

[US Festival of India Draws A Million Delighted Visitors](#)

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Warm Reception Greet Bold Project to Improve Public Opinion Toward Hinduism

"Amazing. And I tell you, to impress me, it's got to be good," declared Michael Maclaine, a production supervisor for Walt Disney Studios and first-day visitor to the Cultural Festival of India in New Jersey. He and his family were among the 75,000 Indians and non-Indians that first weekend to enjoy the lavish US\$5.5 million, month-long, 40-acre fair staged by 2,600 volunteers of the Bochasanwasi Sanstha Sangh under the inspiration of their spiritual leader, H.D.H. Pramukh Swami Maharaj. On July 12, Indian and US spiritual leaders, politicians, businessmen, doctors, TV cameramen and newspaper reporters packed the area behind "Peacock Gate" as the ribbon was cut, officially opening the event.

Local and national TV and newspapers gave the festival extensive coverage, while nearby residents who had watched the construction were the first to flock to the event. Problems were minimal, and mostly the result of the large crowds and unpredictable weather.

America Meets MOTHER INDIA

The festival became a miniature India where Hindus could feel at home and recreate among themselves the friendly and holy atmosphere of their homeland. Into this atmosphere ventured hundreds of thousands of Americans, many with little knowledge of the East. Out of it they emerged with understanding and appreciation of the world's most ancient living culture.

A generous forty-acres at Middlesex County College in Edison, New Jersey (30

miles south of New York City), provided a near idyllic site for the numerous displays, gateways, stages, exhibition halls and booths which comprised the Cultural Festival of India. Large grassed areas - usually a shorter-than-normal golf course - made picnicking, lounging and just general relaxation natural, if not obligatory.

Originally the organizers wanted New York City's Flushing Meadows, site of the 1963 Worlds Fair. The deal fell through, and now most feel it was a divine obstruction. Flushing Meadows is in the midst of racially tense areas, tension which would have dampened the festival's family feeling. The college was pleased to host the festival, which added to both their prestige and their budget-cut bank account. The local community was also pleased - one newspaper said Edison had "lucked out" in getting the event.

Peacock Gate commands the entrance, 40-feet tall and 110-feet long decorated with 40 woven-cane peacocks. On opening day, July 12th, 1991. H.D.H. Pramukh Swami Maharaj, Congressman Bill McCollum of Florida and India's Ambassador to the U.S., Abid Hussain, broke coconuts and cut the ribbon to officially open the 30-day event. McCollum, member of the House of Representatives Immigration Committee, said at the opening, "This festival is about a borderless world, breaking down barriers between people which are created because people don't have an understanding of each other." Ambassador Hussain commented, "Every bit of work you see here has been done by the 2,600 faithful volunteers who did it out of a sense of dedication and loyalty to their faith and not because they wanted any fame."

Nearly all of the ten-thousand plus visitors the first day were Indians, many from the surrounding area. One thousand came from England, 650 from India and a few from other countries. On subsequent days the percentage of non-Indians increased, but not so much as to eliminate the event's "We're in India" ambiance.

The Volunteers

Ninety percent of the 2,600 volunteers were drawn from the 10,000 BSS families in the USA and Canada. Many of the older volunteers quit their jobs for up to three years to participate; the 1,100 youth at least gave up their summer, others most if

not all of the 1990-91 school year. Their simple attitude was "to expect nothing" except the opportunity to serve.

Volunteer Tushar Tank (photo right) explained, "I learned a lot about dedication. You can't be worried about yourself here. I didn't think I could stay up late and work. But you adjust yourself. It is worth it. Spiritually, I learned how to have faith, faith in what you believe in. I believe in this cause. Working here, seeing the end results, gave me faith things will work out."

Aroon Rane, 21, of London, England, was one of the 32 older boys who went to India to learn folk dance. Training was held in Gujarat state, where the temperature reached 120[?]F daily. "It was so hot," recalls Aroon, "At the beginning it was 'Aw, I want to go home.' The heat, the smell, the food...But we really got used to it; we fell in love with India. Personally speaking, it was the best part of my life I've had. We did it to please our Pramukh Swami, really that is the only reason."

