

BHAGWAN SWAMINARAYAN

THE STORY OF HIS LIFE



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Bhagwan Swaminarayan
The Story of His Life

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Dedicated to those who have...

*given purpose to my life...
taught me, at once, to love and let go...
let me lean as I crawl, stumble, and walk...
gifted me the opportunity and strength to serve...
listened, quite indifferently, to me sing and gripe...
held on no matter how hard I tried to shake free...
for on the path of bhakti, one finds comfort
in love – love which hurts, and thereby instructs...
love which casts a light on one's soul
and thereby its Master...
until the love in itself becomes the path
and the self is lost in service of its Master...
for bhakti is a path apt for those willing to
lose in order to find.*

A Word from the Author...

Historians struggle to make sense of faith. Faith, however, makes sense of history quite effortlessly—often with a certain disregard for historicity. The tension between the two has had a demoralizing and rather powerful effect on both the historian and the believer. The historian defers all matters of faith to the believer. Similarly, the believer shows a certain disregard for history while digging through the cultural memory of one's tradition. Yet, a certain understanding may be possible, may be reached—for history and faith continue to coexist in simultaneous and often overlapping realms. History and faith play a central role in the way we understand the past. Some would argue that they integrate quite seamlessly into the accounts of the faithful. Others would argue that they manifest quite disparately in the accounts of the historian. My purpose in raising these queries at the onset is not to propose a solution, or even suggest that there is one. There are many academic works that have attempted to do so. I simply aim to remind the reader that as the author of this *sampradayik* text, I have, in my own humble and feeble way, spent a night or two acknowledging this longstanding tension and have looked for ways to avoid a divorcing of the two. I, too, write with the question of history looming high over the foundation of my faith—a faith that has only benefited from historicity's lingering presence.

Within the bhakti traditions of northern and western India, the story, as a genre, holds an elevated place amongst the retelling and recollecting of history. The endless *varta* literature of Gujarat or the *charitragranths* of the North and East aim to remember, reconstruct, and relive the past. These stories act as an arena for the believer and the historian to rub shoulders. They allow for the remembering of a past which accommodates the beliefs of the faithful and the chronological markers of the historian. For millions of believers, these stories are history; they are a true representation of the past. As a believer who has high regard for history, I

would like to tell stories—stories that are alive; stories that are reenacted and experienced in the minds of millions around the world; stories that are true in more ways than one; stories that spiritual aspirants call on to rekindle their faith; stories that are history.

I have often asked myself, “How difficult could it be to write about someone who lived for only forty-nine years—eleven in his hometown, approximately seven in the forest, and another thirty in Gadhada, a small village in southeastern Gujarat?” A dive into the deep end of the pool—an analysis of previous undertakings—pointed out the naievity in that question. At 26 years, Bhagwan Swaminarayan initiated 500 *paramhansas*, and during his entire life he gave *diksha* to 2,500 sadhus, established a following of more than two million devotees, built six mandirs, and changed the social, cultural, political, and religious landscape of India.

I quickly realized that the question was not one concerning difficulty, but rather responsibility.

Contrary to the tacit claims suggested by embarking on such an ambitious task, I must admit that I am not a writer, translator, or orator. My colleagues and cohorts in the media sector and at Columbia University would probably second my confession. I am but a novice student of religion, music, and communications. My first feeble attempt to produce an English rendering of a very popular Gujarati publication on His Holiness Pramukh Swami Maharaj’s persona, *Eternal Virtues*, was warmly received in 2008. Pujya Ishwarcharan Swami, though never willing to take credit, was the ‘who, why, and how’—the source of motivation, courage, and direction behind that publication and, well, almost everything post-2007 in my life. It was with his *agnas* that I started to write a daily inspiration book for youth of Indian origin worldwide based on the life of His Holiness Pramukh Swami Maharaj. Though several impediments have delayed the completion and publication of this book, I mention that project since it served, single-handedly, as one of the most valuable pedagogical experiences of my personal and spiritual life. I owe much for the lessons on love and forgiveness to Pujya Jnanpriya Swami, then *kothari swami* of the BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir, Toronto, Canada.

This brings us to the story behind the publication of this very book. I first received a call from Pujya Ishwarcharan Swami on September 12, 2010 at 10:30 pm regarding the translation of a hagiography on Bhagwan Swaminarayan written by Sadhu Aksharjivandas in Hindi. Just a few days later, Sadhu Vivekjivandas called asking me to hold off on the translation of the book since an able and experienced writer in Ahmedabad was a quarter of the way through the assignment. Several other tasks were being suggested in place of the aforementioned; I, however, shied away from all of them since I was preparing to embark on a graduate-level academic journey at Columbia University. Several weeks later, Pujya Ishwarcharan Swami called again. This time, he stressed the need for the completion of this publication in three months. I knew this was not possible and therefore tried to put off the project using graduate school as a pretext. He responded with his warm, mellifluous laugh and said, “We will wait for you. I am sure that you will get to it as soon as you can.” And, wait, he did. I did not begin writing until almost fifteen months later on January 1, 2012.

The months that followed Pujya Ishwarcharan Swami’s first phone call were perhaps the most trying of my life. My physical, mental, and spiritual health suffered greatly from an undiagnosed illness—one that fortunately started to loosen its noxious grip on my life just weeks before I embarked on this project. Pujya Ishwarcharan Swami was extremely patient and encouraging through these months. He took personal interest in my treatment, care, and recovery. Fresh in my memory is a three-week period in which he called me at least twice a day. In the hospital, I would wake up to his calls and only fall asleep with the aid of injected morphine after speaking to him. I distinctly remember the motherly worry and fatherly reassurance present in his voice. Quite regularly, whilst calling to check on my health, Pujya Ishwarcharan Swami would remind me of the writing task at hand. It was a tremendous expectation, given that for a few months I was barely able to get out of bed to eat and bathe. Pujya Ishwarcharan Swami’s faith in my ability helped me speed through the extremely demanding Masters program in the study of Religion.

After returning from India in September 2011, I hid in Atlanta for

two months to work on my outstanding graduate studies assignments and doctoral program applications. Upon completion of the doctoral program applications, I decided to channel all of my energy into the rendering of this book. There was, however, one small impediment: I did not know how or where to begin. How was I to translate a Hindi hagiography of Bhagwan Swaminarayan's life for a slightly younger and less culturally-acquainted, English-speaking audience while maintaining the flavor and structure of the author's original creation? Translating, as many scholars have argued, is difficult. Translating a language is interpreting philosophy, bridging generations, and transmitting traditions. This publication is not a translation of the Hindi text. In fact, many chapters share only their titles with Sadhu Aksharjivandas' Hindi text. I have written the text with a slightly younger and less culturally-acquainted, English-speaking audience in mind. The added footnotes and explanatory paragraphs that appear in the middle of the narrative seemed necessary for this rendition. I referred to several *sampradayik* texts written during Bhagwan Swaminarayan's time to verify dates, to fill voids, and to, of course, include more stories. Hence, I shy away from calling this publication a translation. It fails to merit such praise. Yet, to call this publication my original creation would also be inaccurate. I call it a rendering. It is a hagiography of Bhagwan Swaminarayan's life based on the works of previous scholars in a variety of languages: Sanskrit, Hindi, Gujarati, Braj, and English. It is my account of Bhagwan Swaminarayan's life based on the content and organizational structure of several fascinating masterpieces.

It is no secret that Sadhu Aksharjivandas' *Bhagwan Swaminarayan: Ek Divya Jivangatha* has been the primary source of inspiration for the organization of this work. However, I must give credit to several other authors who have influenced the style, structure, and content of my approach. Bhai Manilal C. Parekh wrote the first English hagiography on Bhagwan Swaminarayan's life in 1936. It is a brilliant study that aims to describe important facets of Bhagwan Swaminarayan's personality and his contributions to nineteenth century India. Shri Harshadrai T. Dave's *Bhagwan Swaminarayan* (in five volumes) also provided details and incidents that were purposefully left out by Sadhu Aksharjivandas. Lastly,

Sadguru Adharanand Swami's *Shri Hari Charitramrut Sagar* (c. 1857) is a repository of detail and literary description that has often encouraged me to read and revert, causing me to miss several deadlines. I am indebted to Sadhu Mukundcharandas for sharing some of his original findings from over the past twenty years.

I must clarify what I mean by hagiography and why I use the term. There has been much academic debate on the differences between a biography and a hagiography, specifically in the field of Christian studies. The debate has been carried into the recent classification of detailed accounts of Hindu saints and religious leaders such as Sri Aurobindo and Raman Maharshi. Though questions concerning stylistic nuances and literary genres are at the periphery, the central question is embedded in a Christian understanding of sainthood. The term has also been used pejoratively to denote a biography that is overly reverential to its subject, further highlighting the tension between faith and historicity. Though important, these questions are not central to the purpose or function of this publication. Again, I choose to leave this debate for others to indulge. For the purpose of this work, a hagiography is a loose translation of the Indic genre '*jivan charitra*' or '*charitragranth*.' Historicity, or the lack of it, is not a criterion for placing the text within this literary genre. I believe the stories in this hagiography to be historically true. I use the term hagiography, not because of its appropriateness, but because the term biography may be even less adequate.

There are many ways to write a hagiography. Each one serves a distinct purpose and is often received variably by different cultures, languages, and age groups. I decided not to wander too far from the chronological approach implemented by most of my predecessors for two reasons. First, as Pujya Ishwarcharan Swami pointed out to me, there is a disconcerting void in English literature of a detailed, chronological description of Bhagwan Swaminarayan's life and work. Second, though several editors and advisors suggested that I present Bhagwan Swaminarayan's life creatively, in a way never done before, I rejected such a notion for one simple reason: time. I completed this publication in less than six actual weeks of writing—thirteen days in Atlanta, ten days in Ahmedabad, and another sixteen days in Gadhada. I leave the task of producing creative

works on this subject matter to more talented authors, those who may have the comfort to write with the greatest leisure known to an author: time.

In short, this publication serves to fill the void that has been expressed by the diaspora of English-speaking youth to Puja Ishwarcharan Swami—youth who have always wanted to gain from a detailed account of stories from Bhagwan Swaminarayan’s life but have been unable to do so due to a lack of language proficiency. This, then, is an addition to the hundreds of detailed *varta* or *charitragranth* texts and hagiographies on Bhagwan Swaminarayan’s life, only this time in English.

I am a strong believer in pragmatic spirituality. Every spiritual story or lesson is relevant to our lives. It teaches us something of value, and it can and should influence how we approach the coming moment in our lives. Bhagwan Swaminarayan’s life affirms my belief in this ideology. Though he lived over two hundred years ago, his life’s teachings, both delivered through discourse and those extracted from his *charitras*, are relevant to one who is committed to making progress on the spiritual path even today.

The completion of this project was dependant upon the assistance and support given by many individuals. Bijalben Jadav, the chief editor of this publication, in Houston, TX, and Chaitaliben Inamdar, a matchless researcher, in Edison, NJ, deserve more than a word of gratitude for their commitment and contributions to this publication. If it were not for Bijalben’s endless efforts, around-the-clock availability, and contagious zeal, this publication would have never made it to the press. I would stop but steps short of listing her as a co-author, only so that she may not be held accountable for my shortcomings in completing this publication. This rendering is as much hers as it is mine.

I owe a great deal to the lovely *murti* of Ghanshyam Maharaj, whose beauty, splendor, and warmth gave my eyes, voice, and heart a place to settle during the time that I enjoyed the hospitality of the caring sadhus at the BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir, Atlanta. Sadhu Shantmurtidas, Sadhu Munitilakdas, Sadhu Yognarayandas, and Sadhu Anupamdas welcomed me, fed me, cared for me, and overlooked the shortcomings in my behavior and character as one would with a child or younger sibling.

I was never treated as an outsider but rather as one of them. It was a feeling of belonging that I will cherish for a lifetime. A special ‘thank you’ is in order to Sadhu Munitilakdas and Sadhu Nirdoshswarupdas for making space for me in their office and hearts.

While expressing gratitude, I would like to share a similar note of appreciation to the thoughtful people in Ahmedabad who have made the timely completion of this book possible. Sadhu Yogismarandas and Sadhu Dharmaratnadas have stuffed me with delicacies favored by my tongue and heart. Riteshbhai Ghadia, an exemplar among human beings, was kind enough to share his office, pedagogical silence, and editorial remarks.

I completed this book in Gadhada, thousands of miles and almost 378 days from where I started it. The *kothari swami* at Gadhada mandir, Sadhu Adhyatmaswarupdas, and the fellow sadhus, though some of them barely acquaintances, welcomed me with sweet smiles, silent nods, and caring queries. Gadhada is a place that breeds intellectual creativity. It is home to a magnificent marble mandir that towers atop a beautiful hill. The wind grazes the Ghela’s waters and carries the melody of beating drums, ringing bells, and the liturgical voices resounding *dhun*, *arti*, and *katha* from around the village. Dancing peacocks and galloping horses entertain your mind when you are not writing. And what better place to complete a book on Bhagwan Swaminarayan than the village in which he spent approximately thirty years? Again, I owe the satisfaction of this symbolic merit to Sadhu Adhyatmaswarupdas and the sadhus of the BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir in Gadhada.

Professors Jack Hawley, Sheldon Pollock, and Rachel Fell McDermott at Columbia University, too, must be acknowledged here. My thoughts and writing are a reflection of the intellectual maturity that I am gaining in their presence with each passing day.

I must, yet again, express my sincere gratitude to Pujya Ishwarcharan Swami for commissioning the spellbinding *murti* of Bhagwan Swaminarayan for the cover of this publication. Shri Vasudeo Kamath, an internationally acclaimed artist, created this *murti* based on the two realistic sketches drawn by Narayanji Suthar and Adharanand Swami while in Bhagwan Swaminarayan’s presence.

I was told that the readers of this book would value a simple, easy-to-read account of Bhagwan Swaminarayan's life. Though I believe that thoughts, not language, are responsible for accessibility, I have avoided using diacritics and other scholarly mechanics. This is not an academic publication. The Gujarati and Hindi words have often been used to maintain the flavor of the sentence. The definitions of these words may be found in the Glossary. I find it difficult to overlook some of the shortcomings in the editing of this publication. Perhaps, it is because I am a pedantic. However, I feel it is necessary to apologize for the inconsistencies in spelling convention. Many of the Indic words carry the extra 'a' vowel because they are Sanskrit words. Often, even the Sanskrit words lose the 'a' vowel since there is a more popular spelling convention already in place for that proper noun. This is one of the issues of writing without diacritics.

Though approximately 550 pages and a few weeks can never suffice to write a publication that begins to share the story of Purna Purushottam Narayan incarnate, I accept this shortcoming as the book's greatest contribution. This publication, I presume, will nudge those debating to read the more exhaustive accounts of Bhagwan Swaminarayan's life available in Gujarati, Hindi, and Braj prose and verse. As his Holiness Pramukh Swami Maharaj said to me in Mumbai on 6 January 2011, "This book will inspire readers to learn more about our *ishtadev*'s life. It will bring peace to the reader's mind. One will experience the same solace and serenity that you will have while writing it. Give this task your all. It is the greatest *seva* one can ever hope for. And you have managed to secure it at such a young age." Upon completion of the first draft in January 2013, His Holiness Pramukh Swami Maharaj reiterated these blessings. "How many pages is it? Where is it? Why didn't you bring a copy for me to glance over? Remember, this is a once in a lifetime *seva*. Bhagwan Swaminarayan will reward you, and all those who read it, with *moksha*. The *satpurush*, too, will never forget." Writing this publication and recounting Bhagwan Swaminarayan's *jivan charitra* have helped me grow in many ways, but foremost, they are responsible for restoring my physical, mental, and spiritual health. These stories breathe divinity. They usher in love, strength, and faith—faith not only for Bhagwan

Swaminarayan, but for the existence and actions of a Being that is beyond the comprehension of our crafty, calculative human minds. They have done so for me. It is with the hope of sharing such a spirit and experience that I leave you with this detailed, English *charitragranth* on Bhagwan Swaminarayan's life.

Yogi Trivedi

26 May 2013

BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir, Atlanta

Introduction

The very act of eating and drinking of Swami Sahajanand, the way he walked, the way he rode, his manner of speaking, in fact everything relating to him has been described so closely and fully that it would be difficult to find a parallel to it in any literature, religious or secular. In his disciples' eyes the entire universe was centered in him, and everything relating to him was of the very essence of life and life eternal.

- Bhai Manilal C. Parekh,

Indian Christian Theologian and
Founder of Hindu Church of Christ

Muktanand Swami stepped into Akshar Ordi, Bhagwan Swaminarayan's residence in Gadhada (see photo 28). His sweet, yet suggestive, glance ushered all of the younger sadhus out of the crowded quarters. Once alone with Bhagwan Swaminarayan in the dimly lit room, Muktanand Swami was lost for words. It had been weeks since he had slept well, focused during meditation and evening prayers, or experienced a sense of well-being and inner satisfaction. He had been through similar feelings of emptiness and anxiety in the past. After all, he had been persevering on the spiritual path for quite some time now. This time, however, he could not shake off the feeling. He looked into Bhagwan Swaminarayan's eyes searching for the answers to the questions that engrossed his mind. Bhagwan Swaminarayan gently smiled and asked Muktanand Swami for the cause of this unsettling stare. Muktanand Swami explained the reason for his trepidation: "Maharaj, I have been walking on the spiritual path for decades. Though I have been at ease for the most part, recently, my heart and mind are at unrest. Please show me the way to experiencing *shanti*."

Bhagwan Swaminarayan invited Muktanand Swami closer to his cot and started reciting divine *lila charitras* from his own childhood. Muktanand

Swami attempted to interrupt him, but Bhagwan Swaminarayan was just getting started. He continued to speak of his travels as Nilkanth Varni on the icy peaks of the Himalayas and through the dense jungles of Assam. After what seemed like a few hours, Muktanand Swami lost his patience and interrupted midsentence: “Maharaj, my beloved, I am thoroughly enjoying these moments of your *smruti*, but I don’t think you understand my problem; I need you to help me with my predicament. This feeling of loneliness and emptiness is unbearable.”

Bhagwan Swaminarayan smiled and said, “If this is not helping, take a group of sadhus and tour the nearby villages. I am sure that something good will come of it.” Muktanand Swami was perplexed by the solution proposed by Bhagwan Swaminarayan but silently accepted the *agni*. He bowed at Bhagwan Swaminarayan’s feet and made his way to the outskirts of Gadhada. It was only after his introspective interaction there with Nityanand Swami that he realized the benefits of reliving and relishing in the divine *lila charitras* of Bhagwan and his Gunatit Sadhu.

Most of us are familiar with Muktanand Swami’s incident and, at a more personal level, with that same feeling of emptiness and unrest. Bhagwan Swaminarayan’s prescription for alleviating the misery and emptiness in one’s mind and heart is effective even today. However, we fail to ever take a dose. Bhagwan Swaminarayan implicitly instructed Muktanand Swami to recall and relive these *lila charitras* in the form of short stories, while encouraging others to do the same. This remedy has been prescribed by various gurus and avatars in other Hindu shastras: Naradji to Ved Vyasa, Tulsidas in the Ramcharitmanas, and Shukdevji to Parikshit in the Bhagavata Purana, to name a few.

These stories share more than just mere happenings. They convey the sentiments of those involved and those who engage in their reading and retelling. Stories help us understand people and their culture, processes, and values. Stories paint a complete picture of a historical period. Most importantly, stories teach us how to live from the lessons taught and learned by others. There is much to appreciate from Bhagwan Swaminarayan’s life story. His life is the ultimate guide to understand how to live as an ideal human. What other form of instruction can surpass the opportunity to learn from the human life of Purna Purushottam Narayan?

Bhagwan Swaminarayan was born in Chhapaiya in 1781. He spent eleven years at home performing various *lila charitras*, while giving joy to his family and friends. Shortly after granting *moksha* to his parents, he left his home to travel the length and breadth of India to liberate countless souls awaiting the arrival of divinity in Kaliyuga. After traveling north to the Himalayas and to Kanyakumari in the south, Nilkanth Varni settled in Loj at Ramanand Swami's ashram. Ramanand Swami recognized the teen ascetic as Purna Purushottam Narayan, the Supreme Being, and implored him to continue liberating souls by becoming his successor. He initiated young Nilkanth Varni as a sadhu and gave him two names: Narayan Muni and Sahajanand Swami. Bhagwan Swaminarayan changed the social, spiritual, and moral landscape of Gujarat. In those forty-nine years, he transformed the lives of over two million individuals and initiated over 3,000 ascetics. He revitalized bhakti in modern India by reviving the rites, traditions, and sacraments prescribed in the *shruti* and *smruti* shastras. His social and spiritual reform, noted and appreciated by local rulers, British officials, and Christian missionaries, influenced the work of many of his contemporaries and successors. Bhai Manilal C. Parekh praises him as one of the greatest reformers of the nineteenth century. According to Parekh, his work surpassed that of Ram Mohan Roy and Keshub Chandra Sen,¹ for he integrated members from all strata of society. Beyond his reputation as a social reformer, Bhagwan Swaminarayan rekindled the dwindling flame of bhakti and faith in the early modern era.

Several texts record Bhagwan Swaminarayan's *lila charitras* with references to dates and exact locations. Most of these texts were written during Bhagwan Swaminarayan's lifespan. They not only serve as archives of Bhagwan Swaminarayan's *lila charitras* but are also historical accounts that provide veracity to his life and work. Such texts are hard

1 Ram Mohan Roy was an early nineteenth-century reformer in Bengal, calling for social, educational, and religious reform during British colonial rule. He established the Brahmo Samaj, which attempted to revitalize Hindu religion through the authority of the Vedas. He utilized Christian and Western ideals, applied methods from the French and American revolutions, proposed Western forms of curriculum, and protested against the British revenue administration. Keshub Chandra Sen was a nineteenth-century Hindu philosopher and social reformer who widely argued for the integration of Christian theology into Hindu society. He championed for the poor, promoted literacy, and reformed marriage customs primarily in Bengal.

to find for other Hindu avatars. For instance, the first text about Shri Rama described him as an *adi purush*, or eternal human. It was not until the seventeenth century that Tulsidas composed the Ramcharitmanas extolling the greatness of Shri Rama as an incarnation of divinity and, that too, with such detail. The same can be said of the late emergence of the Bhagavata Purana and the *lila charitras* of Shri Krishna. One of the greatest sources for the description of Bhagwan Swaminarayan's *lila charitras* and divine form are the prose and verse works written by the *ashta kavis*, or the eight celebrated poets of the Swaminarayan Sampradaya. These bhakti *pads* were written in over eight languages. They capture the essence of the bhakti wave ushered in by Bhagwan Swaminarayan. In fact one of the longest texts in Hindavi verse, the *Shri Haricharitramrut Sagar*, written by Adharanand Swami, describes events, festivals, and discourses from Bhagwan Swaminarayan's life in over 100,000 verses. Several other accounts of his life were compiled and written by sadhus and devotees in Hindi, Braj, Gujarati, and Sanskrit. These texts were written based on historical facts obtained and confirmed by Bhagwan Swaminarayan, other disciples, family members, and eyewitnesses. These texts contain accounts of his childhood, travels across India, and his years as the Jivanmukta of millions of followers. There are several texts that focus on one specific part of his life. For example, the *Bal Ghanshyam Charitra* records his early years in Chhapaiya and Ayodhya. The *Hari Van Vicharan Kavya* sings, quite literally, the details of his travels as Nilkanth Varni. The Vachanamrut also serves as a valuable historical source for the chronological organization of Bhagwan Swaminarayan's life's events. The dates at the beginning of each discourse in the Vachanamrut serve as markers of routine events, festivals, and special occurrences. Not only does the Vachanamrut serve as a foundation for the theological aspects of the Swaminarayan Sampradaya, it also adds a certain sense of historical veracity to the accounts of Bhagwan Swaminarayan's life.

Tens of thousands of bhakti *pads* by the Swaminarayan *ashta kavis* also add to the abundance of bhakti poetry describing Bhagwan Swaminarayan's divine *murti* and *lila charitras*. The depth and serenity of this abundance has often been compared to Sur's *sagar* and Mirabai's

river of love.² The poetic genius in the *pads* written by Brahmanand Swami and Premanand Swami has been extolled by literary masterminds such as Rabindranath Tagore and Dalpatram Kavi.³ The true wealth of these *pads* lies in the perspective with which these poets write and sing. The detail and perspective could only be possible if the poets believed Bhagwan Swaminarayan to be Purna Purushottam Narayan. In one of his *prabhatiya pads*, Brahmanand Swami sings:

*Daas malyaa sahu darshan kaarane, jag ne paar utarvaane,
Rasiyoji raai aangan bethaa, komal daatan karvaane...*

“The devotees have gathered for [his] darshan, to be liberated from the cycle of birth and death...

The Beloved Lord is seated in the compound to gently clean his teeth...”

Bhagwan Swaminarayan’s *ashta kavis* created these *pads* with the intention to preserve these *lila charitras* in the minds and hearts of devotees for generations to come. They wrote these *pads* with the intention to secure their *moksha*.

Within the BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha, the first hagiography on Bhagwan Swaminarayan’s life was written in Gujarati by Shri Harshadrai

2 Surdas was the greatest of the *ashta chhap*, a group of eight sixteenth-century poets belonging to the Vallabha Sampradaya. His poetry described Shri Krishna’s *lila charitras* and divine *murti*. The greatest collection of his work is titled *Sursagar*, which contains 15,000 poems. Mirabai is an equally important bhakti poet. Though the details about her life are unclear, scholars such as Nancy Martin have argued for the significant effect that Mirabai’s poetry had on the growing force and intensity of the bhakti movement in Rajasthan, Gujarat, and Vrindavan in the fifteenth century and thereafter.

3 Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) was a revolutionary poet and author. He was the first non-European to win the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1913. He wrote novels, stories, songs, dance-dramas, and essays in Sanskrit, Bengali, and Hindi. He completed a number of paintings and sketches. *Gitanjali* (Song Offerings), *Gora* (Fair-Faced), and *Ghare-Baire* (The Home and the World) are his best-known works. His compositions were chosen by two nations as national anthems: India’s *Jana Gana Mana* and Bangladesh’s *Amar Shonar Bangla*. Dalpatram Kavi (1820-1898) is one of the most reputed Gujarati poets and authors of the colonial period. His writing is characterized by his unique rhythmic prose. He is regarded as *Kavishvar*, or King of Poets, by poets and scholars in Gujarat and abroad. *Sampradayik* sources consider him to be among the disciple lineage of Brahmanand Swami and Devanand Swami, two of Bhagwan Swaminarayan’s *ashta kavis*.

T. Dave. The text has since then achieved a place amongst the canonical texts of the *sampradaya*. It is written in five parts and is as voluminous as it sounds. Shri Harshadrai T. Dave gathered data from textual sources and from extensive fieldwork. He traveled from village to village, gathering facts and confirming accounts. His hagiography, or *jivan charitra*, is probably the most extensive and thorough literary work on Bhagwan Swaminarayan to date. Since its first print in 1981, the five volumes have gone through several organizational and stylistic changes. Several hagiographies have followed. Shri Harshadrai T. Dave also wrote an abridged version in English covering certain key concepts from Bhagwan Swaminarayan's life. Several accounts have also been written in Hindi and Gujarati. Sadhu Aksharjivandas' text comes to mind as one of the most thorough and succinct single volume works. Though there are several short life sketches on Bhagwan Swaminarayan's life in English, there is a void that is felt by English speakers when searching for a detailed account of his life. It is within this lineage of literary greatness that this publication is presented as a humble English rendering of their combined efforts. This book presents an exhaustive, yet manageable, account of Bhagwan Swaminarayan's life in the form of stories.

In the Vallabha Sampradaya, the stories depicted by the *ashta chhap* in their *bhakti pads* were not figments of the poets' imaginations, but rather personal accounts of the *lila charitras* experienced firsthand by the poets with Shrinathji. Similarly, the stories presented in this book are experiences with divinity. They encourage the reader to move beyond the feelings of the mind and explore inside one's soul for faith and spiritual union with Purna Purushottam Narayan.

Bhagwan Swaminarayan's legacy is survived by the living Gunatit Sadhu. His Holiness Pramukh Swami Maharaj (Swamishri), the current guru of the BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha, enjoys this state of constant communion. His life teaches the devotee to eat, breathe, and sleep while remembering the divine form and actions of Bhagwan Swaminarayan. His every action is devoid of worldly desire and infused with the divine *smruti* of Bhagwan and guru.

Once while writing letters in his room in Sarangpur, Swamishri was approached by Sadhu Brahmavihardas with a question. He asked, "Why

is it that whenever you meet devotees, write letters, speak on the phone, and even do puja in the morning, you always have a pillow on your lap? Does it provide comfort, or is it just a habit?"

Swamishri chuckled and pointed to a *murti* mounted on the back wall of the room. Sadhu Brahmavaharidas assumed that Swamishri was avoiding his question. He insisted, "Swamishri please do not change the topic. I am asking you a question—stop deflecting."

Swamishri placed his hands on Sadhu Brahmavaharidas' head and turned it to the *murti*. Sadhu Brahmavaharidas noticed that Swamishri was answering his question. In that *murti*, Swamishri's guru, Shastriji Maharaj, had a pillow in his lap while speaking with another sadhu. Swamishri explained, "Every time I place a pillow in my lap while going about my daily routine, it helps me refresh my guru's *smruti* in my mind. Yes, the pillow brings comfort, however, not to my body, but to my heart and mind." Swamishri's life shows us how to keep these *lila charitras* at the forefront while going about our daily tasks.

These are the two distinct advantages that followers of the Swaminarayan Sampradaya enjoy. First, the affluent archive of prose and verse texts describing Bhagwan Swaminarayan's *lila charitras* by contemporary disciples provides a wealth of first-hand accounts to recall and rejoice in. Second, the *pragat satpurush* serves as a role model who draws from these *lila charitras* and enjoys a constant communion with Bhagwan Swaminarayan. As a result, the *satpurush* is always experiencing and sharing this inner bliss and satisfaction. These advantages allow the believer to not only engage with various *charitras*, but to also learn the method of doing so by observing one's guru.

And, what is this method? To relish these *charitras* with a certain perspective. Bhagwan Swaminarayan tells us in Vachanamrut Gadhada II 10 that a true *bhakta* relishes in Bhagwan's *charitras* while maintaining *diyyabhav*. How are these stories any different than the ones our parents share with us of our childhood? What sets them apart? Bhagwan Swaminarayan answers this question in Vachanamrut Gadhada Section II 35. Bhagwan only engages in these *charitras* for the sake of his devotees—for his pleasure, for her happiness, for their *moksha*. It becomes simple to maintain this outlook if we put ourselves in the

shoes of the *bhakta* who will directly benefit from the *charitras*. That is to say, how does remembering Bhagwan's childhood *charitras* or his travels as Nilkanth Varni grant us, you and I, pleasure, happiness, or contentment? What lessons can we learn from Bhagwan Swaminarayan's *charitras*? Lastly, a clear metaphysical distinction must also be made. If we remember that we are but mere *jivas* warped by *maya*'s grip, all the while striving to become like Brahman so that we may worship Parabrahma-Bhagwan Swaminarayan—how could we perceive fault or dislike in the actions of one who is above *maya*?

With a wealth of such stories available to us and a role model who can show us the path, we are left with no excuses. The following pages in this book attempt to bring stories from Bhagwan Swaminarayan's life to the reader with great detail and painstaking sophistication. It is in the hands of the reader to experience these stories. Reading through these chapters for the sake of getting through the pages or to fulfill a *niyam* will be a great disservice to one's self and the worth of these stories. However, a careful reading of the stories with the intent to place one's self amidst the happenings of Chhapaiya, Pulhashram, or Gadhada is bound to fill a void and an emptiness, which was at the core of Muktanand Swami's and, I am sure, many of our readers' spiritual restlessness and anxiety.

1

Stories from Early On

*Ramat Hari baal vinod kare... Larkan ke sang
laal dharamasut, shyaam tanu shobhit dhuri bhare...
Dharma Aangan mahi keli karat hai, bolat bachan
madhur totare... Devanand Ghanshyam vilokit,
koti bhuvan suk aash tare...*

*Hari [Ghanshyam] plays,
delighting in the pleasures of childhood...
Along with the other children, Dharmadev's son,
resplendent in his dark physical complexion,
claws at the dirt with his hands...
He frolics within Dharmadev's compound,
and speaks sweet words while innocently stuttering...
Devanand [says] having seen Ghanshyam [in this form],
the desire of pleasures of the infinite worlds fade away...*

- **Sadguru Devanand Swami**
(c. 1803-1854 CE), Poet, Linguist, and Musician

The Beginning

According to Hindu accounts of creation and cosmology, there are fourteen *lokas* in our universe; six above what we know as Earth and

seven below it.¹ *Jivas* and *ishvaras* inhabit an infinite amount of such universes. These universes are controlled and sustained by Aksharbrahma, above whom is Parabrahma. Both Aksharbrahma and Parabrahma reside in the divine abode, Akshardham. There are three more eternal entities: *jiva*, *ishvara*, and *maya*. We are all *jivas*. The reigning deities of our universe are *ishvaras*. Both *jivas* and *ishvaras* are bound by a layer of *maya*.

The Parabrahma mentioned in ancient shastras refers to Bhagwan Swaminarayan. Brahma (or Brahman) in those same shastras is a reference to Aksharbrahma Gunatitanand Swami. The word “Swaminarayan” explains our philosophy. It suggests the union of “Swami” and “Narayan,” of Aksharbrahma and Parabrahma. Previous avatars were born with the purpose to destroy evil manifestations on Earth. Bhagwan Swaminarayan came to this Earth to liberate countless souls from the grip of *maya* and take them to his divine abode. He decided to manifest in this world with his devotees, Aksharbrahma Gunatitanand Swami, his ideal devotee, being foremost among them. Along with his Aksharbrahma, Bhagwan Swaminarayan liberated countless souls from the cycle of birth and death. He breathed new spirit into bhakti and dharma in eighteenth and nineteenth century India. This is his divine story.

Parabrahma in Akshardham

Parabrahma is always depicted with two hands and the physical body of a male. His divine abode, Akshardham, has four manifest forms. One of the forms is similar to that of the Supreme Being. With his two hands folded in prayer and possessing a male physical form, Aksharbrahma serves Parabrahma in the divine abode. The second form of Aksharbrahma is that of a divine abode. Aksharbrahma is the only entity that can contain

1 The Vedas describe fourteen *lokas* or realms. There are seven higher realms and seven lower realms. The seven higher realms, from highest to lowest, are: Satyaloka, Tapaloka, Janaloka, Maharloka, Svarloka, Bhuvarloka, and Bhurloka. Man and animals live in Bhurlok. The seven lower realms, from highest to lowest, are: Atala, Vitala, Sutala, Taltala, Mahatala, Rasatala, and Patala. Different types of beings inhabit each of the *lokas*. Moving between the *lokas* is governed by the principle of karma.

Parabrahma and all of the eternal *muktas* within his locative form. Of course, Parabrahma contains all of these powers but chooses not to use them. He delegates this task to Aksharbrahma.

The *aksharmuktas* appear to have similar divine physical forms to Parabrahma, but there is a vast difference in their powers and strengths. It is said that the radiance of countless suns is present in a single pore of an *aksharmukta*. The radiance of countless *aksharmuktas* pales in the presence of the brilliance of a single pore of Aksharbrahma. The radiance from Aksharbrahma pales in the presence of the brilliance of a single pore of Parabrahma. This is the splendor of Parabrahma's divine *murti*. When Parabrahma leaves his mortal body and returns to Akshardham, one can always look towards the physical form of Aksharbrahma on Earth to experience that same radiance and splendor.

1781: His Birth

Word quickly spread. Divinity had graced the small town of Chhapaiya and the humble home of Hariprasad Pande and Bala Devi (see photos 2, 3 & 4). The birds, beasts, and flora rejoiced with the presence of divinity amongst them. The townspeople felt a serene, calm spell envelop the atmosphere. The air seemed lighter and the stars brighter. The devas appeared in the sky showering flowers and singing words of praise and prayer: "Oh Parabrahma! We fail to describe your compassion for gracing the earth with Your presence. We, too, wish that we could be born as humans among the people of Chhapaiya to bear witness to your childhood *lila*."

The *gandharvas* followed the devas' prayers with a musical rendition of their own late night ragas, such as *chandrakauns*, *rageshri*, and *bihag*. Throngs of villagers gathered for a glimpse of the divine child. The child playfully raised his right hand to bless all those who came before him. His innocent smile wooed the hearts of men, women, and children alike. The villagers rejoiced through the streets. Hariprasad Pande shared sweets and gifts with the learned *brahmins* and the well-adorned women who had come to his courtyard with rice, kumkum, and scented flowers. The entire village gathered to celebrate the birth of this child, the Father of the Universe.

Bhagwan Swaminarayan was born in Chhapaiya, a small village in the Gonda district of Uttar Pradesh, India. He was born to a devout *brahmin* couple, Hariprasad Pande and Bala Devi (Mata Premvati). Hariprasad Pande was known in the region as Dharmadev because of his particular adherence to the code of conduct prescribed in the dharma shastras. Bala Devi was similarly known as Bhaktimata due to the central place of bhakti in her life. Bhaktimata had already seen a divine vision in which she was informed of the manifestation of Parabrahma in her womb.

The arrival of divinity was sure to worry evil and its forces. Kalidatta, Bhaktimata's paternal cousin, lived in Chhapaiya. He was the prevailing force of evil in the region. He feasted his senses on the consumption of alcohol, helpless animals, and wanton women. He claimed to have gained powers through the use of black magic and sorcery. He extorted money and goods from the townspeople. Though everyone disliked him, no one had the courage to confront him. With the birth of the divine child, a glimmer of hope lit up their hearts. They prayed that the child would bring an end to his wretched behavior.

Before dawn on the sixth day following the divine child's birth, Kalidatta performed a tantric ritual in which he invoked several *krutyas* to attack the divine child. The *krutyas* approached Dharmadev's house in the shadows of early morning. They entered the child's room to snatch him from his cradle and fled towards Kalidatta. Bhaktimata saw the *krutyas* running away with her child. Her scream pierced the morning air, awakening the entire neighborhood. Everyone gathered to comfort Bhaktimata. As they attempted to foil the *krutyas'* plot, Hanumanji made his way from the skies. The *krutyas* were terrified to see him. They put the child down on the floor and sprinted away to escape Hanumanji's deadly grip. However, it was too late. Hanumanji caught up with them and subjected each of them to his wrath. After thrashing them one after another, Hanumanji picked up the divine child and made his way towards Bhaktimata. She ran to embrace her child once more, teeming with boundless joy. She pressed the divine child to her heart, promising to never let him out of her sight.

Meanwhile, the *krutyas* made their way back to Kalidatta. They

warned him to never attempt to harm the divine child, saying, “Do not tell us to do it again. If you do, we will return to finish you off!”

Fearing for his life, Kalidatta fled from the *krutyas* and hid in the forest.

Naming the Child

Three months and twelve days had passed since the divine child’s birth. The sage Markandeya Muni had come down from the Himalayas and was touring the region with his disciples. He happened to stop in front of Dharmadev’s house and called for his daily ration of alms. Upon seeing the revered sage, Dharmadev ran to the courtyard, prostrated at his feet, and exclaimed, “Dear Sage, I am blessed to have your darshan at my doorstep today.” He brought the sage into his home and washed his feet with warm water. With folded hands, Dharmadev requested the sage to bless the child and perform the naming ritual.

Markandeya Muni walked over to where the child was sleeping. He looked at the child’s blissful face and felt lost for words. After a while he said, “Dharmadev, you are lucky to have this child born as your own. He is the Lord of all deities; he is Parabrahma manifest on Earth. Since he was born with the moon in the *karka* (Cancer) zodiac sign, he will be called ‘Hari’. Since his complexion is dark like the monsoon clouds, he will also be called ‘Ghanshyam’ and ‘Krishna’. Since some may choose to compound the names ‘Hari’ and ‘Krishna’, he may also be called ‘Harikrishna’.”

Markandeya Muni continued without stopping to catch his breath. “The thousand-mouthed serpent Shesh; Saraswati, the goddess of knowledge; and the four-mouthed Brahma fail in completely describing his glory. He has come on Earth to establish *ekantik dharma* and to free countless souls from the shackles of *maya*.” The aged sage then kneeled near Ghanshyam’s crib and placed his own head at the divine child’s feet to pray silently for a few moments.

Dharmadev was delighted to hear of his son’s glory. He arranged for a delicious meal to be prepared for the sage and his disciples. He lovingly fed them and offered them *dakshina* before they departed.

