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PRAMUKH SWAMI MAHARAJ INAUGURATES THE “LABOR OF LOVE” IN HOUSTON

Glistening white pinnacles adorned the Houston skyline as the world renowned socio-spiritual organization the Bochasanwasi Shree Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha (BAPS) inaugurated a magnificent traditional stone and marble mandir. Graced by the spiritual leader of BAPS, His Divine Holiness Pramukh Swami Maharaj, devotees and well wishers from North America and around the world witnessed the momentous inaugural ceremony conducted to the chant of Vedic hymns and ancient rituals.

Conceived in 2000, the temple was constructed through the committed efforts of thousands of volunteers throughout the country. Constructed from marble, limestone and timber, its walls ceilings and windows display intricately carved deities and motifs representing the sacred faith and beliefs that date back over thousands of years.

The inauguration was a culmination of a host of events, termed, Festival of Inspirations held over seven days. From colorful dances, delightful devotional songs, inspirational and educational speeches, to a celebration of the core values of BAPS of service and volunteerism. “It is incredible, the youths formed our core volunteer force during construction” said BAPS volunteer, Kedar Thakkar, “under the scorching sun they helped with everything from heavy duty labor work to cleaning to planning and execution”, concluded Thakkar.

Prayers for world peace also formed a part of the festival through a traditional “*yagna*”. This is a symbolic ceremony of rites and rituals for peace, prosperity and happiness for all of mankind. The mood turned festive after the *yagna* as a parade (*shobha yatra*) of fourteen decorative floats with the *murtis* (deities) to be installed in the mandir traversed the streets of Houston. The floats, made by youth volunteers under the guidance of sadhus, included Shri Akshar Purushottam Maharaj seated on a Peacock float, Shri Ghanshyam Maharaj on an Eagle float, Shri Harikrishna Maharaj on a Lotus float, Shri Radha Krishna Dev on a Swan float, Shri Sita Ram and Hanumanji on a Chariot float, and Shri Shiv Parvati and Ganeshji on the Himalayan float. People in colorful costumes celebrated with folk dances, devotional hymns, and a youth marching band.

The much anticipated mandir inauguration started from the morning of July 25th. Pramukh Swami Maharaj entered the mandir grounds through the Festival Gate where he was welcomed by children of all ages, lined up in traditional costumes as well as a full marching band. Pramukh Swami Maharaj released balloons and entered the mandir where he performed the Murti Pratishtha (consecration ceremony of the sacred deities).

Just as stone becomes a statue at the hands of a sculptor, a carved stone becomes a *murti* once divinity is infused into the statue through a spiritually enlightened Guru. This ritual is known as the *murti pratishtha*. The central shrine houses the sacred deities of Akshar Purushottam Maharaj. The other shrines house Shree Ghanshyam Maharaj, Shree Radha Krishna, Sita-Ram, Hanumanji, Shiva-Paravati, and Ganpatiji. There was an Annakut (food offering), where over 200 vegetarian dishes were offered and displayed in front of the sacred deities. After opening the mandir, Pramukh Swami Maharaj was welcomed in the assembly hall by rapturous applause.

The chief guest was Congressman Tom Delay, House Majority Leader of the 108th Congress. The Congressman spoke on the beauty of the mandir and mentioned 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.” The other dignitaries were Sadguru Bodhinatha Veylanswami from *Hinduism Today*, Judge Robert Herbert of Fort Bend County, Consul General of India Mr. S.R. Tayal. The dignitaries offered a bouquet of flowers and received blessings from Pramukh Swami Maharaj.

Pramukh Swami Maharaj, in his blessings, talked of the commitment of the volunteers whose efforts have resulted in this magnificent mandir. He further added that whoever visits this mandir shall experience peace from within. In conclusion, he prayed for world peace and thanked everyone for attending today’s event. TV Asia covered the entire event live on their network across North America.

Pramukh Swami Maharaj will conclude his 95-day North American tour in Chicago, where another traditional Hindu mandir will be inaugurated on 8th August. This historic ceremony will also be broadcast live on the TV Asia network from 9:30am to 12:30pm Central Time on the same day. Prior to his Houston visit, Pramukh Swami Maharaj graced many spiritual and cultural programs in the major cities of United States, including New York, Edison, Atlanta, Los Angeles, Orlando and Toronto.

About Pramukh Swami Maharaj

His Divine Holiness Pramukh Swami Maharaj, the fifth spiritual successor of Bhagwan Swaminarayan, has inspired millions of devotees across the world to lead a God-conscious, character-centered life. As the present leader of BAPS, he travels from village to village, continent to continent, inspiring people of all ages to center their lives on moral values and sound judgment. He emphasizes the importance of family harmony, community service and spiritual progress among others. Representing the essence of Hinduism, his compassion for humanity, universal wisdom and striking simplicity have touched many world religious and national leaders.

About BAPS

The Bochasanwasi Shree Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha (BAPS), a worldwide spiritual organization in Consultative Status with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations, is dedicated to community service, peace and harmony. Founded on the pillars of practical spirituality rooted in Vedic philosophy, BAPS strives

to care for the world by caring for societies, families and individuals. Besides spiritual activities, through social and humanitarian activities BAPS endeavors to produce better citizens of tomorrow, who have very high esteem for their roots - the rich Indian heritage. Its 9,000 centers including more than 5,000 youth centers across the world support these activities of character building. Under the guidance and leadership of His Divine Holiness Pramukh Swami Maharaj, BAPS aspires to build a community that is morally, ethically and spiritually strong.

For more information on BAPS and further details of Pramukh Swami Maharaj's North America schedule and program, please visit <http://www.swaminarayan.org>.