

[Houston Welcomes Lord Swaminarayan](#)

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TEMPLES

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The Swaminarayan Mission, today's most active, growing, international Vaishnava group, opens its first all-stone temple in the USA

Satguru Bodhinatha Veylanswami, publisher of Hinduism Today, was invited to attend the inauguration of the Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha (BAPS) Shri Swaminarayan Mandir in Stafford, a suburb of Houston, Texas. Yogi Japendranatha accompanied Bodhinatha for the events from July 23 to 26, 2004, and shares a first-hand account.

We were anxious to see the temple but first found ourselves arriving at the Stafford Performing Arts Centre. We were ushered quickly into a ballroom through a large crowd of people, many of whom were dressed in elegant, traditional Hindu attire. Dozens of bright-eyed sadhus greeted Bodhinatha with reverent namaskara as we made our way to our seats. Many more sadhus were seated on the floor next to us, behind whom were another 2,000 Hindus, as well as a handful of local dignitaries seated nearby in chairs. A number of sadhus were assembled on stage amid harmoniums, tablas, synthesizers and microphones, singing devotional songs with utterly beautiful voices. Giant projector screens flanked the stage on both sides. This was the kirtan aradhana, one of several events held at the Stafford Centre during the aptly named Festival of Inspirations around the opening of the new Shri Swaminarayan Mandir of Greater Houston.

After enjoying the bhajans for a while, we were offered a visit to the temple. We were first taken to the original haveli, the large worship hall built years ago. We arrived at the very moment the final evening arati was shown. Among a dozen or so sadhus prostrating and quietly singing "Jai Swaminarayan," the sadhu-priest showed us the arati. Sadhu Vishwamurtidas, one of many sadhus traveling with His

Divine Holiness Pramukh Swami Maharaj, leader of BAPS, on his almost six-month tour of the United States, England and Africa, tied red and yellow strings around our wrists, a sign of brotherhood and protection, and gave us a short introduction to the Swaminarayan philosophy. He sensed our desire to see the new temple and asked our escort to take us there.

When we arrived in front of the temple a few minutes later, we were filled with awe as we looked upon quite possibly the most intricately carved stone gem we had ever seen. As we approached the temple and walked up the steps, we discovered that every inch of stone was carved with astonishing detail. It took us a few moments in front of the 95-foot-by-125-foot-by-73-foot-tall edifice to regain our bearings and remember that we were in Texas.

Kedar Thakkar, a 30-year-old software engineer who took two months off from his job to help build the temple, gave us our tour of the construction site. He told us that BAPS had hired a team of some 1,500 artisans across North India to carve the raw imported Turkish limestone and Italian marble before the stones were packed in containers and shipped to Houston for assembly. Sixty-eight artisans had come from India to expertly fit the stones together, and about 175 devotees from near and far had recently come to contribute time and labor to the temple construction. Only with this information could we believe that such an amazing, detailed, traditional work, all in stone, was done in only 17 months. Not only that, but two weeks later another temple just like this one, built according to a similar timeline, was to be opened in Chicago!

Limestone and marble dust covered the floor. Stone workers and volunteers were everywhere, polishing, applying finishing touches--even doing some last-minute stone fitting and minor carving with millimeter precision--sweeping away chunks of rock and other construction debris and preparing shrines for the Deities to be installed in just two days. We stood moved by the beauty of the countless pillars, filigreed arches, decorative ceilings, domes and glistening pinnacles, and moved more so by the love, dedication and focus of so many volunteers for whom helping build a temple, not just contribute financially, but in the physical construction, was quite possibly the greatest opportunity to serve their guru that they would ever have. Later, Sadhu Vishwamurtidas explained to us, "Sweat, blood, that is what has created this temple, right from the beginning. We don't have millionaires who come here and say, 'Here's two million dollars to build the temple.' It doesn't happen that way. In fact, the people who give the most are those who earn the least."

When we returned to the temple on the morning of July 24, our car made its way through traffic barriers, around security guards and through colorful crowds, passing by rows of giant generators and bundles of temporary ducts feeding electricity and cool air into a medley of buildings and tents. We were whisked inside the "Saints Only " entrance to the back of a fully enclosed white tent of mammoth proportions. We sat on the side of the stage among a band of orange-clad sadhus who were observing their guru, Pramukh Swami Maharaj, performing his morning puja to a small jewel-encrusted Harikrishna murti that accompanies him wherever he goes. We looked over to a veritable sea of people who had come to attend the events.

