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## **A SUMMER'S ODYSSEY FOR 5,000 YOUNG ASPIRANTS**

The world famous International Drive in Orlando, home to many of the famed tourist destinations in this Florida city, will have a distinct Indian flavor for 11 days in July. Beginning July 1<sup>st</sup>, over 5,000 individuals of Indian origin, ranging from the ages of 8 to 35, will descend here for 3 distinct conventions that will inspire, motivate and educate. The convention-series, entitled "Vicharan", attempts to install time-honored and tested ideals in individuals living in the fabric of modern society by speaking to targeted age groups about the issues they may face.

This series is being organized under the auspices of the Bochasanwasi Shree Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha (BAPS) and is being held in the presence of the organization's spiritual leader, His Divine Holiness Pramukh Swami Maharaj. BAPS is an international socio-spiritual organization known in the Indian-American community for its work in preserving and promoting the rich and storied Indian culture throughout the world.

Envisioned over 50 years ago by the previous spiritual leader of BAPS, His Divine Holiness Yogiji Maharaj, the children, adolescent and youth wings receive valuable guidance for all facets of life including education, career, family, health and spirituality. Currently in North America, over 440 weekly assemblies for different age groups, organized in 3 categories - Bal-Balika, Kishore-Kishori and Yuvak-Yuvati, promote the importance of our rich Vedic values and traditions right from the childhood.

The various wings also attempt to nurture a sense of community responsibility by promoting volunteerism from a young age. From aluminum-can recycling drives to assisting in disaster relief efforts throughout the world, the younger generations of BAPS members are taught to have compassion for their fellow person and to be a citizen in the purest sense of the word.

The first of the three conventions was dedicated for people in their 20s and 30s who may now have careers and families of their own. The Yuvak-Yuvati Mandal convention was held from July 1<sup>st</sup> to July 4<sup>th</sup> and was attended by predominantly America-born or raised Indians who are looking to balance the ideals of their parents with the society in which they live. Issues such as rearing the next generation of the Indian-American family and retaining pride in their ancestry were discussed heavily at this convention.

The Kishore-Kishori Mandal convention has already started on July 4<sup>th</sup> and will last until July 8<sup>th</sup>. This group of youngsters is comprised of high school and college aged

individuals and strives to help them avoid the various pitfalls that they come across on a daily basis. Many of these problems are caused by negative peer pressure. Through such motivating conventions this generation cultivates the pride and confidence to avoid the problems that plague their friends and peers.

The last convention is for the children. From July 8-11, the BAPS Bal-Balika Mandal will have fun-filled three-and-a-half days with kids ranging from 8 to 14. As they approach their teenage years, they will gain new found freedom. However, with this freedom come responsibilities that, if understood and done, will ensure the happiness and safety for their loved ones. By addressing lessons such as respect for parents and elders and understanding the importance of education early in life, this convention hopes to strengthen the children's resolve to develop into the ideal citizen.

### **Yuvak-Yuvati Mandal Convention**

The first of the "Vicharan" conventions began on July 1<sup>st</sup>. Over 900 delegates were treated to two-and-a-half days of genuine delight. Discourses focusing on maintaining strong family values were discussed thoroughly and highlighted the convention's program. "We know that in society, many of the problems we face today are caused by a disintegration of family values. It is important to me that I have the correct information for the well-being of my family. This convention provided me with that," said Nikita Patel from Atlanta, Georgia.

Various speeches were given on all aspects of family values, beginning from a selection of a spouse to the upbringing of children. In one of his speeches, Pramukh Swami Maharaj gave guidance for success in marriage. In using the lesson from the Ramayan, Swamishri spoke of the conviction that Sitaji displayed to Ramchandra Bhagwan when he was sent to the forests. Pramukh Swami Maharaj pointed out that only Ramchandra Bhagwan was sent on the 14-year exile. However, Sitaji, who could have just as easily waited for him in the luxuries afforded her as a princess at the time, was adamant in her conviction to go with her husband. Swamishri spoke that this is the type of dedication each spouse need to have towards each other. He further stated, "In today's society, ending marriage is a very simple process. But in our [Indian] culture, there should be no end to marriage. When we give our word in a marriage, we should remain steadfast in it." In order to retain such a value, Swamishri voiced that it is of the utmost importance for a wife to treat her husband with absolute respect and that a husband should treat his wife no different. Another portion of the program was directed towards raising Indian-American children. Again, Swamishri spoke that the core of raising the children stems from the character of the parents.

The organizers of the event were extremely pleased with the outcome of the BAPS Yuvak-Yuvati Mandal National Convention. "When we began to plan for this meeting, we had one main goal. We wanted to give some guidance and inspiration in formulating a stable and secure family. Through the words of advice of Pramukh Swami Maharaj and other learned *sadhus* (Hindu monks) from our BAPS organization, we believe we have been able to give the necessary information to the delegates of this convention", said Sanjiv Bhatt, a National Coordinator for the BAPS Yuvak Mandal.

### **About BAPS**

The Bochasanwasi Shree Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha (BAPS), a worldwide socio-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, BAPS strives to care for the world by caring for societies, families and individuals. Through a number of medical, cultural, educational, environmental, social and spiritual activities, BAPS endeavors to produce better citizens of tomorrow, who have very high esteem for their roots - the rich Indian culture. 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 free of addictions and that is morally, ethically and spiritually strong.

### **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.

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