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Swaminarayan Organization Aims to Change America's Perception of India Culture

"My goal in holding the Cultural Festival of India is to give a comprehensive knowledge of Indian culture in its purest form to as many people as possible and so encourage other cultural groups to preserve their own culture and to respect the culture of others," His Holiness, Pramukh Swami Maharaj told HINDUISM TODAY at the June 30th kick-off event in New York City. "Comprehensive" is Swami's apt description of the 75,000 square foot, multimillion dollar presentation scheduled for the summer of 1991 in New York. The fair will include five spectacular gates, four full-size temples, 200 other exhibits and 500 works of art, all to be viewed by an expected one million visitors. It follows on the heels of (and amplifies) three earlier festivals, two in India and one in England. The 1985 England festival was credited with permanently improving the public image of Hinduism in the United Kingdom, the same goal as the upcoming American festival.

To most observers, the real question was not the constituent parts of the festival but, "How are they going to accomplish this gigantic project?" At the press conference, K.C. Patel, President of Bochasanwasi Swaminarayan Sanstha (BSS), kept mentioning the "volunteers" who were responsible for the event, but their importance was not immediately clear. In the average Hindu organization, a "volunteer" is someone who, through unusual dedication or benevolent coercion, spends a few hours a week helping with the local temple. In times of construction one devotee might even take off from his or her job for a few weeks. But this is not what BSS means by "volunteers." They mean professional members of the community who set aside high paying jobs (or entire self-owned companies) for extended periods of time - months or years.

Dr. Patel told the story of how he called Mr. G.C. Patel in Chicago one day last January and requested GC (as he is known) to report for festival work the following

morning in New York. GC not only arrived on schedule, he quickly arranged for someone to run his telecommunications company-at a salary of US \$17,000/month - in his absence. And more than this, said Dr. Patel, GC expected only to serve, not to be served. "He never asked me anything like "Where do I sleep? What do I eat? Where is my office?" He took care of everything himself." Forty volunteers like GC presently work full-time on the festival. This will increase to an extraordinary 2,600 at the time of the event. When it is over, devotees will have worked a grand total of 14,100 man-months - labor worth \$16 million dollars. The festival's direct expenses will be met by donations and by profits from the fair's commercial booths and pavilions.

Pramukh Swami's organization in India is the Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Sanstha, one of three present-day representations of the movement founded by the 19th century saint, Lord Swaminarayan. The group follow the Vaishnavite philosophy of Sri Ramanuja, vishistadvaita ("qualified non-dualism," emphasizing the worship of Lord Krishna). It arose as a protest to the profligate behavior of the Vallabhacarya sect at the time (one of the great scandals of modern Hinduism). The circumstances of their origin account for the extremely strict regulation of their no contact with women, thereby protecting both the women and the sadhus.

Three million generous members, 450 dedicated sannyasins, thousands of volunteers and hundreds of centers worldwide make the Sanstha possibly the world's largest, wealthiest and most effective Hindu organization.

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