After the puja, Pramukh Swami Maharaj, 84, walked gently toward us, as if floating on a cloud, to formally greet us for the first time. He tied strings on our wrists and applied kumkum and rice to our foreheads, all in a flood of photographers' flashes and TV camera lights. His blessings were palpable.

That afternoon devotees gathered to parade the temple's Deities on elaborately decorated floats through the streets of Stafford, a city of 18,000 just southwest of Houston. We and the sadhus joined for the last leg of the journey from J.F. Dulles High School to the temple a few miles away. Residents from near and far flocked to the streets to witness this magnificent display of Hindu culture replete with children in elaborate, festive outfits expertly dancing, singing and chanting along the way. The number of people both joining in and observing the parade were far too numerous to count.

Finally, the big day arrived. Early in the morning of July 25 we were taken to the giant tent where Pramukh Swami Maharaj was initiating six young men into sadhu life. Being monks ourselves, we were inspired to see this large, well-established monastic order grow again, now to an impressive total of 722 sadhus. The atmosphere was intense and full of support and inspiration, as well as some emotion on the part of the fathers who joined their sons on stage to officially release them into their new life. It was an auspicious beginning to the day that worship would officially, ceremoniously commence in the new temple before 7,000 witnesses who had gathered here from all around the world. Cameramen were scattered here and there, followed by large cables leading outdoors to a portable TV studio and satellite uplink truck from where the day's events were being broadcast live to viewers in 152 countries as well as to the thousands in the giant tent next to the temple who were watching the ceremonies on large projector screens.

Moving to the temple, Satguru Bodhinatha Veylanswami was given a seat just in front of one of the main shrines. Pramukh Swami Maharaj arrived and stood before the central sanctum for a moment of darshan before taking his seat. He then performed the rite of murti pratishtha, in which he invoked and welcomed Lord Swaminarayan and made the traditional puja offerings, including water, rice, incense and lamps. Amidst pandits and sadhus chanting verses from the Vedas and other scriptures, Pramukh Swami Maharaj arose and entered the shrines, there to touch and mystically breathe life into the murtis. The final arati was performed as he, several senior sadhus and Bodhinatha simultaneously showed flaming oil lamps to all the Deities. The temple was now alive, the Gods fully present to bless all who would ever visit them in their now sanctified home.

To understand all the Deities present in this wonderful temple, it is necessary to understand a bit about the Swaminarayan philosophy. The Swaminarayan Sampradaya was founded by Lord Swaminarayan (Sahajanand Swami, 1781-1830) on December 31, 1801. It belongs to the Vaishnava tradition, one of four main denominations of the Hindu religion. It focuses its faith on liberation through total devotion, bhakti, to the Supreme God developed through dharma (righteousness), jnana (wisdom) and vairagya (detachment).

The ascetic-led Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha (BAPS), based in Bochasan and Ahmedabad, Gujarat, is one of three groups within the Swaminarayan Sampradaya. The others are a householder-led group with two acharyas, each the head of his own diocese in the line of Lord Swaminarayan's two nephews, headquartered in Ahmedabad and Vadtal, respectively, and the ascetic-led Shree Swaminarayan Gadi Sansthan, based in Maninagar.

The source of the tremendous guru bhakti of BAPS devotees is at the very center of their philosophy: the concept of Purushottam (Lord Swaminarayan), who is Parabrahman, or the Supreme God, and Aksharbrahman, His ideal devotee, also known as His divine abode, or Akshardham. Lord Swaminarayan declared that He would reside fully in His successor, Gunatitanand Swami, and be eternally present on Earth through every spiritual guru in his succession. Thus, as the lineage has passed from the hands of Gunatitanand Swami (1785 - 1867), to Bhagatji Maharaj (1829 - 1897), to Shastriji Maharaj (1865 - 1951), to Yogiji Maharaj (1892 - 1971) and to Pramukh Swami Maharaj (1921 -), each has been regarded by devotees as an incarnation of Aksharbrahman, the Lord's ideal devotee in whom the Lord resides fully.

