

## [From Bombay's Hell to Vaishnava Heaven by Train](#)

Category : [July 1990](#)

Published by Anonymous on Jul. 02, 1990

# From Bombay's Hell to Vaishnava Heaven by Train

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It was 9:15 PM and travelers were crushed together at Bombay's Central Railway Station. The signal light suddenly glowed green. The railway guard of the Gujarat Mail blew his piercing whistle and the train slowly pulled out. As it gained speed, it rocked me to sleep. At dawn I descended at Nadiad and proceeded by bus to Vadtal, arriving at 6:15 a.m. It was quiet except for the barking of stray dogs. My ears sighed relief as the bus engine roared no more. A ten-minute walk brought me to the majestic gate of Gnan Baug. Someone opened it from inside. I walked in. The ground was powder fine dust - like walking on a silken carpet! I felt as if I was in a heavenly garden.

## Settled in and Looking Around

A life-long volunteer, Kanubhai Bhagat, arranged for my room. These permanent volunteers of this Vaishnavite Swaminarayan sect, known as parshads or bhagats, consider themselves servants of God and carry on all types of work entrusted to them by the priests and saints, claiming nothing in return. Though some are married, they reside here alone. Kanubhai Bhagat joined Gnan Baug when he was hardly ten years old and defect was almost cured by the grace of Kanji Bhagat, the present head of Gnan Baug and Bhagwan Shri Swaminarayan, the 19th century founder of this sect. "Kanu" works as a secretary and has hardly left Gnan Baug even for a day during the last 20 years. Salary, sick leave or casual outings are unfamiliar to him. He wears two or three simple, rough cotton sheets and has a shaven head. He seems to have developed a spiritual power through his simple life solely dedicated to God. He is not a scholar and when I try to drag him toward some philosophical discussion, he says "I know only this much, that I love God whom I call Bhagwan Shri Swaminarayan and that He loves me!"

Gnan Baug covers an area of about 6,000 sq. meters and is surrounded by a 20-foot high wall. Kanubhai explained that "Swaminarayan used to impart divine knowledge here to the vast congregations., so it come to be known as Gnan Baug, 'Knowledge Garden.'" The main temple has three paintings of Shri Swaminarayan inlaid with foils of gold and silver and set with jewels. Just opposite the temple is the life-size statue of Gujarat's most notorious robber, Joban Paji, who surrendered to Swaminarayan as a devotee. I saw two ladies bow down to him in tears. There's a giant workshop near the main memorial. Behind the magnificent, multi-floored art gallery is a massive gobar-gas plant and near it a boiler providing hot water all the time because in this sect there is an unusual custom to bathe as many times as you visit a toilet! I visited their Goshalla where cows in the direct lineage of the cows of Swaminarayan are kept.

## Meeting the Head

I got to meet with Kanji Bhagat, the head of Gnan Baug. His room was of utmost simplicity. He looked like a well-built farmer and has lived here for more than 30 years. I asked him. "Will you describe the development over all these years?" he replied, "Well, God created all from nothing, but I created something from practically nothing. When I came here, this was a deserted place, dangerous at daytime and frightening at night. Pilgrims would visit occasionally only with an armed guard. In the holy name of Bhagwan Swaminarayan I cleaned this place planned out a garden and planted plants, trees and creepers. Villagers, experts and artisans joined with me in this noble task and we all made this place look like heaven above."

I asked him if he had any spiritual experiences? "I love my God - Bhagwan Swaminarayan as my all," he began. "I work for Him from morning to night. My spiritual experience is that I always feel His presence within and without." "Can you do miracles?" I queried. "No, I only change the hearts of people and inspire in them the devotion to God and to lead a good and noble life by following the rules framed by Bhagwan Swaminarayan," he answered.

Every full moon day, Gnan Baug is crowded with people coming from various parts of India to receive Kanji Bhagat's special blessings.

## 200-Mile Walk

Members spontaneously invited me to join a pada yatra (foot pilgrimage). Fifteen of us walked 10 miles a day on rough roads and narrow lanes alongside wide fields. We crossed the barren Bhal Plain (65 miles). Each evening we halted at some hamlet where villagers fed and sheltered us. Before bed we had prayers, chanted God's name and heard religious discourses by Kanji Bhagat. Early each morning we again prayed, chanted, listened to our Sant and then started walking. Before noon, we halted at a village, had our lunch, some religious program and trekked off to reach the next village steppingstone.

For our happiness and comfort, the poorest villagers made their dirtiest cottages as clean as they could. They accepted nothing save Kanji Bhagat's blessings. For the first time I saw life in Indian villages. Take out their religious joy and they would fall to pieces.

After 21 days, we reached our destination without using shaving kit, soap or hot water. We hardly slept five hours a day. But all our evil thoughts were squeezed out by the strain and Kanji Bhagat replaced them by the best that was, that is and that will be in Hinduism.

Before my departure, Kanji Bhagat gave me his blessings, and said, "Return here forever when your family life comes to an end. Your grandfather's grandfather, Shivram Vipra, renounced his worldly life and had become a great saint disciple of Bhagwan Swaminarayan. Bow down to his painting before you leave." I asked Bhagatji for his message to the readers of HINDUISM TODAY. "Remember God and work for Him," he said with powerful simplicity.

Then I left the place. The Gujarat Express, a day train, hauled me back to Bombay where, I surmised, people who commit crimes in hell are sent for just punishment. And here in this gas-chamber that is Bombay I survive because of the sweet remembrance of Gnan Baug.

Address: Gnan Baug Vadtal, Gujarat, INDIA

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