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MONASTIC LIFE

Sarangpur Sadhu School

A rare glimpse inside a remote center that does one thing: train Hindu monks

In 1995, Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami (Gurudeva), founder of Hinduism Today, spent three months traveling in India with two of his swamis. They met Pramukh Swami Maharaj at his 75th birthday celebration in Mumbai in a scene that could have been right out of Vedic times, with dozens of orange-robed sadhus gathered around to catch a glimpse of the two gurus as they sat in mostly silent communion. The two had much in common, though they represented two distinct lineages of Hinduism, one part of the northern Vaishnava tradition and the other of the southern Saivite lineage. Both taught a path that encompassed devotion and meditation, that insists on the strict and traditional rules of monastic life and that holds the guru essential to spiritual advancement.

Pramukh Swami invited Gurudeva to Akshardam in Gandhinagar, north of Mumbai, and to his nearby Sarangpur monastic training center, established in 1981. Though Gurudeva very much wanted to see these places, his India tour was at that point completely booked. But several weeks later, an unexpected break came in the program in Bangalore, and Gurudeva flew to Gujarat.

He and his swamis first stayed at the Gandhinagar administrative center, then under construction. It was an impressive display of dedicated religious work, with the hundred-plus sadhus in residence supported by thousands of local devotees running both the construction project and a complex local ministry. The next day, Gurudeva was taken to Akshardham temple, the huge facility that is a temple to Lord Swaminarayan and a series of spacious display halls dedicated to his teachings and life through exhibits, dioramas and historical items in every manner of presentation.

But it was the Sarangpur center that Gurudeva and his swamis were most interested in, for however much the dedication and devotion of the family community, an organization like BAPS remained based upon the solid foundation of renunciate monks, dedicated, trained and ceaseless in their efforts to please their guru and worship God. Gurudeva wanted to see how the monks were trained in the BAPS system, answer questions they might have for him, and most importantly, inspire and encourage them in their chosen path, which he so admired.

Gurudeva was whisked to Sarangpur, several hours along the modern Gujarat road system. The village itself, and it is definitely a village, sits upon the flat plains amidst farm country. The center is a modern complex of two-story buildings that, at the time of the visit, housed more than a hundred monks in training.

Young men at least 21 years of age wishing to enter monastic life first spend 12 to 18 months at the center as sadhaks (novices). During this time, they do ashram chores, study the movement's teachings, memorize religious songs and are prepared for a life of service and austerity, following all the rules of a sadhu except that they are allowed to see their parents. If they prove qualified and have the written consent of their parents, Pramukh Swami Maharaj initiates them into the parshad order. Their head is shaven, except for a small tuft, and they wear white robes. After a further 12 to 18 months, they may receive bhagwati diksha and the saffron robes of a full renunciate sannyasin. Their training then continues at Sarangpur for a total of five years. A significant number of the monks have earned university degrees before joining the order.

One got an immediate sense of how these monks regarded their own guru by the loving reception they accorded Gurudeva. They had all seen and admired Hinduism Today, which is in their library.

There are no separate rooms for individual monks. They sleep in large, open halls, many of which, during the day, are filled with clotheslines for drying robes. Bedrolls are neatly stacked on shelving, while each monk has a small cabinet in which to keep his few personal belongings.

The monks do all the work connected with the facility, cleaning, cooking and managing the temple. They rotate services every 15 days. Their day begins at 4:00

am with bathing and personal puja, then temple services, morning chores, breakfast, classes, lunch, personal study, meditation, more classes and, at 7:30 pm the sandhya arti is performed. Then, in a charming tradition, each monk touches the feet of all the others and bid "Jai Swaminarayan." After dinner, there are further activities, with each spending an hour in personal study before bedtime at 11:30 pm.

The four-and-a-half hours of sleep a night is only part of the austerities practiced here. Each monk undertakes a waterless, 24-hour fast five to seven times a month, not counting any other fasts he might impose on himself. For meals, each monk mixes the prepared dishes together in his bowl and partakes of the resulting slurry as a discipline to curb the desire for food. They travel about only in pairs (a practice followed by Gurudeva's monks as well). They will not touch money, speak to or even look at a woman, and never again return home after receiving the orange robes. It is not possible to draw these men into a worldly conversation, as each returns the subject to religious matters at the first opportunity. While there are three million Hindu monastics today, most are loosely organized. It is rare to find such a large order of well-trained monks living and serving together.

One of the BAPS monks asked Gurudeva, "People call us fanatics. How should we respond?" Gurudeva said, "Take it as a compliment. They are only saying so because they are envious of your dedication and enthusiasm." In his talks to them, Gurudeva said, "There is only one duty of the disciple. Obey your guru! Obey your guru! Obey your guru!" Several years later, one of their senior monks was sent into the 2001 Gujarat earthquake disaster that killed 50,000 people. Pramukh Swami instructed him to direct the relief work for the people. "It seemed an impossible task," he told Hinduism Today's reporter, "like the story in the Upanishads of the disciple being sent to the forest with 400 sick cows and told to return only when the herd had reached 1,000. But I recalled Gurudeva's words, 'Obey your guru. Obey your guru. Obey your guru.' and proceeded with confidence."

After the meeting, each of the monks came forward to receive a handful of flowers from Gurudeva. Love and devotion radiated from them, just one parcel of their love and devotion for their own guru. It was a memorable visit, and uplifting for both monastic orders. Gurudeva later commented, "I have never seen such a training center for Hindu monks anywhere in the world."