Time began to pass quickly. As Ghanshyam reached four months old,

Dharmadev arranged for Ghanshyam's *upaveshana sanskar*,² and at the beginning of the sixth month, he arranged for the *annaprashana sanskar*.³

One day Dharmadev decided to test Ghanshyam's intellect. He placed a gold coin, a sacred book, and a small dagger on a wooden bench. He brought Ghanshyam into the room and faced him in the direction of the bench. Ghanshyam started crawling towards the objects on the other end of the room. He neared the wooden bench and immediately reached out for the sacred book. His eyes were indifferent to the shiny metal dagger and the glistening gold coin. Dharmadev recognized that his son possessed the traits of a scholar.

Ghanshyam exhibited signs of divinity early on and would display these signs to his parents, siblings, and the village women.

Ghanshyam showed a tremendous amount of affection towards his mother. He would slowly walk towards Bhaktimata while she was cooking and pull the edge of her sari from behind. If his mother ignored him, Ghanshyam would persist until Bhaktimata turned around. How could she refuse Ghanshyam, with his curly black hair, adorable toothless smile, and tiny white fingers? She would swoop him up in her arms and feed him lovingly.

Ghanshyam showed a similar amount of affection for his newly-wed *bhabhi*. Ghanshyam's elder brother, Rampratap, recently married Suvasini. Ghanshyam enjoyed playing with his *bhabhi*. She would play with him in the courtyard and tell him stories. Ghanshyam often showed her his divine prowess.

Once, Ghanshyam and Suvasini were playing in the courtyard. After an hour, Suvasini carried young Ghanshyam into the house, but to her amazement, Ghanshyam was also tossing and turning in Bhaktimata's lap. Which one of these two forms was the real Ghanshyam? She rubbed her eyes and tried to snap out of what seemed like an illusion. As Suvasini

2 The *upaveshana sanskar* is the sixth of the sixteen *sanskars* performed during one's lifetime in the Hindu tradition. It is performed in the fourth month, when the child is bathed and dressed to be taken out of the home for the first time. It is also referred to as the *nishkramana sanskara*.

3 The *annaprashana sanskar* is performed in the six month after birth, when the child is first fed solid foods. It is the seventh of the sixteen *sanskars* performed during one's lifetime in the Hindu tradition.

came closer to Bhaktimata, both forms of Ghanshyam merged into one. Suvasini looked distrustfully at Ghanshyam as he grinned while playing in his mother's lap. Suvasini realized that Ghanshyam was the manifest form of divinity.

The Disappearing Act and Kalidatta Redeemed

Ten miles south of Chhapaiya, on the banks of the Manvar River, is a local place of pilgrimage called Makhoda. Dharmadev decided to host Ghanshyam's *chudakarma* or *chaul sanskar* there. The fifth day of the dark half of the month of Jeth was set as the date for the ritual. Neighbors, friends, and family traveled with the Pandes to Makhoda. Amai, the village barber, also accompanied the group of pilgrims to do the ceremonial shaving. After doing darshan at the local mandir, the group settled down to complete the ritual. Amai sharpened his blade and started to shave Ghanshyam's head. Ghanshyam shifted around in his mother's lap during the ritual. Accordingly, Amai moved around carefully to avoid cutting Ghanshyam. Halfway through the ceremony, Amai started to look around as if searching for something. Bhaktimata became impatient with his behavior and chided, "Amai, stop wasting time! Finish shaving his head so we can get on with the rest of the ceremony."

Amai wiped away the sweat forming on his forehead and mustered the courage to speak up. "Mother, what am I to do? Ghanshyam seems to have disappeared. I do not see him seated on your lap."

Bhaktimata immediately knew that Ghanshyam was up to some mischief. She called out to him, "Ghanshyam, let Amai see you. People will laugh at you if you walk around with a half-shaven head."

Ghanshyam reappeared wearing a sly grin on his face. Amai and the relatives who witnessed this incident realized that Ghanshyam was no ordinary child.

After Amai finished shaving Ghanshyam's head, Bhaktimata bathed Ghanshyam, dressed him in a fresh pair of clothes, and drew a vermillion *swastika* on his freshly-shaven head. Dharmadev invited all of the *brahmins* and his relatives to his home for dinner to celebrate the completion of the ritual. While the adults prepared for the feast, Ghanshyam and his

friends snuck away to play in the forest on the outskirts of the village. Coincidentally, Kalidatta lived in the same part of the forest.

Kalidatta waited for the children to place Ghanshyam under a tree and leave him alone as they went to pick fresh *jambul* fruit. The tantric whirled up a storm with his sorcery. The sky darkened, and the winds uprooted everything in their way. The clouds roared, unable to contain the rain that hammered the forest. Twigs and trunks snapped under the torrential assault. Ghanshyam's friends were unable to turn back towards the tree under which they left Ghanshyam. Kalidatta rushed to Ghanshyam only to find him smiling and awaiting the tantric's arrival. Before Kalidatta could attack him, Ghanshyam shot a sharp glance in Kalidatta's direction. Kalidatta lost his sight and crashed headfirst into the trunk of the enormous tree. Blood spewed from his nose and eyes. He started to vomit blood from his mouth. With its roots shaken, the gigantic tree collapsed on the demon. He shrieked for mercy. In a stroke of kindness, Ghanshyam pardoned Kalidatta's mistakes and liberated his soul (see photo 8). Then, in a matter of seconds, the storm subsided. The winds quieted down, the rains tapered off, and the trees stood still.

Ghanshyam's friends were frightened. Seeing Kalidatta's corpse, they assumed this fierce-looking demon had killed Ghanshyam. With tears in their eyes, they quietly stole back to the village.

Alone in the forest, Ghanshyam felt hungry. Twelve divine damsels—Kirti, Lakshmi, Dhruti, Megha, Buddhi, Pushti, Mati, Lajja, Kshama, Shraddha, Smruti, and Titiksha—appeared in the forest with sweets and gourds of milk to feed the divine child. Ghanshyam also assumed twelve divine forms to provide each of the damsels with the pleasures of motherhood.

In the meantime, Dharmadev and Bhaktimata had been cleaning up after the feast at their home. They realized that Ghanshyam had been missing for a considerable amount of time. They searched the courtyard and their neighborhood, but Ghanshyam was nowhere to be seen. They lit torches and headed to the outskirts of the village to look for Ghanshyam. From a distance they saw the terrifying corpse of the demon Kalidatta and presumed the same fate had befallen Ghanshyam. They rushed towards Ghanshyam, but Ghanshyam sat patiently, as if waiting

for them. Bhaktimata picked him up and swayed him in her arms. She was elated to see him alive and unharmed. The villagers were overjoyed to see Kalidatta dead and no longer a hindrance. They realized, yet again, that Ghanshyam was not an ordinary child.

Embedded in this episode was an important theological lesson. Bhaktimata and Dharmadev realized that Bhagwan might leave their side if they allowed worldly objects and activities to divert their attention away from him and his seva. Bhaktimata and Dharmadev vowed to never let Ghanshyam out of their sight again.

In Love with His Son or Bhagwan?

Ghanshyam's parents took him for a pilgrimage to Ayodhya, the birthplace of Shri Rama. This was the first time Ghanshyam bathed in the holy waters of the Saryu River. They returned to Chhapaiya after a few days, but Ghanshyam had set his heart on visiting the sacred waters of the river and the various mandirs in Ayodhya.

One morning while Dharmadev was doing his morning puja, he asked Ghanshyam to bring him tulsi leaves for the ritual. Ghanshyam immediately rushed to retrieve them and quickly returned with a handful of leaves. Dharmadev was surprised at the sight of so many tulsi leaves. At that same moment, Suvasini ran in from the courtyard and announced, "Father, I was sweeping the courtyard and noticed heaps of tulsi leaves, vermillion powder, and rice."

Dharmadev ran outside to see for himself. He openly pondered the reason for the sudden appearance of these items in such abundance.

Ghanshyam smiled and said, "Father, the deities wanted to offer their respects this morning. They came early this morning when all of you were fast asleep. They left extra ritual accessories for your morning puja."

Dharmadev was rendered speechless. He quietly returned inside to finish his morning puja.

Every morning during his puja, Dharmadev would meditate on the *murti* of Shri Krishna. One morning, Ghanshyam decided to grant his father darshan of his own divine form. As Dharmadev sat in meditation, he observed Ghanshyam in the place of the usual *murti* of Shri Krishna. Dharmadev opened his eyes and tried to refocus. He closed his eyes

and again only saw Ghanshyam. He repeated this exercise several more times. When that did not work, he stood up and went for a walk to clear his mind. He came back, washed his face, and sat down to meditate again. Yet again, he only saw Ghanshyam's *murti* smiling back at him. Dharmadev became nervous, and sweat started forming on his forehead. Dharmadev worried about how he would forgive himself for losing his attachment to Shri Krishna and instead becoming attached to his son. He closed his eyes again to search for his beloved Shri Krishna's *murti*. However, he only saw the radiating *murti* of his son surrounded by a divine aura of light. He opened his eyes and prayed out loud, "Oh Parabrahma, please forgive me. I have fallen victim to your illusion. Please save me from this attachment to my son. I only care to see your divine form in meditation again."

Ghanshyam's heart brimmed with compassion. He pulled his divine form from his father's mind. Elated upon seeing Shri Krishna's *murti* again, Dharmadev rushed through his meditation lest the *murti* should disappear again. Alas, if only it was easy to understand that the form of Ghanshyam was the divine form of Purna Purushottam Narayan manifest on Earth.

Moving to Ayodhya and the First Day of School

Ghanshyam was now five years old. He often begged his parents to take him back to Ayodhya. After many such requests, Dharmadev and Bhaktimata were persuaded to move to Ayodhya with their family. Once in Ayodhya, Dharmadev decided to teach Ghanshyam Sanskrit and lessons from the Upanishads. An auspicious date was set upon which Dharmadev would begin teaching Ghanshyam. Ghanshyam learned the language and the texts quickly. For this reason, Dharmadev felt it was better to place Ghanshyam under the tutelage of the reputed scholar, Hridayram Pandit. Ghanshyam prostrated at the pandit's feet and started his lessons with the renowned scholar.

To the scholar's surprise, Ghanshyam would fully grasp the day's lesson even before he finished teaching it. The pandit quickly realized that Ghanshyam possessed an intellect far superior than that of any other student. The pandit would fold his hands and awe at the grace with

which Ghanshyam would read, recite, and debate. Ghanshyam often asked difficult questions that startled the pandit. He would then, himself, respectfully offer to answer the questions laced with metaphysical and philosophical intricacies. His answers articulately quoted references from the Vedas, Upanishads, Puranas, Mahabharata, Ramayana, and the ancient astrological texts.

Ghanshyam loved visiting the mandirs in Ayodhya. He set a daily routine for darshan and *katha*. Ghanshyam would sit up in bed and meditate at three o'clock every morning. He would take his *kalash* and walk to the banks of the Saryu River to bathe thereafter. He was especially fond of Shankaracharya's '*Bhaja Govindam*' *stotra*⁴ and would recite it throughout his morning routine. He would return home drenched in the freezing waters of the Saryu River. He would put on a fresh pair of clothes and offer his morning puja to a small *murti* of Balmukund.⁵ Before leaving home to do darshan at the different mandirs in Ayodhya, he would bow down to his parents. He was also keen on following the tenets of a celibate, even more so than the city's renunciates. He would then return home and milk the cows before helping with other household chores. Lastly, he would drink a glass of milk before sitting down to study. He would barely blink between pages and would listen attentively to everything his pandit and father taught him. A year passed in such manner in no time.

Ghanshyam was known to have *nasikagra* vision. His eyes would never look past the tip of his nose. He would rarely look out of his line of sight at someone or something passing by. Rather than playing with the other children, Ghanshyam would spend his time chanting *stotras* and Bhagwan's name. He had simple tastes and preferences for food and clothing. He disliked sweets, savories, and fatty foods. He would offer *thal* to the *murti* of Balmukund before having only a small portion

⁴ *Bhaja Govindam* is a Sanskrit devotional hymn by Shankaracharya (c. 800), the founder of the Advaita school of thought (see footnote for further discussion). It poetically describes the importance of praying to Bhagwan for spiritual progress to escape the cycles of birth and death. The hymn also explains the perishable nature of the human body, this world, and its worthless relations.

⁵ Balmukund is the childhood form of Shri Krishna primarily worshipped within the Vallabha Sampradaya of the Vaishnav tradition.

of milk, yogurt, or *dudhpak*. He was not interested in dressing in fancy, stitched clothes. He preferred to wear a bare white dhoti with an equally plain *upvastra*.

Many Mandirs, Many Forms

One evening, Ghanshyam left home to do darshan at the city's mandirs. He heard Bhaktimata calling behind him, "Ghanshyam, please come home soon. Dinner is almost ready."

Ghanshyam pretended not to hear and took his time to do darshan at each of the mandirs. Bhaktimata grew impatient and sent Rampratap to find Ghanshyam and bring him home.

Ghanshyam's concentration while doing darshan would amaze all those around him. How was a mere child of six years of age able to concentrate his mind and senses on the *murti* of Bhagwan with such ease and perfection? Ghanshyam was a model *bhakta*. His life was scented with the flavors of bhakti, dharma, *jnan*, and *vairagya*.

Rampratap arrived at the gates of the Hanumangadhi Mandir (see photo 9). There, he saw Ghanshyam attentively listening to the Ramayana. He nudged his younger brother and instructed, "Ghanshyam, come home! Mother is waiting for you."

Ghanshyam smiled and replied, "I will be finished in just a few minutes. Why don't you go do darshan at the nearby mandir? We will walk home together."

Rampratap walked to the Kanak Bhavan Mandir (see photo 10) and was astounded by what he saw. He observed Ghanshyam sitting in the front row, listening to the *katha* of the Bhagavata Purana. He walked over to a devotee and asked, "How long has that child been sitting in the *katha*?"

The devotee replied, "Since the beginning."

Rampratap could not comprehend how that was possible. He walked up to Ghanshyam and requested, "Are you coming home, or are you in the mood for games again?"

Ghanshyam smiled dubiously and insisted, "Brother, no games. The Bhagavata *katha* is almost done. Why don't you go do darshan at the nearby Kop Bhavan mandir? We will walk home together."

Rampratap walked to the Kop Bhavan mandir and noticed that

Ghanshyam was seated near the *murtis*, chanting the name of Bhagwan. Rampratap approached the pujari and inquired, “How long has this child been sitting here chanting?”

The pujari replied, “Ghanshyam comes here every afternoon and chants the name of Bhagwan late into the evening.”

Ghanshyam opened his eyes and bargained, “Brother, I am almost done chanting the name of Bhagwan. There is another beautiful mandir nearby. Why don’t you go there for darshan? I will have completed my *malas* by then.” Before Rampratap could protest, Ghanshyam closed his eyes and started chanting again.

Rampratap visited every mandir in the city, and at every mandir, he noticed that Ghanshyam was listening to *katha*, chanting the name of Bhagwan, or singing bhajans. Rampratap did not know what to do. Out of curiosity, he returned to the Hanumangadhi Mandir, where the reading of the Ramayana had just finished. Ghanshyam walked towards him with a smile and said, “Brother, let’s go home. Mother will be waiting for us.”

Rampratap was speechless. He followed Ghanshyam home thinking about the evening’s events. Was Ghanshyam simply his younger brother or a manifestation of divinity?

Suvasinibhabhi’s Ring

Ghanshyam had a special relationship with his *bhabhi*. Suvasini loved Ghanshyam like her own child. Ghanshyam would take every opportunity to show his love for her. Often, this love was demonstrated through mischief. On one such occasion, Ghanshyam walked into the kitchen where Suvasini was cooking and groaned, “Bhabhi, I am hungry. What will you feed me today?”

Suvasini lovingly placed her hand on Ghanshyam’s head and said, “Dear one, wait for a few minutes. I am going to make you some hot *shiro*.”

Ghanshyam did not like to wait. He nagged, “No, Bhabhi! I am hungry now. Feed me now.”

Suvasini told him to wait outside for a few minutes. Ghanshyam walked over to the corner ledge where Suvasini had carefully placed her gold ring to avoid damaging it while doing household chores. He

snatched the ring and slipped out of the kitchen. He gathered his friends and walked to the town confectioner (see photo 12).

The confectioner was greedy. He would often overcharge his customers and sell old sweets in place of fresh ones. Ghanshyam approached the confectioner and said, “Hello Mr. Confectioner! I was wondering how many sweets you would give me and my friends in exchange for this gold ring.”

The confectioner saw his chance to make extra money from an unsuspecting child. He offered, “I can give you two kilos.”

Ghanshyam was not satisfied and responded, “That won’t do. Give us more. The ring is solid gold.”

The confectioner counter offered five kilos.

Ghanshyam was still unsatisfied. “How about you let us fill our stomachs with as much as our little hearts’ desire?”

The confectioner agreed. He thought to himself, “How much can these little children manage to eat? That ring is probably worth more than fifty kilos of my sweets.”

Ghanshyam and his friends started eating sweets in front of the shop. His friends’ little stomachs filled up fast, but Ghanshyam’s appetite was insatiable. He finished everything on display and stored in the front of the shop. He looked at the confectioner, smiled, and declared, “I am still hungry, Mr. Confectioner. Where are the rest of your sweets?”

The confectioner started to feel nervous. There would be nothing left for him to sell! He took the child to the back of the shop and reasoned, “I am sure you are almost full. Take five or ten more pieces and get on your way!”

Ghanshyam smiled and started making his way through the pots and pans in the shop. One after another, he emptied them all. The confectioner was shocked. How did this little child acquire the appetite of the legendary Bhimasena?⁶

Ghanshyam was far from done. When he emptied all of the vessels of sweets, he asked for gur, ghee, and sakar. He finished off these ingredients

⁶ Bhimasena, also called Bhima, is the second of the Pandav brothers, protagonists in the Mahabharata. Known mostly for his strength, Bhima also had an insatiable appetite. It is said that he could eat all the grains in the world and still not be satisfied.

too! The confectioner was nearly in tears. Ghanshyam pitied him and asked for a glass of water before running off to the woods to play with his friends.

At home, Suvasini complained to Dharmadev about Ghanshyam disappearing with her ring. When Ghanshyam returned home in the evening, Dharmadev sat him down and asked him for his side of the story. Ghanshyam told his father the truth. Dharmadev, Rampratap, and Ghanshyam immediately set off for the confectioner's shop. The confectioner was sitting in dismay at the front of his shop, trying to figure out how he was going to prepare all those sweets again. Dharmadev walked up to the confectioner, greeted him, and proceeded to ask him about the ring. "Brother, my son tells us that he gave you my daughter-in-law's gold ring. Is this true? If so, we would appreciate it if you would return it to us."

The confectioner was enraged. "You dare to ask me to return the ring after your son ate more than fifty kilos of sweets from my shop?"

Dharmadev looked at Ghanshyam. He smiled and said, "Father, he is lying. How would I be able to eat so many sweets in one sitting?"

The confectioner invited Dharmadev into his shop to inspect the empty vessels. To the confectioner's surprise, all of the vessels were filled to the brim, and not one piece was missing. He was dumbfounded. He looked at Ghanshyam and then back at the filled vessels. How was this possible? He had served the sweets with his own hands! The confectioner's face turned red with embarrassment as he reached inside his pocket to retrieve the gold ring. He handed it back to Dharmadev and said, "Your child is not human. He has to be Bhagwan."

Through this one incident, Ghanshyam taught all those involved lessons about understanding his glory and suppressing one's greed.

On Vacation in Targam and Looking West

Suvasini's parents lived in Targam, a small village near Chhapaiya. Her brother, Baldev Dube, had come to take Suvasini and Rampratap to Targam for a few days. Suvasini wished to take young Ghanshyam with her too. Bhaktimata agreed but only if Suvasini promised to be back in less than one week. Suvasini was delighted at the thought of taking Ghanshyam home with her and immediately agreed. The four of them

set off for Targam later that afternoon.

One day, Ghanshyam went to the fields to play with the village children. Upon seeing the laborers weeding the fields, Ghanshyam also decided to help them. However, his work on the fields was different from the routine chores. Instead of pulling out the weeds, Ghanshyam started to pull out the crops! The laborers ran back to Baldev Dube and complained about Ghanshyam's behavior. If a few more minutes had passed, Ghanshyam would have uprooted more than half of the field!

Ghanshyam returned home with the village children. Rampratap was furious upon learning of Ghanshyam's behavior. He walked over to Ghanshyam and, without asking his side of the story, slapped him. Ghanshyam's eyes welled up with tears the size of cherries. He started sobbing and denying all of the accusations. Suvasini's heart could not bear the sight of Ghanshyam crying. She ran towards him and held him in her arms, comforting him. Ghanshyam wept, "Bhabhi, they are all lying. Why would I uproot our crops?"

They all set out for the fields to survey the damage. To their surprise, all of the crops were in their place, and not one had been uprooted. The laborers swore on their lives that the crops had been uprooted. They could not believe their own eyes! They realized that Ghanshyam was a miraculous child.

Ghanshyam's *lila charitras* always had a purpose. Once, Ghanshyam had gone to play on the outskirts of a nearby village named Perojpur. He climbed to the top of a tree while playing hide-and-seek with his friends. His friends noticed that Ghanshyam had mounted the highest branch and was staring in a westward direction. When he came down, they inquired as to the reason for Ghanshyam's fixed gaze. Ghanshyam replied, "There are thousands of devotees that are waiting for me in that direction. I must make my way there soon." Ghanshyam would soon set out on his way to Gujarat. From this moment, his eyes were set on the West, with the intention to educate, reform, and liberate.

Flowers, Cows, and the Injured Thigh

Ghanshyam would often visit a small lake on the outskirts of Targam. An aged ascetic named Haridasji lived there. Haridasji would

recite the Ramayana to all those that gathered there. Ghanshyam would listen to Haridasji's *katha* with his friends and would then bathe in the lake.

Ghanshyam's friends would often take him to the woods and pick scented flowers. They would adorn Ghanshyam with ornaments made of these flowers by placing a garland around his neck, a decorative hat on his head, and *baju bandhs* and anklets around his arms and legs. They had but one intention: to gaze at Ghanshyam's bewitching *murti* embellished with these beautiful flowers.

One afternoon, a cowherd was passing by Ghanshyam and his friends with a large herd of cattle. Ghanshyam called down to the cowherd from atop a tree upon which he was seated and said, "Dear Friend, how do you singlehandedly control such a large group of cattle?"

The cowherd smugly responded, "I know black magic. I control my herd of cattle using tantra. I have never lost a single cow."

Ghanshyam smiled back and remained silent. A few minutes after the last of the cattle passed the tree Ghanshyam was seated on, Ghanshyam called out to the cattle with a booming voice. To the cowherd's disbelief, all of the cows turned their heads and ran towards Ghanshyam. Controlling his cattle was a matter of pride for the cowherd. He chanted his mantras and even tried to beat his cattle back into formation, but they would not budge. The cattle settled under the tree, staring up at Ghanshyam.

Exhausted after several minutes of shouting and striking his stick, the cowherd came to Ghanshyam and humbly bowed at his feet. "Are you Shri Krishna? How do you control my cattle with the grace and efficiency attributed to Shri Krishna in the Bhagavata Purana?"⁷

Ghanshyam remained silent and gave him darshan of Shri Krishna. The cowherd was moved to tears. He realized that this child was none other than Bhagwan in human form. He gathered his cattle and went his way, singing Ghanshyam's glory.

Ghanshyam used to love climbing trees. He would climb swiftly,

⁷ The Shrimad Bhagavata Purana cites several stories in which the soldiers of the evil King Kamsa would attack herds of cattle belonging to the villagers of Gokul. Shri Krishna would steer the cattle back to their rightful owners with the mere sound of his *bansuri*, or flute.

leaving his friends far behind. One day, when Ghanshyam was making his way up a tamarind tree, a thick branch pierced his right thigh. The wound bled severely. Ghanshyam looked towards the sky, and at that very moment, two white-clothed devas appeared. They bowed to Ghanshyam, cleaned and dressed the wound with a bandage, and disappeared. Later that evening, Ghanshyam's friends told Suvasini about the two white-clothed devas and the wound on Ghanshyam's leg. The next day when Suvasini reached to clean the wound, Ghanshyam removed the bandage and revealed that there was no need to redress the wound because it had healed. Suvasini inquired as to what happened and who originally dressed the wound. Ghanshyam smiled and said, "The twin healers, the Ashvini Kumars, came to heal my wound."

Ghanshyam's thigh bore a small mark attesting to the *seva* rendered by the Ashvini Kumars.

The Fisherman and His Fish

Ghanshyam stayed in Targam for six months. Once while playing with his friends, they wandered towards Meen Sarovar, a large lake located in between Targam and Chhapaiya. Ghanshyam and his friends noticed a fisherman casting his net in the lake. He would scoop up fish in his net and then empty them in a bucket before throwing the net back into the lake hoping for a larger catch. Ghanshyam could not bear the sight of the squirming fish in the bucket.

Ghanshyam mercifully glanced at the bucket of dying fish. All of the fish fell back into the lake, infused with life (see photo 6). The fisherman was enraged. He was looking for the culprit when his eyes fell on Ghanshyam and his friends. Ghanshyam walked over to the fisherman and tried to reason with him. "This entire creation is made and sustained by Bhagwan. Only he has the right to give and take life. Why do you kill these helpless fish? There are many other things that you can grow and eat. There are also many other ways to earn a living. How will you answer Bhagwan when he asks why you interfered with his process of sustenance and destruction? The accumulation of good karmas by performing good actions leads to *moksha*. The gathering of bad karmas by performing sinful deeds leads to Yamaloka. Have you heard of anyone surviving the

consumption of poison? Similarly, no one can escape the hand of karma. Please listen to what I have to say. It is for your own good.”

The fisherman ignored Ghanshyam, and when he could not listen to the advice any longer, he threatened to beat Ghanshyam. Ghanshyam stood fearlessly. This further irritated the fisherman. He rushed at Ghanshyam with his net. Ghanshyam snapped his fingers and sent the fisherman into a trance. The fisherman was shown the perils and distress one is met with in Yamaloka. He experienced the punishments imposed by Yama, the god of death, on those who take the lives of other creatures. The fisherman was extremely frightened. He had never imagined being dipped into twenty-four pools of boiling oil nor being stoned by Yama’s attendants. He begged for mercy and prostrated at Ghanshyam’s feet. Ghanshyam compassionately brought the fisherman out from his trance. The fisherman described the perils he had experienced in Yamaloka. He implored Ghanshyam for forgiveness and vowed to change his occupation.

Ghanshyam’s *lila charitas* were lessons in life transformation. With each *charitra*, he improved the lives of countless individuals. More importantly, his *charitras* continue to impact lives even today.

Sparrows in a Trance

Dharmadev and Bhaktimata had sent a messenger to Targam to call Ghanshyam, Rampratap, and Suvasini back to Chhapaiya. They set out from Ayodhya and met the three in a field on the way to the village. Ghanshyam was meeting his parents after several months. He ran towards them and prostrated at their feet. Dharmadev hugged Ghanshyam dearly, and Bhaktimata smothered him with kisses.

The family prepared to harvest the crops from their fields and bring them back to Ayodhya. Ghanshyam’s task during the harvesting process was to ensure that sparrows would not feast on the crops. However, this would often get in the way of playing with his friends in the fields. Every time a flock of sparrows tried to feast on the crops, he would have to pause his game and tend to the crops. As a solution, Ghanshyam decided to put all of the sparrows into a trance (see photo 7). Whenever the sparrows tried to feast on the crops, they would automatically enter a trance and fall to the ground.

Ghanshyam's friends worried that these sparrows had died. Ghanshyam calmly smiled and assured them, "Don't worry. They are in a trance. They will wake up and fly away once we are done playing."

When the friends narrated the story to Ghanshyam's parents, they showered their son with love and appreciation.

Through these *charitras*, Ghanshyam continued to liberate countless souls. Under which other circumstances would a sparrow have the darshan of Akshardham?

The Sacred Thread

At the age of nearly eight, Ghanshyam was to be given the *upavit sanskar* or the *janoi*. On the tenth day of the bright half of the month of Fagun (Feb.-Mar.), Dharmadev and Bhaktimata hosted the grand festivities for Ghanshyam's *upavit sanskar*. One of Bhaktimata's brothers, Vishram Tiwari, and his family came to Ayodhya for the auspicious day. The day before the festival, Dharmadev performed the necessary rituals to prepare for the ceremony. The *mandap* was beautifully decorated, and special trees were planted within the *mandap* for good fortune.

On the day of the *upavit sanskar*, Ghanshyam walked into the ritual grounds holding his father's right hand. His head was freshly shaven. He was dressed in a yellow, silk *pitambar*. The top half of his body was covered with a white, silk cloth. His face shone with the radiance of *brahmacharya*. The atmosphere was filled with the sounds of *shehnais* and *dholas*. A special mat of braided straw and a dark deerskin hung at his waist. The *brahmins* asked Ghanshyam to repeat the rules and precepts for a celibate entering this stage of his life. Ghanshyam repeated each verse with joy and excitement. Unbeknownst to the *brahmins*, Ghanshyam would instill the same precepts into the minds of millions of individuals just a few years later. At the end of the ceremony, Ghanshyam took up the celibate's staff and gourd in his hand and went from house to house asking for alms, "*Biksham dehi bhavati*."⁸

⁸ In the Hindu tradition, the guru teaches, and the disciple learns from the guru. As the gurus's main concern is to instruct and not waste time in other pursuits, the disciple collects food for his guru's family and for himself. When a disciple begs for alms, he says, "*Bikshaam dehi bhavati*," meaning "May you give me some alms." This tradition teaches a sense of humility to the disciple.

During his studies, Ghanshyam compiled a small text with the essence of four important shastras. He included the fifth and tenth *cantos* of the Shrimad Bhagavata Purana; Shri Vasudeva Mahatmya from the Skanda Purana; Vishnu Sahastranama, Vidurniti, and the Bhagavad Gita from the Mahabharata; and the Yagnavalkya Smruti from the *dharma* shashtra corpus. Ghanshyam kept this compilation with him at all times, even during his travels across the Indian subcontinent as Nilkanth Varni.

Pitying Devibaksha

Ghanshyam would rest in the afternoons at an ancient Shiva mandir (see photo 11) on the outskirts of the village of Barhaddapur. The mandir still stands there today. The mandir is isolated and, therefore, makes for the perfect place for contemplation and self-realization. While resting, Ghanshyam would often notice Devibaksha, a *kayastha brahmin* devotee of Shivaji, praying to the deity and asking for a boon. He would lay his head down in front of the deity and implore Shivaji to grant him his wish. Once, Ghanshyam happened to venture close enough to overhear the scribe's prayers. Ghanshyam was stunned. The devotee was asking Shivaji to grant him his next birth as a donkey. Ghanshyam asked the devotee why he wished for such a boon.

The scribe said, "I cannot enjoy the pleasures of this body because I am bound by social stigma. If I were a donkey, I wouldn't have to worry about what people think or say. I can enjoy the sensual pleasures of the body of a donkey without concern for social customs."

Ghanshyam pitied the scribe's reasoning. He asked the scribe to sit next to him on the steps of the mandir. Ghanshyam explained to him the purpose of this human body: "Dear Friend, the whole point of being born as a human is to liberate oneself from the cycles of birth and death. You can enjoy the pleasures of the physical body as any specie. However, you can only worship Bhagwan and eradicate your base desires as a human. You have the opportunity to overcome these desires this time. Why do you want to throw it away? Don't ask for something that you have already done. Bodily pleasures are temporary. Once the moment passes, you cannot enjoy those pleasures

again. However, the pleasure of Bhagwan is eternal. Ask for that. Move forward. Ask for liberation.”

Devibaksha was surprised to hear this advice from a child. He folded his hands and humbly bowed at Ghanshyam’s feet, uttering, “Are you Shivaji in the form of a child? You must have come to liberate me and teach me the true path to liberation.” Ghanshyam’s words saved Devibaksha from having to return to Earth through another cycle of birth and death.

Convincing His Mother

One morning when Bhaktimata was bathing Ghanshyam, she smiled and thought to herself, “Kaushalya was blessed to have Shri Rama as her son. Similarly, I am blessed to have Ghanshyam as my son. It would be quite the treat if I could also have the darshan of the child form of Shri Rama whom Kaushalya had raised.”

Ghanshyam was *antaryami* and, thus, aware of his mother’s wish. After he completed his bath, he put his mother into samadhi. Bhaktimata’s body lay on the bed, but her *atma* followed Ghanshyam into the cosmos. Ghanshyam showed his mother the universe, the means of its creation, and the cosmological presence and responsibilities of all the *jivas*, *ishvaras*, and other metaphysical entities. He showed her the vastness of space and the all-pervasive nature of *maya*.

The entire universe was dark except for the divine light emanating from Ghanshyam. It was this light that helped Bhaktimata see amidst the darkness, literally and figuratively. As they passed through the different *lokas*, Bhaktimata noticed that the deities, *ishvaras*, and sages offered their prayers to Ghanshyam. Ghanshyam blessed them and kept moving forward. He wanted to show his mother that which existed beyond the grip of *maya*.

Ghanshyam identified the various functionaries who regulated the universe at the behest of Aksharbrahma. They had now entered Akshardham. Only Aksharbrahma and Parabrahma were beyond the realm of *maya*. Bhaktimata realized that only Ghanshyam could have brought her to this divine abode. She looked around the abode and noticed that along with Aksharbrahma and Parabrahma, there were countless

aksharmuktas. Each of them had a human form, but their bodies were divine. The light which emanated from even their toenails was brighter than the brilliance of the sun. However, each of these liberated souls was at the service of Parabrahma.

Ghanshyam then pointed towards Aksharbrahma. "Look, Mother! This is my Aksharbrahma. He is responsible for the creation, sustenance, and destruction of all the universes. All of the glory which is usually ascribed to me belongs to him. The only attribute which is mine is that I am above him. I liberate countless *jivas* through Aksharbrahma. It cleanses these souls of their base instincts and presents them to me."

Bhaktimata was spellbound by Ghanshyam's serene and liberating tone. She immediately realized her mistake. The thoughts and wishes which had entered her mind while she was bathing Ghanshyam were due to her ignorance. Ghanshyam was the cause and reason behind the entire universe and its functionaries. Ghanshyam was Parabrahma. Why wish for the darshan of any other avatar?

Bhaktimata was delighted by the sight of Akshardham, Aksharbrahma, and Parabrahma. There was only one problem. She voiced her concerns to Ghanshyam. "After experiencing the divine bliss of Akshardham, I do not want to go back to the realm of *maya*. Let me stay here. I implore you."

Ghanshyam laughed and explained, "Mother, I brought you here through samadhi. You still have to transcend the bonds of your karma on Earth. After you complete that, you will become *brahmarup*. Then you will be able to stay in Akshardham forever. Becoming *brahmarup* is not easy. One has to come into direct contact with me or my Gunatit Sadhu and eradicate one's base instincts. Only after becoming completely pure, can one attain Akshardham. There are millions of spiritually-inclined people on Earth. They perform sacrifices, engage in rituals and ceremonies, and visit pilgrimage places around the world, yet without association with *pragat* Bhagwan or the Gunatit Sadhu, they will not be able to attain Akshardham."

Ghanshyam brought Bhaktimata back from the samadhi and into her physical body lying on the cot in Ayodhya. She woke up and remembered nothing from the trance. Ghanshyam still wanted to fulfill

her desire of enjoying the presence of Bhagwan in her home as her son. However, she would not be able to do so if she remembered that her child was Parabrahma.

Kashi and Back

Dharmadev was preparing to travel to Kashi for the traditional, post-eclipse bathing ritual. Kashi was a pilgrimage place known as a center for learning and philosophical genius (see photo 13). Ghanshyam asked if he could accompany Dharmadev. Dharmadev agreed as it would be the perfect chance for Ghanshyam to bathe in the Ganga—and an equally perfect chance for the Ganga to be sanctified by the touch of Parabrahma.

Father and son set up camp outside of the city in Gomath. The presiding king of Kashi was an elevated soul. He arranged a feast for the *brahmins* and scholars that were in town for the bathing ritual and also provided generous gifts and alms to the revered *brahmins*. The king was also known for his patronage of philosophical debates and scholarly inquiry, so he organized an academic debate at his palace.

Every scholarly debate needs an objective and well-versed moderator. Who would be qualified to mediate a debate hosting such a diverse group of scholars? The king's advisers and the scholars unanimously voted Hariprasad Pande (Dharmadev) of Ayodhya to occupy the moderator's chair.

Dharmadev accepted the king's invitation and arrived at the royal palace on the day of the debate. Hundreds of scholars assembled in the palace. The foremost among them sat on either side of the hall in a straight line. Dharmadev's seat was on a small, elevated platform in the middle of the room. Young Ghanshyam sat to the right of his father.

The scholars debated intellectual positions articulately and succinctly. Each side established its own position and negated the arguments put forth by their counterparts. The debate seemed to continue endlessly. Dharmadev realized that as moderator, he was entrusted with bringing the debate to a meaningful and productive conclusion. He stood up on his platform and clapped his hands twice. He followed the claps with a loud yet respectful call to the pandits. The pandits lowered their tones

and looked towards the moderator's chair. Dharmadev signaled for them to take their seats. Just as Dharmadev was getting ready to deliberate, young Ghanshyam stood up and pulled his father's hand. When Dharmadev kneeled, Ghanshyam whispered in his ear, "Father, if you permit, I would like to conclude today's debate."

Dharmadev was pleased to hear the confidence in his son's voice. He nodded with approval and signaled Ghanshyam to the gathering of scholars.

Many of the pandits were infuriated at the notion of a child deliberating on their intellectual arguments. They found this to be a mockery of their intellect. However, Ghanshyam's calm yet commanding voice brought all of them to attention. Ghanshyam folded his hands and bowed to the pandits as a gesture of reverence.

He began by honoring the pandits' presence: "I am privileged to be in the presence of so many senior scholars from around the country. You are all familiar with the shastras and their different interpretations. Most importantly, all of you are respectful of one another's philosophical stance. This is a great quality amongst scholars. Every philosophical argument is correct from a certain vantage point. However, it is not wise to assume that each argument is complete and correct. We fail to measure the greatness of Parabrahma with our intellect. One can only begin to understand the true form of Bhagwan after foregoing the confidence and pride in one's intellect. In order to understand Bhagwan, one is to rely on faith and not intellect. One should never insult or offend others in the process of establishing one's own philosophical stance. I suggest that one should present one's own argument with sound reason and textual references, which would on its own merit convince the others to agree."

This ten-year-old child mesmerized the entire gathering of scholars. They were all speechless. They held onto his every word. When Ghanshyam stopped for a breath, the scholars shuffled in their seats, impatiently waiting for his next postulate.

Ghanshyam began by establishing that Bhagwan has a divine form. "How can the maker of this unparalleled creation be formless? A potter or sculptor has to have a form in order to create a beautiful pot or sculpture

that also has a tangible form. Similarly, Bhagwan must have a form since he has given all humans and animals a unique, tangible form.”

Ghanshyam summarized his philosophical system in a few sentences. “There are five eternal entities: *jiva*, *ishvara*, *maya*, Brahma, and Parabrahma. *Jivas* and *ishvaras* are bound by *maya*. They do not have the strength to free themselves from the influence of *maya*. They can only do so through direct association with Brahma or Parabrahma. Without this direct association, there is no other way to transcend *maya*. Engaging in countless sacrifices and penances is futile. The Shrimad Bhagavata attests to this fact.”

Ghanshyam used various modes of logic and analogies to assert his point to the scholars. The scholars listened attentively. He planted the seed of bhakti in all of them. Before concluding his remarks, Ghanshyam glanced at the scholars and sent them into samadhi. In the samadhi, they saw Ghanshyam seated in Akshardham as Parabrahma. The king was also fortunate to experience darshan in this samadhi. The scholars and the king prostrated at Ghanshyam’s feet as soon as they came out of the samadhi. They realized that the philosophy expressed by this child was one favored by Parabrahma.

The king organized another feast for all of the scholars and *brahmins*. He generously gave gifts to all those in attendance. He bid farewell to Dharmadev and Ghanshyam and sent his chariot to take them home to Ayodhya.

The story of Ghanshyam’s presence at the debate in Kashi had given him considerable fame in Ayodhya as well. He became the topic of conversation in every home and on every tongue. Yet Ghanshyam would walk the streets of Ayodhya humbly. He wielded power and fame with art and ease. This only made the people of Ayodhya love and respect him more.

Liberating Bhaktimata

One of Ghanshyam’s six reasons for incarnating on Earth⁹ was to liberate his parents by helping them to understand the glory of his true

⁹ Bhagwan Swaminarayan disclosed six reasons for incarnating on Earth to Gopalanand Swami. Nishkulanan Swami overheard this exchange and listed them in detail in his Bhaktachintamani. Refer to the chapters entitled ‘The Nawab’s Question–Six Answers’ and ‘The Six Purposes’ for a detailed description of these reasons.

form as Parabrahma. The day had come for liberating Bhaktimata.

