Pride of India
Category : April/May/June 2006
Published by Anonymous on Apr. 01, 2006

SPECIAL FEATURE

Pride of India

Swaminarayan Akshardham opens in New Delhi with praise from India's religious, cultural and political leaders

Rajiv Malik, New Delhi

In 1968 Sri Yogiji Maharaj told his devotees that he saw a grand temple to Lord Swaminarayan built alongside the sacred Yamuna River where it passes through Delhi, the capital of India. In 2005, his successor, Pramukh Swami Maharaj fulfilled that vision with the dedication of Akshardham Delhi. The spectacular religious complex ranks as one of the greatest Hindu monuments of all time.

In November 6, at 6:15 pm, his divine Holiness, Pramukhswami Mararaj--in the presence of the President of India, Dr. A. P. J. Abdul Kalam; the Prime Minister of India, Shri Manmohan Singh; the Leader of Opposition in the Indian Parliament, Shri L. K. Advani; and 25,000 guests--opened Swaminarayan Akshardham Delhi. At the center of this immense hundred-acre religious and cultural complex is a 141-foot-tall, 110,000-square-foot, nine-domed monument enshrining an 11-foot gold-plated murti of Lord Swaminarayan. As President Kalam entered it for the first time, he clasped the hand of the sadhu guiding him and said, "Today I feel proud being the first citizen of India." Indeed, the complex inspires awe even from a distance, and will surely leave every Indian visitor with that same sense of pride Dr. Kalam felt. The monument is one of the most extraordinary architectural creations of the last thousand years, in India and anywhere else. Already it is Delhi's prime

tourist attraction, with tens of thousands visiting daily, and it will likely come to be regarded as a wonder of the modern world.

The simultaneous presence of India's three top political leaders--a Muslim, a Sikh and a Hindu--was a sign of the country's high regard for this new creation. Each lavishly praised the project. In his speech, Dr. Kalam said, "Akshardham creatively blends the traditional stone art and architecture, Indian culture and civilization, ancient values and wisdom and the best of modern media and technology. Multiple layers of this complex express the strength of the mind, willpower of the human being, indomitable spirit, flowering kindness, fusion of scientific and medical talent, myriad colors of varied cultures and, ultimately, the power of knowledge." Prime Minister Singh hopes the inauguration of the temple would mark a beginning of a new era in religious tolerance and "spread the message of peace and communal harmony throughout the world." Shri L.K. Advani declared Akshardham "the most unique monument of the world."

Sri Pramukh Swami in his speech modestly redirected their praise. He offered, "We have a tradition of humility and humbleness. We are the servants of even those who are the servants of the God. Our purpose in building this monument was to fulfill the dream of my guru, Shri Yogiji Maharaj. It has taken 35 years to translate his dream into reality." "The message of Lord Swaminarayan, " Pramukh Swami went on, "was to work for the welfare of the whole of humanity. Lord Swaminarayan said that only through love and bhakti can we change the hearts of the people. He did not just say this, but he put this philosophy in practice and transformed the lives of all those who came in touch with him. He freed them from the clutches of vices such as drinking, smoking and meat eating." Pramukh Swami expressed the hope that all those who visit would also have their lives transformed by understanding the teachings of Bhagwan Swaminarayan.

The Swaminarayan Akshardham Cultural Complex occupies 105 acres on the banks of holy river Yamuna in the heart of India's capital, New Delhi. The US$44 million project was built in just five years with the help and support of 11,000 craftsmen and volunteers of Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminaryan Sanstha (BAPS) who devoted millions of man hours to complete the project. BAPS, one of Hinduism's foremost organizations, traces its roots to the life and teachings of Lord Swaminarayan (1781-1830), a great saint of the Vaishnava tradition who lived in Gujarat.

Brahmavihariswami, one of the team of eight sadhus who oversaw the project, explained, "The idea is not to have people come here just to learn about Lord Swaminarayan. The idea is that they deepen their attachment to India, and thereby we elevate the consciousness of our country. The greatest need in India today is to make Indians proud to be an Indian, proud to belong to a great culture. That is what will change everything." "The project has already had a positive impact, " he said. "It projects the right image of Hinduism, as beautiful, mild, gentle, all accepting. Pramukh Swami himself had stated, "This temple has not been constructed to show our strength or to be number one. It has been done because it is natural and spontaneous, and God has given us the guidance."

