be consecrated in the *mahamandir*. The atmosphere was filled with singing of *dhun* and bhajans. Youths and teenagers in traditional dress joyously performed traditional dances. Youths of the Dallas Marching Band played numerous celebratory tunes. Women devotees of all ages joined by carrying *kalashes* on their heads as per tradition. They also performed *raas*, *garba* and devotional dances along the route. The devotional atmosphere pervaded throughout the campus.

The *nagar yatra*, stretching for over one-and-a-quarter miles, stopped before the majestic *murti* of Tapomurti Shri Nilkanth Varni. Behind the *murti* is the stepped





Swamis and devotees participate in the Tadag Utsarg ritual

Brahma Kund, built of pink stone. Here, the Vedic Tadag Utsarg ritual was performed in which *sadguru* swamis, other swamis and devotees ceremonially poured the sacred waters of 555 pilgrim places into the Brahma Kund.

Then, the procession continued to the *mahamandir*. The *murti* of Bhagwan Swaminarayan was carried in a *palkhi* to the main *garbhagruha*, where Pujya Bhaktipriya Swami performed its *pujan* and an assembly was held to conclude the *nagar yatra*.

Thereafter, over 1,000 women devotees participated in the Jal Yatra. They carried sanctified water from the Brahma Kund in *kalashes* in a joyous procession to the *mahamandir*, where the water was collected in a large *kalash*. This water would be used to perform the *murti-pratishtha* rituals for all the *murtis* in the *mahamandir*.

In the evening, the Vedic *snapan* (bathing)



Pujya Bhaktipriya Swami performs the Tadag Utsarg ritual



Devotees perform the Tadag Utsarg ritual



Women devotees pull a chariot during the *nagar yatra*



Women perform a dance during the evening assembly

and *tattvanyas* (offering an array of items) rituals were performed for the *murtis* of 12 shrines, that is, all the shrines except the main shrine.

### CELEBRATING WOMEN'S CONTRIBUTIONS

The evening assembly was presented by women devotees. Titled 'Celebrating Women's Contributions: Sanskars, Seva and Sanskriti', the programme highlighted three pillars – values, service and culture – as pivotal in guiding future generations.

The pillar of *sanskars* highlighted the benefits of attending weekly spiritual discourses that teach a life based on values. An engaging monologue emphasized the vital role of a mother as the key link to pass on values across generations in a family.

Through a recorded video message, Pujya Swayamprakashdas (Doctor) Swami emphasized that one single virtuous mother can have the impact of one million good teachers. He stressed the wisdom of ancient sages who upheld that the foundation of values begins when the child is in the mother's womb. Pujya Anandswarupdas Swami shared similar sentiments through a recorded video message, emphasizing that the biggest asset of parents is their children, to whom they bear the responsibility of teaching these values.

The value of *seva* (service) incorporates values

such as unity, faith and compassion. Through touching narrations, several young women shared their inspiring stories of their long-term *seva* on the Swaminarayan Akshardham construction site as volunteers.

*Sanskriti*, that is Hindu culture and traditions have been preserved amid many challenges through its mandirs, shastras and spiritual guides, which have protected, nourished and promoted Hinduism's timeless traditions. Mandirs like Swaminarayan Akshardham enhance the legacy of Sanatan Hindu Dharma. Devotees shared touching stories of how multiple generations have preserved Hindu *sanskriti*.

Many visionary guests who have made significant contributions as women leaders in their fields graced the assembly.

Dr Purvi Parikh, an immunologist, conveyed, "As I arrived, I felt at peace. Places like Akshardham remind you of your purpose. I'm inspired by this community and hope to be part of it for many years to come."

Gayatri Patel Bahl, an actor, Indian classical dancer and tech entrepreneur, said, "Thank you for everything you're doing for our community, culture and our children. Watching these performances I'm moved and reminded of the commitment my parents made to foster in me a deep connection to my culture." ♦



# MURTI-PRATISHTHA

## Session 2

Day 5: 4 October 2023

The second of the three *murti-pratishtha* sessions marked the consecration of the *murtis* of Bhagwan Swaminarayan and Aksharbrahma Gunatitanand Swami in the Tilak Mandapam and the *murtis* of Bhagwan Shri Ram, Sitaji, Hanumanji, Lakshmanji; Bhagwan Shri Shiv, Parvatiji, Ganeshji, Kartikeyaji; Bhagwan Shri Krishna, Radhaji; Bhagwan Shri Tirupati Balaji, Padmavatiji and the revered BAPS Gunatit gurus.

Before, Swamishri's arrival, the preliminary *murti-pratishtha mahapuja* rituals were performed. Chief guest Pujya Swami Govinddev Giriji, Treasurer of the Shri Ram Janmabhoomi Teerth Kshetra Trust, performed the rituals in the shrine of Bhagwan Shri Ram while *sadguru* and other swamis performed the rituals in the remaining shrines.

Thereafter, Swamishri performed the concluding *murti-pratishtha mahapuja* rituals





(Top left clockwise) Pujya Ishwarcharan Swami performs *murti-pratishtha* rituals. Pujya Doctor Swami performs *murti-pratishtha* rituals of Shri Ghanshyam Maharaj. Devotees seated during the rituals before the central shrine. Pujya Govinddev Giriiji Maharaj performs *murti-pratishtha* rituals of Bhagwan Ram and Sitaji

in the Tilak Mandapam which depicts Bhagwan Swaminarayan identifying Gunatitanand Swami as the manifest form of Aksharbrahma, through whom he remains manifest on earth. After performing the *murti-pratishtha arti*, Swamishri performed *pujan* of the *murtis* in all the other shrines. At the shrine of Bhagwan Shri Ram, Swamishri also performed *pujan* of Pujya Govinddev Giriiji and prayed for the success of the upcoming grand *murti-pratishtha* of the Ram Janmabhoomi Mandir in Ayodhya.

Then, in the assembly, Pujya Govinddev Giriiji Maharaj said, “Akshardham is a lighthouse. What is a temple? It is a lighthouse, and it

shall give its light forever. This lighthouse will spread its light through generations in the form of knowledge. This is a temple of humanity; a temple of faith; a temple of universal love; a temple of universal brotherhood.”

In his blessings, Swamishri said, “This Akshardham is divine and heavenly. It is incomparable and all who come will be inspired to progress. Now, this external Akshardham is ready. But we have to make our inner Akshardham and adorn it. Only then will its purpose have been achieved. Since, all this has been done to become *brahmarup* and awaken the divine in all.

“I bow repeatedly to Harshadbhai [Chavda]



Spiritual leaders and Swamishri on stage during the Interfaith Harmony Day assembly

and all the artisans and devotees who have served here.

“In short, we have to become *brahmarup*, take this Akshardham within and honour it.”

In the afternoon, the Dikshu Homa was performed in eight directions in the perimeter of the *mahamandir*. While chanting Vedic mantras, prayers were offered that the glory and wisdom of the enshrined deities spread in all directions.

### INTERFAITH HARMONY DAY

Akshardham embodies the principles of faith, unity, selfless service, mutual respect and understanding. The Interfaith Harmony Day was a vivid reflection of these values, showcasing the power of faith to bridge divides and strengthen the bonds of humanity.

Before the evening ‘Interfaith Harmony Day’ assembly, a group photo of Swamishri and all the spiritual leaders representing Hinduism, Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism was taken in front of the Akshardham Mahamandir.

In the assembly, Bishop Darin Moore, Chair, Governing Board of the National Council of

Churches, said, “We are truly on holy ground today. This monument that has been erected, the wonderful way in which the architects have given so much detail is awe-inspiring. But what makes this powerful most of all is the people who are part of this great movement.”

Elder David Buckner of Area Seventy, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, said, “As I entered this beautiful location and looked at the spires, we were told of what they represent and the ornate architecture. Most importantly, the artistic design draws the eyes to see light. I started to recognize that I was looking heavenward. It was doing exactly what a temple should do. It should turn me to God. It should help me see that.”

Addressing the assembly, Mahant Swami Maharaj said, “First, I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to all the faith leaders present for accepting our invitation and gracing this occasion. My humblest pranams. Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist, Jain, Sikh, Hindu and many other faith leaders have blessed this assembly. Our spiritual guru Pramukh Swami Maharaj used to say, ‘Religion and spirituality spread love and respect amongst all.’ That was



On Interfaith Harmony Day, Swamishri and spiritual leaders before Akshardham

his life's motto. Our shastras say, 'The whole universe is one family.' We are all connected to one another. We are all God's children. If we come together and unite, then we can make miracles. All the great founders of various faiths have conveyed the same message of love, harmony and compassion. We share the same sky, the same earth, we breathe the same air, drink

the same water and we are all God's children. This is the message of Akshardham. Bhagwan Swaminarayan gave the same message. He used to say that unity is God's power. Anything can be achieved with unity. We pray that we all get the strength to imbibe these values of love, unity and harmony and make this circle of unity bigger and bigger." ♦



# CELEBRATING COMMUNITY

Day 6: 5 October 2023

In the afternoon, the Vedic *snapan* and *tattvayas* rituals were performed in the main *garbhagruha* of the Parabrahma Mandapam by swamis and devotees.

Also, a continuous, thick *nadachhadi* was wrapped around the outside of the Akshardham Mahamandir to symbolize protection (*raksha sutra*).

Sanctified water was also ritually poured on the *kalashes* and flagstaffs.

## CELEBRATING COMMUNITY

The evening ‘Celebrating Community’ assembly commemorated the unity and collaboration fostered within various communities across America by honouring prominent mayors and state officials.

Chaitanyamurtidas Swami highlighted the shared values between American



(Top left clockwise) Mayor David Fried of Robbinsville presents a Key to the City to Swamishri. Daniel R. Benson of New Jersey's 14th Legislative District presents a citation. Swamishri with a citation presented by Mayor Hemant Marathe of West Windsor. Mayor John F. Higdon of Matthews, North Carolina, presents a citation to Swamishri

founding principles and Hindu teachings of unity, emphasizing the collaborative spirit of communities like Robbinsville.

Robbinsville Mayor David Fried recounted his decade-long association with BAPS, "Every time I've reached out to BAPS, they never failed to answer the call, and for that, I'm incredibly grateful. What you are teaching our youth is so important because the next generation needs to become part of our community, and that is something that you should be very proud of. This community [BAPS] has become part of our community. We are grateful and honoured that you thought to choose our community and

had the vision to turn this piece of land into something that is truly unbelievable. And for that, I want to thank you. And last but certainly not least, I want to congratulate you on the inauguration and be the first person to officially say 'Welcome to Robbinsville'."

Assemblyman Daniel R. Benson of New Jersey's 14th legislative district, said, "Today, the inspiration and progress I have seen is a testament to the selfless sacrifice and service from those thousands of individuals working together to show what folks can do when there are no limits to your inspirations."

Mayor Hemant Marathe of West Windsor,



said, “When people used to ask ‘Where is West Windsor?’ I used to say that it’s the town next to Princeton University. Now I say, ‘It’s the town next to BAPS Robbinsville,’ and everyone knows where it is. So thank you, Mayor Fried, for making that possible.”

State Representative of Pennsylvania’s 111th legislative district, Jonathan Fritz said, “Being here today, my heart cries tears of joy because of the pure kindness, goodness and love that radiates from all of you. It is a physical manifestation, this compound, this campus, this building. I come here and am reminded of the goodness, the love, compassion, and care that is truly the driving force that keeps us all grounded and makes us all one family.”

Mayor John Higdon of Matthews, North Carolina, shared, “I certainly found something today. When I heard His Holiness (Mahant Swami Maharaj) speak about the universality of the human experience – we all breathe the same air, we sit under the same sky, and we drink the same water – it really touched my heart, and I think that’s what I’m going to come away with.”

Texas State Representative Dr Suleman Lalani said, “I feel that we are blessed with a good heart, and we all do *seva*, but most of us fall under the service of convenience. We serve when it is convenient. But I will challenge everyone here today, including myself, to follow the example of BAPS and elevate ourselves to the service of conviction. And service of conviction means whoever, whatever, whenever there’s a need, you need to say yes.”

Mayor of New York City Eric Adams shared a recorded video message saying, “BAPS and the Hindu community are a vital part of our country and our city’s culture. I was fortunate to join you for your centennial celebration at the Colden Center. And I appreciate all you do to support interfaith dialogue, harmony, and service. Spirituality

and service must go hand in hand. What we preach in the temple must be practised on the street. Congratulations, once again, on this landmark achievement.”

Thomas Marino, former United States Representative from Pennsylvania, said, “You have to experience this incredible campus, this temple, but more so not only from the beautiful structure, but from what your heart will observe and absorb as you’re going through this. I always thought of myself as a good person, but as I’m leaving here, my heart is now telling me to be more compassionate and giving.”

Blessing the assembly, Swamishri said, “On this day of celebrating community respected officials of many places have graced this stage. The mayors, representatives and other state officials, we welcome you all and extend our heartfelt thanks for accepting our invitation to Robbinsville Akshardham. I convey my deepest gratitude to all the communities and leaders who have supported us in making this *mahamandir*. Over many decades Swaminarayan mandirs have flourished in various communities in NJ. As we gather, we understand each other’s traditions, values and meanings. Together we make our community better by diversity. And we intermingle and have respect for each other.

“Pramukh Swami Maharaj tells us, ‘If we work with unity, we will have success. Definite success.’

“Akshardham teaches us to respect all, to be a good human, and to serve humanity selflessly. If we practise these values, not only can we help each other, but we can also contribute to each other’s happiness.”

Swamishri also inaugurated a new issue of The BAPS Swaminarayan Research Journal and launched the BAPS magazine app. ♦



# Celebrating 'IN THE JOY OF OTHERS'

Day 7: 6 October 2023

In the morning, the *sadguru* swamis performed the Vedic *tattvanyas* rituals in the central *garbagruha* in the Parabrahma Mandapam. Over 350 *tattvas* – raw materials – were offered symbolizing the best materials of earth.

## CELEBRATING 'IN THE JOY OF OTHERS'

Pramukh Swami Maharaj's vision for Akshardham in the USA is a testament to his profound spiritual foresight and dedication. From an inner wish to a stunning reality, BAPS Swaminarayan Akshardham is a beacon of hope, faith and unity that will inspire countless towards the path of devotion and righteousness.



(Top left, clockwise) Jefferson Van Drew, U.S. Representative, NJ-02, presents a proclamation. Swamishri and Phil Ramos, Deputy Speaker, New York State Assembly. Pujya Gurudevshri Rakeshji Maharaj blesses the assembly. Yousif Ahmed, Deputy Chief of Mission for the Embassy of the Kingdom of Bahrain, addresses the assembly

The evening ‘Celebrating In the Joy of Others’ programme was dedicated to Pramukh Swami Maharaj’s life-long motto and honoured his devotion to Bhagwan Swaminarayan.

In touching recollections from the past twenty-five years of his divine vision, many shared the rich history of Pramukh Swami Maharaj’s resolution for the fruition of this monument to Sanatan Hindu Dharma.

Aksharvatsaldas Swami paid homage to Pramukh Swami Maharaj’s extraordinary feat as a master-builder of over 1,100 mandirs across the globe, not as mere art but spiritual sanctuaries where God resides to benefit all who enter.

Jnanvatsaldas Swami emphasized the level

of care, detail and knowledge Pramukh Swami poured into making mandirs, to ensure every detail benefited the communities within which they reside.

Describing his vision as beyond comprehension, Yagnavallabhdas Swami recalled the guidance of Pramukh Swami Maharaj over decades so that all devotees from North America could participate in the making of Akshardham.

BAPS North America CEO Kanubhai Patel described Pramukh Swami Maharaj as a visionary leader. Having constructed a traditional mandir in London in 1995, he brought the Hindu faith to the western hemisphere, setting a course for mandirs throughout the globe.

A moving video showed Pramukh Swami Maharaj's focused dedication, joy and devotion to build Swaminarayan Akshardham despite many challenges. He would say over the years that though he may physically be in India, his heart and mind resided at Akshardham. Pramukh Swami Maharaj's historic visit to bless this land in 2014 was a shining example of his staunch adherence to the promise of selfless service he gave to his guru Shastriji Maharaj decades previously.

The divine personality and achievements of Pramukh Swami Maharaj were acknowledged by thousands around the world. In honour of his impact, guests also shared their experiences with Pramukh Swami Maharaj and his vision for Swaminarayan Akshardham.

Pujya Gurudevshri Rakeshji Maharaj said, "What touched me most was his firmness in following spiritual disciplines, because for him they were always a pleasure and never a pressure. He never compromised his values and that is something that has touched me the most. We learn so much by seeing him love others and his circle of love was so wide. His love was deeper than the Pacific Ocean, encompassing the whole of humanity. His life was love in action. He won the hearts of people. He was so good at both formation – building around 1,100 mandirs – and transformation – initiating around 1,000 sadhus. He used every second of his life giving and giving and giving."

His Excellency Yousif Ahmed, Deputy Ambassador of the Embassy of the Kingdom of Bahrain in Washington, DC, remarked, "I have to say it is quite stunning that this beautiful white lotus has bloomed right here in the Garden State. I bring greetings from the Kingdom of Bahrain. This is a historic occasion, and it is my duty to be present here to celebrate the joy of others like it's the joy of my own."

Sadguru Brahmeshanand Acharya Swamiji expressed, "This Akshardham mandir

is a revolution by Pramukh Swami Maharaj, who was my friend. He introduced and established Sanatan Dharma to the world by building mandirs in many cities in America."

Congressman Jeff Van Drew of New Jersey's 2nd Congressional District remarked, "America is a great melting pot, a nation of opportunity, a nation where we can all come together, whatever our religion is. Because we do share more in our humanity than everything that should ever separate us." Following his address, Congressman Van Drew presented two proclamations to Mahant Swami Maharaj – one for Swaminarayan Akshardham, and one for Swamishri – along with a 'Challenge Coin' given in peace, respect and love. Deputy Mayor Tony DiPietro of Galloway Township, NJ, also presented a proclamation to Mahant Swami Maharaj.

