

Chapter 23

The Unique Attractions of Akshar Mandir

Thousands of devotees would come to the Sharad Punam festival in Gondal at Swamishri's loving insistence. Swamishri would write letters to some devotees requesting them to come to the festival as volunteers so they could help with the arrangements. But for the most part, the attraction of Swamishri presiding in Akshar Mandir was such that thousands of male and female devotees would flock to the festival. If they didn't have money to pay for a train or bus fare, they would borrow the money but find a way to get to Gondal. Many children and teenagers felt there was no better way to spend their Diwali and summer vacations than to be in Swamishri's presence in Gondal.

And once they arrived, not one or two, or five or twenty-five, but countless young and

old, big and small, male and female, would take every opportunity they could to stay as close as possible to Swamishri. Like a person lovestruck, they were crazy for Swamishri.

At 4 a.m., while it was still the dark of night, everyone would have taken a bath, completed their puja and rushed to take their places in Akshar Deri. In Akshar Deri, they would enjoy the divine darshan of Swamishri's puja. Whether Swamishri was doing his puja in Akshar Deri or performing *arti*, doing *mahapuja*, doing the *arti* and *pradakshinas* as a part of the *mahapuja*, or delivering discourses—these moments in Swamishri's presence made everyone forget their body consciousness. Everyone would be gazing at Swamishri with rapt attention. They would be lost in the timeless bliss of *sachchidanand* Brahman. It was as if they were experiencing firsthand the bliss of Akshardham on this Earth!

After *shangar arti*, at Swamishri's behest, everyone enthusiastically joined in various

service activities. “*Nichi tel male to māne bhāgya jo...*” (If you receive a menial service opportunity, understand it to be your great fortune..) Swamishri would teach everyone about this extraordinary greatness of *seva*. Thus, in every corner of the mandir one could see living ideals of people performing service and bhakti coupled with an understanding of its greatness. Some might sweep the courtyard while others would clean the stables, some would wash utensils while others would clean the dining hall. Some would clean the toilets while others would clean the compost heap. Forgetting about their age, their worldly greatness, and their positions and power, everyone would join in *seva* with the singular aim of pleasing Swamishri. On such occasions, one saw extraordinary examples of the sacrifice inherent in selfless service.

On the other hand, there was a constant stream of discourses continuing in the assembly hall. There, elderly and learned sadhus and devotees delivered passionate

discourses explaining Gunatit *jnan* and expounding on the glory of the Satpurush. In this way, as the bhakti of service and the bhakti of *jnan* continued constantly throughout the day, in the empire of the Gunatit Sant, the barriers of time dissolved. No one knew where the time went. Before they knew it, the days of Diwali were over. Here, Swamishri's love bound everyone to him, freeing them from the bondage of *kal*, karma, and *maya*.

Swamishri himself lovingly ensured that all arrangements for all the devotees' needs were properly made. For breakfast, he made sure that everyone had enough chai and spiced milk in addition to *gathiya* and *bundi* laddus. For lunch, Swamishri himself came out to lovingly serve the devotees a full meal. In the evening, there would also be a full meal for all the devotees. Yet, the youths who came to stay with Swamishri would get the opportunity to regularly fast.

On this occasion, Naranbhai Sheth was overseeing the kitchen in Gondal. As he was

very keen to feed everyone, everyone was pleased with his arrangements. The senior devotee, Jhaverkaka, with Raysaheb, Purushottam Bhagat, Viramji Bapu, and several youngsters, made arrangements for devotees' accommodations and bedding. Swamishri would send several youths to the Gondal train station every time a train was scheduled to arrive to receive any devotees who might be on the train. They would hoist the devotees' luggage into bullock carts and make their way to the mandir singing *dhun* and bhajans. If the devotee was elderly, the youths would insist on having them sit comfortably in the bullock cart. However, most devotees wished to travel from the train station to the mandir on foot as a symbolic pilgrimage.

This year, on 12 October 1954, a beautiful assembly gathered in the courtyard of Akshar Mandir beneath the soothing moonlit sky of Sharad Punam to celebrate the birthday of Aksharbrahma Gunatitanand Swami. The stage background was a large illustration of the

incident of Maharaj and his followers sitting in the Und River on a thick cloth that miraculously served as a raft. In front of this illustration, the painted *murtis* of Maharaj, Swami, and the guru lineage were installed in a *sinhasan*. After the speeches of Ajagia Saheb and Chimanlal Shastri, Mota Swami performed the *artī*.