Lord Swaminarayan and Gunatitanand Swami are enshrined in the middle of the main sanctum of the temple. To the right is Ghanshyam Maharaj (Lord Swaminarayan's childhood persona), and to the left is Lord Harikrishna, along with Radha and Krishna in the form of the flute player. Behind this central sanctum are small shrines for each guru in the lineage. Near the entrance to the temple there is a shrine for Siva, Parvati and Ganesha on the left, and another for Sita, Rama and Hanuman on the right.

After the murti pratishtha ceremony was complete, crowds thronged in a way that reminded us only of visiting the great temples of India on auspicious festival days. Everyone wanted an opportunity to see and feel the uplifting spiritual vibration of the newly installed and empowered icons in this beautiful temple. Houston's temperate climate allows this temple to be open-air, unlike most other temples in the West. All of this coupled with the hundred-degree temperatures outside under the hot Texan sun, and we could just as well have been in Mother India.

The final event of the day took place back inside the giant air-conditioned tent next to the temple. Senior sadhus gave inspiring speeches in Gujarati and Hindi, and Satguru Bodhinatha Veylanswami gave a talk praising Pramukh Swami Maharaj and his temple-building efforts, explaining, "A temple such as the Shri Swaminarayan Mandir helps individuals find more peace within themselves, which in turn brings greater harmony into their homes, which in turn creates greater tolerance and unity within the community."

Political dignitaries were present on stage as well and were invited to address the audience. The chief guest was Congressman Tom Delay, Majority Leader of the 108th Congress of the United States, whose constituency includes the Houston area. Others present included Robert E. Herbert, the head judge of Fort Bend County, and the Consul General of India in Houston, Shri S.R. Tayal. Beginning his speech with a rousing "Jai Swaminarayan," Congressman Delay affirmed the promise of religious freedom to all creeds that put down roots in America and remarked that "the combination of architectural skill and poetic spirit imbued in this mandir honors not only the faith that it will serve but also the community it will beautify." Before concluding blessings from Pramukh Swami Maharaj, boys dressed in beautiful, traditional blue and red Gujarati outfits danced with great fervor to energetic Indian devotional music.

Such a beautiful cultural expression was only one of the ways in which youth were

involved in the week's events. Transmitting the Hindu faith to the next generation is at the forefront of the minds of Pramukh Swami Maharaj and his sadhu ministers. One of the ways they are ensuring that this happens is by involving young people in nearly every aspect of their temple activities, from planning to completion. Sadhu Jnanpurushdas, head of the Houston BAPS temple, noted, "One of the things the whole country lacks is family values, and children are losing their roots. That's not beneficial for the overall advancement of society. Therefore, in a mandir the children can relate to their culture, their roots and their heritage in a much more profound way than they could just by going on the Internet or reading magazines and learning about Hinduism."

Much of this temple festival was organized and coordinated by an exuberant team of youths that were seen everywhere providing such services as organizing guest accommodations, security and crowd control and driving parking shuttles. The successful involvement of young people on such a large scale makes this organization the envy of nearly every other Hindu temple society. When we asked Sadhu Jnanpurushdas how they do it, he offered, "It's because of Pramukh Swami Maharaj. It's his inspiration, his divinity, the fact that he is not an ordinary figure for these people. Youths all have role models--basketball, baseball, football, or pop stars, TV stars, or film stars. But here, when they look at Pramukh Swami as a divine figure, as someone who is beyond this material world--and the fact that he can also relate to them so discreetly--I think that appeals to them to go out and do something for society, or for people, or for the mandir. What they are really doing is something for themselves. Whatever energy they put into something, it comes back manifold. That's seva."

The Swaminarayan Mandirs in Houston and Chicago are the first temples built in North America all out of stone in the traditional, North Indian architectural style, designed according to the instructions of ancient scriptures and fully adorned with the fine sculpture of skilled craftsmen. The only comparable project in the US is the San Marga Iraivan Temple, an all-granite temple of South Indian, Chola style, currently being built at Hinduism Today's headquarters from stones that are hand-carved in Bangalore and shipped to Hawaii. Both the Houston and Chicago BAPS temples have plans for facilities which will provide visitors with a thorough, interactive, audio-visual introduction to Hinduism and the organization's emphasis on service and volunteerism.