Mahant Swami Maharaj blessed the assembly, "Today, we celebrate the life and divine message of our guru Pramukh Swami Maharaj. His universal message was simple and yet profound, 'In the joy of others lies our own.' How simple yet powerful were his words. He did not just preach this message, he lived them every moment. He dedicated his life for us, inspiring people to lead better lives. People can build their lives according to the messages found here at Akshardham. Akshardham teaches us to serve and help others selflessly. To be good humans, to be ideal devotees of God. To have hearts as pure as Akshardham where God can reside forever. Let us strengthen these virtues so that we too can create a home for God within ourselves. Today we pay tribute to Pramukh Swami Maharaj, and pray for his divine blessings to grace us now and for generations to come."

Swamishri also inaugurated a new English publication by Swaminarayan Akshardham – *Pramukhswaminess: Life Poetries about Pramukh Swami Maharaj* and the photobook of BAPS Swaminarayan Akshardham, Robbinsville. ♦



# Mahant Swami Maharaj's 90<sup>TH</sup> BIRTHDAY Celebration

Day 8: 7 October 2023

Over the past decade, Pragat Brahmaswarup Mahant Swami Maharaj has endeavoured tirelessly to fulfil the vision of Brahmaswarup Pramukh Swami Maharaj to build Swaminarayan Akshardham in Robbinsville.

Today marked *guruhari* Mahant Swami Maharaj's 90th birthday. During his morning puja, swamis sang bhajans in honour of Mahant Swami Maharaj and thereafter, *sadguru* swamis honoured him with decorative garlands devoutly prepared by devotees.

Devotees from across North America, Europe, Africa, the Middle East, India and





(Top left clockwise) Pujya Doctor Swami honours Swamishri with a garland. Andy Ogles, U.S. Representative, TN-05. Jack Ciattarelli, Former New Jersey State Assemblyman. Swamishri, senior sadhus and stage guests

Australia joined the evening 90th birthday celebration assembly of Mahant Swami Maharaj themed ‘Celebrating Spiritual Legacy’. The programme highlighted Mahant Swami Maharaj’s nine decades of selfless service, humble saintliness and God-centric divinity.

The assembly began with a wonderful video rendition of the specially composed bhajan ‘Akshardham Forever for Us’.

Mahant Swami Maharaj has personally practised selfless service, and gently instilled this spirit in thousands across the globe. During the COVID-19 pandemic, and at the beginning of the war in Ukraine, his compassionate appeals inspired many to volunteer and selflessly serve in the relief efforts. Pujya Viveksagar Swami, who has closely observed the life of Mahant Swami Maharaj for over six decades, narrated Swamishri’s innate desire to serve at every opportunity.

Pujya Ishwarcharandas Swami shared his six decades of experiences of Mahant

Swami Maharaj’s saintliness, describing how Swamishri has always served selflessly and with total humility. Continuing this sentiment, Brahmaviharidas Swami said, “What do we mean when we celebrate the life of Thomas Edison? We are not just celebrating one life, but we are actually celebrating the billions of light bulbs across the world. We are celebrating light at night. When we celebrate the life of Shakespeare, we are celebrating the wonder of the English language. Similarly, when we celebrate the life of our *guruhari* Mahant Swami Maharaj, we are celebrating saintliness at its peak, because without speaking any words, with his own life he has given a new dimension and a new depth to the meaning of saintliness. Of the many countless virtues of saintliness, one prominent virtue is love.”

The story of Mahant Swami Maharaj’s life is also a celebration of ninety years of divinity. Anandswarupdas Swami elaborated upon Swamishri’s virtues, God-centric life, and

observance of God's commands.

Pujya Doctor Swami recalled Swamishri's divinity and that, despite being the leader of such a large organization, he has exemplified how no act of service is too small.

Many distinguished guests were present on this occasion.

Swami Paramatmanandji, Founder Acharya of Arsha Vidya Mandir, said, "I had the fortune to meet him [Mahant Swami Maharaj] almost 48 years ago, way back in 1975-76. I stayed with him. Over all these years, one thing I have observed is that Mahant Swami is nothing but an embodiment of Hindu culture, Hindu values and Hindu Dharma. One thing that has touched me for all these years is that Mahant Swami Maharaj is an embodiment of *tapas*. Mahant Swami is also an embodiment of an ideal *bhakta*."

On a day meant to celebrate the extraordinary life of His Holiness Mahant Swami Maharaj, he instead took the occasion to write and share his innermost feelings on the inauguration of Swaminarayan Akshardham.

Swami Shriji

P.P. Pramukh Swami

### CELEBRATING THE PRATISHTHA ARTI...

Most all beloved devotees of Swami Bapa and all the volunteers serving at Akshardham, Jai Swaminarayan from Sadhu Keshavjivandas. You have all endured many physical hardships

to serve beyond expectations. You have sidelined your jobs, businesses, studies, family and other priorities to serve at Akshardham and have exemplified Loya 3.

It is natural for me and you all to wish to be physically present for the *pratishtha* rituals. But due to the present circumstances this is not possible. I am deeply pained that I am unable to serve you all in this way. However, I will perform the main *pratishtha arti* while remembering you all. So please be happy and forgive [me] with an open mind. You are all my hands and feet. Without you, all this would not have been possible. I am grateful to you all. This *pratishtha* will take place because of you – 12,000 volunteers. Wherever you are, believe that Maharaj is in front of you. You are all in my heart and so are with Maharaj. In the presence of Maharaj, I will remember you with all my heart. I will remember all of you dearly tomorrow.

Now, it is my wish to offer *arti* to you all.

Celebrating the inauguration of Akshardham, two proclamations marking Akshardham Day in New York were presented. Also, senior swamis honoured Mahant Swami Maharaj with beautiful garlands and decorative shawls on behalf of all devotees.

In spirit with Mahant Swami Maharaj's love and compassion for all, he then led the assembly in prayers for the recent conflict in the Middle East. ♦



On the morning of 7 October 2023, a distinguished delegation of ambassadors and representatives from the United Nations visits Akshardham





# Murti-Pratishtha Akshardham Mahamandir Final Session 3

Day 9: 8 October 2023

Over 25 years ago, His Holiness Pramukh Swami Maharaj had expressed a divine wish to build an Akshardham in North America. He had blessed the project over the years from India and made a historic journey to sanctify the land during his final spiritual tour in 2014, at the age of 93. At that time, during the land-purifying ceremony, Pramukh Swami Maharaj had placed a sanctified *kalash* in the foundation at the location above which the *murti* of Bhagwan Swaminarayan would be consecrated nine years later, in 2023, by His Holiness Mahant Swami Maharaj.

After a quarter-century of effort and prayers for this joyous moment, at 8 a.m., the third and final *murti-pratishtha* session commenced with Pujya Bhaktipriya Swami (Kothari Swami) performing the preliminary Vedic *murti-pratishtha mahapuja* rituals before the *murtis* of Bhagwan Swaminarayan and Aksharbrahma Gunatitanand Swami in the main *garbhagruha* of the Parabrahma Mandapam.

On this occasion, Pujya Ishwarcharan Swami addressed the assembly, “Today is an especially pious, important and historic day. In the letter Pujya Mahant Swami Maharaj wrote and read yesterday he has promised to remember everyone during the *arti* on this momentous and auspicious occasion. Here, Bhagwan Swaminarayan is seated bestowing his divine blessings on all and



Swamishri performs *pujan* with rice grains

next to him Gunatitanand Swami is humbly poised to serve him. This is a message to us that we must also humbly engage in *seva*, satsang and devotion.”

Pujya Swayamprakashdas Swami (Doctor Swami) praised the dedicated, selfless labour of love and service of over 12,500 volunteers to complete the construction of Akshardham, and added, “Gunatitanand Swami has said, ‘We have to become *brahmarup*.’ We are on that path, but still have a lot to do.”

Thereafter, Mahant Swami Maharaj arrived to perform the concluding rituals. Due to the height of the *murti* of Bhagwan Swaminarayan, Swamishri sat on a decorated crane to perform the rituals.

The special feature of this ceremony was that on 22 July 2012, Pramukh Swami Maharaj had invoked the presence of the divine in small *murtis* of Bhagwan Swaminarayan and Aksharbrahma

Gunatitanand Swami by performing the Vedic *murti-pratishtha* rituals, and this divinity was to be transferred into the larger *murtis* today.

As the Vedic invocation mantras were recited, Swamishri invoked the presence of the Divine by touching the eyes, heart, head, arms and other parts of the *murti*. Swamishri applied *chandan archa*, showered the *murti* with flowers and rice grains and held a mirror before the *murti*’s face. Simultaneously, Pujya Ishwarcharandas Swami performed the rituals of the *murti* of Gunatitanand Swami. Then, Swamishri also performed the *pujan* of Gunatitanand Swami.

Thereafter, Swamishri sat before the main *garbhagruha* and, as the bells tolled and drums beat rhythmically, devoutly performed the *murti-pratishtha arti*.

On this auspicious, Swamishri blessed the assembly by reading a letter he had written.





(Top left clockwise) Swamishri reverently touches the feet of Parabrahma Bhagwan Swaminarayan and performs *puja*. Pujya Ishwarcharan Swami performs the pre-*pratishtha* rituals of Aksharbrahma Gunatitanand Swami. Devotees witness the *murti-pratishtha* rituals. Swamishri performs *puja* of Aksharbrahma Gunatitanand Swami

Swami-Shriji  
P.P. Pramukh Swami

6 October 2023  
Robbinsville

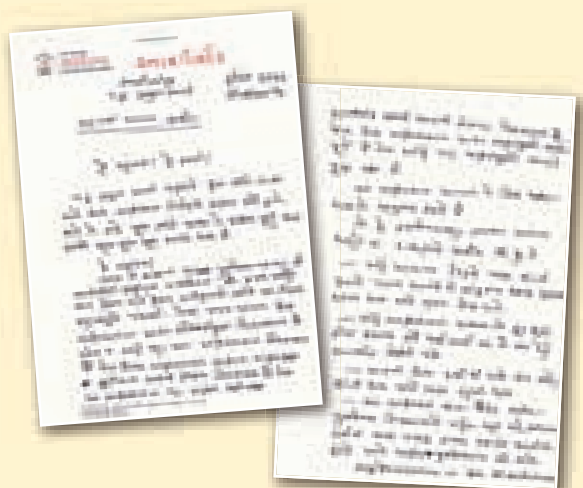
Prayer to Maharaj  
O Maharaj! O Swami!

Param Pujya Pramukh Swami Maharaj had compassionately envisioned to build a majestic and divine Akshardham. For this, he endured many hardships. Now that his wish has been fulfilled, I am extremely delighted.

O Maharaj!

You are the eternal Parabrahma Purushottam Narayan – the Lord of infinite *brahmands* (universes). As per Vachanamrut Gadhada I 71, out of your innate compassion you manifested on this earth in human form. Just as you reside in the divine Akshardham with your infinite powers, you also reside in this Akshardham. Just

as in the divine Akshardham, Aksharbrahma himself is in your personal attendance, similarly, in this Akshardham, Aksharbrahma Gunatitanand Swami himself is in your service. Just as in the divine Akshardham, countless *akshar muktas* revere you, here also, *akshar*





Senior swamis offer *mantra-pushpanjali*



*Sadguru* swamis perform *arti*



Pujya Kothari Swami honours Swamishri with a garland



Pujya Ishwarcharan Swami performs *pujan* of Swamishri



Swamis and devotees during the *murti-pratishtha* ceremony

*muktas* worship you. This Akshadham gives the experience of your divine Akshardham.

Therefore, O Bhagwan Swaminarayan, I humbly pray at your [holy] feet that:

- May all who visit here be blessed with ultimate peace, ultimate joy. May they progress in life and may their lives become divine.
- May all men and women who serve this Akshardham – from here or remotely – attain ultimate *moksha* in this birth.
- With your divine blessings, may harmony and peace increase everywhere and may everyone be happy.
- Through this Akshardham, may the glory of the Akshar-Purushottam doctrine greatly flourish, may the flag of Sanatan [Hindu] Dharma fly high throughout the world on all continents; and may Akshar-Purushottam be hailed everywhere.

Jai Swaminarayan from

Sadhu Keshavjivandas

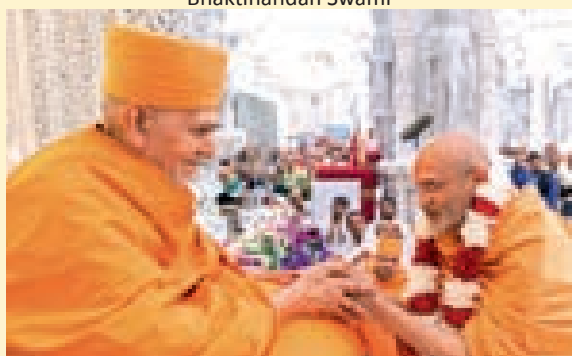
Then, Swamishri garlanded and blessed swamis and devotees who had for many years dedicated their time and efforts to this project: Pujya Ishwarcharan Swami, Shrijiiswarup Swami, Bhaktinandan Swami, Aksharvatsal Swami, Anandswarup Swami, Dharmavatsal Swami, Narayanmuni Swami, Yagnavallabh



Swamishri greets Yves Pepin



Swamishri blesses Shrijiswarup Swami and Bhaktinandan Swami



Swamishri blesses Yagnavallabh Swami

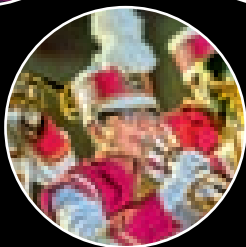


Swamishri blesses Shri Kanubhai Patel

Swami, Prashantdarshan Swami, Atmakirti Swami, Nilkanthseva Swami, Haridarshan Swami, Bhaktiswarup Swami, Muniraj Swami, Vivekmurti Swami, Akshaymuni Swami, Vishwavihari Swami, Brahmavihari Swami, Paramnayan Swami, Brahmaseva Swami, Yogikishore Swami, Amrutvallabh Swami, Shri Harshadbhai Chavda, Shri Prakashbhai Sompura, Shri Kanubhai Patel, Shri Vinodbhai Patel, Shri B.M. Patel, Shri Haribhai Patel, Shri Dineshbhai, Shri Rohitbhai, Shri Rakeshbhai, Shri Bharatbhai, Shri Ashokbhai and the volunteer stone artisans.

Ishwarcharan Swami paid a special tribute to the late Dr K.C. Patel, who was one of the pioneers of BAPS Satsang in North America, and the efforts of the American-born swamis, *parshads* and *sadhaks* from Sarangpur who had endeavoured tirelessly to complete the construction ahead of schedule.

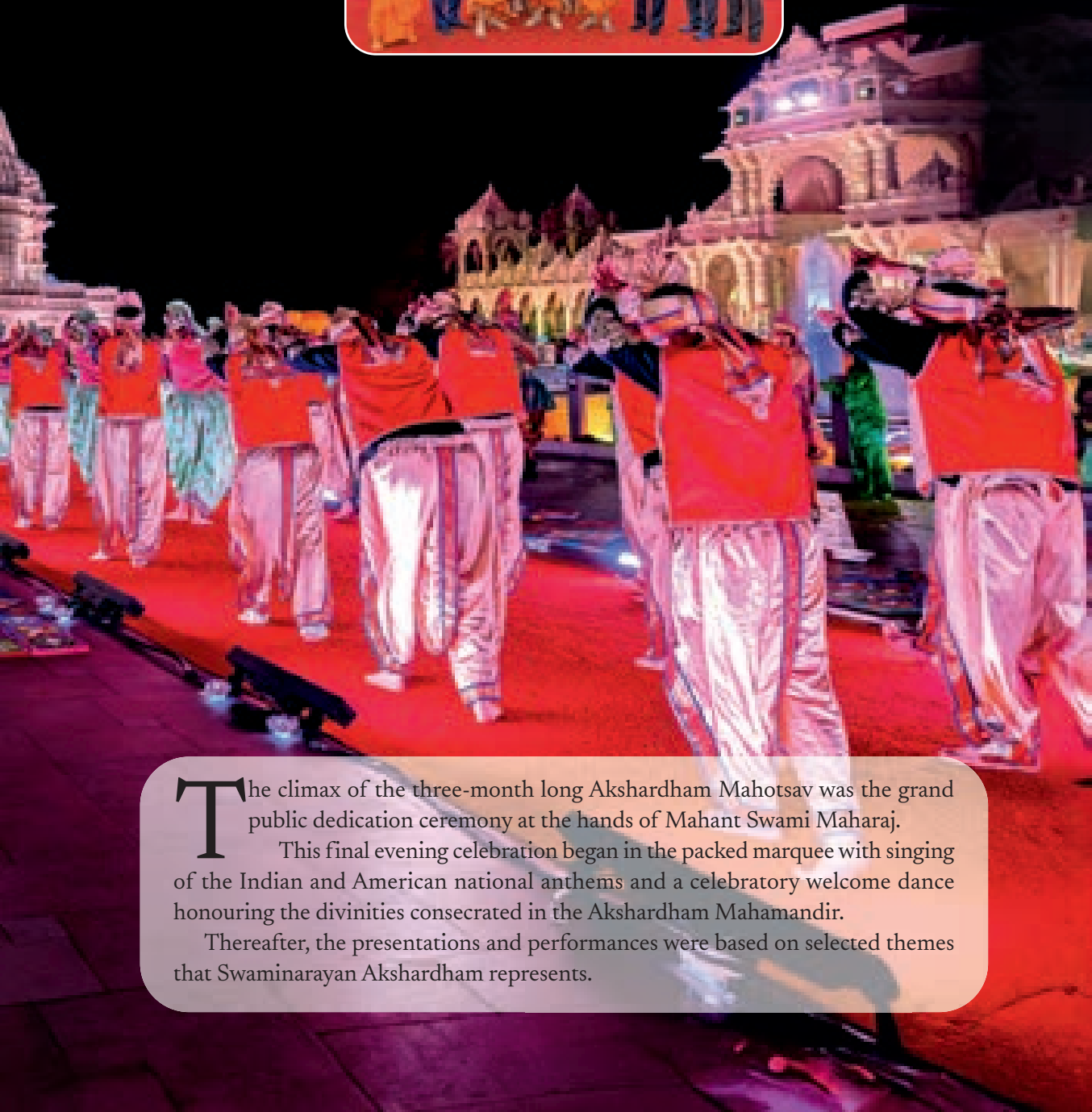
On this occasion, Swamishri also blessed Yves Pepin, the renowned creative director who had helped to design the water shows at the Akshardhams in New Delhi and Gandhinagar; Reed Smoot, an internationally acclaimed director of photography who had filmed the large format *Mystic India* film; and Sam Cardon, an award-winning composer who had composed the music for the *Mystic India* film. ♦



# GRAND DEDICATION

## Ceremony of Swaminarayan Akshardham

Day 9: 8 October 2023

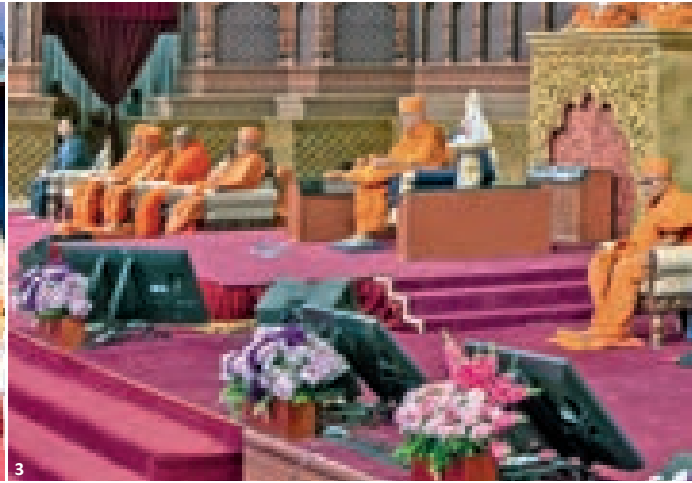


**T**he climax of the three-month long Akshardham Mahotsav was the grand public dedication ceremony at the hands of Mahant Swami Maharaj.