For three weeks prior to the opening, thousands of BAPS devotees and spiritual, political and business leaders visited the site. They included leading saints of India, such as Sri Satyamitranand Giriji of Bharat Mata Mandir of Haridwar, Sri Balagangadharanatha Swami of Adichunchunagiri Mutt in Karnataka, Swami Chidananda Saraswati (Muniji) of Parmarth Niketan, Rishikesh and Sri Rameshbhai Oza, to name just a few. Satish Gujral, one of India's foremost architects, observed after his visit, "I have seen great monuments, and I am speechless. Every pillar, every canopy is a masterpiece and made with incomparable craftsmanship. Normally, it would have taken 50 years to build such a thing. It is a very beautiful place, very well planned, and can make a non-believer become a believer. "

On November 3, Satguru Bodhinatha Veylanswami, publisher of Hinduism Today, was chief guest for the last of this series of pre-dedication events. After touring the monument, he addressed the evening gathering of 25,000 international BAPS devotees. Bodhinatha spoke on the power of obedience to the guru, saying, "Organizations that have a lineage of living satgurus are truly fortunate, for the divine blessings of a living satguru help us to make much greater spiritual progress in our lifetime than is otherwise possible. Of course, this acceleration of spiritual progress is not automatic--rather it happens because we are obedient. Obedience is a word that does not fall easily from most people's tongue in these modern times. But it is an essential quality of good character, and we should not be afraid of the idea, even if others are. In truth, obedience is the guiding principle of families, businesses, peace-keeping forces and, of course, spiritual institutions around the world, of every faith." After his talk, dozens of devotees and saints were recognized by Pramukh Swami for their contribution to the successful completion of the project. Three days later the temple was thrown open to the public.

The Akshardham Experience

Most visitors will approach Akshardham from the Delhi side of the Yamuna River via the Nizamuddin bridge, driving into the back of the complex through small farm plots to a sprawling parking area for thousands of cars. In front of the parking area is an immense lawn and landscaped area called Bharat Upvan, Gardens of India, first stop on the way to the main monument. Set in the gardens are dozens of larger-than-life bronze statues of the great role models of India. They include warriors such as Chhatrapati Shivaji, freedom fighters such as Subhashchandra Bose and national luminaries such as Mahatma Gandhi and Swami Vivekananda. A display of great women includes Draupadi of the Mahabharata and Saint Mirabai; and another for children includes Nachiketa of the Upanishads who faced the God of Death, and Shravan, who carried his ailing parents on pilgrimage across India.

Looking beyond the gardens, one is face-to-face with the immense central monument, securely ensconced within a lengthy outer colonnade. It is indeed difficult to believe the project was completed in just five years. To enter this area, one must pass through the security area, run by BAPS volunteers with military and police backgrounds. Security is tight here, though unobtrusive. Sheel Gadhiya, a volunteer in the public relations department, commented, "Every day around ten to twelve thousand people are visiting. On weekends we get 35 to 45 thousand, and expect this to go up."

The monument area proper is entered through Mayur Dwar, Peacock Gate, with its 869 sculpted peacocks. "When the devotee enters the temple he should feel he has been transported one thousand years back, that he is entering a different era, not a museum, " explained Srijiswaroopswami, the artist in charge of design for Akshardham Delhi. Giving what he informed us was his first interview in 35 years as a sadhu, he explained, "Everything is pure Indian art form selected from motifs from seventh- to tenth-century temples." Asked how such a great monument was created, he responded, "Pramukh Swamiji had faith in getting this monument made. That inspired everyone to think at that level. With more money, a more delicate temple could have been built. But here the faith shows and the stones are speaking."

A broad, paved path framed by lawns and gardens leads from the peacock gate to the central monument housing the 11-foot-high gold-plated murti of Lord Swaminarayan, surrounded by his successors, Gunatitand Swami, Bhagatji Maharaj, Shastriji Maharaj, Yogiji Maharaj and Pramukh Swami Maharaj. The structure itself is Rajasthan sandstone on the outside and Italian marble on the inside. Every surface is intricately carved. Adorning the inner walls and ceilings are 1,200 statues and statuettes, 120 ornate pillars and 40 filigreed arches.