BAPS has big plans for expanding its presence in North America even further in the next few years. They currently have 8,000 - 10,000 actively involved families and 40 centers here. Major regional centers, including Atlanta, Toronto, Los Angeles and

New York, will soon see the arrival of traditional, stone temples like Houston and Chicago. These new temples, which are truly magnificent statements of Hinduism's beauty and greatness, will likely bring the awareness of Americans to BAPS as one of the largest, thriving Hindu organizations in the country, as occurred in England when the organization built its first all-stone temple outside India in Neasden, London, in the 1990s. Including smaller satellite centers, they hope to have a total of 100 centers in the US and Canada in time for the organization's centenary celebrations in 2007. This would be a major accomplishment, indeed. But with a million followers dedicated 108 percent to fulfilling their guru's every instruction, this organization, which is setting such a fine example for Hindu groups across the globe, is quite capable of it.

Due to these Sadhus, Our Future Is Bright

BAPS guru clarifies common misconceptions about renunciate life

The following is an excerpt from a talk by His Divine Holiness Pramukh Swami Maharaj given on the occasion of a sadhu initiation rite held on October 26, 1985.

To give up comforts and material possessions, wealth, good jobs and businesses, and tread on this path is not a trivial matter. Today many virtuous youths from noble and respectful families have become sadhus. It is only after thoughtful consideration that they have stepped forth onto this noble path.

The more we encourage those who walk this path, the more progress we will see in society. The life of a householder is such that no matter how strong his good intentions, man becomes entangled in the web of worldly activities; thus, he is unable to engage in spirituality and social service as much as he would wish. For those noble souls who desire to sacrifice their lives for the good of society, there is no better way than the path of renunciation. Sadhus are able to offer devotion to God and at the same time give their services for the benefit of society.

Sometimes parents try to dissuade their children from following this noble calling, saying, "It would make us look bad in society." That is hard to believe. If your son

were to follow the way of vice, if he became a drunkard, if he engaged in adultery or immoral activities, that would certainly make you, your family and your community look bad. But if he walks the path of God and offers devotion, then your name is made even more luminous!

Some may feel that these young men are becoming sadhus because they had nothing to eat at home. Here, no one has become a sadhu motivated by hunger pangs. You all know that young men from America and London have come here to become sadhus. Many of those receiving initiation are engineers. Many have received other degrees and are highly qualified.

Some feel that the highly qualified engineers, doctors and other graduates here might have been very useful working for our nation--and they are becoming sadhus! But all the professionals who become sadhus will accomplish a hundred million times more work in their lifetime as a sadhu than they could have accomplished in their respective fields. Yet we question how our nation's work will be done without these engineers? There will never be a shortage of people for those worldly tasks. That work will never come to a halt. But today, our society has a desperate need for people to perform that most fundamental work, which is the development of character. Think about it. If we offer such talented, illustrious young men from society at the holy feet of God, they will do such great work that thousands of others will be inspired to become good.

Today many of our children migrate to foreign lands. We are unable to even set eyes on them. We lose contact with them--not even a letter! Yet our life goes on. We should be similarly glad if our son walks on such a noble path of renunciation. Then, if we can just understand that our son is sitting in a place even greater than America! He is in Akshardham with God, in God's service. And what a great thing that is, for in God's palace, misery does not exist!

From a small family, he is now entering a large family. From one small community, he moves to a very large one--the community of the entire world becomes his. They begin to develop the expansive notion of Vasudhaiva kutumbakam, "the whole world is my family." For others, it is just "me and my brother " or "me and my wife; " they see nothing beyond that. Whereas for the sadhu, "The entire world is mine. All those living in the world are my people, and I want to do good to them all." He dedicates his entire life for this noble cause.

So, if anyone from your family wishes to take this path, you should happily offer your blessings. Truly, spiritual welfare will be the reward for those who take this path. No one will suffer a loss in this endeavor.

Often parents are not overly concerned if their son ruins his life in bad company, but if he walks on the path to God they become worried, "What will become of him? Will he like it there? Will he be all right?" But when the parents get their son married, do they not worry about questions like "Will he like it or not?" Do we even ask him? Nothing like that ever happens. We simply impose it upon him and worry about the consequences later. The thought "Will you like it in a foreign country?" does not cross our mind. Therefore, this path will also be agreeable to him. If he is spiritually inclined, if he desires to walk on this path, then we should very enthusiastically offer him at the feet of God. What he will be able to accomplish at home, he will be able to accomplish ten million-fold if he walks on this path.