This final evening celebration began in the packed marquee with singing of the Indian and American national anthems and a celebratory welcome dance honouring the divinities consecrated in the Akshardham Mahamandir.

Thereafter, the presentations and performances were based on selected themes that Swaminarayan Akshardham represents.





1. Youths and children commence the dedication assembly by singing prayers 2. Youths wave flags during a presentation 3. Swamishri, senior swamis, Randhir Jaiswal, Consul General of India, New York and Delaware Governor John Carney. 4. Projection of visuals during the celebration assembly

## AKSHARDHAM: AN ABODE OF INDIAN CULTURE

Each stone of Akshardham is a window into the millennia of India's rich and fruitful history, traditions, values and achievements. Youths presented these facets through performances depicting yoga, Ayurveda, the Sanskrit language, the *gurukul* education tradition, mathematics, astrology, devotional traditions, mandirs, architecture and other contributions of India to world progress.

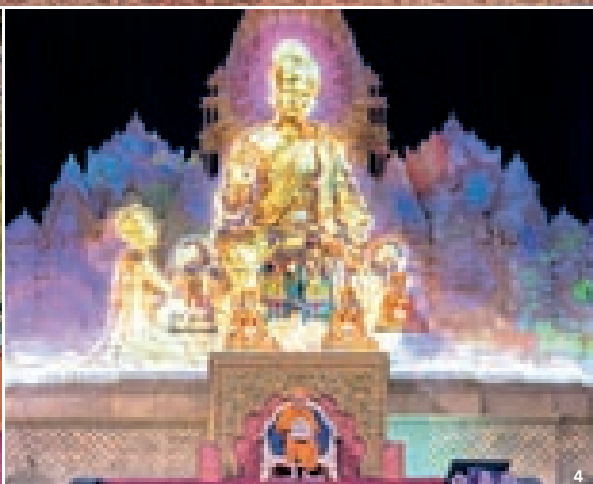
## AKSHARDHAM: AN ABODE OF PIOUS INSPIRATION

The stories of transformation inspired in individuals of varied backgrounds by their

visits to and association with the Akshardhams in New Delhi and Gandhinagar were presented. This Akshardham will also inspire people to progress in their lives and experience peace.

Youths conveyed the Vedic sentiments of 'Ā no bhadṛāḥ kratavo yantu vishvataha' (Let noble thoughts enter from all directions) and 'Vishvam bhavati ekneedam' (The whole world is one nest) through excellent presentations.

Akshardham inspires selfless service. The dedication of over 12,500 volunteers who contributed their time and efforts to serve in a multitude of ways was depicted by a video. In addition to physical service, many had undertaken numerous observances as their prayer for the Akshardham project. A special



mention was made of 71-year-old Anilbhai Patel who had rigorously observed the *dharna-parna vrat* for 26 years.

**Akshardham inspires sincere faith.** Anand-swarup Swami elaborated on how Akshardham cultivates and nurtures sincere faith in Bhagwan, guru, nation and oneself.

**Akshardham inspires inner peace.** This message was presented by children, teenagers and youths melodiously singing the Vedic Shanti Path.

### **AKSHARDHAM: THE ABODE OF BHAGWAN SWAMINARAYAN**

Akshardham is the eternal residence of Parabrahma, Paramatma Bhagwan Swaminarayan. First, children dressed as *akshar muktas* offered prayers to Bhagwan

Swaminarayan. Through projection mapping, beautiful visuals were displayed on the stage backdrop.

After a video on the glory of Bhagwan Swaminarayan, a mesmerizing augmented reality presentation portrayed Pramukh Swami Maharaj's vision and efforts for building Akshardham in America. Then Ishwarcharan Swami added, "It was Pramukh Swami Maharaj's wish that a grand monument dedicated to Bhagwan Swaminarayan be built to inform and inspire people through his life and teachings. This Akshardham is not to show off to the world, but is merely so that faith in God, trust, love and devotion increase in people's lives."

Then Brahnavihari Swami spoke, "The journey of Robbinsville Akshardham was started by Pramukh Swami Maharaj and completed



Children and youths perform during the celebration assembly

by Mahant Swami Maharaj. He saw Pramukh Swami Maharaj's dream and turned into his own dream and made it our dream. The soul and breath of all the volunteers is Mahant Swami Maharaj. Mahant Swami Maharaj said to Pramukh Swami Maharaj, 'We will not forget you.' Today, let us promise Mahant Swami Maharaj that 'We will not forget you' because you have brought out the best in us."

Thereafter, Ishwarcharan Swami felicitated the distinguished guests: Governor John Carney of Delaware, Congressman Steny Hoyer (Maryland), Congressman Andy Kim (New Jersey), Shri Randhir Jaiswal, Consul-General of India, and others.

Some of the guests then addressed the assembly.

Congressman Andy Kim said, "I grew up here in this area since I was a little boy. I spoke with many of you who have volunteered to help put this all together. And one powerful thing that I take away is that it wasn't just about how ornate or how extraordinarily beautiful this mandir is. It is the craft instilled in those

that worked here: the values, the discipline, to be able to make sure that we understand that we're part of something bigger than all of us. So, I am humbled by this opportunity to be a part of this."

Congressman Steny Hoyer said, "The life of this edifice is relevant in terms of the service, passion, love and community that you give it. It is those thousands of volunteers who spent millions of man-hours to create this temple. They did so in the name of faith and service. They took time off work and school to participate. Volunteers travelled here from across the country and indeed across the world. They did it because they believe in the values this structure represents: equality, liberation, truth, harmony, and most importantly, service to others.

"This mandir is not merely an architectural marvel, though that it is. It is a symbol of the bond between America and India and our shared commitment to our values and our faith. It is a testament to how the Indian American community has so enriched our



Swamishri and dignitaries untie the *nadachhadi* to inaugurate the Akshardham Mahamandir

culture and become a crucial, critical part of our American family. This mandir is a place of worship, but also a place of service and togetherness. It will remind us to practise that central teaching of Hinduism and the BAPS movement: ‘In the joy of others lies our own.’ That shared ideal is bigger than any mandir. It reaches a moral height greater than even the tallest *shikhar*. We pray together that it will endure longer than any stone or any metal, or any marble. That creed spreads with every act of service, every good deed and every simple act of kindness.”

Consul-General of India Shri Randhir Jaiswal said, “As I was going around the temple this evening, four things struck me. I had a lady accompanying me and giving an explanation. She explained to me the importance of having water bodies in the temple. The water body signifies unity because you have water present everywhere on all five continents of the world. How beautiful that can be as an expression. Then going around, we talked about Indian civilization, how it is represented here through

musical instruments, dance forms, Vedas and Upanishads. So, you see the beauty of India and India’s cultural wealth represented here [Akshardham]. She talked about the quotes of Jalaluddin Rumi, Martin Luther King and Mahatma Gandhi that are etched on the walls of the Akshardham Mahamandir. That makes this place a true embodiment of ‘Vasudhaiva kutumbakam’ – This world is one family. Then we talked about the architecture and I learnt that for every tree that has been cut 300 have been planted.

“I now have the honour to read the message of the Prime Minister of India Shri Narendra Modi sent for this occasion, for this auspicious day and special location.

“I am pleased to learn about the opening celebration of the Akshardham Mahamandir in Robbinsville, NJ. It is an occasion of profound spiritual significance for the vast legion of devotees worldwide. India’s enduring, illustrious spiritual heritage holds timeless and universal relevance. Spirituality constitutes an integral element of a socio-cultural heritage



1. Swamishri lights a *divo* to launch the dedication ceremony 2. Youths perform a traditional dance during the dedication assembly 3. Swamishri, senior swamis and invited dignitaries on the *parikrama* podium

and principles. Philosophy and traditions emphasize that the goal of an individual's life revolves around *seva* or selfless service. Temples have been the hub of service and social cultural activities for centuries. They are not only centres of devotion, but also serve as the best platforms for giving expression to art, architecture, excellent literature and knowledge. Such profound cultural principles have been guiding humanity for generations. Bhagwan Swaminarayan presented the eternal ideals of our culture and powerful lessons that could be accessed by every section of society. He emphasizes the importance of purity of thought and conduct through spirituality and social reform. Pujya Pramukh Swamiji Maharaj gave a new direction and a higher dimension to the Swaminarayan movement. I always encourage

people to prioritize the well-being of others, serve and contribute to the betterment of society through public welfare. I consider myself blessed to have met such a towering spiritual personality as him [Pramukh Swami] on several occasions and receive his unbounded affection. Celebrations of action showcases Indian architectural excellence and a glorious ancient culture and ethos. It will also help in establishing a connection between the members of the diaspora, particularly the youth to connect with and take pride in Mahabharat India. The right stage shares an abiding relationship both nations have nurtured and broadened these ties into a robust, multifaceted relationship, fostering extensive interaction among the people. May the inauguration enhance the auspiciousness and significance of this endeavour. Best wishes to



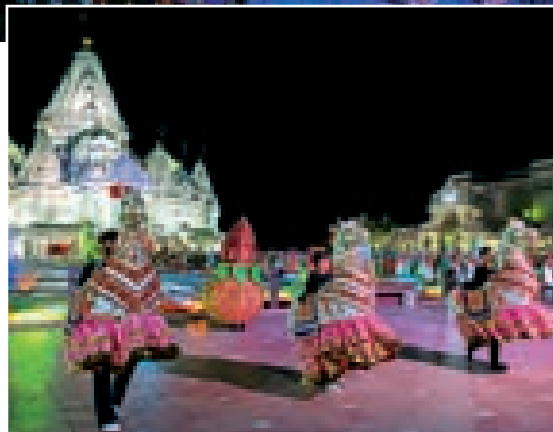


Joyous dances, celebrations and fireworks mark the dedication of Swaminarayan Akshardham

everyone and all those involved in this initiative. Jai Swaminarayan. Thank you.”

Governor John Carney said, “I was struck by one of the things that the Swami said, ‘The temple is a bridge from the past to the future. A bridge from India to America. A bridge from one community to the next.’ Incredible place for faith and devotion. Thank you for inviting me to be with you all tonight.”

Rishi Sunak, Prime Minister of the UK, also sent a message, which was displayed on the screens: “I was honoured to have received the blessings of His Holiness Mahant Swami Maharaj conveyed to me this morning, and I understand that His Holiness is inaugurating another beautiful Swaminarayan Akshardham temple in Robbinsville, USA, very soon. I would like to send my very best wishes to His



Holiness and all the devotees of BAPS ahead of the opening.”

Blessing the assembly, Swamishri said, “In the Vedic Sanatan Hindu tradition, divine avatars like Bhagwan Krishna, Bhagwan Ram, as well as *rishis*, *munis*, great saints and inspiring personalities have taken birth on this earth. One purpose of their birth was to liberate their devotees and fulfil their wishes. Bhagwan Swaminarayan also manifested with his abode,

*muktas* and divine powers to grant liberation to all. He tirelessly endeavoured to nurture the Vedic values.

“Bhagwan Swaminarayan and his *paramhansas* toured in the villages encouraging people to lead moral, character-based lives. They taught people spiritual values and divine philosophical principles. These teachings were continued by Gunatitanand Swami, Bhagatji Maharaj, Shastriji Maharaj, Yogiji Maharaj and Pramukh Swami Maharaj. Pramukh Swami Maharaj spread the universal values of Sanatan Dharma and the Swaminarayan Sampradaya throughout the world.

“Pramukh Swami Maharaj inaugurated the first mandir in America in 1974. Thereafter, he inspired the building of many more mandirs. These mandirs have nurtured values in children and youths.

“Pramukh Swami Maharaj wished to build an Akshardham in America where all can visit regardless of caste, creed or background. Here, people can receive inspiration to progress individually, as families and as a society.

“This vision has been fulfilled by the loving efforts of thousands of volunteers. There are not enough words to fully honour their services.

“Today, with this public dedication of Akshardham, Pramukh Swami Maharaj’s vision is fulfilled. That brings me great joy. Bhagwan Swaminarayan, Gunatitanand Swami, Bhagatji Maharaj, Shastriji Maharaj, Yogiji Maharaj and Pramukh Swami Maharaj are all showering their blessings.

“May all who come to Akshardham be inspired, attain good health and prosperity, progress in their chosen paths and advance spiritually.

“Innumerable people from around the world have supported the construction of Akshardham. We are indebted to them. I bow to them all. May Bhagwan Swaminarayan and Pramukh Swami Maharaj bless you all profusely.”

Then, as youths performed a vibrant dance to the lyrics of ‘Swaminarayan Akshardham Sanatanam...’, Swamishri and the stage guests proceeded to the Akshardham Mahamandir for the public dedication ceremony.

## AKSHARDHAM PUBLIC DEDICATION CEREMONY

Swamishri and the guests proceeded along the central pathway amid the night darkness, observing the illuminated Akshardham Mahamandir and surrounding areas, while celebratory tunes were played by the Dallas Marching Band.

In the *mahamandir*, Swamishri, *sadgurus* swamis, Swami Paramatmanandji and other distinguished guests were present. Swamishri untied the *nadachhadi* with the distinguished guests as resounding hails of the *jai naad* echoed everywhere. Swamishri and others approached the main *garbhagruha* of the Parabrahma Mandapam and offered *mantra-pushpanjali*.

Then, Swamishri and the guests exited from the *mahamandir*, and on reaching the end of the central pathway, Swamishri unveiled a plaque dedicating Akshardham to the world. Swamishri also launched the 50th anniversary celebrations of BAPS Satsang in North America.

Swamishri, *sadguru* swamis and the distinguished guests took their places on the *parikrama* podium, behind the two rectangular-shaped water bodies, facing the Akshardham Mahamandir.

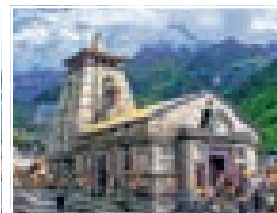
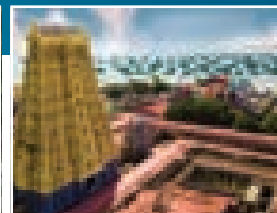
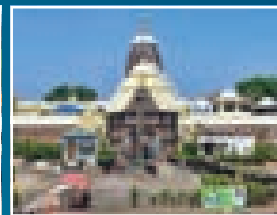
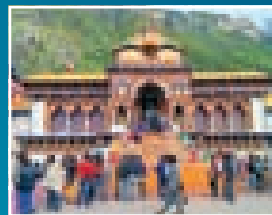
Here, together with hundreds of performers in traditional attire, Swamishri, *sadguru* swamis and the guests performed the *arti*. Thereafter, youths performed a colourful and variety-filled traditional dance paying tribute to Akshardham.

The dedication ceremony concluded with an exhilarating fireworks display. ♦

# Soil and Water of Sacred Places and Holy Rivers

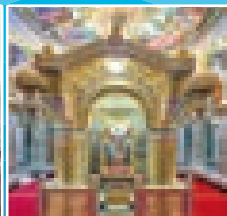
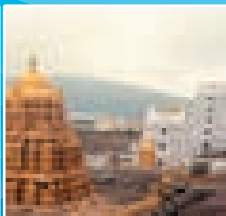
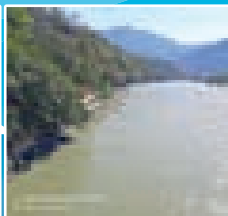
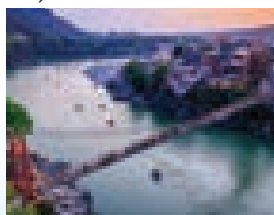
Prior to the *murti-pratishtha* of the *murtis* of Bhagwan Swaminarayan, Gunatitanand Swami, Radha-Krishna Bhagwan, Sita-Ram Bhagwan and other deities in the Akshardham *mahamandir*, special Vedic rituals were performed. The soil and waters of 550 sacred places and holy rivers of India and other countries were placed on the pedestals of all *sinhasans* before the installation of the *murtis*. Mahant Swami Maharaj, *sadguru* swamis and senior swamis also performed the *abhishek* rituals of all the *murtis* and *shikhar kalashes* with the holy waters. The holy waters were also ritually poured by *sadguru* swamis and over 100 BAPS swamis into the Brahma Kund.