One is struck repeatedly with the sheer artistry of the work. While based completely within the norms of traditional Hindu architecture, brilliant creativity is apparent everywhere. For example, dozens of near life-sized marble statues of a devotee in a devotional mood at the top of the pillars support the domes. The poses are taken from bharata natyam dance, and each is exquisitely graceful (seen in photo above). And this is just one feature.

Once outside again, visitors can circumambulate the monument by following the elephant plinth. This is a series of 60 scenes of elephants, depicted in their natural habitat, in their life with man and in the divine world. This project alone, with carvings of 148 individual elephants, 125 humans and 42 other animals, required four years of work by sixty sculptors and six million pounds of stone. Also on the outside walls are dozens of forms of Lord Ganesha, the elephant-headed Lord of Dharma, each executed with striking artistry. There are literally tens of thousands of such images of Gods, divine beings and saints. Surrounding the elephant plinth on three sides is Narayan Sarovar, a shallow moat that contains holy water from 151 lakes and rivers sanctified by Lord Swaminarayan during his lifetime. Devotees can sit by this moat, do their prayers and make water offerings in the traditional way.

"This is the most beautiful monument I have ever seen in my life, " said Dharmendra Pramod Bhai Patel, 44. He is a Swaminarayan devotee, and a medical professional. "Being a satsangi of BAPS, " he explained, "everyone dreams of going to heaven, which we call Akshardham. But I have seen Akshardham while I am alive." He added, "New Delhi did not have something like this which truly represented Hinduism. Therefore this is a good development for the city."

The immense courtyard around the central monument is a combination of wide, paved pathways, lawn and gardens, all laying within a 3,000-foot-long, two-story colonnade which also serves as a circumambulatory path. Aside from the central monument--of which we have described only a few of its features--there are exhibition halls and a huge step well with a musical fountain, Yagnapurush Kund, where a sound, water and light show is performed every evening.

The first of the two exhibitions is a charming 12-minute "Cultural Boat Ride " reminiscent of something in Disneyland. The boats are not powered, but drift with the flowing water through exhibits of ten thousand years of Indian history. The displays include a village of Vedic India, Takshashila, the world's first university, an

astronomical observatory and the tools and techniques of the early Ayurvedic physicians. Narration is given in Hindi or English as visitors wind through the cave-like river circuit.

The second exhibition hall, the "Hall of Values, " is a series of displays, dioramas and audio-animatronic presentations from the life of Lord Swaminarayan. There is a similar exhibition hall at the Akshardham complex in Gandhinagar, opened in 1992, but the Delhi hall is technically and artistically much more advanced. Eighteenth-century India is recreated through life-like robots that move and speak, teaching the values of nonviolence, prayer, morality and more.

By far the most impressive feature is the giant screen theatre showing the film Neelkanth Yatra on the early life of Lord Swaminarayan. The screen is 85 feet wide and 65 feet tall, with the seating arranged in such steep tiers that one has the sense of sitting on a precipice. The movie itself was an immense project utilizing the same technology as the Imax films. It was shot at 108 locations in India with a cast of 45,000. All this was done during the same time the Akshardham Delhi project was being built--a testament to the BAPS organization's astounding abilities to accomplish monumental tasks. As with Akshardham Delhi, it was the organization's volunteers and sadhus who shouldered most of the work, with experts and artisans hired only as needed.

Abhishek Sharma, a class-six student at Jinabani Bharati Public School in Dwaraka Colony of Delhi, commented, "The movie Neelkanth Yatra shows how even a small child can change this world by his imagination. If one works in a determined fashion, there is nothing which is impossible in this world." Tanushree Holkar, a class-eight student of the same school, said, "The change in my life after being here is that I will stop this showing off business and be a good child. I will study hard for my own betterment and also help others in whatever way I can. Today I feel proud to be an Indian." Anuja Pant, their teacher, added, "These exhibitions give them pause and compel them to ponder in which direction their lives are going. I cried after listening to these teaching of Lord Swaminarayan. The effect was so profound. I saw many of the boys and girls also in tears."

