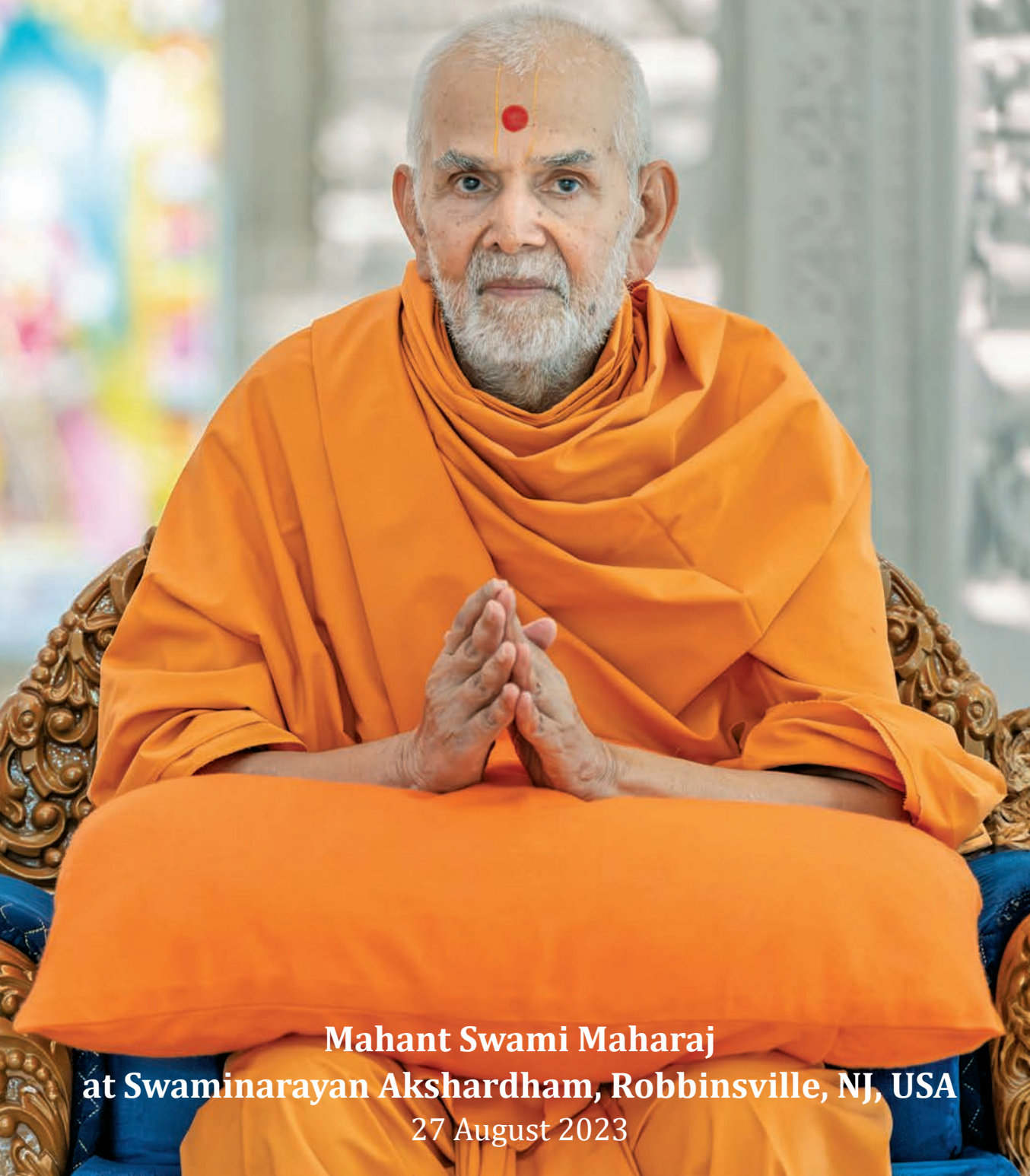


SWAMINARAYAN **BLISS**

November–December 2023 Annual Subscription ₹ 80/-



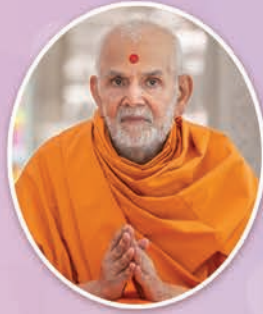
Mahant Swami Maharaj
at Swaminarayan Akshardham, Robbinsville, NJ, USA
27 August 2023



MAHANT SWAMI MAHARAJ'S VICHARAN
Robbinsville

1. Swamishri garlands the Akshardham volunteers with an ID card, 29 September.
2. Devotees engrossed in the darshan of Swamishri as he departs from Swaminarayan Akshardham, Robbinsville, 16 October.

Mahant Swami Maharaj's New Year Blessings



Swami - Shreeji
P. P. Pramukh Swami

Gondal
25.10.23
Wednesday
Ekadashi

To,

Swami Bapa's most beloved
Haribhaktos

HAPPY NEW YEAR

Prayers for you and your family

- Prayers for firm conviction
in Maharaj and Swami
- Prayers for firm adherence
in our niyams
- Prayers for strong attachment
with the satpurnesh
- Prayers for satsang



Centric Life

- Prayers for peace,
prosperity and happiness

Heartiest Tai Shree Swaminarayan
from Sadhu Keshavjivandas



Swamishri with Akshardham site volunteers in front of the Mahamandir as construction nears completion

SWAMINARAYAN BLISS

November–December 2023, Vol. 46, No. 5



Shri Akshar-Purushottam Maharaj



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

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

SUBSCRIPTION RATES

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

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Dada Khachar's Heartfelt Appeal

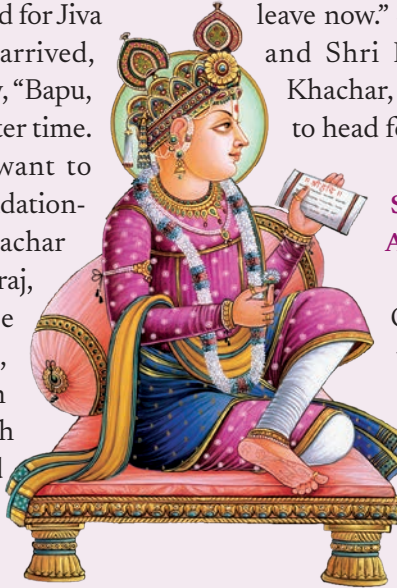
Shri Hari had a deep desire to build a mandir on the hilltop in Gadhada. However, when Jiva Khachar of Gadhada refused to part with his share of the land Shri Hari left to search for land in other villages...

The next day, Maharaj called for Jiva Khachar. As soon as he arrived, Shri Hari spoke explicitly, “Bapu, now let’s leave other talks for a later time. Dictate the document now. I want to quickly perform the mandir foundation-stone laying ceremony.” Jiva Khachar replied softly but craftily, “Maharaj, the fort will come in good use during an attack or invasion. Thus, you may construct the mandir on some other location.” After a brash reply, Jiva Khachar stood up and left. On hearing Jiva Khachar’s coarse refusal, Shri Hari looked at Ladha Thakkar and said, “You are right about Jiva Khachar because you know how to assess a person well.” Then, Shri Hari got up¹ to retire to his residence in Akshar Ordi.

SHRI HARI DEPARTS FROM GADHADA TO SEARCH FOR LAND IN OTHER VILLAGES

Soon enough, Somla Khachar arrived from Botad, Sura Khachar arrived from Loya, Vasta Khachar arrived from Kariyani and Jiva Khachar arrived from Sarangpur. Shri Hari was surprised to see them all arrive at the same time. He enquired, “How come you have all come so suddenly?” They replied, “Maharaj, we came to know that you are planning to build a mandir here, so we have come to tell you to build a mandir in our village. We will donate whatever amount of land you require.”

Shri Hari immediately called Naja Jogiya and instructed, “Saddle my mare, Manki. I wish to



leave now.” Soon, Naja Jogiya brought Manki and Shri Hari left Gadhpur with Somla Khachar, Sura Khachar and Vasta Khachar to head for Botad.

SHRI HARI DECIDES TO BUILD A MANDIR IN SARANGPUR

With Jiva Khachar’s refusal in Gadhada, Shri Hari was in a hurry to build a mandir elsewhere. So, he travelled to search for an appropriate place in the villages of Botad, Kariyani, Loya, Nagadka, Kariyaana, Kotda and Vankiya. But he was not satisfied. Eventually, he came to Sarangpur.

The village chief, Jiva Khachar, showed Shri Hari his own field, pasture and open land to the east of the village. Maharaj was pleased to see the open land. It was here that Shri Hari had earlier reined his agitated horse, Rojho, on the day of the Fuldol festival. He had then declared, “Today, I have performed the ground-breaking ceremony for a large mandir.”

Then, Jiva Khachar said, “Maharaj, whatever amount of land you ask for I shall grant it. Furthermore, the stone mine for the mandir construction is not far from here. Ghelasha, who resides in the nearby village of Barvala, is very pious and will provide oxen carts for transporting the stones here. Hence, please make a mandir at this place.”

The land on the outskirts of Sarangpur was to Shri Hari’s liking and choice. He thus resolved to

1. In 1951 (V.S. 2007), Shastriji Maharaj built a marble mandir on the hilltop and fulfilled Shri Hari’s wish.

build a mandir in Sarangpur. Panchaliba, the wife of Jiva Khachar, also deeply desired that Maharaj build a mandir in Sarangpur. Their two sons, Vagha Khachar and Amra Khachar, and son-in-law, Matra Dhadhal, wished similarly.

Then, Panchaliba cooked a meal for Shri Hari. While Shri Hari ate she was elated that Maharaj wished to build a mandir there. Jiva Khachar explained, “Sarangpur village is located in the region of Limbdi and there is no chance of any opposition for the mandir. Furthermore, Thakor Saheb, the king, will donate his pasture for the mandir. Therefore, Maharaj quickly start building a mandir here.”

Shortly after, Dada Khachar, Jivuba, Laduba, Panchuba and others arrived from Gadhada. They had rushed to Sarangpur on learning that Shri Hari had decided to build a mandir in Sarangpur. The entire family had abstained from food and water on the day Shri Hari departed from Gadhpur to explore for a place to build a mandir.

Shri Hari was having lunch. On seeing Maharaj, all the family members broke down profusely in tears. Maharaj asked, “Why are you all crying so intensely?” Then, Dada Khachar asked, “Maharaj, you stayed in Gadhpur for all these years and considered it to be yours. So, instead of building a mandir there why did you leave to build a mandir elsewhere?”

Shriji Maharaj was listening to Dada’s words. The latter continued, “Maharaj, we may not be able to acquire the entire land on the hilltop, but half of it belongs to us. So, we will fight for it in the court of Bhavnagar and acquire it. Hence, build the mandir in Gadhpur. If needs be, we will donate our home (*darbar*) to you, but do not renounce Gadhpur.”

Shri Hari did not wish to disappoint them because of their profound dedication and love. Thus Maharaj decided instantly, “I will return to Gadhpur and, according to your wish, will build

a mandir in your *darbar*.” Subsequently, Dada Khachar and his sisters were greatly relieved and happy.

A GRAND MANDIR SHALL BE BUILT HERE

On the other hand, Jiva Khachar, Panchaliba, Devkuba, Rathod Dadhal of Sarangpur turned sad. Jiva Khachar humbly and tearfully asked, “Maharaj, you had finalised the land and decided to build a mandir here, yet why have you changed your mind?” Shri Hari felt it improper to hurt the feelings of a rustic, pious devotee like Jiva Khachar. He thought for a while and revealed to him, “Bapu, do not be sad. A grand mandir will be built on this land. I will reside here with my Dham (Aksharbrahma) and Mukta (Gopalanand Swami), and the mandir will become popular. Pilgrims will flock here in large numbers.”² Jiva Khachar was pleased and soothed by Maharaj’s words.³

WE HAVE DONATED OUR HOME TO YOU

Shri Hari then blessed Jiva Khachar and returned with Dada Khachar to Gadhpur. Maharaj informed Dada Khachar, “I would like to perform the foundation-stone laying ceremony of the mandir in the month of Jeth (May–June). It would be nice to build the mandir on the land where presently there are rooms facing the south in the *darbar*. And the mandir will look magnificent facing north. Call Jivuba, Laduba, Panchuba, Rajba, Ghela Dhadhal, Nagmal and Ladha Thakkar to discuss and decide upon this matter.”

Dada Khachar hurriedly assembled all of them. They all bowed to Shri Hari and sat down. Then, Maharaj said, “It is the wish of Dada Khachar and you all to have a mandir built here in the *darbar*. You are also eager to donate the entire *darbar*, but I wish to personally know your opinions. If the whole *darbar* is donated then all those living here will have to relocate elsewhere. I do not want to

2. Harililamrut, Kalash 8, Vishram 61.

3. In 1916, Shastriji Maharaj fulfilled Shriji Maharaj’s wish by building a three-storey grand mandir on this land in Sarangpur. He consecrated the *murtis* of Bhagwan Swaminarayan, his Dham – Gunatitanand Swami – and his Mukta – Gopalanand Swami.

hurt your sentiments by moving you elsewhere. Now, say whatever you have in mind about this.”

Jivuba passionately expressed, “Maharaj, what are you saying! We do not believe this *darbar* to be ours. The day you arrived here we had decided and offered it to you. If, however, out of spiritual ignorance or self-possession, we were to hold on to the *darbar*, then we would have to give it up one day. So, it would be better to attach ourselves to you, and by having you alone we understand that we have wealth, land and everything.”

Shri Hari knew that Dada Khachar and his entire family were totally attached and dedicated to him and that they had offered their land, wealth and everything to him. Still, Maharaj wished to test them and he said, “Panchuba stays in the south-facing rooms, however if she happily gives them up, we can pull them down to build the mandir. But only if she gives them with a smile shall I accept them.”

YOUR SACRIFICE IS OVERWHELMING

Panchuba was understanding and ready to give up her rooms. She responded, “Maharaj, what better fortune can I have when Thakorji would be installed on the land where my rooms are! Furthermore, my eldest sister, Jivuba, has already stated that, ‘Everything is yours.’ Thus, there is nothing more for me to think about.”

Shri Hari was looking at Panchuba while she was talking. He grasped her intense devotion and the straightforwardness resonating in her words. Maharaj replied, “Panchuba, we will build new rooms for you.” Then, Jivuba said, “Maharaj, there are other homes besides the *darbar*, so there is no need to build new rooms. We will all stay together.”

Shri Hari smiled and praised, “Jivuba, your sacrifice is overwhelming and it eclipses that of many in the past. Though your dedication and services are monumental we still have to take care of you. You have to be looked after in accordance with your status.”

