

Symbol of Love, Peace and Tolerance Opens in Atlanta BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir

Appreciating the Mandir for its outstanding social activities and declaring the day as BAPS Mandir Lilburn, Georgia Day, the Chief Guest of Honor Congressman Henry Johnson, Jr. unveiled a plaque officially opening BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir, Atlanta. After 17 months and many hours, the Mandir pinnacles stood glistening as the long awaited inauguration ceremony finally took place. Also present on this occasion were The Honorable Mayor Jack Bolton and the Commissioner of Gwinnett County Mr. Charles Bannister.

Pramukh Swami Maharaj inaugurated the mandir through a Vedic ceremony known as *murti pratishtha*, in which divinity is infused into the sacred images. Once this ceremony takes place, the building is not just a mere stone structure, but a place where people can come to worship. The Mandir is also a center for many social and cultural activities.

All stood up during the inauguration for the national anthem sung with great enthusiasm by the Birkmar High School Choir which was followed by the Indian national anthem.

Constructed from 34,671 pieces of meticulously hand carved Italian Carrara Marble and Indian Pink Sandstone the Mandir was inaugurated during the culmination of a 5-day festival. The Mandir, which has been inspired by His Divine Holiness Pramukh Swami Maharaj, the spiritual leader of BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha (BAPS), involved the efforts of over 1500 skilled craftsmen in India and 400 local BAPS volunteers.

The Mandir is completely etched with intricate carvings in marble and sandstone, from the external walls and domes to the inside pillars and ceilings. They depict a mosaic of tales of inspiration, devotion and dedication, along with historical figures from Hinduism. Artisans created the carvings in India with great love, skill and patience before the pieces were shipped to Atlanta. The Mandir is situated on a 29-acre complex, complete with a reflection pool consisting of a miniature waterfall and hand carved marble sculptures.

Local and regional BAPS volunteers, both young and old, tirelessly dedicated their time and effort to construct the Mandir. Many came from miles to volunteer their time. "I used to drive down once a month to help out with garbage cleaning, gardening and stone polishing" said Tanvi Patel, a student from Charlotte.

Hundreds dedicated their weekends and free time to ensure the successful and timely completion of the Mandir. For many, it has been a unique learning experience. It was also an opportunity to work alongside skilled artisans and learn about general construction.

Young children prepared for the festivities through dance and drama practices and also saved money from their weekly allowances to donate to the Mandir. Men and women spent hours cooking in preparation for the opening weekend.

Other highlights of the five-day festival included BAPS Centenary where 100 years of BAPS were celebrated. The event took place on Friday 24th August including thought provoking dramas and lively dances reflecting the growth of BAPS over the years to serve communities, families and individuals. BAPS was revealed by Bhagwan Swaminarayan and was established in 1907 by the third spiritual successor, Shastriji Maharaj. The Attorney General Thurbert Baker proclaimed Pramukh Swami Maharaj as Honorary Attorney General for the State of Georgia.

BAPS values living in harmony with others and on Saturday August 25, in accordance with this belief, people of all ages participated in a prayer for world peace called the *Vishwashanti Mahayagna*, This symbolic ceremony was performed for the peace, prosperity and happiness of all.

Part of the festivities also included an afternoon procession known as *nagar yatra*, with the BAPS *Akshar Dhvani* marching band leading a parade of decorated floats, elephants, vintage horse drawn carriages, and dancing troupes in traditional Indian costumes.

The procession began at Lilburn Middle School and culminated at the new BAPS Swaminarayan Mandir, where a series of traditional dances and speeches were performed. The evening ended with a fireworks show illuminating the night sky. The Mandir will open to the public on September 1, 2007.

The people of Toronto, Georgia and the entire world have been bestowed with a magnificent Complex that will bring spiritual well being, knowledge of the heritage of Indo-Americans, and many colorful festivals and events.

Atlanta's BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir, By The Numbers:

- **5** Shikhar (pinnacle)
- **86** decorative ceilings
- **116** archways (Toran)
- **340** pillars
- **34,000** carved pieces
- **17** months to complete stone work
- **8** tonnes, heaviest stone
- **37** grams, lightest stone
- **4,500** tonnes of Turkish limestone
- **4,140** tonnes of Italian Carrara marble
- **3,065** tonnes Indian sandstone
- **1,500** craftsmen involved at 26 different sites in India
- **900** volunteers gave their services
- **1.3** million man hours of construction.
- Built to last **1000** years

About BAPS

The BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha (BAPS), established in India, in 1907, is a worldwide civic and religious organization dedicated to the spirituality of the individual while promoting harmony between individuals, within families, and within diverse communities. Since 1970, BAPS has been serving in the areas of: Family Unity, Spirituality, Indian Heritage, Children and Youth Development, and Humanitarian Services.

About the Inspirer and Creator: Pramukh Swami Maharaj

Pramukh Swami Maharaj, the fifth spiritual successor of Bhagwan Swaminarayan, has inspired millions of devotees across the world to lead a God-conscious, character-centred life. 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.