It was the eighth day of the bright half of the month of Kartik (Oct.-Nov.). Bhaktimata fell ill with a burning fever. Dharmadev was caring for her throughout the day. Ghanshyam came and sat next to her. He spoke to her about overcoming *maya* and becoming *brahmarup*. Bhaktimata lay in bed with her eyes closed. She attentively listened to Ghanshyam. Ghanshyam helped her recant her worldly desires. Now, she simply wanted to experience the bliss of Parabrahma. Curious as to how and when she would be liberated, Bhaktimata questioned, “Ghanshyam, I was never given the opportunity to study the shastras. Being born as a woman, I was never allowed to enjoy the close proximity of sadhus and ascetics. How will I be able to overcome *maya* and attain Akshardham?”

Ghanshyam replied, “Mother, you have experienced the joy of my presence. However, those who have not enjoyed the proximity of my physical body must strive to gain the *samagam* of my Gunatit Sadhu on Earth. It is only through his association will they be able to eradicate their base instincts and imbibe dharma, *jnan*, bhakti, and *vairagya*. Gender and caste are irrelevant factors in attaining *moksha*. Your *atma* has no gender or caste. Parabrahma and Aksharbrahma grant *moksha* to all.”

Bhaktimata’s curiosity intensified. She asked, “How is one to differentiate between sadhus? What are the characteristics of such a Gunatit Sadhu, a Satpurush?”

Ghanshyam described a Gunatit Sadhu’s characteristics at great length. “Such a Sadhu is compassionate and loving. He holds no grudges. He prefers to tolerate despite wielding the strength to retaliate. He has no enemies. He forgives and forgets with ease. He does not crave attention or appreciation, yet he gives it to others. He stands strong and fearless like a mountain but knows when to yield for the benefit of those around him. He is above the feelings of joy, sorrow, pleasure, and pain. He lives with the intention to serve those around him. He has control over his senses and mind. His every action is based on the simple thought: How will this please Bhagwan? He lives for my darshan and to hear my *katha*. Lastly, he realizes that his true form is not the

body or mind but his *atma*, and at the center of the *atma*, he is able to see me. A sadhu who is complete with these traits is one who should be valued and sought after for liberation. This sadhu is the gateway to *moksha*. Attaining the company of such a sadhu is the same as being in my presence. It is only through him can my devotees attain Akshardham and thereby me.”

Bhaktimata was engulfed in Ghanshyam’s flow of *jnan*. She closed her eyes and fixed her mind on the divine form of Aksharbrahma and Parabrahma. She was ready to go to Akshardham. Ghanshyam graced his mother with a redemptive glance. Bhaktimata’s eyes closed forever, and her *atma* left her body for Akshardham. Ghanshyam had partially completed the first of his reasons for manifesting on Earth.

After Bhaktimata’s passing away, the Pandes performed her last rites in accordance with the prescribed traditions and rituals. They fed the *brahmins* and generously donated alms to the pandits and needy.

Ghanshyam’s Wrestler Friends

Ghanshyam was a celibate. From a young age, Ghanshyam enjoyed *katha* on *brahmacharya* and followed *niyams* that enhanced his own *brahmacharya*. He also enjoyed listening to the Vedic and Puranic tales of great sages and *brahmacharis*, both male and female.

There were two celibates, Dinasinh and Bhuvandin, in Ayodhya who had adhered to their vows of celibacy for their entire lives. Dinasinh was a *kshatriya*, and Bhuvandin was a *brahmin*. They were both wrestlers. Ghanshyam was fond of both of them, and they too enjoyed spending time with Ghanshyam. Ghanshyam would talk to them daily about celibacy and its importance on the path to *moksha*. The wrestlers, in turn, decided to teach Ghanshyam how to wrestle. Ghanshyam would wake up early every morning, finish his morning puja, and leave for the *akhada* with a gourd of milk and soaked *dal*. They taught him how to make his body agile and flexible. They also taught him several yogic postures to increase bodily strength and speed.

In a few weeks, Ghanshyam mastered the art of wrestling. He would bring worthy opponents to their knees in practice bouts. All of the wrestlers

were pleased to see an eleven-year-old boy make such progress in a short period of time. However, there was a *brahmin* wrestler who envied Ghanshyam's progress and praise. He wanted to challenge Ghanshyam to a wrestling match and show the people of Ayodhya that he was the more capable wrestler.

When the wrestler expressed his wish to challenge Ghanshyam to a duel, everyone laughed at him. He was over thirty years old, and Ghanshyam was barely eleven. How could this ever be a fair match? The wrestler, however, refused to retract the offer. He set a date and time for the challenge, and Ghanshyam accepted the wrestler's invitation for the duel.

On the day of the match, the wrestler attacked Ghanshyam with the fury of a mad elephant. Ghanshyam dodged all of the wrestler's maneuvers swiftly and calmly. When the wrestler lost his energy from his unsuccessful attacks, Ghanshyam suggested another means to compete. He proposed, "Why don't you hold my waist with all your strength? I will get out of your deadly hold in a matter of seconds."

The wrestler agreed. He tightened his deadly grip around Ghanshyam's waist. However, in just the shake of his torso, Ghanshyam was able to loosen the wrestler's hold. Ghanshyam then moved his body with such agility and speed that the wrestler lost his footing and was thrown a few hundred yards away. The wrestler's arms and legs were fractured, and he was bleeding from a wound on his head. Ghanshyam and the other spectators rushed to where the wrestler had fallen. Ghanshyam pitied the wrestler's state. He caressed the wrestler's injured body with his right hand, allowing the wrestler to breathe again.

Word about the wrestler's condition reached his family and friends, and they rushed to the *akhada* to check on him. Upon seeing the wrestler's plight, they started to threaten Ghanshyam. Dharmadev and Rampratap had also been summoned. Tempers were flaring, but Ghanshyam stayed calm. While everyone was busy arguing, the wrestler regained his composure. Though he was in pain, he told all of those present that it was his malicious intent that had gotten him into this situation. He claimed responsibility for the accident and folded his hands in repentance.

towards Ghanshyam. His family then carried him home on a wood and straw stretcher.

Dinasinh and Bhuvandin were amazed by the dexterity and strength that Ghanshyam displayed during the match. They realized that their young student was divinity in human form. Having developed a meaningful friendship with Ghanshyam, Dinasinh and Bhuvandin increasingly spent more time with him, often asking him questions about Akshardham and the glory of Parabrahma.

On the day of Ramnavmi, the King of Ayodhya was parading through the city with a royal procession. Beautiful, young maidens welcomed the king around the city by showering flower petals, vermillion powder, and rice grains. Some of the king's counselors, however, made lewd remarks and suggestions about these innocent women. The women tried to avoid their comments and attention, but the king's men were persistent, much to Bhuvandin and Dinasinh's dismay. Bhuvandin and Dinasinh attempted to reason with the king's men, but they were in no mood for a lecture. They insulted the wrestlers and demanded that they leave. The wrestlers could not bear witnessing such harassment of the maidens and decided to protect them. They started to beat the royal counselors. The king's soldiers were summoned to assist the royal counselors. Though the wrestlers fought bravely, they were outnumbered and fatally injured.

The procession concluded and the young women escaped. Knowing that the young women remained unharmed, the wrestlers ceased fighting. As they lay themselves down on the ground, they thought of their divine friend Ghanshyam. Ghanshyam heard their prayers and rushed to their aid. He sat next to them and eased their pain. He also fetched cold water to quench their thirst. As they closed their eyes and fixed their minds on Ghanshyam's divine form, the wrestlers experienced the bliss of Parabrahma as they departed this world for the next.

Last Words

As the months passed, Dharmadev became increasingly frail and would frequently fall ill. On one such occasion, when Dharmadev lay ill in bed with a raging fever, Ghanshyam started reciting Shri Krishna's *lila*

charitras from the Shrimad Bhagavata Purana. Dharmadev's mind settled on Shri Krishna's divine *charitras*.

Ghanshyam decided that in order for him to take Dharmadev to Akshardham, he would have to convince his father of his true greatness as Parabrahma. He glanced at Dharmadev and sent him into samadhi. In the samadhi, Ghanshyam took Dharmadev through the universe just as he had done so with Bhaktimata. He showed Dharmadev all of the different worlds and abodes. Dharmadev realized that Ghanshyam was none other than Purna Purushottam Narayan, the Lord of countless universes. All along, Dharmadev had thought of Ghanshyam as his son, but after his experience of samadhi, Dharmadev now understood Ghanshyam's true greatness.

After awaking from the samadhi, Dharmadev held Ghanshyam's hand and proclaimed, "Now, I am convinced that you are the ruler of this entire creation. You were born as my son to liberate countless *jivas* in this universe. I have realized that you are not an ordinary human, deity, or *ishvara*. You are Parabrahma."

Ghanshyam smiled and placed his hand on his father's head. Ghanshyam excused himself to bathe on the riverbanks. When Ghanshyam returned, Dharmadev folded his hands and placed his head at Ghanshyam's feet. He implored Ghanshyam to liberate him, "Oh Parabrahma! I have seen enough to realize that only you can grant me *moksha*. Please liberate me. I am ready. I have surrendered myself at your feet."

These were Dharmadev's last words. His *atma* left his mortal body and traveled to Akshardham on the fourth day of the dark half of the month of Jetha (May-June).

Ghanshyam and Rampratap completed the cremation rites at Ram Ghat on the banks of the Saryu River. With the first of his six goals complete, Ghanshyam was now ready to take the next step.

The Last Meal

It is normal for children to mourn for an extended period after the death of their parents. This is, at least, what Rampratap and Suvasini suspected when Ghanshyam stopped playing with his friends, withdrew interest in food and clothing, and spent his days in meditation.

Ghanshyam, however, was preparing for the next leg of his journey on Earth. After liberating his parents, he sought to liberate countless souls through his travels of the Indian subcontinent. Ghanshyam was waiting for the appropriate time to leave his family and friends in Ayodhya for the betterment of mankind. Ghanshyam's mind was firm and resolute with purpose.

Ghanshyam began spending more time out of the house. He would sit in meditation for days on the banks of the Saryu River. He failed to come home in time for meals and barely spoke to anyone at home. Ghanshyam's behavior disturbed Rampratap, who would often have to search for Ghanshyam, scold him, and force him to return home. Although Suvasini was more understanding of Ghanshyam's actions, she worried and earnestly wished to see Ghanshyam return to the way he was prior to Dharmadev's passing.

One day, Rampratap went to the riverbanks in search of Ghanshyam. He saw him sitting there with his eyes closed and his legs folded in a *padmasana*. He yelled at Ghanshyam from a distance and then ran towards him. He woke Ghanshyam up from his meditation and scolded, "Do you have any idea of how this looks? It is late into the night. You wander on the banks of the river. People talk about us—you and me, our family dynamics. They think that I mistreat you now since father has passed. What am I to tell them? Come home now, or else, I will never let you out of the house again."

Ghanshyam did not utter a word in rebuttal. He picked up his deerskin and started walking home. Once home, Rampratap continued to rebuke Ghanshyam. "I don't want to hear your philosophical gibberish. Save it for someone else. If you don't start living according to the rules of this house, I will tie you down and never let you out."

Ghanshyam responded boldly yet politely, "Brother, I want nothing to do with this house or family. I have come on Earth to liberate *jivas*. Mother and Father realized my true greatness and were liberated. I aim to spread the message of *ekantik dharma* to millions of people. I cannot and will not attach myself to a home and family."

Rampratap warned Ghanshyam again, "One more peep out of you, and I will tie you up."

Ghanshyam calmly explained, “Bhagwan can only be bound with love. Do you have what it takes to tie me up with love?”

Rampratap stormed out of the house and thought to himself, “The only way to put sense into Ghanshyam’s mind is to get him married.”

Rampratap and Suvasini searched for a bride worthy of Ghanshyam. They settled on a young maiden from the nearby village of Kambhariya. Her name was Chandrabala Mishra,¹⁰ the daughter of Nihal Mishra.

For the next few days, Ghanshyam spent his days on the riverbanks meditating on his own *swarup*. One day, when Ghanshyam returned home after sunset, Suvasini set his plate and served him supper. Ghanshyam smiled at his *bhabhi* and said, “Dear Bhabhi, this is the last meal you will get to serve me. Feed me all you want.”

Suvasini quickly interjected, “Ghanshyam, we haven’t even set a date for the marriage. Wait until Chandrabala gets here before you stop letting me feed you.”

Ghanshyam was unaware of the agreement made with Nihal Mishra’s family for his marriage. He remained silent but knew that the time had come to leave home.

After supper, Ghanshyam retired to his room. He lay on a straw mat thinking of the times he had spent in Chhapaiya and Ayodhya and the time he had spent with his *bhabhi*, a second mother to him. Tonight, though, he would leave it all behind.

Before sunrise, Ghanshyam sat up in his bed, stood up, and walked out to the courtyard. Ayodhya slept unaware of the loss it was about to suffer. The monsoon mist had moistened the air and ground. The clouds rumbled sporadically and rather softly. Flashes of lightening randomly lit parts of the city. Ghanshyam looked at his home one last time and started walking towards the banks of the Saryu River. He was clad in a white loin cloth. He put a dark deerskin on his right shoulder. He took five meager possessions with him: a *mala*; a self-edited compilation of shastras; a yogic austerity staff; a small *shaligram*, which was the *murti* of Balmukund that he prayed to every morning; and a small gourd for his drinking and ritual water.

¹⁰ Certain *sampradayik* sources also identify her as Chandrakala Mishra.

As he approached the banks of the Saryu River, he turned around and bowed in reverence to the holy city that had been his home for the past six years. He bid farewell to Ayodhya and turned towards the river.

2

Stories of the Child Yogi

*Chaalya uttar dishaama pote ekalaa re,
van parvat odangiya dash-vish, balihaari naval Ghanshyamni re...
Muktnaath jaine tap kidhelu re, saadhi jogkala te Jagdish...
Jagannath jai dakshina padhaariyaa re,
pacchi aavyaa te pashchim desh...
Gaheri chhaayaa ajab Girnaarni re,
bhetya Ramanand sukhkand...
Brahmanand kahe jag upare re, vadhyo din din adhik pratap...*

He walked alone in the northern direction, crossing scores of forests and mountains, I fall at the feet of my beloved Ghanshyam...

*He went to Muktinaath and performed austerity,
the Master of the World, mastered [ashtanga] yoga...*

*He traveled south after arriving in Jagannath Puri,
from where he arrived in the western lands [Gujarat]...*

*In the dense shade of the Girnaar Mountains,
he met Ramanand, the Mountain of Joy...*

*Brahmanand says, onto the world,
his prowess increased with each passing day...*

- Sadguru Brahmanand Swami (1772-1832 CE),
Commentator, Poet, Artist, and Musician

Liberating Kaushik and Saryu

Ghanshyam left his home to travel across the subcontinent to grant *moksha* to the countless *jivas* that were awaiting his arrival. Ghanshyam was now Nilkanth Varni, the blue-necked ascetic, or often simply referred to as the child yogi.

The Puranas share a story in which the devas and *asuras* churned the ocean with the intent to find *amrut*. By drinking this *amrut*, they hoped to become immortal. However, in the process of churning, they first came across a vessel of poison. Their eyes started tearing, and their lungs burned from the poison's fumes. They ran to Mount Kailash to ask Shivaji for help. Shivaji consumed the poison to save the devas, *asuras*, and humans from suffocating in the poison's deadly fumes. Shivaji gulped the poison but did not digest it; he held it fixed in his throat. As a result, the toxins from the poison tainted his throat with a blue hue. Thereafter, Shivaji was named Nilkanth, or one with the blue throat. The term became widely used for ascetics who matched Shivaji's austerity, tolerance, and sacrifice. Ghanshyam's reputation as the child ascetic possessing such qualities spread among the sadhus, ascetics, and the pilgrim circuit.

At the banks of the Saryu River, Nilkanth intently stared at the stormy waves bashing against the banks, as if requesting him not to forsake his childhood home. Nilkanth was undeterred. Morning was fast approaching. If he did not cross the river, Rampratap, Suvasini, and his friends would come looking for him. He needed to put a barrier between them. Nilkanth turned back to look at the sleeping city for a moment and then sat down to meditate on his *atma*.

Kaushik, a cousin of the late Kalidatta, lived in the woods near the banks of the river. He had been waiting for the right chance to avenge his cousin's death, and this night presented a fitting possibility. He approached Nilkanth stealthily. Nilkanth, however, felt the presence of evil around him. He opened his eyes before Kaushik could attack. He smiled at the demon and asked, "How deep is the river? I want to cross over to the other side."

Kaushik seized this opportunity and offered assistance with the intention to drown Nilkanth. "I can help you. Why don't you just climb onto my shoulders? I will take you across."

Nilkanth suspected Kaushik's nefarious objective. He politely declined with his eyes. Sensing his plan had failed, Kaushik madly rushed at Nilkanth, picked him up, and flung him into the river. His deafening laugh drowned out the sound of the river's waves. "That should get you to the other side," bellowed Kaushik.

Nilkanth went underwater. He resurfaced moments later and shot a glance at the beast of a man who was still roaring on the banks of the river. Kaushik immediately felt dizzy, and his body started to burn. Moments later, he fell to the floor clutching his throat. He was suffocating. Upon seeing Kaushik's anguish, Nilkanth liberated the poor soul from his misery by sending his *jiva* to *Badrikashram*. Bhagwan manifests on Earth to liberate *jivas* regardless of their economic and social state and employs different means as necessary for each of them. He liberates even those who bear animosity towards him.

The Saryu River raised Nilkanth to the crest of its waves, carefully carrying him to the other end of its waters. Once placed on the edge of the river's flow, Nilkanth stood up, dried himself, and sat down to meditate under a large tree.

The Saryu River manifested itself as a divine damsel and presented herself for the child yogi's darshan. Nilkanth lowered his eyes and respectfully asked the dame to have darshan from a distance. Saryu Devi's eyes welled up with tears as she wondered why Nilkanth had denied her the privilege to touch his feet.

As Saryu Devi wept, Varuna Deva, the controller of all of the water in the universe, manifested in human form for Nilkanth's darshan. Nilkanth told him to speak to Saryu Devi and explain the reason for this distance. Nilkanth instructed, "Tell Saryu Devi that while I travel as Nilkanth, I am a *brahmachari*. I must follow *ashtanga brahmacharya*. If I was to allow a woman to touch my feet, it would be a violation of my celibacy vows."

Saryu Devi overheard Nilkanth's explanation and replied, "But you used to bathe in my waters until now. What has changed? Moreover, you are Bhagwan. You are above the distinction of gender. We are all your children."

Nilkanth smiled and said, "Saryu Devi, when I bathe in your waters, you are not in the human form of a woman. You are in your divine form

as the daughter of the creator of the universe, Brahma. And the second argument you make is valid. Bhagwan and his Aksharbrahma are above the distinction of male and female. However, I have manifested on Earth. If I don't behave in accordance with the rules of *brahmacharya*, how will I encourage and inspire other humans to do the same? When Bhagwan incarnates on Earth as a human, he must subject himself to all the precepts prescribed by the dharma shastras for humans."

Saryu Devi folded her hands and bowed her head to show her agreement with Nilkanth's reasoning. Nilkanth smiled and raised his right hand to bless Saryu Devi and Varuna Deva. They accepted the blessings and departed.

Hanumanji also presented himself in Nilkanth's service. He folded his hands and said, "Oh Bhagwan, I am at your service. I can travel with you in the woods, protect you, and carry you on my shoulders when you tire. Please give me this opportunity to serve you."

Nilkanth looked up at him and shook his head. "Hanumanji, I don't need anything for the moment."

Hanumanji offered, "If there is anything I can do to make your travels less exhausting, please call on me." Hanumanji then leaped towards the sky and disappeared.

Nilkanth stood up and looked northwards. He had set the Himalayas as his destination. He took his first step in that direction, beginning a 12,000 km, barefoot journey across the Indian subcontinent.

Drowning in Sorrow

On the other side of the Saryu River, Ayodhya woke up to a feeling of dread and loneliness. Suvasini and Rampratap were saddened to learn of Ghanshyam's absence. Their little Ghanshyam had left them. They asked around the city, but no one had seen their Ghanshyam. They sent Ghanshyam's friends to look for him in the city's alleys, in the woods, at the mandirs, and by the banks of the Saryu River. They searched all of those locations twice. However, Ghanshyam was nowhere to be found. Rampratap started to blame himself for Ghanshyam's departure. The city's people could not bear to look at the miserable state of the Pande household. Ghanshyam's younger brother, Ichchharam, would look up

at everyone that came into the house and ask, “Where is my brother? When will he come back? Will you go find him? Who will play with me if he doesn’t come back?”

Moved by their sorrow, Hanumanji came to the Pande’s courtyard. Rampratap and Suvasini prostrated at his feet and pleaded, “Oh Son of the Wind God, where is our little Ghanshyam? Only you can bring him back to us. Please help us!”

Hanumanji laughed mildly and said, “Your Ghanshyam is no longer yours. He was born in your family and spent several years here, but you failed to recognize his true form. Ghanshyam is not an ordinary child. He is Bhagwan manifest in human form. He has to liberate millions of souls. How can he do that while staying in Ayodhya? Ghanshyam will live in your hearts through the joyous memories he has given you. Know that Ghanshyam is well and that he is not upset or angry with any of you, not even you, Rampratap!”

Hanumanji blessed the family and left as swiftly as he had appeared. The Pande household was relieved. They spent the day remembering Ghanshyam’s divine *lila charitras*. The happiness experienced through this *smruti* helped them forget the sorrow felt from their beloved Ghanshyam’s departure.

Northward Bound

Nilkanth traveled day and night—his goal: the Himalayas. He did not care for his body. He lived on fruits and water, and even then, he would only have a small amount after offering the food to the *shaligram* he carried. He would never eat the cooked meals offered by the villagers. He would offer delicacies to his *shaligram* and distribute them amongst the villagers as *prasad*.

What transpired in the tiny village of Amarpur became the classic occurrence wherever Nilkanth went. Nilkanth arrived at the outskirts of the village. A few villagers on their way to the farms noticed this child yogi lost in meditation. Instantly, they were enamored by his presence. They could not stop staring. One of the villagers sat until dusk adoring Nilkanth’s radiant *murti*. The villagers brought a gourd of milk along with a variety of fruits. Nilkanth offered them to his *shaligram* and gave

them back as *prasad* to the villagers. They urged him to accept some of the *prasad*. He ate a few pieces of the sliced fruits and started to hand them out again. They urged him to take some food along with him for the rest of the journey, but Nilkanth refused. He reasoned, “A true sadhu feeds off of what Bhagwan provides for him. He never accrues wealth, objects, or necessities. He leaves finding his next meal up to Bhagwan. Bhagwan will provide for such a sadhu.”

The villagers asked him to stay awhile, but Nilkanth politely refused and resumed his trek. He made it a point to spend the morning and the same day’s night in two separate places. He would sing the *Gopika Gitam*¹ or turn his *mala* while traveling. He never looked up at a beast or human unless he was directly asked a question, and even then, he never abandoned his vows of celibacy. He traveled towards the Himalayas like a true renunciate.

Nilkanth stopped at the ancient Shiva mandir in Lodheshwar, Uttar Pradesh. There he did darshan and spoke to the pilgrims who had gathered to learn about the qualities of a true sadhu. He passed through Jetpur, Pethapur, and Kherilapur, arriving at the Naimisharanya Lake. On the lakeshore, several hundred ascetics anticipated Nilkanth’s arrival. A few days before arriving, Nilkanth had given them darshan while they were meditating. They each waited with a garland of flowers in their hands. They placed their garlands and a basket of mangoes at Nilkanth’s feet. Nilkanth offered the mangoes to the *shaligram* and returned the *prasad* to the ascetics. The ascetics were overjoyed with the chance to see and serve Nilkanth. Nilkanth blessed each of them several times before heading further north.

Sahejapur and Bareli

Sahejapur is a small village on the banks of the Ramganga River, one of the largest tributaries of the Ganges. Nilkanth arrived on the riverbanks where the entire village had gathered to witness the monsoon rise of

¹ Translated loosely as the ‘Song of the Gopis,’ the *Gopika Gitam* is a selection from the Shrimad Bhagavata Purana. In response to Shri Krishna’s departure, the Gopis sang the *Gopika Gitam* out of intense sadness from the separation. The love with which they sang the song brought Shri Krishna back to them, illustrating that Bhagwan is bound by the love-infused bhakti of his devotees.

the river. The waves crashed against the large boulders on the banks, making noises that would have scared even the devas. Since it was time for Nilkanth's afternoon prayers, he decided to bathe in the river before sitting down for meditation. Nilkanth walked towards the elevated river. The villagers tried to stop him by scaring him with fatal stories of the last monsoon, but Nilkanth was unperturbed. To everyone's amazement, the river's waves calmed at the touch of Nilkanth's feet. Even as he waded deeper into the waters, he remained afloat on the crest waves. It was as if the river was accommodating this young yogi's desire to bathe in its waters. Nilkanth finished bathing and returned to the shore. The river's waves picked up speed and height again, seemingly aware that Nilkanth had completed his bath.

The villagers flocked for the chance to touch Nilkanth's feet. He blessed the villagers from a distance and asked for their leave. When they refused, Nilkanth promised to return and quickly moved towards Bareli.

History teaches us that most ancient human civilizations flourished near bodies of fresh water. The pattern of human settlement was no different in northern India. Nilkanth arrived at another village settled on a riverbank. He spent the night outside of Bareli. In the morning, when the village women came to fill their pots with water, they saw this young child rapt in meditation. Failing to remember their original purpose for coming to the river, they sat there lost in the child's divine beauty.

Nilkanth made his way towards Narad Vun. In that forest, Nilkanth enchanted the animals and flora. Trees showered their flowers on Nilkanth's path and lay down their fruits for his meals. The forest's animals gathered around Nilkanth and sat peacefully, forgetting their natural tendencies to hunt and gather. Nilkanth lovingly pet them. Bhagwan's love is universal—it graces humans and beasts alike. Nilkanth stayed in Narad Vun for ten days. From there, he came upon the banks of the Ganges in Bahadurpur. This was the second time Nilkanth was bathing in the Ganga.

The Discreet Brahmin

Nilkanth came to Haridwar in a boat. Haridwar is located at the foot of the Himalayas and is one of the most visited Hindu pilgrimage centers dedicated to Shivaji and Vishnu. Nilkanth bathed at the famous Har ki

Paudi.² Thousands of pilgrims were in attendance. As Nilkanth attempted to navigate away from the crowds to find a quiet place to meditate, a middle-aged *brahmin* clad in white garments gently grabbed Nilkanth's hand and tactfully guided him through the horde of pilgrims. Once out of the crowd, the *brahmin* led Nilkanth inside the Shiva mandir. The mandir was empty. The *brahmin* prostrated at the child yogi's feet and prayed, "Oh Bhagwan, I am blessed to have your darshan. Why have you made me wait this long?"

Nilkanth silently accepted the *brahmin's* reverence. At that moment, the *brahmin's* wife entered the mandir. She was surprised to see her husband bowing to an ascetic given that hundreds of ascetics passed through Haridwar every day and he had never bowed to anyone of them. She asked, "Why are you prostrating at his feet? I thought you were weary of renunciates."

Her husband explained, "Why don't you sit in meditation. You will see why I am bowing at his feet."

The *brahmin's* wife sat in meditation and immediately realized that this young yogi was Parabrahma. She too attempted to prostrate at Nilkanth's feet. Nilkanth blessed her from a distance. She asked, "Bhagwan! Do you recognize us?"

Nilkanth smiled and said, "Of course Mother Parvati. How can I not recognize the Destructor and Transformer of this Universe and his divine consort?"

The Roar of a Lion

Nilkanth left for Rishikesh later that evening. He crossed the Ganga using the Lakshman Jhula, a bridge that is said to have been constructed by Lakshman, Shri Rama's younger brother. Once he crossed the Ganga, he started to ascend Himagiri. Nilkanth took up the road towards Kedarnath. En route, he stopped to have darshan at the ancient Shiva mandir at the Kamleshwar Math (see photo 15) on the banks of the Alaknanda River.

2 Har ki Paudi is a famous ghat on the banks of the Ganga and is one of the holiest pilgrimage sites in Hinduism. It is believed that both Shri Vishnu and Shivaji visited here during Vedic times. Literally, 'Har ki Paudi' means 'the steps of Har, or Shivaji.' There is a large footprint believed to belong to Shri Vishnu on a stone wall near the steps.

After doing darshan, he bathed in the river and decided to spend the night under a large tree in Shripur.

Nilkanth closed his eyes and became one with his *atma*. A few hours elapsed in this manner, and passing villagers would stop and stare at the young yogi. Sunset transformed the bustling village into a barren ghost town. Mothers carried their children into their homes and shut the doors and wooden shutters. Traders and businesspeople carted their goods inside the city walls. Herbivorous animals hid behind large boulders. It seemed as if even the mighty Shivaji locked himself inside his mandir.

The mahant of the mandir saw the child yogi seated outside of the village walls on the banks of the river. He ran outside with his attendants and respectfully bowed to Nilkanth. He opened his mouth to speak but noticed that Nilkanth was lost in meditation. He touched Nilkanth's feet to get his attention. Nilkanth opened his eyes and looked at the aged mahant. The mahant urged Nilkanth to come inside the village walls. "Young celibate, your face shines with the glow of life. You are too young to die. A fierce feline beast roams these jungles. He devours men and beasts. In fact, he comes here to drink water in the middle of the night. Please join us and secure your safety. You will not live to see dawn if you spend the night here."

Nilkanth compassionately smiled at the mahant. He realized that the mahant did not understand the power of the *atma*. Nilkanth assured, "Oh Revered One, I do not fear death. I am aware of the dangers posed by wild animals, yet I leave my well-being up to Bhagwan. My *atma* is invincible and immortal. The beast will not be able to tear my *atma* with his teeth or claws. So why worry? Besides, I do not live in villages and towns. I prefer solitude on the banks of a river or in the woods. I will be fine. Please don't worry for my sake."

The mahant conceded to what he attributed to be the child yogi's stubbornness. He walked back inside the walls to secure his own safety while Nilkanth returned to indulge in the joy of his own *atma*.

The mahant could not sleep that night and would periodically peep out of his window to check on Nilkanth. Around midnight, the mahant heard the roar of a lion. He rushed to the window to have one last look at the young yogi. The lion moved closer and closer to Nilkanth, roaring

loudly as it sprung in Nilkanth's direction. The mahant looked away, unable to watch the child yogi's fate. To his surprise, he did not hear the child scream or shriek. His curiosity convinced him to steal a glance towards Nilkanth. The mahant was shocked to find Nilkanth still sitting under the tree untouched, both physically and mentally. The lion circled around Nilkanth and took his place, with the rest of the world, at the child yogi's feet. Nilkanth lovingly smiled at the beast. Sensing Nilkanth's love, the lion nestled closer to Nilkanth. Nilkanth affectionately pet the docile beast.

The night passed quite uneventfully. The lion stood up shortly before dawn, bowed to Nilkanth, and slipped back into the jungle. The villagers and the mahant ran out in the morning and humbly bowed at Nilkanth's feet. The mahant begged Nilkanth to forgive him. "You are Bhagwan in a human body. Please pardon me for doubting you. I should have recognized you. Please stay here. I offer my position as the mahant of this ashram to you. I, along with all my followers, will become your disciples. This *math* earns close to 100,000 rupees every year. All of that income is at your disposal."

Nilkanth smiled and said, "Mahantji, I have come on this Earth to liberate people. How then can I let myself be tied down by wealth and power? I cannot accept your offer; please excuse me."

Nilkanth respectfully bowed to the mahant and started towards Kedarnath.

Kedarnath and Badrinath

Nilkanth arrived in Kedarnath after passing through Guptkashi and Triyuginarayan and bathing in the warm springs of Gaurikund.

Kedarnath hosts a beautiful mandir (see photo 16) and is also the origin of the holy Mandakini River. Pilgrims were not allowed to spend the night at Kedarnath in the winter months. Even the pujari would make his way down to Gaurikund after the evening *arti*. The pujari tried to convince Nilkanth to join him. Nilkanth remained adamant. "Why would I come down if I want to continue on towards Badrinath?"

The pujari explained that there was nowhere to spend the night. The arctic-like winds and heavy snowfall made it practically impossible for humans to survive. Nilkanth replied, "I will spend the night at the

origin of the river."

The pujari again tried to reason, "My child, there are no trees there. Where will you find comfort from the frigid rains and the assaulting hailstorms? I implore you; please come down with us."

Nilkanth's resolve was firm. He bid the pujari farewell and walked to the origin of the river. Nilkanth spent eight days and eight nights in Kedarnath. Thereafter, he decided to take the western, mountainous route to Badrinath.

Again, the pujari tried to dissuade Nilkanth: "Child yogi, Badrinath can only be reached by returning to Gaurikund and going around the mountains. There are no roads, trails, or trees on these mountains. You won't find any water to drink—just stretches of white, glistening sheets of ice. The sunlight reflecting off these sheets of ice will blind you. There are avalanches almost every day. No one will even know where to look if you are buried under one of them. Worst of all, you won't see any vegetation or life for days on end—nothing, no one, survives there. You will have to sleep on these sheets of ice. There is a stretch of the mountainside where there isn't enough land upon which to place your feet. You will have to cross these passes by clinging to the sheets of ice on the hills. Can you handle all of this? If so, please proceed. If not, please listen to me and turn back."

Nilkanth nodded his head in acceptance of the challenge and set out for Badrinath. After nine straight days of traveling in these conditions without food and water, Nilkanth reached Badrinath (see photo 17). He bathed in the Tapt Kund and sat down to meditate despite having drenched his body in freezing water. Nilkanth went to do darshan of the deity at Badrinath. Vermillion powder had been scattered all over the floor in the mandir. Nilkanth accidentally walked over the powder. As he walked, the pujari noticed that Nilkanth's feet left imprints of the sixteen holy symbols found on the feet of Bhagwan.³ The pujari rushed

3 The sixteen holy symbols found on the feet of Bhagwan are: (1) *swastik* (swastika); (2) *ashtakon* (octagon); (3) *ankush* (goad); (4) *padma* (lotus); (5) *ketu* (flag); (6) *urdhvarekha* (ascendant line); (7) *vajra* (thunderbolt); (8) *jambu* (jambul fruit); (9) *java* (barley grain); (10) *meen* (fish); (11) *trikon* (triangle); (12) *dhanushya* (bow); (13) *gopad* (footprint of a cow); (14) *vyoma* (space); (15) *ardh-chandra* (half-moon); and (16) *kalash* (holy pot). The first nine symbols are found on his right foot, and the latter seven symbols are found on his left foot.

to Nilkanth and prostrated at his feet. He prayed, “Oh Child Yogi, please grace my humble home.”

Nilkanth followed the pujari to his quarters where they discussed Nilkanth’s travels. The pujari was extremely devout, and his love and affection for Nilkanth increased day after day. Rewarding the pujari’s bhakti, Nilkanth blessed the pujari with the opportunity to serve him for twenty-one days.

On the twenty-second day, Nilkanth told the pujari that he wanted to travel to Badrikashram. The pujari was stunned and warned, “Nilkanth, no humans travel past Badrinath to Badrikashram. That land is reserved for divinity. Nar-Narayan Dev resides there. He performs austerities there.”

Nilkanth smiled and said, “Yes, I know. That is why I want to go there. Humans may be restricted there, but am I human?”

The pujari understood Nilkanth’s implicit message. He humbly bowed at Nilkanth’s feet and gave him a coarse blanket to help bear the elements on his trip. Nilkanth accepted the gift out of respect for the pujari’s bhakti but gave it away to an ascetic shivering from the bitter cold at the outskirts of the village. Nilkanth would not add as much as a single piece of cloth to his meager possessions.

Nilkanth in Badrikashram

Nilkanth crossed the Charanapaduka Peak and reached the Urvashi hot springs. Past the hot springs begins the sacred land of Badri Vun. Many explorers and mountain climbers successfully reached the Charanapaduka Peak but were not able to set foot past them. In the Skanda Purana, Shivaji says that past these springs lies Badrikashram, the sacred hermitage of Nar-Narayan Dev. Shivaji further elaborates on the existence of several smaller centers of pilgrimage and mandirs, which are only known to him. Nilkanth yearned to travel to Badrikashram irrespective of any obstacles. He wanted to offer darshan to the countless sages and ascetics who had been doing penance for thousands of years. Most importantly, he wanted to give darshan to Nar-Narayan Dev.

Nilkanth crossed dozens of icy peaks and finally made it to Badrikashram. He granted Narayan darshan from a distance. Narayan was overjoyed and ordered Nar Rishi to go forward and welcome Nilkanth.

“Tell the devas that Parabrahma has incarnated on Earth. They should adjust the climate and environment to ease the difficulties of his travels. Hurry, please go welcome him.”

Himalaya presented himself as a celestial being and bowed to the twelve-year-old celibate. He said, “Nilkanth Varni, I have caused you much pain while you blessed me with your presence on my mountains. Please give me the opportunity to carry you to Badrikashram. I would consider myself fortunate.”

Nilkanth politely refused. “Great One, a pilgrimage is to be endured on foot. Each step in the right direction and with the right intent yields the fruits of a hundred great sacrifices. Please allow me to complete my pilgrimage to Badrikashram on foot.”

Nilkanth walked twenty-five miles daily for twenty-four days. On the twenty-fourth day, Nilkanth reached Nar-Narayan Dev’s ashram. Narayan Dev ran from a distance and prostrated at Nilkanth’s feet. He closed his eyes and tried to absorb the child yogi’s *murti* in his mind and heart. He brought Nilkanth to his own seat and requested him to sit on it. He sat at Nilkanth’s feet with folded hands and requested, “How may I serve you, oh Parabrahma?”

Nilkanth smiled and said, “Your austerity has no equal. You have done this austerity for the sake of the people of Bharat Khand. Your austerity is what keeps the elements convenient and the people safe. I was pleased with your austerity and, hence, came to give you my darshan.”

During the conversation, Narayan Dev would fold his hands and touch his head to Nilkanth’s feet. All of the other ascetics wondered why the *adhishta* deva of the entire earth was prostrating in front of this child yogi. Who was this young celibate? Narayan Dev read their minds and clarified, “This entire universe, with all its worlds, is governed by Aksharbrahma. I, myself, am at Aksharbrahma’s service. Parabrahma is the only entity greater than Aksharbrahma. Aksharbrahma is dependent on Parabrahma. Nilkanth Varni is Parabrahma incarnate in human form!”

All the sages bowed their heads to Nilkanth and said, “Oh Parabrahma, we have been waiting for your darshan for thousands of years. Please grant us *moksha* so that we may enjoy your bliss in your abode above *maya*.”

Nilkanth blessed the sages: “All of you will be born on Earth. You

will be blessed with the opportunity to serve Aksharbrahma. Through his association, you will be liberated and given a place in my abode, Akshardham."

Nilkanth, bound by Narayan Dev's bhakti, stayed in Badrikashram for three months. When it was time to continue his *moksha-yatra*, Nar-Narayan Dev and the sages walked with Nilkanth to the edge of the Badri Vun to see him off. Nilkanth obliged their love and devotion with gratitude and *moksha*.

Nilkanth at the Lake

Nilkanth started on the road towards Manasarovar, the mystical lake in the Himalayas. Tulsidas compares the Ramcharitmanas, the narrative of Shri Rama's *charitras*, to the Manasarovar, describing both as lakes which grant liberation upon bathing in their waters.

On his journey to Manasarovar, Nilkanth did not see life for days on end. Every human and animal had migrated down to the foothills for the winter. After thirty-four days, Nilkanth arrived on the shores of Manasarovar.

Nilkanth bathed the *shaligram* in the lake and then took a bath himself. Himalaya took the form of a celestial being and brought ripe fruits for Nilkanth. Nilkanth had not eaten anything in over three months. He offered the fruits to his *shaligram* and, at Himalaya's insistence, ate some as well.

He spent five days on the shores under the open winter skies. On the sixth day, he bowed from a distance to Mount Kailash, Shivaji's abode, and Rakshastal, the penance hermitage of King Ravana, and then started on his way back. The return path was as treacherous as the path to reach Manasarovar. Nilkanth, however, was accustomed to and even enjoyed difficulty.