Fifty craftsmen had come from India. HINDUISM TODAY met four - Gautam, 30, Sapan, 28, Nitai, 25 and Dilip Pall, 32, all of Calcutta - as they were putting the finishing touches on the large toy horse at the India Village. Though not members of the BSS, they too worked without pay.

We met Dhavin Poojari, 16, of Wellingberg, England, as he devoured an ice cream bar near the cafeteria. He had arrived just 3 days earlier and was now doing guard duty at the Akshar temple for the next 24 hours with just 3 hours rest. The lad is a distant relative of Gunatitanand Swami, first of the spiritual leaders specific to the BSS line of Swaminarayan. "My dad doesn't believe in God. Me and my mum are the only ones who do. I feel it is my duty to become a saint [sannyasin] to keep religion going in my family," he told us.

The Festival Grounds

The linear setup of the festival route takes visitors from the Peacock Gate past a 20-foot Siva Nataraj (photo right) exquisitely Grafted out of bamboo strips. Then comes the Sun Chariot, Elephant Archway (photo page one) and Krishna Mandir in

the form of a chariot complete with wheels and pulling elephants.

In the next section to the right is the Indian Village, and to the left, commercial booths selling Indian handicrafts. The Village, in which some of the handicrafts were being made by Indian craftsmen, was one of the event's popular attractions. Cane workers deftly wove decorative pieces and potters turned bowls on a hand-spun wheel, though the potter (photo right) admitted to HINDUISM TODAY he used an electric wheel in Bengal. Experts in dyeing showed the various natural substances through which they could achieve nearly every color in the rainbow. The Indian puppet show delighted all the children while teaching India's ancient wisdom through the stories of saints and devotees. "Faith in God, that is the real message we are passing through," explained puppeteer Kirit R. Shelat, who with his wife and 65-year-old Rajasthani puppeteer Ranaji Ravat (photo right) performed several times a day. Kirit said, "People must understand that religious truths are something to be realized. So if they respond to the stories in laughter, my job is over. They have understood."

Visitors encounter side exhibits such as the "Friend's Garden" with its homey advice on relating to others, scenes from the life of Lord Swaminarayan, founder of the sect and the first of two dance stages, where dance troupes performed Indian folk and classical dances all day long. Everywhere on the grounds are flowers. A total of 340,000 plants were brought from Texas and Ohio. There was even a lily bred by an Indian scientist just for the event. The nearby commercial booth area was teeming with customers and beaming merchants who paid at least \$7,600 for a month's booth space. Nearby one unexpectedly encounters the first of a number of mini Pizza Huts selling a Swaminarayan-correct pizza: no meat, no fish, no eggs, no garlic and no onions.

The Lord Shiva temple stands forty feet high to one side of the grass area, topped, somewhat incongruously, with a beautiful cane 15 foot, 4-faced Lord Brahma - an uncommon temple combination. Further on, Lord Ganesha dances 19-feet tall at the grass's edge and looks out upon the center piece of the festival, the Akshar Purushottam Mandir, an authentic replica of the famous Indian temple. Visitors, ten at a time, may enter the sanctum (after removing their shoes) and receive prasadam. No puja was performed here, or in any of the other temples, though undoubtedly the public would have loved to have witnessed Hindu worship.

Visitors next catch their first glimpse of the "Sprung Structures" at the end of the

grounds. These gargantuan tent-like enclosures house the three exhibitions: smaller versions were used for the video displays, commercial booths and the wedding hall. The perfunctory white canopied shelters, up to 120 by 360 feet, are visually unappealing, technological marvels assembled in a few days by the volunteers.

The displays, gates and miniature temples are a mixture of methods. Some are woven cane or bamboo strips, intricate in design and inspiring in execution. Others, such as Elephant Gate, are burlap - coarse but functional. Those made from styrofoam, such as the Swan Gate, do not benefit from close inspection. Some temples are inharmonious combinations of artistic cane and bamboo with cheap chipboard and simple rattan matting. Still, it is hard to fault any of the construction, given the time and money constraints, as well as the simple fact that it is all temporary. The artistic pieces are eventually to be auctioned off.