Soon, the demolition of the south-facing rooms of Panchuba commenced. Shri Hari enjoined the devotees who arrived to assist in the demolition *seva*. The walls of the rooms were very strong and difficult to break. However, Bhim Dabhi used a crowbar to weaken the base of the wall and then pushed it down with the help of fifteen devotees. Shri Hari was seated on a chair watching the whole scene. He was pleased with Bhim Dabhi’s smart effort and garlanded him.

SHRI HARI PERFORMS THE FOUNDATION-STONE LAYING CEREMONY

After deciding upon the spot on which to perform the foundation-stone laying ceremony Shri Hari called Ramchandra Bhatt. The latter gave the auspicious date of 28 May 1825 (Jeth *sud* 11, A.S. 1881) for the ceremony. Shri Hari sat to perform the ceremony himself and told Dada Khachar to sit next to him. The family members of Dada Khachar found this occasion to be exalting and auspicious. They felt, in spite of the large palaces of powerful kings, Dada’s *darbar*, which was much smaller and far less opulent, was incomparable and priceless because Parabrahma Purushottam Shriji Maharaj was present and staying there. Furthermore, today, he was going to provide a longstanding memory by performing the foundation-stone ceremony of a grand mandir.

Shri Hari held a golden trowel to fill the small ritual pit with mortar and lime. Then, Ramchandra Bhatt chanted Sanskrit verses while Dada Khachar formally pledged to offer the land to Shri Hari.

A large gathering of devotees was witnessing the divine and historic occasion. All were impressed and humbled by Dada Khachar’s devotion and selfless sacrifice. Many even prayed that they too be blessed with such virtues. ♦

(Contd. in next issue)

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



SATPURUSH

HH MAHANT SWAMI MAHARAJ
IN AMERICA  2023

8 Swaminarayan Bliss | November–December 2023



The third leg of Mahant Swami Maharaj's 'Akshardham Yatra' in Robbinsville continued as he presided over special events to commemorate the Akshardham Mahotsav – Festival of Inspirations. The following report is a summary of Swamishri's story in Robbinsville from 16 August to 29 September 2023.

AUGUST 2023

16 AUGUST: FAMILY VALUES

The evening assembly was themed 'From House to Home: Inspiring Family Values'. After a variety of presentations that provided guidance on positive parenting, Swamishri blessed, "Parents should not compare their children with others. This may seem like a small thing, but it rebounds to cause problems. Guide children so that they do not go out of line. Comparisons belittle and confuse children, even leading them to suicide.

"Parents must raise their children with love. Do not be impatient. Impatience ruins everything. Also, being overly lax spoils them. They become unruly. Raise them to be of good character.

"The behaviour of parents influences children. They may not speak, but they know everything. You are their role models.

"At home, you must reinforce what they learn in the *bal sabha*. You must teach them to be honest and strengthen their faith. If you understand their nature and adapt accordingly, you will raise virtuous children. You must teach them to do good, not bad things."

17 AUGUST

After puja, Swamishri blessed, "*Nishkam* bhakti is to have refuge only in Shriji Maharaj. Offer all your prayers to him."

After lunch, during a discussion with the swamis praising the efforts of the volunteers for the completion of Akshardham, Aksharvatsal Swami recalled, "Swami, in 2017, you had come to Pindvada to see the ongoing work. As per the calculations, it was projected that Akshardham in Robbinsville would be completed in 2027. Then you said, 'Is it possible to finish in 2023?' So, all this has been possible by your wish."

Swamishri said, "Whatever Bhagwan does is for our good."

19 AUGUST: KISHORE-KISHORI DIN

After puja, Swamishri blessed, "Through



Kishores rejoice before Swamishri during the Kishore-Kishori Din assembly

Aksharbrahma Gunatitanand Swami, we have attained Shriji Maharaj. And we have attained Shriji Maharaj through his Sant. Maharaj established a Sant tradition who will lead us to *moksha*. This path for *moksha* will continue forever. By contemplating on this attainment, one secures *moksha*. Have unshakeable faith in Shriji Maharaj and his holy Sadhu. They will grant *moksha*. We are in Akshardham.”

In the evening, the Kishore-Kishori Din assembly was themed ‘Swami Malavathi: A Journey of Smrutis’. Over 1,500 *kishores* and *kishoris* were seated in the assembly, with countless more throughout North America watching the live webcast at their centres. Presentations by the *kishores* reflected how every gesture, blessing, support and memory of Swamishri forged their firm bond with him, empowering them and nurturing every aspect of their lives. Thereafter, Swamishri blessed the assembly through a series of questions. A selection is presented below.

Q: What is your guidance to save us from the perils of TV, social media, internet, bad company and other pitfalls?

Swamishri: 1. Do puja daily. 2. Respect your

parents. 3. Come to *sabha* every week. 4. Do satsang reading daily. 5. Avoid vulgar reading, movies, TV shows and social media. 6. Study hard while practising satsang.

Q: While doing puja, *arti*, *thal* daily we do not feel your presence, so we often lose interest. What can we do to feel elated while engaged in our daily rituals?

Swamishri: Develop *mahima*. If you understand the glory, the joy will follow.

Q: What is the true meaning of *malvu* (meet)?

Swamishri: When your thoughts and inclinations and the Satpurush’s thoughts and inclinations become one.

After the assembly, when Swamishri was returning to his room, at an open spot in the campus, he stopped to play *raas* from his cabin with hundreds of *kishores*.

20 AUGUST

After Thakorji’s darshan, under the mandir dome, Swamishri sanctified various creative and decorative *hindolas* devoutly prepared by *balaks* and *balikas*.

After puja, Swamishri blessed, “Today, we



Swamishri presides over the evening Gun Grahana assembly

will perform the *murti-pratishtha* of the *murtis* for mandirs in Birmingham, Huntsville and Montgomery (all in Alabama). With this *murti-pratishtha*, Shriji Maharaj will himself reside in the *murtis*. So, *arti*, bhajan, bhakti and *seva* must be performed daily. Visit the mandir daily; if you live far, then visit at least once a week. By offering devotion daily, Shriji Maharaj is pleased. The *murtis* are no longer mere paintings or statues, since Shriji Maharaj resides in them. So, offer reverence to them.”

Thereafter, Swamishri inaugurated a new audio publication titled *Anand Antar Chhayi Rayo*.

Then, Swamishri performed the Vedic *murti-pratishtha* rituals, *arti*, *pujan* and *mantra-pushpanjali* of all the *murtis*.

The theme of the evening assembly was ‘Gun Grahana’ – seeing the virtues in others.

Youths presented a skit depicting the benefits of *gun grahana*, and then several devotees of the southeast region narrated *prasangs* demonstrating *suhradbhav*, *seva*, *niyam*-dharma, bhakti and other qualities practised by devotees of their region.

Blessing the assembly, Swamishri said, “Even if a person has 99 faults, identify his one virtue.

Then you will benefit. By learning in this way from others, you will experience joy and peace. This is what Pramukh Swami Maharaj did throughout his life. This is today’s message. Seek out the good in others. Make this a habit.”

21 AUGUST

After puja, Swamishri launched the *Akshardham Weekly Spotlight* programme to be broadcast by TV Asia, showcasing Robbinsville Akshardham and the Akshardham Mahotsav. The weekly programmes would also be broadcast on the BAPS YouTube Channel, Gujarat 1st, ITV Gold and other channels.

Thereafter, Swamishri inaugurated a Greek translation of the Satsang Diksha.

In the evening, after a tour of Akshardham, actor Suniel Shetty and international cricketers, Venkatesh Prasad and Parthiv Patel, met Swamishri and received his blessings.

23 AUGUST

After puja, Swamishri led the prayers for the successful landing on the moon of the Indian Space Research Organization’s Chandrayaan 3.



Swamishri writes a letter congratulating the PM of India and ISRO on Chandrayaan 3's the successful moon landing



Children perform a skit before Swamishri

In his blessings, Swamishri said, “Understand that Shriji Maharaj resides in the Sant. The Sant is not Shriji Maharaj. Shriji Maharaj and Gunatitanand Swami both exist – without any doubt, just as you see me and I see you all. Shriji Maharaj graced us by bringing and identifying Aksharbrahma. He has not deceived us.”

Later in the morning, on hearing of Chandrayaan 3's successful landing on the moon, Swamishri wrote a congratulatory letter to Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the entire team at ISRO.

24 AUGUST: GHAR SABHA

After puja, Swamishri read from *Yogi Vani* and blessed the assembly, “Whatever one does to please the Satpurush are good actions, because the Satpurush is constantly attached to Bhagwan. To sincerely believe that the Satpurush is *nirdosh* – beyond any faults – is true guru *pujan*. Yogiji Maharaj has given a new meaning: guru *pujan* is to see one's own faults.”

The evening ‘Ghar Sabha’ assembly was presented in the form of a skit with Swamishri on a *padhramani* to the homes of everyone present.

So, as per tradition, *pujan* and *arti* were performed. Thereafter, *prasangs* of families who regularly conduct *ghar sabha*, the challenges they face and the benefits they have experienced were narrated.

Swamishri blessed the assembly through a question-answer session. A selection is presented below.

Q: We conduct *ghar sabha* regularly, yet we do not feel the manifest presence of Shriji Maharaj and the Satpurush. How can we feel their presence?

Swamishri: You will do so. Observing this *agna* is itself the darshan of Maharaj and Swami.

Q: We attend the weekly area and mandir Sunday assembly, so do we need to conduct a *ghar sabha*?

Swamishri: Yes, you will experience the benefits by doing it. The family members will become better acquainted and understand each more. You will respect each other and this will create a positive home atmosphere. Unity will increase.

Q: We want to do *ghar sabha*, but do not get time to do so. What should we do?

Swamishri: If it is in your mind to do so then



Swamishri offers *mantra-pushpanjali* during the Pramukh Swami Maharaj Smruti Sabha

you will be able to find time and do *ghar sabha*.

Q: What should we do to ensure our *balaks* and *kishores* (children and teenagers) join in?

Swamishri: Do things which interest them. In this way, gradually build up to deeper topics.

Q: Despite doing *ghar sabha* for many years, we do not see a reduction in our family problems. What understanding should we have?

Swamishri: It is Pramukh Swami's *agna*. Even if you do not experience any benefits, you must continue. You will benefit, because *ghar sabha* is the right thing to do.

Q: We do not have any major problems in our family. Do we need to do *ghar sabha*?

Swamishri: There are many benefits of *ghar sabha*. Even if you have no problems, to do *ghar sabha* is Swami's *agna*. Observing this *agna* earns Bhagwan's blessings and prevents problems from arising in the future.

Concluding, Swamishri added, "To do *ghar sabha* is Swami's *agna*. You will benefit, but be patient and daily conduct *ghar sabha* for 15 minutes. Even a single word can trigger a big change, because these words are divine nectar. By doing *ghar sabha*, Bhagwan will enter your home."

25 AUGUST: PRAMUKH SWAMI MAHARAJ SMRUTI SABHA

After puja, Swamishri read from *Yogi Vani* and elaborated, "The easiest, most convenient form of *dhyān* is to contemplate on the *mahima* [of God, Satpurush and Satsang]. This can be done anywhere – while walking, in a car, or on a train or aeroplane.

"Remain alert so that thieves in the form of *maya* do not enter to disturb your devotion.

"Enagage frequently in *samagam*. We have many opportunities to associate. Gunatitanand Swami conducted a six-month *chhavni* (spiritual camp) and freed people from material desires.

"When faced with hardships, we escape. But one who has *mahima* will lovingly tolerate and progress."

After puja, Swamishri sanctified the certificate and mementos for 12-year-old Jay Hemantbhai Patel, the first *balak* in North America to memorize all the 565 Sanskrit verses of the *Swaminarayan Siddhant Karika*. Anandswarup Swami presented the items and honoured Jay in Swamishri's presence.

The evening assembly was themed 'Guruji Nahi Bhulu Tamane', to mark the seventh anniversary of Pramukh Swami Maharaj's return to Akshardham.

Swamishri inaugurated the USA Akshardham



Swamishri performs the Yantra Pujan Vidhi

website (usa.akshardham.org), which will be the source of information on Robbinsville Akshardham and the Akshardham Mahotsav. Swamishri also launched variously sized models of the Akshardham Mahamandir.

Then, swamis recollected Pramukh Swami Maharaj's divine qualities of humility, selflessness and unconditional love, and his deep connection with God.

At the end of the assembly, Swamishri blessed, "Pramukh Swami Maharaj's saintliness was hiding in plain sight. He dedicated his life for the sadhus and devotees. He delivered infinite times more than he had pledged before guru Shastriji Maharaj. He lived among us, but we failed to fully recognize his glory.

"Day and night, he disregarded his body to serve the sadhus and devotees. He lived amongst us, but was divine. What did he expect in return? Nothing, except that we practise satsang and progress on the spiritual path.

"So, believe that satsang is (eternally) true. Shastriji Maharaj, Yogiji Maharaj and Pramukh Swami Maharaj are all true. With this faith, continue to offer *seva* and *bhakti*."

26 AUGUST

Today, Shravan *sud* 10, marked the seventh anniversary (by *tithi*) of Pramukh Swami Maharaj's return to Akshardham. Sadhus and youths sang bhajans in his honour during Swamishri's puja.

After puja, Swamishri performed *pujan* of the *yantras* to be placed under the *murtis* of the avatars of Sanatan Dharma to be consecrated in the Akshardham Mahamandir.

28 AUGUST: AKSHARDHAM SITE VISIT

At 6.30 p.m., Swamishri visited the Akshardham campus to view the various types of *seva* being performed: food services, general store; electric, courtyard, *parikrama*, housekeeping, rebar station, ground team (inc. crane operators), *abhishek mandapam*, stone repair and finishing, scaffolding, stairs, museum, safety team, surveying team, design team, *murti* team and others. Haridarshan Swami explained the duties of each *seva*. During this visit, at 6.53 p.m., Swamishri directed the crane to place the last stone of the *amalsar* in position on top of the *shikhar*.



Swamishri visits the BAPS Swaminarayan Akshardham campus to view the ongoing construction and bless the volunteers

29 AUGUST

In the evening, Swamishri sanctified the prayers written by the over 10,500 *satsangi* families of North America which will be placed in the *kalashes* that will crown the *mahamandir*.

30 AUGUST: MAHAMANDIR KALASH PUJAN

Today, Shravan *sud* Punam, was Rakshabandhan and also marked the 9th *patotsav* of the Robbinsville *shikharbadhha* mandir consecrated by Pramukh Swami Maharaj in 2014.

In the early morning, *sadguru* swamis performed the *patotsav* rituals and then Swamishri performed the *patotsav arti* in the central shrine.

At around 11.00 a.m. Swamishri arrived at the stairs of the Akshardham Mahamandir, where a total of 18 *kalashes* that will crown the *mahamandir* had been arranged. The intricately designed *kalashes* were embellished with streams of colourful flowers.