Nilkanth returned to Badrinath six months after his first visit. The pujari had returned a few days prior from lower grounds at Joshi Math. He prostrated at Nilkanth's feet and asked of his well-being. The pujari's eyes brimmed with tears upon seeing Nilkanth's body reduced to merely skin and bones. Nilkanth compassionately accepted the pujari's concern and came to his quarters. The pujari prepared a meal for Nilkanth. Nilkanth

offered it to his *shaligram* and then ate a cooked meal for the first time in six months. Nilkanth shared his experiences from Badrikashram and elsewhere with the pujari. The pujari listened attentively, all the while thinking to himself that this child yogi must be Bhagwan incarnate.

The King of Punjab

King Ranjit Singh of Punjab was on a pilgrimage at roughly the same time Nilkanth was in Badrinath. The king spotted Nilkanth from a distance one evening. He walked up to Nilkanth and sat in front of him while he meditated. After some time, Nilkanth opened his eyes to see the king seated with his hands folded and head bowed. Nilkanth smiled and said, “Oh Protector of the People, how may I be of service to you?”

The king was moved by the young yogi’s beauty, articulation, and mannerisms. He said, “I am attracted to your divine *murti*. Please keep me with you. If not, come back with me to my kingdom. I do not wish to be separated from your blissful *murti*.”

Nilkanth replied, “King, we are two different types of people. You enjoy materialistic pleasures of this world. I care for nothing but the bliss of Bhagwan and my *atma*. It would be difficult to spend the rest of our time in this world together. You have been given a responsibility. You must rule justly and fairly. Look for Bhagwan inside all of your subjects. Treat them with respect and love. If you do all of this, I will always be at your side.”

The king was touched by such wisdom flowing from the mouth of a thirteen-year-old child. He bowed his head and again requested, “At least spend some more time with me. Grace my kingdom with your presence.”

Nilkanth wanted to leave for Gangotri the next morning. “King, spend a few days in Badrinath and then descend to Haridwar. I will meet you there in a few days.”

Nilkanth departed for Gangotri. Similar to previous treks, there were no roads. The trails were hard to identify and were nearly deserted. Nilkanth, though, was not one for turning back. He arrived in Gangotri and bathed in the frigid waters. He then headed for Haridwar to keep his promise to King Ranjit Singh. In Haridwar, the king spent a few days in the young yogi’s service. He listened attentively to the spiritual discourses

Nilkanth shared. After satisfying the king's desire to serve him, Nilkanth took his leave and set out for Muktinath.

The path to Muktinath followed the flow of the Saryu River. Nilkanth stopped for an hour outside of Ayodhya. He bathed in the holy waters of the Saryu River and meditated. He left for Muktinath without inquiring about his family and before anyone recognized him as Bhaktimata's little Ghanshyam.

Black Mountain

Nilkanth passed through Haraiya and stopped to rest in Vanshipur, Uttar Pradesh. He laid out his deerskin under the *pipal* tree and sat in deep meditation. The King of Vanshipur happened to pass by the *pipal* tree and was mesmerized by this young celibate's *murti*. He gazed at Nilkanth as his horse circled around the tree. The king managed to stop his horse, dismounted, and prostrated to Nilkanth. He petitioned, "Please bless me. I would be fortunate to have your *padhramani* in my palace."

Recognizing the king to be a true *bhakta*, Nilkanth agreed. The king seated Nilkanth on his own horse, grabbed the reigns, and led the horse through the town square to his palace. The citizens were alarmed to see their king walking while a thirteen-year-old child rode in his place. The king, however, took no notice of their stares and whispers. He was delighted that Nilkanth would be gracing his home.

The king, his queen, and their two daughters, Ila and Sushila, warmly received Nilkanth in their palace. The king ordered fresh, dairy sweets to be prepared for Nilkanth. The king bathed and brought the delicacies to Nilkanth for *thal*. Nilkanth offered the *thal* to his *shaligram* before having just one or two pieces. He gave the rest to the king and his family as *prasad*.

The king and queen were so attracted to Nilkanth's divine form that they decided to ask him to marry their daughters and crown him the King of Bansipur. Nilkanth read their minds. "King, I know what you are thinking. I respect your intentions, but I cannot accept your offer. I have come from Akshardham to liberate *jivas* from their attachment to *maya* and this world's possessions. My life will set an example of true *vairagya*, *bhakti*, and *ekantik dharma*."

The royal family understood Nilkanth's sentiment but was not completely convinced. When Nilkanth decided to leave that evening, the king could not bear the sight of the young yogi's departure. He ordered the royal guards to place him under house arrest in the royal palace. Later that night while the king slept, Nilkanth sent the guards into samadhi and escaped from the palace to continue on his journey.

The forests were green with life. The rains infused vitality into the plants and animals. Nilkanth passed through the dense vegetation and even denser swarms of insects. Nilkanth traveled great distances every day. He willed to climb Kala Parvat, or Black Mountain.

Black Mountain had never been successfully climbed by any humans. The vegetation is so thick that sunlight does not touch the forest floor. Nilkanth walked for a month before he reached the base of the mountain. During that month, Nilkanth had not come across any fresh water. His body was weak and dehydrated. His feet were heavy, and his head throbbed with pain. To make matters worse, Nilkanth lost his way. He traveled for three straight days without making any progress. On the third day, Nilkanth fainted and fell to the ground. A few hours later, he regained consciousness. Fighting his fatigue, He mustered all his strength and dragged his body a little further to a freshwater stream. Nilkanth filtered the water, bathed his *shaligram*, and offered it water before finally taking a sip. He wanted to continue but was too weak. He remembered Hanumanji, and within seconds, Hanumanji appeared with folded hands.

Nilkanth instructed, "Hanumanji, please stay with me as I climb this mountain. I am going to need your help."

It was certain to Hanumanji that this was a test. Bhagwan was asking him for help! Hanumanji folded his hands and said, "Please tell me how I may serve you. I am here for you to command."

Hanumanji immediately set out to gather fresh, juicy fruits. Nilkanth washed them and offered them to the *shaligram*. Given that he had not eaten in days, Nilkanth also ate more fruits than usual. Hanumanji then set out to gather a special type of soft grass. He collected the grass and weaved it together to make a bed for the young yogi. He laid out the bedding under a tree and massaged Nilkanth's feet as he rested. Hanumanji spent the night in Nilkanth's *seva*. He would look up at the young yogi's face as

he slept—it was so serene, so content, so blissful.

In the middle of the night, Hanumanji felt a storm approaching. The trees swayed and their branches rustled in the wind. The clouds roared with thunder, but no rains followed. Hanumanji suspected the hand of evil, and he was right. Just moments later, he noticed that the demon Kal Bhairav was approaching with a horde of witches, demonesses, and demonic soldiers. Hanumanji struck before the evil spirits could counter his attack. He bashed them against the trees and boulders. The spirits begged for mercy. Kal Bhairav, however, was not dissuaded and attacked Hanumanji with all his might. Hanumanji retaliated with the single blow of his mace. He then increased his size to that of a mountain. Kal Bhairav stood up and attempted to use his tantric powers against Hanumanji. However, one blow from Hanumanji's fist was enough to send the demon's head smashing through his neck and into his body. The demon shrieked with pain as he lost his life in the short battle with the powerful servant.

When Hanumanji returned to Nilkanth, he noticed that the young celibate was lost in meditation. Nilkanth opened his eyes and praised Hanumanji's efforts. Hanumanji knew that the credit was due elsewhere—it was Nilkanth's strength that conferred him victory. Nilkanth was merely accepting Hanumanji's *seva*.

Now that the forest had been rid of Kal Bhairav, Nilkanth bid Hanumanji farewell and resumed his trek in the middle of the night.

Austerity in Pulhashram

Nilkanth's austerity in Pulhashram has been praised as one of the greatest undertakings of his journey. However, the journey to Pulhashram was no less of an accomplishment. Nilkanth traveled through Nepal's mountainous terrain. Crossing Black Mountain had taken a toll on Nilkanth's body, but he was not one to waiver from his goal. Nilkanth started following the Kali Gandki River in the hope that the river's route would help him reach Pulhashram. The river would often cut through the dense jungles and hide amidst its vegetation, but Nilkanth was an excellent navigator. Using this method, he stuck with the river and reached Tatopani. Thereafter, however, Nilkanth was unable to hold on any longer and unfortunately wandered away from the river. He was lost.

Nilkanth was in the deepest gorge in the world, located between the two massive mountains of Dhavalgiri and Annapurna. The sound of water crashing from falls hundreds of feet high was deafening. The thickets between the mountains were impenetrable. Nilkanth, however, managed to cut through most of them. Having expended such laborious effort to advance through the thickets, Nilkanth decided to rest for a short while.

That day, Himalaya appeared again in the form of a celestial being. He requested, "Nilkanth Varni, please let me help you cross the river. I will get you to Muktinath in no time."

Nilkanth was determined to make the pilgrimage by himself. He said, "Oh Invincible One, just show me how to get to Muktinath. I will make the journey on my own."

Himalaya was adamant. "Nilkanth Varni, the path to Muktinath cuts through a cave in the middle of the river. It is full of alligators and deadly fish. Even if you do find the cave and manage to cut through it to the other side of the mountain, it is almost impossible to reach the Kali Gandki River. Please don't be stubborn. Let me help."

As soon as Himalaya finished his sentence, Nilkanth plunged into the torrential waters of the river. He swam against the current looking for the opening of the cave on the side of the mountain. After several hours, Nilkanth found the opening and came ashore. He walked for four days and found the Kali Gandki River. He crossed over to the other side of the river and started walking once again. He had not eaten anything in days. Nilkanth noticed some wild bananas on the floor. He peeled them and offered them to the *shaligram* before munching on one.

He rested on the banks of the Kali Gandki River for five days before heading towards Pulhashram. He followed another streamlet which he assumed was the Kali Gandki River, but Nilkanth once again lost track of the river. He saw no option but to dive into the river, which abruptly flowed off the edge onto a lower elevation. Nilkanth traveled down the fall and ended up on the opposite side of the river. He came out of the river and spotted Dhavalgiri, or White Mountain. He knew that Pulhashram lay on the other side of White Mountain on the peak of a mountain called Thorang. Climbing the snow-covered White Mountain was as difficult as spanning Black Mountain. White Mountain is approximately 26,800

feet tall, and Thorang stands approximately 17,770 feet high. Nilkanth remained determined. He crossed White Mountain and followed the Kali Gandki River all the way to Pulhashram.

Nilkanth finally arrived in Pulhashram. He had longed to come to Pulhashram since his childhood. Nilkanth did darshan at the Muktinath mandir (see photo 18). This ancient pilgrimage center is dedicated to Shri Vishnu and Shridevi-Bhudevi. The Safed Gandki River flows in a circular pattern here. Nilkanth picked this spot as his austerity haven. He laid out his deerskin on a hill and stood on one foot, balancing himself in a yogic posture. Nilkanth closed his eyes and drew his senses inwards. His bare body was covered in only a loin cloth. His arms stretched upwards as if invoking the sun. It snowed every day and every night. Nilkanth's mat of hair, eyebrows, eyelashes, and back were covered in a thick sheet of ice. But Nilkanth stood still. He chanted the Surya mantra⁴ tirelessly for six months.⁵

On the night of the Prabodhini Ekadashi, Surya Dev presented himself as a celestial being. He folded his hands and asked, "Parabrahma, why have you called upon me? How may I serve you?"

Nilkanth replied, "I have manifested on Earth as a human. Austerity should be performed by all humans. I have done this austerity to set an example for my devotees. The human body is made up of five elements. I have rid the body of all excess and leveled it down to its bare minimum—water. I have also invoked you as a witness. Our people have invoked the sun as a witness since Vedic times. I call upon you to bear witness to the *ashtanga brahmacharya* that I have followed in my days as Nilkanth."

The sky filled with the devas. They hailed young Nilkanth for his severe austerity and unfaltering *brahmacharya*. They showered flower petals from their celestial chariots. Nilkanth raised his hand to bless them as they departed. Surya Dev bowed in reverence and returned to his abode.

⁴ The Surya mantra is a religious chant spoken when worshipping Surya, the Sun God. Surya is depicted as seated on a chariot drawn by seven horses. Many believe that worship to all the cosmos is included in this powerful mantra. *Brahmacharis* are known to offer devotion to Surya.

⁵ The length of the austerity performed in Pulhashram by Bhagwan Swaminarayan is debated in *sampradayik* sources. Though most hagiographies agree upon the six-month duration, the *Bhaktachintamani* asserts that Nilkanth did austerity in Pulhashram for four months.

Nilkanth's Friend

Nilkanth returned to the Muktinath mandir, did darshan of the deities, and started towards Nepal. His body had diminished to the point where one could see his veins and count his ribs. His stomach cavity curved inwards. It was hard to guess whether the bones kept the skin together or whether the skin held the bones together. Nevertheless, Nilkanth continued onwards. He did not heed his body's declining state or the pain caused by the discomforts of the journey.

Traveling through the dense jungles on the way to Nepal, Nilkanth came across Mohandas, a pilgrim who had lost his way. Mohandas was a jolly, young man. His smile was further widened by Nilkanth's darshan. Although elusive to Mohandas, something attracted him to Nilkanth.

Mohandas spoke first. "Namo Narayan. I am Mohandas. I have lost my way in these woods. Who are you, young yogi?"

Pleased by Mohandas' spirit and energy, Nilkanth said, "I am one who helps the lost find their way."

Mohandas deciphered the meaning of Nilkanth's enigmatic words. He asked if he could join Varni. Nilkanth agreed. Nilkanth and Mohandas developed a deep friendship. Nilkanth taught Mohandas how to meditate and survive in the wild. Mohandas had found a friend, mentor, and guru in Nilkanth.

Mohandas was greatly attracted to the shining gourd in Nilkanth's hand. Mohandas would often check on the beautiful gourd. One afternoon when Nilkanth and Mohandas were crossing a streamlet, Mohandas noticed that Nilkanth was losing his footing on the smooth surface of the stepping rocks. He called out to Nilkanth, "Please be careful. Don't fall. And if you do, make sure the gourd doesn't break!"

At that very moment, Nilkanth smashed the gourd against the stones and cracked it. On the other side of the streamlet, Mohandas lamented the loss of the gourd. Nilkanth laughed and said, "Here you are, alone in the woods. You left your family and don't care for wealth, women, and fame. You want to worship Bhagwan, yet you find yourself attached to a gourd? Don't you find that unsettling? Anyone that looks to me for direction will never remain attached to materialistic objects. I broke that gourd for your own good. Learn to enjoy that which is around you by sacrificing it."

Mohandas regained his composure and started walking with Nilkanth. A little further, they came upon a tree yielding a wild, purplish fruit. The fruit looked juicy and ripe. Nilkanth reached up to the branches, grabbed one, and started to eat it. Mohandas followed Nilkanth's lead, but Nilkanth stopped him. "The fruit is poisonous. If you eat it, you will die!" Mohandas' mouth watered as he watched Nilkanth eat several poisonous fruits.

A short while later four ascetics passed by the same tree. They saw Nilkanth enjoying the fruit and decided to do the same. Nilkanth told Mohandas to warn the ascetics. Mohandas did just that; however, the vain ascetics would not listen. "Why should we believe you? That little boy seems to be enjoying them."

Mohandas responded, "That little boy is Parabrahma."

The ascetics laughed and quipped, "Sure he is. And so are we!" They ate the fruits and met their demise just a few feet from where Nilkanth and Mohandas stood. Nilkanth pitied their arrogance and granted them *moksha*.

Nilkanth and Mohandas came to a small village with a Shiva mandir. Nilkanth asked to take Mohandas' leave. "I am going to go south and then west. Come meet me there. I will keep you with me forever."

Despite feeling sorrowful about Nilkanth's departure, Mohandas eagerly anticipated being in his presence again.

Nilkanth came to Butolnagar (Butil) in present-day Nepal. King Mahadatt and his sister Mayarani were virtuous and ardent *bhaktas*. Nilkanth accepted their *seva* for five months. He lived in the royal gardens outside of the village. After celebrating Janmashtami, Nilkanth left and started towards Pokhra.

En route to Pokhra, Nilkanth came to Mataripur. The King of Matarpur suffered from a severe condition of avarice. He falsely believed that all ascetics and sadhus knew how to make gold. He would keep these ascetics in his palace and care for them for years in hopes of acquiring gold. Nilkanth pitied his condition. He spent a few days in the king's palace. Nilkanth explained the difference between a true a sadhu and a fraud. He instructed the king to save money and use his wealth for the benefit of his people. The king bowed and was grateful for these words of wisdom.

Nilkanth then traveled towards the dense jungles surrounding Pokhra.

Yoga with Gopal Yogi

In the woods surrounding Pokhra lived an aged ascetic named Gopal Yogi. Most current forms of yoga fail to fully make use of the body, let alone the mind and the soul. Gopal Yogi had mastered ashtanga yoga, the highest integrated form of yoga for the mind, body, and *jiva*. Nilkanth had heard of the revered sage in the neighboring woods and decided to visit his hermitage.

The evening sun was peering past the ruffling leaves of the swaying trees. The streams flowed melodiously, resembling the tempered drone of a stringed instrument. There was a straw hut surrounded by a small yet neat courtyard. Nilkanth walked into the hermitage and humbly bowed at the yogic master's feet. Gopal Yogi awoke from his meditation, raised Nilkanth with his arms, and wrapped him in his own arms. They embraced for several minutes. Gopal Yogi asked Nilkanth to sit with him. They talked for many hours as Nilkanth shared his experiences from the Himalayas and beyond. Gopal Yogi listened attentively and earnestly, making it difficult to judge whether he was the guru or the disciple.

The next morning, Nilkanth asked the yogic master to teach him ashtanga yoga. Gopal Yogi chuckled and replied, "Nilkanth do not mock me. I know that you are Parabrahma. You do not need me to teach you anything. However, if you would like to give me the *seva* of teaching you in order to liberate me, I will accept you as my disciple."

Nilkanth was an exemplary student. In only one year, he learned the same ashtanga yoga that Shri Krishna had mastered. He diligently listened to instruction and practiced late into the night. Nilkanth also set the ideal example of a disciple. He treated his guru with the respect and reverence befitting any teacher.

The time came for Nilkanth to take his guru's leave. Prior to his departure, Nilkanth liberated Gopal Yogi's *atma* from his body.

Kathmandu

Nilkanth spent a few days in Pokhra before heading for the waters of the Blue Ganges, or Narayani Ganga. He bathed in the holy river and headed for Kathmandu, the capital of Nepal. Rana Bahadur Shah of the Shah Dynasty was ruling the kingdom of Gorkha. King Rana Bahadur had

been ill for an extremely long period of time. The illness had also affected his mental health. He would round up all of the ascetics and mendicants in the capital and invite them to his palace. After caring for them for a few days, he would ask them to heal him. If they failed, he imprisoned them. At times, he even took their lives. The sadhus in the Gorkha kingdom were frightened and stopped visiting the capital. However, Nilkanth was fearless. After comforting and reassuring the sadhus, Nilkanth assembled a group of sadhus and traveled with them inside the capital's walls.

The king was elated upon hearing that several dozen sadhus had come to the capital. He had not seen sadhus in his kingdom for many months. He went out to greet the sadhus and announced, "I am blessed to have your presence in my city. I welcome all of you to my palace. As you know, I have an illness which is incurable. I will give all of you the chance to cure me. If you fail, I will have you imprisoned. Sadhus have to be versed in tantra. What good is a sadhu who does not know how to use magic?"

Nilkanth pitied the poor king's ignorance. He walked to the front of the sadhus' coterie and explained, "A sadhu is not meant to be versed in sorcery or magic. A sadhu is pure-hearted and compassionate. A sadhu is one that brings other *jivas* closer to Bhagwan. Oh King, health, sickness, wealth, poverty, and fame are all dependent on our previous karmas. Bhagwan gives us the fruits of our actions. Only Parabrahma can change these things."

The king listened attentively, drawn to the inexplicable uniqueness of this young celibate. The king closed his eyes and listened to Nilkanth instruct him on matters of state, faith, and saintliness. The king opened his eyes and said, "Oh Nilkanth! For me, you are Bhagwan."

Nilkanth asked for a gourd of water. He offered it to his *shaligram* and then asked the king to sip the water. The king had only taken three or four sips when his mental and physical health began to recover. He felt rejuvenated, as if he was a decade younger.

The king prostrated at Nilkanth's feet and thanked him. Nilkanth instructed the king to free all of the imprisoned sadhus, and the king obliged instantly. Nilkanth spent thirty days in Kathmandu and addressed the royal family daily.

Nilkanth did darshan at the famous Shiva mandir of Pashupatinath before leaving for the Adivaraha pilgrimage center.

Burning Bansipur and His Own Words

Nilkanth once again arrived at the outskirts of the beautiful, little village of Bansipur in present day Uttar Pradesh. The village was on the shore of a clear, blue lake. The village garden was green with vegetation and hummed with the sounds of honeybees and melodious birds. Nilkanth sat under a tree in the lush garden to meditate. After finishing his evening prayers, Nilkanth opened his eyes to appreciate the natural beauty surrounding him. Nilkanth was enjoying the sounds of a chirping bird sitting on a branch when, suddenly, one of the king's guards fired a shot and killed the small creature. The bird's body hit the ground with a bleak thud. Nilkanth immediately liberated the bird's *atma*, but he could not stop thinking about the gunman's cruel action. He lay down under a tree after sunset to get some rest. However, he tossed and turned the entire night out of compassion for the bird. In the middle of the night, Nilkanth sat up on his deerskin and decided to leave the town immediately. While getting up, he uttered, "Let this city burn!"

In less than a few seconds, the entire city was ablaze. People awoke from their sleep to find their homes burning. Nilkanth immediately realized that the fire was the result of those words he had casually murmured. He ran into the lake and prayed for the flames to subside. The flames started to simmer down. Nilkanth took some water in the cup of his hands and declared, "From this day onward, may my words never see fulfillment if they are uttered in vain or if they may cause distress and harm to others." Nilkanth was careful to never repeat such words during his lifetime again.

Nilkanth headed north towards Tibet, glanced at China from the mountain ranges, and arrived at the Adivaraha mandir. This ancient mandir is on the banks of the Koka River. Nilkanth spent three days here before he turned towards the east.

In Eastern India

Sadhus have played an important role in the preservation and transmission of Hindu dharma. Sadhus are meant to guard and sustain

the ideals inherent to traditions. They are to remind society that aside from the tasks of surviving, providing, and indulging, the human birth is intended for a more productive purpose. The ultimate goal of the human birth is to gain *moksha*. The sadhu is therefore expected to lead a simple, humble, and honest lifestyle, and for the most part, sadhus did. However, with the coming of the Kaliyuga, people began to deviate from their prescribed and expected roles. Some sadhus started abusing the honor and power of the saffron cloth to extort wealthy businessman, control kings, and dishonor women. They carried weapons, consumed addictive substances, and wasted the common man's resources to indulge in worldly objects. They were driven by greed and lust. They destroyed all that came in their way to attain and enjoy these pleasures. They started by killing animals, which eventually made them comfortable enough to slaughter humans for the sake of power and fame. During his travels, Nilkanth was keen on drawing a clear distinction between pious sadhus and fraudulent imitators. By doing so, he helped save true *bhaktas* from falling prey to such immoral mendicants.

King Siddhavallabh was the ruler of Sirpur in eastern India. He was a spiritually-minded soul who enjoyed giving to charity and caring for sadhus in his kingdom. He had built a special dharmashala so that the sadhus could reside in his royal gardens. He would take his queen along every morning to bow down to the sadhus in his kingdom.

Nilkanth arrived in Sirpur and stayed with the other sadhus and ascetics in the royal gardens. One morning, the king caught sight of the young yogi. Nilkanth was seated on his deerskin at the base of a large tree with his head slightly tilted back, eyes closed, and senses focused inwards.

King Siddhavallabh recognized that this young yogi was not an ordinary ascetic. He was not interested in bodily comforts or worldly gossip. Nilkanth spent his days lost in meditation and engrossed in the divine form of Bhagwan. The king and queen sat in front of Nilkanth. They waited for him to open his eyes. Nilkanth sensed their arrival and opened his eyes. The royal couple asked for Nilkanth's blessings. Nilkanth raised his right hand and blessed the king and queen from a distance. The king was impressed by Nilkanth's *brahmacharya*. He

invited the young yogi to his palace. Nilkanth accepted the offer and graced the king's palace.

Offended by the care and respect the king had showed to young Nilkanth, some of the mendicants in the royal gardens started to instigate trouble. Their leader was known to be well-versed in sorcery. He chanted tantric mantras and created a whirlwind. The clouds started to rumble, and it began raining though the monsoon was months away. Sirpur's citizens ran inside their homes as if attempting to escape an apocalypse. Nilkanth remained calm and fearless. He did not move from his seat under the tree.

The mendicant chanted more mantras to destroy the entire garden. All of the trees were uprooted, and the wildlife was killed. Nilkanth, however, was unscathed. Nilkanth glanced at the mendicant and changed the direction of the storm. The mendicant's forces were now attacking him. An uprooted tree fell on the medicant, instantly throwing him to the floor. He lay on the ground breathing his last. Nilkanth's heart overflowed with mercy, so he saved the mendicant's life.

The king witnessed these events. He prostrated at Nilkanth's feet and asked the young yogi to stay and teach him about dharma, *jnan*, bhakti, and *vairagya*. Nilkanth agreed to the king's request. The king would come to the garden daily and sit in Nilkanth's discourses.

After a few days, the mendicant recovered. He was burning with envy—why was this young yogi receiving so much attention from the king? He called one of his own disciples and cast a spell on him. His disciple started to vomit blood incessantly. He challenged Nilkanth, "If you can stop this man from dying, I will admit defeat and leave you alone."

Nilkanth smiled and put his hand on the dying man's head. The man stopped vomiting and regained consciousness. The mendicant was astonished by this child's ability to reverse his spell.

The mendicant fled from the town and was never seen again. The king again requested Nilkanth to grace his palace. Nilkanth stayed in Sirpur until the Kartik Punam (Oct.-Nov.) festival and then asked for the king's permission to leave. The royal couple humbly bowed at Nilkanth's feet and begged him not to depart. Nilkanth sent them into samadhi and gave them darshan of his true form in Akshardham. They awoke from the samadhi and agreed to let Nilkanth leave, for Nilkanth

had yet to liberate countless souls in the southern and western parts of the subcontinent.

Assam

Nilkanth bathed in the Brahmaputra River, which is regarded by many as the cradle of the second oldest human civilization on Earth. The river flows at the base of Nil Parvat, or Blue Mountain, in Assam. Nilkanth did darshan at the ancient Kamakshi Devi mandir. Several mendicants had ruined the ambience of this historic center for pilgrimage. They would extort money from pilgrims by scaring them with threats of misfortune and death through sorcery and tantra. Nilkanth's arrival changed the mood and temper of the atmosphere. The pilgrims and local devotees were attracted to the young celibate's discourses, and as a result, they paid less attention to the mendicants. Nilkanth spoke to them about overcoming blind faith and superstitious beliefs. He explained, "Bhagwan controls everything. No one can hurt you or help you unless Bhagwan wills for them to do so."

One afternoon, Nilkanth was speaking to an assembly of pilgrims when the town's notorious tantric, Pibek, barged into the middle of the assembly and interrupted the discourse. His eyes were bloodshot. He untied his long, curly locks, letting them loose to wreak havoc in the minds of all those who watched. He chanted a tantric mantra to incite fear in the hearts of the pilgrims. They shuddered in Pibek's presence. Pibek chanted a few mantras and threw a fistful of grains on a large tree. The tree dried up into a feeble hedge. Its leaves crumbled into dust, and its trunk shrunk to a fifth of its original size.

Nilkanth was unmoved. He challenged, "Excellent performance of your powers, but if you really want me to believe that you are an accomplished tantric, bring the tree back to life. Prove to us that you can give back what you can take away."

Pibek was fuming now. How could this young child dare to insult him in public? Pibek chanted a few mantras and called upon several demons to attack Nilkanth. The demons raced towards Nilkanth, but instead of attacking him, they prostrated at his feet.

Pibek remained steadfast. He chanted more mantras and called

upon Kal Bhairav and his horde of evil spirits. Again, the evil spirits bowed to Nilkanth. However, this time they attacked Pibek. In a matter of minutes, Pibek was bleeding from every limb. He begged for mercy with loud shrieks. Nilkanth glanced at the evil spirits, and they disappeared.

Nilkanth's sympathetic heart could not bear to see Pibek suffering. He walked over to the dying tantric and blessed Pibek with his right hand. Pibek was forced to admit defeat for the moment, but his ego would not let him rest. Later that night, he summoned Batuk Bhairav, a powerful, evil spirit. Pibek commanded, "Batuk Bhairav, I have invoked you with my powers to destroy that child yogi. You must do this immediately!"

Batuk Bhairav laughed with his mouth open. "You fool! Don't you know? Nilkanth is Purna Purushottam Narayan. He is Bhagwan. None of us can do anything to him. Gain your senses. Prostrate at his feet and beg for forgiveness. He is compassionate. He will forget all of your sins and forgive you."

Pibek came to understand the true form of Nilkanth. The next morning he went to Nilkanth and humbly bowed at his feet. He begged for Nilkanth's forgiveness. He also vowed to help Nilkanth convince other tantras to discontinue their use of sorcery to control innocent pilgrims. Nilkanth helped purify the environment and religious practices at one of the most revered pilgrimage centers in western India by showing that the only way to progress spiritually is by increasing one's bhakti for Parabrahma. Black magic, tantra, and sorcery are but crutches upon which to lean for the weak and unfaithful.

900,000 Yogis

Nilkanth traveled south from Assam. Assam is known for its picturesque but dense jungles. The distinctive terrain, people, and language, in comparison to other regions through which Nilkanth had traveled, contributed to the already arduous journey.

Nilkanth stopped to rest at the base of Nav Lakha Mountain. The mountain was named after the 900,000 ascetics that lived on its peak. Nav Lakha Mountain was a chaste territory where only the pure-minded and bhakti-oriented could enter. These 900,000 ascetics had been doing

penance for thousands of years awaiting the darshan of Bhagwan.

Nilkanth climbed to the top of the mountain where the ascetics anticipated his arrival. Each ascetic stood with a garland of flowers in his hand to welcome Nilkanth. Nilkanth assumed 900,000 forms so that he could embrace each of them. Nilkanth spent three days on the mountain and liberated all of the ascetics.

Nilkanth passed through Chatganv. He was about to enter Ramkot but decided to turn away when he reached its outskirts. In Ramkot, hundreds of mendicants lived in private huts. Though their bhakti for Bhagwan was commendable, they each kept several women to serve their personal needs. Nilkanth thought it was best to avoid an environment in which *brahmacharya* was not valued and practiced.

Nilkanth sped towards Kapilmuni Ashram near Gangasagar. En route, Nilkanth stopped to rest at the Balwakund hot springs. The water in the springs was so hot that the pilgrims could not see past the vapor that arose from the hot water. Thus, pilgrims would bow to the sacred waters and move onwards. Nilkanth, of course, dove in. He bathed for several minutes and came out of the springs unharmed.

Nilkanth reached Gangasagar, approximately nineteen miles outside the city of Kolkata. Nilkanth stayed there for three days so that he could speak with and give darshan to the pilgrims. He sat in a boat and crossed over to the Sundarbans. Nilkanth did darshan at Kapilmuni Ashram where Kapil Dev, an incarnation of Shri Vishnu, wrote his treatise on the Sankhya philosophy.⁶ Nilkanth stayed in the ashram for one month.

Nilkanth was determined to make it to Jagannath Puri, one of the

6 The Sankhya philosophy is one of six philosophical schools of thought in Hinduism. Liberation from suffering and *maya* is realized through knowledge, discrimination, and understanding of the transient nature of things that originate from Prakruti, or primordial matter, and of the fact that the true self is Purush, or soul. The Sankhya philosophy is dualistic because it advocates that matter, which is inert or without consciousness, and self, which is conscious, are different from each other and are the only two basic realities. It also advocates pluralism because it recognizes the plurality of souls. The Sankhya philosophy is an enumerationist philosophy that shows creation through the listing of twenty-five ontological realities in an organized manner. Though in its purest form it is thought to negate the existence of Bhagwan, many of the later schools within the bhakti traditions were heavily influenced by this Sankhya philosophy while maintaining the centrality of a deity.

holiest cities in India, before the Rath Yatra festival.⁷ Nilkanth liberated several *rakshas*, asuras, and *khavis*, or headless man-eaters, on the way to Jagannath Puri. Bhagwan grants *moksha* to all those that he meets. He is *sarva jiva hitavah*—he genuinely cares for all *jivas*, whether good or evil.

The Bear

On his way to Jagannath Puri, Nilkanth stopped to rest under a tree near the Ramji mandir on the outskirts of a small village. He bathed in a nearby lake and sat down to meditate. Nilkanth could not help but to overhear the Ramayana being recited inside of the mandir. He noticed two studious, young women listening to the pujari read and explain the ancient text. At one point in the middle of a verse, the pujari fumbled for an answer. He tried his best, but the two sisters were not satisfied with his exegesis. Nilkanth walked over to the pujari and offered, with folded hands, “If it is okay with you, Pujariji, may I attempt to explain this verse?”

The pujari was pleased with the young yogi’s polite and respectful demeanor and gave his consent. Nilkanth’s articulate speech and experience-infused analysis convinced and charmed the pujari and the sisters. The sisters rushed home to tell their parents about the teen celibate. The sisters had a sixteen-year-old brother named Jayramdas who was a devout soul. He spent his days engrossed in the study of shastras and in Bhagwan’s bhakti. Upon hearing his sisters’ account of Nilkanth’s divine beauty and speech, Jayramdas ran to the Ramji mandir and humbly bowed at Nilkanth’s feet. He begged Nilkanth to come to his home. Nilkanth tried to respectfully decline, but Jayramdas’ love overwhelmed Nilkanth. He agreed to grace Jayramdas’ home.

The days passed quickly at Jayramdas’ home. Nilkanth and Jayramdas quickly became friends. Nilkanth would speak to Jayramdas about his

⁷ The Rath Yatra festival is a Hindu festival devoted to Lord Jagannath that was first celebrated in the city of Jagannath Puri. It takes place on the second day of the Indian month Ashadha (June-July). On this day, *murtis* are placed on huge, richly-decorated chariots which are taken around the city to commemorate Lord Jagannath’s visit to Gundicha Mata’s mandir. The giant chariots are pulled with ropes by devotees for the ritual procession. This festival is now celebrated by Hindus all over the world. Refer to the chapter entitled ‘The City of Juggernauts’ for further discussion of this festival.

travels in the Himalayas. Jayramdas listened fervently and asked questions between stories.

Nilkanth and Jayramdas would often row a small, wooden boat in the nearby lake. One day, Nilkanth, Jayramdas, and Jayramdas' friend, Ramkrishna Tamboli, were rowing their boat in the middle of the lake. Nilkanth urged Jayramdas to take the boat to the opposite side of the shore. Jayramdas cautioned Nilkanth, "Growing up, we were always told to never go ashore on that side of the lake. Apparently, there are dangerous beasts and cannibals that live there."

Nilkanth smiled and again asked Jayramdas to guide the boat to the other side of the river. He assured him that nothing would happen. Jayramdas reluctantly agreed.

Nilkanth got off the boat and walked towards the forest. The two friends cautiously followed Nilkanth. Suddenly, a wild sloth bear appeared from the forest. Jayramdas and Ramkrishna almost fainted as they watched the bear approach Nilkanth with great speed. They regained their composure and climbed a nearby tree. They got to the top and peered down to see if Nilkanth was following. Nilkanth, however, stood unflinchingly in his place. The large, black bear circled around Nilkanth as if doing a *pradakshina*. It then sat by his feet. Nilkanth looked into the animal's tearing eyes and empathized with his sorrow. He caressed the bear's head and consoled him. After a few minutes, the bear stood up, lowered his muzzle as if bowing, and ran back into the depths of the forests. Nilkanth looked up at the tree and called the two frightened teens down.

Stricken with fear, Jayramdas and Ramkrishna were silent during the boat ride back home. Once they got off the boat on the other side, they asked Nilkanth about the bear. Nilkanth explained, "That was Jambuvan's friend and colleague.⁸ He fought alongside Jambuvan against the mighty demon Ravana and also witnessed Jambuvan's fight with Shri Krishna. He was crying because he has been roaming the woods waiting to be liberated. I comforted him and granted him liberation in his next birth

⁸ Certain *sampradayik* sources state that Nilkanth Varni did not grant *moksha* to Jambuvan's friend, but rather to Jambuvan himself. Jambuvan was the wise bear who fought alongside Shri Rama and battled Shri Krishna for the Syamantaka Jewel. He later offered his daughter, Jambuvati, in marriage to Shri Krishna.

when he will be born as one of my devotees.”

News of Nilkanth’s interaction with the sloth bear spread rapidly. The entire village came to understand this young yogi to be Parabrahma. Similar to his prior interactions, Nilkanth did not enjoy recognition and praise. He decided to leave in the hours before dawn to escape the onslaught of attention from the villagers. When Jayramdas and his family awoke in the morning, they were heartbroken to find Nilkanth’s bed empty. Jayramdas set out to look for Nilkanth and to bring him home. After traveling for approximately ten days, Jamramdas caught up with his friend. He ran to hug Nilkanth. He broke down into tears and asked Nilkanth for an explanation. “Why did you leave us? Was our love and bhakti not good enough for you?”

Nilkanth tried to comfort Jayramdas but to no avail. Nilkanth asked Jayramdas to travel with him for a few days. In the days together, Nilkanth spoke to Jayramdas about bhakti, the characteristics of a true sadhu, and the true method of attachment to Bhagwan and his Gunatit Sadhu.

Not too far from where he had met Jayramdas, Nilkanth left one morning for Jagannath Puri. Nilkanth stopped to do darshan in Bhubaneshwar, the capital of present-day Orissa and home to the famous Lingaraja Mahadeva mandir, and Sakshigopal, where Hindu pilgrims pay homage to the mandir commemorating Shri Krishna’s incarnation as a *sakshi*, or witness, to true love between devotees.

In Jagannath Puri

The English word ‘juggernaut’ is said to have been derived from the Sanskrit word ‘Jagannath,’ which literally means ‘ruler or lord of the world.’ Jagannath Puri is one of the most important pilgrimage centers for Hindus in India. There is a mandir dedicated to Shri Krishna. The English word traces its origin back to the awe-inspiring sights and sounds of the famous Rath Yatra festival in the city. The *murti* of Bhagwan Jagannath is placed on a massive chariot, which is then pulled by tens of thousands of devotees around the city in procession. The enormous amount of force and energy resonating in the people and the environment encouraged scholars to adopt the word into the English language as a noun to describe overwhelming energy and force.

Nilkanth was overjoyed to finally be in the ‘City of Jagannathji.’ He did darshan of the *murti* and walked over to the Garuda Stambha. The Garuda Stambha is found in many mandirs dedicated to Shri Vishnu and Shri Krishna. It is a long staff with a *murti* of Shri Vishnu’s devotee and celestial carrier, Garuda, on top. Close to three hundred years before Nilkanth’s arrival, Shri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, an exalted Krishna-*bhakta* and the founding *acharya* of the Gaudiya Sampradaya,⁹ would sit and sing the glory of Shri Krishna. His love was said to bring Jagannathji out of the mandir’s *murti* to listen to him sing kirtans. Nilkanth sat in that very spot to meditate, turn his *mala*, and listen to the daily *katha*.

As the days passed, the chief pujari of the Jagannath Mandir (see photo 19) observed that Nilkanth spent his days without eating or drinking. The pujari brought *prasad* from the mandir deity’s *thal* to Nilkanth. Nilkanth accepted the pujari’s offering.

During his stay, Nilkanth would often bathe in Chandan Sarovar, Indradyumna Sarovar, and the Bay of Bengal. King Divyashinhdev noticed Nilkanth working on his yogic asanas and felt a divine attraction to his *murti*. He walked over to the young yogi and prostrated at his feet. The king was kind, generous, and fair. He would spend his leisure time giving alms to the poor and listening to *katha*. He asked Nilkanth to initiate him as a disciple, and Nilkanth obliged. The king went into samadhi where he saw Nilkanth’s true form as Parabrahma. After he awoke from the samadhi, he asked Nilkanth to grace his palace.

Jayramdas too had made his way to Jagannath Puri. He found Nilkanth and humbly bowed at his feet. He begged Nilkanth to let him stay with him. Nilkanth could not refuse the teen’s zeal.