Having now trekked most of a mile, visitors arrive at the three exhibition halls. Admission is US\$5.00, which many would pay just to stand in the air-conditioned tents during the muggy New Jersey afternoons. Each hall has its own theme: Beautiful Borderless World; India - A Cultural Millionaire; In the Joy of Others. The first is intended to create a feeling of unity among mankind, asking such questions as "What color is the air? Black? Brown? White? What is the religion of water? Hinduism? Christianity? Islam?" The museum-like exhibits received an interesting professional evaluation from visitor Walt Buhnke (who was with his wife Stephanie and daughter Ilene): "It is difficult for me to explain my reaction to it because I do exhibits for a living. The way it was put together was very simple, naive in a sense, but it was driven by a religious message, not by anything else. It was all just kind of taped together, and I was looking at the form of it and then that religious message hit me. I think what they did was really fantastic. It is easy for people who've never been to India to understand it."

The displays on hatred, drugs and family break-up were executed in a blunt fashion. In one scene, a disharmonious family was shown literally tearing their house apart with ropes: in another a wall of thorns across a living room separated a family who's mother and father were fighting. A third depicts a man growing into a successful career and then sinking into alcoholism and the bottle (an oversize Seagram's Seven bottle, to be exact).

The Cultural Millionaire exhibit (after Mark Twain's famous compliment to India) is

the most professional of the exhibits with beautiful translite photographs (175 in all) showing every nook and cranny of India, its people, mountains, villages, oceans, rivers and on and on. It was assembled by the shadowy, highly skilled "A-Team" group of Swaminarayan volunteers based in London. Like their television predecessors (a group of benevolent mercenaries), they've vowed to go "anywhere, anyplace, anytime and do any job" in service to their religion.

Also in this exhibit were scenes out of India's villages, some so realistic as to have been merely packed up (except for the plaster cows and people) in a remote corner of Rajasthan and shipped to New Jersey. The last exhibit is the most religious and goes into the life of Lord Swaminarayan, the development of the BSS, the religions and saints of India.

Overall the exhibits are excellent, accurate and - from our interviews - effective. There is a small amount of repackaging for western consumption. One scalemodel scene is of the contest for Draupadi in the Mahabharata, who was won by Arjuna in an archery contest. In the BSS exhibit, Draupadi is no longer the contest's human trophy to be carried off by the victor, rather the contest was to "select a suitable husband" for her. Harmless revisionism, perhaps, but notable in the general context of the Swaminarayan Fellowship whose swamis are not allowed to talk to women and avoid seeing them, a policy with consequences at the festival.

We were puzzled by the placement of guards at certain locations until we witnessed a somewhat irate Indian lady being bodily blocked from entering the main festival offices at "Engineering West" by a guard who politely said. "No women allowed." The lady had a complaint she wanted to register. Similarly, guards were posted at the main meeting tent to intercept ladies headed into the front half of the 360-foot-long tent, where the swamis were seated. Hindu custom seats women on the left and men on the right, here the women were behind the men. Anasuya Prasad of California, complained to Imlid West newspaper, "I think the organizer have already built concrete borders between men and women. Women are not being treated at par with men, and as a woman I am very much offended." It would have been difficult for any festival visitor not familiar with the Swaminarayan sect practices to realize the strictness of the separation of the women from the swamis. Other than this, men and women, boys and girls of the 2,600 BSS volunteers mixed freely with on another.

Visitor Reactions "It's great. I like it. I'm amazed at the culture of the people here

and I like the dance. The music is so different," exclaimed Pat Romero, originally of San Salvador, Central America, and now living in Hoboken, New York, with her husband Tim and young daughter. Tim, who was gamely struggling with a mouthful of pan, said they came the first weekend because "they figured the dancers would be a little more enthusiastic." He said they "would never have gone to Flushing Meadows" if the festival was held there, even though it was 30 miles closer to their home.

Jill Miller of Milltown, New Jersey, said. "I'm really fascinated because I never realized that India was so large and had so many different cultures. I hope that people will come. It's a real education."

Anila Pahwa of Maryland says she came "by accident. I'm just too excited. I don't know where to begin. My 3-year-old, Ratanbeep, was looking around and said, 'Mommy, some day I am going to do this!' If we don't bring our children to these things, how could we even ask them to remember our culture?"