Swamishri came to the *mahamandir* podium to take his place next to the main *kalash*. The *sadguru* swamis had performed the preliminary *pujan* rituals. Swamishri joined them to perform the main *pujan* rituals. At 11.10 a.m., they offered *abhishek*

with *panchamrut*, saffron water and plain water. Then Swamishri applied *chandlo* to and showered rice grains on the main *kalash*.

Thereafter, Swamishri blessed the gathering seated on the open ground, “Today is a day of protection. Bhagwan has provided us with the best protection by guiding us on to the path of *moksha*. That is the best protection. There is nothing greater.”

Then, at 11.30 a.m., Swamishri entered the main *garbhagruh* where the *murti* of Shriji Maharaj was to be ritually established – *murti shapan*.

The *murti* was suspended a few feet above the podium where it will be seated. Swamishri performed *pujan* of the *charanarvind* of the *murti*. He also perform *pujan* of the *yantras* and then placed them and other sacred objects at the spot where the *murti* will be placed.

Then, Swamishri performed *pujan* of Gunatitanand Swami’s *murti* and also offered *mantra-pushpanjali* to all the other *murtis* that will be consecrated in the *mahamandir*.

Thereafter, Swamishri returned to face the *murti* of Shriji Maharaj. Then *sadguru* swamis ceremoniously split coconuts, after which *abhishek* and other Vedic rituals were performed.



Swamishri performs *abhishek* of the main *kalash*



Swamishri performs rituals during the *murti-sthapan* ceremony

In conclusion, Swamishri blessed, “The *murti* is *adbhut* – wonderful. By everyone’s efforts, Akshardham has been completed. Men and women have all sincerely endeavoured with unity.”

The evening assembly theme was ‘Raksha’ (Protection). After children, youths and elders had voiced their prayers, Swamishri blessed the assembly, “Maharaj has given 212 codes in the Shikshapatri. If you live according to them, you will not face problems. You must have a firm refuge in Bhagwan. The stronger your refuge, the greater the protection. God protects us in many ways, but we are unaware of them. So, keep a firm refuge in Maharaj and Swami. Only they can free one from the cycle of births and deaths.”

SEPTEMBER 2023

2 SEPTEMBER: BAL-BALIKA DIN

After puja, Swamishri blessed, “Material objects are perishable, so do not crave for them. You are *atma*. You are not ordinary *balaks*. You are spiritually aware. You have faith in Maharaj and Swami. Become brave, increase your spiritual awareness and you will be happy. Otherwise, you will be drawn away by worldly desires. You are

like lions – brave, wise and understanding; you observe *agna* and have *upasana*.”

The evening Bal Din assembly was titled ‘Akshardhamna Balak Ame’ (We Are Balaks of Akshardham). When the curtains of Swamishri’s cabin were opened, he was informed that around 1,500 *balaks* and *balikas* were present in the assembly, and hundreds more were participating from their own centres via the live webcast.

Views of the *balaks* at other centres were displayed on the screen. They greeted Swamishri by bowing, saluting, giving a thumbs up or a high-five, forming a heart with their hands, and other gestures. Swamishri responded to each with the same gesture.

Then, Swamishri took part in various activities to inspire the children to perform daily puja, bow to their parents, read satsang texts, participate in *ghar sabha*, limit TV, social media and video games, and attend the weekly *bal-balika* assembly. The children learnt that these essential spiritual practices are strengthened through *smruti* (memories) of the guru, sincerely following *niyams*, and daily prayers.

On this occasion, Swamishri inaugurated two



Swamishri participates in an activity during the Bal-Balika Din assembly

illustrated children's books based on the parables often narrated by Yogiji Maharaj: *Together We Fly!* and *Know the True You*.

At the end Swamishri blessed, "You may be small and young, but know this – you are all *akshar muktas*. You are all Akshardham *bal muktas*. You are all mine and I am forever yours."

3 SEPTEMBER: SAMJAN DIN

On the way to his morning puja, Swamishri sanctified a large origami paper model of the Akshardham Mahamandir made over eight months by 15 *balaks* and 4 *kishores* from Indianapolis.

In the evening 'Samjan Din' assembly, inspiring stories were narrated of devotees who had endured and overcome financial, health and other difficulties through the spiritual understanding they had learnt in satsang.

Then Swamishri blessed, "These devotees persevered through such hardships due to their faith. Without such faith and understanding, even the mightiest would be at a loss what to do. Such understanding earns Maharaj's blessings and enables one to attain the ultimate spiritual state."

7 SEPTEMBER: JANMASHTAMI

After puja, Swamishri read from *Yogi Vani* and blessed, "The understanding one gains from spiritual discourses bestows peace of mind. So, one's mind focuses on Bhagwan and does not waver. Spiritual discourses train us to see the divinity in all and ignore drawbacks. This is a source of great joy. This satsang is divine. The dharma-*niyams* are divine. Everything is divine. But if one remains unchanged by all this, then one has not at all practised satsang."

At 6.00 p.m., Swamishri sanctified the *yantras*, *asthi pushpa* and other items to be placed under the *murti* of Pramukh Swami Maharaj. These were then taken to the *garbhagruh* in the *mahamandir*, where Pujya Tyagvallabh Swami placed them in position while Swamishri watched via video. Thereafter, Prmaukh Swami Maharaj's *murti* was placed in position on the pedestal.

In the evening, Swamishri presided over the Janmashtami celebration assembly. After the speeches and skits, the birth of Bhagwan Krishna was celebrated with Swamishri rocking the cradle with the *murtis* of Shri Akshar-Purushottam Maharaj and Shri Krishna Bhagwan.



Swamishri engaged in darshan during the Janmashtami celebration assembly

8 SEPTEMBER

At 6.45 p.m., Pujya Shivratri Deshikendra Swamiji arrived to meet Swamishri. He is the 24th Pithadhipati of Shri Virsinhasan Mahasansthan. He had toured the Akshardham campus and said to Swamishri, “Akshardham is marvelous. No words to express.”

Thereafter, Swamishri went to the evening assembly, which was titled ‘Niyam-Dharma’.

13 SEPTEMBER: MAHANT SWAMI MAHARAJ'S 90TH BIRTHDAY

Today marked Swamishri's 90th birthday (by date). After puja, Swamishri blessed the assembly, “Shriji Maharaj graced us by coming on earth. The devotees he nurtured had only Shriji Maharaj in their hearts. That should be our goal. To achieve that, Yogiji Maharaj says we must have *samp*, *suhradbhav*, *ekta*, *divyabhav*, *dasbhav*, *mahima* and other such virtues.

“Shriji Maharaj strongly advocated *dasbhav*. Cloth is measured in metres. Water is measured in litres, and bhakti is measured by one's *dasbhav*. The more sincere one's *dasbhav*, the stronger one's attachment to Bhagwan. Without *dasbhav*, one is

incomplete, even if one has other virtues.

“Also, develop *mahima* and contemplate on one's spiritual attainment (*prapti*). What we have attained is so glorious that it gives tremendous joy.

“In contrast, material desires will lead to one's downfall. So, pray to Maharaj, ‘Maharaj! Free me from material desires and enable me to realize the glory of your devotees. May we mutually understand each other's glory and develop affection.’”

Just after noon, Swamishri arrived at Akshar Vatika, the open ground between the Brahma Kund and the Sant Ashram, to perform *pujan* of the 22 flagposts and flags that would be placed atop the *mahamandir*. The biggest was 46 ft in length. Swamishri also performed *pujan* of the 21 remaining flagposts.

Swamishri performed *pujan* of the main flag and also signed it in Gujarati: ‘Sadhu Keshavjivandas na Jai Swaminarayan. 13 September, 2023. Akshardham’. Then, he sanctified the flag further by imprinting his *chandana*-coated palms on it. Prayers were offered that wherever the air touched by these flags and flagposts go, may devotion and satsang flourish.



Mahant Swami Maharaj honoured with a garland during his 90th birth anniversary celebration

Swamishri also sanctified the seven *kalashes* which would grace the *shikhars* of Akshardham. The ceremony culminated with Swamishri circumambulating the flagstaves and *kalashes*.

The evening birthday celebration assembly was titled ‘Yours Forever, Sadhu Keshavjivandas’.

The presentations depicted the impact of Swamishri’s letters, written over many decades, to devotees of all ages and backgrounds to provide them comfort, strength, inspiration, motivation, resolutions to questions, understanding and other necessary guidance.

A special highlight of the assembly involved the *sadguru* swamis – Pujya Dr Swami, Pujya Kothari Swami, Pujya Tyagvallabh Swami and Pujya Ishwarcharan Swami – interacting with Swamishri in the cabin on stage.

Swamishri had written a letter noting the main virtues of each *sadguru* swami. Narayanmuni Swami read what Swamishri had written for each, following which the *sadguru* swamis voiced their prayers before Swamishri.

This interaction was intensely spiritual and reflected their deep mutual respect and affection.

In his blessings to the assembly, Swamishri

said, “To resolve all situations that arise in your life, daily engage in 15 minutes of ‘*prapti no vichar*’ – contemplate on the glory of what one has attained.

Elaborating, Swamishri said, “Our attainment is fantastic. Gunatitanand Swami is beyond the infinite *muktas*. And Shriji Maharaj is infinite times beyond him. Constantly think of this attainment. By contemplating on this attainment, all of one’s questions will be resolved.”

15 SEPTEMBER: RAJIPO DIN

The evening assembly was based on the theme ‘Rajipo’. The presentations depicted the incidents of several devotees who had faithfully adhered to satsang principles and Swamishri’s wishes despite facing testing circumstances.

At the end, Swamishri blessed, “Is the Satpurush pleased with me?” To answer this question, ask the Vachanamrut, Swamini Vato and the *jivan charitras* of the gurus. They will guide you. If you ask the Satpurush directly, he will always say yes. But how does one measure whether the Satpurush is pleased? In the Swamini Vato, it is stated that ‘if the Satpurush is pleased, one experiences inner joy.’ Externally, the



Swamishri and devotees perform the *arti* during the Rajipo Din assembly

circumstances may be different, but within, one experiences bliss.

“The physical body is the home of pain and misery. But such a devotee, overflows with inner peace. His faith is strengthened daily. He is content and has no worldly desires. This is an indication that the Satpurush is pleased.

“To attain the Satpurush’s pleasure, follow his wishes. Do what pleases him. If one realizes whose pleasure is attained, then everything can be done. By earning his pleasure, one attains the *brahmic* state. Then, bliss. So, constantly strive to please the Satpurush.”

16 SEPTEMBER: VASUDHAIVA KUTUMBAKAM

The evening assembly was titled ‘Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam: The World Is One Family’. This message from the ancient Sanatan Hindu shastras promotes a world of harmony and compassion.

After Swamishri arrived in the assembly, a skit depicting his care and compassion for Steven, a native African coconut vendor, was presented. Also, Mr Wilson, a Taiwanese BAPS devotee since 2004, and Nick Valero, a

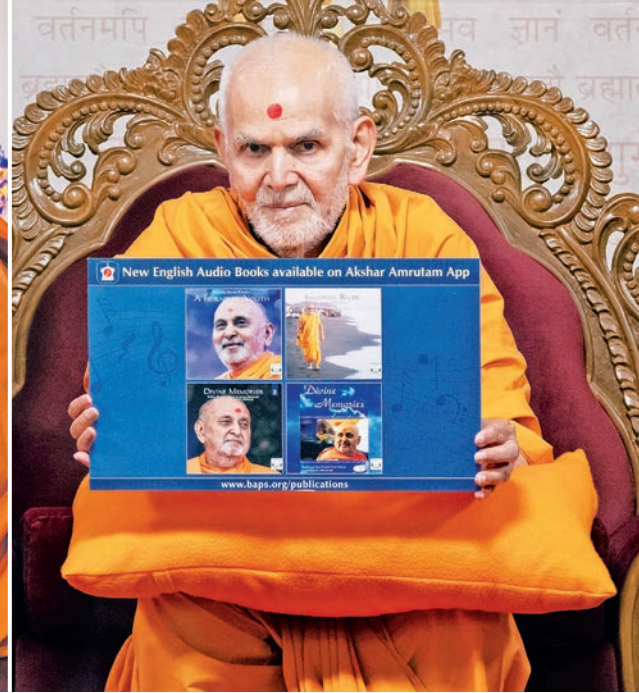
BAPS devotee of Italian and Spanish heritage, narrated their personal stories of the affection and acceptance they had experienced in satsang despite cultural differences.

Among the dignitaries present was Shri Bawa Jain, Secretary General of the World Council of Religious Leaders. He said, “The essence of Hindu philosophy is Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam. Pramukh Swami Maharaj established that foundation 23 years ago at the United Nations. He also declared to everyone that in your happiness lies my happiness; this is the essence of unity, bringing people and families together.”

Blessing the assembly, Swamishri said, “Our shastras teach ‘Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam – the world is one family. We are all God’s children.’ This is an unalterable truth. God and the spiritual guru make no distinctions among people; such dividing perceptions are our own creations. The spiritual guru perceives the divine in everyone, devoid of any hierarchy. As long as our actions reflect morality and our character remains pure, irrespective of our worldly status, we are esteemed in the eyes of God.”



Swamishri sanctifies the 'Karika-Jayi' certificates



Swamishri inaugurates new English audiobook publications

17 SEPTEMBER

Today was Vishwakarma Jayanti, in honour of Lord Vishwakarma who is revered as the divine architect and craftsman. On behalf of Swamishri, Ishwarcharan Swami performed *pujan* of a *murti* of Vishwakarmaji and various instruments used in construction. Then, Swamishri blessed the artisans engaged in the construction of Akshardham. During Swamishri's puja, 13 *balaks* from BAPS centres throughout North America who had memorized the 565 Sanskrit verses of the *Swaminarayan Siddhant Karika*, recited selected verses.

After puja, Swamishri sanctified the certificates and mementoes for these *balaks*, which were presented by Dr Swami, Tyagvallabh Swami and Ishwarcharan Swami.

Swamishri also blessed the certificates and mementoes for the two *balikas* who had also fully memorized the 565-verse *Swaminarayan Siddhant Karika*.

In his blessings, Swamishri said, "Sanskrit is a difficult language. And for these children in America to memorize such high-level Sanskrit is possible only through their sincere determination.

Congratulations also to their parents, for their support and encouragement. These children have earned the 'Karika Vijayi' title. They have accomplished a difficult feat." Swamishri concluded by repeatedly bowing in appreciation of their achievement, and saying, "Heartfelt congratulations to them all."

Thereafter, Swamishri inaugurated four English audiobooks: *Pramukh Swami Maharaj: A Friend of Youth*, *Immortal River: Swamishri's Holy Travels*, *Divine Memories, Part 2* and *Divine Memories, Part 3*.

