Swaminarayan Mission Stuns UK With its Imposing White Mandir
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In an astounding feat of dedication, devotees of His Divine Holiness, Pramukh Swami Maharaj of the UK's Swaminarayan Hindu Mission just managed to complete the construction of their magnificent new temple in Neasden in time for its inaugural ceremonies. On August 18, 1995, volunteers were still working alongside temple artisans to finish the infinitely ornate Shri Swaminarayan Mandir. Meanwhile, the deities were parading toward the temple in a rath yatrathrough the streets of Central London to bless the cityscape before settling into their new home. A leading London newspaper, The Independent,noted the significance of the event, "As the chanting procession passed along the streets from which the Empire once was governed, it made a powerful symbol of the ways in which Britain is losing its religious establishment and becoming a society in which all religions are esteemed more or less equally."

Of course, the temple was completed in time. And the joyous Hindu community of UK, Europe and abroad came to celebrate its opening for the next six days. The last day of celebrations,

August 23, Guru Bhakti Day,was dedicated to honoring Pramukh Swami and expressing gratitude for "his priceless gift to generations by building this mandir in London." Also on this day, Swamiji was presented the Hindu Renaissance Award as Hindu of the Year for 1995 on behalf of the publishers of Hinduism Today. Thousands of devotees from all over the world saw and took part in these sacred events.

The British Prime Minister, John Major, was astonished to learn that in what is considered by many British as the "wasteland" of the North London suburbia of Neasden, the previous site of a motor works factory could be transformed into a pilgrimage place of beauty and transcendence. He was impressed that this was accomplished with no government finances. In his message of congratulations to the devotees he declared, "Completion of this temple is a great achievement. There is no doubt that this huge complex will be a matter of pride to Hindus throughout Britain and Western Europe, and, I hope, in India too."

The Duke of Edinburgh, husband of Queen Elizabeth II, felt that the temple's message was one of peace. He offered that, "Religious faith has traditionally inspired the creation of great works of art. I hope that it will inspire many future generations to work for the ideals of love, peace and harmony between all mankind."

Hindus Come of Age in Britain

The non-Hindu Brits were a bit stunned to finally see the immense reality of this atypical (for England), but undeniably alluring, Indian edifice. The construction of the temple in

record time and the response of the Indian and British communities amazed many British bureaucrats, whose priority is the regeneration of the inner cities and the establishing of harmonious community relations.

Both ethnic and mainstream newspapers and television dedicated significant time and space to the events. The coverage was glowing. Even the usual quota of critics could find little to carp about. Reporters keenly commented on the magnitude of such a temple opening in the UK. The Independentsaid that the temple is not only a remarkable building by any aesthetic standard but also a socially impressive statement. "It proclaims that we have a prosperous and self-confident community in our midst." The Guardian noted that "Something altogether extraordinary has happened in Neasden. There has been an almighty outbreak of Hindu faith. It's the sort that political parties can only dream of harnessing when they talk of community. It is a symbol of the coming of age of Britain's Hindu community, now hundreds of thousands strong." The conservative Financial Timesventured to say, "To see how perfectly the temple has been built is to recognise a continuing tradition of craft skills. At night, it is wonderfully lit, with triumphant silk pennants flying and golden pinnacles shining. Most striking of all is its brilliant whiteness. Watching the elegant Indian ladies in their saris and everyone barefoot to climb the temple steps, it was hard not to feel transported."

Since its opening, the Swaminarayan Mandir has attracted lakhs of visitors, including the Queen and the Crown King of Nepal, the Speaker of India's Lok Sabha and scores of Indian politicians, such as the Chief Minister and the entire cabinet of

Gujarat. Many more VIP visits are planned.

UK Connection

The realization of the Swaminarayan temple is a triumph of inspired human endeavor, highly motivated teamwork and the unleashed power of devotion. The enshrined murtis are of Lord Ganesha, Rama-Sita, Radha-Krishna, Shiva-Parvati, Ghanshyam Maharaj and Shri Swaminarayan. Eight types of murtis are installed: shailee,stone; lauhi,gold or panchadhaatu; lekhyaa,engraved or drawn; manimayi,gems; darumayi,wood, usually Jack tree; lepyaa,earth; saikati,sand and manomayi, mind.

Built with Bulgarian limestone exteriors and Italian Carrara marble interiors, the mandir is the first-ever traditional Hindu temple to be constructed of stone outside of India entirely according to ancient Hindu Shilpasastras,architectural scriptures. It is reported that a total of 2,828 tons of limestone and 2,000 tons of marble were shipped to India, where over 500 craftsmen sculpted for two years. Within a record time of three years, all the massive pieces were shipped from India to London to be assembled like a giant jigsaw puzzle.