The sacred soil and holy waters of India were collected by Jaysukhbhai Jhala with the blessings of Mahant Swami Maharaj and instructions of



Ishwarcharan Swami. Jaysukhbhai travelled for 2½ months to all parts of India: Gangotri, Yamunotri, Badrinath, Kedarnath, Ayodhya, Chhapaiya, Mathura, Gokul, Vrundavan, Dwarika, Somnath, Jagannathpuri, Tirupati, Rameshwaram and other holy places. He also acquired, through the assistance of several BAPS swamis and devotees, the holy soil of and water from Muktinath in Nepal, Sirpur in Bangladesh, Parshuram Kund in Arunachalam, Kamakshi Devi Mandir in Assam, Navadwip, Kanyakumari and many more places. He also pilgrimaged to attain the waters of rivers Ganga, Yamuna, Sarasvati, Saryu, Narmada, Kaveri and others.

The soil and water of places and rivers visited and sanctified by the guru *parampara* in North America, UK, Europe, Africa, Australia and New Zealand were also acquired and used in the *pratishtha* rituals. ◆





# Volunteer Departments

Backbone of the Akshardham Mahotsav



On 26 February 2023, in Mumbai, Mahant Swami Maharaj wrote a message to all the devotees of North America, “Be ready. I am Coming. Akshardham Mahotsav 2023.”

With this clear message from Swamishri, planning for the grand inauguration of Swaminarayan Akshardham in Robbinsville, New Jersey, gathered pace.

Swamishri himself had titled his 2023 overseas satsang *vicharan* to the UK, Canada and USA as the ‘Akshardham Yatra’.

As Swamishri was scheduled to stay from

8 July to 16 October in Robbinsville only, appropriate arrangements were made to enable devotees from throughout North America to enjoy the darshan and blessings of Swamishri and to view Swaminarayan Akshardham.

On 16 July 2023, in Robbinsville, Swamishri formally launched the ‘Akshardham Mahotsav: Festival of Inspirations’. The main inauguration celebrations took place from 30 September to 8 October.

## VOLUNTEER COORDINATION

To manage the Akshardham Mahotsav, the



Volunteers doing *seva* in the decoration department

Volunteers Coordination Department oversaw the volunteer registration and allocation requirements.

Using the Mahotsav Volunteer Registration website and mySatsang mobile app, volunteers submitted their availability. Also, the requirements for each department were collected. Accordingly, skilled and support volunteers were allocated. Over 5,900 male and 6,500 female volunteers from throughout the USA and Canada served for between 7 and 90 days during the 'Akshardham Mahotsav: Festival of Inspirations'. In total, over 24 departments and over 140 sub-departments were active throughout the Akshardham Mahotsav to ensure that all devotees and visitors had a memorable experience.

The administrative duties of this department included ensuring optimal and efficient use of the available volunteers. The department coordinated the accommodation and transport requirements of the volunteers, as well as their uniform, ID badges and other necessities. The department communicated with the volunteers through established *karyakar* channels such as Regional Coordinators (RC) and Regional

Admins (RA), as well as specific social media groups.

Volunteers were assigned duties based on their skills, departmental requirements and the duration for which individuals had committed to serve. Volunteers could log in to the system to find out their *seva* assignments, team leaders and other necessary information. This approach enabled efficient communication and provided clarity to everyone on what *seva* they had been assigned.

During their *seva*, volunteers were continually motivated through daily podcasts that also strengthened their personal satsang. At the end of their *seva* period, each volunteer, male and female, was requested to note down, on specially created *gun grahan* petals, a positive or inspiring quality they had observed in another volunteer. These *gun grahan* petals were collected to create a *chadar* that was then presented to Mahant Swami Maharaj. This initiative promoted a positive and harmonious atmosphere and encouraged everyone to see the good in others.

Brief profiles of some of the departments are as follows.





Volunteers engaged in audio-visual seva

## AKSHARPITH

The function of Aksharpith was to ensure the availability of BAPS publications and other merchandise for devotees and visitors.

Over the preceding year, swamis and volunteers selected the various products to be made available and arranged for their design, branding and production.

Volunteers manned the stores in the Welcome Center and Swaminarayan Nagar, managing the sales and inventory.

The off-site Aksharpith warehouses and on-site containers were used to store the items to ensure cost-efficient supply to meet the demand for publications and other merchandise.

## DECORATION

Through the efforts of swamis and male and female volunteers, the Decoration Department ensured that each venue and event had grand decorations. These included the *nagar* and *yagna* entrance gates; stages of the main Yagnapurush Sabha Hall and *yagna* arena; entrance gates for the dining and reception areas; stage on Akshardham podium for the Kalash Pujan ceremony; main *mandir pratishtha* flower decorations; Pramukh

Swami Maharaj's *murti* and podium in the Swaminarayan Nagar; floats and other items for the *murti-pratishtha nagar yatra*, *mudras*; 20 *hindolas* during the *hindola* period; Mahant Swami Maharaj's puja backdrops; arrangements for the *murti-pratishtha* rituals for other mandirs; *rangolis*; float for the India Day Parade in New York; as well as support for decorating locations and events of other departments – *yagna*, cultural programmes, *samuh lagna*, reception, guest services and many others.

Some decorative elements from Pramukh Swami Maharaj's Centenary Celebrations were shipped from India and used during the Akshardham Mahotsav.

## AUDIO-VISUAL

The demands on the Audio-Visual Department were numerous. They had the important responsibility of ensuring that all who came to the Mahotsav could see and hear the proceedings of all the events taking place. For this, the department installed, operated and maintained screens and speakers in many locations throughout the site.

The Audio-Visual Department took

photographs of all the events, Mahant Swami Maharaj's interactions, guest visitors, *samip* darshan sessions and provided photos for the press releases and online use.

The department was also responsible for the live relaying of events throughout the campus and the live international broadcasts online and through TV channels.

The department also created the Guruhari Darshan videos, videos of Swamishri's blessings, the Akshardham *Spotlight* programmes for TV ASIA, AASTHA and other platforms, audio-visual content for the daily assemblies and the 'Making of Swaminarayan Akshardham' exhibition. They also prepared the daily photo galleries and event news reports for the Sanstha's website, baps.org.

The diligence of the volunteers ensured that all the duties were fulfilled in a timely fashion.

## COMMUNICATIONS

Volunteers of the Communications (Media) Department prepared press releases for all events, as well as weekly or bi-weekly articles, features and supplements as required by Indian American papers and magazines. The mainstream media – paper, TV, online and others – who wanted to cover Akshardham were also provided content as requested.

Through Akshardham USA social media channels, regular short videos and reels were posted featuring volunteer stories, visitor experiences, Akshardham explanations and other fascinating content.

Indian American TV channels included TV-ASIA, Sahara USA, ITV Gold, TV9, Gujarati One, AASTHA.

Mainstream channels included CBS NY, NBC NY, Fox Philadelphia, CBS Philadelphia.

## FOOD SERVICES

The Food Services Department was responsible for preparing all the meals – breakfast, lunch, dinner and snacks – and

serving them to all volunteers, devotees and guests in the dining areas.

During Swamishri's stay in Robbinsville, over 1.2 million meals were served. The menus included over 485 unique items – sweet, savoury, Indian and Western.

During the *mahotsav*, over 1,000 volunteers from over 50 BAPS centres served in this department. A large team of women volunteers daily produced *rotli*, *bhakhri*, *paratha* and many varieties of bread. Over 100 volunteers were engaged daily in slicing and preparing vegetables for cooking.

## GUEST SERVICES

During the festival period many dignitaries, government officials and renowned public personalities visited Swaminarayan Akshardham. The arrangements for these distinguished visitors were managed by the Guest Services Department.

Around 5,100 guests attended, including spiritual leaders – Hindu and non-Hindu, current and former members of congress, state senators and representatives, mayors and council members of local authorities, United Nations officials, athletes, actors, musicians,



Dining hall



Technology services department



Site volunteers doing seva

business executives, leaders and representatives of Hindu mandirs and organizations, academics, healthcare professionals and others.

Over 2,150 attended the special events organized to celebrate the opening of Swaminarayan Akshardham, such as the Health Professionals Conference, Celebrating Sanatan Dharma assembly, International Students Conference, AAHOA Conference, Township Appreciation Day, Veterans Day, UN Event, Police Appreciation Day, Mayors Day, Interfaith Harmony and others.

Many were guests of honour in the evening assemblies in the presence of Mahant Swami Maharaj.

### TECHNOLOGY SERVICES

The Technology Services Department provided the software and hardware services and infrastructure required by the various festival departments to carry out their tasks.

In particular, the volunteers of this department developed the mySatsang and mySeva apps and online Volunteers Registration System to enable:

1. Devotees to select their darshan slot.
2. Devotees to register for the *yagna*.

3. Volunteers to register and efficiently perform their duties.

4. Volunteers to check and manage the devotees attending each darshan slot.

5. Registration for invited guests.

Wireless internet connectivity was provided to departments for their daily operations. In particular, the audio-visual department required wireless transfer of photos to their storage servers and office for prompt editing.

### SITE FACILITIES

The duties of the Site Facilities Department included:

1. Planning the campus layout for marquee locations, walking paths, traffic flow, decorations and the assembly, dining and *yagna* locations.
2. Erecting the marquees and department offices.
3. Operating the equipment and machinery for the site preparations.
4. Setting up and maintaining Swaminarayan Nagar – where the main celebration events were held.
5. Ensuring adequate drinking water supply.

6. Installing and maintaining the temporary electrical infrastructure.
7. Ensuring proper housekeeping and waste management.
8. Maintaining temperature control in the permanent and temporary buildings.
9. Landscaping and irrigation throughout the entire Akshardham campus. Over 50,000 plants, shrubs and flowers were used.
10. Signage to guide and inform all visitors regarding campus locations and events.

Other departments also contributed to the smooth and successful Akshardham Mahotsav celebrations. These included the following.

**Registration:** Coordinated the registration of volunteers, devotees from North America and worldwide, guests and *yagna* participants. Devotees had the opportunity to register for a 4-day visit prior to 30 September during which they would enjoy Swamishri's darshan and blessings during puja and other special assemblies. Over 50,000 male and female devotees in 22 batches visited in this way. This arrangement enabled all devotees to be cared for satisfactorily.

In addition, around 24,000 devotees registered to attend during the main inaugural celebrations.

**Accommodations:** Arrangements for the lodgings of devotees and volunteers during their stay in Robbinsville.

**Transport & Parking:** Operating the service vehicles, airport and hotel shuttles, campus tram, as well as on-site and off-site parking.

**Public Safety & Security:** Ensuring appropriate awareness, guidance, training and implementation of safety and security measures to help prevent injury and damage. Also, liaising with police, fire, ambulance and other emergency services.

**Medical Services:** Experienced doctors provided appropriate treatment to anyone who fell ill.

**Sabha Programme Planning:** Designing the assembly schedules, creating the required audio-visual and other content, liaising with the *bal*, *kishore*, *yuvak* and *sanyukta mandals* to prepare their presentations.

**Sabha Arrangements:** Making the necessary stage and floor arrangements as per the *sabha* requirements, implementing the scheduled *sabha* programme and handling the *samip* darshan sessions.

**Akshardham Experience:** Arranging guided tours for all devotees and guests and managing the public flow throughout the campus. ♦



Installing electrical infrastructure



Planting flowers

# Vedic Yagna and Rituals Department



Every significant stage of the Swaminarayan Akshardham construction began with auspicious rituals by Pramukh Swami Maharaj, Mahant Swami Maharaj, *sadguru* swamis and other swamis. Hence, the inauguration was also marked by a multitude of rituals, in which many thousands of devotees also participated.

Vidhi Vyavastha Department was responsible for ensuring the necessary arrangements for the grand Vedic Yagna for World Peace and the numerous other rituals that took place during the Akshardham Mahotsav.

Over a period of 83 days, between 19 July and 9 October, over 14,000 *yajman* couples participated in the 101 Vedic Yagnas for World Peace held. Devotees registered online to participate in the *yagna* by selecting from the available date and time slots. The two-hour *yagna* ceremonies were conducted by experienced

Brahmins and swamis. The *yagna* arena housed 34 *yagna kunds* – 24 square, 9 octagonal and one main lotus-shaped. At each *kund*, volunteers helped the *yagna* participants. Daily, Swamishri's Akshar-Purushottam Maharaj came to grace the *yagna* arena and grant darshan to the participants.

The Vidhi Vyavastha Department also arranged the *samuh lagna* and engagements (*sagai*) ceremonies.

A separate *yagna* arena for *balaks*, *balikas*, *kishores* and *kishoris* was set up in which children and youths themselves performed the *yagna* rituals. This was managed by trained *bal* and *kishore* volunteers.

The main Vedic consecration rituals and ceremonies of Swaminarayan Akshardham were performed between 30 September and 8 October, details of which are provided in the appropriate sections of this special issue. ♦





When you walk through the building, what you see is service... it shows how important community is.

**Nina Melker**  
Mercer County Commissioner



Inspired by the disciples who selflessly give, I met a girl from Miami who had done *seva* for a year. The satisfaction on her face is absolutely amazing.

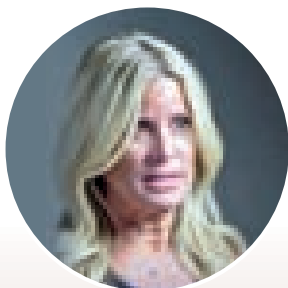
**Suniel Shetty**  
Actor



Talking with the volunteers, I got the sense that this was a deeply moving experience. This will be something they carry with them for the rest of their lives.

**Kevin Mullin**  
US Congressman

## *Voices of* Guests



The diversity resonated with me greatly, and the respect for one another. It's one big family, and that's what I got out of it.

**Tanya Lehmann**  
President, Robbinsville  
Board of Education



We are not building Akshardham, Akshardham is building us.

**Dilip Joshi**  
Actor



Everybody here leads with humility... from the Guru down to our tour guide, everybody seemed like they had that respect for each other.

**Foyesade Oluokun**  
NFL Player



This monument  
will proudly represent  
Indian traditions.

Every carving  
adorning it showcases  
intricate beauty,  
crafted from  
merely stones but  
also the devotion  
embedded within.

**Gurudev Sri Sri Ravi Shankar**  
Art of Living



All the carvings are  
just absolutely mind-  
blowing and inspiring  
in so many different  
ways. There's a certain  
level of purity to it. To  
accomplish something  
great you need to be  
devoted to something  
outside of yourself.

**Aaron Gordon**  
NBA Player



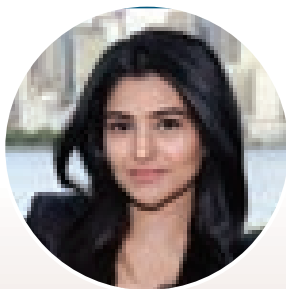
Touring today and  
seeing so much more  
than you could even  
imagine, Akshardham  
definitely feels  
like special land...  
sacred land.

**Sondra Shannon**  
CEO Gatemaster Technology



This will stay with  
you for generations...  
In life if you ever  
feel like you have  
darkness around you,  
just come to the temple,  
you'll see the lights  
come on to you,  
you'll see the light you  
have been missing.

**Arthur Kapoor**  
HealthEC, President & CEO



I think Akshardham  
has done a fabulous job  
to make it a place that's  
really kid-friendly and  
family-friendly. The  
more people learn about  
Akshardham, the more  
it will benefit their own  
personal growth and  
their wellbeing.

**Avani Modi**  
Co-founder of Modi Toys



There's so much  
peace here.  
No matter what's  
happening  
outside in the world,  
the moment you come  
to such places you can  
find a lot of peace and  
you can go back with  
a lot of happiness.

**Venkatesh Prasad**  
Former Indian Cricketer



These kinds of structures are symbols of inspiration for other communities.

In every corner, in every step that you are taking on this campus, you understand that this place is about embracing people.

**Reyhan Özgür**  
Consul General of Türkiye



What I see today is mind-blowing. The intricacies of the temple and the energy you feel here – you're in the presence of greatness.

**Ndileka Mandela**  
Granddaughter of Nelson Mandela



What is fascinating is just the attention to detail, the beauty of it; in some ways, the simplicity of it, but also the complexity of it.

**Mike Lawler**  
United States Congress Representative, New York's 17th Congressional District



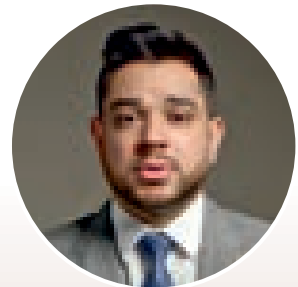
It's instantaneously apparent that people are comfortable with one another, that people are being generous to one another, and that everyone is here to serve each other, including me.

**Heidi Campbell**  
State Senator, Tennessee



We are honored that you thought to choose our community and had the vision to turn this piece of land into something that is truly unbelievable and one of the wonders of the world.

**Mayor David Fried**  
Robbinsville, NJ



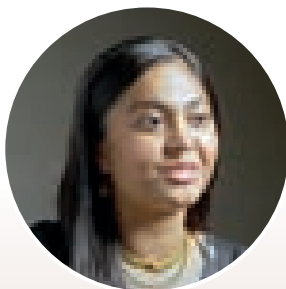
It was an incredible experience. It was mesmerizing. To see Akshardham was absolutely jaw-dropping. I think it goes to show the values of the BAPS community.

**Mayor Sam Joshi**  
Edison, NJ



Akshardham is undeniably one of the greatest monuments I have ever seen in my life. Stepping into it felt like entering heaven on earth. It's brimming with beauty and an overwhelming sense of love.

**Kamlesh C. Mehta**  
The South Asian Times



I was at a loss for words. Today was really special, not just for me but (also) for mom and seeing the smile on my grandparents' face is just really awesome. Having a place like Akshardham is so important.

**Swayam Bhatia**  
Actress



This is a good model for the United States and Americans to see. It's not about being indoctrinated, it's about learning how to work together, be yourself, connect to the universe, and understand the Divine.

**Dr David Frawley**  
American Author



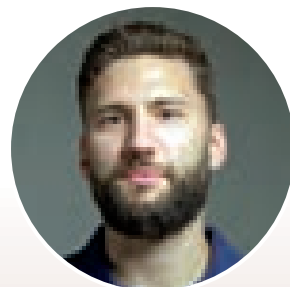
This will transcend generations, thousands of years from now. When we are not here, this will still be here as a testament to the importance of inclusion and unity and embracing others.

**Mayor Lisa Morotta**  
Rocky Hill, CT



When you walk through the gates and go through the security you feel transported to another world. These intricate works right here in New Jersey! It is other-worldly.