BAPS: A Global Organization

Thousands of volunteers and 722 sadhus run hundreds of temples in 45 countries

The bochasanwasi shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha (BAPS), founded in 1907 by Shastriji Maharaj (Swami Yagnapurushdas), works in the areas of spiritual, moral, cultural, medical, educational, women's, social and tribal care and relief work through an impressive global network of 396 temples and over 9,000 centers.

The Sanstha is based in Gujarat, India, and draws most of its membership from that community. Members follow a strict and rewarding religious lifestyle. The organization has 722 sadhus and approximately 55,000 registered volunteers, plus another million people who attend the temples and follow the codes of a Swaminarayan devotee. Volunteers donate twelve million hours annually, giving BAPS the ability to operate a prodigious list of socio-spiritual activities (visit www.swaminarayan.org for a complete list), including a campaign against addictions such as smoking, drinking and drugs. Large exhibitions in temple complexes, as well as mobile exhibitions displayed in schools, factories, village squares, fairs, railway stations and private functions, explain Hindu philosophy and the adharma of addiction and contribute greatly to the long lasting success of these

campaigns around the world.

Oaths of a Swaminarayan Devotee

Following strict daily disciplines reaps rewards of guru's grace and spiritual progress

According to the basic philosophy of the Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha (BAPS), the purpose of all sadhanas (spiritual disciplines) is striving to please and receive the grace of the guru, for only by the grace of the guru can one attain liberation from the cycle of birth and death.

All the practices of BAPS members are aimed at expressing the Hindu ideals of satya (truth), daya (compassion), ahimsa (nonviolence), brahmacharya (celibacy) and asteya (nonstealing), which are five of the Vedic yamas and niyamas, Hinduism's code of conduct. When they are initiated, members take an oath to abide by eleven disciplines: 1. No violence: not to abuse, hurt or kill anyone, not even an insect; 2. No adultery: not to commit adultery, or associate overmuch with the opposite sex; 3. No meat: not to eat meat or take medicines derived from animal products; 4. No alcohol: not to consume alcoholic drinks or take medicines containing alcohol; 5. No suppression: not to suppress or take advantage of helpless people, such as widows; 6. No suicide: not to commit or even contemplate suicide; 7. No theft: not to steal, or even pick a flower without the owner's permission; 8. No slander: not to backbite or malign the character or life of another; 9. No vilification: not to speak against other Deities or religions, but to respect all faiths; 10. No impurity: not to take food which is impure, not prepared with filtered water or prepared by unknown hands (all Swaminarayan devotees also avoid eating onions and garlic); 11. No atheistic association: not to keep the company of atheists or lend one's ears to lectures given by nonbelievers.

In order to progress on the path, BAPS devotees also engage in spiritual practices that express the higher ideals of dharma (righteousness), jnana (wisdom), vairagya (detachment) and bhakti (devotion). These include: refraining from addiction to nicotine, marijuana and other drugs and intoxicating substances; maintaining a sense of respect for parents and elders; donating one-tenth or one-twentieth of their earnings to the organization; reading the scriptures of the Swaminarayan Sampradaya daily; attending weekly spiritual discourses and assemblies; fasting on

Ekadashi, the eleventh day of each half of each lunar month; striving to develop attachment only to God and not to material things; personally performing puja every morning after bathing and before eating or drinking anything; attending daily arati in the mandir or at home; offering food to God before eating; chanting the Swaminarayan mantra daily; performing mental worship of God and the guru; singing devotional songs regularly; going regularly to the nearby mandir for darshan of the Deities; performing regular seva, selfless service, in the organization's activities; getting together with the entire family daily for a half-hour of prayer, scriptural reading and personal discussion; and observing Hindu festival days.

A more comprehensive list of the basic practices of Swaminarayan followers is found within the 212 verses of the Shikshapatri, a scripture written by Lord Swaminarayan as a code of conduct for His followers. Visit <http://www.shikshapatri.org.uk/> for an online multimedia presentation of the scripture.