In the late afternoon, Swamishri blessed the swamis and volunteers engaged in the Akshardham site *seva* by walkie-talkie. Swamishri said, "You have all fulfilled Param Pujya Pramukh Swami Maharaj's grand, divine and sublime wish. With full dedication, you have completed it. Words cannot describe what you have done. You have all worked with *samp*, *suhradbhav* and *ekta*. Now, the next task is to ensure that everything is cleaned – inside and outside. Remove all the waste and make everything spotlessly clean."

Swamishri's words truly charged everyone to accomplish the clean-up task.



Swamishri performs *pujan* of Shri Ganeshji



Children perform a skit before Swamishri

19 SEPTEMBER

Today was Ganesh Chaturthi. Swamishri performed *pujan* of a *murti* of Shri Ganeshji.

After his morning puja, Swamishri read from *Yogi Vani* and blessed, “Our faults are due to *maya*. Our struggle is against them. If you develop a desire to attain Bhagwan, you will not wish for anything else. However, this is a big struggle. You have to think, contemplate, introspect and act. If you are Bhagwan-centric your interest in other things will decline. For this, you must relinquish your worldly wishes. Firmly control your mind.

“As long as your mind is drawn to worldly objects, this cannot be achieved. You can do only one of the two – attach to Bhagwan or the world. But since you have the association of Bhagwan, you will accomplish this. Satsang is to immerse yourself in Bhagwan. If you do this you will experience true bliss.”

20 SEPTEMBER

In the evening, Swamishri blessed the many officials who had attended the Robbinsville Township Appreciation Assembly. Various officials expressed their experiences of their

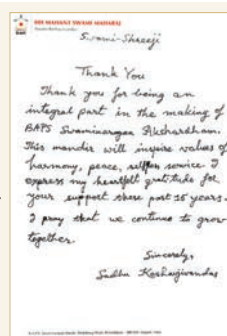
involvement in this project over the past 15 years.

Then, Swamishri read a letter he had personally written to all the officials:

Thank You

Thank you for being an integral part in the making of Swaminarayan Akshardham. This mandir will inspire values of harmony, peace, selfless service. I express my heartfelt gratitude for your support these past 15 years. I pray that we continue to grow together.

Sincerely, Sadhu Keshavjivandas



Thereafter, Swamishri attended the evening satsang assembly. Children and youths elaborated upon Vachanamrut and Swamini Vato references to highlight Swamishri's and guru *parampara*'s unconditional and selfless love for all devotees.

Then, Swamishri blessed the assembly through a question-answer session.

Q: We have affection for the Satpurush, but when our wishes are not fulfilled, we feel disheartened. How can we prevent this?



Youths present a skit during the Yuvak-Yuvati Din assembly

Swamishri: Understand his *mahima*. He is independent. Believe that whatever he does is divine.

Q: How can we joyfully observe whatever *niyams* and *dharma* you specify for us?

Swamishri: Understand that your *atma* is separate from your body, *indriyas* and *antahkaran*, and sincerely endeavour to follow the moral commands.

Q: Is your affection for everyone the same or does it vary?

Swamishri: The same for everyone. Just as the air is the same for everyone.

Q: Why is it the same?

Swamishri: Because you are all Bhagwan's children.

Q: How can we develop affection for you like you have for your gurus?

Swamishri: Through *mahima*. This a divine quality and strengthens your understanding.

Q: When you fulfil our wishes *mahima* for you increases, otherwise it decreases. What should we do?

Swamishri: This reflects a deficiency in understanding. There are no shortcomings in the Satpurush.

21 SEPTEMBER: YUVAK-YUVATI DIN

The evening Yuvak-Yuvati Din assembly was based on the theme 'Mahima'. The key message was that *mahima* is the currency of satsang and the more one has the richer one is spiritually.

Youths recounted their profound interactions with Mahant Swami Maharaj, highlighting his affection, humility and loving guidance in critical situations.

As Swamishri took his seat in the cabin, a video was shown in which Swamishri said, "I am Gunatitanand Swami, I am Bhagatji Maharaj, I am Shastriji Maharaj, I am Yogiji Maharaj I am Pramukh Swami Maharaj..."

Then, as he said, "I am Keshavjivandas," the cabin curtains were drawn open. Everyone greeted Swamishri and his words with rapturous applause.

As part of the assembly, Swamishri was asked to select from the following items sanctified by Pramukh Swami Maharaj: *mojdis* (traditional shoes), *pagh* and *mala*.

Swamishri selected the *mojdis* and reverently bowed to them. He then picked them both up and, inspecting the worn soles, said, "Bapa did so much *vicharan*, he was continuously on the move."



Swamishri greets the representatives of organizations during the Indian Community Day assembly

Swamishri's guidance was also sought through a series of questions.

Q: You often say that if one has *mahima* everything is attained. What is attained?

Swamishri: Bhakti towards Shriji Maharaj. The more one's bhakti, the greater one's inner bliss. Also, dharma, *jnan* and *vairagya* are attained and one's joy increases.

Q: As youths, we have study, work, business and family responsibilities. Therefore, we are not sincere or regular in our satsang practices of attending *sabhas* and daily reading. How can we remedy this?

Swamishri: You are young, and it is natural that you lapse in these things. However, in your mind you must resolve that no matter the circumstances you want to progress spiritually. With such an attitude you will progress.

Q: We often feel we have done enough satsang, so what is the harm in missing one or two *sabhas*?

Swamishri: Yogiji Maharaj used to insist on repeating bhakti and *seva* daily. Shriji Maharaj has also said that even one day without satsang sets one back spiritually. So, practise satsang daily.

Q: We want to do as you say, but circumstances

often put us off. What understanding should we develop?

Swamishri: You should firmly resolve within that no matter what you want to do *seva*. Then you will be able to do so. Also, set a goal that you want to please Bhagwan and guru whatever the challenges.

Q: What is *labh*? We think that being in your physical presence is *labh*. But what is true *labh*?

Swamishri: True *labh* is to live by the *niyams* and dharma. Then, even if you are thousands of miles away physically, you are still near Bhagwan. However, if you do not observe *niyam*-dharma, then even if you are seated in Bhagwan's lap, you are thousands of miles away. So, the extent of *niyam*-dharma observed is a measure of your proximity to Bhagwan and guru.

23 SEPTEMBER: INDIAN COMMUNITY DAY

After puja, Swamishri performed *pujan* of the bricks, *kalash* and other items to be used in the construction of the new BAPS mandirs in Boston, Massachusetts, and Jersey City, New Jersey.

Later in the morning, Swamishri met Rahul Gupta, Director of the Office of National Drug

Control Policy. He was the chief speaker at the medico-spiritual conference being held at Akshardham today, for which 1,500 doctors were present. Swamishri blessed, “You are doing a great service, since addictions ruin people’s lives. Your services save many people. Thank you.”

The evening assembly was celebrated as ‘Indian Community Day’, in the presence of representatives of dozens of organizations endeavouring to nurture the legacy of India’s rich heritage and traditions in the present and future generations in America.

In his blessings, Swamishri expressed his gratitude to all for their noble work and added, “Yogiji Maharaj used to say ‘May Bhagwan do good for all’ and Pramukh Swami Maharaj’s motto was ‘In the joy of others lies our own’. Also, the Taittiriya Upanishad teaches that we should all encourage each other’s work so that everyone progresses. If we do this and do not hinder others, the world will become a divine place.

“If we work with unity, everyone will progress. In India, there is unity in India, there is unity in diversity. Akshardham has been built with these sentiments. May you all excel in your endeavours for dharma and society.”

24 SEPTEMBER

The theme of the evening assembly was ‘Katha Varta’ (Spiritual Discourses).

Swamishri read from *Yogi Vani* and blessed, “You must engage in *katha varta* daily. Not even one day must pass without it. Through such spiritual knowledge, you will feel that you have gained something and will develop *mahima*, unity and friendship. Your dislike for others will be eradicated. All these are PhD level achievements.

“As long as ego prevails, everything is zero, zero, zero. When the messages truly ‘click’ in your heart and mind, then you can be said to have listened to the spiritual discourses. So, whenever you can, engage in spiritual discourses. Our goal is to enter the *gunatit* realm.”



Shri Hari Krishna Maharaj and Shri Gunatitanand Swami Maharaj in a boat during the Jal-Jhilani celebration

25 SEPTEMBER

In the evening, Swamishri entered the Pramukh Hall to give *samip* darshan to the devotees. Haridarshan Swami informed him, “This is your last session of *samip* darshan scheduled for this visit to America.” Then, at the end of the session, he said, “Swami, you have met all the devotees of America. In the 25 *samip* darshan sessions, you have personally blessed over 17,000 devotees.”

26 SEPTEMBER: JAL-JHILANI EKADASHI

During Swamishri’s puja in Keshav Krupa, swamis, *parshads* and *sadhaks* sang bhajans celebrating the Jal-Jhilani festival. A large pond had been set up in front of Swamishri’s cabin. Thakorji was seated in a remote controlled boat and offered *arti* and *thal*. After puja, Shri Akshar-Purushottam Maharaj were seated in the ‘Akshardham Manvar’ boat. After a cruise in the pond, they were honoured by performing the fifth and final *arti* and offered *thal*. Swamishri also performed *pujan* of Shri Ganeshji and then the Jal-Jhilani ritual was performed.



Swamishri interacts with volunteers during the evening Akshardham Operations Volunteers Sabha

28 SEPTEMBER: AKSHARDHAM OPERATIONS VOLUNTEERS SABHA

In the evening, Swamishri presided over the Akshardham Operations Volunteers Sabha. An ID card had been placed around his neck. After various presentations, Anandswarup Swami read a letter Swamishri had penned in Gujarati for this occasion. The following is a translation:

Swami Shriji

P. P. Pramukh Swami Maharaj

Robbinsville

28.9.23

As per the divine wish of Param Puja Pramukh Swami Maharaj, this grand and divine Akshardham has been built in quick time by the outstanding seva of the volunteers. Shortly, the pratishtha will also take place. Everyone who comes here will experience peace and be inspired. Every stone here will enhance the prestige of Bharat's Sanatan Hindu tradition and Bhagwan Swaminarayan. This Akshardham is for all of humanity. There are no distinctions here. All who come here will learn humble service, unity, love, integrity and other virtues. Unique works that enhance individuals and society will be performed from here.

The management of this Akshardham is your responsibility. So, all devotees should come to do seva – full time, part time or for 15 days, as per your convenience. Kishores and yuvaks should enrol in the Akshardham Academy and enhance their knowledge of satsang.

I have prayed for you all that you all attain happiness and with good health serve at Akshardham.

With blessings.

Jai Swaminarayan from

Sadhu Keshavjivandas

Thereafter, Swamishri blessed the assembly via a question-answer session.

Q: Swami, in your mind what is your picture of an Akshardham sevak?

Swamishri: Yogi Bapa often emphasized sarbhara – hospitality. For this, affection for and seeing the divine in all is at the root. Yogi Bapa's love for all was exemplary. So, genuine affection for all will leave lasting impressions.

Q: How can we achieve this?

Swamishri: *Mahima.* This place – Akshardham – is God's place. All who come here are *muktas*. If you treat them with this sentiment they will experience joy and you will, too.



Swamishri presents the Akshardham volunteers with an ID card

Q: How can we maintain the enthusiasm to serve day in, day out?

Swamishri: Again, *mahima*. If you have genuine sentiments, everything will be sustained.

Q: How can we develop such *mahima*?

Swamishri: By thinking of one's *prapti* – attainment. This will take you to great heights. Your progress and personal development are determined by thinking of one's *prapti* – the Bhagwan and gurus we have attained.

Q: What should we do to ensure that you are not displeased?

Swamishri: One, no *abhav-avgun*. Place a big cross on this. It destroys everything and leads to decline. So, don't take it as a joke. This is from my experience – that *abhav-avgun* causes much damage.

Second, develop expertise in *sarbhara* and your duties. If you endeavour sincerely, they will develop.

Third, if you have firm *nishtha*, the visitors will also be inspired.

Q: Any special guidance?

Swamishri: Focus on *sarbhara*. Genuinely attend to and serve everyone.

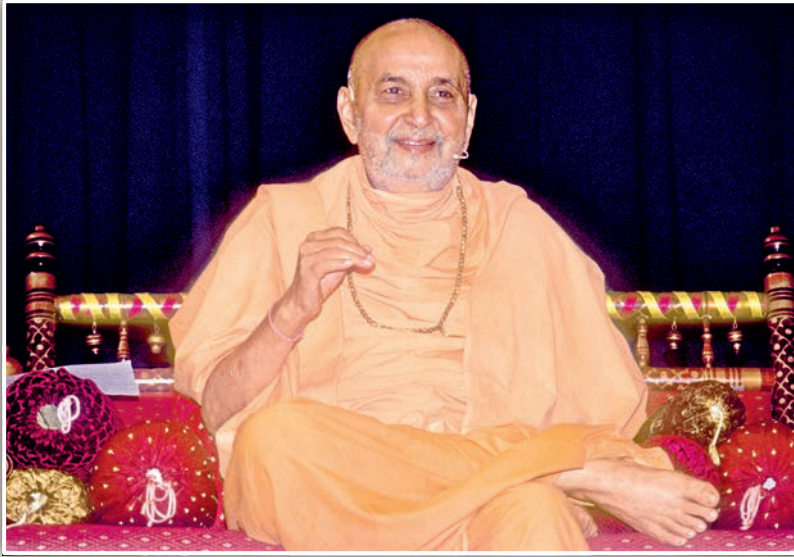
29 SEPTEMBER

After puja, Swamishri read the letter he had written prior to the Pramukh Swami Maharaj Centenary Celebrations to specify the characteristics of an exemplary volunteer. While reading it, he emphasized, “This chance to serve at Akshardham is due to the grace of Bhagwan. So, serve as per the wishes of the Satpurush. Observe discipline. Remember that Maharaj, Swami, Satpurush, Siddhant and the Sanstha are true at all times. Do *seva* wholeheartedly, with true understanding and *nishtha*. Remain calm and composed and serve with humility. Appreciate each other's *mahima* and see the divinity in all while engaged in *seva*. Serve with unity. Observe *niyams* and dharma while serving – without proper conduct, everything is zero. Speak with respect and dignity. By doing *seva* in this way, you will earn *rajipo*, your hearts will become golden and the impact will echo universally.”

Thereafter, Swamishri appreciated the Akshardham volunteers by gesturing to present them their ID cards. ♦

(Compiled by Sadhu Amrutvijaydas using baps.org news articles and translated extracts from Brahmavatsal Swami's Gujarati reports of Mahant Swami Maharaj's vicharan.)