9 The Gaudiya Sampradaya was founded in the sixteenth century by Shri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu in Bengal. It is named after the region in which it originated, Gaud or Bengal. It follows many of the rituals and traditions prescribed by the older Vaishanav *sampradayas* from southern India. The *sampradaya*’s central deities are Shri Krishna and Radhaji. Chaitanya Mahaprabhu is celebrated as the ideal *bhakta*, one who was lost in constant spiritual union due to his intense love for Shri Krishna and Radhaji. It is founded in the philosophical tradition called the Achintya Bheda Abheda in which the Supreme Being and the *jivas* are inconceivably and simultaneously one and different. It views Shri Krishna as the Supreme God from which all other incarnations manifest. The *sampradaya* later spread to Vrindavan, the heart of Krishna-bhakti. Its most visible presence is seen through the ISKCON or ‘Hare Krishna’ movement.

Nilkanth moved to the shores of Indradyumna Sarovar. He visited the mandir daily, sat in front of the *murti*, and spent his day in its meditation.

Every year during the monsoon, large hordes of mendicants and ascetics would come to live in the forests surrounding Indradyumna Sarovar. They would rob pilgrims and wrest money from the king through intimidation. One afternoon when the king came to listen to Nilkanth's discourses, he asked, "Is there no end to the torture these mendicants wreak on my people and the kingdom? I know that sadhus have a special place in our dharma, but these thieves and barbarians cannot be called sadhus, can they?"

Nilkanth replied, "Oh King, rest assured, one day I will create a coterie of sadhus that will represent the ideals of dharma, bhakti, *jnan*, and *vairagya*. They will draw inspiration from the life of a Gunatit Sadhu, Aksharbrahma himself."

The king was relieved to hear such reassurances from Nilkanth.

Nilkanth celebrated the Rath Yatra festival in Jagannath Puri in 1797. The king invited Nilkanth to sit on the central chariot. Nilkanth's *murti* enthralled the hearts of the thousands of pilgrims who had gathered to celebrate the festival in the ancient city. Nilkanth's presence evoked the feeling that Bhagwan Jagannath himself had emerged from the *murti* to give darshan in human form.

Though thousands felt blessed to have this memorable darshan of the child yogi, many burned with envy. The king increasingly spent more time at Nilkanth's place on the shores of the lake. This further displeased the mendicants. One morning, a jealous mendicant tried to prove his authority over Nilkanth. "Hey, you, little one! Do what I ask of you. Go fetch me some vegetables from the garden."

Usually, Nilkanth enjoyed spending his time in the *seva* of elderly sadhus and ascetics. However, he discerned that this mendicant was only asking for this favor to feed his ego. Nilkanth replied, "Oh Revered One, I can't follow your orders. How can I take the life of a poor plant? I am sorry that I can't follow your *agna*."

The mendicant was infuriated and threatened to use force unless Nilkanth went immediately to the garden. A few ascetics watching from a distance were disgusted by the mendicant's tactics of intimidating a

child. They stepped in-between the mendicant and child yogi. In a few minutes, ten thousand mendicants formed opposing sides, threatening to kill each other. The two sides eventually battled with spears, tridents, maces, and swords. The king sent his men to maintain peace, but the mendicants were difficult to control. The king's men carried Nilkanth to safety inside the palace walls. The mendicants' forces settled equally, which eventually led to their mutual destruction. Nilkanth was disheartened to learn of this violence. Nilkanth had never used physical force, arms, or violence to assert a point. For this reason, he decided to leave Jagannath Puri.

After spending ten months in the presence of Jagannathji's *murti*, Nilkanth transitioned to the south. With Jayramdas at his side, Nilkanth visited Adi Kurma and came to Manaspur. Adi Kurma is said to be the holy spot graced by Shri Vishnu in his incarnation as the great tortoise.¹⁰

Saving the Shaligrams

Nilkanth decided to rest in Manaspur for a few days. King Satradharma of Manaspur would often ride out on his horse to visit the scores of ascetics that lived in the woods outside of his kingdom. On that particular day, he noticed Nilkanth. The young yogi resembled the human form of Shiva. The king got off his horse and bowed down to Nilkanth. He sat and spoke to Nilkanth for hours that day as he had much to discuss.

There was a horde of mendicants who lived in the woods outside the kingdom and they harassed the townspeople. More notoriously, they set a bad example for the townspeople by drinking alcohol, smoking intoxicating substances, and misconstruing Hindu rituals to fit their liking and needs. The king told Nilkanth about the leader of these mendicants who had gathered nearly one hundred different *shaligrams* and had placed them in a large clay gourd. The mendicant would pour water into the gourd every morning, shake it, and dump the *shaligrams* onto a dirty

10 In his second incarnation, Shri Vishnu assumed the form of a tortoise or *kurma*. When the devas and asuras set forth to churn the ocean of milk in hopes of finding *amrut*, the cosmic mountain Mount Mandarachala was used as a churning rod. However, as they churned the ocean, Mount Mandarachala began to sink. Shri Vishnu, in his second incarnation as Kurma, dove to the bottom of the ocean to lift up Mount Mandarachala by supporting it on his back.

piece of cloth. He would then smoke marijuana near the *shaligrams*, as if offering them a whiff of the lethal drug. The king's eyes welled up with tears as he described the scene. Nilkanth was moved to action and elected to help the king confiscate the *shaligrams* from the mendicant. First, Nilkanth sent Jayramdas to speak to the mendicant. That, however, did not work. In fact, Jayramdas barely escaped the mob in one piece. Nilkanth decided to resolve the problem on his own.

That night, while the mendicants slept, Nilkanth made the *shaligrams* fly out of the gourd and land in the river. The next morning, the mendicant shook the gourd only to find his *shaligrams* missing. He immediately suspected the young yogi and his understudy to be the conspirators. He gathered his disciples to attack Nilkanth. As they encircled Nilkanth and Jayramdas, they felt their bodies burning. They dropped their weapons and fell to the floor. The mendicant willed for his revenge. He stood at a distance and threw stones at Nilkanth. However, none of the stones landed within four feet of Nilkanth's seat.

The king learned of the planned assault and sent his men to thwart the attack. The mendicants were ordered to leave the kingdom. The king then asked Nilkanth to bless him. Nilkanth sent him into samadhi. The king was enthused to see Nilkanth as Bhagwan in Akshardham.

Nilkanth expressed his wish to continue further south. The king bade Nilkanth farewell and offered him a special walking stick made of *shisham*, or East Indian Rosewood, as a token of his bhakti. Nilkanth and Jayramdas then left Manaspur.

Gur-water, Smallpox, and the King of Tilanga

Nilkanth crossed the Krishna River and Godavari River before arriving at the ancient mandir dedicated to the Narasimha incarnation of Shri Vishnu.¹¹ As a custom, the pujari offered water sweetened with gur or

¹¹ As his fourth incarnation, Shri Vishnu manifested on Earth in the form of Narasimha avatar solely to protect his ideal devotee, Prahlad, from his demonic father, Hiranyakashipu. Narasimha avatar was neither human nor beast: his head was that of a lion, while the remainder of his body was that of a human. This half human, half animal form enabled Shri Vishnu to kill Hiranyakashipu, who had been granted three boons for invincibility, one of which was that he could not be killed by any human being or any animal.

gol to the deity. Nilkanth accepted the *prasad* from the pujari and headed for the dense jungles.

The road split into several directions. Before Nilkanth chose a path, Jayramdas made an announcement. “Up until today, I assumed that I would be able to convince you to come home with me. It turns out that I was wrong. If you don’t want to come home with me, I am going to turn back today.”

Nilkanth looked at Jayramdas with sympathy and said, “Friend, I understand. I am going to continue onwards. When you decide to leave this world as you know it and join my world forever, come to Gujarat. I will await your arrival there.”

Jayramdas took Nilkanth’s leave with tears in his eyes. On his way home, Jayramdas became ill with a severe case of smallpox. There was no way he would survive. He prayed to Nilkanth, “Oh Parabrahma! If you let me live, I won’t go home. I will head towards Gujarat now. I will spend my days in your bhakti and wait for you to make your way there.”

Nilkanth heard Jayramdas’ prayers and healed him. Jayramdas recovered and headed towards Gujarat as promised.

Nilkanth, on the other hand, arrived in Venkatadri. Venkatadri is the most popular pilgrimage center in Andhra Pradesh. There, he did darshan of Tirupati Balaji.

Nilkanth decided to rest under a tree in the woods. He found a demon sleeping on the ground. Nilkanth gently tapped the demon’s head with his right toe. The cannibal demon woke up and prostrated at Nilkanth’s feet. Nilkanth sent him into samadhi and gave him darshan as Parabrahma.

The demon spoke of an intriguing story. He was previously the King of Tilanga located in present-day northern Andhra Pradesh. Two *brahmins* in his kingdom were bickering over a domestic dispute, and he was asked to rule on the matter. He picked the side he considered to be just based on his study of the shastras. The losing *brahmin* immediately cursed the king, stating that the king would turn into a demon. The other *brahmin* alleviated the king’s misery and revealed, “Though you may have to suffer for a few years, Parabrahma will give you darshan in human form. You will be liberated by Bhagwan.”

Nilkanth smiled upon hearing the detailed account and granted the

demon *moksha*. “You will be born again as Rata Bashiya. You will be my devotee. That will be your last birth. I will take you to Akshardham.”

Having liberated the King of Tilanga, Nilkanth started for Kanchipuram.

The Ungrateful One

Bhagwan Swaminarayan speaks of the next portion of his journey as Nilkanth in southern India in Vachanamrut, Gadhada I 10.

As Nilkanth was passing through the forest, he heard the mellifluous voice of a *brahmin* named Sevakram singing *shlokas* from the Shrimad Bhagavad Gita and the Shrimad Bhagavata Purana. Nilkanth was instantly attracted to the clear diction and pronunciation. Nilkanth decided to travel with Sevakram.

Despite possessing knowledge of these sacred texts, Sevakram's character was poor. He was greedy, selfish, and despotic. He had nearly forty kilograms of personal belongings and approximately three thousand gold coins in his possession. However, Nilkanth was not interested in any of his things. He only cared for Sevakram's bhakti and *jnan*.

A few days had passed when Sevakram suddenly fell ill with severe diarrhea. By noon, Sevakram was passing a large amount of blood in his stool. He fell to the floor unable to continue. He started to cry, “Who will take care of me? I am all alone. I might as well commit suicide.”

Nilkanth felt sorrow for Sevakram and reassured him by offering to care for him. Nilkanth carried Sevakram to a quiet place under a banyan tree and helped him lay down. For the next two months, Nilkanth selflessly cared for Sevakram. He would clean the ground under the tree, lay a fresh layer of banana leaves to make a soft bed one foot off the ground, and change these leaves several times a day. Even though the closest river was a kilometer away, Nilkanth would carry all of Sevakram's soiled clothes to the riverbank and wash them twice a day.

Sevakram started to recover. Nilkanth's aid helped Sevakram regain some of his physical strength, but he was still weak and needed energy to help him continue his journey. He took out a gold coin and handed it to Nilkanth. “Go to the village and fetch me ghee, flour, vegetables, sugar, and rice. Make me some tasty food. I need to put on weight and increase my stamina.”

Nilkanth bought the groceries and cooked Sevakram's meal. Sevakram finished all of the food. He did not care to save any food for Nilkanth. This continued for several days. At one point, Sevakram was strong enough to digest several kilograms of *shiro*. Yet, he made Nilkanth complete all of his personal chores and did not offer Nilkanth any food. Nilkanth would clean up after the unmindful *brahmin* and then would walk back to the village where he would beg for alms. He ate only on days when something was given and starved on the rest. The days he went hungry started to outnumber the days he was given food.

Sevakram was the epitome of ungratefulness. He never bothered to ask, "Nilkanth, have you eaten? Why don't you eat with me?" Nor did he ever say, "Nilkanth, there is enough for both of us. Come sit and eat with me."

Able to continue his journey, Sevakram ordered Nilkanth to carry all of his possessions and never offered to assist Nilkanth with the weight. Nilkanth was aware that Sevakram was completely healthy. Realizing that Sevakram was exploiting his spirit of service, Nilkanth left him and continued towards Kanchipuram.

This story from Nilkanth's life teaches the spiritual aspirant three critical lessons. One, selfless *seva* is at the foundation of spiritual progress. No *seva* is too small or too great for a spiritual aspirant. Second, people with ungrateful personalities should be forsaken, for they may stunt one's own spiritual progress. Third, to accept the favors or assistance of an individual without acknowledgement or consideration, is a grave sin—a sin that results in Bhagwan forsaking the spiritual aspirant.

In the South

Nilkanth did darshan in Vishnu Kanchi and Shiva Kanchi, two large and ancient mandirs in Kanchipuram. Nilkanth then traveled to Mannargudi and did darshan of the four-armed *murti* of Shri Vishnu at the Rajgopal mandir.

Nilkanth quickly left for Srirangam Kshetra. Srirangam is one of the eight self-manifest sacred sites for Hindus in the south. It is said that the entire 156 acre campus was given by Shri Vishnu himself. Nilkanth did darshan of the *murtis* of Shridevi-Bhudevi, along with the four-armed

Shri Vishnu.

Srirangam is also an important center for pilgrimage in the Shri Vaishnav Sampradaya founded by Shri Ramanujacharya.¹² Nilkanth stayed here for two months. He met with senior scholars from the Shri Vaishnav Sampradaya to understand the Vishishtadvaita school of thought.¹³ He inquired about the existence of five eternal metaphysical elements. However, those he asked had only heard of three—*jiva*, *maya*, Brahman. Although Nilkanth felt this explanation to be incomplete, he was pleased with the Vaishnav doctrines of *murti puja*, *sakar upasana*, and *kinkar bhav* or *das bhav*.

Nilkanth traveled at a steady pace and reached Setubandh Rameshwaram, Dhanushyakoti, and Dharbhashayan. From there he went to Sunderraj, where he had the darshan of Shridevi-Bhudevi and Shri Vishnu. While speaking to the pujari, Nilkanth realized that he missed Bhutpuri, Shri Ramanujacharya's birthplace (known today as Sriperumbudur). The pujari pointed out, "Bhutpuri was just 20 miles from Kanchipuram. It is a whopping 250 miles from here. Don't worry about it. Let it be."

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- 12 The Shri Vaishnav Sampradaya was founded by Ramanujacharya (c. eleventh century). The sect was principally popularized by the Alvars (twelve bhakti poets from southern India, who lived between the sixth and ninth century and who composed Tamil bhajans in praise of Narayana and his consort) and by Ramanujacharya. The *sampradaya*'s theological school of thought is called Vishishtadvaita (see footnote for further discussion). The Supreme God possesses a physical form; is the only cause of the universe's creation, sustenance and destruction; and reveals Himself through incarnations, sacred shastras, *murtis* and the Guna-tit Sadhu. A central tradition of the *sampradaya* is *murti-puja*. The concept of *prapti*, or total surrenderance, is at the heart of the *sampradaya*'s theological beliefs.
- 13 The Vishishtadvaita school of Vedanta means qualified non-dualism. It was founded by Ramanujacharya, a Vaishnav *acharya* and proponent of the the Shri Vaishnav Sampradaya (see footnote for further discussion). It accepts the existence of the Supreme Being to be non-dual, different from individual souls, with a divine form, and full of innumerable, divine qualities. Individual souls are different from one another and are neither parts of nor identical to Parabrahma. It propogates the existence of three realities: Brahman, *jivas* (that which is sentient), and *maya* (that which is non-sentient). Bhagwan is the soul and the *jiva* and *maya* constitute his body. *Jivas* and *maya* are distinct but not independent from Bhagwan because they are dependent on Bhagwan for their existence and are controlled by Bhagwan.

Nilkanth smiled and said, "Of course not, I will go no matter what." Nilkanth turned back from Sunderraj.

Feeding Nilkanth Varni

Nilkanth took a short cut through the dense jungles to get to Bhutpuri. He walked for five days without food and water. These frequent spells of hunger and dehydration were taking a toll on his body. This time, Nilkanth could not continue any longer. On the morning of the sixth day, Nilkanth collapsed in the jungle and lost consciousness for a few minutes. He attempted to drag his body further. He leaned on a nearby tree to pick himself up. After trudging ahead a few more minutes, Nilkanth found a freshwater well. He dipped the gourd into the well and pulled out some cool, clear water. Nilkanth placed the *shaligram* into the water to bathe it. To his surprise, the *shaligram* drank all the water. He repeated this five times, and each time the *shaligram* drank all of the water. Finally, the sixth time, the water was left untouched in the gourd for Nilkanth.

Nilkanth was moved. If the *shaligram* was this thirsty, it must be equally hungry. But where would he find food to offer to the *shaligram*? At that moment, a couple riding on a bull passed by Nilkanth. The couple was none other than Shivaji and Parvatiji. They bowed to the young yogi with folded hands. Parvatiji cooked a simple meal for Nilkanth. She wanted to serve Nilkanth a second time, the first occasion having been in Haridwar a few years ago. Nilkanth offered the *thal* to his *shaligram*. He also ate a small portion before giving the rest back to Shivaji as *prasad*. Shivaji and Parvatiji were overjoyed to have been able to participate in this opportunity to serve Nilkanth. They took the *prasad* and disappeared.

Nilkanth walked for another ten days to get to Bhutpuri. He went more than three hundred miles off track to do darshan at this special pilgrimage center. Nilkanth's example of deep devotion, illustrated by the laborious, self-imposed expedition to Bhutpuri, is an important lesson for the *bhakta*. He left Bhutpuri and walked back for twelve days to a small town not too far from Darbhashayan called Totadri.

Flawed Brahmacharya

Totadri Pith (see photo 20) is known as the main seat of the Shri Vaishnav Sampradaya. The *pith* buzzed with energy, an energy of bhakti, scholarly curiosity, and preservation of traditions. Nilkanth met the mahant of the *pith*, Jeeyar Swami. Nilkanth bowed to the aged ascetic. The mahant gave Nilkanth permission to live in the *pith* and to study the Vaishnav shastras and interpretations. Nilkanth studied the *Shri Bhashya* and other *sampradayik* texts. Two months passed rather quickly in this manner.

One afternoon, Nilkanth was wrestling with a philosophical exegesis of a particular metaphysical argument. He tried to understand the author's viewpoint but could not seem to make sense of it. He walked into the mahant's quarters to find a solution to his intellectual query. Nilkanth was dumbfounded by what he saw in Jeeyar Swami's quarters. Jeeyar Swami was sitting on his bed surrounded by several women and engaging in flirtatious conversation and other promiscuous behaviours. Nilkanth lowered his eyes and advised, "Oh Mahantji, you are the leader of all the ascetics in this *pith*. You are their caretaker and adviser. If you engage in such activities, what kind of example will you set for them? As an ascetic, you are to follow *ashtanga brahmacharya*."

The mahant refused to be lectured and ordered Nilkanth to leave the *pith*. Nilkanth bowed to the aged ascetic and left Totadri at once.

Although his stay ended with an unfortunate incident, Nilkanth was pleased to have had the opportunity to study Shri Ramanujacharya's philosophical treatises. His interactions with the mahant also taught him to remain vigilant on the path of *brahmacharya*.

Nilkanth traveled for ten miles to Nambi Narayan. From there, he passed through the pilgrimage centers in Kanyakumari, Suchindram, Thiruvananthapuram (fomerly known as Trivandrum), Janardan, Adikesavay, and Guruvayur. He moved towards Maharashtra passing Kishkindha, the famous city of the King of the Monkeys, King Sugreeva.¹⁴ After visiting Pandharpur and Pune, he arrived in Burhanpur.

¹⁴ King Sugreeva was the ruler of the monkey kingdom of Kishkindha, in current day Karnataka. King Sugreeva and his army of monkeys aided Shri Rama in rescuing his wife, Sita, from the demon king, Ravana. King Sugreeva is extolled as one of Shri Rama's greatest devotees.

Making a Promise in Burhanpur

Nilkanth stopped to bathe at the union of the Tapi River and the Mona River. However, several male and female pilgrims were bathing together in the water. Nilkanth kept his distance from there and bathed in the silent waters of the Tapi River further upstream.

Burhanpur is not a chief place of pilgrimage, but Nilkanth had stopped to make a promise to two devotees. Nilkanth sat down to meditate after bathing. Two merchants, Shiva Shah and Govind Shah, were passing by the banks of the Tapi River on their way to town. They noticed this young yogi lost in meditation. His austere looks and divine radiance held both of them at a standstill. They sat in front of Nilkanth until he awoke from his meditation. Nilkanth opened his eyes and noticed the pure-hearted devotees. He smiled tenderly at them. They asked, "Won't you grace our home? The radiance on your face suggests that you are some form of divinity."

Nilkanth quietly followed them to their homes. The devotees asked *brahmins* to make pure delicacies for the young yogi. While the delicacies were being prepared, Nilkanth called the devotees closer to him and addressed them. He spoke to them about Parabrahma and Aksharbrahma's complete glory. He also drew their attention to the characteristics of a true sadhu. Nilkanth's speech was enchanting. Once the food items were made, Nilkanth offered *thal* to his *shaligram* before having some food mixed with water in a bowl. He gave the remaining food to the family members as *prasad*. Nilkanth had earned their affection in an extremely short period of time. When Nilkanth prepared to leave, the devotees were in tears. Nilkanth calmed them by making a promise, "Be patient. In the future, I will send one of my sadhus to help you progress on the spiritual path."

Nilkanth crossed the hilly terrain of Maharashtra and arrived in Nasik.

Nasik, Surat, and Vadodara

Nilkanth bathed in the Godavari River and did darshan at the renowned Tryambakeshwar Shiva mandir. Nilkanth traversed the mountains and arrived in Dharampur. He spent two nights on the plinth of the Hanuman mandir. Here, Nilkanth observed that the people were neither friendly nor helpful. Nilkanth crossed through the dense jungles

in between present-day Maharashtra and Gujarat and arrived in Surat.

Nilkanth had not eaten in five days. He was searching for a place to receive alms and was directed towards the Gaudiya Vaishnav mandir, Nirvan Akhada. The mahant of the mandir was delighted to see the young yogi. Compared to the disciples of his ashram, this teen far better exemplified the ideals and values of asceticism.

The mahant called the young yogi closer and asked him for his name. Nilkanth told the mahant that he had not eaten in five days. The mahant ordered one of his disciples to take Nilkanth to the ashram's kitchen and feed Nilkanth. The disciple took Nilkanth out of the mahant's presence and started to insult him. The disciple called the other ascetics in the ashram, and they too began to insult and abuse Nilkanth. Their verbiage and actions were insufferable, but Nilkanth remained silent and returned to the mahant with a smile on his face. Despite Nilkanth's silence, the mahant deduced the meaning of this series of events. He prostrated at Nilkanth's feet and apologized, "Oh Young Yogi, these disciples don't listen to me anymore. They insult every decent pilgrim or ascetic who visits the ashram. They do not heed any of my warnings or orders. Please liberate me from here."

Nilkanth blessed the mahant. He then turned to the disciples and cautioned, "Lakshmi, the Goddess of Wealth, deserts those who insult a true *bhakta* or *sadhu*. The ashram of such arrogant fools becomes lifeless. Be mindful of your actions, or it will cost the entire ashram." It was as if the goddess Lakshmi had walked out of the ashram with Nilkanth that very afternoon.

Nilkanth moved towards Bharuch and visited all of the places of pilgrimage on the banks of the Narmada River. He passed through several towns before arriving in Vadodara (Baroda). Here, Nilkanth spent the night near the sixteen-pillared gate.¹⁵

The next morning, a merchant named Amichand caught sight of the young yogi's divine *murti*. He immediately bowed to Nilkanth and asked, "Have you eaten, revered one?"

15 The Mandvi Gate, often termed the North Gate, is a major landmark in Vadodara. It was built during the Mughal period. The square pavilion has three arched openings on each of its four sides and is therefore known as the sixteen-pillared gate.

Nilkanth replied, “I will have whatever you have prepared at home.”

Amichand ran home and told his wife about the young celibate. His wife prepared *khichdi* and brought it to where Nilkanth was meditating. Nilkanth offered *thal* to his *shaligram* and ate a few morsels. He gave the rest to Amichand and his wife. Amichand’s wife ate most of the *prasad*. To her astonishment, her lust, anger, and ego seemingly disappeared over night. The next morning she prepared some dairy sweets and ran to Nilkanth. She placed them at his feet and thanked him for the change in her personality. Nilkanth blessed her and accepted a sweet from her offering.

Amichand made his way to where Nilkanth rested. He too started to feel different. It was as if he only wanted to meditate on the young yogi’s divine *murti*. Amichand pleaded, “Please don’t leave. Stay with us. I feel attached to you from within. I pray that you never leave from within my heart and eyes.”

Nilkanth replied, “In your house, you have two *murtis* of Laxmi-Narayan Dev. Care for them. Serve them as if I reside within them. In future, I plan on building a large mandir. I will call upon you for your *seva* then.”

Amichand and his wife bowed to Nilkanth and promised to care for the *murtis*.

Entering the Heart of Gujarat

Nilkanth had been traveling continuously for seven years now. He headed north from Ayodhya towards the Himalayas, through Nepal, and then moved east. He passed through Bengal, Orissa, and Assam before turning south. He touched the southernmost tip of the subcontinent at Kanyakumari and headed northwest up the shore of the Arabian Sea to Maharashtra and Gujarat.

Nilkanth had finally arrived in the heart of Gujarat—Charottar. The people, climate, language, and environment had changed, but Nilkanth’s routine was unaltered. He crossed the Mahi River and arrived in Bamangam. He bathed in the river and sat down to meditate on its banks.

Khoda Pandya was a devout *bhakta*. His wife was also spiritually-inclined. She would fast and follow a variety of *niyams* in hopes of having

Bhagwan's darshan. Pandyaji realized that today Bhagwan had finally come to grace them. He prostrated in front of Nilkanth and asked him to grace his home.

Nilkanth agreed, "You walk ahead of me. I will follow you."

Pandyaji started walking but was cautious. He did not want to lose this chance to feed and care for the young yogi. He turned around at every intersection to confirm that Nilkanth was still following him.

Nilkanth chuckled and said, "Pandyaji, stop worrying. I am coming with you. I want to bathe, do puja, and eat at your place. I am right behind you." Nilkanth's words placated Pandyaji's concerns.

Pandyaji hurried home and told his wife about the young celibate. His wife prepared a warm meal for Nilkanth. Nilkanth offered the *thal* to the *shaligram* and ate to his heart's content. Pandyaji's wife requested Nilkanth to stay for another day. She wanted to make *ladus* for the young yogi. Nilkanth promised to return. "Mother, not this time. I want to leave for Dakor. I promise to eat your *ladus* someday." Nilkanth's words pacified their worries, and they allowed him to travel to Dakor.

Nilkanth had darshan in Dakor and Umreth and came to Vartal. On the lakeshore, Joban Pagi, the infamous warrior and thief, noticed the young yogi. Joban was not one to be impressed by sadhus and mendicants. However, he seemed magnetically drawn to Nilkanth's *murti*. Joban dropped his sword, shield, and bow. He walked over to the ascetic and requested him to grace his home and family. Nilkanth followed Joban to his house. There, Nilkanth cooked *bati* and offered it to his *shaligram*. He then asked Joban and his relatives to partake in the *prasad*. The Pagis were reluctant to let Nilkanth leave Vartal. Nilkanth convinced them as he had the others in the past and left to meet his *bhakta*, Kashidas.

Gifting Kashidas with a Mandir

Nilkanth entered Bochasan and made his way to the Ramji mandir. The pujari, Narsinh Baba, had spent his life in devotion and puja of the deity at the village mandir. Nilkanth sat with the pujari and spoke to him about his travels around the Indian subcontinent. Bochasan was not necessarily a pilgrimage site, but Nilkanth had come here for a different reason. Parabrahma had ordered his Aksharbrahma and *aksharmuktas*

to manifest on Earth with him. Nilkanth was in Bochasan to meet one of his *aksharmuktas*.

The pujari spread word to the villagers of this young yogi's arrival. The town's *mukhiya*, Kandas, sent his son, Kashidas, to verify that the young yogi was as virtuous as the pujari had described him to be. Kashidas was instantly mesmerized by Nilkanth's *murti*. Kashidas managed to gain control of his mind and speech and humbly bowed at Nilkanth's feet. Nilkanth affectionately smiled at Kashidas. Kandas had organized a feast for the town's *brahmins*, and Kashidas requested Nilkanth to grace their house. Nilkanth agreed, and the pair walked home, talking and laughing as if they had known each other for a lifetime.

Kashidas' mother was also enchanted by Nilkanth's darshan. When she offered to serve him, Nilkanth said, "Mother, just give me some milk, rice, and sugar. I don't want to eat anything else."

Kashidas' mother tried to reason with him. "Nilkanth, cows only give milk in the morning or in the evening. How am I to find milk at noon? Eat something else. I will save milk for you in the evening."

Nilkanth smiled and said, "Mother, have you tried to milk the cows now? I am sure they will give milk today."

She did not want to upset the young celibate. She took her pot and went to the cowshed. To her surprise, after only one stroke, the cow started to give milk. In fact, she gathered more milk from one cow that afternoon than the milk given by all of the cows in the morning!

Nilkanth smiled at her and said, "Hurry, Mother! I am hungry." Nilkanth offered the milk and rice to His *shaligram* and enjoyed a bowl for himself.

When Nilkanth was getting ready to leave, Kashidas' mother requested, "Nilkanth, please join us for lunch tomorrow as well."

Nilkanth thought it was time to reveal the truth to her. "Mother, just tomorrow? I plan on having three meals a day in Bochasan for as long as the sun shines and the wind blows. I will live in Bochasan with my Aksharbrahma forever."

Kashidas' mother did not understand Nilkanth's enigmatic words, but she was pleased with the idea of Nilkanth returning to her home for lunch tomorrow. Nilkanth did *arti* at the Ramji mandir that evening and

left for Khambhat.

When Nilkanth did not show up for lunch the next day, Kashidas and his mother were heartbroken. They searched the entire village and neighboring villages as well.

Nilkanth gave both of them darshan and said, “Why are you running around from village to village? Why are you crying? You have my word. I will come back to Bochasan soon. Be patient and return home for now.”

Nilkanth passed through the port city of Khambhat and rested on the shores of Lake Nareshwar. He met an ascetic by the name of Haridas. Haridas was the mahant of the local ashram. Nilkanth asked him for alms. However, when Nilkanth learned that Haridas was fasting that day, He also resolved to do an *upvas*. Nilkanth left the next day for Budhej.

The Brazen Maid and the Overflowing Well

Nilkanth had not eaten for two days and was famished. Budhej's *mukhiya*, Khodabhai, was a devout *bhakta*. He had been running a *sadavrat* for the past two decades with the hope of being merited with liberation if just one true sadhu was given alms. Nilkanth walked up to the veranda in which Khodabhai was sitting and tallying up his account ledgers. Nilkanth hailed the traditional call for alms, “Narayan Hare, Sachchidanand Prabhu. *Bhiksham dehi!*”

Khodabhai did not look up from his books and ushered Nilkanth to another house from which he operated his *sadavrat*. Nilkanth walked towards the house and voiced the same call. A poorly-mannered maid peeked out of the house. She was annoyed to have to answer Nilkanth's call. She started to instruct Nilkanth on the realities of this world. “You are but a boy. You should be embarrassed to ask for free food when your body still works. Work for your food. No one is going to support you for your entire life, you indolent child!”

Nilkanth ignored her snarky comments with a smile. He lovingly called out to her again, “Mother, please give me something in alms. I haven't eaten in two days.”

The maid was brash. She turned to Nilkanth and exclaimed, “I won't give you a morsel of food from here, even if you stand here the entire day.”

Nilkanth again smiled and remained silent. He paced the strip of

land in front of the veranda. The maid ignored him and started to grind some oat.

Almost an hour later, the maid saw Nilkanth patiently waiting for a morsel of food. She went inside, grabbed a handful of *juvar* grains and threw them into Nilkanth's bowl. "Take this and get out of my sight. Khodabhai feeds hundreds of mendicants like you every day. We don't have time for your antics."

Nilkanth called out to her as she walked back into the house, "Mother, I know that many ascetics come here for alms, but I assure you that none of them are like me. That's why I am asking you to give me something that has already been cooked. If not, give me some flour. I will cook something myself."

The maid was enraged. She slammed the door on Nilkanth's face and stormed away. The birds, insects, and swaying trees that witnessed this theatrical display of emotions by the maid were surprised to see Bhagwan tolerate such disrespectful behavior. Nilkanth's patience stemmed from his desire to liberate Khodabhai by eating a morsel of his food.

Nilkanth whispered the words "Hari, Hari" and started walking towards the periphery of the village. He took a few *juvar* grains and placed it in his mouth. Despite everything that had taken place at the *sadavrat*, Nilkanth liberated Khodabhai and his maid. He threw the rest of the grains to the pigeons and walked towards Vadgam.

Nilkanth passed by the fields of a generous farmer, Bijal Koli, outside of Gorad. He stopped to ask the farmer for some water. The farmer went to the well and started to haul his leather bucket to pull up cold water for the young yogi. Nilkanth stopped him. "Dear Sir, I cannot drink water pulled in a leather bucket. Don't you have any other vessel to pull up the water?"

Bijal Koli looked around but was unable to find anything else in the fields. He was worried. How was he going to get water for Nilkanth?

Nilkanth sat down to meditate near the well. He called upon Varuna Deva. In a matter of minutes, the water from the well started to overflow. Bijal was surprised, as it normally required several turns of the pulley to fetch water from his deep well. Nilkanth bathed his *shaligram* and offered it water. He then drank several gourds of water himself. Bijal opined, "If

you are this thirsty, you must be hungry, too. Let me get fresh melons and cucumbers from the fields. Please wait here.”

Nilkanth waited for the farmer to return with the vegetables. He ate some and then went on his way. Bijal Koli sped towards the village and told everyone of the divine incident at his well. The villagers then attempted to run after Nilkanth. They saw a young cowherd approaching and asked, “Boy, have you seen a young yogi walking down this road?”

The cowherd replied, “Yes, I saw a yogi walking as if he was flying. His speed was like that of lightening. You won’t be able to catch up to him.”

Disheartened by Nilkanth’s departure, the villagers returned to the well. They prostrated at the location where Nilkanth had meditated and prayed so that they would have his darshan in the near future.

A Vegetarian Lifestyle and Walking on Water

Nilkanth did darshan at several pilgrimage spots near the Gulf of Khambhat and then arrived at the delta of the Arabian Sea, the Sabarmati River, and the Mahi River.

The sun was setting into the dark blue waters. Several fishermen returned after many days out at sea. Nilkanth saw a poorly clad fisherman smoking ganja while staring out into the sunset. Nilkanth asked him his name. Lakha responded nonchalantly, almost as if he had not noticed Nilkanth.

Nilkanth spoke to him about non-violence and vegetarianism in detail. He employed simple logic: “How would we like it if someone killed our family members and decided to scarf them down for a meal? Animals have feelings too. They might not be able to express their emotions and feelings as adequately as humans, but they also feel pain. Plus, the human body can function just as well, if not better, with a vegetarian diet. Why should we eat something that isn’t meant for our consumption?”

Nilkanth gave Lakha the same darshan of the different punishments in Yamaloka that he had given several years back to the fisherman in Targam. Lakha was in tears. He was unaware that he was committing a serious sin. Nilkanth immediately comforted him and said, “Lakha, don’t worry. I will bring these fish back to life.”

With the snap of Nilkanth’s finger, the fish in Lakha’s bucket

floundered back into the water. Lakha was overjoyed and bowed with humility at Nilkanth's feet. Nilkanth blessed him and said, "Don't worry. A sin committed out of ignorance does not bear the same fruits as that which is committed out of spite or on purpose."

Lakha begged Nilkanth to return from the delta to his village. Nilkanth politely refused. He wanted to cross the waterway there. Lakha protested, "Nilkanth, there are dangerous beasts on the other side of the forest. Also, the water is flowing too fast for a human to swim against the current. Please listen to me and turn around. I will help you cross the river tomorrow morning."

Nilkanth was adamant. He replied, "Lakha, don't worry about me. I will get across just fine. Once I reach the other side, I will wave my deerskin for your peace of mind." Before Lakha could further object, Nilkanth walked into the water.

Lakha could not believe his eyes. This young yogi was not swimming in the water—he was walking on it! In less than a few minutes, Nilkanth was on the other side of the waterway. Lakha realized that this young yogi was truly extraordinary. He related this story to all of the villagers.

On the other side of the delta, Nilkanth spent the night in the forest. He traveled to Bagad and ate at Govindram Vyas' place. He spent the night on the floor of Rana Bavaloj's courtyard. When Rana asked Nilkanth why he insisted on sleeping on the floor, Nilkanth replied, "This piece of land was a young maiden. She prayed for years to be liberated. Now, she will be born again as a *bhakta*."

Nilkanth passed through several villages, farms, and *sadavrats*. He liberated all those that warmly received him and served him.

Miracles: One after Another

Outside of Polarpur, Nilkanth saw a delightful grove. He stopped to rest in the grove. He laid out his deerskin and sat down to meditate under a *pipal* tree. Jetha Banani's wife, Jivkorbai, noticed the young yogi sitting under the tree, but she decided to let him remain in the grove. The family was making arrangements to feed *brahmins* in accordance with the *barmu* ritual to honor Jetha's deceased mother, and this was an opportunity to feed one more *brahmin*.

Jivkorbai sat and stared at the young yogi for a few minutes. She was captivated by his *murti*. She then resumed her task of arranging for the feast. When it was time to eat, she asked Jetha to inquire whether Nilkanth wanted to eat as well. Nilkanth purposefully declined.

Night settled in, and Nilkanth stood up from his seat under the tree and moved into the house's courtyard. The young woman sent her servant to prevent Nilkanth from entering, but Nilkanth explained, "The stray dogs will not let me sit in peace over there."

She did not have the heart to refuse him. After a few minutes, Nilkanth shifted to the veranda. When asked why he moved, Nilkanth said, "The dogs urinate and empty their bowls over there, and the smell is intolerable."

Before the young woman could refuse again, Jetha agreed to let Nilkanth settle there. A few minutes later, Nilkanth walked to the house and gently knocked on the door to the young woman's room. She was seated in her room, conversing with several female relatives. She asked, "Yes, little one? What would you like now?"

Nilkanth replied, "Mother, I am hungry. Please spare me some *khichdi*. I won't be able to sleep on an empty stomach."

Irritated with Nilkanth, the young woman remarked, "I already asked you if you wanted to eat. I washed all the pots and dishes. There is no food left. You will have to wait until the morning."

Nilkanth replied, "Mother, please don't get annoyed. Check the vessels. I am sure there is some *khichdi* there."

Jetha then instructed, "Go and check. You may have some left."

The young woman went to the kitchen and inspected the pots. To her surprise, there was *khichdi* in one of the vessels despite her having washed all of those pots earlier in the evening. From where had the *khichdi* come?

Nilkanth asked the young woman, "Mother, may I have a gourd of milk?"

She replied, "Dear Young Yogi, where am I to find milk at this odd hour? You must know that cows only give milk in the morning and evening!"

Nilkanth urged her to try, and out from the cow's udder sprung milk. Nilkanth ate his meal and lay down on the deerskin. Now convinced

that this young yogi was Bhagwan, the family did not want to let Nilkanth leave.

The next morning, even before the rooster crowed, Nilkanth was on his way to Vallabhipur. Jetha's family despondently searched for Nilkanth but could not find him. Thereafter, the young daughter-in-law spent her days and nights meditating on young Nilkanth's *murti*.

Nilkanth passed through Vallabhipur and Bhavnagar and arrived in Kukad. He cooked his own meal there and offered the rest of the *prasad* to Bhagwansinh Darbar, a *kshatriya* devotee.

Nilkanth decided to stop in Lakadiya, aware that Premji Thakkar awaited his arrival. Premji had woven a beautiful straw mat and hidden it in his home. The mat was to only be offered to Bhagwan when he came to Lakadiya. Premji was a Khoja, but Nilkanth was above the bounds of caste, creed, and religion. Nilkanth passed through the town's market and walked to Premji's house. He asked Premji for the mat, but Premji denied the existence of any such mat. Nilkanth revealed, "Premji, you have saved that mat for me. I know that you are hiding it in the chest in your bedroom. Do not let this opportunity pass you by."

Premji humbly bowed at Nilkanth's feet and scurried off to retrieve the mat. Nilkanth sat on the mat and meditated before taking Premji's leave and heading for Piparala in the Patan District of Gujarat.

There was a devout *brahmin* in Piparala who would feed an ascetic each day in the hopes of, by chance, feeding Bhagwan someday. Nilkanth came to his house and asked to be fed. When the *brahmin* sat down to serve Nilkanth, the young yogi opened his mouth and showed the *brahmin* the universe. The *brahmin* bowed in humility at Nilkanth's feet. Nilkanth blessed him and headed towards Gopnath Mahadev.

On the way, there was a Khoja woman named Janbai traveling to Gopnath Mahadev with a pot of milk. She wished to offer the milk to the deity at the mandir. However, when she saw Nilkanth, she asked him to accept the milk. She called after the young yogi, "Oh Dear Child, wait! Please drink some milk. You must be tired from all of your walking."