Creating this Heaven on Earth

Once the land was formally acquired in the year 2000, the hard part must have seemed over for many within BAPS. They had spent the preceding 32 years, from the time in 1968 when Yogiji Maharaj expressed his vision of a temple along the Yamuna River, just to acquire the site. The land in question along the Yamuna is farm land owned by the local governments, the municipal Delhi Development Authority (DDA) and the state of Uttar Pradesh. There were many false starts, grants given and then revoked and abortive attempts to place the temple elsewhere. Finally, in 1997 and 1998, a host of national and state government officials, engineers and others agreed that, as part of a plan to develop 25 kilometers of the river's banks, the particular area along the Yamuna that would become Akshardham was suitable for "cultural and spiritual purposes." It was a great act of faith on the part of the governments to turn this land over to BAPS, trusting that they would create something that would be the pride of all India.

While plans had been begun in 1994, it was only upon the formal acquisition of the land that work began in earnest on all fronts at once: blueprints, site preparation, stone quarrying and carving, exhibition preparation, etc. It was a marvel of coordination utilizing every ancient and modern means of construction and management.

Sadhu Anandswarup Das, head of Akshardham Gandhinagar, was part of the team of eight sadhus formed for building the Delhi project. Most were also involved in building the Gandhinagar project and brought a great deal of practical experience with them. But more than that, they brought a spiritual way of working together, and with their guru, which made the seemingly impossible possible. "Before we decided something, " he explained, "we would brainstorm it to come up with new ideas. Then we'd go to Pramukh Swami, tell him what we were thinking, and he would fine tune it."

"We are not a professional group of sadhus who are expert architects and designers, " Swami went on. "We are simple sadhus who are doing our prayers and doing something for our guru, for Lord Swaminarayan and for India and Indian culture. Our team of eight handled three thousand volunteers and seven thousand craftsmen working all over India for five years. In this huge project, there has never been anybody shouting and arguing." He explained that teams of sadhus were sent around India and as far as Angkor Wat in Cambodia to study Indian architecture prior to the Muslim period. Everywhere they found inspiration for details which ultimately appeared in the monument's domes, walls, plinths and sculptures.

More than two dozen workshops were established at Pindvada and Sikandra in Rajasthan and surrounding villages. Seven thousand carvers were put to work. These included local farmers left idle by drought who were pressed into service as stone carvers, much to their economic gain. Many became adept carvers. Fifteen hundred tribal women, likewise idled by the drought, were hired to polish stones by hand. Work went on day and night, from quarrying to carving to transporting the ready rocks to Delhi. Preliminary shaping was accomplished in short order with huge stone-cutting machines, while detail work was completed patiently by hand. The excellent balance of method resulted in a monument which appears hand carved, without a "machined " look to it.

In Delhi, the first order of business was the foundation. The site was hardly ideal from a structural point of view. Studies had determined the Yamuna River was unlikely to change course back toward the site--it was gradually moving away at this bend toward Delhi. But to build a huge temple on a soft river bank required a deep foundation, 15 feet of rocks and sand interlaced with wire mesh and topped by five feet of concrete. Five million specially fired bricks raised the foundation another 21.5 feet, which was then capped by three more feet of concrete to form the main plinth under the monument.

Complex computer programs tracked the stones from quarry to Delhi where 4,000 workers and volunteers manned the site. The huge trucks could only travel through Delhi at night, so one set of volunteers worked nights for years supervising their arrival while thousands more toiled through the days to complete the monument in record time, all coordinated by Pramukh Swami's sadhus.

Vijay Bhai Chawada is a BAPS devotee and ex-army officer responsible for the security of the entire complex. During the five years of building, he had the onerous duty of receiving and checking in over one hundred trucks of stones every night. "Even during my army days, I never did so many night duties as I have in the past five years, " he confided. "It is a miracle that despite being awake during the night for years together, I never fell sick, nor did I experience any problem with my eyes, which is associated with not sleeping at night. At the time, eight to ten of us slept in a small tin shed, complete with kitchen and temple." He doesn't mention some of the other challenges, such as the mosquitoes and weather--howling storms in winter, and Delhi's scorching sun in the summer.

Mission Accomplished

Despite all the austerities and hardships, Akshardham Delhi was completed on time and beyond anyone's expectations. Hindus around the world have a place which shows the best of India and the best of Hinduism. Brahmavihariswami summarized the process, "We were just a group of devoted sadhus and volunteers working together, absorbing and being open to the inspiration of God and guru. And in the process of this, something beautiful has happened."