In the UK, more than 2,500 volunteers devoted their time and energy to the most labor intensive task of polishing the marble, always working to the specifications of the architects. The volunteers paid their own travel fare. Students on summer vacation deciding to spend their holidays on this mammoth task stayed in local devotees' houses and came to the temple to spend day and night in selfless service. Hinduism Today asked some of the young volunteers from Chicago what drove

them to such dedication. They replied simply, "We want to please our Swami. Because for us, He is our God." Pramukh Swami would inspire the hard working volunteers by saying, "Here, the gardens should be so beautiful that one forgets the outside world. The temple should be so beautiful that one forgets the gardens. And the deities should be so beautiful that one forgets the temple." Today, the astounding complex, seventy feet tall and 195 feet long, with its pillars and pinnacles, domes and deities, is indeed a heavenly sanctuary.

The architecture of the adjoining cultural center, Haveli,is a revival of wooden craftsmanship encompassing 102,018 square feet. Not in the last 100 years has such a huge Haveli been created, not even in India. Steel is not used in either structure, because, as volunteer Tarun Patel explains, "The magnetic fields from metal can interfere with meditation and worship." Despite such strict traditionalism, all the modern needs and regulations have been met. It has natural lighting, under-floor heating, lifts for the disabled, fire exits and concealed lighting and control systems for the movement of crowds. The buildings have attracted students and architects from all over the world.

Environmentalism Pays Off

The Mission's unique fund-raising scheme was itself a boon to the environment, and the community. Pramukh Swami suggested, with a "zero budget," to collect aluminum cans and sell them to a recycling company. The project launched on May 15, 1992, in all Swaminarayan Satsang centers (26 in the UK). The company buying the cans was Alcan Recycling Company. Swami intended the can collecting as an ego-reducing and family-binding sadhana.He wanted the devotees to engage in

some humble service which helped the local community and also raised funds. He also wanted all his devotees, young and old, to feel a part of the temple.

The can plan worked. Devotees of all ages participated, from children aged 4 to men of age 80. The sale of 5.5 million cans resulted in recycling 22 tons of aluminum. Once this money was generated, the temple was started, and donations started pouring in.

Now, for the first time, a temple has a true Hindu identity in London. It is neither a converted church nor an old country house where Hinduism may be felt out of place. What motivated the volunteer parents and children was pure love of their guruji, and the realization that they must build a future which is deeply rooted in our Vedicculture. By their achievements, they have sent a message, set an example and contributed significantly to the Hindu renaissance worldwide.

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Sidebar: Pujya Pramukh Swami Maharaj

Shri Shastri Narayanswarupdas, widely known as Pramukh Swami Maharaj, is the supreme inspiration and motivating force behind the new Swaminarayan temple in London. He is the fifth spiritual successor of Lord Swaminarayan and the present leader of the Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Sanstha. This is the parent organization of which the Swaminarayan Hindu Mission in the UK is a branch. Swami

Shree was born in Chansad, a small village near Baroda, in Gujarat, in 1921. After a quiet childhood, he became a sadhu at the age of eighteen. Hidden by his humility and simplicity, he is known to possess an infinite divine power. Shastriji Maharaj, his guru, was aware of this and appointed him as the President of the Swaminarayan Movement. He fervently served and earned the grace and blessings of his guru. In 1971, he became the next spiritual master in the hierarchy of Lord Swaminarayan.

Under his guidance, the Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Sanstha has blossomed with a worldwide network of 1,100 centers, 350 temples, 1,550 youth forums, 200 children's forums, 600 centers for women and more than a million followers around the globe. This dynamic Hindu institution engages in ultra-diverse activities: from remote tribal areas of Africa to such projects as social help; moral teaching; relief camps; cultural preservation and educational, medical and ecological programs. Deeply inspired by Swamiji, his followers work in rural communities, organizing anti-addiction camps, eye camps, engaging in tree planting, dry wells recharging and much more.

Pramukh Swami is always travelling and solving the problems of his followers. He leads an austere life of celibacy, with no personal wealth or comforts, maintaining the Hindu tradition in all its purity. His striking humility, wisdom and simplicity has touched many world religious and national leaders.

In the introduction of the booklet, released at the time of the temple opening, he wrote: "Mandirs, scriptures and saints are

the supporting pillars of our Vedicculture. Right from the Vedic age, Hindu culture has accepted their importance. Since time immemorial, mandirs have remained centers of our eternal Vedicform of worship. Only through mandirs, where God and his incarnations are being worshiped and prayers are offered, has society been able to attain peace, happiness, devotion and religious feelings. And so, the values of Indian culture have remained alive. Such auspicious values have been nourished by the mandirs of each and every sampradaya.Hence, society has remained united. By offering prayers, devotion and meditation in the mandir, the mind finds peace. May God reside in this mandir and may peace prevail in all of England and the whole world. May all be happy, with such prayers to Lord Swaminarayan."

A mandir is a center for realizing God. A mandir is where the mind becomes still. A mandir is a place of parmount peace. A mandir inspires a higher way of life. A mandir teaches us to respect one another. -- Pujya Pramukh Swami Maharaj