Nilkanth accepted her bhakti and drank the milk. He remembered the woman's name and village. When she was doing darshan of the deity at the Gopnath Mahdev mandir, Shivaji came out of the *murti* and gave

her darshan with a white moustache, one evidently formed by the milk she had offered to Nilkanth!

Gopnath Mahadev and Promising Queen-hood

Off the coast of the Arabian Sea on the Saurashtra Peninsula sits Gopnath Mahadev, one of the oldest Shiva mandirs in Gujarat. Nilkanth's arrival seemed to change the atmosphere of the Gopnath Mahadev mandir. The mahant of the mandir stood up from his throne and walked towards Nilkanth. Though he was old enough to be Nilkanth's grandfather, he prostrated at the young yogi's feet. He gently grabbed Nilkanth's wrist and took him to the throne. He asked Nilkanth to sit on the throne and told all of his disciples to serve Nilkanth. Nilkanth remained calm and unmoved by all of the attention and appreciation.

There was a divine aura surrounding Nilkanth which attracted the mahant. The mahant thought to himself, "I will ask Nilkanth to stay here. I will offer him my throne and mahant position. I will feed him with ghee, sweets, and dairy products. He is too thin to adorn a throne. I will feed him until he is fit to sit on the throne. I will become his disciple and join his service."

Nilkanth, however, had different plans.

Every afternoon the ascetics from the mandir would bathe in the sea. Nilkanth went along with them that afternoon. After they were done bathing, Nilkanth said to the mahant, "I am going to sit down to meditate here. I will spend the rest of the night here."

The mahant would not agree. "Nilkanth, there is a high tide tonight. The waters reach the mandir steps. You are not safe here. Also, it gets cold here at night. You will freeze to death. Come join us in the mandir. You can meditate there all you want."

Nilkanth would not budge. "Mahantji, if you are so worried about the cold, send some firewood. I will start a fire and keep myself warm."

Nilkanth drew a small circle in the sand with his toe. He sat inside of the circle and closed his eyes. The mahant had no choice but to return to the mandir.

That night the mahant watched in disbelief from the main dome of the mandir. The waters had reached the mandir steps, but the fire

started by Nilkanth blazed into the early morning. Nilkanth was not in the slightest bit harmed by the high tide.

The next morning, the mahant rushed out to Nilkanth. He folded his hands and bowed in humility at Nilkanth's feet. "You must be Parabrahma. Please stay here. Do not leave me...."

As he was completing his sentence, Nilkanth sent him into a trance. In the trance, Nilkanth showed the mahant Akshardham. The mahant awoke and begged Nilkanth, "Oh Parabrahma, please liberate me. Please take me to Akshardham."

Nilkanth was touched by his genuine prayer. Nilkanth promised to take the mahant to Akshardham when he breathed his last.

Nilkanth left Gopnath Mahadev and came to a village named Kalsar. Nilkanth observed the people to be rude and violent. They would steal, lie, and fight about trivial matters. They spent their days gossiping and gambling. Adultery and promiscuity seemed to be standard behaviors. Nilkanth decided not to spend a minute longer in that village and looked towards the ancient port city of Mahuva.

On his way to Mahuva, Nilkanth came upon a small village called Basa Katpur. He sat down on the banks of the Malan River. Nilkanth noticed a used goods businessman traveling on the same road from which he came. He called out to the businessman, "What is your name, sir? Where are you coming from?"

"My name is Pitambar. I am a salesperson. I live in Mahuva but sell my goods in Kalsar. Unfortunately, I don't make any money, and the people often steal from me."

Nilkanth placed his hand on the businessman's head and said, "Don't go to Kalsar anymore. One should avoid doing business with people who do not have ethics or follow civil laws. Sell your goods in Mahuva. You will prosper."

Nilkanth stayed at the Lakshminarayan mandir in Mahuva. The mahant of the mandir, Balakdas, was mystified by Nilkanth's *murti*. Nilkanth stayed with him for three days before continuing to Pipavav, Rajula, Vadgam, Rampura, and Bhatvadar.

Nilkanth went to Nagpal Varu's house in Bhatvadar. His call for alms was answered by Nagpal's five-year-old daughter Jashuba. Jashuba,

though young, was a *yogbrashta atma*. She had accrued enough *punya* from her past lives to be blessed with Bhagwan's darshan in human form and to be able to recognize him. She ran inside her house and retrieved flour, rice, and vegetables for the young yogi. Nilkanth cooked the meal and offered it to the *shaligram*. He had a few bites and gave the remainder to little Jashuba. Pleased with Jashuba's *seva* and *bhakti*, Nilkanth advised, "You will adorn the throne of a large kingdom." Nagpal was elated upon hearing such fortune.

Nilkanth traveled through various cities and arrived in a small town named Dolaha. Nilkanth stopped to rest next to a camp of tribal Ahirs. Just a few feet away from Nilkanth's seat was the makeshift hut of the Ahirs' guru. The guru was a *bhakta*. In the middle of the night, he would utter "Shri Rama" each time he turned on his side. After four or five times, he started hearing a response to his calls. The guru got out of his bed and traced the sound to Nilkanth sitting under a tree turning his *mala*. The guru asked, "Are you Shri Rama?"

Nilkanth answered without hesitation, "Yes, I am Shri Rama." Nilkanth sent the guru into samadhi. In the samadhi, Nilkanth gave the guru darshan in the form of Shri Rama. The guru was overjoyed to finally have the darshan of Shri Rama, his deity of choice. Nilkanth knew that remembering this *lila charitra* would give the guru, and all those with whom he shared it, a sense of peace and inner bliss—a pathway to *moksha*.

Nilkanth blessed the Ahir community and left for Lodhva in the morning.

Sixty Buffaloes

There was a middle-aged woman named Lakhubai sitting on a cot in a beautiful home in Lodhva. Her back was turned to Nilkanth. Nilkanth lovingly called out to her, "Mother, I am hungry. Give me some milk please."

Lakhubai was drawn to the charm of the teen's voice. She had never before heard such a sweet voice. She turned around to look at the boy. She froze. The child's ascetic apparel, controlled eyes, thickly matted hair, and slim, god-like frame was enough to steal Lakhubai's heart. Nilkanth called out to her again. It was then that Lakhubai awoke from her reverie. She

immediately stood up and bowed to the young yogi. She sat on the floor, covered her head with the veil of her sari, and prostrated to Nilkanth.

Nilkanth laid out his deerskin and sat down to meditate. Lakhubai sat across from him and did not want to move. She forgot to milk her buffaloes and neglected her chores. She remained in front of Nilkanth until he awoke from his meditation. Nilkanth asked Lakhubai about her guru and philosophical beliefs.

Lakhubai answered briefly, “My guru’s name is Atmanand Swami. I was one of his senior disciples along with Ramanand Swami, Vithalanand Swami, and Balanand Swami. Atmanand Swami believed Bhagwan to be *nirakar*. As time went by, his understanding of Bhagwan’s form changed. He started to believe in a *sakar* form. Ramanand Swami agreed with his new philosophy. The three of us had trouble agreeing with Atmanand Swami’s new belief system. Atmanand Swami told us to follow Ramanand Swami’s *agna* after he passed away, but we couldn’t bring ourselves to believe in a *sakar* Bhagwan. Now, all three of us live in Lodhva. We meditate every day and read books on Advaita philosophy.”¹⁶

Nilkanth listened attentively. He spoke to her about his findings in southern India at the Ramanujacharya *piths* in Shrirangam Kshetra and Totadri. He explained the form of Bhagwan to be like that of a human. He used scriptural references and logical arguments to help Lakhubai understand his philosophical stance.

16 The Advaita school of Vedanta, founded by Shankaracharya and referred to as the Kevaladvaita Vedanta, represents absolute monism. It is often rumored to be the most famous school of Indian philosophy. It maintains the existence of only one Ultimate Reality called Brahma (Brahman), which is both with attributes, to the ordinary aspirant, and formless, to the realized soul. Brahma is omnipotent, omniscient, and all-pervasive. The individual soul is not different from Brahma, and there is not a plurality of souls. Ultimate *moksha* is gained by becoming one with Brahma through the realization that one’s soul is Brahma. This philosophy also maintains that *maya* causes ignorance, which leads one to incorrectly believe in the multiplicity of names and forms of Brahma, and that the world is unreal and illusory. Bhagwan Swaminarayan and all of the other acharyas negated this school of thought for one primary reason: the distinction between *jivas* and the Ultimate Reality is not clear. The spiritual aspirant could be misled into thinking that there is no difference between his *jiva* and the Ultimate Reality, which could further lead to lapses in his dharma, bhakti, *jnan*, and *vairagya*.

Nilkanth stayed for three months to educate Lakhubai about Bhagwan's *sakar* form and to accept her *seva*. Lakhubai was persuaded by Nilkanth's arguments. She served Nilkanth with the utmost admiration and dedication. She saved seven of her sixty buffaloes for Nilkanth. She would milk the first buffalo and feed that milk to the second buffalo. The milk from the second buffalo was given to the third buffalo and so on. The milk from the sixth buffalo was all that was fed to the seventh buffalo. Nilkanth was then given milk from the seventh buffalo mixed with sugar, cardamom, and almonds. The milk was so thick and creamy that the stirring utensil stood upright in the pot of milk. Lakhubai would not allow anyone else to drink that milk. She had not cared for her own child and husband in the way that she served Nilkanth.

After three months, Nilkanth informed Lakhubai that it was time for his departure. Lakhubai was moved to tears. Nilkanth then advised her to request any boon from him. Lakhubai said, "Oh Young Yogi, I am financially content. I have enough money for my family. Bless me so that I, along with my son, daughter-in-law, and sixty buffaloes, become immortal in this mortal world."

Nilkanth laughed and said, "Mother, it is called the mortal world for a reason. We must all leave this human body. You are well-versed in our shastras. You already know this. Your infatuation for your family and possessions is affecting your reasoning. Ask for something else."

Lakhubai was persistent and did not want anything else. Nilkanth finally said, "Mother, you have come of age. I grant you my Akshardham. When it is time for you to leave your mortal body, I will come to take you to my divine abode."

Lakhubai folded her hands and bowed her head. Nilkanth started towards Somnath Mahadev. In a few days, Lakhubai fell ill and breathed her last. Nilkanth fulfilled his promise and came to take her to Akshardham.

The Lion, Displacement, and Two Promises

Nilkanth did darshan at the Somnath Mandir (see photo 21) on the coast of the Arabian Sea. This is one of the twelve self-manifest Shiva *lingas* in India, known as the *jyotir-lingas*. The mandir built on the

site of the *linga* also has its own rich history. Some historians posit that the Somnath Mandir has been destroyed and reconstructed six times. Nilkanth's visit was likely to the fifth reconstructed mandir. Today, the Somnath Mandir stands as the tallest Hindu mandir in Gujarat.

Nilkanth then traveled to Junagadh. Junagadh is beautiful during the monsoon season. The peacocks' sounds add to the splendor of the rhythmic beating of raindrops on the green vegetation. Nilkanth loved the monsoon. He bathed in the sacred Damodar Kund. He did darshan of the *murtis* of Shri Damodarji. The pujari took a liking to Nilkanth's soft and polite demeanor. He said to Nilkanth, "Child, spend the night here. Crossing the forest alone can be difficult at night. Go with a few pilgrims in the morning. These forests are known for their lions and tigers. Why risk it?"

Nilkanth did not heed the warning. He wanted to cross the forest that night. He walked into the forest and only stopped at midnight to rest. He saw a small, abandoned mandir. A freshwater stream flowed near the mandir. He sat under a tree just a few feet from the mandir. Nilkanth closed his eyes while he leaned his head against the tree. A few minutes later, a wild gir lion approached Nilkanth and circled around him. Gir lions are known for their larger tail tufts and tamed manes. Nilkanth was unaware of its presence. The lion put its head at Nilkanth's feet and sat there patiently, as if waiting for Nilkanth to open his eyes.

A few hours later, a caravan of pilgrims was passing through the jungle. They spotted the lion from a distance and stared in amazement at the sight of the lion sitting near the calm and composed child. Why was the child not scared? Did he not care for his life?

The passengers climbed onto the tree and shouted at the lion in an effort to get it to leave. However, the lion would not move. One of the pilgrims ran to call the pujari from the Damodar mandir. The pujari recognized the child as the young yogi he met a few hours ago.

Nilkanth was still resting unaware of the commotion. The group of pilgrims and villagers grew larger. Eventually, Nilkanth was awakened by their noise. He opened his eyes and saw the lion at his feet. He lovingly caressed the lion between its ears. The lion stood up, bowed before Nilkanth, and dashed back into the forest.

The villagers were relieved and prostrated at Nilkanth's feet. The pujari begged Nilkanth to return to the mandir. Helpless against the love of a true *bhakta*, Nilkanth returned and spent three days at the Damodar mandir in Junagadh. The next difficult part of Nilkanth's journey still awaited him: Nilkanth wanted to climb the Girnar Mountains. He left to take on the highest mountain range in Gujarat.

Nilkanth traveled from cave to cave and peak to peak to liberate the thousands of ascetics who lived in the Girnar Mountains. He gave them darshan in several different forms. He would often give darshan as Vaman and Dattatreya.¹⁷

Nilkanth trekked to the other side of the mountains and came upon a large *sadavrat* run by Dharmadas. Nilkanth had come here with the intention to liberate Dharmadas by accepting a morsel of his food. He bathed in the lake and sat down in the line to be served. As soon as he sat down, a mendicant called from the other end, "Get up little boy. My disciples usually sit there. Go sit in that corner."

Nilkanth smiled, stood up, and sat in the corner. As soon as he sat down, another mendicant told him to stand up. "Not here, boy. This is where I sit."

Nilkanth stood up again and found another empty spot. He shifted from seat to seat seven times, but the mendicants would not let him sit anywhere for his meal. Nilkanth calmly stood up and exited Dharmadas' *sadavrat*.

As he was walking away, Nilkanth heard a voice from behind. One of the ascetics observing the incident ran after Nilkanth. He apologized to Nilkanth for the behavior of the other mendicants. He said, "Oh Young

17 The Vaman avatar is the fifth avatar of Shri Vishnu. Shri Vishnu incarnated as a *brahmin* dwarf to win back the three worlds from the asura King Bali. King Bali was a staunch devotee. As requested by Shri Vishnu, King Bali gave away three steps of land, which encompassed all three worlds, despite being warned by his guru. Shri Vishnu was pleased with King Bali's bhakti. After King Bali retired to the netherworld, Shri Vishnu stood guard outside of King Bali's palace as a sign of his fidelity towards his devotees. The Dattatreya avatar is worshipped in various Hindu traditions. Some believe him to be an incarnation of Shri Vishnu, and others believe him to be an incarnation of Shivaji. His life is celebrated as an ideal example of a spiritual aspirant. He is revered for accepting twenty-four different gurus and focusing on the good qualities of each, while ignoring any bad traits.

Yogi, I didn't eat since I saw that you had to leave on an empty stomach. Your ability to tolerate is beyond that of anyone I have ever met. Please let me travel with you."

Nilkanth permitted the ascetic to travel with him for a few days, after which he convinced him to turn back. The ascetic prostrated at Nilkanth's feet and said, "Just as I have been given the fortune to eat and sleep next to you for the last few days, please grant me such fortune before you come to take me to your abode."

Nilkanth compassionately smiled and said, "You have my word. I will do just that."

Nilkanth next journeyed towards Piplana. Once in the village, Nilkanth went straight to Narsinh Mehta's house. This middle-class *brahmin* was the namesake of a great Gujarati *bhakta* and poet who spent his life in the worship of Shri Krishna.

Nilkanth melodiously called out for his alms. Mehtaji was engrossed in meditation and in the puja of his *shaligram*. His wife came out and said, "Oh Young Yogi, please wait for a few minutes. I will quickly make you some warm *roti*."

Nilkanth did not want to wait, so he turned around and started walking towards Akha.

Inside the house, Mehtaji noticed a divine light emanating from his *shaligram* and being absorbed into Nilkanth's *murti*. He sent his son running after Nilkanth. Nilkanth returned, having conceded to Mehtaji's bhakti. A warm meal was offered to the *shaligrams* and then to Nilkanth. Nilkanth ate sparingly and distributed the rest as *prasad*.

Mehtaji spoke of his guru, Ramanand Swami. Nilkanth listened patiently and then sent Mehtaji into samadhi. Mehtaji woke up knowing that Nilkanth was Bhagwan. He humbly bowed at Nilkanth's feet and shared the news with his wife. They were unable to utter a single word—how is one to respond when Bhagwan comes to his home?

Nilkanth blessed both of them and asked for their permission to leave. Mehtaji and his wife became teary-eyed. They did not want to let Nilkanth leave. Nilkanth assured them, "Don't worry. We will meet again."

Mehtaji asked, "When will that be?"

Nilkanth smiled and said, "Sooner than you can imagine. In fact, we

will meet quite often now.”

Nilkanth then sped towards Mangrol.

To Yamaloka and Back

Nilkanth arrived in Mangrol and rested under a tree. Govardhan, a *bhakta* of Ramanand Swami’s, noticed the young yogi. He was attracted to the celibate’s divine aura. He asked, “Have you eaten? If not, please accept my offering.”

Nilkanth replied, “Sure. Bring whatever you have at home.”

Govardhan both skipped and ran home. He prepared some *sukhdi* with fresh ghee, gur, flour, and almonds. He offered the sweet to Nilkanth. Nilkanth offered it to his *shaligram* and then ate a decent portion. Nilkanth asked, “Why have you brought *sukhdi*? Is today a special day for your family?”

Govardhan replied, “Yes, it is. We are commemorating the *barmu* of my deceased paternal aunt. She was a great devotee. Her guru Ramanand Swami praised her often.”

Nilkanth smiled and revealed, “As great as she may have been, your aunt is in Yamaloka. She is suffering in the Kumbhipak section.”

Govardhan could not believe his ears. How could his aunt, an exemplar among devotees, be in Yamaloka? He argued with Nilkanth, unconvinced of his aunt’s fate. Nilkanth decided to show Govardhan and sent the young businessman into samadhi. In the samadhi he saw his aunt burning in a pot of boiling oil. She was screaming to get his attention. Govardhan tried to stretch out his hand to rescue her. Just then, one of the attendants in Yamaloka pushed Govardhan away. Govardhan awoke from his samadhi.

He prostrated at Nilkanth’s feet and begged forgiveness for his aunt. “Nilkanth Varni, I am not sure what she did wrong. But only you can save her. Please help her. Quickly save her.”

Nilkanth’s heart filled with compassion. He told Govardhan to go back into samadhi and try to save his aunt again. This time Govardhan was sucessful. He sent his aunt to Badrikashram to repent for her sins and then returned to Nilkanth in Mangrol.

Govardhan realized that this young celibate was none other than

Parabrahma Bhagwan. How else could he have redeemed his aunt? Curious about his aunt's actions, Govardhan asked Nilkanth, "What did she do wrong? Why was she in Yamaloka?"

Nilkanth explained, "She stole Ramanand Swami's gold coins. The punishment for such a sin is burning in oil in Yamaloka."

Govardhan was touched by Nilkanth's prowess, honesty, and sympathy and wanted to inform the entire village of Nilkanth's presence. He requested, "Nilkanth, please wait here for a few minutes. I will be back momentarily."

Govardhan gathered the entire village to welcome Nilkanth into town. However, Nilkanth was not interested. As sunset approached, Nilkanth left Mangrol for the final destination of his pilgrimage and *moksha-yatra* across the Indian subcontinent: Loj.

3

Stories from Loj

*Lojni vaav upar avataari, aavi betha batuk brahmachari...
Naari nagarni aavi jal bharavaa, tene nirakhyaan navalvihaari...
Durbal deh dekhi dayaa upaji, naathji pratye boli sab naari...
Kem tajyu gharbaar kahoji, risathi ke vairaagye vichaari...
Komal kamal samaan tanu chhe, dekhi dayaa upje ur bhaari...
Bhukhdima kon sukhdi detu, vimal kon paatu hashe vaari...
Aa tanne ghate shaal dushaalaa, te tame valkal lidhaa che dhaari...
Je shir upar mugat shobhe, te shir par jataa aape vadhaari...
Varniji vahaalaa vishesh laago chho, joi murti thare vruti amaari...
Shobha joi tamaaraa sharirni, kotik kam tani chabi haari...
Shaligraamno batvo galaamaa, kar jalmala dhari adhhaari...
Vishvavihaarilaal amaru, rakshan karjo sadaa sukhkaari...*

*Having arrived on the stepwell, there sat the child celibate...
The village women came to collect water, there they noticed the young
delightful one...
Pity overcame them upon seeing his slender physique, they spoke
addressing the Lord,
“Pray tell, why did you leave home, taking offense to heart or out of
renunciation?
Your body is like a gentle water lotus, seeing for which compassion*

brims in our hearts.

Who fed you when you were hungry, who served you pure, drinkable water?

This body is befitting of shawls and royal garments, but you have donned tree bark...

On a head which is worthy of a crown, you have grown long matted hair...

O Celibate, you are dear to us with some speciality, viewing your murti, our senses become still...

Seeing the beauty of your form, the beauty of infinite Kama Devas pales...

With the Shaligraam in a small gourd tied around your neck, and your hand carries a mala."

Vishvavihaarilal pleads, always protect us, oh Giver of Joy...

- Acharya Vishvaviharilalji Maharaj (1852-1899 CE),

Third Acharya of the Vartal Swaminarayan Gadi,
Poet, and Patron of the Arts

At the Stepwell

The morning sun glistened in the clear, languid water of the village stepwell. Smaller reflections shone off the dew drops collected on the vegetation and the uncovered water pots carried on the village ladies' heads. On this morning, the sun had settled to share the warmth of its rays with only this small village in southwestern Gujarat. The birds chirped a decibel above their usual gibber. The cows and buffalos gave milk before being asked by the maidens' usual stroke. The children slept silently, seemingly to let their mothers slip away and fetch water from the village stepwell.

Dozens of ladies had gathered at the stepwell (see photo 23) to gaze upon the divine *murti* of this young *brahmachari*. Nilkanth was unfazed and likely unaware of their presence. His eyes were closed, and his mind was focused deep in meditation. He sat with his spine straight, which further accentuated the visibility of each rib. The stepwell's water augmented the blue radiance of his complexion. His solid, black mat of hair was tied to perfection, resembling the uniform, serpent-like head

of Shesha Naga. Nilkanth sat amidst the bustle of the villagers yet aloof from it all. His deer skin and staff bore the weight of all that could be called his possessions. Nilkanth's *murti* enchanted those who came to fetch water and share the morning's news. In fact, Nilkanth was now becoming this morning's news.

Amidst this commotion, a sadhu from the village's Vaishnav ashram came to fetch water from the stepwell. Sukhanand Swami was a disciple of the renowned Vaishnav sadhu, Ramanand Swami. He walked straight down the steps to fill the ashram's pots. The commotion did not alter his concentration. His mind was fixed on the *murti* of his guru and Bhagwan. However, as he walked up the steps with the filled pots, his eyes casually wandered to the emaciated frame of the young celibate lost in meditation under the neem tree. In that brief moment, he was caught, like a mystical *chakor* bird glimpsing at the moon.¹ Sukhanand Swami found it impossible to retract his eyes and the rest of his senses from the young celibate's *murti*, so he conceded to its beckoning. He placed the water pots against the first step of the well and walked over to the celibate.

Sukhanand Swami placed his head at Nilkanth's feet. He could not contain his excitement. A series of questions spurt forth. "Who are you, oh Celestial Being? Where are you from? Where are you traveling to? Who are your parents? Where are you staying while in Loj? If it is not too much to ask, would you be kind enough to grace our ashram?"

Nilkanth curiously opened his eyes only to see Sukhanand Swami's impatient stare. Nilkanth answered Sukhanand Swami's questions in the order in which they were asked. "I am from a land beyond the clasp of *maya*. Akshardham is where I live. I travel to liberate *jivas*. I only choose to stay with my true *bhaktas*."

Amused by the bewildered look on Sukhanand Swami's face, Nilkanth decided to speak in terms familiar to the earnest sadhu. Nilkanth gently said, "If you are asking of my birth and identity of

1 In classical Sanskrit poetry, and in later vernacular literature, the *chakor* bird is known for its attraction to the moon and its rays. The *chakor* bird relishes in the moon's beauty from a distance. It is a symbol of intense love in the Indic literary tradition.

this world, I was born in a small town near Ayodhya. I was born to a *brahmin* family. My parents were Hariprasad Pande and Bala Devi. I traveled across the subcontinent by navigating forests, wading rivers, and meditating under trees. I often visit villages and cities in hopes of helping those who have wandered from the path of *moksha*. However, I prefer solitude. They call me Nilkanth Varni or Nilkanth Brahmachari. Wherever I go, I ask the wise to answer a single question. I wish to stay for a long period of time in a place where my question regarding the five eternal elements is answered. My question is: What are *jiva*, *ishvara*, *maya*, Brahma, and Parabrahma? If you can answer this question, I will come to your ashram. I have yet to find anyone capable of answering my question.”

Sukhanand Swami replied, “I am not sure that I can answer your question, Nilkanth. Though my guru Ramanand Swami is in Kutch, his senior disciple Muktanand Swami will be able to answer your question. Please, young yogi, grace our ashram.”

Nilkanth was pleased with Sukhanand Swami’s honesty and genuine reverence. He gestured for Sukhanand Swami to lead the way.

Nilkanth and Sukhanand Swami arrived at the ashram. Nilkanth washed his face and asked for water. The ashram’s ascetics ran to fetch a gourd of water for the mystical teen. In the meantime, Muktanand Swami made his way to Nilkanth. Their eyes met. Nilkanth immediately prostrated at the revered sadhu’s feet. Muktanand Swami raised Nilkanth and embraced him. Muktanand Swami seated Nilkanth next to him, while the other ascetics and sadhus assembled around the pair. In a matter of minutes, the entire ashram had gathered, as if magnetically drawn to this young teen.

Nilkanth was curious to hear Muktanand Swami speak. He turned to the wise sadhu and asked his question. Muktanand Swami spoke for several minutes explaining the characteristics and function of each metaphysical element based on what he had been able to extract from his guru’s teachings. Nilkanth’s face lit up; though, there was much to be clarified and expounded upon, this was the best set of answers he had heard to date.

Explaining the Five Metaphysical Elements

Muktanand Swami acknowledged the shortcomings in his answer. “Nilkanth, from the look of satisfaction and delight on your youthful face, I am convinced that you were only asking to test my understanding of these five elements. Please feel free to add to my humble attempt to answer your question.”

Nilkanth smiled, folded his hands, and bowed his head to the aged sadhu. Nilkanth was mindful of Muktanand Swami’s age—twenty-three years greater than his own—and experience. He asked for permission before proceeding to explain his metaphysical system. Nilkanth had not spoken about his metaphysical system in such detail since leaving his family in Ayodhya.

Most of the Hindu *acharyas* who outlined their own metaphysical system, with the exception of Shankaracharya, had done so well into the latter part of their lives. Nilkanth identified and explained his *darshana*, or metaphysical system, at the tender age of eighteen. His *darshana* was the first such system to include five metaphysical elements instead of three.

Nilkanth was aware that much of what he was about to say would incite curiosity and possibly confuse those listening. He knew that it would take nearly another hundred years and the work of a scholar and courageous sadhu like Shastri Yagnapurushdas (Shastriji Maharaj)² to give tangible form to this philosophy. However, the time to plant its seeds had come.

Nilkanth began by explaining each element, starting from the bottom of the metaphysical hierarchy and moving upward. Nilkanth gifted the bhakti tradition a philosophical system that would be read, debated, and analyzed by some of the brightest minds in the world for centuries to come.

2 Shastri Yagnapurushdas, more commonly known as Shastriji Maharaj, was the third spiritual successor of Bhagwan Swaminarayan and the founder of the BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha. The prefix ‘Shastri’ was given to him for his eminent scholarship in Sanskrit and Vedanta. He established the Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha in 1907 and built its first mandir in Bochasan, Gujarat. Refer to the chapter entitled ‘Shri Hari Present on Earth Forever’ for further discussion about Shastriji Maharaj.

"*Jiva, ishvara, maya*, Brahma (Brahman), and Parabrahma are the five eternal elements from which our universe is constructed. By eternal, I mean that they are neither born nor do they perish.

"Like an atom, the *jiva* is infinitesimal in form. The *jiva* has three forms: *sthul*, *sukshma*, and *karan*. The *sthul* form is the only form that we see with our naked eyes. The *sukshma* form is experienced in the dream state of our minds. The *karan* form is the cause of the other two forms. The *karan* form is entrapped by *maya* and, hence, is the carrier of our *swabhavs*, instincts, and desires. The *jiva* is constant. It is invincible, indivisible, and invisible. This *jiva*, in its purest form, is blissful, eternal, and full of consciousness. Yet, because it is ensnared by *maya*, it fails to recognize its true form and its true objective in life. It wanders from body to body, passing from one animal species to another, completing its cycle through the 8.4 million life forms.³ The *karan* form is the cause of its misery. There are countless *jivas* in existence in our universe.

"There are numerous *ishvaras*. They are higher than the *jivas* in our metaphysical hierarchy but are still bound by *maya*. *Moksha* is not within their jurisdiction. They attempt to achieve it through the accretion of positive karma or merits. These *ishvaras*, through the powers manifested in them by Brahma and Parabrahma, help govern the universe and the forces of creation. For example, certain *ishvaras* help sustain, while others function as creators and destructors. It is important to remember that these extraordinary powers are vested in them by Brahma and Parabrahma.

"It is best to think of *maya* as a force that envelops and swallows almost everything. Space is consumed by *maya*, as is everything within it. *Jivas* and *ishvaras* are contained by *maya*'s influence. *Maya* also has a manifest form. This form presents itself to facilitate the universe's creation, sustenance, and destruction. *Maya* is Parabrahma's force. *Maya*'s force is tamed by Parabrahma and his divine abode, Brahma.

"Brahma has often been mentioned inaccurately by my predecessors. Brahma is not the ultimate force of our universe. Brahma is Purna

³ The Hindu concept of reincarnation is based on the cycle of birth and death. The *jiva* is not born and never dies. Rather, due to the bonds of karma, it takes birth in various life forms based on its past karmas. According to Hindu beliefs, there are 8.4 million such life forms in total.

Purushottam Parabrahma's divine abode; it is my home. It is the cause and controller of the three aforementioned elements through the power vested in it by Parabrahma. Brahma is above *maya*. That is to say, Brahma's actions are not mandated or influenced by *maya*. The liberated *jivas* and *ishvaras* reside within Brahma as well. The Vedas and Puranas fail to fully exalt its glory; rather they say '*Neti neti*,' or 'not this, not that,' as finding accurate words to describe Brahma is impossible for sages, seers, and devas bound by *maya*. Though everything and everyone within Parabrahma's creation answer to Brahma, Brahma forever remains humbly in Parabrahma's service. Brahma helps the *jivas* and *ishvaras* vanquish their *karan* forms and grants them *moksha* by giving them a place within its confines in Akshardham. Brahma is often also referred to as Aksharbrahma, Mul Akshar, or simply Akshar. When manifest on Earth in the form of a sadhu, Brahma is often referred to as the Gunatit Sadhu, Satpurush, or Ekantik Sant."

"Parabrahma is above all else in the universe. All the other elements are dependent on Parabrahma for their existence and powers. Parabrahma is above Aksharbrahma. Most of the adjectives, characteristics, and qualifiers used to describe Parabrahma are only fit to be used for Aksharbrahma. Parabrahma is uniquely indescribable and incomparable. Parabrahma is present in Akshardham in a human form. Though the body looks as if it were human, it is divine and above *maya*. The end goal for all of those bound by *maya* is to become *brahmarup* and reside in Parabrahma's service in Akshardham. All of you are fortunate to be present on Earth during this time. Parabrahma has incarnated on Earth with his Aksharbrahma to liberate the countless *jivas* and *ishvaras* who have been praying for his *seva* for millennia. I am that Parabrahma. I have come to take you to my Akshardham and free you from the snares of *maya*, which loom ever-threateningly above your heads."

Muktanand Swami and the other sadhus sat spellbound. This young yogi's speech was as captivating as his *murti*. Though most of them barely understood what Nilkanth was saying, Nilkanth affirmed that he was not an ordinary human being. He was beyond the grasp of an intellect bound by *maya*.

A Remarkable Past: Ramdas Swami and Muktanand Swami's Stories

It was only his first day, but Nilkanth had taken a liking to the ashram. There were a few things he wanted to change, but that would have to wait as it was too soon. He participated in several sevas around the ashram. In his free time, he would sit by the *murti* in the small Shri Krishna mandir and sing bhajans and bhakti *stotras*. His melodious voice would fill the ashram's air with divinity. Nilkanth would cook meals and offer *thal* to the *murtis* in the mandir and to his *shaligram*. Nilkanth would mix some of the *prasad* from the *thal* with water in a small, clay pot and consume it with no regard for its taste or nutritional value. His actions inspired a new wave of austerity and bhakti in the ashram's sadhus. Everyone in the ashram was sure of one thing: they were not going to let Nilkanth leave them.

That evening after *arti*, everyone gathered around Muktanand Swami and Nilkanth. Nilkanth was anxious to learn about the guru and senior disciples of the ashram. How were they able to maintain such a pious environment? Most of the ashrams Nilkanth had visited were corrupted by the evils introduced by lust, greed, and ego. Nilkanth's curiosity presented itself on his face. Reading the expression on Nilkanth's face, Muktanand Swami began to introduce Ramanand Swami and some of the other senior disciples.

"Ramanand Swami, previously known as Shri Ram Sharma, was born in Ayodhya to Ajayprasad and Sumatidevi. He left home at an early age on the pretext of learning the Vedas. He came to a small village named Talaja in Saurashtra and learned from the wise Kashiram Pandit. Ram Sharma traveled to the peaks of the Girnar Mountains and met Atmanand Swami. He asked Atmanand Swami to grant him darshan of Shri Krishna. Atmanand Swami promised to do so a few months later. They traveled together for many months.

"One day, Atmanand Swami called young Ram Sharma to his side while meditating and said, 'Bhagwan is without a form, and you cannot see him. Stop wasting your life away by hoping to have his darshan. Meditate on what you can see: your own *atma*.' Ram Sharma was disheartened by his guru's words and decided to leave him. He traveled

to Totadri Pith in the south, the Shri Vaishnav Sampradaya *pith*. He stayed there for several months and studied the Vishishtadvaita philosophy. One night, Shri Ramanujacharya, the founder of the *sampradaya*, came to Ram Sharma in his dreams. Shri Ramanujacharya applied a Vaishnav *tilak* on Ram Sharma's forehead and initiated him with the name Ramanand Swami. Shri Ramanujacharya taught the young sadhu the method of observing fasts, celebrating festivals, offering the nine forms of bhakti to Shri Krishna,⁴ and living in accordance with the dharma shastras. Ramanand Swami woke up and left the next morning for Saurashtra. On his way north, he sang the praises of Shri Radha-Krishna and dedicated his life to inspiring others to do the same. He has inspired fifty sadhus like me to take *diksha* as his disciples and to devote our lives to Shri Krishna's bhakti. Twelve of us are his senior disciples: Ramdas, Atmanand, Svarupanand, Sukhanand, Paramchaitanyanand, Anandanand, Shatanand, Niranjananand, Mukundanand Brahmachari, Jayram Brahmachari, and Jayanand Brahmachari."

As Muktanand Swami spoke, he pointed and identified the senior sadhus seated in the front of the gathering of ashram members. Nilkanth bowed to the senior sadhus out of respect for their renunciation and virtues. The sadhus immediately returned his polite gesture with folded hands.

Muktanand Swami continued to share the stories of a few of Ramanand Swami's senior disciples. He pointed at an aged sadhu in the front. "Nilkanth, this is Ramdas Swami. Ramanand Swami met him in the fields outside of a small village in Khandesh. He was tilling the land when

⁴ The nine forms of bhakti listed in the Bhagavata Purana (and the Ramacharitmanas) are as follows:

Shravanam: Listening to spiritual discourses or devotional songs related to Bhagwan's *mahima*.

Kirtanam: Singing Bhagwan's *mahima*.

Smaranam: Remembering Bhagwan's *lila charitras*.

Padasevanam: Serving Bhagwan's holy feet.

Archanaam: Anointing Bhagwan with sandalwood paste.

Vandanam: Bowing before Bhagwan.

Dasyam: Selflessly serving Bhagwan as a servant.

Sakhyam: Cultivating a friendship with Bhagwan.

Atmanivedanam: Unconditionally offering oneself and all of one's belongings to Bhagwan with absolute submission.

he met Ramanand Swami. He immediately developed a zeal for bhakti and *vairagya*. He left his fields untilled and joined Ramanand Swami. He had the pleasure of being initiated as Ramanand Swami's first disciple. Next to him is Anandanand Swami. He was the powerful mahant of the Ramgalola *math* in Ayodhya. He left all of its assets and the power that position yielded to learn the true path of bhakti from Ramanand Swami. Swarupanand Swami was a wealthy *brahmin* who lived in Kurukshetra. He stopped here en route a pilgrimage to Dwaraka but decided to stay here and serve Ramanand Swami forever. Each of these fifty sadhus has an interesting story leading up to their arrival in our ashram, and each one is more impressive than the last."

Ramdas Swami, whose silence had intensified Nilkanth's wonder, spoke next. "Nilkanth Varni, Muktanand Swami has earned our guru's grace and blessings through his tireless efforts to become the perfect spiritual *sadhak*. I know that he will not appreciate me speaking of him with such high regard, but I feel that as the most senior sadhu in this ashram, it is my duty to speak of his inspiring spiritual journey."

Nilkanth's eyes widened with fascination. He leaned forward, intent to catch every word that sprang from Ramdas Swami's mouth. In the meantime, Muktanand Swami found an excuse to leave the assembly, further exemplifying his outstanding humility.

Ramdas Swami narrated the following tale:

"Muktanand Swami was born Mukunddas in c. 1758 in a small village in Saurashtra named Amrapur. He grew up cultivating his passion and skills as an artist, musician, poet, and, most importantly, as a *bhakta*. His parents, Anandrai and Radhadevi, wanted to see him married so that his thoughts of renunciation and asceticism would fade away. Mukunddas entered wedlock at a young age. He lived in Amrapur with his wife for a few months before deciding to leave home in search of a true guru. One morning, he left his home and went to Dwarkadas' ashram in a village named Dhrangadhra. Young Mukund expressed his desire to become the ascetic's disciple and to spend the rest of his life in bhakti while observing *ashtanga brahmacharya*. Dwarkadas admitted, 'Mukund, your desire is commendable, but I am going to be honest. I am not the right person to help you follow celibacy. Go to Kalyandas in Vakaner. He sternly

guards his celibacy. He may be able to motivate you to maintain a life of strict celibacy.”

Nilkanth Varni listened attentively as Ramdas Swami continued the narrative with only a few pauses to catch his breath.

“Mukunddas left for Vakaner to search for the famed celibate. Kalyandas was impressed by Mukunddas’ resolve but at the same time unwilling to take on his responsibility. Kalyandas advised Mukunddas, ‘You are young and inexperienced in matters of bodily comfort and sensual pleasure. Bhagwan has also given you a face and frame built for mutual attraction. Are you sure that you want to waste all of it? It will be too late to enjoy the pleasures of this world once you are old and senile. You will regret it, I am sure. I speak from experience.’ Kalyandas went on to narrate a story from four decades ago. ‘In my youth, I traveled extensively before settling in this peaceful city. Once on my way to Benares, I stopped outside of Morbi. There, at the village well, I saw a young lady pulling a bucket of water. Her skin glowed with the radiance of youth, and her smile warmed me more than the afternoon sun. I asked her which road led to Ujjain. Her eyes slightly squinted as if she was recalling a piece of information from a deep corner in her mind. She gracefully flung her hand towards the left and said, ‘Oh Celibate, Benares lies ahead on this road.’ Kalyandas revealed to Mukunddas, ‘It has been forty years since that summer day in Ujjain, and despite trying repeatedly and desperately, I have not been able to forget that woman nor her graceful hand gesture. Therefore, I advise you to tread carefully on this path.’ Mukunddas was heartbroken. How was he to follow celibacy without an able guru? Mukunddas decided to end his life by plunging off a tall tamarind tree. He climbed to one of the highest branches, and just as he was about to push himself off the tree’s trunk, he heard a voice. ‘Why are you taking your life? Be patient. You will have the fortune of meeting Parabrahma incarnate on Earth. For now, go to Sardhar.’”