Question Time with PRAMUKH SWAMI MAHARAJ



In Gandhinagar, on 7 September 1975, youths presented a programme titled 'Sahaj-Anand'.
Q: Swami, what presently can we do to please you?

Swamishri: Everyone should worship Bhagwan and youths must refrain from extravagance in worldly pursuits. People go out of their way to please others in this world. So, to please Bhagwan, sincerely observe *niyams* and dharma; this is the discipline required to please Bhagwan and the Satpurush. This is the way shown by Yogiji Maharaj. Without any hesitation, *yuvaks* must root out extravagance. We should preserve our traditions. Simplicity and cooperation pleases the Satpurush. How can you even do that which displeases God?

* * *

In London, on 24 June 1977, Swamishri discoursed on Vachanamrut Gadhada III 31 in the morning.

Swamishri: There is no difference at all between the *swarup* in Akshardham and this *swarup*.

Q: This was Maharaj speaking at the time

[while he was still on earth]. Thereafter, Maharaj has remained manifest through the Gunatit guru, but they have different physical forms. So, how should this be understood now?

Swamishri: The outer form may be different, but who sees through their eyes? Who walks through their feet? Who resides in every part of their body? So, even though the outer appearance is different, there is nothing but Maharaj in them. That is why Maharaj says 'no difference at all'. Even though the form is different, the inner entity is the same.

* * *

In Lenasia, South Africa, on 22 November 1977, a journalist from *Rapport Sunday* met Swamishri.

Q: I think this faith is very strict.

Swamishri: The sadhus and devotees must observe their codes of conduct. By observing *niyams*, one gains inner strength and progresses spiritually.

Q: So, will youths who want to enjoy life avoid this dharma?

Swamishri: No. Youths seek the refuge of Bhagwan and the Satpurush because of the affection they receive. And due to their encouragement and support, the youths are able to observe the *niyams*.

Q: Who do you worship?

Swamishri: Akshar-Purushottom or Swaminarayan.

* * *

In Rajkot, on 2 November 1991, a youth interacted with Pramukh Swami Maharaj.

Youth: Have you had the darshan of God?

Swamishri: Yes, that is why I experience joy and am able to talk about him.

Youth: Is it in reality?

Swamishri: Yes, it is.

Youth: So, can I see God?

Swamishri: Not without effort. You have to endeavour with faith and obey the guru's commands. I have darshan of God in my guru.

Thus, Swamishri clarified about how to experience God.

* * *

On 14 November 1991, in Ahmedabad, a youth preparing for the Indian Administrative Services (IAS) exam asked Swamishri, "Swamiji, if people die anyway, what is the point in living?"

Swamishri replied, "To help others and by offering bhakti to God, to attain liberation for one's *atma*. Live with these sentiments and objectives."

In this way, Swamishri revealed the purpose of life: to help others and offer devotion to God.

* * *

In Mumbai, on 5 January 1992, during a special assembly for *yuvaks* and *yuvatis*, the *yuvaks* presented a debate on the topic 'What is better for inner progress: Engaging in activities (*pravrutti*) or not engaging in activities (*nivrutti*)?' In conclusion, Swamishri revealed, "For us, *pravrutti* is included in *nivrutti* and *nivrutti* is included in *pravrutti*. Those who obey the wishes of God and guru progress internally and outwardly. For those who act wilfully, *nivrutti* is, in fact, *pravrutti* – it is *bahyavrutti*. One

who engages in satsang *seva* or discourses in one's own way, will still become bound by that. Always think, 'Is what I am doing according to the guru's commands?' If you live with this guideline, both paths will make you *brahmarup*."

* * *

In Gondal, on 12 June 1992, a medical student met Swamishri.

Student: I am so depressed. What will happen?

Swamishri: Life will always throw problems at you. If you do not learn to face them now, what will you do in the future? Do not become fearful. Fear will derail your life. Keep faith in God. Put in the effort and accept the outcome. Do not bury yourself in fear. Live in the present and do not worry about the future.

In the evening, two young boys approached Swamishri.

Boys: Bapa! When you perform *arti* in the Akshar Deri, what do you experience?

Swamishri: I have the darshan that God is actually seated there. Just like you are seated in front of me and talking.

Boys: Bapa! What is the difference between you and Shriji Maharaj?

Swamishri: Shriji Maharaj is Purushottam Narayan, and I am his humble servant.

* * *

In Vidyannagar, on 24 December 1992, Swamishri was preparing to retire to sleep for the night.

Yogicharan Swami: Bapa! What was your original nature like? The same as now or different?

Swamishri: At first, I was slow and quiet. If two people were arguing, I would leave from there. I would not involve in activities much also.

Yogicharan Swami: So when did you develop this activity-based nature?

Swamishri: Shastriji Maharaj assigned me the duties, so I had to fulfil them. That required telling people and being strict.

* * *

In Mumbai, on 12 February 1993, Swamishri was with *kishores* (teenagers).

Kishores: Swami! At our age, we have many ambitions...

Swamishri interrupted: Worldly ambitions are never-ending. The only ambition of use is to offer bhakti and please God. However, you should certainly have an ambition to be noble.

Kishores: Bapa, how did you progress?

Swamishri: If you remain as the humblest, you will become greater than all. But if you try to become superior to all, you will lag behind. You cannot progress by suppressing others. One who helps others will progress.

Kishores: We feel that our parents are old-fashioned and out of touch with today's society. And our parents think that we are disrespectful and do not behave properly. How can we bridge this gap between us?

Swamishri: Not all parents are old-fashioned, but you just believe they are. Parents tell you so that you become good and virtuous. You should understand this, and do not forget that you are indebted to them. If you remember your duty towards them, then there will be peace.

Kishores: Bapa! What is your expectation from *kishores* like us?

Swamishri: I do not expect you to serve me personally or become sadhus, but that you become good devotees, study well, and serve the society and country. Our aim is to create a virtuous society with no corruption, and honest and sincere work and business practices.

* * *

In Mumbai, on 18 March 1993, Shri Harkisan Mehta, an experienced editor of the reputed weekly, *Chitralkha*, interviewed Swamishri.

Harkisan Mehta: Which incident from your life do you like the most?

Swamishri: That I attained a manifest, God-realized guru and he gave me the chance to serve. That is the main incident for me. Shastriji Maharaj and Yogiji Maharaj inspired me and so I have been able to serve with satisfaction.

Harkisan Mehta: Is there any incident that

when you recall you are pained?

Swamishri: No. I just always feel joyous.

Harkisan Mehta: Any occasions where you became angry?

Swamishri: No reason to get angry really, because everybody makes mistakes.

Harkisan Mehta: Do you have to rebuke anyone?

Swamishri: When I have to tell anyone, I speak with affection so that they are inspired and I speak so that they are not hurt or discouraged.

Harkisan Mehta: What if someone insults you?

Swamishri: That doesn't really bother me. In God's eyes, we are right, so let others speak as they want. They do not know and in the future will understand.

Harkisan Mehta: Do you feel the need to comment on and clarify any criticism?

Swamishri: Not at all.

* * *

In Surat, on 20 April 1993, some newspaper reporters interviewed Swamishri.

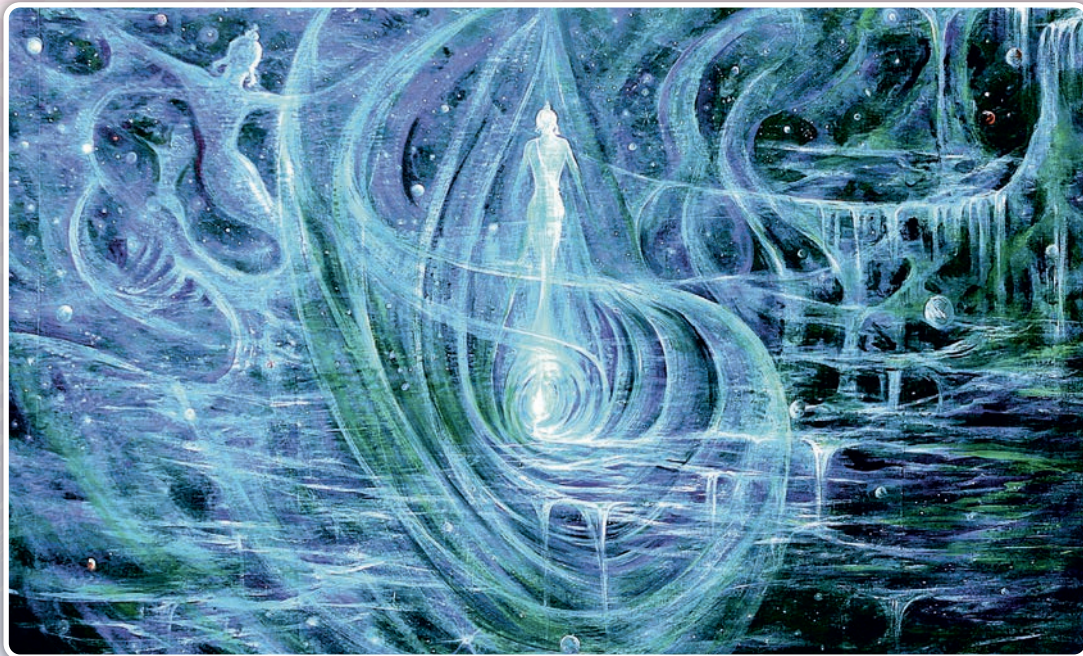
Reporter: Dharma in politics...

Swamishri interrupted: Dharma is virtuous conduct. So, politics without dharma does not give peace. In fact, a life devoid of dharma is a life wasted.

* * *

In Bocharan, on 10 July 1993, Shri Ramanbhai Patel asked, "Swami, we follow your major and minor commands, but is there one supreme command which we can follow to earn your innermost blessings?"

Swamishri replied, "*Nijatmanam brahmarupam...* (Believe oneself to be *atma* [and worship Purushottam]). If you can follow this command then you will be supremely happy. Since, whether anyone calls you or not, or whether you are insulted or praised – nothing will affect you. This command is for everyone. This is the one supreme command." ♦



Karma and Reincarnation

In this second article, we discuss the benefits of believing in reincarnation and cite examples of reincarnation in the Hindu shastras and the Swaminarayan Sampradaya.

BENEFITS OF A BELIEF IN REINCARNATION

There are six benefits:

1. Most importantly it helps to overcome the fear of death with the understanding that life does not end with death.

2. It helps one to understand the apparent disparities in life. People often wonder that despite not having performed any bad karmas or even wished ill about anybody, why do they still experience misery. Reincarnation provides solace that this is due to the fruits of actions in past lives. Health and wealth in this life are not just due to *kriyaman* karmas of this life, but also due to *sanchit* karma of past lives. Maurice Maeterlinck, the Belgian essayist observed, “It [reincarnation] alone, with its doctrine of successive expiations and purifications, accounts for all his physical and intellectual inequalities, all the social inequities, all the

hideous injustices of fate” (Head & Cranston 1970; 200).

3. One is inspired to avoid non-pious karmas and perform good deeds. By performing bad or unlawful karmas, one may evade justice in this life, but their fruits will have to be borne in future births.

4. One remains optimistic that even if one fails to attain *moksha* in this life, then this can be achieved in further births. Death does not end the potential avenues to *moksha*.

5. One develops tolerance and affection for all life forms. Hindu texts state that all *jivas* are empirically the same. Hence, one regards them as *atmavat sarvabhuteshu* – as oneself. Humans should not regard them with disdain, to be exploited or killed for food or other selfish purposes. By the awareness of the principle of rebirth, one can visualize that in future births, ‘I could be one of these creatures.’ Therefore, it is man’s duty to

regard all forms with mercy and affection and live on the planet in harmony with nature.

6. One appreciates Paramatma's compassion and mercy on *jivas*. Since he is the ocean of love, compassion and mercy, he never disdains *jivas* because of their flaws and limitations. On the contrary, he grants them rebirth opportunities to progress on the spiritual path, to remove *vasana* and ignorance, to realize one's *atma* and Paramatma and so attain *moksha* – freedom from rebirth.

Now we cite examples of reincarnation in the Hindu shastras.

NARADJI

The Shrimad Bhagavatam(1.5.6) states that Naradji was initially a Gandharva – a celestial being – expert in music. Due to a curse by the devas, he was then born to a maid servant. As such, along with his mother, he served rishis. Then Paramatma blessed him to be born as Brahmaji's son. He is also known as the mind of Paramatma.

JAY AND VIJAY

These were gatekeepers (*dwarpals*) of Bhagwan Vishnu in Vaikunth. Once, the four 5-year-old Sanak rishis, who were staunch devotees of Vishnu, arrived for his darshan. Since they were naked, Jay and Vijay refused them entry. An argument ensued. The rishis then cursed the two. Vishnu then arrived and apologized on behalf of his *dwarpals*. However, since the curse could not be withdrawn, he offered the *dwarpals* two options: either to take three births as demons or seven births as devotees. Their choice to be born as demons led them to become Hiranyaksha and Hiranyakashipu, Ravana and Kumbhkarna, and Dantvakra and Shishupal in their three births.

PRAHLAD

Initially, he was Somsharma, a devotee of Vishnu who offered devotion in Harihar Kshetra. Once, some demons obstructed his devotion. At death, he remembered these demons. Hence, he

was born in the demon family of Hiranyakashipu, yet remained a true devotee of Vishnu.

BALI RAJA

Though he was a *devabrahmin*, he lived an immoral life. Once, on his way to gift perfume and other things to a prostitute he fell and fainted. On awakening, he offered the materials to a Shivling nearby. By this *punya* karma, he went to Swarg. Then, he took birth as Bali, son of Virochan.

PARVATIJI

Sati, the daughter of Daksha, was Shiva's first consort. After immolating herself in her father's *yagna*, she was born to Himavan Parvat and Mena. From the name *Parvat* – meaning mountain – she was named Parvati, who then became Shiva's second consort.

JADBHARAT

Bhagwan Rishabhdeva's son, King Bharat, forsook his kingdom to perform *tapas* in the forest. There, he became attached to a fawn. So, in his next birth he was then born as a deer. After this, he was born as Jadbharat, then as Lalji Suthar in the 18th century, who later became Nishkulanand Swami, a *paramhansa*-poet of Bhagwan Swaminarayan.

MANTHARA – PUTNA

Kakshivan Rishi cursed his wife Charumati for her infidelity that she would become a demoness who would be redeemed by Shri Krishna. She was then born as Manthara and then as Putna, Shri Krishna's *masi* – maternal aunt.

KING MOOCHKUND

He was born as Narsinh Mehta in Junagadh, who offered exuberant devotion to Shri Krishna.

