

[Monumental Temple Opens In the Great White North](#)

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WORSHIP

Monumental Temple Opens In the Great White North Prime Minister leads Canadians' warm welcome of the latest Swaminarayan mandir

Canada's newest and most elaborate Hindu temple opened on July 22, 2007, its white marble domes and golden spires gleaming bright in the sunlight. Top Canadian authorities joined H.H. Pramukh Swami Maharaj, founder of BAPS Shri Swaminarayan, to participate in this event. "Today we're celebrating one of our country's greatest strengths--our commitment to pluralism, " proclaimed Prime Minister Steven Harper to the thousands attending as he officially opened the new mandir in Toronto. Gathered in a giant tent adjoining the ornate temple, thousands of Hindus greeted his words enthusiastically, waving both Indian and Canadian flags.

Ontario's premier, Dalton McGuinty, concurred. "It seems to me Toronto is the perfect place for this mandir. This is a place where people from all over the world come together to create something beautiful--a strong and diverse society." Exemplifying this appreciation for diversity and tolerance, the leaders of both government and opposition--fierce political opponents--courteously stood side by side. This participation by Canada's highest-ranking leaders demonstrated how prominent and welcome Hindu communities have become worldwide, as did Prime Minister Harper's thoughtful speech. In 2002, even Queen Elizabeth II visited a Hindu temple in London.

The summer day's ceremonies had begun earlier with a joyous and colorful parade through the streets of Toronto. Onlookers were delighted by the many floats, singers, sadhus, dancers young and old, flag bearers, marching band and mothers with babies in strollers. The thousands in the parade joined thousands more who had already arrived at the temple.

To begin the formal ceremonies, child dancers led a delegation of Canadian and international leaders up the temple's broad front steps. While elegantly dressed devotees crowded under the sprawling tent to watch the proceedings on closed-circuit TV, Sri Pramukh Swami Maharaj performed the rituals that instill the divine spirit in the temple's Deities, after which formal worship commences. The inauguration of the first traditional marble temple in Toronto was witnessed in the four corners of the world through live broadcasts.

A Hindu Museum for All

Outside the main building visitors explored the haveli, a community center, its portico a captivating structure in ornately carved teak wood. Everyone is welcome. Those entering find an 1,800-square-meter museum dedicated to the culture and basics of Hinduism. The exhibition, called "Understanding Hinduism," showcases the rich history, civilization, diversity and cultural heritage of India. "The museum will attract thousands of Canadians who can experience what it's like to immigrate to Canada from India," activity coordinator Aarti Patel observed. The goal is to facilitate stronger intercultural relations, mutual respect and harmony, helping the community more fully integrate into Canadian society. The exhibition topics include Hinduism's history and basic theology, cultural highlights, saints and heroes and the scientific discoveries of ancient India. Museum volunteers are present to answer questions or serve as tour guides. A key purpose of the museum is to conduct programs for local school children, just as BAPS has done in Delhi, London and Chicago. These tour programs have markedly improved the image of Hinduism among the children.

A Community of Temple Builders

The Toronto mandir is the 650th temple built under the leadership of Sri Pramukh Swami Maharaj, an official Guinness World Record for temple construction. In 1973, Pramukh Swami had asked two devotees living in Toronto to hold satsangs, spiritual classes. Such were the modest beginnings of this grand new temple. This is not unusual in the history of the fast-growing organization: BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha is less than 200 years old, tracing its roots to Lord Swaminarayan (1781-1830), a great Vaishnava saint of Gujarat who was a champion of temple building.

Pramukh Swami's devotees are such ardent builders, and now so experienced, that this mandir went from groundbreaking in 2004 to consecration in three years flat. Members of BAPS Swaminarayan were the key to such a rapid manifestation. They not only are expert fund-raisers, but have an admirable hands-on tradition of volunteering to do the construction work themselves. Even the monks join in.

Some devotees took extended leave from their work to participate in the project; others offered their holidays to organize fund-raising events and to help in the construction. One couple postponed their honeymoon trip, and many were the children that--inspired by the adults' perspiring devotion--gave from their own allowances.

Mitesh Badiwala, a cardiac surgery resident who was one of those hundreds of volunteers, said, "Growing up in Canada, there wasn't a place I could come to explain my Indian roots and share them with the people who were close to me." A proud smile spread across his face with this words. "Now I don't need to say anything. I just have to bring them here." Meera Sharma, an Indian-born journalist who hosts a local Punjabi radio show, sees it as "a way to not just maintain our culture, but give to Canada."