For more information, visit http:/www.akshardham.com

INTERVIEW

How Yogiji Maharaj's Dream Was Fulfilled

Pujya Ishwarcharan Swami is one of the eight most senior swamis of the BAPS order. He is a direct disciple of Yogiji Maharaj, the preceding guru of BAPS. He was deputed by Pramukh Swami Maharaj, the present guru, to oversee the Akshardham project in Delhi as head of a team of eight sadhus. Following are excerpts from his interview with Hinduism Today's Rajiv Malik.

The whole project in the shape we are seeing it today was the dream of Yogiji Maharaj. He strongly desired that an Akshardham should be built up in Delhi on the banks of river Yamuna. When Yogiji Maharaj expressed this desire in 1968, we just had two or three devotee families in New Delhi. Swamiji used to tell these devotees repeatedly when they came to see him in Gujarat to do something about the proposed Delhi temple. He used to say that even the holy river Yamuna had become very impatient that a temple should come up on its banks. All this was happening in the year 1968, three years before Yogiji Maharaj left his physical body. The devotees tried their best, but there was little progress.

More than a decade later, in 1982, his successor Pramukh Swami Maharaj asked the devotees to explore the possibilities of constructing a temple in Delhi. A request for allotting land for this project was filed with Delhi Development Authority [DDA].

Other areas in and around Delhi and nearby Ghaziabad, Gurgaon and Faridabad were also explored. But Yogiji Maharaj had already given the address for the project, and that was the banks of river Yamuna. Pramukh Swamiji said we had to fulfill his intention. Eighteen years later, in April, 2000, 60 acres of land was alloted to us by the DDA and 30 acres, the front portion, by the Uttar Pradesh Government.

In 1997-98 we had requested Pramukh Swamiji to start the time-consuming stone carving work even before acquiring the land. But Pramukh Swamiji said the work would begin once the place was finalized. Later on, we realized that if we had begun the work beforehand, we would not have finally created something which is so marvelous and huge. We could not have given so much attention to the details as we did.

Finally, when we got the land, Pramukh Swamiji came and performed a puja here for the success of the project. He said that the land was even better than the site dreamt by Yogiji Maharaj and that all our line of gurus, Yogiji and even Lord Swaminarayan will be all very happy with the unique project that will come up. We inaugurated the work here on November 8, 2000 and Akshardham was launched on November 6, 2005. So the project was completed in precisely two days less than five years.

Right from the drawing stage we consulted Pramukh Swamiji Maharaj. First, we developed a model of Akshardham. Swamiji was consulted on each aspect, including the monument, the concept and theme of exhibitions, the theatre building, pond and plaza. All of us agreed to what he said and desired. If he did not like something, then it was dropped.

Our sadhus worked very hard on this project. They supervised the finer carving work on the Deities, based on their research on India craftsmanship from the 8th to 12 century. They even went to Cambodia and visited the ancient temples of Angkor Wat. They visited Jodhpur, Jagannath Puri, Konark and temples in South India. Two of our saints, Shriti Swami and Parampurush Swami, are scholars of the Pancharatra Shastra which lays down many of the architectural rules of temples and the carving of Deities, such as the twenty-four forms of Vasudeva. Like this, we worked together with our guru, our fellow sadhus and the many devotees. We believe that this project was completed only due to Pramukh Swami's inspiration and guidance and the blessings of the saints of our lineage.

This project has come up only due to immeasurable devotion of Pramukh Swamiji for his guru, Shri Yogiji Maharaj. Pramukh Swamiji says that behind the construction of the Delhi temple are prayers done by devotees of Lord Swaminarayan spread all over the world. The BAPS organization has around one million devotees all over the world. Half of these devotees undertook special fasts, japa (mantra recitation), pradakshina (circumambulation of the temple) dandavats (repeated prostrations) and other forms of penance, as well, for the success of this project. Pramukh Swamiji says that the monument is a symbol of the devotion of these hundreds of thousands of devotees. The completion of this project could not be accomplished just by the power of human intellect and physical skill. This project could only be completed through the blessings and inspiration of Bhagwan Swaminarayan. No doubt the craftsmen and others worked in an efficient manner. But still we have felt that it has all happened on its own due to the blessings of God.