REINCARNATION IN THE SWAMINARAYAN SAMPRADAYA

Sevakram, cited by Bhagwan Swaminarayan in Vachanamrut Gadhada I 10, took birth as the poverty-stricken Kathi chief, Khodabhai of Zinzar

in Saurashtra. Jetha Mer and his wife, of Madhada, near Mangrol, had observed *brahmacharya* for one hundred births, since Satya Yug, with the sublime intention of attaining Bhagwan's darshan. In 1799, Nilkanth Varni arrived and blessed both.

Lakshmichand Sheth, a rich merchant who built the Shri Ranganath Mandir in Vrindavan, took birth as Nathu Patel in Kariyani, Saurashtra.

Ruda Rani, the Rajput queen who built the famous Adalaj Stepwell near Ahmedabad, took birth as Kushalkunvarba, the queen-mother of Dharampur in South Gujarat. Bhagwan Swaminarayan revealed this to the latter when he visited Dharampur in 1816.

Once, Jayram Brahmachari, a poet and attendant of Bhagwan Swaminarayan, was passing through Ghodasar, a town near Ahmedabad. On seeing him, a *kesuda* tree (flame of the forest) swayed (in joy). Noticing this, he approached the tree and sprinkled a few drops of water on it, as a *vartman* ritual (initiation into satsang). By this ritual, all *kesuda* flowers dropped down. Jayram collected them. In Vadtal, he narrated this event to Bhagwan Swaminarayan, who revealed, "The *khakharo* (*kesuda* tree) was a *tapasvi jiva* (a soul inclined to perform austerities). Yet, he upset a rishi who cursed him to be born as a tree. Now it will dry up, take a human birth and become a good *satsangi*." Jayram extracted the orange colour from the *kesuda* flowers, which he offered to Shriji Maharaj, the day after Holi, to be sprinkled on everybody (*Haricharitrachintamani* 3.13).

SHIVLAL SHETH

When Nilkanth Varni arrived in Sirpur in Bengal, he met King Siddhavallabh who was later born as Shivilal Sheth, a rich merchant of Botad. He was a devotee of Aksharbrahma Gunatitanand Swami. His eighth generation descendants currently live in Ahmedabad.

When Shastriji Maharaj was building the five mandirs, he often requested childless devotees in Gujarat for trees from their farms for wood needed to build havelis or *sant* ashrams in the mandirs.

He then blessed them that the *jivas* of these trees would take birth in their family.

Once, in Gondal, an 84-year-old man met Yogiji Maharaj. After staying there for a few days, he discerned Swami's divinity and bowed to him. He then asked Swami about their karmic acquaintance. Swami replied, "During the *yagna* (in 1808) performed by Shriji Maharaj in Jetalpur, you were one of the dissenters who flung laddus into the pond."

Yogiji Maharaj also covertly divulged to a few sadhus initiated in 1961, in Gadhada, that they had been in satsang in previous lives.

During Pramukh Swami Maharaj's time, there were several cases of reincarnation of children. One was Janmejaya who described in detail his two previous lives: the first during the time of Bhagwan Swaminarayan and the second during the time of Shastriji Maharaj. Another example was 5-year-old Parth, who was born in a Gujarati family in 2005. He only spoke Hindi at the age of 2½ years. This is known as xenoglossy – the ability to speak a language not learned in this birth. A third case was of Lakshmi, born in 2000. She addressed her father as 'bhai' (brother). She claimed to be his sister in her previous birth, who was murdered by her in-laws. These details are cited in *Karma & Reincarnation: Hindu Principles and Beliefs*, 4th ed., 2022, Swaminarayan Aksharpith.

Today, Mahant Swami Maharaj often says that many young children, who memorized Satsang Diksha in 2021, are 90+ or 100+, meaning they have been in Satsang in previous lives, hence their precocity.

In the next and final article, we discuss the evidence of reincarnation by Western scientific investigations.

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In Your Own Hands

Determine your mindset: Are you a honeybee or a fly?



A study of the honey bee and the fly can provide valuable lessons for improving our relationships and quality of life. The honey bee flies from flower to flower extracting only the nectar, without disturbing the flower. The mindset of a honey bee is to seek the essence of each flower. Even in a place filled with piles of rotting garbage, rather than giving its attention to all the filth, the honey bee focuses on finding nectar. It eagerly flies to even a single tiny flower amid lots of garbage.

In our relationships, we have so much to learn from the honey bee. It teaches us the art of focusing on the positives and dealing appropriately with the faults in each other. There will be deficiencies everywhere and in everyone. There is never a shortage of things to complain about but just as the honey bee seeks nectar, even in the most unexpected of places, we can aim to focus on a positive quality in those around us.

The fly, however, represents another type of mindset. It passes over hundreds of flowers but what does it focus on? It focuses on tasting garbage and excrement. It ignores the sweet fragrance of rose gardens. Even in the best of circumstances and in the cleanest places, the fly will focus on the trash. This represents the mindset of ignoring the good qualities in those around us and focusing on their faults.

WHY DOES THIS HAPPEN?

1. Fault-finding Is a Habit

It is so easy and requires no effort to see the flaws in others. There is a classic example of this in the Mahabharat. Once, Duryodhan, the chief of the Kauravas, was asked to find a virtuous person in the city of Hastinapur, northern India. He spent hours looking everywhere, but he could not find even one good person, because he had a habit of focusing on the bad. On the other hand, Yudhishtir, head of the Pandavas, was asked to find a wicked person in the same city. He went around but could not find one bad person. Both returned empty-handed, but the difference was that Yudhishtir saw some good even in the bad, whereas, Duryodhan saw bad even in the good. For some reason, we seem to be naturally inclined towards wearing Duryodhan's glasses. Because many times in life, we ignore the virtues a person may have, and instead, we magnify the smallest of drawbacks.

2. We Judge People Based on Their Outer Qualities and Actions

We often make the mistake of perceiving others through our ingrained, narrow beliefs and assumptions, such as their status, skills, talents, skin colour, appearance and social profile. We often jump to conclusions. Our preconditioned notions about someone or something influences

what we see. In other words, our attitude within shapes our perception about the world we live in.

3. Superiority Complex

Sometimes, we look at ourselves as far more superior than others. The reason for this attitude is nothing but our own arrogance or ego: “What I believe is always right. My opinion is the best and others’ opinions are useless. My approach is always right and others’ approach is not worthwhile.”

This creates an egocentric mindset which fuels our ego. As a result, we view others as inferior to us. It is a vicious cycle. We then tend to belittle others and look down upon certain individuals who ‘don’t fit in’ with us.

HOW TO DEVELOP A POSITIVE ATTITUDE?

1. Practise ‘Emotional Hygiene’

“A hundred years ago, people began practising personal hygiene, and life expectancy rates rose by over 50 percent in just a matter of decades,” says Dr Guy Winch, a leading psychologist in New York.

He continues, “I believe our quality of life could rise just as dramatically if we all began practising ‘emotional hygiene’ by battling negative thinking. One will not only heal one’s psychological wounds, but one will build emotional resilience and thrive. People will then feel happier, more fulfilled and the world would be a better place to live in.”

2. Change the Way We Look at Things

The following story explains this. Akbar, a Mogul emperor, once had a dream in which he had only one tooth left. Puzzled, he consulted his astrologer to interpret the dream. The astrologer contemplated on his chart and gave his verdict that all of Akbar’s family members would die before him. The king became disheartened and furious. He immediately expelled the astrologer from his kingdom. Later, he called Birbal, his wise personal adviser, and asked him to interpret the dream. Birbal thought for a while and said, “Your majesty, the dream reveals that you shall live

longer than your family members.”

Pleased to hear of his long and healthy life, Akbar rewarded Birbal. Both interpretations were the same, but with one big difference. The astrologer framed the dream in a negative way, evoking a negative emotion in Akbar. Birbal framed the dream in a positive way. Instead of saying, “The glass is half-empty, he said the glass is half full.” That is, rather than saying, “Your family members will die before you,” he said, “You shall live longer.” Birbal’s success was due to his ability to represent things in a positive way.

3. Be Humble

We all find it difficult to admit when we might be wrong. In an increasingly polarized world, it seems as if people are more convinced of their own beliefs and less willing to contemplate others’ views points.

“The idea of intellectual humility is that we should be humble in our opinions, and humble in our beliefs and conclusions. We have to know our limits,” says David Dunning, a social psychologist.

In relationships, it is important to have honest and sincere communication. It should be focused on appreciating the positives while dealing with the negatives in a gracious and constructive manner, at the same time trying to bring out the best in each other. In doing so, we learn to recognize our own positive qualities and overcome unhealthy low self-esteem.

CONCLUSION

The world is full of both good and bad. In all people on this planet, there are bound to be virtues and there are bound to be drawbacks. It is up to us to choose which aspect we look at. We can either focus on their positive aspects or we can focus on the negative. The virtues and drawbacks in others may not be in our hands, but the focusing mechanism is in our hands.

Honey bee mentality or fly mentality – it is entirely up to us. ♦

A Mark of Growth

*A young pupil's journey of courage
amid the challenges of peer pressure.*

In the mandir, it is commonplace to see males with an orange U-shaped mark and a red dot on their foreheads. Outside the walls of the mandir it's not common to see this mark on anyone's forehead. In the mandir, no questions arise from this symbol, known as a *tilak-chandlo*. Outside the mandir, however, the *tilak-chandlo* can lead to endless questions, which most kids my age are not ready to answer. For that reason, I would only wear the *tilak-chandlo* inside the walls of the mandir, where I am around people who aren't going to make a big deal about it.

I spend most of my Sundays at the mandir, where I hang out with my friends, eat tasty Indian food, and of course, attend the mandir's youth assemblies. During these assemblies, I have learned some great takeaway points that have helped me use my faith to get me through stressful times in life and learn about my culture and traditions. On one such occasion, a topic of emphasis was the origins of the *tilak-chandlo*.

The *tilak-chandlo* is a religious mark applied by Swaminarayan Hindus on their forehead. There are two main parts – the *tilak* and the *chandlo*. A *tilak* is made of sandalwood paste applied in a U-shape. It symbolizes God's feet. The *chandlo* is a circle applied with a red powder – kumkum (vermillion) – at the centre of the *tilak*, and represents *me*, the person, Aarav, touching the feet of God. The mark also symbolizes the dual devotion to Bhagwan Swaminarayan and my gurus, Pramukh Swami Maharaj and Mahant Swami Maharaj. As I started to better understand the meaning behind the symbol, I started to think about taking the next step and wearing it every day, not just on Sundays



during worship, but every day... even to school.

I decided I would be ready to answer questions. That morning, I left for school 'looking' different with a bright orange and red *tilak-chandlo* on my forehead. Walking out of the threshold of my door, I felt as confident as a lion.

As expected, many of my friends had questions. The first few times I stuttered as I answered. I could feel my confidence breaking with my first responses. To my surprise within a few days, there were no more questions. I thought to myself – alright I'm good and 'hey this wasn't too hard', or so I thought.

A week later, I had settled into homeroom, brought my materials out of my backpack, and prepared for another regular day of school proudly wearing my *tilak-chandlo*.

Then out of the blue, a boy came up to me and said, "Hey Aarav, how are you still alive. It looks like you just got shot in the head." More than half of the class heard it and erupted into laughter. I thought it was just a one-time joke and didn't think much of it. I was wrong.

After four-and-a-half hours of class, I was looking forward to relaxing at recess and playing football with my friends – like I had done all year

long. Today though, my friends did not want to play with me. They stopped me and said, “Sorry, we don’t want blood all over the ball.” I walked away confused and frustrated while the laughter in the background became louder and louder.

I went looking for other places to find friends to hang out with. The soccer field, the playground, the swing set. All of my classmates said pretty much the same thing. “We don’t want someone who got shot in the head to play with us.” That confusion and frustration turned into sorrow. I went to the back of the bleachers and cried my soul out. Somehow, that ‘joke’ from homeroom had spread throughout the entire 5th grade, and now everyone was avoiding me. It was like being quarantined for practising my faith.

For the next few weeks, it was the same type of harassment over and over again. School had just become a torture zone for me. After a few weeks, the teachers that were in charge of recess saw a bunch of kids picking on me because of my *tilak-chandlo*. First, it was a warning. Just five minutes later, they were caught bullying me again and had to sit out of recess. After recess, these same kids were walking back into the school when they shouted, “Get down, there’s a sniper pointing at Aarav.” That was the final straw for the teachers. They escorted the bullies to the principal’s office. I don’t know what happened in the office, but after that I didn’t hear a single comment on my *tilak-chandlo*. People were treating me like a human being again. It had felt like the remarks were, at long last, coming to an end. School went back to normal, nobody bugged me, and I enjoyed the rest of my 5th grade.

That summer we moved to a new town. This would mean a new school for me. Wearing the *tilak-chandlo* had become so natural by now that I didn’t think twice about applying it on my first day in my new school. The *tilak-chandlo* was now officially a part of my identity.

As expected, many of my new schoolmates had questions. By now I had gotten pretty good at answering questions on what that ‘thing’ was



on my forehead. I would confidently explain what each part meant and why I wore it. My new schoolmates appeared to be genuinely interested. No one was giving me any trouble or finding ways of bullying me in my new school. In my mind I thought ‘6th grade is going to be awesome!’

I was now three weeks into school. Everything’s going great; then suddenly, a kid comes up to me in school and says, “Dude, you have a sniper laser pointing right towards your head!” The class went berserk. You could hear laughter, even more name-calling and worst of all, people congratulating him for saying such a horrid comment.

My mind shifted from ‘this will be the best years of my life’ to ‘this is going to be worse than 5th grade.’ I had people coming up to me at random times calling me names like, laser head, bullets for brains, and others. I just couldn’t take it anymore. When I was going to my next class, I ran to the bathroom and washed the *tilak-chandlo* away with tears filling in my eyes. I decided I would never wear it to school again. I thought to myself that this symbol is not worth being the target of jokes in school.

In a few days’ time, the name-calling stopped. I gained friends and popularity. It was what I wanted in school. But as the weeks went on, I may have been smiling and enjoying time at school, but inside I felt more and more disconnected from my faith, my religion, my people. My dad and family started to notice and ask what happened with my *tilak-chandlo*. I would either change the conversation or lie to them and say ‘I forgot’.

Eventually my dad figured out something was not right with me. I finally got the confidence to tell him the truth – “Dad, I can’t wear the *tilak-chandlo* without being ridiculed anymore.”

My dad then shared with me his own personal experiences with wearing the symbol on his forehead. We then spoke with other kids at the mandir on how they handled similar situations. I learned at that moment in time that the biggest mistake I made throughout all this was not asking for help or talking to my family, school administration and friends sooner. I soon learned from all their experiences. All I needed was the confidence to speak up about what was going on.