Ramdas Swami proceeded to explain the next part of Muktanand Swami’s journey:

“Mukunddas left for Sardhar that same evening. He went to the village Ramji mandir and stayed with the aged mahant, Tulsidasji. The old sadhu was pleased to have found a young disciple who was able and

hard working. He instructed him to operate the *sadavrat*. Mukunddas tirelessly worked late into the night offering alms to the pilgrims and renunciates. One evening while he was distributing alms, he heard the sounds of a discourse being given by a sadhu in the neighboring home. He put his ear to the wall and paid close attention to the sermon. Mukunddas was enamoured by the sadhu's simple yet striking words. He walked over to the neighboring house and inquired about the learned sadhu, Ramanand Swami. Mukunddas asked Ramanand Swami to accept him as a disciple. Ramanand Swami would only accept him if his family and Tulsidasji gave him written consent to leave the *sadavrat*. Mukunddas knew that he would have to employ a strategy to obtain their consent, so he decided to act insane. He would throw away completely usable groceries. He would turn away renunciates and ascetics without offering alms. Tulsidasji realized that Mukunddas wanted his permission to leave, and he sadly gave Mukunddas his consent. Mukunddas returned to his home and started to act in a similar manner with his family. Sick of his tantrums, his wife and parents also gave him their consent. Mukunddas returned to Ramanand Swami triumphantly. Ramanand Swami warmly welcomed him and initiated him as Muktanand Swami."

As soon as Ramdas Swami finished narrating Muktanand Swami's past, Muktanand Swami returned to the assembly and dismissed all of the praise. He then introduced a few of the lay devotees, such as Mayaram Bhatt and Parvatbhai, to the young yogi. Nilkanth met all of the sadhus and householder devotees one after another, receiving each one with folded hands and a friendly smile.

Changes Around the Ashram

On the third day after Nilkanth's arrival, the entire village gathered to celebrate Janmashtami, the birth of Shri Krishna. The ashram was bustling with preparations for the midnight *arti* to reenact the moment of Shri Krishna's birth. The ashram was filled with the sounds of musical instruments accompanying beautiful bhajans being sung by sadhus in their sweet voices. Amidst the sounds of the festivities, everyone's eyes were fixed on the small, jewel-encrusted cradle in which Shri Krishna's *murti*

swayed back and forth. To everyone's surprise, the *murti* was replaced with the *murti* of young Nilkanth! The sadhus and devotees whispered among themselves, asking how this was possible. The young yogi was sitting in the front row next to Muktanand Swami and Ramdas Swami. They rubbed their eyes and pinched each other's arms, as if trying to awaken from a dream, but Nilkanth's *murti* was still visible in the cradle. Meanwhile, Nilkanth sat quietly with his eyes closed as his body swayed to the melody of the bhajans.

Muktanand Swami's stare shifted between the young yogi and the rocking cradle. He realized that only Bhagwan could give darshan in two forms at once. In his mind, he made a gesture of reverence to the young yogi and celebrated his fortune of sharing a seat with this miraculous teen.

The next day, Nilkanth walked around the ashram making mental notes of the changes he wished to propose. Most of the recommendations were related to the ideals of *stri-purush maryada* for the lay devotees and *ashtanga brahmacharya* for the ascetics. Nilkanth was Parabrahma manifest on Earth. He saw no difference between the genders, but to establish the purest form of bhakti and *ekantik dharma*, He wanted to set clear parameters for worship and ritual in the religious space. Nilkanth noticed that men and women prayed and participated in rituals together in the ashram's mandir. According to Nilkanth, this was unacceptable. He also noticed that during the evening assemblies in the ashram and in Jivraj Sheth's courtyard, men and women would sit next to each other while the senior sadhus lectured. Nilkanth understood the importance of focusing one's mind on Bhagwan's *murti* during these times. Human nature causes the mind to seek the favor and attention of the opposite gender. If men and women sat together during these moments of required concentration, their focus would wander from the divine to one another. Nilkanth used examples cited in the Upanishads and Puranas to convince Muktanand Swami of the need for separation of the genders inside the ashram. Though Muktanand Swami was reluctant at first, he immediately agreed after noticing that the other sadhus and devotees understood Nilkanth's prerogative. That evening, Nilkanth instructed the men and women to sit in separate groups during the evening puja and the discourse that followed. He also set up separate

times and areas for the male and female devotees to stand in the mandir while doing darshan.

While visiting the different parts of the ashram, Nilkanth came upon the ashram's kitchen. It was a dimly lit enclosure with several cooking fires, storage racks, and large vessels. Nilkanth was pleased with its cleanliness. However, a small window in one of the interior walls caught Nilkanth's eye. He spoke to one of the sadhus trying to keep the coals of the cooking fire lit. "Sadhuram, what is that little outlet in the wall for?"

Without giving it much thought, the sadhu answered, "Nilkanth Varni, this little break allows access to the neighbor's kitchen. Often, when the fire dies out in our kitchen, we borrow burning embers from the ladies next door in order to save time when relighting the fire. They are kind and generous. They oblige our requests for burning coal or embers immediately."

Nilkanth watched the sadhu turn his attention to a boiling pot. He thought for a second and looked at Muktanand Swami. "Swamiji, this hole is not only a small fracture in the wall. It is a breach of character for the ashram's sadhus and their *brahmacharya*. Sadhus are meant to follow *ashtanga brahmacharya*. The dharma shastras forbid a sadhu from communicating with women under any circumstances, except in a life or death emergency."

Before Muktanand Swami could respond, Nilkanth asked the younger sadhu for soil. He wet the soil with water and plastered the break in the wall with his own hands (see photo 22). Nilkanth's resolve for *brahmacharya* pleased Muktanand Swami and the other sadhus. Nilkanth washed his hands and headed for the evening *arti* at the mandir.

An Ideal Aspirant Is an Ideal Sevak

Nilkanth settled into a routine at the ashram, a routine filled with *bhakti* and *seva*. Though Nilkanth was Parabrahma incarnate, he spent his days demonstrating the life of an ideal aspirant. He awoke well before the rooster's crow and the sun's climb in the east. He walked to the village stepwell and bathed before the villagers populated its steps. He meditated and completed his morning puja before others called it morning. He fetched water from the well and carried the heavy vessels

on his head, sometimes making several trips every morning. He washed the sadhus' clothes and helped the elderly bathe. Nilkanth was eager to perform physically-taxing tasks. He swept the entire campus, sprinkled water on the dirt paths, and picked flowers for the deity's garlands. The energy and meticulous care he infused in every *seva* changed the ashram's atmosphere in a few days.

Nilkanth's work ethic set an example for the other sadhus. He picked *sevas* that other sadhus were quick to avoid: collecting cow dung patties from the village paths, washing the cooking vessels, and gathering dry firewood for meal preparation. The most cumbersome of the tasks was collecting cow dung patties. After Nilkanth had enforced the *ashtanga brahmacharya* tenets for the sadhus, it had become difficult for the sadhus to collect the patties amidst the village women. Nilkanth, however, had a solution. Every time a woman from the village kneeled to collect patties next to the ashram, she saw the cosmic creation, with all its planets and beings, in the heap of manure. Intrigued and bewildered all at once, she dropped the patty and ran. Nilkanth collected those patties for the ashram's use. The sadhus were amazed by Nilkanth's dedication to and passion for *seva*.

Nilkanth barely ate during the day. Once a day, he kneaded a ball of flour with ground chili and swallowed it with a gourd of water. He was the first to leave for the neighboring villages to gather alms for the ashram. Though he rarely consumed any of the alms, he gathered the most grains for the ashram's sadhus. In fact, he would travel so far in the heat that he often fainted on his way back. Passing villagers would lift Nilkanth's tiny frame and place it under a tree. They would wait for him to gain consciousness and would plead with him to care for his body. Nilkanth would sit up, thank them for their assistance, and rush off to finish the rest of the *seva* in the ashram. After several such incidents, Muktanand Swami forbade the young yogi from traveling to other villages for alms. None of this, however, dampened Nilkanth's energy and fervor for *seva*.

Along with physical *seva*, Nilkanth spent time teaching the sadhus various yogic postures and perfecting their methods of meditation. He would often walk by meditating sadhus, tap them on their shoulders,

and politely suggest, “Sadhuram, where is your mind wandering off to? Harness it!”

A similar event occurred with the revered Muktanand Swami. Muktanand Swami had just finished painting his clay drinking pot and set it to dry in the afternoon sun. He sat under a neem tree and meditated on his *atma*. At that very moment, Nilkanth happened to be returning from collecting dung patties from the village. He walked up to Muktanand Swami and jested, “Oh Respected Swamiji, is that drinking pot your true form?”

Muktanand Swami opened his eyes and realized his mistake. Instead of meditating on his *atma*, he had been thinking of his freshly-painted drinking gourd. He folded his hands and asked the young yogi for forgiveness.

Once, Nilkanth asked Muktanand Swami to meditate on Ramanand Swami’s *murti*. Nilkanth intended to enter Muktanand Swami’s mind to have Ramanand Swami’s darshan for the first time. Muktanand Swami lit a lamp and sat inside a dark room. He folded his legs into a *padmasana* and focused his mind inwards. As his guru’s *murti* came before his eyes, Muktanand Swami reminisced about every feature, from head to toe. When he woke up, Nilkanth startled him with a detailed description of the *murti* he had just visualised in his mind.

In just six short months, Nilkanth transformed the social and spiritual climate of the ashram in Loj. He earned the affection and respect of the sadhus with his humility and miraculous *lila charitras*. It was clear to the entire village that this young celibate was divinity incarnate.

The Letter

Nilkanth Varni and Muktanand Swami had developed a deep friendship based on mutual respect in the short time they had spent together. Nilkanth often begged Muktanand Swami to let him set out to find Ramanand Swami, saying, “Swamiji, please let me have Guruji’s darshan once. Then you and I will leave this town and retreat to the jungle. We will pass our days speaking of Bhagwan and singing his bhajans. We won’t live within a town or city again. It distracts our minds from bhakti.”

Muktanand Swami would appease him by saying, “Ramanand Swami will come soon. Be patient. The fruit of the darshan will be sweeter if you follow Ramanand Swami’s *agni* and wait for him at the ashram.”

After the seventh month passed, Nilkanth became restless. He felt parched by the separation from his guru. Muktanand Swami resolved to write a letter to his guru. The letter urged Ramanand Swami to return to the ashram. It described young Nilkanth’s traits and deeds from the moment he set foot in the ashram.

Muktanand Swami also recommended that Nilkanth write his own letter. Nilkanth obliged with what is now one of the most famous letters recorded within the Swaminarayan Sampradaya. It is preserved in its original prose form and described in the Bhaktachintamani by Nishkulananand Swami in verse form. Nishkulananand Swami’s version is often referred to as the *Patri*. In the letter, Nilkanth described his trip across the Indian subcontinent. He listed the various pilgrimage centers he visited along with the sadhus he met. Nilkanth implored the guru to return and help him have darshan of Bhagwan. He concludes by saying, “Please reply upon receiving this message. If I don’t hear from you soon, I will not be able to survive.” Nilkanth’s plea for Ramanand Swami’s darshan emotionally resounded with all those who read the letter.

When Mayaram Bhatt delivered the letter to Ramanand Swami in Kutch, Ramanand Swami touched the letter to his head, offering his respects to young Nilkanth. He read the letter and closed his eyes to have Nilkanth’s darshan. He addressed the puzzled assembly, “I have been waiting for the arrival of this young yogi for years. Though most of you believe me to be the form of Shri Krishna, I am merely the prologue. Nilkanth is the true incarnation of Bhagwan.”

Ramanand Swami spent the rest of the day extolling Nilkanth’s virtues. The next morning, he ordered Mayaram Bhatt to return to Loj. He instructed Mayaram Bhatt to tell all of the devotees who lived en route to plan a trip to Loj for Nilkanth’s darshan. On his way to Loj, Mayaram Bhatt stopped in Shekhpur to share Ramanand Swami’s message with Lalji Suthar.

Lalji was deeply devoted to Ramanand Swami. He was unsure who this young celibate was, but his mind only wanted to go to Kutch to see

his guru. He arrived in Kutch after a few days. Ramanand Swami was slightly bothered to see him. “Did you not get my message? Why did you come here?”

Lalji expressed his hesitation. Ramanand Swami ordered Lalji, “Leave for Loj now. I will be there in a few days.”

Lalji responded with an onslaught of questions. “Who is he? How great is he? Is he as great as Datt, Kapil, or Shri Rama? Why are you sending me to Loj?”

Ramanand Swami knew that he had to put Lalji’s mind to rest. “Lalji, Parabrahma has never graced this Earth. This Nilkanth Varni is Parabrahma himself. He is greater than all of the incarnations that have previously manifested on Earth. Believe me when I say that he is greater than you can imagine. He is the Supreme Being.”

Lalji was left speechless. He collected his belongings and left for Loj immediately.

In Loj, the disciples gathered around Mayaram Bhatt to hear their guru’s message. Mayaram announced that Ramanand Swami would be leaving Kutch in the next few days and returning to Loj. He turned to Nilkanth and said, “Varni, our guru has said, ‘If you care to progress in satsang, pass your days in proximity of the pillars. Embrace them and don’t wander too far.’”

Nilkanth immediately ran towards the pillars in the ashram’s mandir and embraced them dearly. Mayaram smiled and retorted, “Nilkanth Varni, Guruji is speaking of pillar-like elements within our satsang. Muktanand Swami’s maturity and *sadhuta* suggests such pillar-like stability.”

Nilkanth immediately prostrated at Muktanand Swami’s feet to follow Ramanand Swami’s *agna*. Muktanand Swami raised and tightly embraced the young yogi.

Meeting His Guru

Kurji Dave walked into the ashram late in the afternoon. The mood in the ashram around that time was always contemplative and serene. Most of the sadhus were lost in meditation with their heads covered with their shawl-like upper garment. Almost none of them noticed the bounce in Kurji’s step as he headed straight for Muktanand Swami’s quarters.

Kurji bowed to Muktanand Swami and tried to contain his excitement as he delivered the joyous news. “Swamiji, Ramanand Swami has finally returned from Kutch. He is in the neighboring village of Piplana. He has given everyone permission to come to Piplana for his darshan.”

Kurji looked at Nilkanth and said, “Nilkanth Varni, Ramanand Swami is especially eager to see you.”

The news quickly spread around the ashram, from the sadhus preparing the evening *thal*, to those tending to the cattle, and finally awakening those deep in meditation. The forthcoming trip to Piplana was a jubilant occasion, and the entire ashram began preparing for the journey. Sadhus and householders gifted Kurji Dave with personal items of value, as was customary of the time when someone delivered joyous news. Nilkanth examined his possessions. He had nothing of value that he could offer to Kurji. Nilkanth thought for a few moments and then turned to Kurji. “Kurjibhai, I will give you what no one else has been able to give before, something which has remained unattainable even by the greatest *rushi munis*. When it is time, I will gift you my Akshardham.”

Kurji was unsure of the significance of Nilkanth’s promise but acknowledged its importance. He nodded his head in acceptance of the young yogi’s present.

Muktanand Swami set out for Piplana with the ashram’s sadhus. Nilkanth was weak and lagged behind the rest of the group, which worried Muktanand Swami. He assumed that Nilkanth would not be able to complete the four-hour trip and, therefore, instructed one of the healthier sadhus to carry Nilkanth on his back. The sadhu placed Nilkanth on his back and started walking with the group. The sadhu advanced a few steps but then placed Nilkanth on the ground. Though the sadhu was tall and broadly built, he could not bear Nilkanth’s weight. Nilkanth grinned mischievously. Muktanand Swami realized that Nilkanth was using his yogic powers to tire the otherwise physically fit sadhu.

The band continued towards Piplana with Nilkanth at the front. Nilkanth sped past the rest of the group and arrived on the banks of the Ojat River. He politely asked a boatman to help him cross the river, but the boatman was reluctant to accept the risky request. The rivers

in Saurashtra were highly unpredictable when the rains swelled their waters during the monsoon. He suggested that the young yogi spend the night on the banks and wait to cross the river tomorrow once the waters settled. Nilkanth was in no mood to wait. He plunged into the river and started swimming. The boatman held his breath as he watched the young yogi cross the flooded river. He finally relaxed after seeing Nilkanth swim ashore on the opposite side. The remaining members of the group spent the night on the riverbank and waited for the waters to calm. The next morning they crossed the river and came to the outskirts of the village. There they found Nilkanth meditating under a tree, patiently waiting for them. Together they walked to Narsinh Mehta's home in Pipalana.

Ramanand Swami received word of the group's arrival. He waited for his disciples in the courtyard with open arms. Nilkanth saw the aged guru and ran towards him. He prostrated at his guru's feet. Ramanand Swami raised Nilkanth and greeted him with teary eyes and a tender heart. He could not remove his gaze from the young yogi's *murti*. Everything Mayaram Bhatt had told him was true; this was the young yogi whose arrival he awaited.

Ramanand Swami met with the rest of the sadhus and sat down to talk with Nilkanth. He asked about Nilkanth's travels and experiences. After nine months of separation, the guru and his disciple finally met on Wednesday, 18 June 1800. Ramanand Swami ordered the other sadhus to return to Loj but allowed young Nilkanth to join him while he traveled through the neighboring villages.

Nilkanth Becomes Sahajanand

Ramanand Swami picked an auspicious day for Nilkanth's initiation. The *diksha* ceremony was scheduled for Tuesday, 28 October 1800, in Piplana. Narsinh Mehta was given the honor of hosting the festival in which hundreds of devotees from all over Gujarat participated. Ramanand Swami supervised the preparations and made sure that all went according to plan. He oversaw the administration of the invitations, the arrangements for the ceremony, and the procurement of the supplies. He followed up on even the smallest of tasks and checked on Nilkanth every few hours.

The arriving devotees immediately sensed the unique aura surrounding the festival.

Ramanand Swami spoke in the assembly every evening after *artī*. He extolled the young yogi's greatness, often repeating the analogy about the prologue and the main act. Nilkanth, he assured, was the main act—he was Parabrahma incarnate.

On the morning of the ceremony, Narsinh Mehta's house was bustling with the sounds of chanting *brahmins*, clattering pots and pans, and chattering devotees imagining the splendor of the day's events. Kala, the village barber, was summoned to shave Nilkanth's long, matted hair. A thin tuft of hair was tied at the center of his cleanly shaven head as a sign of the Vaishnav ascetic order. Ramanand Swami sat next to Nilkanth as the *brahmins* chanted verses from all four Vedas. He applied a *tilak* on Nilkanth's forehead and whispered the guru mantra into his ears. Ramanand Swami named him Sahajanand Swami and Narayan Muni (see photo 24). Nilkanth was now Sahajanand.

Ramanand Swami and Sahajanand Swami spent the next few months in Loj. Ramanand Swami was worried about his disciple's health. Sahajanand Swami was merely skin and bones. There was not enough fat in his body to cause him to perspire. Ramanand Swami ordered the sadhus to prepare nutritious meals and to feed Sahajanand Swami three times a day. Often, the guru would feed his favorite disciple with his own hands. Ramanand Swami also ordered the sadhus to harvest a special herb from a nearby forest called *awala* (*senna auriculata*). This plant's leaves were known to possess certain medicinal qualities that strengthened the human body. Ramanand Swami had the leaves boiled and bathed Nilkanth with that water. Ramanand Swami also had some leaves wrapped around Nilkanth's body to increase his body's overall health and immunity.

Muktanand Swami and the other sadhus were elated to follow their guru's requests. However, Raghunathdas, one of Ramanand Swami's disciples, was an exception. He was envious of this young sadhu. What had he done to deserve so much attention? Raghunathdas started to insult and speak poorly about his guru and the young sadhu. "Ramanand Swami is old and senile; he has lost all sense of his dharma. He is destroying all

the medicinal herbs in the forest and killing innocent plants for the sake of this young mendicant. We don't even know where this boy is from. It's possible he may have run away from home after committing some major crime."

When word of this reached Ramamand Swami, he laughed off Raghunathdas' foolishness and said, "This Sahajanand Swami is Bhagwan. Raghunathdas is fretting over a few plants. Sahajanand Swami is the protector of our entire universe. It would only be fitting to give all of our lives for the sake of his."

The other sadhus came to realize the place Sahajanand Swami had secured in his guru's heart in just a few short months. Ramanand Swami took Sahajanand Swami with him as he toured Saurashtra for the next twelve months.

The Pashtun and the New Festival

During their *vicharan*, Ramanand Swami and Sahajanand Swami spent a few days at Mayaram Bhatt's house in Manavadar. Dozens of devotees gathered for Sahajanand Swami's darshan. Sahajanand Swami was extremely respectful of his guru. Despite all of the attention and reverence he received from the devotees, Sahajanand Swami remained humble and obsequious in his guru's presence.

One evening, an Afghan Pashtun passed by the village's outskirts and felt a sense of tranquility. He inquired within the village to find the source of such serene feeling. He was directed towards Mayaram Bhatt's house. The Pashtun came to Mayaram's courtyard and experienced an even greater feeling of peace. He sat behind the rest of the devotees and focused his eyes on Sahajanand Swami. In a matter of minutes, the Pashtun went into samadhi. He saw Sahajanand Swami seated in Akshardham. He saw sadhus, *ishvaras*, and even Ramanand Swami joined in Sahajanand Swami's *seva* with folded hands. The Pashtun awoke from the samadhi, immediately walked to the front of the assembly, and asked, "This is odd—the real Bhagwan is sitting on the floor, and his servant is sitting on the elevated seat."

Ramanand Swami laughed and said, "This is the beauty of the guru-disciple relationship within the Hindu tradition. Shri Rama,

Shri Krishna, and all the other avatars sat on the floor in their guru's presence."

The Pashtun shrugged, failing to fully grasp the depth of Ramanand Swami's words, and then described what he witnessed in the samadhi. The sadhus and devotees realized that their guru was speaking earnestly; Sahajanand Swami was Bhagwan.

This year Sahajanand Swami proposed celebrating Sharad Purnima (Oct.) differently. Up until now, the festival celebrating the departure of monsoon and the arrival of winter held very little importance in Ramanand Swami's ashram. Ramanand Swami agreed with Sahajanand Swami and decided to host the festival in the village of Jetpur. The invitations were sent and the preparations were underway, but Ramdas Swami was perplexed. He thought to himself, "What real significance does Sharad Purnima have for us?"

He approached Ramanand Swami with his concerns. Ramanand Swami revealed, "From this year onwards, Sharad Purnima will be celebrated every year. Parabrahma has incarnated on Earth with Aksharbrahma. Aksharbrahma was born on Sharad Purnima."

Ramdas Swami followed with a series of questions. "Aksharbrahma has taken birth on Earth? Where? To whom? When can we have his darshan?"

Ramanand Swami stroked Ramdas Swami's head, signaling patience. "You will have his darshan when the time is right. My guru Atmanand Swami has a disciple in Bhadra. His name is Bholanath. Aksharbrahma has taken birth from Bholanath's wife, Sakarba. Sahajanand Swami will initiate Bholanath's son, Mulji Sharma, as a sadhu and introduce all of you to him."

It was then that Ramdas Swami understood Sahajanand Swami's explanation of the five metaphysical elements: Aksharbrahma and Parabrahma manifest on Earth to liberate the *jivas* and *ishvaras* from *maya*.

Appointed Guru

The day after the Sharad Purnima celebrations, Ramanand Swami organized a meeting with all of his senior disciples, both ascetics and lay people. In the meeting, Ramanand Swami expressed his desire to transfer the leadership of the *sampradaya* to one of his disciples. He posed the

question to the group. “Who do you think is worthy of assuming the responsibility as your guru?”

Muktanand Swami and the rest of the disciples answered unanimously. “Swamiji, only Sahajanand Swami is worthy of replacing you as guru.”

Ramanand Swami was overjoyed; his disciples accepted the proposal before he had even presented it. There was, however, one very important person who needed convincing: Sahajanand Swami. Ramanand Swami entrusted Muktanand Swami with the task.

Muktanand Swami approached Sahajanand Swami later that afternoon. Sahajanand Swami was always delighted to spend time with the elderly sadhu. He particularly appreciated Muktanand Swami’s resolve to only speak of dharma, *jnan*, *vairagya*, and *bhakti*. He never wasted time on gossip or worldly drivel. However, today, the look on Muktanand Swami’s face suggested a different topic of conversation. Sahajanand Swami inquired as to why Muktanand Swami was beaming with a glow of exuberance. Muktanand Swami started off slowly and tactfully. He addressed Narayan Muni by the shortened name that he often lovingly called him. “Muni, I knew from the day you set foot in our ashram that you came with a purpose. You are not an ordinary sadhu or ascetic. You are our guru’s preeminent and favored disciple. Today, my prophecy comes true. Ramanand Swami has selected you as his heir. You will be given the responsibility of maintaining and nurturing the satsang community. You will become guru.”

Sahajanand Swami’s eyes widened with surprise. He dismissed Muktanand Swami’s comments as mere speculation and tried to change the topic. Muktanand Swami, however, was persistent. “Muni, they have set a date for the festival. You will be made guru on Monday, 16 November 1801.”

Sahajanand Swami was devastated. “Swami, you know that I have not come here to become guru. You promised me that we would leave for the forest once I received *diksha* from Ramanand Swami. What are we waiting for? Let’s go! I do not want to be guru.”

Muktanand Swami talked to Sahajanand Swami for several hours and finally brought the young heir apparent to Ramanand Swami. Ramanand Swami was overjoyed to see them together. He asked, “Is our young Muni

ready? I have begun the preparations already.”

Sahajanand Swami prostrated at his guru’s feet and pleaded, “I have not come here to be guru. I know that power corrupts. Power gives one the opportunity to accrue wealth and bask in lust. I do not want to fall prey to these obstacles. Please spare me. Allow me to retire to the forest and resume my life as a wandering ascetic.”

Ramanand Swami attempted to convince Sahajanand Swami using different modes of logic and reasoning. The young sadhu was adamant. At the end, Ramanand Swami begged. He folded his hands and said, “Oh Parabrahma, nothing can taint your character. You are above *maya*. You should stop acting as if you are a human. The time has come to show the world your true greatness.”

Sahajanand Swami blushed and immediately complied with his guru’s *agna*. Sahajanand Swami’s acceptance to becoming guru was a joyous and momentous occasion, worthy of a grand celebration (see photo 25).

It was the morning of Prabodhini Ekadashi. Sahajanand Swami rose well before the sun. He bathed and put on white garments. Ramanand Swami had arranged for the young sadhu to be taken to the riverbank for the ceremony on a gold carriage atop an elephant. Both guru and disciple sat on the elephant and rode to the riverbank. The devas showered the procession with flower petals, and the entire village gathered to watch the festivities.

Ramanand Swami held his young Muni’s hand and slowly walked knee-deep into the Bhadra River. He scooped the water from the river into a gold *kalash* and repeatedly poured it on Sahajanand Swami’s head. Ramanand Swami called all of the sadhus and several senior lay devotees, including Mayaram Bhatt, Parvatbhai, and Gordhanbhai, to participate in the *abhishek* ritual. Sahajanand Swami stood with his head bowed and hands folded. Though honoring him was a joyous occasion for the others, his actions showed that a true sadhu is disheartened by praise and worship.

Sahajanand Swami was brought back to the village where an enormous tent housed the hundreds of devotees and villagers in attendance. Sahajanand Swami entered the tent to the deafening cheers

of the devotees, “Sahajanand Swami Maharaj ni jay!”⁵

He followed Muktanand Swami’s lead and walked onto the stage and stood in front of his guru. Ramanand Swami ushered the young sadhu to sit on the seat reserved for him. Sahajanand Swami looked pleadingly at Muktanand Swami, as if trying to avoid another insult. Muktanand Swami grabbed his hand and sat him down next to the aged guru. As planned, Mayaram Bhatt walked onto the stage with a platter of fine, gold-trimmed, silk garments and gold ornaments. Ramanand Swami addressed Nilkanth, “Put these on, Muni. You will enhance their shine.”

Sahajanand Swami was nearly in tears. He stood up from his seat and for the first time spoke abrasively to his guru. “Swamiji, I cannot follow this *agni*. I am a sadhu. How can a sadhu wear such silks and embellish his body with jeweled ornaments? I have never worn a garland of roses without feeling contravened. How am I to put these on?”

Sahajanand Swami then began to walk off the stage. Muktanand Swami grabbed his hand and brought him back. Ramanand Swami bowed to his young disciple and said, “Muni, you are the epitome of saintliness. However, you must remember that you are Bhagwan incarnate on Earth. If you do not wear these ornaments, your devotees will never have the pleasure of seeing your divine *murti* as it dwells in Akshardham. I implore you, if not for me then for the devotees, please adorn yourself.”

Hearing his guru’s prayer, Sahajanand Swami silently accepted the offerings and allowed Mayaram Bhatt and the senior sadhus to adorn him. They first dressed him with a gold-threaded, yellow dhoti and a contrasting, sparkling *jaamo* on his torso. They placed a buttermilk-colored *pagh* on his head. They ornamented his neck with jewel-encrusted necklaces of various lengths, making each one distinctly visible from a distance. Each of his fingers was decorated with several gemmed rings. His ears slightly stooped bearing the weight of two intricate, gold earrings.

5 In ancient India, such hails were voiced for deities, kings, and warriors when they were victorious or performed a noble deed. It is a sign of respect. In this case, it praises Sahajanand Swami Maharaj (Bhagwan Swaminarayan) for being appointed as heir to Ramanand Swami and the new leader of the *sampradaya*. Today, these words are hailed during the daily *arti* ritual.

His wrists and upper arms were bound by gold *baju bandhs*. Finally, they completed ornamenting Sahajanand Swami by placing a fresh garland of white jasmine buds and a garland with hundreds of shiny, white pearls around his neck. The assembly was in awe, silenced by the divine majesty that had reentered the tent.

Ramanand Swami did *arti* of his disciple and turned to address the audience. “I told you for quite some time now that I was simply setting the groundwork for Parabrahma incarnate. This Muni is Parabrahma incarnate. He is what the shastras extol as Purna Purushottam Narayan. Do not be fooled; he may walk, talk, and look like us, but he is not one of us. He is an entirely different metaphysical element. Listen to his *agna*. His word should carry more importance in your lives than even mine. If you please him, you will benefit in this world and the next.”

He turned to the newly-appointed guru and said, “I am extremely pleased with you. You followed my *agna* against your own will. Ask me for any two boons, and I will grant them.”

Sahajanand Swami folded his hands and bowed his head in reverence to his guru and all those in the assembly. The two boons he asked for exemplified his selflessness and set an example for all spiritual leaders to come. He requested, “If my devotee is to suffer from a misery that is comparable to the sting of a single scorpion, please have it so that I may suffer the misery of an infinite number of scorpion stings in each of my pores in his place. Bless me so that my devotee would never feel such agony. Second, if my devotee is to suffer from the deprivation of the basic food, shelter, and clothing necessities of a human being, please let me suffer from such deprivation in his place. Bless me so that my devotee never suffers from the pangs of hunger or from the lack of basic human necessities.”

Sahajanand Swami petitioned responsibly. As his first step as guru, he placed his *bhaktas'* needs before his own. Sahajanand Swami asked for the security of all those who sought refuge in him.

Ramanand Swami's eyes welled up with tears of joy. He had made the right choice. He turned to the audience and said, “In the past, thousands of gurus have passed on their legacy to their disciples, but never before has a disciple asked for the benefit of his devotees in place of his own on

such an occasion. This Muni is a rare find.”

Ramanand Swami and the newly-appointed guru walked to the edge of the stage and sat down so that the devotees could offer their respects and *dakshina* to Sahajanand Swami. Each devotee passed by, donating land, grains, cattle, or gold to their new guru. Sahajanand Swami greeted each of them with a smiling face and accepted their offerings with gratitude.

Towards the end of the line stood Bholanath Sharma from Bhadra. He brought both of his sons, Mulji, who was fifteen, and Sundarji, who was twelve, for Sahajanand Swami’s darshan. Ramanand Swami inquired, “Muni, does this fifteen-year-old boy deserve an introduction?”

Sahajanand Swami’s face lit up as Mulji approached. Sahajanand Swami explained, “Guruji, this boy and I have shared a bond since eternity. You know that he is Aksharbrahma; I reside in him. He has been with me throughout my travels on Earth and elsewhere. I do not go anywhere without him.”

Mulji stood by his father’s side engrossed in Sahajanand Swami’s darshan. Mulji knew that the appropriate time would come when he would join Sahajanand Swami’s side as a sadhu. For now, he watched his father offer a cow at the newly-appointed guru’s feet. He pulled his younger brother along as they were holding up the line.

His Last Agna

Ramanand Swami’s mind was at peace. He had completed his task of introducing Parabrahma to his devotees. Now it was time to return to Akshardham. He summoned Muktanand Swami to his room to ask him for a favor. “Muktamuni, I am getting old. My body will not go on like this for much longer. Now that Sahajanand Swami is in charge of the *sampradaya*, I wish to end my mortal life. I need you to promise that you will look after Sahajanand Swami. He is young and extremely detached. He cares not for any pleasures, objects, or comfort. Try to understand his likes and dislikes. Always act accordingly. Never upset him. He will always shun material pleasure and praise. Since he is a renunciate at heart, he will always avoid his family from Ayodhya. If he is forced to meet them, he will lose interest in all that is here. He will be disheartened

and will have thoughts of leaving the *sampradaya* and resuming his life as a wandering ascetic. Be careful that this never happens. Remember, he may look like you and me, but he is not a mere *jiva* or *ishvara*. Take care of him for the *sampradaya's* sake."

Muktanand Swami nodded his head in compliance. He promised his guru that he would forever remain unwavering in his service to Sahajanand Swami.

Ramanand Swami also called upon Mukund Brahmachari. Mukund Brahmachari was a senior disciple. He was a flawless celibate who was born to a *brahmin* family in Ayodhya. Ramanand Swami entrusted the young guru's personal care to him.

"Mukund, this Muni will never care for himself. Make sure to feed him, care for his physical needs, and dress him appropriately. You are fortunate to have the personal *seva* of Parabrahma. Never leave his side. From this day on, you are to be his shadow."

Mukund Brahmachari also accepted his guru's final *agni*.

In Faneni, Ramanand Swami called a final assembly before his departure. The mood was solemn, and everyone paid close attention to their guru's final wishes. "All of you have served me dearly. From this day onwards, follow Sahajanand Swami's *agni* as if it is my own. He will bless you dearly. His blessings will yield more than mine ever have. You are a few of the handpicked *jivas* that will have the fortune of serving the manifest form of Parabrahma. Take advantage of this opportunity. He will establish *ekantik dharma*. His fame will spread far and wide. His theological system will enlighten the entire world. Shriji Maharaj will guide all of you to Akshardham."

From thereon, Sahajanand Swami was often called Shriji Maharaj and Shri Hari.

A few days later, Ramanand Swami crossed his legs in a *padmasana* and prepared to leave his mortal body. He asked Shriji Maharaj to grant him permission to enter Akshardham. Shriji Maharaj smiled and raised his right hand before prostrating at his guru's feet. He put his head at Ramanand Swami's feet for the last time and offered his respects. Ramanand Swami retracted his breath, stopped his pulse, and left his mortal body for Akshardham.

Shriji Maharaj performed Ramanand Swami's cremation rites and comforted the satsang community. Though there was a sense of loss surrounding Ramanand Swami's departure, the feeling was alleviated by Shriji Maharaj's presence. The young guru's presence assured the sadhus and devotees of the bright days that lay ahead.

4

Stories of Samadhi

Swaminarayan Swaminarayan kaho re mana meraa,

Ehi he mahaamantra saar mite bhav feraa...

*Shrimukhe Shri Hari aap ehi jaap preraa,
Muktaanand mantra aaj metat andheraa...*

*Swaminarayan Swaminarayan,
say, oh dear mind,*

*It is the essence of all mantras,
and the key to your liberation...*

*Shri Hari has given the mantra himself,
and suggested its chanting,
Muktanand sings the mantra,
in this moment, will eradicate all darkness...*

- Muktanand Swami (c. 1758-1830 CE),

Senior Sadhu, Poet,
Commentator, Artist, and Musician

What is Samadhi?

In the Hindu tradition, each avatar is associated with specific *lila charitras* and *bhaktas*. The avatar is remembered and celebrated within the context of these associations. For instance, Shri Krishna is

remembered through his association with the Gopis,¹ the pinky-lifted mountain,² and the philosophical depth of the Shrimad Bhagavad Gita.³ Shri Rama is remembered through his association with the bow and arrow,⁴ Hanumanji and the army of monkeys,⁵ and the loyal vows of the Raghus.⁶ Similarly, Purna Purushottam Narayan Bhagwan Swaminarayan's incarnation on Earth is remembered today through his work to eradicate

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- 1 The Gopis of Vrindavan were a group of cowherd girls known for their profound bhakti for Shri Krishna. Their love for Shri Krishna was indescribable and exemplifies the highest form of unconditional love for Bhagwan. The Bhagavata Purana describes stories of their intense love for Shri Krishna. Bhagwan Swaminarayan has also praised their selfless love for Shri Krishna in several discourses recorded in the Vachanamarut.
 - 2 The farmers and cowherders of Mathura were preparing for a festival to worship Indra, the deva of rain, for having showered them with ample rainfall during the monsoon, resulting in a rich harvest. Shri Krishna debated with the farmers and convinced them that Govardhan Mountain deserved to be worshipped for it provides fertile farming and grazing lands. The villagers then started offering their prayers to Govardhan Mountain. This infuriated Indra, so he used his powers to flood the village. Shri Krishna lifted Govardhan Mountain with his pinky finger for seven days, thereby providing the people of Mathura shelter from Indra's wrath-filled ego.
 - 3 The Bhagavad Gita is written by Ved Vyasa and is part of the Mahabharata. It is a dialogue between Shri Krishna and Arjuna, one of the Pandavas, on the battlefield of Kurukshetra. Arjuna loses his courage to fight against his cousins, the Kauravas. In the dialogue that takes place between the two, Shri Krishna urges Arjuna to perform his duty as a *kshatriya*—to protect dharma and destroy evil. The Bhagavad Gita imparts knowledge about yoga, the notion of avatars, the divine cosmic form of Bhagwan, the doctrines of karma and rebirth, and the guru-*shishya* relationship. It is one of the most widely read, sacred Hindu texts.
 - 4 Shri Rama is said to have conquered the *rakshas* and asuras on Earth with his bow and arrow. It is with this weapon that he slayed Ravana, Maricha, and Khar and Dushana. For this reason, *murtis* of Shri Rama are depicted with a bow and arrow in hand.
 - 5 Hanumanji, the son of Vayu, the deva of wind, was born as the son of Anjani. He was known to have inherited his father's strength and powers. When Sita was abducted by the evil Ravana, the King of Lanka, Hanumanji aided Shri Rama in reaching Lanka. Hanumanji was one of the chief warriors in King Sugreeva's army of monkeys. Other notable warriors included Prince Angada, Jambuvan, and Nal and Neil.
 - 6 The members of the Raghu dynasty were known for stringently abiding by their promises, as evidenced by the maxim: "The tradition of the family of Raghus is eternal: may one lose his life but never go back on a given word." For example, King Dashrath, a descendant of Raghu, had previously granted his wife, Kaikayi, a boon. In order to prevent Shri Rama from succeeding as heir to King Dashrath, Kaikayi used the boon to send Shri Rama into exile from Ayodhya for fourteen years so that her son, Bharata, could become King of Koshala. Dashrath was forced to grant Kaikayi the boon in accordance with this tradition.

the base desires and worldly attachments of his bhaktas. Bhagwan Swaminarayan destroyed the layer of ignorance that enveloped the *jiva*; he lifted the *jiva* above *maya* and into Akshardham.

In the early years after Ramanand Swami's demise, Bhagwan Swaminarayan used *samadhi*. These *samadhis* helped the *jivas* understand the reality of the *atma* or the self, cosmology, Aksharbrahma, and Parabrahma. *Samadhi* helps a spiritual aspirant recognize the truths concerning one's own and Bhagwan's *swarup* in a matter of seconds, a task otherwise cut short by death for even sages and seers.

Samadhi is the last step of ashtanga yoga. As the name ashtanga yoga suggests, there are eight facets: *yam*, *niyam*, *asana*, *pranayam*, *pratyahar*, *dharana*, *dhyan*, and *samadhi*. In the *Shrimad Bhagavata Purana*, Ved Vyasa states that Shri Krishna mastered all eight facets of yoga during his incarnation on Earth, which was otherwise impossible for humans. In the Swaminarayan Sampradaya, it is known that Bhagwan Swaminarayan, Gopal Yogi, and Gopalanand Swami also mastered ashtanga yoga.