**Joe Signorello**  
Mayor of Roselle Park, NJ



Kindness, Humility, Gratefulness. I think that represents, in many ways, the whole concept and place here very well. The one thing that impresses me greatly is the dedication and the purity of the spirituality within the people.

**Maxi Kleber**  
Dallas Mavericks, NBA



Service to others is the rate you pay for being on this earth. And that's what I felt here. This visit will always hold a special place in my heart.

**Marvin Washington**  
Former NFL Player



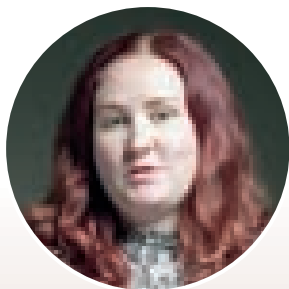
Every time I visit this place, I am mesmerized and inspired by the beauty, the kindness, the welcoming and the mission of giving back to others by volunteering your time and helping.

**Deborah Blakely**  
President, Robbinsville Township Council



One lesson I'm taking in, how did thousands of people come together to make this impossible possible? The sacrifice that thousands of volunteers have made to make what Akshardham is today, is unparalleled.

**Neeraj Kalani**  
Global Head: Moderna



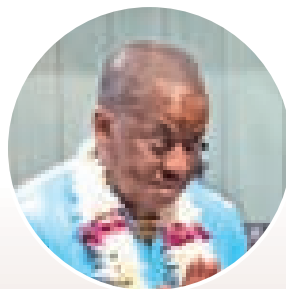
This building, from every detail and every little piece and part that has come together with all of this love, you can feel it. It resonates. The moment you arrive on the campus to the moment you leave, there is love, welcome and peace.

**Ashley Johnson**  
Deputy Fire Marshal,  
Vineland, NJ



Brilliant! It's outstanding! You've got to come here and see it to believe it – what volunteers and everyone have done for this temple. Every time you come here there's always a different kind of energy.

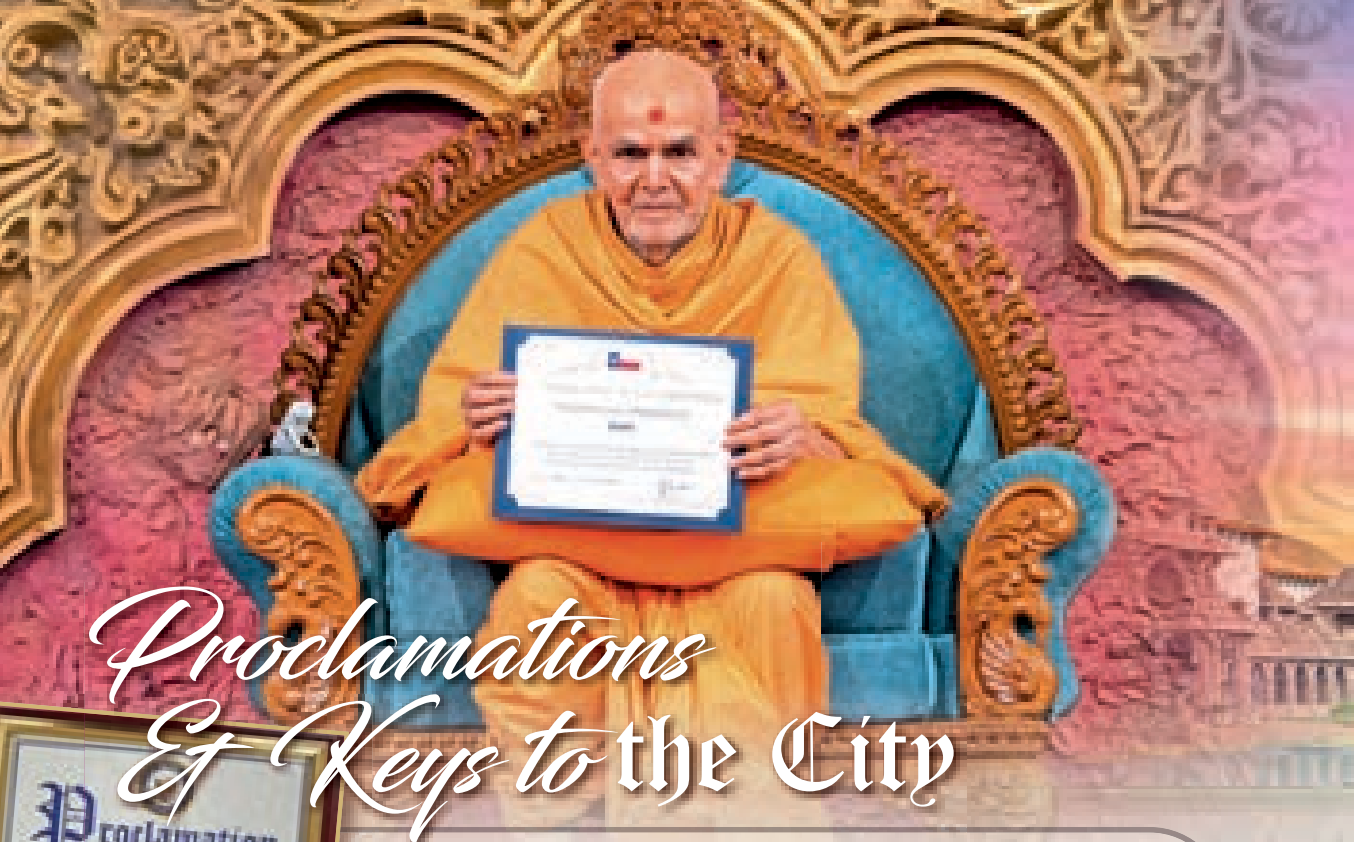
**Parthiv Patel**  
Former Cricketer



The people who have built this have volunteered their time, invested weeks, months and, some of them, years. And yet they've opened it to the community at large and I think it's a beautiful thing.

**Noah Croom**  
Senior Vice President  
Legal Counsel LIFT Sports  
Management





# Proclamations Of Keys to the City

During the Akshardham Mahotsav in Robbinsville, 26 governors, congressmen, assemblymen, mayors and other political leaders of states, cities and towns presented proclamations, citations, letters of appreciation and keys to the city.

They were presented in the evening assemblies to honour Mahant Swami Maharaj and for the inauguration of Swaminarayan Akshardham. A list of the honours bestowed (August to October 2023) is as follows.

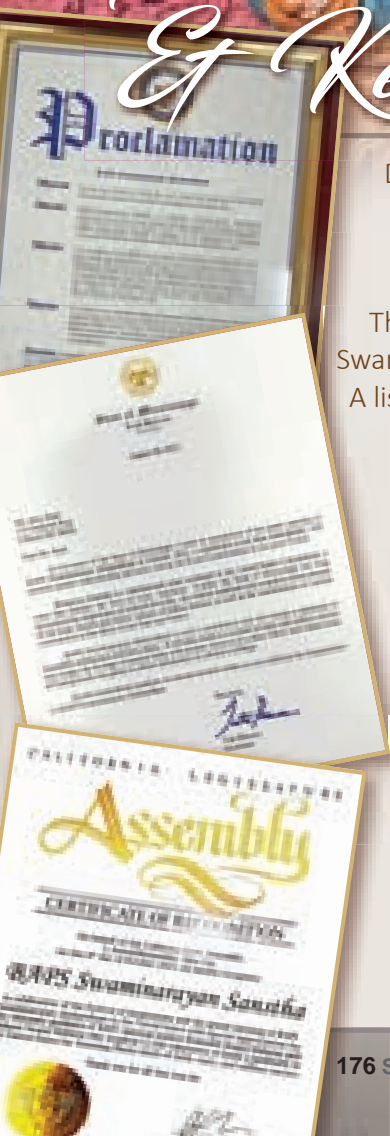
1. Proclamation: Inauguration of BAPS Swaminarayan Mandir (Akshardham)

Mayor Mark W Myers,  
*Greenwood, Indiana, 20 August*

2. Proclamation: In Honor of H.H. Mahant Swami Maharaj  
Congressman Donald Norcross  
*First Congressional District, N.J*  
*24 August*

3. Letter of Recognition on opening of BAPS Swaminarayan Akshardham

Governor Tate Reeves,  
*Mississippi*  
*28 August*





4. Proclamation: Inauguration of BAPS Swaminarayan Akshardham

Mayor George Flaggs Jr.  
*Vicksburg, Mississippi, 5 September*

5. Proclamation: Inauguration of BAPS Swaminarayan Akshardham

Mayor Gary L. Rhoads  
*Flowood, Mississippi, 5 September*

6. Proclamation: Hindu Heritage Month – October 2023

Mayor Paul M. Kanitra,  
*Point Pleasant Beach, NJ*  
*5 September*

7. Letter of Appreciation and Wishes: To Mahant Swami Maharaj on his 90th Birthday Celebrations

Governor Roy Cooper  
*North Carolina, 21 September*

8. Key to the City of Mathews, North Carolina: Mahant Swami Maharaj on his 90th Birthday

Mayor John F. Higdon  
*Town of Matthews, NC, 21 September*





9. Proclamation: BAPS Swaminarayan Akshardham opening

**Mayor Rick Stopfer**  
*Irving, Texas, 25 September*

10. Proclamation: In Honor and Recognition of BAPS Swaminarayan Akshardham, North America

**Joint Legislature: Senator Vincent J. Polistina, Assemblyman Donald A Guardian, Assemblywoman Claire S. Swift**  
*New Jersey, 28 September*

11. Proclamation: In Honor and Recognition of H.H. Mahant Swami Maharaj

**Joint Legislature: Senator Vincent J. Polistina, Assemblyman Donald A Guardian, Assemblywoman Claire S. Swift**  
*New Jersey, 28 September*

12. Letter of Appreciation on opening of Akshardham, Robbinsville

**Prime Minister Narendra Modi**  
*India*  
*29 September*

13. Proclamation: Official Congratulations – Grand Opening of BAPS Swaminarayan Akshardham

**Mayor Roy Nirenberg**  
*San Antonio, Texas*  
*29 September*

14. Key to the City: Presented to H.H. Mahant Swami Maharaj

*Jackson, Mississippi*  
*5 October*

15. Key to the City: Presented to H.H. Mahant Swami Maharaj

**Mayor David L. Fried**  
*Robbinsville, N.J.*  
*5 October*

16. Proclamation: To Honor and Salute BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha

*The Senate and General Assembly State of New Jersey, 5 October*

17. Citation: Inauguration of BAPS Swaminarayan Akshardham

**Terry Meza**  
*State Representative Texas House District 105/Irving, 5 October*



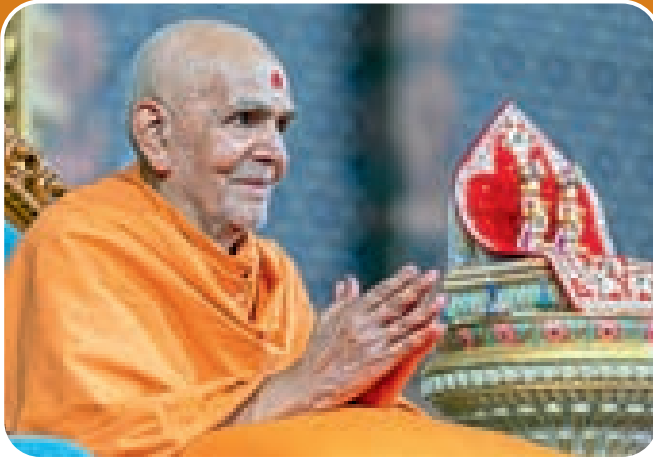




18. Certificate: In Honor of Opening of Akshardham Mahamandir Temple in Robbinsville  
**Suleman Lalani**  
*State Representative, House District 76, TX*  
5 October
19. Congressional Coin 1 & 2 in Commemoration of Akshardham  
**Congressman Jefferson Van Drew**  
*Second Congressional District. N.J.*  
6 October
20. Proclamation: In Honor of BAPS Swaminarayan Akshardham  
**Congressman Jefferson Van Drew**  
*Second Congressional District. N.J.*  
6 October
21. Proclamation: In Honor of H.H. Mahant Swami Maharaj  
**Congressman Jefferson Van Drew**  
*Second Congressional District. N.J.*  
6 October
22. Proclamation: In Honor of BAPS Swaminarayan Akshardham, North America  
**Mayor Anthony Coppola**  
*Galloway, NJ, 6 October*
23. Proclamation: In Recognition of Akshardham Day  
**Board of Supervisors of Alameda County, California**  
8 October
24. Citation: Certificate of Recognition of BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha  
**Assembly Member Alex Lee**  
*California State Legislature*  
8 October
25. Proclamation: Declaring Akshardham Day on 8 October 2023  
**Congresswoman Grace Meng**  
*Sixth Congressional District. N.Y.*  
8 October
26. Citation: BAPS Akshardham Day, Opening of Akshardham  
**Assembly Member David Weprin**  
*New York State Assembly*  
8 October



# Meeting Mahant Swami Maharaj



*During the Festival of Inspirations, hundreds of dignitaries and stage guests were given a guided tour of the Akshardham precincts. Later, many got an opportunity to meet Mahant Swami Maharaj. Selected reflections of their meetings are as follows.*

**DONALD NORCROSS**  
U.S. Congressman  
24 August

“Being with His Holiness I feel here is something that has not happened to me very often in my life. I look at what I see here and the experience I just went through with His Holiness and, quite frankly, that feeling hasn’t been around all that often, but I felt it here and I don’t say that in a quip or easy way. It was something special. I am looking forward to going back to Washington and sharing what I experienced here today, both in the Senate and the House, to encourage them to make a pilgrimage here and hopefully experience what I feel.”

**NAKIA GRIFFIN-STEWART**  
NFL Player  
6 September

“My favorite part was getting a chance to go in front of the guru today and bow my head and give a quick prayer. I felt very privileged and very blessed to have that opportunity. I am not from the Hindu faith so didn’t understand the magnitude or even know who he was prior to this visit. But seeing the reaction and excitement

from everybody else when he came in and when they had their opportunity to go in front of him really reassured (me of) how blessed I was to have that opportunity.”

**JOHN PACE**  
Partner  
NFL Representative at 3XL Sports  
Management  
14 September

“His presence was just unbelievable, and there was a glass there due to health constraints and stuff. There was a glass there, but there wasn’t.”

**BOB SMITH**  
State Senator, New Jersey  
15 September

“Thank you to BAPS, because you’ve made New Jersey not only a prettier place to live, but one where the quality of life, because of your presence and what you do with your children and yourselves and how you participate in society, makes New Jersey even greater. I’ve now had the opportunity to meet our Swami, Mahant Swami Maharaj. What a holy man.”

**DAN WAGNER**

**SVP Government Relations  
The Inland Real Estate Group of  
Companies, Inc.**

**15 September**

“I have to tell you, it’s just an incredible honour to be able to meet (Mahant) Swami Maharaj. I can’t tell you the feelings that are just inside me right now (because they) are just unbelievable. Totally humble, gentle eyes that he has, but they’re piercing through you. And while we didn’t speak, we had this feeling with each other that’s hard to describe. Something I’d never in a million years was expecting when I came here. And it really was a very spiritual moment for me. And I’m going to tell you that it’s something that I will never forget for the rest of my life. This rosary was presented to (Mahant) Swami and he held it in his hands. He blessed it. Words can’t describe how honoured I am. And this rosary is going to be buried with me.”

**SAM JOSHI**

**Mayor, Edison Township, NJ  
16 September**

“Being in the presence of His Holiness was truly very special. There’s an aura around him and it truly means a lot.”

**TOMMY BARNES**

**County Commissioner, Colbert County,  
Alabama  
20 September**

“The messages that were (given) today by Mahant Swami were unity, love, humility; things that we can all grow from. Just an honour to be in his presence. I’ll never forget this day. It was a special time in which he encouraged me to continue my efforts and of common goals in being good to people, regardless of their background, regardless of their race, regardless of their financial status.”

**JAY AMIN**

**Fashion Designer, Founder, Amin Standard  
21 September**

“It’s an unbelievable experience. I mean, I just can’t say enough. It’s something that you need to make time for. It’s hard to actually put it into words (meeting Mahant Swami). It felt surreal. I didn’t really realize how much it was going to overwhelm me feeling-wise to see him that close and to be in an environment where everybody was elated as well. And then afterwards get his blessings directly was something I’ll remember forever.”

**KEVIN MULLIN**

**U.S. Congress Representative (CA-15)  
22 September**

“I had an opportunity to meet the Guru (Mahant Swami Maharaj) and was deeply moved by that experience. It was an experience unlike any other that I’ve had, to be honest with you. And I have to tell you when I made eye contact with the Guru I definitely felt something. It was a special experience to be in his presence, so it was something I will always remember.”

**JOSHUA PRUTCH**

**Executive Vice President  
National Independent Soccer Association  
24 September**

“It was divine, that’s probably the word that comes to my mind. It was very divine. It felt like he was showering all the blessings through his eyes. He wanted to say thousands of words to me, and he was praying for me, my family, and this world.”

**MARVIN WASHINGTON**

**Former NFL Player, Super Bowl XXXIII  
Champion, 25 September**

“I can tell that’s a true man of God, that’s a true spiritual being. When I was in front of him this evening my whole spirit lifted. A very moving experience and will always hold a special place in my heart.” ◆





## Marathon Blood Drive

20 July to 28 September 2023

Swaminarayan Akshardham, Robbinsville

critical, occurring during a nationwide blood shortage. The American Red Cross stated that replenishing blood supplies can take weeks in such situations. Michelle Kuremsky from the American Red Cross praised the effort, saying, “We want to thank BAPS Charities for allowing us to come in and collect blood, and enabling us to meet diverse donors of various ages and backgrounds. From the Red Cross, we want to thank you for bringing us all together, all different blood centers, to help our blood supply flow.”

Embodying the spirit of service and community inherent to Akshardham, Michael Leviton from RWJBarnabas Health remarked, “This is a caring group of people that just want to give back and help others. ‘In the joy of others’ [Pramukh Swami Maharaj’s life motto] is how hundreds and hundreds are going to live because of the efforts of BAPS Charities and RWJ.”