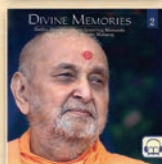
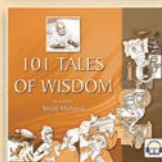
Over the next few weeks, I met with our school guidance counsellors who had helped other kids

with situations where they were bullied at school. We then came up with a plan to help me get back to focusing on school without the need to hide parts of my identity. The school took action against the kids who were responsible for most of the bullying and also helped educate others that had ‘questions’ on my behalf.

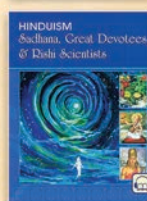
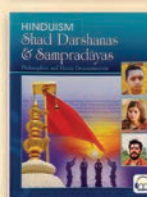
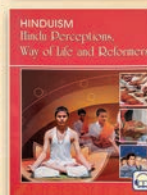
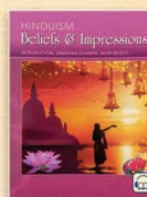
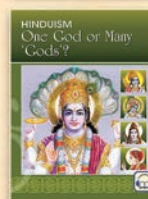
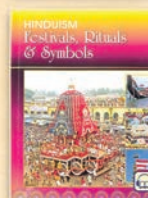
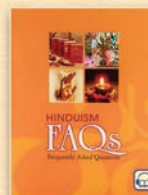
My life of wearing a *tilak-chandlo* still has its ups and downs. The comments, though way less frequent, still come and go. But what does not come and go is my confidence in remaining true to myself. And now even on the rare bad days, I go to the bathroom not to wipe away the *tilak-chandlo* – but to look myself in the mirror and remember what it stands for and symbolizes – my faith, my identity, me. ♦

New English Audiobooks

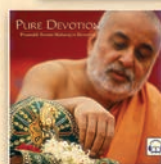
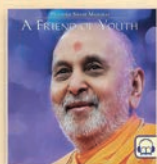
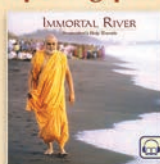
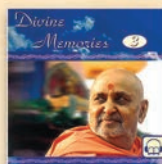
Swaminarayan Aksharpathi is pleased to announce the publication of new English audiobooks.



- Impressions: Incidents from the Life of Bhagwan Swaminarayan – Parts 1, 2, 3
- 101 Tales of Wisdom as Told by Yogiji Maharaj
- Divine Memories: Parts 2, 3
- Immortal River: Swamishri's Holy Travels
- Pramukh Swami Maharaj: A Friend of Youth
- Pure Devotion: Pramukh Swami Maharaj in Devotion
- 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



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INSPIRATIONS

*A potpourri of inspiring and interesting
information and wisdom*

RESTING PLACE



Through his question in Vachanamrut Gadhada I 32, Shriji Maharaj reveals, “Birds leave their nests to gather food, but after gathering their food, they always return to their respective nests at night to rest. Never do they forget their own nests and return to another bird’s nest. Similarly, after feeding on discourses, talks, devotional songs, etc., related to God, devotees of God also return to their own nest in the form of God to rest. Again, animals, birds and, in fact, all creatures, return to their respective homes to rest after feeding. People also travel far and wide for their work,

but only when they return to their own home do they rest peacefully.

“Now based on the analogies that I have just narrated, I ask all the devotees: Just as a non-believer is attached to worldly *vishays* (objects) and is unable to live without them for even a single moment, similarly, after becoming firmly attached to the *vishays* in the form of *shravan* (to listen), *manan* (to contemplate), etc., of the talks and discourses related to God, have you also become attached to and engrossed in them, or not? Also, just as a bird returns to its nest after feeding, do all of you also return to rest in your nest, the form of God, after feeding on feed in the form of discourses, devotional songs, etc., related to God? Or, do you rest elsewhere?”

“Furthermore, cattle that are domesticated return to their stake in the evening after grazing in the village outskirts, whereas stray cattle do not return to their stake. A stray cow, after grazing in someone’s field, sits wherever it wishes. There, someone may beat it, or if a tiger comes, it may even attack the cow. Now, do you return to your stake like the domesticated cattle, or like the stray cattle, do you sit down to rest anywhere after grazing in someone else’s field?”

From this, one has to understand that although one may be engaged in worldly duties, ultimately, one has to resort to the *murti* of God to find real and lasting peace.

- Analogy from the Vachanamrut

COW OR TIGER?



There was a Patel. His father died. It is a tradition in India that after the death of one’s father one should give alms. This is called *punyadan*. So the Patel called a Brahmin and gifted him a cow. The horns and hooves were decorated with gold.

And the cow’s back was covered with a beautiful cloak. The Brahmin accepted the cow and started on his way home.

Along the road four thieves saw the Brahmin and the cow. They decided to steal the cow and so made a secret plan. One thief approached the Brahmin and said, “Hey, Bhudev! Where are you taking this tiger? Has that Patel gifted you a tiger because of his father’s death?” The Brahmin replied, “What are you talking about? This is a cow.”

The Brahmin walked on. He was soon met by the second thief who said, “Sir, where are you taking this tiger?” A doubt now crept into the Brahmin’s mind, “What if it really is a tiger?” He glanced behind to make sure the gift really was a cow.

He walked on through the jungle. Soon the third thief met him and said, “Sir, you are a Brahmin, and you’ve grabbed this tiger!” On hearing this the Brahmin’s doubts grew even stronger. He began to walk at a distance from the cow. He was scared to look behind now. On the road ahead he met the fourth thief who said, “Sir, where did you get this tiger from? It will tear someone up and eat them.”

Now four people had said the same thing to the Brahmin. He was convinced that the cow was a tiger. He ran for his very life, leaving the cow behind. The thieves then took the cow.

Moral: If someone tells us, “That person was saying nasty things about you,” we readily believe him.

Remember that words are but empty space. If someone calls us *param ekantik* – does it mean that we really are *param ekantik*? If someone calls us a donkey, do we become like a donkey? One should see and hear with correct judgement.

- 101 *Tales of Wisdom* by Yogiji Maharaj

SOCIAL, SCIENTIFIC AND SPIRITUAL CONTRIBUTIONS OF INDIA

In the domains of social, scientific and spiritual knowledge, ancient India had made remarkable strides. Its rishis or great spiritual masters, through their powers of self-realization and God-realization, had explored various realms of human knowledge. An example is as follows.

Currency, Government and Social System

The Hindus, it seems, were the first to have coined money, and as pointed out by Princep, “The Hindus were at least 800 years before Christ in possession of elaborate schemes of exchange. They had developed an excellent system of government suited to the times and the laws propounded by them were foundations of the Egyptian, Persian, Grecian and the Roman code of law.”¹

Writers and thinkers like Coleman, Dr Robertson, Prof. Wilson and others admired the laws and civic system set up by the Indians by saying that the social organization of the ancient Hindus showed a highly advanced stage of civilization and culture.

LIVING IN THE PRESENT

On a Monday, during a lecture at a college in Wyoming, Arizona, a physics professor, with a hundred students before him, suddenly burst out, “I have only one student present in this lecture of mine!” The sudden outburst caught the fullest attention of all the students.

“Why Sir, we are a hundred!” exclaimed an intrepid backbencher.

The professor explained, “Out of the entire class only Peter has been paying attention to what I’ve been saying. The rest of you have been mentally wandering in and out of this lecture hall.”

We are all given to walking out (mentally) during conversations and satsang assemblies. Probably, in the last fifteen minutes you’ve mentally travelled to places far and wide and to things way out of your reach. To make your mind stable, doing one thing at a time is quite tough. Real tough! For students, mental wandering distracts concentration and dilutes academic performance. ♦

1. Chand Narang, Gokul, *Real Hinduism*. New Delhi: New Book Society of India, 1999, p.29.



INDIA

BAL AND BALIKA PARAYANS

17 August to 14 September 2023



During the holy month of Shravan, over 121,000 boys and girls up to the age of 14 participated in and attended the 2,282 separate Bal and Balika Parayans held at BAPS centres throughout India. Focusing on the Satsang Diksha, a shastra written by Mahant Swami Maharaj, the three-day Bal and Balika Parayans comprised programmes designed by the BAPS Children's Activities Central Office.

The *parayans* focused on verses 209 to 212, which Swamishri has written especially for children. The *parayans* began with a procession in which *balikas* and *balaks* reverently paraded the Satsang Diksha shastra around the *parayan* location, which the children had themselves decorated.

On each of the three days, the child selected as the main speaker would sing a verse from the Satsang Diksha and elaborate upon it through stories and couplets. Along with the main speaker's explanations, engaging videos also helped the children in the audience understand how to apply the Satsang Diksha's teachings in their daily life.

The daily themes for the *parayans* were avoiding bad company, excelling in studies, and becoming an ideal child. Kids were inspired to keep good friends, limit screen time, stay away from harmful addictions, be productive, concentrate on their studies, manage their time better, be humble, do *seva* and behave well.

YUVA PARAYANS

17 August to 14 September 2023



Thousands of *yuvaks* and *yuvatis* attended the separate three-day Yuva Parayans held at hundreds of BAPS centres throughout Gujarat, Maharashtra and other states in India.

The *parayans* were based on three topics from the Satsang Diksha shastra: self-control, understanding and keeping good company. Each topic was presented by the *yuvaks* and *yuvatis* in their respective *parayan* assemblies through discourses, speeches, skits, discussions and videos. Videos of Mahant Swami Maharaj's explanations of the three topics were also shown during each two-hour *parayan* assembly.

The youths made special efforts to decorate the *parayan* locations to reflect the topics of the *parayan*. The *parayans* also re-inforced in the youths the need to daily read five verses from

the Satsang Diksha shastra to remain aware of their duties.

RAJKOT SILVER JUBILEE YUVA SHIBIR-DARSHAN YATRA

1-5 September 2023



Over 950 *yuvaks* and *yuvatis* of Rajkot joined the five-day Yuva Shibir-Darshan Yatra organized as part of the 25th anniversary celebrations of the BAPS Mandir in Rajkot.

To become eligible for the *yatra*, the youths had to pass written and oral tests on the basics of the Sampradaya and also participate in the week-long *seva*, *bhakti* and *upasana* programmes: helping to clean the *sanskardhams* in Rajkot, performing extra *bhakti* in the form of *malas*, *dandvats* and *pradakshinas*, and inspiring one friend to visit the mandir for darshan.

The five-day 2,000 km *yatra* took the youths to BAPS mandirs and ancient Hindu mandirs in Bocharan, Bharuch, Navsari, Selvas, Nasik, Mumbai, Tithal and Chansad. The youths learnt the rich and meaningful traditions and history of each place, which helped them to better understand the role and relevance of mandirs in daily life. They also visited other holy sites and rivers of Sanatan Hindu Dharma to offer prayers and devotion.

During the *yatra*, at seven locations, *shibir* sessions were held in which Puja Viveksagar Swami and other learned swamis explained the glory of Hindu mandirs. The sessions also featured workshops, discussions, videos, skits

and other activities to re-inforce the glory of mandirs.

PERSONAL AWARENESS CAMPAIGN

15-24 September 2023



As part of their training in the Yuva Talim Kendra, the 125 youths of the YTK 2023 second batch conducted 10 days of satsang *vicharan* in Gujarat, Maharashtra and Rajasthan.

In groups of four (total 31 groups), the youths visited a total of 285 towns and villages to encourage devotees to perform daily personal puja, attend the local weekly satsang assembly, regularly visit their local mandir for darshan, daily read the Vachanamrut and Swamini Vato, observe *ekadashi* fasts, conduct family assemblies, and participate in other activities to strengthen their personal and family's practise of satsang.

They contacted around 4,355 families; conducted 284 public assemblies, reaching over 18,100 people; and visited 142 schools, guiding over 21,350 children. Through their efforts, the youths inspired over 1,250 people to shed addictions to tobacco, alcohol and other harmful habits.

NIRIKSHAK GUIDANCE SEMINARS

17 September 2023

Over 2,185 men and women *nirikshak* volunteers attended the one-day seminars to receive guidance on their duties in their respective centres.

The seminars featured speeches by experienced



swamis and senior volunteers, workshops and videos, including blessings from Mahant Swami Maharaj.

The seminars helped to clarify the important role of *nirikshaks* in ensuring the smooth conduct of regular and project-specific activities at all BAPS centres.

BAPS FLOOD RELIEF WORK

18–21 September 2023, Bharuch



Due to heavy rainfall, water from the Narmada River overflowed into many villages in the Bharuch and Ankleshwar districts. Water levels reached up to 10 feet in many homes and even flooded animal shelters. This led to the disruption of both human and animal life. Swamis and volunteers from the BAPS Mandir in Bharuch immediately assisted those affected. They distributed more than 20,000 food packets and provided hot meals to over 10,000 people.

Around 1,000 affected families were also provided clothing and ration kits comprising around 18 kg of grains and other cooking

essentials. Additionally, many affected livestock were provided with dry and green fodder. The swamis and volunteers put in extraordinary efforts to reach the affected, whether by boat or on foot, through waist-deep water and tricky muddy areas.

MEDICO-SPIRITUAL STUDENTS CONFERENCE

22–24 September 2023, Sarangpur



Over 400 *yuvaks* and *yuvatis* studying medicine, dentistry, ayurveda, homeopathy and physiotherapy participated in the annual Medico-Spiritual Students Conference. To be eligible for the conference, each delegate had to pass written tests based on two designated books: *Sadhutana Shikhar Mahant Swami Maharaj* and *Satsang Diksha*.

This year's conference theme was 'Nishthavan Bhava – Develop Firm Faith'. The students were guided on developing firm faith in *siddhant* (principles), *dharma* (duties), *kartrutva* (responsibilities), *seva* and guru through speeches by learned and experienced swamis. The attendees also participated in workshops, discussions, quizzes and other activities.

FLOOD RELIEF WORK

24–27 September 2023, Nagpur

In the aftermath of heavy rains that caused floods in the city, more than 100 swamis and volunteers from the BAPS Swaminarayan Mandir, Wathoda, Nagpur, assisted the local government



by preparing and providing hot meals to 1,500 flood-affected families, and distributing 500 ration kits to needy families in various parts of the city.

BAPS DEVOTEES PARTICIPATE IN CLEAN INDIA INITIATIVES

1 October 2023



Thousands of devotees, young and old, participated in the Clean India initiatives organized at BAPS centres throughout India to promote public and personal hygiene and cleanliness.

PROSTHETIC HAND SAKSHAM CAMP

2 October 2023, BAPS Mandir, Kolkata

During a Saksham Camp, a high quality, maintenance free, easy to operate and free of cost LN4 Prosthetic Hand (artificial hand) was fitted on eight patients who lost their arms four inches below the elbow. They were all overwhelmed and grateful for this noble initiative.



The camp was organized by BAPS in collaboration with the Rotary Club of Calcutta Presidency who arranged for the prosthetic hands from the USA.

EYE CHECK-UP CAMP

15 October 2023, BAPS Mandir, Kolkata



An Eye Check-Up Camp was organized in collaboration with Atha Foundation, Kolkata, and Vivekananda Mission Ashram Netra Niramay Niketan, Amtala.