Twenty-year old Anuja Thakar, a student of law and one of many youth volunteers, confided, "The mandir has become a second home to me, my parents and my friends. I feel that I personally contributed to it--a little financially and a lot physically--and I am proud to have it stand in my neighborhood. Because we worked together, I am now closer to many whom I would generally not even speak with." He continues, "I did every task thinking of my beloved guru. I think the biggest gift this process gave me was to bring me closer to God. As Pramukh Swami Maharaj said, the mandir will be completed only because it is God's wish to build one, but seize this opportunity for yourself. I did."

Nishma Fumakia, a young nurse born in Kenya, shared the same devotional views. "Along with prayers comes effort. After all, what do we pray to God for, but for blessings and the success of our endeavors? Then we have to work on them. Making the sacrifice to come to the temple every day to help was done to please my guru and to earn his blessings. That created a strong spiritual bond between my guru and myself. I feel great satisfaction because I know how many hours of hard work and sleepless nights I put in for the success of the temple."

The construction effort was colossal and efficient. Extensive testing determined the resistance of different kinds of stone to the cold Canadian climate. Though seldom used today, stone is the preferred material for temple building. Sacred texts advise, "It is a hundred times more meritorious to build a temple in stone." The most ideal materials were selected, including the finest Carrara marble, similar to that used by master renaissance sculptor Michelangelo. Containers of this white marble from Italy, limestone from Turkey, Burmese teak wood and local sandstone were shipped from their quarries to 26 different carving sites in India, where skilled artisans carved thousands of masterpieces in exquisite detail. These were carefully packed and shipped 12,800 kilometers to the building site in Toronto.

BAPS expects the temple to last for a thousand years. The structure is a holy entity in itself. Their sadhus explained, "The seers of ancient India conceived temples not just as buildings, awe-inspiring and beautiful, but as true representations of God."

"A Source of Pride for All Canadians "

A transcript of the speech given by the Right Honorable Stephen Harper, Prime Minister of Canada.

Your Excellency, High Commissioner Narayan; Premier McGuinty; Mayor Miller; Ministers Oda and Kenney; Members of Parliament Deepak Obhrai, Wajid Khan and Bruce Stanton; colleagues from the Provincial Parliament; swamis and BAPS officials; ladies and gentlemen; Your Divine Holiness, Pramukh Swami Maharaj; Jai Swaminarayan. Swagatam. Namaskar.

Today we celebrate one of our country's greatest strengths--its commitment to pluralism. A country of freedom and democracy, a land of hope and opportunity, Canada has drawn immigrants from all corners of the Earth. Our national makeup may be as diverse as six continents, but it is a country united in purpose--because

regardless of our surname, the language spoken by our ancestors, or our religious affiliation, we are a people bound together by a common goal--to build a peaceful, prosperous nation rooted in equality of opportunity. And, my friends, it is this pursuit that makes us Canadian.

Canada's accommodation of diversity is, however, not without precedent. There have been forerunners, and of these perhaps none is as noteworthy as India. Tracing its beginnings to prehistoric times, the country has amassed a millennia-old history of linguistic, ethnic and spiritual pluralism. Such diversity has, at times, posed significant challenges for India. But the country is making a determined effort to alleviate tensions and reconcile interests through its democratic institutions. Where far too many other countries have failed, India is succeeding.

Speaking of the connection between his country's success and its commitment to pluralism, Prime Minister Singh said these sage words: "If India succeeds, we will have lessons for the rest of the world. After all, we are one-sixth of humanity and if one-sixth humanity makes up its mind, our influence is going to be felt more and more in the comity of the nations." Well friends, while our country is far less populous than India, I believe the world has much to learn from the peaceful, prosperous, pluralistic society we have fostered. In Canada we embrace the cultural contributions and differences of our ancestors, while eschewing the age-old conflicts that detract from them and seeking a common future for the generations yet to come.

Today's event marks another step forward in our national quest. Located in the country's most ethnically diverse city, the BAPS Swaminarayan complex stands as a testament to Canada's and India's proud traditions of pluralism. Through its museum, the facility will inspire visitors to appreciate how the spiritually diverse, multi-ethnic heritage of Indo-Canadians has contributed to the fields of arts, architecture, science, democracy, education and pluralism, while its mandir will provide an additional place of worship for Hindus in the Greater Toronto Area. On behalf of the Government of Canada, therefore, it gives me great pleasure to declare the BAPS Swaminarayan complex officially open.

In closing, I'd like to thank His Divine Holiness and BAPS Canada for seeing this ambitious project through to fruition. This awe-inspiring work of architectural brilliance will serve as a source of pride for not just Indo-Canadians, but indeed all Canadians. I'd also like to commend this organization for the role you've played

over the years in fostering peaceful coexistence among all communities through heightened understanding and cooperation, while preserving heritage and faith.

Namaskar. Thank you. And God bless Canada.