Caitlin, a collection specialist of Miller-Keystone Blood Center, said, “Donors amaze me that they willingly come in week after week to donate to help a stranger. It’s just nice to see people are willing to help strangers that they don’t necessarily know, but that they’re in their community as well. One donation will affect three different patients’ lives. That’s three different patients, three different families three different outcomes.”

Since 2006, BAPS Charities has organized around 500 blood drives in the USA that have significantly contributed to national healthcare. ♦

As part of the Akshardham Mahotsav celebrating the inauguration of BAPS Swaminarayan Akshardham, Robbinsville, BAPS Charities organized an extensive 10-week blood drive in collaboration with local hospitals and organizations. During this period, over 4,470 people donated blood, potentially helping to treat more than 13,000 patients.

Donors were from across North America, and the collected blood was distributed to regional healthcare providers like Miller-Keystone Blood Center, American Red Cross, RWJBarnabas Health, New Jersey Blood Services, and Vitalant, all partnering with BAPS Charities.

This multi-week blood drive was particularly



## 'Days of Giving' Campaign

From 15 July to 30 September 2023, a 75-day campaign at Akshardham, Robbinsville, aimed to collect school supplies, hygiene products, and food items for the local Robbinsville community

BAPS community throughout North America. Sweta Patel, an Early Childhood Education Coach and coordinator of the collection and delivery efforts for this campaign, remarked "It was overwhelming to see how so many people are willing to support this cause. From picking up a few extra food cans while grocery shopping to bringing a suitcase full of school supplies, individuals and families were enthusiastically taking on this opportunity to give back."

During her visit, Purvi Desai, a devotee from Houston, Texas, participated in the 'Days of Giving' campaign with her son and daughter. She reflected on the opportunity to give back, "My kids were excited to be part of the campaign as part of the Akshardham opening. This donation drive is a unique opportunity to teach them the value of service. Regardless of who we are and where we live, we can still make a difference in the lives of others."

Every few days, BAPS Charities' volunteers delivered these donations to partner organizations. On one drop-off, Prutha Patel, a local volunteer and a pre-med student at New York Institute of Technology, met the children who would be using the donated school supplies at the Boys & Girls Club of Mercer County. She shared, "I'm grateful I had the opportunity to see the impact of this campaign first-hand. It showed me the importance of participating in these kinds of initiatives to support our local community."

At the heart of 'Days of Giving' lay the values of unity, compassion and selfless service that BAPS Charities has upheld now for 50 years. ♦

With a vision to inspire individuals to unite and serve for the greater good, BAPS Charities launched a 'Days of Giving' campaign, a donation drive at the BAPS Swaminarayan Akshardham in Robbinsville, New Jersey. The 75-day coast to coast BAPS nationwide campaign aimed to collect school supplies, hygiene products, and canned food items to serve the Boys & Girls Club of Mercer County, HomeFront NJ, Legacy Treatment Services, Rise, Robbinsville Food Pantry, Shine and Inspire, The Rescue Mission of Trenton, Trenton Area Soup Kitchen (TASK), and Womanspace Inc. As BAPS volunteers, devotees and well-wishers arrived from across the country for the opening of Akshardham, they brought these donation items with them to meet the urgent needs of the community.

BAPS Charities collected nearly 12,000 items, underscoring the spirit of service shared by the

# BAPS Charities, North America



**B**APS Charities engages in numerous activities to provide philanthropic support to community organizations throughout North America, working with them to address education, health and other challenges facing local populations. Partnering with other non-profits, BAPS Charities volunteers better understand the needs and efforts of important organizations in their local communities, joining together to meet local needs.

Among the activities BAPS Charities organizes annually are:

## WALKATHONS

In the past 20 years, over 1,000 walkathons have been organized, providing financial support to local hospitals, children's organizations, township entities, school systems, environmental causes, and various health issues, including cancer and heart disease.

## HEALTH AWARENESS LECTURES

BAPS Charities Health Lectures provide the public at large with information to improve their lives through healthier living. In the last two decades, over 5,000 lectures, conducted at around 80 BAPS centres every year, have provided



an avenue for medical professionals to share important guidance about cholesterol & fats, dementia, cancer, preventative medicine, mental health, oral health, environmental awareness, healthy eating, vaccinations, healthy sleep habits, protein sources for a vegetarian diet, practising yoga, regular health check-ups, children's health & safety, cardiovascular diseases, cancer, diabetes, chronic respiratory diseases, mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic, health precautions during travel and other important topics.

## HEALTH FAIRS

Organized with the support of experienced doctors and medical professionals to provide primary health guidance to individuals on how to prevent and manage common ailments. More than 500 health fairs have benefitted over 130,000 participants.

## **BLOOD DONATION DRIVES**

Every year, hundreds of donors participate in the blood donation drives conducted at about 45 BAPS centres throughout North America. Over 500 blood donation drives have been held in the last two decades, collecting enough blood to save 56,000 lives. Over 4,470 donors participated in the three-month long blood drive during the Akshardham Mahotsav, potentially saving upwards of 13,000 lives.

## **BONE MARROW DRIVES**

BAPS Charities organizes bone marrow registration drives to increase the chances of patients with leukaemia, lymphoma, myeloma or other blood disorders finding a match in the donor registry for bone marrow transplants.

In the last two decades, over 6,500 individuals have joined the registry in 126 drives.

## **FLU VACCINATION DRIVES**

Flu is a contagious respiratory illness caused by influenza viruses that infect the nose, throat, and sometimes the lungs. BAPS Charities Flu Vaccination Drives organized across North America reduce the risk of this contagious disease. Over 160 flu vaccine drives have been organized to vaccinate 9,000 individuals. Also, during the COVID-19 pandemic, over 40,000 COVID-19 vaccines were administered.

## **CHILDREN'S HEALTH & SAFETY DAYS**

BAPS Charities Children's Health and Safety Day has been held in many communities across the United States and Canada. Local Police, Fire Department and doctors helped educate thousands of children about important health and safety topics providing them with the tools and resources to make better lifestyle choices. The event has also helped to build relationships between BAPS Charities and the communities it serves.

## **FOOD DRIVES**

National statistics estimate that 1 in 6 Americans cannot afford to place a meal on their tables on a daily basis. BAPS Charities holds annual food drives across the United States in an effort to address hunger across all communities. Volunteers of all ages and community partners collectively donate hundreds of canned and dried food items which are then delivered to local food banks.

## **COMMUNITY ACTIVITIES**

BAPS Charities serves communities through cleanup activities and sporting events.

Donated \$711,000 to over 77 community organizations.

Provided \$190,000 for healthcare and community support.

Donated 175,000 pieces of personal protective equipment (PPE).

## **EDUCATIONAL SERVICES**

Education is the primary driver of development and progress in the world. BAPS Charities provides extensive support through career fairs, scholarships and assistance to educational institutions.

## **DISASTER RELIEF**

BAPS Charities has served and supported communities affected by earthquakes, wildfires, and hurricanes and helped during the Ukraine humanitarian crisis.

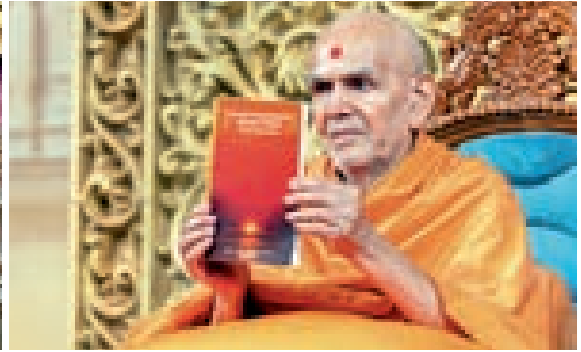
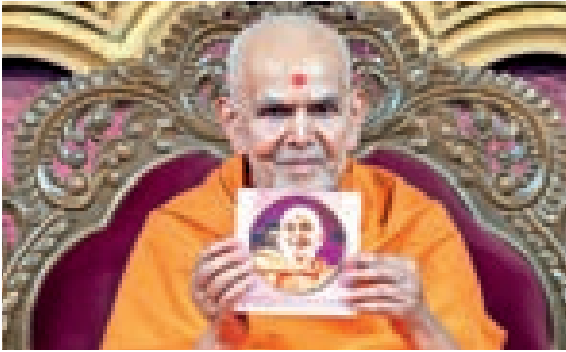
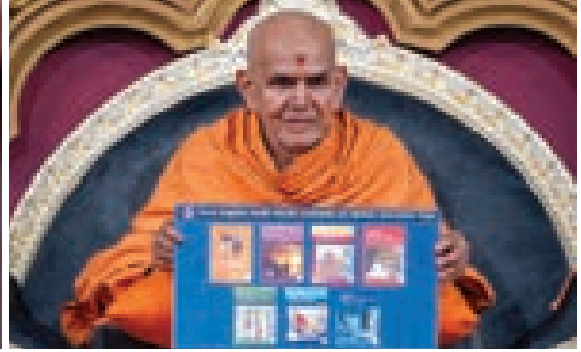
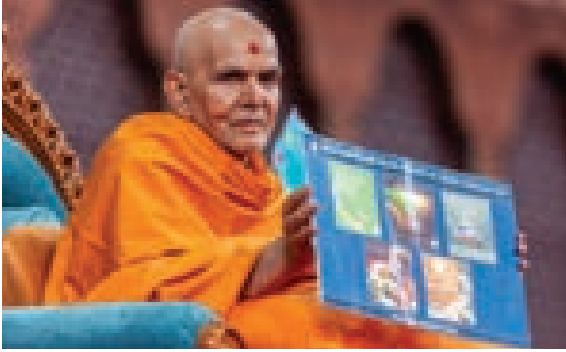
## **ENVIRONMENTAL INITIATIVES**

Awareness of important environmental issues is raised through active participation.

BAPS Charities supported the planting of 361,000 trees in the USA by supporting The Nature Conservancy. Also, participated in community activities during Earth Day and Earth Hour. ♦

# NEW PUBLICATIONS

*During the Akshardham Mahotsav, several BAPS print and audio publications were inaugurated by Mahant Swami Maharaj*



## PRINT PUBLICATIONS

- *If Stones Could Sing...*, by Yogi Trivedi, a professor at Columbia University
- The BAPS Swaminarayan Research Journal and BAPS magazine app
- Pramukhswaminess: Life Poetries About Pramukh Swami Maharaj
- Photobook of BAPS Swaminarayan Akshardham, Robbinsville
- People of Akshardham

## AUDIOBOOKS

The audio books are accessible on [baps.org](http://baps.org) and Akshar Amrutam app.

- Pramukh Swami Maharaj: A Friend of Youth
- Immortal River: Swamishri's Holy Travels
- Divine Memories: Part 2
- Divine Memories: Part 3

- Impressions: Incidents from the Life of Bhagwan Swaminarayan: Part 1
- Impressions: Incidents from the Life of Bhagwan Swaminarayan: Part 2
- Impressions: Incidents from the Life of Bhagwan Swaminarayan: Part 3
- Pure Devotion: Pramukh Swami Maharaj in Devotion
- 101 Tales of Wisdom as Told by Yogiji Maharaj
- Hinduism: Frequently Asked Questions
- Hinduism: Beliefs and Impressions
- Hinduism: Festivals, Rituals and Symbols
- Hinduism: Hindu Perceptions, Way of Life and Reformers
- Hinduism: One God or Many Gods?
- Hinduism: Shad Darshans and Sampradayas
- Hinduism: Sadhana, Great Devotees and Rishi Scientists



# Hindu Hriday Milan Initiatives



**B**ased on Mahant Swami Maharaj's wish that "the circle of Global Harmony will continue to grow" and as part of the momentous opening of Shri Swaminarayan Akshardham in Robbinsville, New Jersey, three projects were organized between May and September 2023 under the Hindu Hriday Milan (HHM) initiative that strengthened the rapport between BAPS and Hindu mandirs and organizations in North America: HHM Unity Forums, HHM Family Meetings, and HHM Satsang Sabhas.

Mahamahopadhyay Bhadreshdas Swami, Munivatsaldas Swami, Jnanvatsaldas Swami and Amrutcharitdas Swami visited centres in North America to conduct these HHM events together with local swamis and *karyakars*. Under the guidance of Vivekmurti Swami, the National Community Affairs team created a programme package for HHM 2023 events with the help of national, regional and local teams.

## HHM UNITY FORUMS

The Unity Forums took place at the BAPS mandirs, bringing together leaders and senior representatives of Hindu mandirs and Indian community organizations in North America. The aim was to discuss the many common challenges affecting Hindus and collectively

find solutions, to strengthen the rapport with each other and to raise awareness about BAPS Akshardham, Robbinsville, NJ.

The audience of the Unity Forum events included both male and female participants. The theme of the Unity Forums was 'Growing Together' and involved group discussions and brainstorming on various issues impacting Hindus and mandirs at large. A concluding speech was given by a swami.

In total, 21 Unity Forums were organized at the following BAPS mandirs, which were attended by 1,060 representatives of 473 Hindu organizations:

**Midwest:** Chicago, Columbus, Detroit

**Northeast:** Boston, Cherry Hill, Edison, Hartford, Long Island, Parsippany, Philadelphia, Robbinsville, Washington DC

**Southeast:** Miami, Orlando, Raleigh, Tampa, Jacksonville

**Southwest:** Dallas, Houston

**West:** Sacramento, San Jose.

## HHM SATSANG SABHA

The Hindu Hriday Milan Satsang Sabhas focused on topics of common interest to the broader Hindu community, raised awareness about the opening of Swaminarayan

Akshardham in Robbinsville and strengthened the bonds with local Hindu communities and organizations.

The *sabhas* were held at local BAPS or other Hindu mandirs, featuring speeches by prominent local representatives and BAPS swamis. In total, over 85,000 devotees, well-wishers and invited guests attended the 126 assemblies held. The following are some of the locations these assemblies were organized:

**Midwest:** Chicago, Cleveland, Columbus, Dayton, Detroit, Indianapolis, Minneapolis, St. Louis

**Northeast:** Atlantic City, Boston, Edison, Lansdale, Long Island, Philadelphia

**Southeast:** Jacksonville

**Southwest:** Dallas

**West:** Sacramento, San Jose, Seattle.

### HHM FAMILY MEETINGS

The Hindu Hriday Milan Family Meetings were small gatherings organized at the homes of well-wishers. The hosts invited colleagues, associates, friends, relatives and other acquaintances to the evening family meetings to discuss about spiritual and life lessons from the Hindu shastras. Thereafter, learned swamis spoke about the opening of Swaminarayan Akshardham. The smaller audience enabled focused conversations and interactions.

In total, 3,221 well-wishers participated in the 53 HHM Family Meetings held at 21 locations:

**Midwest:** Chicago, Cleveland, Columbus, Detroit, Indianapolis, Minneapolis, St. Louis

**Northeast:** Boston, Clifton, Edison, Lansdale, Robbinsville

**Southeast:** Knoxville, Orlando, Jacksonville

**Southwest:** Dallas, Houston, Jackson

**West:** Sacramento, San Jose, Seattle

Senior representatives and other members of the following distinguished organizations participated in the various assemblies of the

HHM initiative:

Chinmay Mission, Srimad Rajchandra Mission of Dharampur, International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), JK Yog, Brahma Kumaris, Aarsh Vidya Gurukulam, Art of Living Foundation, Vraj Dham, Minakshi Mandir, Malibu Mandir, Gayatri Parivar, Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh (HSS), Vishwa Hindu Parishad, America (VHPA), Coalition of Hindus of North America (CoHNA), Hindu American Foundation (HAF), Hindu Mandirs Empowerment Council, Hindu Mandir Executives' Conference (HMEC), Hindu American University Leuva Patidar Samaj of America, Local Chapters of Gujarati Associations, Federations of Indian Associations (FIA), Balaji Temple, Umiya Mataji Mandir, Sanatan Dharma Kendra, Vedanta Society, Sri Siddhi Vinayaka Cultural Center, Federation of Jain Associations in North America (JAINA), Asian American Hotel Owners Association (AAHOA) and others.

### FEEDBACK

"A lot of common problems every organization in the US are facing today. Forums like this help us to come together to solve these common problems."

**Mihir Shah**

*President Jain Center of NJ, Edison*

"The Unity Forum is the need of the hour to educate our youth of Sanatana Dharma."

**Avinash Pancholi**

*Volunteer Teacher, Sanatan Dharma,  
Long Island*

"It was a very heart-warming experience. The warmth & love of everyone teaches what Sanatana Dharma is."