Sheila Bruno, who lives right across the street from the college found "many things very beautiful. I was in India fifteen or twenty years ago and to me it brought back so many memories being surrounded by all these Indian people and food."

Peter and Shirley also of Edison, were "impressed with the structures enjoyed the people, but the food...We have some close Indian friends, so the food is not up to snuff to what we eat at their house. We enjoy looking at the people and walking around." There were other comments about the food - those unfamiliar with Indian food found the very mild dishes still too spicy," while those like Peter and Shirley with Indian friends apparently intended to eat their way from one end to the other of the festival. But a large-scale production of delicacies was beyond the kitchen and staff faced with daily feeding 7,000 people by cooking rice, potatoes and other dishes a half-ton at a time.

Jeanne Williams, an African-American from New York said, "I'm just fascinated. I love all the saris, the colors, the very nice people. I've had wonderful smiles, they made me feel welcome here. I feel good and I'm going to come back several times. I have people I want to bring to see the exhibit. It's beautiful."

Conferences and Music Performances

Special events were held throughout the festival, including conferences of child development, anti-addiction, cultural unity, women, youth and the transmission of traditions, as well as musical performances by such luminaries as Hariprasad Chaurasiya, Shivkumar Sharma, Zakir Hussain, Pandit Jasraj, Suresh Wadkar and Anuradha Paudwal.

The Unity Conference was attended by representatives of 178 Hindu or Indian organizations and addressed by spiritual leaders such as Swami Chidanand, head of Divine Life Society in Rishikesh, Swami Satchitananda of Integral Yoga Institute, Virginia. Swami Chidanand of Parmarth Niketan, Rishikesh, Shree Chitrabhanuji and Acharya Sushil Kumar. The principle message from speaker after speaker was ahimsa, the Hindu ideal of nonviolence. The conference was decidedly non-political - leaving a few delegates who had hoped for a more activist agenda in a sullen mood. Swami Chidanand of DLS gave an outstanding speech on brahmachariya and "the creative power of continence."

In a few ways the conference could have been improved. There was no opportunity for delegates to spend time with the guest spiritual leaders, who were whisked off to private dining rooms as soon as the speeches were finished. Among delegates there were no workshops or other organized interaction.

Five thousand youth crowded Yogi Hall for the International Youth Conference on July 24th and 25th. The only elder present was HINDUISM TODAY correspondent, S.S. Bhatt, who observed. "In the beginning I was thinking this might not be a success, but now I am very impressed." The saints held meetings with the boys, and emphasized the need for strong families and adherence to discipline.

One hall was set up for Hindu weddings, not as an exhibition, but honest-to-goodness, real weddings. Nimish and Kshama Patel were the first to be married, in front of 2,000 guests, about 15% of them non-Hindu Americans, for whom a special section had been reserved. An announcer explained the various parts of the wedding ceremony. Sue, a Jewish American on-looker commented. "I was struck by the similarity of all wedding ceremonies of all cultures. There was a very good feeling of happiness and wishing the couple well from all the people

here."

Guru Purnima fell in the middle of the event, the special day on which all Hindus honor their guru. For the occasion, the Swaminarayan devotees chose to weigh their guruji, Pramukh Swami, against platinum - going one better than the 1985 London festival devotees, who used gold. That donation built a hospital in India. No amount was mentioned, but a reasonable guess is about US\$900,000 worth of platinum.

Is it a Success?

Organizer Mukund Patel, who gave up a \$100,000/year consulting job with Boeing aircraft to work three years on the festival, told HINDUISM TODAY they once feared no one at all would attend the festival after it moved to New Jersey from New York. Seventeen days in the event, 500,000 visitors had come, as many as the optimistic estimate for the entire month.

It is, of course, too soon to judge the festival's impact on American opinion. Initial mainstream press coverage, such as the New York Times, was enthusiastic and very favorable. The visitors, both Indian and American, were more than pleased with what they saw. The young BSS volunteers especially have emerged from the long and hard hours of work with a lifetime of dedication, which will produce untold future benefits. Every Hindu in America will benefit from this selfless project of Pramukh Swami Maharaj and his band of devotees.

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