Free vision testing, free eye-power testing, free spectacles and free cataract operations were part of this camp manned by experienced doctors, their staff and volunteers. A total of 477 patients attended the camp, of which 67 were referred for surgery and 307 for spectacles.

MAHAYAGNA FOR WORLD PEACE

24 October 2023,, Delhi

Around 1,700 devotees participated in the Vishwa Shanti Mahayagna at Swaminarayan Akshardham, New Delhi, to pray for world peace



on the auspicious occasion of Vijaya Dashami (Dussehra).

Devotees sat in groups around the 111 specially prepared *yagna kunds*. Accompanied by the chanting of holy mantras, devotees performed the Vedic rituals and made the traditional offerings into the *yagna kunds*. In addition, recital of the 315 verses of the Satsang Diksha shastra added to the spiritual atmosphere.

After completion of the *mahayagna*, Bhaktavatsal Swami addressed the spiritual assembly, “As per the Upanishads, *yagna* is a special ceremony of devotion and prayers. Today, when the world is facing challenges and difficulties, we turn to God to bless us on this auspicious day with the wisdom to create and spread peace and harmony. Let us all endeavour to work towards ‘Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam’ (The world is one family), because Pramukh Swami Maharaj always said, ‘In the joy of others lies our own.’”

UK & EUROPE

NATIONAL KARYAKAR SHIBIR

25–27 August 2023, Germany

A three-day *shibir* for over 160 *karyakars* was arranged in the presence of swamis from the BAPS Mandir in London, amid the picturesque settings of the European Youth Education Centre in Weimar, central Germany.

The *shibir* was inaugurated with the video blessings of Mahant Swami Maharaj, in which he had personally scribed the *shibir*’s theme, ‘Maru

Kartavya’, underscoring the profound sense of duty and commitment of a BAPS *karyakar*.

The conference explored how one can perform one’s *seva* with passion, humility, and integrity. Enlightening sessions featured a series of insightful talks by swamis and senior volunteers as well as a history of satsang activities across Europe.

In-person presentations as well as live video presentations by swamis from the UK and India delved into the responsibilities of a volunteer, focusing on the virtues and principles to help them excel in their personal spiritual development as well as their social and professional lives.

Breakout sessions and team-building activities allowed the delegates to share inspiring stories of other volunteers as well as the best practices from across various centres.

The *shibir* inspired the delegates to continue their dedicated service with renewed vigour and devotion.

BAPS PARTICIPATES IN INTERFAITH CHARITY RUN

3 September 2023, London

BAPS volunteers participated in the third London Interfaith Fun Run held at the StoneX Stadium in Barnet. BAPS joined more than 35 other charities to raise funds for their respective good causes, and also shared information about its diverse social and spiritual activities.

The Fun Run – organised by the Faith & Belief



Forum and Maccabi GB, and supported by His Majesty's Lord-Lieutenant of Greater London's Council on Faith – brought together many different faith groups to send a global message of unity and friendship between people from diverse backgrounds.

NEASDEN TEMPLE PARTICIPATES IN OPEN HOUSE FESTIVAL

16–17 September 2023, London



BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir, London, welcomed hundreds of visitors during the Open House Festival – an annual architectural initiative celebrating London's buildings and design.

Organised by Open City, the Open House initiative began in 1992 to offer free access to London's best buildings and inspire the public about the benefits of great design. It has since grown into an international network of more than 50 cities, from Lagos to Taipei and New York to Santiago.

The mandir is an active participant in the

annual Open House event and welcomed visitors throughout the weekend. Volunteers provided guided walk-throughs, explaining the mandir's architecture, history, and religious significance as well as its contributions to the wider community. Guests also visited the 'Understanding Hinduism' exhibition and witnessed the *arti* ceremonies during the day.

Visitors from various walks of life experienced the mandir's religious architecture, peace and spirituality, with many sharing impressions of their visit. A selection of their experiences is provided below:

"Amazing temple with the friendliest volunteers I have ever met. Such a welcoming religion. I learned so much from this visit. Thank you for welcoming the community and teaching me so much." - Arberina, Cyber Security Consultant

"The place is extremely beautiful and spectacular. I recommend everyone to visit. Everyone in the temple was so kind and helpful. They all make you feel part of the community and they are so respectful." - Jose, Publisher

"Insightful information on Hinduism in the exhibition. Lovely to be able to attend a prayer. Thank you!" - Laetitia, Nutritional Therapist

"It's really a nice place to be. I love to visit this temple as it gives so much positive energy. The feeling is very relaxing." - Neeraj, Service Industry

"It's a beautiful place and I really appreciated the warm welcome from everyone we encountered. Thank you for opening your doors to the public. I learned a lot!" - Sharon, Teacher

NORTH AMERICA

INAUGURATION OF NEW BAPS MANDIR

25–27 August 2023, Calgary, AB, Canada

Situated in the scenic Rocky View County, the BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir in Calgary, Alberta, Canada, was inaugurated by BAPS swamis from Toronto, and senior swamis from North America and India. The inauguration



involved Vedic Hindu prayers for global peace, a cultural procession, and the auspicious *murti-pratishtha* ceremony. Dignitaries, community leaders, and well-wishers from across the globe attended the celebrations.

ASIA PACIFIC

KISHORE-KISHORI SHIBIRS

22 July to 9 September 2023, Australia & New Zealand



Over 400 youngsters attended the one-day Kishore-Kishori Shibirs held at 12 major BAPS centres across Australia and New Zealand, based on the theme, ‘Pacific Rangvu Chhe: Akshar Purushottam ni Bhakti thi Rangvu Chhe’.

Each *shibir* was thoughtfully organized into three illuminating sessions. The first session, discussed the Akshar-Purushottam Upasana, presenting a comprehensive understanding of the theological and philosophical underpinnings of BAPS.

In the second session, the attendees

explored the concept of Akshar-Purushottam bhakti through introspection, discussions and contemplation on three profound quotes, and presenting their interpretations in the form of 60-second skits. This was followed by enlightening speeches by swamis and a panel discussion on the significance and transformative impact of daily satsang reading in the lives of youths.

The third session featured a compelling skit that underscored the paramount importance of observing *niyams* and addressed the pervasive influence of social media in today’s world. Speeches by swamis further elucidated the necessity of *niyams*, both in the worldly context and within satsang. The session culminated with a constructive discussion on the effects of social media, providing practical solutions for managing its impact in a positive and balanced manner.

The *shibirs* helped to empower the attendees to embrace and fortify their spiritual foundations, to enhance their journey of self-discovery, spiritual growth and service to the community.

INAUGURATION OF NEW BAPS MANDIR

2–3 September 2023, Townsville, Australia



A momentous two-day celebration commemorated the auspicious opening of the new BAPS Swaminarayan Mandir in Townsville, in the presence of BAPS swamis from the ANZ region, devotees and well-wishers.

On 2 September, Mayor Jenny Hill and other

officials participated with devotees and well-wishers in a grand procession in honour of the *murtis* along a picturesque 1.5 km route through Townsville Esplanade.

In the evening, swamis and youths presented a medley of devotional bhajans, gracefully conveying the timeless traditions and enduring values that the mandir instils.

On the morning of 3 September, devotees and members of the local Hindu community took part in the Vedic *mahapuja* ceremony and then Paramchintandas Swami and other swamis performed the Vedic mandir inauguration rituals. Following these sacred rites, a grand *annakut* was offered to the divine *murtis*.

Previously, in Atladara, on 12 January 2022, Mahant Swami Maharaj had performed the Vedic *murti-pratishtha* rituals of the *murtis*.

SHIKHAR STHAPAN MAHOTSAV

15–16 September 2023, Perth, Australia



The two-day festivities to commemorate the grand Shikhar Sthapan Mahotsav of the BAPS Swaminarayan Hindu Mandir in Perth began on the morning of 15 September with the auspicious Mandir Prasad Pravesh ceremony. In the evening, devotees participated in the Vedic Mahapuja, after which Paramchintandas Swami addressed the assembly, inspiring all to regularly visit the mandir for darshan, personal prayers and other activities. In the evening, Brahmasmarandas Swami, other swamis and youths presented a wonderful *kirtan aradhana*.

On 16 September traditional Vedic prayers and captivating cultural programmes were held. Among the distinguished guests were the Consulate General of India Mr Amarjit Singh Takhi, Federal Senators Dean Smith and Fatima Payman, and members of parliament. Their participation symbolized the harmony and unity the mandir fosters within the community. Local government representatives appreciated the magnificent achievement of building a mandir that truly belongs to the community.

MAHANT SWAMI MAHARAJ'S 90TH BIRTHDAY PADYATRAS

16–17 September 2023



More than 1,800 devotees of all ages joined the special 9 km *padyatras* organized by 14 BAPS centres to mark the 90th birthday of *guruhari* Mahant Swami Maharaj and express their devotion and reverence towards him. The distance of 9 kilometres symbolized Mahant Swami Maharaj's birth on Bhadarva *vad* 9.

The participants were provided selected *prasangs* and teachings of Mahant Swami Maharaj to read and reflect upon while walking. They also engaged in group discussions and contemplation on these *prasangs*, and engaged in *gun-grahan* and singing *dhun*. The walks were characterized by a profound atmosphere of spirituality and devotion. After the *padyatras*, participants engaged in darshan, *pradakshina* and *arti* at the designated destination.

INAUGURATION OF NEW BAPS MANDIR

23–24 September 2023, Ba, Fiji



Two days of celebrations marked the consecration of the new BAPS Swaminarayan Mandir in Varadoli, Ba, Fiji.

On the morning of 23 September, a Vishwa Shanti Maha Yagna was performed to pray for global peace and harmony. Shri P.S. Karthigeyan, the High Commissioner of India in Fiji, was present on this occasion.

Later in the day, a grand *nagar yatra* gracefully honoured the *murtis* through the streets of Ba.

On 24 September, the Vedic *murti-pratishtha mahapuja* and *murti*-installation rituals were performed by Paramchintan Swami and other swamis in the presence of devotees and well-wishers.

Thereafter, the celebration assembly highlighted the mandir's rich history and the life of its inspirer Mahant Swami Maharaj.

Previously, in Ahmedabad, on 25 June 2022, His Holiness Mahant Swami Maharaj had performed the Vedic *murti-pratishtha* rituals of the *murtis*.

NEW ZEALAND PRIME MINISTER VISITS BAPS MANDIR

8 October 2023, Auckland, New Zealand

In a joyous celebration, filled with enlightening speeches and skits, devotees from across Auckland commemorated the 90th birth anniversary of His Holiness Mahant Swami



Maharaj. The occasion was a beautiful and emotional tribute celebrating and appreciating the saintly virtues and services of *guruhari* Mahant Swami Maharaj. It also emphasized the importance of having a guru who guides devotees from material darkness to spiritual enlightenment.

On this special occasion, BAPS New Zealand welcomed and honoured The Rt. Hon. Chris Hipkins, Prime Minister of New Zealand. With him were Labour Party MPs Dr. Anae Neru Leavasa and Vanushi Walters, and Labour Party candidate Kharag Singh.

Addressing the audience, the prime minister acknowledged His Holiness Mahant Swami Maharaj, the mandir's volunteers and attendees. Mr Hipkins recalled his visit to the BAPS Mandir in Wellington and expressed his best wishes for the new mandir being built there. Commending the work of BAPS, he said, "BAPS plays an incredibly important role in bringing people together and fostering a strong Hindu community. You provide value-based spiritual education, and create a platform for people to both preserve and promote their cultural and spiritual values. I want to commend you for all of the work that you do in our community."

The celebration concluded with *arti* and *mantra-pushpanjali*.

AFRICA

MURTI-PRATISHTHA MAHOTSAV

5–6 September 2023, BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir, Sotik, Kenya



A two-day celebration marked the inauguration of the new BAPS Mandir in Sotik, Kenya, in the presence of Priyavrat Swami and other swamis.

As requested by Pujya Bhaktipriya (Kothari) Swami, this mandir has been built within the residence of Shri Kantibhai Patel and his sons, Ashwinbhai, Mukeshbhai, Maineshbhai, and Pareshbhai. Within the house an assembly hall was constructed wherein the *murtis* were ceremoniously installed. Previously, in Surat, on 4 May 2022, Mahant Swami Maharaj had performed the Vedic *murti-pratishtha* rituals of the *murtis*.

The first day featured a *kirtan aradhana* by swamis and devotees. On the second day, the *murtis* were honoured in a grand procession, after which the *mahapuja* and *murti*-installation rituals were performed. A magnificent *annakut* was also offered to the *murtis*. *Sadguru* swamis blessed the assembly via video. Then Priyavrat Swami addressed the devotees and well-wishers and urged them to take advantage of daily satsang and devotion through the mandir.

BAPS CHARITIES

BLANKET DONATIONS

July–August 2023, Australia

BAPS Charities in Melbourne, Sydney and Adelaide donated over 150 blankets to local



organizations such as The Big Group Hug, Westcare, The Hutt Street Centre and the Lions Club of Salisbury to help provide warmth and comfort to those struggling to secure suitable shelter during the winter months.

CATARACT SURGERIES

6 September 2023, Nairobi, Kenya



BAPS Charities Kenya, in association with Lions Sightfirst Eye Hospital, organized and provided free cataract eye surgeries for 58 patients.

To facilitate their cataract operation, the patients were provided free transportation to the hospital, meals for two days, full body check-ups, and transportation back home.

The patients will also receive free post-operative check-ups after one month, two months, and three months. ♦



MAHANT SWAMI MAHARAJ'S VICHARAN, INDIA, OCTOBER 2023

1. Thousands of sadhus and devotees seated during the Sunday evening welcome assembly, Ahmedabad, 22 October.
Inset: Swamishri blesses the assembly.
2. Swamishri blesses the evening Sharad Purnima celebration assembly, Gondal, 29 October.



ANNAKUT CELEBRATIONS, NOVEMBER 2023

1. Swamishri doing darshan of the *annakut* offered in the Akshar Deri, Gondal, 13 November.
2. Puja Tyagvallabhdas Swami presents an Amrut Kalash to Dr S. Jaishankar, India's Minister of External Affairs, during his visit to the BAPS Mandir, London, on Diwali. He commented, "The Indian community abroad is our real strength. I thank you all for everything that you do every day. That is what really defines Indian." 12 November.
3. Leader of the UK Opposition, Sir Keir Starmer, attends the Diwali celebrations at BAPS Mandir, London. He said, "I stand in awe of the celebrations here and selfless *seva* of thousands of volunteers. Neasden Temple is a beacon of compassion and harmony for everyone – regardless of creed or background – and is an integral part of the religious and cultural landscape of Great Britain." 13 November.