

Chapter 17

Pujari of Akshar Deri

Preparations were underway for the annual *patotsav* of the Gondal mandir, and many devotees had arrived from the surrounding villages. Devotees who came for darshan early in the morning would invariably see Swamishri sweeping the floor in Akshar Deri, as per his routine whenever he was in Gondal. Swamishri would take the collected dust and, understanding it to have come from the feet of devotees doing *pradakshina*, apply a pinch of it to his head and eyelids in a gesture of reverence for the devotees. Then, he would wash Maharaj's *charanarvind* with water, grind sandalwood into a fine paste, and use it to offer puja to the *charanarvind*. He would apply a *chandlo* of sandalwood paste to each sacred sign on the *charanarvind*, on each of the toes, and in a perimeter around the *charanarvind*. Then he would offer roses and jasmine flowers

to the *charanarvind*, arranging them in beautiful designs. The darshan of this puja would astonish the devotees, bringing them an experience of unparalleled joy. Then, Swamishri would perform the *arti* and do *pradakshinas* of Akshar Deri. Seeing Swamishri do *pradakshinas* would inspire the devotees to do them as well. If Swamishri saw anyone standing at a distance, he would call them close and explain the glory of performing *pradakshinas* of Akshar Deri.

Then, Swamishri would go upstairs to the main shrine to perform the *arti*. No one could forget Swamishri's captivating form as he did darshan of the *murtis* with utmost devotion. Then he would return to Akshar Deri to perform the *mahapuja*. He would have the devotees who had come for the festival sit in the *mahapuja*. He would put a spoonful of water in their hands and have them make a sacred resolution. He would ring a bell at the beginning of each step of the *mahapuja*. Then he would loudly clap and chant the *dhun* so

that the devotees' prayers may be answered. He would call the seated devotees by name, declare their specific supplications, and continue chanting the *dhun*. The devotees would be convinced that their prayers were answered at that moment, and their wishes would be fulfilled. Swamishri would glance at the devotees with eyes full of compassion, sway from side to side, and smile broadly while chanting the *dhun* with increasing enthusiasm. This darshan of Swamishri as the sage of Akshar Deri brought everyone an experience of unbridled joy.

Day and night, the assembly hall would reverberate with kirtans and spiritual discourses. Sometimes the Harililamrut would be recited, and other times Mota Swami would deliver discourses. Devotees would also deliver discourses. This was a distinctive aspect of the Gunatit community. Devotees would be assigned to speak from their spiritual experience, even in the presence of sadhus. Periodically, Swamishri's recitation of the

Swamini Vato and his insightful exposition of the text would draw all the devotees to the assembly hall. Saying, “Come on, come on, Bapa is speaking!” devotees would drop whatever they were doing and rush to the assembly hall.

On the morning of the *patotsav*, Swamishri and the sadhus would perform an *abhishek* ritual of the *murtis*. Whenever Swamishri would stick the end of his *dhotiyu* into his rolled waistband and bathe Harikrishna Maharaj with both hands using *panchamrut* and clean water, the devotees would feel they were witnessing the devotion of Gunatitanand Swami serving Maharaj. Bathing Ghanshyam Maharaj by gently rubbing his nose, eyes, and face, Swamishri would be lost in the *murti*. He would especially offer *abhishek* on Maharaj’s *charanarvind*. Whenever he innocently folded both hands and did darshan, everyone witnessed his oneness with Shriji Maharaj. Swamishri also ensured that devotees who had come from various villages were able to

participate in this sacred service. He would call them near, grasp them by their hands, and engage them in the *murti's* service with the feeling that they were serving manifest God. He would also have the devotees participate in the *arti*. In this way, Swamishri was always eager to grant everyone this windfall of devotion.

Kothari Vasudev Swami, other sadhus, Jhaverkaka, Mohan Bhagat of Ramod, Shivshankar Maharaj, and others oversaw the various aspects of festival arrangements. Swamishri, however, would be engaged in all the arrangements. If he were seen in the mandir, he would soon be cooking in the kitchen, serving food to the devotees, or giving prasad from the storeroom. Thus, it seemed to devotees that there were multiple forms of Swamishri serving and pleasing the devotees. While he would have a chance to sit in the assembly only occasionally, his mere presence fulfilled the devotees, and they would forget the hardships that were a natural part of the celebration of such festivals.

One of Swamishri's distinctive traits was that he would remember everyone, great and small. Whether the individual was present before him or not, Swamishri would remember him. Remembering the devotees, he would write letters to them. If someone were traveling to their village, Swamishri would send a message and prasad with them, but he would never forget anyone. It was as if he was constantly engaged in looking after everyone's spiritual and material needs! The devotees were his life. During the *mahapuja*, he would invariably pray for the specific wishes of each devotee and chant the *dhun*. If he received a letter filled with a devotee's tale of woe, he would immediately take the letter to the Akshar Deri, pray for the devotee and reply with an encouraging letter of blessings and consolation. He could have prayed for that devotee from where he was sitting since Maharaj is forever with him. However, he would go to the Akshar Deri, tell Maharaj and Swami of the devotee's pain or hardship, and do *dhun*. His incessant

correspondence reached all over Gujarat, Mumbai, and even Africa.

In June 1952, Swamishri traveled to Ahmedabad at the request of Babubhai Kothari. Swamishri went with the devotees to Narayan Ghat, and showered everyone with the bliss of Brahman.