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Spectacular Diwali & New Year Celebrations at BAPS Swaminarayan Mandirs across North America

Color and spectacle mingled with joy and tradition, as Diwali, the most auspicious celebration in the Hindu calendar, was celebrated in spectacular style at the BAPS Shree Swaminarayan Mandirs and centers across North America.

The Diwali and Hindu New Year festivities were immediately apparent for all visitors to the temples as they were greeted by a big and colorful Rangoli, a floor decoration at the entrance, made from colored rice displaying various traditional Hindu symbols. Both young and old of various background & culture participated in the festivities wearing colorful new clothes, enjoying snacks and sweets, meeting and rejoicing with relatives and friends in an atmosphere of happiness.

Diwali means a row of lights, and hence it is also known as the festival of lights. During this time friends and families visit temples, exchange gifts and enjoy festive meals together.

In the weeks leading up to the celebrations, scores of devotees, both young and old spent over a month in planning and helping with decorations, food preparation and setting the stage for the most significant ritual, the Annakut. In *Sanskrit*, the word Annakut literally means a "mountain of food" and in reality also it consists of an elaborate mountain of thousands of food dishes traditionally arranged in tiers or steps as an offering to God.

Annakut preparation lends itself as an opportunity for teamwork and creativity. The preparation begins at 5.00am in the morning for us as various food dishes consisting of sweets, fried foods, vegetables and intricately carved fruits to confer color and vibrancy to the Annakut are methodically arranged.

"The logic behind this grand Annakut offering is to first thank and offer our all to God as the New Year begins. We pray that we be good citizens, pure devotees, and loving family members", explained Mayank Patel of Edison.

Diwali is also a time when children look forward to the fun and joy it brings. It came as no surprise that the BAPS Children's Diwali party complete with games, comedy, gifts and a magic show was a thoroughly noisy and fun filled event for young and old alike.

BAPS

NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATION IN CONSULTATIVE STATUS WITH THE ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COUNCIL OF THE UNITED NATIONS

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During the evening festivities, there were delightful devotional songs, and BAPS sadhu Pujya Yagnavallabh Swami explained the significance of Diwali. "It celebrates the return of Lord Rama to the city of Ayodhya, after he vanquished the demon king, Ravana.", he said, " and for us this symbolizes our own struggle for righteousness and defeat our own demons", he concluded.

Each mandir also had decorations and exhibits conveying noble messages from the Indian scriptures. The celebration at many centers also saw an exhibition on Mystic India, a large format film soon to be released portraying India's rich culture, traditions, festivals, architecture and landscapes with the powerful message of 'Unity in Diversity'. The 'MYSTIC INDIA' film will to be released soon in 2005.

These celebrations took place at all the BAPS Swaminarayan mandirs and centers including the major mandirs at Atlanta, Chicago, Edison, Houston, Los Angeles, New York and Toronto.

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 BAPS' Diwali celebrations, please visit www.swaminarayan.org.
- For more information on the Large Format Film 'Mystic India', please visit www.mysticindia.com.