**Sister Sabita and Uma**

*Brahma Kumaris, Long Island*



Akshardham THEN

2014



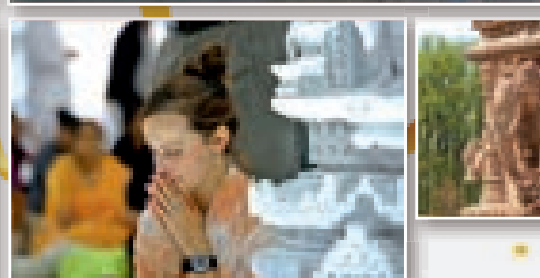
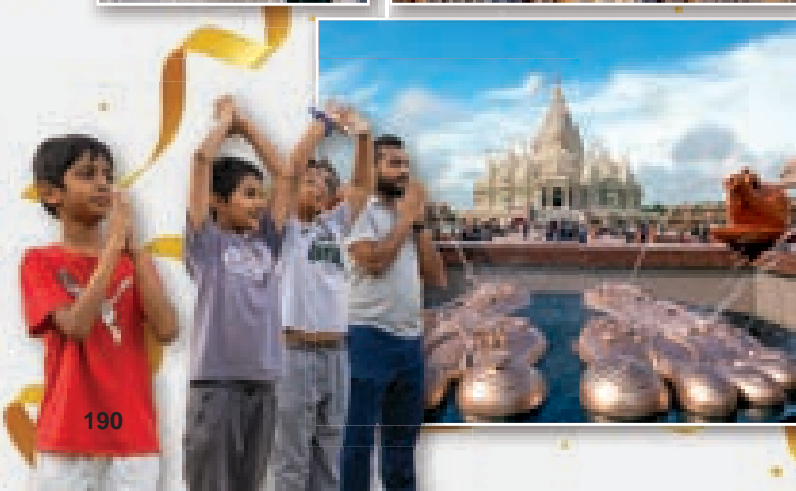
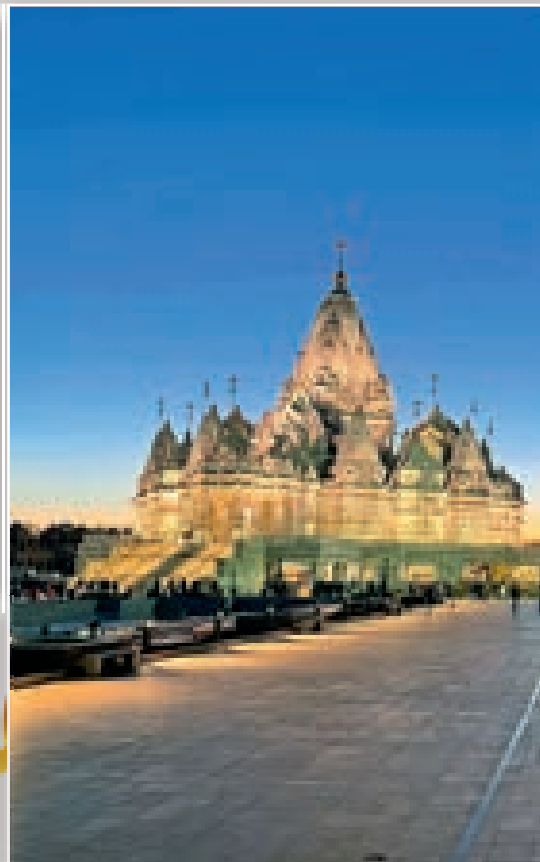
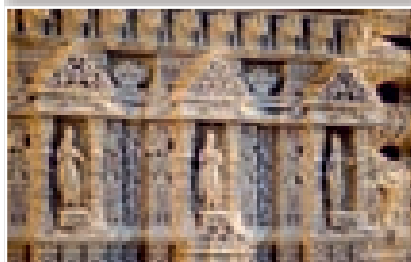
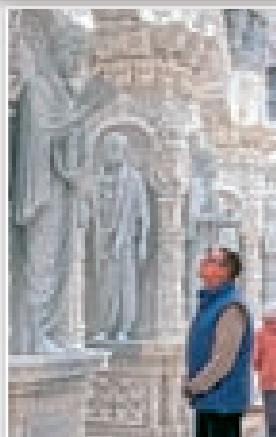
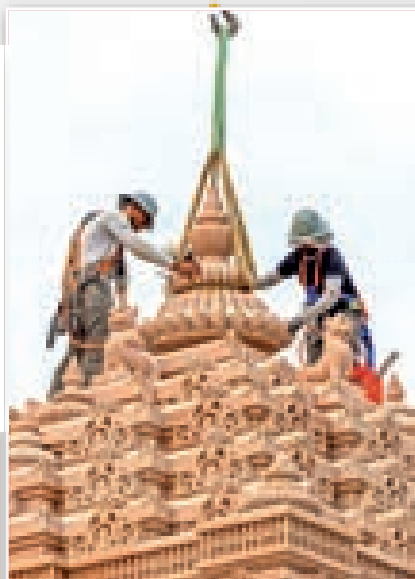
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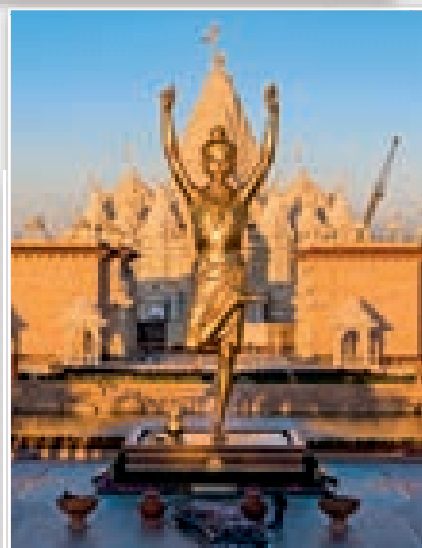
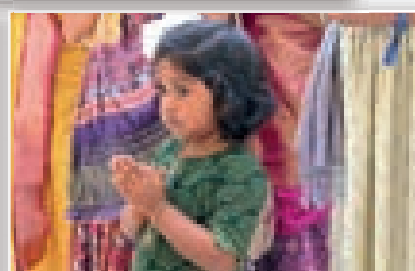
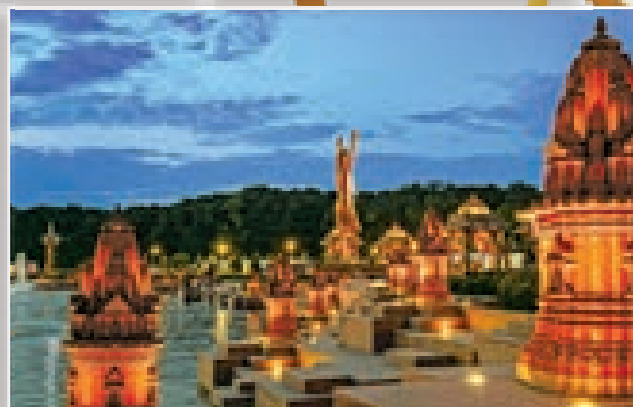
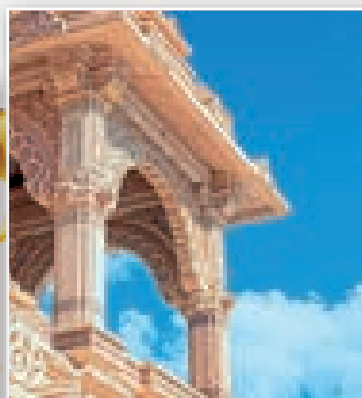
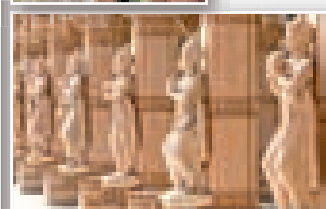
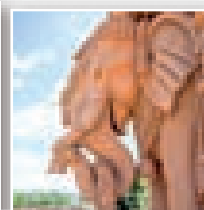
2023



Akshardham

# *Divine Moods*







# Media COVERAGE

*The Festival of Inspirations and the historic inauguration of BAPS Swaminarayan Akshardham in Robbinsville, New Jersey, on 8 October 2023, generated a vast amount of media coverage, both nationally and internationally.*

*The key aspects of the coverage are as follows.*

## NEWS OUTLETS

### Mainstream News Outlets

Major media outlets such as *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *USA Today*, along with prominent TV channels including CBS, ABC, NBC, FOX, and News 12 provided extensive coverage of the event, highlighting its importance as the world's second-largest Hindu temple and North America's first Akshardham. Additionally, television channels and other media in Europe and India also reported on the event.

### Indian American News Outlets

Indian American news channels and newspapers extensively covered the event, showcasing its impact on the local community and its potential to become a major tourist attraction. More than 17 special supplements, varying in length from 5 to 40 pages, were featured in a variety of publications.

## ONLINE MEDIA

### Indian News Websites

Numerous online platforms dedicated to Indian affairs provided detailed reports on the inauguration ceremony, showcasing the grandeur of the temple, the spiritual significance of the event, and the presence of dignitaries.

### Social Media

The event went viral on social media platforms like X (Twitter), Instagram, Facebook and LinkedIn, with users sharing breathtaking photos and videos of the temple and the ceremony, garnering millions of views



and sparking conversations about the cultural significance of the inauguration.

## KEY POINTS HIGHLIGHTED IN THE COVERAGE

### Spiritual Significance

The inauguration was portrayed as a momentous occasion for Hindus worldwide, marking the presence of their faith and culture in North America. The intricate details of the temple's architecture and the traditional rituals performed during the ceremony were highlighted as representations of devotion and spiritual values.

### Architectural Marvel

The stunning architecture of the Akshardham campus, incorporating intricate carvings, pink sandstone, and white marble, was widely praised by media outlets. The campus's blend of traditional Hindu elements and contemporary design was seen as a testament to the enduring legacy of Hindu craftsmanship.

### Community Impact

The potential positive impact of Akshardham on the local community was a recurring theme in the coverage. The temple's spiritual, educational and humanitarian service initiatives were mentioned, along with its role in promoting cultural understanding and interfaith dialogue.

The inauguration was seen as a significant event not just for the Hindu community but also for the broader society. The media highlighted the event's potential to attract tourists from around the world and further bridge cultural gaps.

### Voluntary Effort

The humongous voluntary effort by 12,500 male and female volunteers from all corners of North America was highlighted by the American and Indian media.

### Excerpts of the Coverage

"Akshardham is a labor of love, representing the dedication and unwavering commitment to selfless service and unity."

- *NJ.com*

"Akshardham Temple, a heritage site and an abode of spiritualism."

- *The Statesman*



“The temple, about 15 years in the making, is believed to be the largest in the Western Hemisphere and is expected to draw religious pilgrims and tourists from all over the world. As they approached a large gold shrine, many gasped in wonder, having arrived at the place where they believe God resides in the form of sacred images.”

- *The New York Times*

“Members of the BAPS community are largely known for their selfless service, or *seva*, which they see as an act of devotion to God. Through their *seva*, BAPS has opened 100 temples across the United States alone. Next year, the *sampradaya*, or Hindu sect, will celebrate 50 years of history in North America.”

- *The Washington Post*

“The path to God runs down the New Jersey Turnpike, where, in the suburban stretch of central New Jersey, the town of Robbinsville improbably boasts the largest Hindu temple in the Western Hemisphere, a dazzling sacred landscape.”

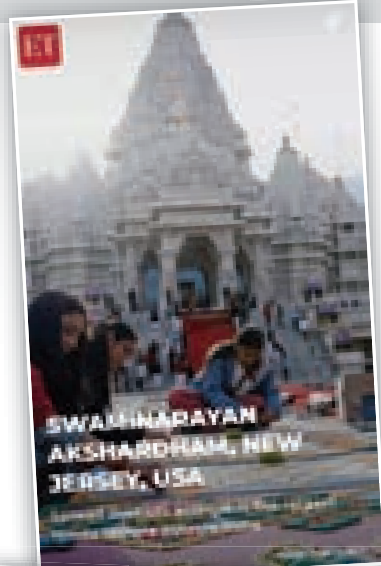
- *New York (Magazine)*

“Psychologically, what compels humans to see God in a stone and to build majestic stone abodes for the Divine? If marble stones could speak, they would sing from the depths of the human psyche some of the highest aspirations of the human mind. Satish Jangid, a skilled sculptor of wood and stone crafts, had rarely traveled outside of his home district of Rajasthan. But when he got the opportunity to contribute to what was once considered a dying art, he took up the challenge. You can find him instructing volunteers and visitors about the work he did on the marble pillars and carved statues. He is one of the artisan volunteers or Vishwakarma sculptors, named after the Hindu deity of architecture.”

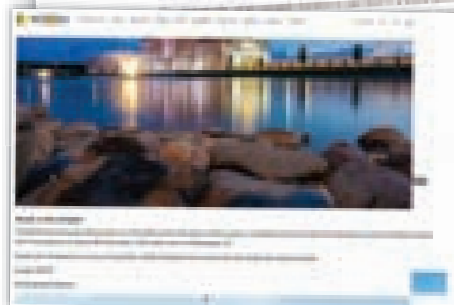
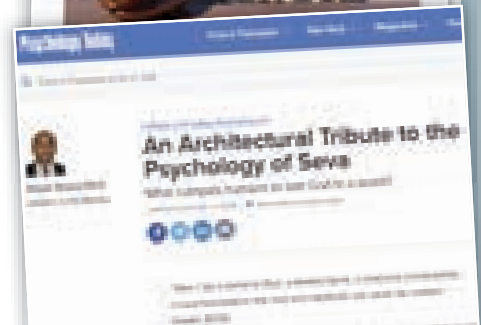
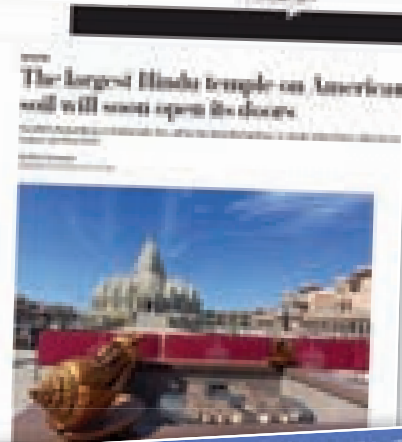
- *Psychology Today*

“It is an occasion of profound spiritual significance for the vast legion of devotees worldwide,” Modi wrote in a letter to BAPS Swaminarayan Akshardham in Robbinsville.

- *The Economic Times*



The Washington Post



## Overall Tone

The coverage of the Akshardham inauguration was overwhelmingly positive, emphasizing its spiritual importance, architectural grandeur, and potential for positive community impact. The event was seen as a milestone for the Hindu community in North America and a celebration of faith, culture, and tradition.

## LIST OF AMERICAN MAINSTREAM NEWS OUTLETS THAT COVERED BAPS SWAMINARAYAN AKSHARDHAM'S INAUGURATION

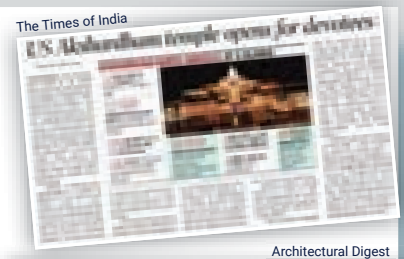
*The New York Times*; *The Washington Post*; *USA Today*; PBS; ABC News; *National Geographic*; *Architectural Digest*; NBC4 New York; *LA Times*; *Seattle Times*; CBS New York; Fox News; CNBC TV18; WFAA Dallas; NJ 101.5; NBC 5 & Telemundo 39; OSV News; *The Record*; NJTV; New York Magazine; Getty Images News; News 12 New Jersey; Voice of America; The Star-Ledger/NJ.com; Fox 5 TV; *Hinduism Today*; Feature Story News (Provides content and services for TV, radio, online...); WNYC (A public radio station in New York City); *New Jersey Monitor* – Focuses on in-depth coverage of political and social issues in New Jersey, Reuters, TV9 USA, AP News (Associated Press News), Jersey Digs (A digital platform focusing on development, real estate, and community news in New Jersey); *Psychology Today* (A premier magazine and digital platform).

## PROMINENT NEWS OUTLETS/ NEWS AGENCIES OUTSIDE OF USA

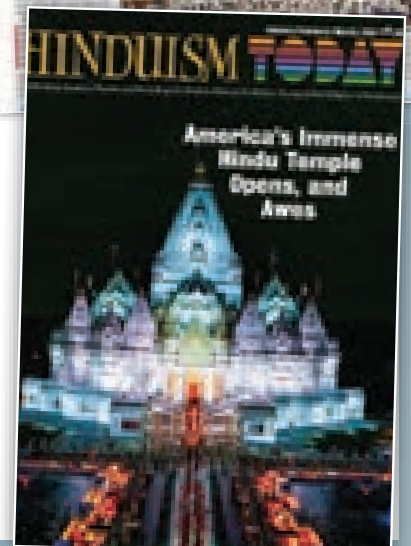
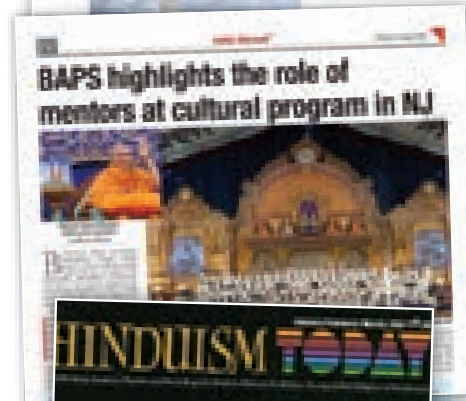
*Daily Mail* (A British newspaper, a strong online presence in the USA); AFP News Agency; RTL Nieuws (A Dutch news programme offering global event coverage relevant to U.S. audiences.); Press Trust of India (India's largest news agency); ANI (Asian News International, a leading South Asian news agency).

## INDIAN-AMERICAN ETHNIC NEWS OUTLETS

*Desi Talk*; *Gujarat Times*; *Hi India*; *Hum Hindustani*; *India Herald*; *India Tribune*; *India West*; *Indo American News*; *News India Times*; *The Indian EYE*; *The New India Abroad* (English); *The New India Abroad* (Hindi); *The New India Abroad* (Punjabi); *The South Asian Times*; *Garvi Gujarat*; *India Post*; *Gujarat Samachar*; *Gujarat Darpan*; *Akila* (USA); *American Kahani*.



Architectural Digest





## INDIA

English: *Times of India*; *Indian Express*; *Ahmedabad Mirror*; *The South Asian Times*; *Hindustan Times*; *Lokmat*; *Bangalore Mirror*; *Free Press Journal* and others.

Gujarati: *Divya Bhaskar*; *Gujarat Samachar*; *Nav Gujarat Samay*; *Akila*, *Rajkot*; *Phulchab*; *Jai Hind*; *Kutch Mitra*; *Janmabhoomi*, *Mid-day*; *Sanj Samachar*; *Aajkal*; *Gujarat Mirror*; *Sanj Samachar*; *Chitralekha* and others.

TV channels: *Gujarat First*; *TV9 Gujarati*; *ABP Asmita*; *News18 Gujarati*; *Zee 24 Kalak*; *Mantavya News*; *Aaj Tak*; *India TV*; *ABP Live Hindi*; *Zee News* and others.

## HINDI AND OTHER LANGUAGE DAILIES

*Rajasthan Patrika*; *Dainik Bhaskar*, *Punjab Kesari*; *Metro Herald* and others.

- Lenin Joshi

Lawrence Township, NJ





## Akshardham Post-Pratishtha

18 October 2023, Robbinsville. A day of new beginnings. A day of excitement. A day of inspiration. This was the day that BAPS Swaminarayan Akshardham opened to the world. It had been 10 days since Mahant Swami Maharaj had performed the final *pratishtha* ceremonies. He had left the Robbinsville campus two days prior, entrusting the Sanstha's largest project in North America to the hands of his beloved sadhus and devotees.