Then, Swamishri spoke in his inimitable style:

“Through association with the devout, we are able to understand the greatness of God and the Sant. The power of the Gondal Deri is extraordinary. Shastriji Maharaj loved this great abode. During such festivals, one should take the benefit of the spiritual discourses. If possible, one should perform *seva*, but one should refrain from *aseva*. With the dissolution of delusion, one can attain liberation. Through festivals such as these, one’s delusion dissolves and the darkness of ignorance recedes. One attains the *samagam* of the great Sant. Today, festivals provide us with every accommodation.

In the past, the sadhus had to endure beatings. There were no railways or other methods of easy transport. Today we are experiencing the full-throated youth of the Satsang fellowship. One should follow God's commands, sustain *upasana*, perceive good in all, and remain loyal. Become *brahmarup*. Remain honest in all your actions. If you can understand this, there is no limit to what you can attain, and if you can't understand this, there's no limit to your loss.”

Mota Swami and Naranji Maharaj delivered their speeches. The King of Gondal, Vikramsinhji, and his family had come for Swamishri's darshan. As they entered the assembly, they were welcomed by a marching band.

The third *artī* of the assembly was performed. Then, in his speech, Harmanbhai said, “The organized youth activities are leading to tremendous growth in Satsang. Yogiji Maharaj is making unparalleled efforts to make this project successful.” Then, after performing

the ritual puja, the fourth *artī* was performed. Following Khengarjibhai's speech, Swamishri performed the fifth *artī*. Harmanbhai was the master of ceremonies for the festival assembly. Bhagwatsinhji and Daji Bapu were looking after all the other arrangements in the assembly.

The day before the festival, Swamishri had gone to the *kothari*'s office for some work, and several devotees had followed him in. Kothari Vasudevpriya Swami had laughingly said, "Jogi! Get out. As soon as you entered, such a large crowd followed you in, I feel suffocated, and I can't get any work done."

Swamishri laughed heartily and immediately began to leave. He was so accommodating that he didn't feel hurt in the slightest at the *kothari*'s remark. Seeing this, Vasudevpriya Swami again laughed and said, "Oh, Jogi! Come back. I was just kidding. I couldn't help but point out that while so many people follow you around everywhere you go, no one cares to follow me."

On the occasion of the festival, Keshavchandra Amin had come from Mumbai. In May, he had gone to Jammu-Kashmir for work. On the way to Shrinagar, he had a car accident, and his car had fallen into a ditch. His driver, his colleague, and he himself had suffered some minor injuries, but they had come out of it largely unscathed. Out of gratitude for God's protection, he had resolved to offer *mahapuja* in Akshar Mandir. Thus he had come to Gondal for the festival.

Swamishri welcomed him, and inquired about his welfare. When he heard about the accident, Swamishri told him to do *pradakshinas* in Akshar Deri. Keshavchandra's father, Shankarbhai Solicitor, had instilled the values of satsang into his son, and thus he was a sincere spiritual aspirant. So, he completed his vow with devotion. Through his brief contact with Swamishri, he was deeply touched by Swamishri's loving personality. After this incident, his interest and commitment to Satsang continued to increase.

One night at 10 p.m., Swamishri was sitting in the mandir's assembly hall writing letters. A handful of devotees were seated before him. While *cheshta* was going on, Arjunkaka's son, Chandubhai, and his friend, Babubhai Mohanlal Patel, arrived in Gondal for Swamishri's darshan. Swamishri called them to him and inquired about their food and accommodation arrangements. They told Swamishri they had already eaten and planned to sleep in the assembly hall. Thus, Swamishri told a nearby *parshad* to bring him two bedrolls. When they came, Swamishri began to lay them out himself.

Both friends were stunned to see this, and they both fell asleep contemplating how much Swamishri cares for his devotees' welfare and how humble he is.

Early the next morning, after taking a bath, they went to Akshar Deri. They were scheduled to leave today. Swamishri arrived in Akshar Deri to perform the *arti*. The atmosphere was

completely divine. It was like Akshardham on Earth.

As the *arti*'s last line, “*Ā avasar karunā
nidhi karunā bahu kidhi...*,” was sung, Swamishri beckoned both friends near and handed them the *arti* to perform. Thereafter, Swamishri served them breakfast and saw them off. Both of these incidents became lifetime memories for these youths.

When Swamishri would perform the *arti* in Akshar Deri, he would often turn to devotees around him and give them the *arti* to perform. Upon receiving this divine opportunity, the devotees would feel even more attached to Swamishri. Every second with Swamishri, but especially the personal encounters with him, became unforgettable memories in each person's life! Such was the divinity radiating from his being.