Though the focus for months had been Akshardham Mahotsav, there was a team of dedicated volunteers working tirelessly behind the scenes to ensure that the experience of the first guest to walk through the doors and every visitor thereafter would be fulfilling.

In just the first 45 days, Akshardham has welcomed hundreds of thousands of visitors through its doors. Who were they, what did they experience and how did they find out about Akshardham?

### VISITORS

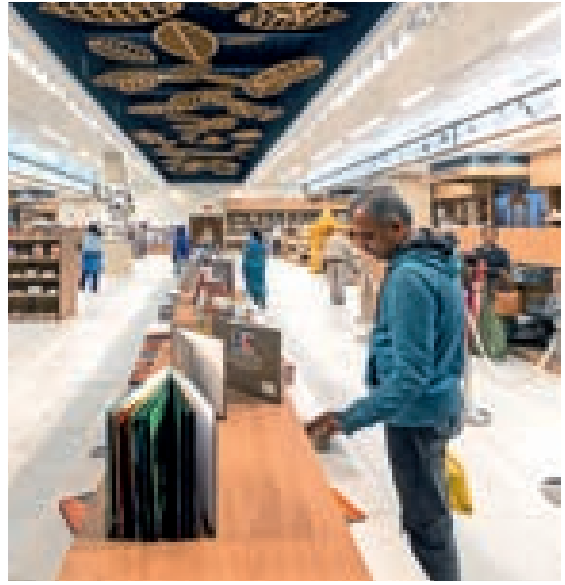
Since the opening, visitors have come from all corners of North America and the world. Not only are they of Indian background, but over 35% were non-Indian. Many had heard

about Akshardham through the extensive television and media coverage received during the opening ceremonies, while others heard about Akshardham through the dozens of media pieces done by local, state, national and international news outlets since the opening. So many others have been drawn to visit merely by word of mouth from friends and family who had already visited. Some were driving along US Highway 130 and were drawn by curiosity at seeing the *mahashikhar*, while others were heading elsewhere and stumbled upon the site.

A contractor of Russian descent was walking around the grounds doing a video call with relatives. He was showing them the 49-foot-tall Tapomurti Shri Nilkanth Varni. He spoke to them in Russian, but later, he explained that he told them, "I don't know what it is, but there is a peace I feel in front of this statue that I have never felt. I didn't know how to describe this place, so I wanted to show them."

A visitor by the name of Terri Taylor Tattan wrote on Google, "Stunning. Magnificent. Massive! Words alone can't describe the scope and beauty of this BAPS Swaminarayan Akshardham campus. All of the architecture, campus layout, shops and the friendliness of the staff and





volunteers were truly mind-blowing. Allow enough time to visit absolutely everything!”

An invited guest, Reshma Saujani, CEO of Moms First and the founder of Girls Who Code, said after her visit to Akshardham during Diwali, that if she were asked by someone what it was like visiting Akshardham, she would tell them, “Go there to find peace and love.”

Congressman Hank Johnson, who represents Lilburn, Georgia, the location of the Atlanta BAPS Mandir, was unable to visit Akshardham prior to the *pratishtha* ceremonies. However, he came soon thereafter. He summed it up well, “[This] mandir itself is a representation of peace, harmony and unity with the goal of service to mankind. It’s renewing and refreshing my commitment to the people I represent.”

The congressman further expressed his joy that Akshardham will be open to the public because it will allow people to learn more “about the Hindu philosophy. And if they have no philosophy, perhaps they will take on a new philosophy. But if they do have a religious teaching that they follow, a visit here will help strengthen whatever one might be. And that is a good thing, because that is where the harmony and unity come into people and that is what we

need now more than ever before”.

Many visitors also first came to find out about Akshardham through social media postings by people they follow or images that came up on their feeds. Although photography is not allowed inside the *mahamandir*, the breathtaking visuals from the Welcome Center and courtyard have fast become ‘must-have’ posts for those with accounts on Instagram and Facebook. Simple videos of the exterior of the campus from individuals with a nominal number of followers end up having millions of views just because of its uniqueness, beauty and aura.

As the winter months entered, it did not stop the flow of visitors. People have braved cold weather during the Christmas and New Year’s holidays in order to take selfies and capture memories of their visit with loved ones. Visitors often want to cap off their visits by savouring the culinary tastes of Akshardham at BAPS Shayona Café. Kids are delighted to see favourites such as french fries and grilled cheese, while those wanting a more authentic experience go for the *thali* and *chaat* options. A mother of two children said, “I really wanted to try Indian food, but I knew that my children probably wouldn’t want to try. I was so happy to

see cheese pizza as an option. It just added to the positive experience my kids had.”

## OPERATIONS

For visitors, many describe their experience as seamless. They are walking from one part to another and filling their senses with divinity and tranquillity. However, in order to make that experience a reality for every visitor, a team of over 2,500 volunteers are offering their services on full-time, part-time and as-needed basis. During the peak days of the winter holidays, over 500 volunteers were devoting their personal time at any given time during their holidays, away from their families and friends to give people the Akshardham experience.

A large number of the volunteers help in one of two areas – Visitor Services, the department responsible for greeting visitors and ensuring they have a comfortable experience, and Food Services which includes the dining experience at Shayona Café. However, there are many other departments working behind the scenes including Public Safety, Information Technology, among others.

While most of the volunteers are within an hour of Robbinsville, there are many others who come on a fixed schedule from as far away as Washington, DC – a drive that normally takes three hours. There is a team of female volunteers from DC Mandir that are regularly scheduled for the early shift at Shayona Café. They meet at their mandir around 5 a.m. and drive to Robbinsville. They usually arrive by 8 a.m., do darshan and then start their *seva* by 8.30. Normally, they would finish their *seva* by 2.30 p.m., but many times they find out that there are not enough people to help with the evening shift and so offer to stay until the campus closes and wind up their *seva* at 8.30 p.m. At times, they have no choice but to reach home that night, so instead of accepting

accommodations, they make the journey back reaching home well past midnight. Volunteers such as these are at the heart of the Akshardham experience.

The Akshardham Operations team also understands that in order to give a great experience to visitors, our own volunteers should have an experience that motivates them to continue to give their time and inspire others to join. In order to provide this service to devotees and volunteers, a decision was made a year ago to build a Personnel Care & Management team. Led by industry experts in the field of human resources, they have taken tried and tested corporate strategies of retention and wellness and applied them to the world of *seva*.

One of the leaders of the PCM, Shefali Patel, a Global Talent Development Director at the multinational pharmaceutical company Astra Zeneca, said, “I was skeptical at first about how corporate strategies on well-being would apply to volunteers, but I have been so impressed with how everyone throughout the operations team is not just forward thinking, but satsang thinking. Not only are we trying to make sure everyone enjoys their time doing *seva*, but we are also making sure that we provide avenues for them to enhance their satsang. Everyone is encouraged to take time to enjoy darshan, and in order to remember that this is *seva*, all teams take a few minutes before the start of their *seva* to do *seva prarthana* and read a *prasang*. It helps start conversations between people who have never met and builds bonds over shared experiences.”

The Akshardham Experience is for everyone. Whether you are a volunteer, an individual on a spiritual journey, a curious seeker of culture and architecture, everyone who has stepped on the grounds has found an inner-connection with Akshardham.



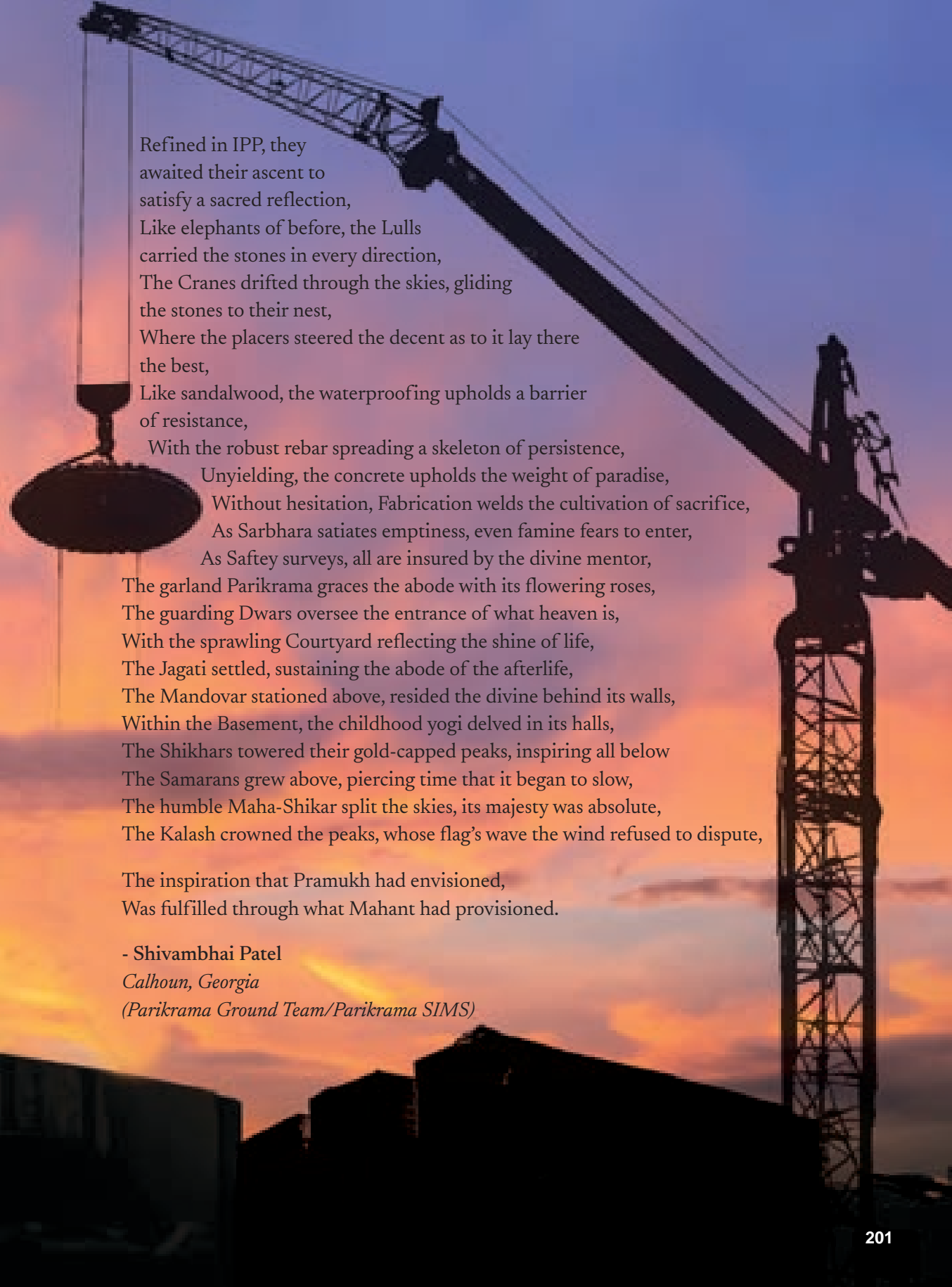
Siddharth Dubal  
Millstone, NJ

# Ode to Akshardham

How is it possible for such a structure to rise?  
How can a moonlit spire pierce the sunlit skies,  
What was the vision that mothered such radiance,  
What was the cause of a glory with infinite radius,  
Why is it that an incoming downpour arrives as a mist,  
Why is it that the all advancing time decides not to resist,  
When did the sun start to hesitate on its ritual descent?  
When did the insignia of night peak early its crescent?  
Where is it, the site where the whole world is manifested,  
Where the immaterial abode of the liberated has nested,  
Who is it, the inspirer of the bliss around this abyss?  
Who is the cause of all this?

He, who inspired possibility in impossible,  
Made the uncrossable sea of materialism crossable,  
He, who crafted a place where opposing generations,  
Unanimously fused together to build its foundations,  
He, who curated a site where those with everything,  
Revered those who the world perceived to have nothing,  
He, who commissioned such a benevolent task,  
That the benefactors of his sacrifices, sacrificed all without an ask.

With nothing but the sun rising above, the task commenced,  
Who stood unhindered that the mammoth project was against?  
The earth gifted its jewels bestowed upon divine carvers,  
Divinity was etched, displaying what the heavenly  
abode harbors,  
Carefully loaded, it traversed the vastness of the ocean,  
Precisely unloaded at Khetar, where the way was set  
in motion,



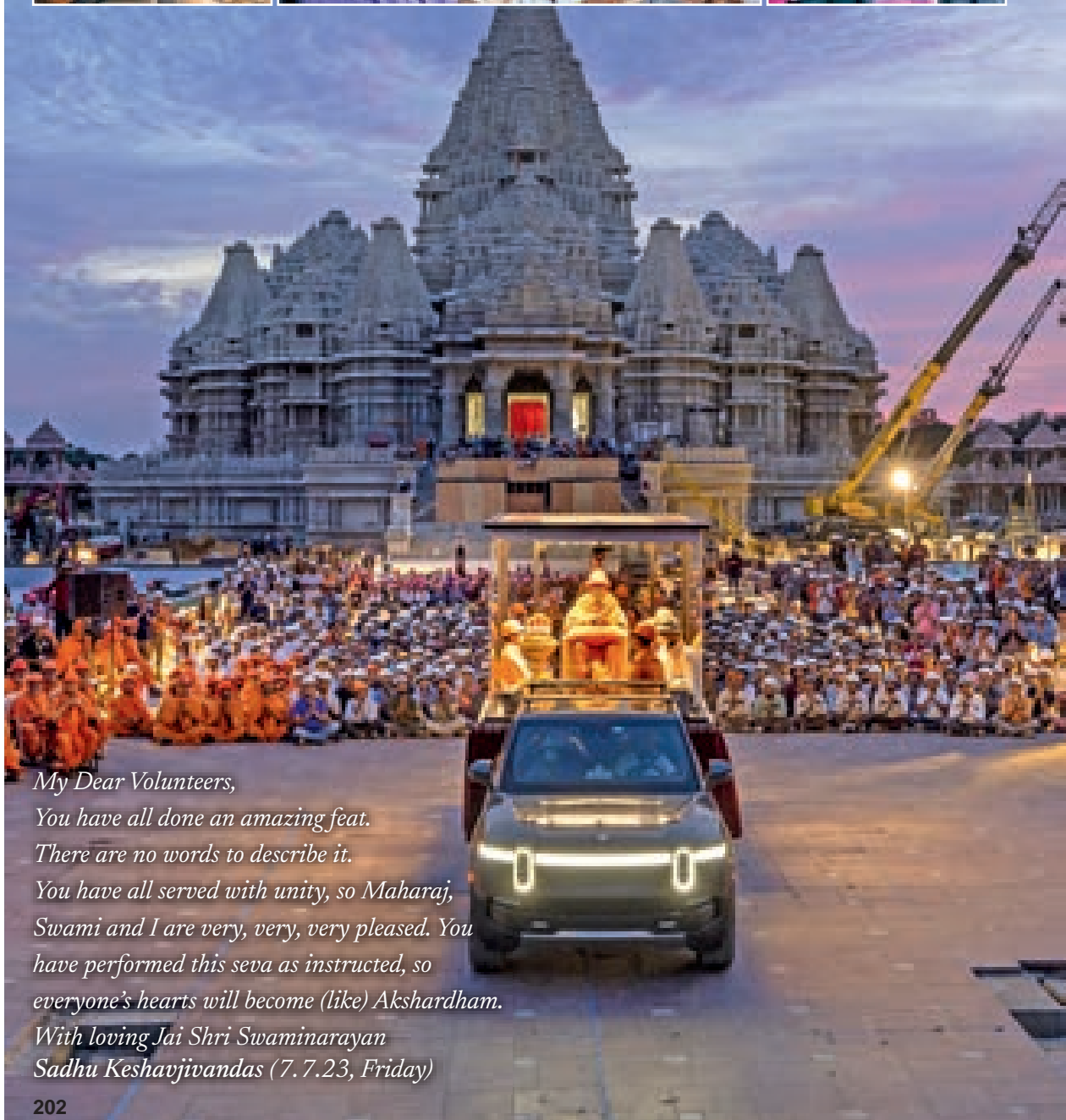
Refined in IPP, they  
awaited their ascent to  
satisfy a sacred reflection,  
Like elephants of before, the Lulls  
carried the stones in every direction,  
The Cranes drifted through the skies, gliding  
the stones to their nest,  
Where the placers steered the decent as to it lay there  
the best,  
Like sandalwood, the waterproofing upholds a barrier  
of resistance,  
With the robust rebar spreading a skeleton of persistence,  
Unyielding, the concrete upholds the weight of paradise,  
Without hesitation, Fabrication welds the cultivation of sacrifice,  
As Sarbhara satiates emptiness, even famine fears to enter,  
As Saftey surveys, all are insured by the divine mentor,  
The garland Parikrama graces the abode with its flowering roses,  
The guarding Dwars oversee the entrance of what heaven is,  
With the sprawling Courtyard reflecting the shine of life,  
The Jagati settled, sustaining the abode of the afterlife,  
The Mandovar stationed above, resided the divine behind its walls,  
Within the Basement, the childhood yogi delved in its halls,  
The Shikhars towered their gold-capped peaks, inspiring all below  
The Samarans grew above, piercing time that it began to slow,  
The humble Maha-Shikar split the skies, its majesty was absolute,  
The Kalash crowned the peaks, whose flag's wave the wind refused to dispute,  
  
The inspiration that Pramukh had envisioned,  
Was fulfilled through what Mahant had provisioned.

- Shivambhai Patel

*Calhoun, Georgia*

*(Parikrama Ground Team/Parikrama SIMS)*

# Appreciations



*My Dear Volunteers,  
You have all done an amazing feat.  
There are no words to describe it.  
You have all served with unity, so Maharaj,  
Swami and I are very, very, very pleased. You  
have performed this seva as instructed, so  
everyone's hearts will become (like) Akshardham.  
With loving Jai Shri Swaminarayan  
Sadhu Keshavjivandas (7.7.23, Friday)*





49 ft high *murti* of Shri Nilkanth Varni in front of Swaminarayan Akshardham, Robbinsville



Divine *murti* of Bhagwan Swaminarayan in the central shrine of Swaminarayan Akshardham, Robbinsville