Yam is the first and most basic step of yoga. It empowers the aspirant to restrain one's mind and body by following the moral codes prescribed in the dharma shastras: non-violence, compassion, abiding by the truth, not stealing, not gathering worldly possessions, and following *brahmacharya*. *Niyam* is purity of the mind and body through observances and austerity, along with the study of shastras, to further one's understanding of the self. The central focus of the *niyam* stage should be Bhagwan's *bhajan*, *bhakti*, and *katha*. Though both of these first two stages are often dismissed by many yoga masters as being elementary, they are the foundation upon which the path to the other six steps is built.

Asana mandates stability, patience, and endurance of the body and the mind. It strengthens and tests all three of these qualities through one's ability to fixate in certain yogic postures. *Pranayam* requires the extension or drawing out of one's breath through certain exercises. These exercises enhance the ability to control one's body, mind, and desires. *Pratyahar* is the act of withdrawing one's mind from the senses and pulling it inward. *Dharana* requires one to focus and concentrate the mind on the *atma*, and then its master, Parabrahma. After completely focusing one's mind on Parabrahma, the aspirant enters *dhyan*, in which one loses an individual

state of being. *Samadhi* is the final stage in which the aspirant becomes one with Parabrahma through an ontological experience, usually through darshan of Bhagwan or the *ekantik sant*. The aspirant participates in this union through the grace of Bhagwan.

Under ordinary circumstances it is impossible for an aspirant to enter *samadhi* without passing through the other seven stages. However, through Bhagwan and his *ekantik sant*'s grace, the aspirant may immediately experience *samadhi*, affording him the opportunity to relish in the bliss of Parabrahma in Akshardham.

Bhagwan Swaminarayan viewed *samadhi* as the best medium to spread *atma-jnan* and *Paramatma-jnan* to a large number of aspirants in a short amount of time. It was a blessing granted by Bhagwan Swaminarayan to his devotees. In this setting, *samadhi* should not be misunderstood as a form of black magic, sorcery, superstition or hypnotism. The following chapter shares a handful of accounts from the thousands of occurrences recorded by Bhagwan Swaminarayan's devotees. Spreading *ekantik dharma* through *samadhi* by chanting the Swaminarayan *maha-mantra* was one of Bhagwan Swaminarayan's redemptive *lila charitas*.

The Swaminarayan Mahamantra

After completing the *termu* (thirteenth day) rituals commemorating Ramanand Swami's life on Earth, Shri Hari organized the first official *sabha* after his guru's *aksharnivas*. He was adorned in all white and wore a tightly bound, silk embroidered *fento* that Mukund Brahmachari had tied with precision and expertise. The simple yet elegant ornaments on his ears, neck, and hands shimmered under the afternoon sun. A group of senior sadhus were arranged to his left and right. Thousands of devotees sat spellbound by Shri Hari's *murti*, waiting patiently for him to share his first *ashirvachan*.

Shri Hari spoke with a confident yet gentle demeanor. "Whosoever wishes to earn the merit of my blessings should follow the dharma prescribed in the shastras. Brahma, Vishnu, Mahesh, Indra, Surya, Chandra, and other *ishvaras* follow Bhagwan's *agna*, and that is why the other *jivas* and *ishvaras* respect and venerate them. It is therefore

extremely important to follow Bhagwan's *agni* and adhere to the path of dharma, *jnan*, bhakti, and *vairagya*. Today, I introduce you to a new *mahamantra*. It is a mantra that contains the essence of all other mantras. By chanting this mantra, one can overcome any sort of physical, mental, or environmental calamity. It will ward away evil spirits, remove superstitious beliefs, and give all who chant it the courage to face the difficulties in their lives. It possesses the power to liberate *jivas* from the cycle of birth and death. It is the only mantra which can fulfill all your mind's wishes and desires. From this moment onwards, you will only recite the Swaminarayan *mahamantra* during your *mala*, *jap*, puja, and other daily activities."

Shri Hari closed his eyes and loudly chanted, engaging the *sabha* to do the same, "Swaminarayan, Swaminarayan, Swaminarayan..." The devotees followed his cue and started to recite the *mahamantra* in a rhythmic pattern.

Seated amidst the assembly was a pilgrim named Shitaldas. He was disappointed to see that his aged guru, Ramanand Swami, had passed. He was debating whether to stay with Shri Hari or to continue on his pilgrimage. Shri Hari lovingly called out to him and said, "Why not try reciting the mantra? It will fulfill all that you wish for."

Shitaldas chanted the Swaminarayan *mahamantra*. After a brief moment, he fell into *samadhi*. The entire *sabha* watched Shitaldas' eyes close and body tip over on its side. They speculated about what may have caused this young pilgrim to lose consciousness. Shitaldas saw the brilliance of a thousand suns yet felt the radiance cooling. He looked around and recognized several of the devas, *ishvaras*, and avatars. He even saw his guru Ramanand Swami standing on the side offering prayers to a central deity. As he moved closer, he realized that the central deity that the others were worshipping was none other than Shri Hari. He also wanted to do puja of Shri Hari in this celestial environment but was caught in a dilemma. How was he to offer his puja to all of the devas, avatars, *muktas*, and Shri Hari at once? There were an infinite number of celestial beings and only one of him. Shri Hari read his mind and said, "Shitaldas, why don't you select any one of these avatars and believe them to be Parabrahma. If your belief is

true, you will be able to manifest in infinite forms and offer your puja to all of us.”

Shitaldas immediately closed his eyes and prayed to each of the avatars and Ramanand Swami as Parabrahma, but nothing happened. Shitaldas was disappointed. Shri Hari smiled and suggested, “Now, believe me to be Parabrahma and let us see what happens.”

Shitaldas obliged, and he manifested into infinite forms. Seizing this opportunity, he offered his puja to all of the *muktas*, avatars, and Shri Hari. Ramanand Swami turned to Shitaldas and advised, “Child, do not ever lose sight of this truth. Shri Hari is Parabrahma. Always follow his *agna*. I, too, do his bidding. When you return from *samadhi*, be sure to share your experiences with the rest of the sadhus and devotees.”

Shitaldas returned to his mortal body to find everyone leaning over him. He stood up and described what he saw in Akshardham. The assembly was startled. Several of the devotees started to chant the Swaminarayan *mahamantra*. Shri Hari compassionately sent the entire *sabha* into *samadhi*. For several minutes, all of the devotees enjoyed the bliss and joy that Shitaldas had experienced in Akshardham. Shri Hari gently snapped his fingers and brought everyone back to consciousness.

Muktanand Swami was enchanted by this experience and instantly wrote a bhajan praising the glory of the Swaminarayan *mahamantra*:

*Swaminarayan Swaminarayan kaho re mana meraa,
Ehi he mahaamantra saar mite bhav feraa...
Shrimukhe Shri Hari aap ehi jaap preraa,
Muktaanand mantra aaj metat andheraa...*

*Swaminarayan Swaminarayan, say oh dear mind,
It is the essence of all mantras, and the key to your liberation...
Shri Hari has given the mantra himself, and suggested its chanting,
Muktanand sings that the mantra, in this moment, will eradicate
all darkness...*

Shitaldas was captivated by this experience. He asked Shri Hari to initiate him as a sadhu. Shri Hari agreed, and Shitaldas became

Vyapkanand Swami. He canceled the remainder of his pilgrimage and remained in Shri Hari's service.

The Mahamantra's Prowess

Nineteenth-century Gujarat owed its vibrant pulse to rediscovered trade routes and a rekindled interest in its centers of pilgrimage, namely Shri Krishna's Dwaraka and Somnath Mahadev.⁷ In order to assist these pilgrims en route to Dwaraka, Ramanand Swami set up *sadavrats* along the major roads leading to the renowned pilgrimage center. Word spread through Saurashtra, and specifically from these *sadavrats*, that a Jivanmukta, who was known to his followers as Swaminarayan, was traveling around Gujarat and liberating all those with whom he came into contact. Within a few months, scores of ascetics and lay aspirants departed for Saurashtra in search of the Jivanmukta. Mahants of ashrams from the north and east left their property and traveled to confirm the stories they heard about the Jivanmukta. Many of them came with their disciples and encouraged them to seek refuge in Bhagwan Swaminarayan, despite not having previously met Shri Hari. These ascetics took up the rituals and lifestyle of the bhakti *sampradayas*. Shri Hari was right—the Swaminarayan *mahamantra* was changing lives.

Prabhanand Swami's life illustrates one such story. A few months prior to Ramanand Swami's *aksharvas*, a Vaishnav trader from Divbandar stopped in Loj for Ramanand Swami's darshan on his way to Dwaraka. His mind found peace upon having Ramanand Swami's darshan. Ramanand Swami read the trader's mind and revealed, "You are going to Dwaraka to fulfill a *manta*, no? Please be careful. There is a storm brewing in

⁷ Dwaraka is considered to be one of the seven sacred cities in India and is one of the four pilgrimage *dhamas* of India. It is located in Saurashtra by the port of Okha. The city is said to have been established and ruled by Shri Krishna after defeating his evil maternal uncle, King Kansa of Mathura. For this reason, Dwaraka is revered as holy by Vaishnavs. Dwaraka is also one of the four original *maths* established by Shankaracharya. Somnath Mahadev is one of the oldest temples in Gujarat. It is said to have been sacked by Mahmud of Gazni and several other invaders. It was first built in the seventh century and most recently rebuilt in 1947 by Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel. It is one of the highest mandirs in Gujarat. It is also one of the twelve auspicious *jyotir-lingas*, or self-manifested forms of Shivaji.

the waters near the port city. Do not worry; Bhagwan will protect you and your fellow travelers.” The trader was astonished when Ramanand Swami’s prophecy was fulfilled. He accepted Ramanand Swami as his guru. Several years later, the trader learned that Ramanand Swami had passed and that a young yogi was now responsible for Ramanand Swami’s spiritual community.

The trader traveled to meet the young yogi who had taken the place of his guru. The trader wept since he had missed the opportunity to serve Ramanand Swami during his final days. Shri Hari comforted him and asked him to come closer. “Why not share your concerns and grievances with this young, eleven-year-old Lakshman. He will relay your message to Ramanand Swami.”

Shri Hari instructed Lakshman to chant the Swaminarayan *mahamantra*. In a matter of minutes, Lakshman entered into *samadhi*. The trader asked several questions, and the boy replied with an air of confidence and profound insight, which was uncharacteristic for a young child. Lakshman conveyed Ramanand Swami’s message explaining that Shri Hari was Parabrahma. Although the trader was convinced of Shri Hari’s greatness, he questioned, “I believed Ramanand Swami to be an incarnation of Shri Krishna. If you are Parabrahma, then what is your true greatness?”

Shri Hari smiled softly and replied, “I am the Parabrahma that the shastras speak of. All those who have preceded me have incarnated on Earth at my behest. I have never come before. I have manifest on Earth with my Akshardham and *akshar muktas* to liberate countless *jivas* from the cycle of birth and death.”

The trader wept again but this time with tears of joy. He spent three days in Loj and decided to return to Divbandar. Though he was in Divbandar, the trader found his mind wandering to Loj several times a day. He returned to Loj and requested Shri Hari to initiate him as a sadhu. Prabhanand Swami learned the skills of a new trade, the trade of bhakti.

The villagers of Piplana and Dhoraji experienced similar incidents. Bhagwan Swaminarayan liberated several wandering spirits and ghosts that lived on a large tree outside of Piplana. The villagers watched as

Shri Hari freed them of the spirits' torments with the wave of a single hand. The spirits entered into *samadhi* in which they were given a divine form and sent to Badrikashram to repent for their sins. In Dhoraji, Shri Hari sent a band of rowdy atheists and agnostics into *samadhi* to prove to them the existence of Parabrahma and Akshardham.

Shri Hari sent his sadhus in groups around the region to spread the *mahima* of the Swaminarayan *mahamantra*, to expound the message of *moksha*, and to explain the importance of living a life untouched by superstition, vices, and immoral activities. Shri Hari illustrated these principles by imbibing them in his own life.

The Divine Walking Stick, Ramdasji, and Parvatbhai's Wish

Upon returning to Piplana, Shri Hari continued to bless devotees and villagers with various types of darshan in *samadhi*. One morning while bathing on the banks of the Ojat River, Shri Hari glanced at Narsinh Mehta's son, Raghunath. Raghunath fell over on his side. The villagers gathered around him and tried to revive him, but Raghunath lay on the floor with a blissful look on his face. When Shri Hari revived him, he begged to be sent back to the divine environment of Akshardham. He was not interested in spending another second on Earth. Shri Hari smiled and said, "The time will come when you will be able to stay there forever. For now, do bhajan, bhakti, and *seva* here."

The next morning, Shri Hari was leisurely swaying back and forth on a swing decorated with vividly colored flowers. The sadhus were singing bhajans, and the devotees were repeating the chorus lines. Shri Hari called Ladha, a poor *brahmin* devotee to the front of the gathering. He handed Ladha his royally ornamented staff and instructed, "Ladha, take this walking stick. Whomever you touch with the tail end of the stick will enter into *samadhi* and have my darshan in Akshardham. If you want to wake them up from *samadhi*, tap them with the other end. I entrust you with a great responsibility and *seva*."

Ladha accepted the staff and used it throughout the village. Scores of aspirants were blessed with the opportunity to have Bhagwan Swaminarayan's divine darshan amidst their daily routines.

News of Shri Hari's *samadhis* spread across the Indian subcontinent. An ascetic named Ramdasji from northern India came to Piplana to complain about Shri Hari's extensive use of *samadhi*. He approached Shri Hari discontentedly, "Jivanmukta, this is too much. People like me have been doing austerities our whole lives with the hopes of having a glimpse of Bhagwan, and now you are blessing ordinary peasants, farmers, children, and women with the experience of *samadhi*. Please explain your reasoning for this."

Shri Hari replied politely, "Everyone that we bless with such an experience has accrued merits through their previous births. These *samadhis* are a result of the austerities and other good deeds they performed with the wish to attain Bhagwan."

Immediately after Shri Hari finished, Ramdasji was sent into *samadhi*. He woke up with his head placed at the Jivanmukta's feet.

Shri Hari arrived in Agatral to spend some time at Parvatbhai's house. Parvatbhai was one of Ramanand Swami's senior lay disciples. Parvatbhai was fond of singing bhajans and listening to the sadhus' discourses. He would meditate on Shri Hari's *murti* for countless hours. Though he believed Shri Hari to be the rightful successor to Ramanand Swami and understood Shri Hari to be Bhagwan, Parvatbhai often wondered what forms the other avatars had assumed. One afternoon, he was speculating about what the Narasimha avatar would have resembled when manifested on Earth. As Parvatbhai doodled in his imagination, he slipped into *samadhi* and had the darshan of all twenty-four avatars⁸ offering their prayers to Bhagwan. Parvatbhai was overjoyed because Shri Hari had

⁸ The Puranas and other shastras state that Shri Vishnu incarnated on Earth in twenty-four avatars, each assumed on Earth in human or other form to quell evil forces and reestablish dharma. In addition, the twenty-four names are based on the permutations of the four objects he holds in his four hands. For example, in the form of Keshav, he holds a lotus flower in his lower right hand, a conch shell in his upper right hand, the *sudarshan chakra* in his upper left hand, and a mace in his lower left hand. In the form of Narayan, he holds a conch in his lower right hand, a lotus flower in his upper right hand, a mace in his upper left hand, and the *sudarshan chakra* in his lower left hand. The names of the twenty-four forms of Shri Vishnu are as follows: Keshav, Narayan, Madhav, Govind, Vishnu, Madhusudan, Trivikram, Vaman, Shridhar, Hrushikesh, Padmanabh, Damodar, Sankarshan, Vasudev, Pradyumna, Aniruddha, Purushottam, Adhokshaj, Narasimha, Achyut, Janardan, Upendra, Hari, and Krishna.

granted his wish. Later that evening when Parvatbhai met Shri Hari after the evening *sabha*, he asked, “I only wanted to see one avatar. Why did you bother to show me all twenty-four?”

Shri Hari laughed and said, “And what if tomorrow you wanted to see another avatar? I took care of all of your desires at once. No more wishes, Parvatbhai. You have seen them all in my *seva*.”

Emptying Yamaloka

Shri Hari arrived at Bhimabhai’s house in Kalvani. Bhimabhai wanted to present his question to Bhagwan Swaminarayan for quite some time. One afternoon he requested, “Bhagwan, this is the first time you have incarnated on Earth. It is as if a new reign has begun under a new ruler. Even when a worldly ruler takes over the throne, he pardons the criminals and empties the prisons. You are Bhagwan, merciful beyond the *jiva*’s comprehension. Why not free all of the *jivas* suffering in Yamaloka? Give them a second chance, Shri Hari.”

Hearing Bhimabhai’s plea, Shri Hari called the aged and wise Swarupanand Swami. Swarupanand Swami was one of Ramanand Swami’s first disciples. He was bold yet modest. Shri Hari instructed Swarupanand Swami, “Swami, you are perfect for this task. Go to Yamaloka and chant the Swaminarayan *maha-mantra* in every section: near the boiling pots of oil; in the dark, beast-filled caves; and by the drowning wells. Take your time. Instruct the *jivas* to repeat after you. The *maha-mantra* will liberate them and send them to Badrikashram to do penance.”

Swarupanand Swami accepted Shri Hari’s *agni*. He traveled from one section of Yamaloka to the next. The *jivas* repeated the mantra following Swarupanand Swami’s signal. The entire netherworld was transformed into an oasis of tranquility. The *jivas* were freed from its bounds, and the attendants of Dharmaraj, the caretaker of Yamaloka, watched as the freed *jivas* flew towards Badrikashram.

Dharmaraj was amazed as well. He conveyed his prostrations to Shri Hari, “Swamiji, I have never witnessed the liberation of so many *jivas* from Yamaloka. Parabrahma is the only being capable of changing the fruits of a *jiva*’s karmas.”

Swarupanand Swami returned to his mortal form and reiterated the incident to all the sadhus and devotees present in the *sabha* in Kalvani. The incident rekindled the faith of the aged sadhu and the other disciples. Muktanand Swami captured the moment in one of his *bhakti pads*:

*Pote Parabrahma re,
Swami Sahajanand, Narayan prabal prataap chhe,
Swaminarayan mukhe uchhare, tene janam-maran re,
jamno bhay jaay,
Sarve naraknaa kund khaali thayaa, bhukhyaa jamgan re, kar
ghasi pachhtaayaa...*

*He is indeed Parabrahma, Sahajanand Swami, He is the mighty, manifest form of [Purushottam] Narayan,
One who utters Swaminarayan from the mouth, will be freed from the cycle of birth and death, and the fear of Yama,
All the sections of Narak were emptied, the desiring [helpless] attendants of Yama, unsettlingly watched with their hands wrung...*

The *sampradaya*'s texts mention a similar incident in which Bhagwan Swaminarayan sent Vyapkanand Swami to Bhumapurush's *loka* to convey the message of his incarnation on Earth.

The Nawab's Question—Six Answers

The Muslim Nawab of Mangrol, Vajaruddin Shah, had heard of Shri Hari's *samadhis*. The Nawab had accepted Ramanand Swami's invitation to come to Jetpur on the day Bhagwan Swaminarayan was given the reigns of the *sampradaya*. He knew that Shri Hari was not an ordinary human being. When he learnt that Shri Hari was in the neighboring village of Kalvani, he sent a royal emissary with correspondence. "Swaminarayan, I have witnessed the charm of your *murti* in person. I have not been able to forget it since the day I set eyes on you. Grace me by blessing my royal palace. I would be honored if you celebrated a festival with all of your devotees in my kingdom."

Shri Hari sent word to Govardhanbai (Gordhanbai) and

Anandjibhai in Mangrol to make arrangements for a festival in the royal gardens. Shri Hari, just twenty-two years old, set out for Mangrol with Ramdas Swami, Swarupanand Swami, Anandanand Swami, Niranjanand Swami, Vyapkanand Swami, Muktanand Swami, and other senior sadhus.

Shri Hari's reception in Mangrol was an awe-inspiring sight. The Nawab arranged for horses and elephants to welcome Shri Hari and his sadhus, while *brahmins* showered them with flowers as they arrived. The *brahmins* recited Vedic mantras, and the townspeople gathered on their rooftops and verandas for a glimpse of the Jivanmukta. Shri Hari and the sadhus settled into the royal garden. Anyone that came for Shri Hari's darshan would be sent into *samadhi*. They would lie there for many days until their family members came for them, after which Shri Hari would wake them up from *samadhi* with the snap of his finger.

Mangrol was mesmerized by Bhagwan Swaminarayan's *divya lila charitra*. One afternoon, the Nawab invited Shri Hari to the royal palace. He posed a set of questions which had been pestering him. "Swaminarayan, what is *samadhi*? What is the experience like? Is there a way for me to experience it?"

As soon as the Nawab finished asking his questions, Shri Hari sent him into *samadhi*. In *samadhi*, the Nawab saw all the different devas offering puja to Shri Hari in Akshardham. The euphoria of Akshardham felt by the Nawab was indescribable. He awoke from *samadhi* and prostrated at Shri Hari's feet. His mind was overcome with a strong desire to interview Bhagwan Swaminarayan. He folded his hands and expressed his wish. Shri Hari permitted him to do so with the wave of his right hand. The Nawab bowed to Shri Hari and asked, "Swaminarayan, the bliss in Akshardham is beyond anything I have experienced or heard. Why did you leave that bliss to incarnate on this Earth? You are Parabrahma manifest. How can you stand this world and the *jivas*, which are enveloped in *maya*?"

Shri Hari realized that it was time to share the six reasons for which he had manifested on Earth. He addressed the Nawab with a tone of confidence and authority. "Nawabji, I have come on Earth from Ak-

shardham to fulfill six purposes. First, I was born to establish *ekantik dharma* by strengthening the foundations of dharma, *jnan*, *vairagya*, and Bhagwan's bhakti on Earth. Second, I wanted to liberate my human parents by sharing with them the truth regarding my divine form and the bliss of Akshardham. Third, I manifested on Earth to share the truth regarding my form as Parabrahma with spiritual aspirants of all faiths and belief systems—to liberate the previous avatars and their devotees. Fourth, I wished to liberate the spiritual aspirants around the Indian subcontinent who have been doing penance for scores of years to attain the darshan of Parabrahma. Fifth, I wished to spread the true knowledge of my *upasana*—the philosophy of Aksharbrahma and Parabrahma. Sixth, and lastly, I came to proclaim the importance of my Aksharbrahma and its manifestation through the Gunatit Satpurush. It is only through the Gunatit Satpurush will a spiritual aspirant make his way to Akshardham and me.”

The Nawab was flabbergasted to hear such an articulate and detailed response. He prostrated at Shri Hari's feet and begged him to stay in Mangrol. “You are Bhagwan. There is no other Bhagwan but you. Please bless me so that I too may attain Akshardham.”

Shri Hari promised the Nawab to spend more time in Mangrol. He stayed in the town for a little over a month. He celebrated the first Fulidol celebration⁹ in the town's gardens. The festival carried a different flavor than previous years. Shri Hari encouraged devotees to stay away from the usual singing and yelling of profanities. He also separated the act of playing with colors between male and female devotees. The festival was celebrated with strict adherence to *stri-purush maryada* as revived by Bhagwan Swaminarayan.

9 Fulidol is a Vaishnav festival celebrated in the month of Fagun, marking the onset of spring. The celebration of this festival occurs on the day after Holi with the spraying of colored water and colored powder on each other. Fulidol is also known as Pushpadolotsav (Festival of Flowers). On this day, the Yadavs prepared a swing of flowers for Shri Krishna and his disciple Arjuna and gently swayed Shri Krishna and Arjuna with love and bhakti. The sentiment behind the festival is to ask Bhagwan to color one's life with bhakti, and the swinging movement symbolizes continuously bringing Bhagwan closer to one's heart. Today, this festival is enthusiastically celebrated in the Swaminarayan Sampradaya.

The Everpresent Murti and the Poor Confectioner

Shri Hari spent the remainder of his time in Mangrol at Mulchand Sheth's mansion.

Along with genuine interest, misconceptions about Shri Hari's *samadhis* had spread as well. When Shri Hari passed through the city to bathe at the banks of the Tapi River, the townspeople would close their windows and chain their doors shut. They wanted to avoid being sent into *samadhi* or being blessed with the constant darshan of Shri Hari's *murti*. It was rumored that once you saw Shri Hari's *murti*, it would never leave your eyes. The common townspeople assumed that it would disrupt their daily schedule: how would they cook; how would they fetch water from the village well; how would they spend time with their loved ones? One such middle-aged woman was careful to lock herself inside her home every morning when she heard the beating *dhols* and chiming *manjiras* played by Shri Hari's entourage as they passed through the town center. As the sounds faded, she removed the rusted chains on her doors and pushed out the window shutters. One morning, she pryingly cracked open the creaky, wooden shutter as the music grew softer to catch a glimpse of the Jivanmukta. She peeked at Shri Hari, who glanced back from the corners of his eyes. She slammed the shutter closed, but it was too late. Shri Hari's *murti* was etched into her eyes and heart forever. No matter what she did, the *murti* would not disappear. While she cooked and cleaned, the *murti* remained in front of her eyes. The lady shared this news with her friends, but her excitement was dampened by those who believed this constant darshan to be a predicament. They convinced her to ask Shri Hari to release her from this alleged misery. She went to Shri Hari and pleaded with him to assist her. Shri Hari asked, "Mother, are you sure you want to remove my *murti* from your eyes forever?"

The lady nodded in acceptance. Shri Hari advised her to follow the *niyam-dharma* prescribed for Swaminarayan devotees, and if followed, the *murti* would disappear. The lady started doing puja every morning, attending the ladies' *sabhas*, and stopped eating food considered unsuitable for devotees. In a matter of days, the *murti* disappeared. A few months later, after fully comprehending Bhagwan Swaminarayan's *mahima*, she

cried with remorse about her foolish request.

In many places where Shri Hari spent a considerable amount of time, he found ways to contribute to the local community. Shri Hari noticed that the stepwell in Mangrol was old and damaged. Women would have trouble walking down and climbing up the steps with their water-filled pots. Shri Hari ordered his devotees to help clean the stepwell and lay new steps around its edges. He also arranged for the sadhus to personally manage and care for the *sadavrat* established by Ramanand Swami. Shri Hari sowed the seeds for the spirit of service, which is now an integral part of the Swaminarayan Sampradaya's international activities.

Meghjit was a confectioner in Mangrol who had spent many years learning different forms of yoga. Though the confectioner was tainted by his arrogance, the townspeople were impressed by what little he could display of his yogic powers. Troubled after hearing about Shri Hari's *samadhis* for the past month, the confectioner announced to the townsmen that he would retract his *atma* from his body and enter into another form. He craved to be the center of attention in Mangrol again. He lay down on a mat in the center of town to display his yogic powers. In the middle of his yogic exercise, Meghjit lost control of his senses. He could not control his *atma*; he could neither pull it from his body nor renter it. He was trapped in a realm between the two states. Meghjit rolled around on the floor suffering from agonizing pain. His eyes implored the townsmen for assistance. One of the bystanders ran for help and passed the message to Mulchand Sheth's mansion. Shri Hari immediately came to the village square to save the vain confectioner. He placed his hands on Meghjit's chest and relieved him of his misery. Meghjit caught his breath and then prostrated at Shri Hari's feet. Shri Hari not only saved him from this yogic mishap but also from his fatal arrogance.

In the weeks that followed, Shri Hari spent an enormous amount of time sharing his views on *ekantik dharma* with the devotees who had gathered from great distances. On the day of the Janmashtami festival, Shri Hari spent several hours explaining the concept of *stri-purush maryada*, the different facets of dharma, bhakti, *jnan*, and *vairagya*,

and the importance of the Gunatit Satpurush in realizing one's own form and Bhagwan's true form. This priceless *updesh* was compiled by the sadhus present in the discourses and has been preserved as the *Narayan Gita*.

Three Old Friends

While traveling through eastern and southern India, Nilkanth Varni met three spiritual aspirants whom he befriended. Each of them expressed their desire to spend the rest of their lives with the teen yogi. Nilkanth promised to meet them again in Gujarat. True to his word, Nilkanth sought out Jayramdas, Mohandas, and the old ascetic from Ayodhya whom he met in Pandharpur. He initiated them as sadhus within the *sampradaya*.

Jayramdas followed Nilkanth down the eastern end of the subcontinent in hopes of bringing Nilkanth back to his home. When Nilkanth continued towards the south, Jayramdas announced that he would return home to his family. Nilkanth knew that Jayramdas would change his mind. "When you decide to leave this world as you know it and join my world forever, come to Gujarat. I will await your arrival there."

Jayramdas came down with a fatal case of smallpox on the way back to his village. He prayed to Nilkanth and asked him to save his life. Once cured, Jayramdas came to Gujarat and waited for Nilkanth's arrival. Upon hearing of the Jivanmukta, Jayramdas rushed to Loj. Shri Hari greeted his old friend with open arms. He initiated Jayramdas as a sadhu and named him Jignasanand Swami.

Mohandas witnessed several of Nilkanth's miracles, including the incident when Nilkanth digested poisonous fruits in an orchard in eastern India. Mohandas followed a group of pilgrims to Loj and recognized Shri Hari. Shri Hari fulfilled his promise to Mohandas and initiated him as Vrajanand Swami.

In Pandharpur, Shri Hari met a horde of renunciates from Ayodhya. One of the renunciates was attracted to Nilkanth's *murti* and requested to accompany Nilkanth. Nilkanth promised him that they would meet again in Gujarat. The renunciate left his cohorts in Maharashtra and headed for Gujarat. On his way to Loj, the ascetic was resting under a

tree in the forest when he was approached by the local king's female servant. The maid was dressed in the queen's ornaments, beautiful enough to be mistaken for royalty. She had acquired twenty thousand gold coins and all of the queen's ornaments. She offered her hand in marriage to the young ascetic. "You are too handsome to be an ascetic. Your body is made for pleasure, not austerity. I have enough money for us to live comfortably. Marry me and indulge in the pleasures of this world."

The ascetic told her to wait under the tree while he bathed in a nearby river. The maid waited until dusk, at which point she realized that the ascetic would not return. The ascetic arrived in Loj and prostrated at Shri Hari's feet. He requested to be initiated as a sadhu. Govindanand Swami then spent several years traveling with Bhagwan Swaminarayan as his attendant.

Magniram

Sorcery, tantric magic, and superstition engulfed nineteenth-century Gujarat. Taking advantage of this frailty within the community's faith-based fabric, tantras and sorcerers from all over the subcontinent came to Gujarat to earn a living. Magniram was a *brahmin* from southern India who had traveled to Bengal in search of a true guru. Unfortunately, he met a tantric yogi instead. The tantric taught him the ways of sorcery and pleasing the lower deities to ask for materialistic wealth and destructive power. One day, the tantric ordered Magniram to accept his daughter as a bride. Magniram was not interested in starting a family. He ran away that night, leaving his guru and the young maiden behind. He traveled from region to region, displaying his tantric magic to subdue ascetics, wealthy landowners, and even kings. He amassed a brigade of over one thousand mendicants, which was more than any small kingdom or village could forcefully oppose. There was hardly a king or mahant who had not made a payment to avoid harassment by the faux renunciates.

Magniram traveled west from Bengal and arrived in the coastal town of Porbandar. The port city was home to a beautiful *math*. Magniram harassed the ashram's ascetics and even beat the mahant. With tears

in his eyes, the mahant spoke about the powers of the Jivanmukta. “Anyone can beat an aged, helpless ascetic like me. If you are confident in your powers, try to subdue Sahajanand Swami. Thousands of people in Saurashtra believe him to be Bhagwan. If you can conquer him, I will accept your leadership and turn over the assets of the *math* to your band of mendicants.”

More than his desire for the *math*’s assets, Magniram was driven by his ego and enticed by the challenge. He had yet to find someone who proved to be a worthy adversary. He rushed towards Mangrol, looting villages in his path.

Magniram arrived in Mangrol just as the sun was retiring for the day. Shri Hari was addressing an assembly of aspirants under a tree on the outskirts of the village. Magniram approached the assembly and roared, “Are you Swaminarayan? You think you are Bhagwan? Come face me. I will show you what it takes to become Bhagwan! Your deception will not work with me.”

Shri Hari smiled and responded calmly, “I teach my devotees to live a life that is moral and spiritual. They chant the Swaminarayan *mahamantra* and experience the bliss of Akshardham. You are the one that has been deceiving thousands of individuals around the subcontinent.”

Magniram was in no mood to engage in a verbal joust. He warned Shri Hari that he was capable of destroying entire cities. Shri Hari paid no heed to his threats. This further infuriated Magniram. He grabbed a few grains from a sack that hung from his left shoulder, muttered a hymn, and threw the grains on a large tree. The tree shriveled up into a pile of charred twigs and leaves. The devotees’s were frightened, and they turned to Shri Hari expecting a reply. Shri Hari looked at Magniram with piercing eyes and said, “What right do you have to take that tree’s life? I will only acknowledge your tantric powers if you can bring the tree back to life.”

Magniram’s eyes reddened and his nostrils flared. He vowed to destroy the young Jivanmukta in front of his disciples. Shri Hari was unperturbed. Magniram grabbed another handful of grains and shouted more hymns, but this time he targeted Shri Hari. To his surprise, Shri Hari

was untouched. He tried several times but was unable to even loosen the white *pagh* on Shri Hari's head. Shri Hari smiled and taunted, "Is there anything else you would like to try? I am not going anywhere at the moment."

Magniram was disgraced in front of the entire village. He ran to his camp to devise another plan. There, he prayed to his deity Sharda Devi for several hours. The *devi* presented herself to Magniram late into the night. Magniram bowed at her feet and wept due to his hurt ego. He asked her to help subdue Swaminarayan. Sharda Devi clarified her point through an analogy. "Magniram, imagine a swarm of fireflies trying to outshine the sun. The two of us trying to oppose Parabrahma is equally as foolish. Understand his greatness and ask for his forgiveness. He is the only one who can liberate you. All of your tantric powers have no use in surpassing *maya*. Even I pray to him to liberate me from this *ishvara* form."

Magniram realized the grave sin he committed: he was trying to challenge the ruler of the entire universe. He bathed at the riverbank and returned to the village. He went to Mulchand Sheth's house and waited for an audience with Shri Hari. Shri Hari finished his morning meditation and lovingly called Magniram closer. Magniram prostrated at his feet and wept while asking for forgiveness. Shri Hari assured him, "Magniram, we all make mistakes. I know that you left home to find Bhagwan. You have found him. Go home and follow the *agnas* that I have prescribed to the other devotees. I will liberate you when the time is right."

Magniram did not wish to leave. "Sharda Devi told me about your greatness. You are Parabrahma manifest. I am not leaving your side. Please accept me as a sadhu in your *sampradaya*."

Shri Hari tested Magniram's resolve. "Magniram, you won't be able to live amongst my sadhus. You will have to sleep on the floor, eat meagerly from alms, and wash your own clothes and utensils. You won't be allowed to control any of the younger sadhus. Your arrogance must completely dissolve before I initiate you. As a prerequisite, I would like for you to take the footwear of all of the sadhus, tie them up in a bundle, and circumnavigate around the entire gathering of devotees and sadhus with

that bundle of shoes.”

Magniram immediately agreed. He circled around the sadhus and devotees five times. Shri Hari was pleased with Magniram’s resolve and initiated him with the name Advaitanand Swami. Many of Magniram’s followers also took *diksha*, but a few, less fortunate ones turned back towards Bengal.

The news spread from Gujarat to the eastern, northern, and southern tips of the land: Magniram, the Invincible, accepted Swaminarayan as his guru. Increasingly more people flocked to Gujarat for a glimpse of this miraculous, life-changing Jivanmukta.

Muktanand Swami Convinced: “Jay Sadguru Swami”

Shri Hari sent the senior sadhus to travel around Gujarat to meet Ramanand Swami’s senior lay disciples. Ramdas Swami traveled to Ahmedabad and Muktanand Swami to Kutch. Anandanand Swami and several other sadhus were traveling with Shri Hari. The *samadhi prakran* in Mangrol received mixed reactions. Never before had so many different incidents of *samadhi* been experienced and recorded within the satsang community. News of the *samadhis* reached Muktanand Swami in Kutch. He was infuriated and decided to leave for Saurashtra at once.

Shri Hari was resting that afternoon in Meghpur on his way to Kalvani to celebrate the Prabodhini Ekadashi festival of 1802. Muktamuni arrived in Meghpur and headed straight for Shri Hari’s quarters. His face amber red and limbs shaking with anger, Muktamuni was not in the mood for idle conversation. Shri Hari saw Muktamuni from a distance and stood up to greet the aged sadhu. He prostrated at the aged sadhu’s feet, and Muktamuni’s anger calmed. Muktamuni raised Shri Hari and returned the *pranam*. They greeted each other and retired to an inner room to continue their conversation. Once alone, Muktamuni revealed his concerns. “Shri Hari, I heard about all the *samadhis* you have been granting. This is deceit. Ramanand Swami would never have approved of this. How do you raise an aspirant past all seven steps of ashtanga yoga and grant one the ability to experience the bliss of Akshardham?”

Satsang is not increased by miracles. We have to teach our disciples to believe, follow, and pray.”

Shri Hari listened to Muktanand Swami patiently before replying. “Swamiji, I am not trying to deceive anyone. I encourage the devotees to chant the Swaminarayan *mahamantra* or to remember our guru, and they are immediately sent into *samadhi*. It is the power of the *mahamantra*. I am not using any form of sorcery or tantric magic. Yet if you feel that I have made a mistake, I apologize. You are my guru’s elder disciple. Please forgive me.”

Muktanand Swami’s anger subsided. He knew that Shri Hari was not intentionally deceiving the devotees, but the *samadhi prakran* was becoming increasingly unmanageable. Muktamuni wanted to put an end to the young guru’s *samadhis*. He decided to spend a few days with Shri Hari and then try speaking to him again.

Later that evening, Shri Hari and a few sadhus went to bathe in the Meghavati River. Several of the village’s teens gathered for Shri Hari’s darshan. Shri Hari sent two of them into *samadhi*. Muktanand Swami was thoroughly disturbed. He fanned them with a wet cloth, hoping to revive them before word of their *samadhi* reached the village, but it was too late. The villagers converged at the river to hear the teens’ accounts when they awoke. After a few minutes, the teens regained consciousness and shared their experiences of Akshardham from the *samadhi*. Muktanand Swami could not bear to witness this any longer. He filled his gourd with water and headed for the forest for his ablutions. Alone in the forest, he wondered what would happen to the *sampradaya*. He thought, “Would this young guru defile the *sampradaya*’s purity and destroy everything my guru created?”

His mental trepidations were interrupted by Ramanand Swami’s divine darshan. The guru appeared in pure, white robes and with a smile that pitied Muktamuni’s confusion. Ramanand Swami encouragingly said, “I told you many times that I was merely the prologue. Sahajanand Swami is the main act; He is Parabrahma. Was I not clear enough?”

Muktanand Swami nodded in affirmation. Ramanand Swami continued, “Then, why the doubt? Believe me, Muktamuni, Sahajanand

Swami is the ruler of the entire universe. Serve him without any doubts. Inculcate unflinching faith in Shri Hari; this is the only way to rise above maya and enter Akshardham.”

This was enough to convince Muktanand Swami as his guru’s word carried immense weight. He ran back to the banks of the Meghavati River where he encountered Parvatbhai. He shared his vision of Ramanand Swami with his dear friend and asked Parvatbhai to return to the village with him. There, Muktanand Swami laid out his guru’s asana and decorated it with flowers. He wove a garland of beautiful flowers and prepared an *arti* before Shri Hari’s return from the riverbank. When Shri Hari arrived, Muktanand Swami grabbed him by the hands and forced him to sit on Ramanand Swami’s asana. He applied a layer of sandalwood paste to Shri Hari’s forehead and placed the garland of flowers around his neck. With tears streaming from his eyes, Muktanand Swami did *arti* of Shri Hari with the following words flowing from his lips:

*Jay sadguru swami,
Sahajanand dayalu, balavant bahunaami...
Purushottam pragatnu je darshan karshe,
Kal karamthi chhuti, kutumb sahit tarshe...
Aa avsar karunaanidhi karunaa bahu kidhi,
Muktanand kahe mukti, sugam kari sidhi...*

*Hail to the compassionate Sahajanand Swami,
an eminent preceptor, and
the Mighty Omniscient One...*

*Whoever has the darshan of this present incarnation of Purushottam,
shall be freed from the bonds of karma and time, and will be
liberated along with their loved ones...*

*On this occasion, oh Treasure of Compassion, You have been
extremely merciful,*

Muktanand says, liberation, you have made easily attainable...

In this *arti*, Muktanand Swami sings the *mahima* of Bhagwan Swaminarayan as the manifest form of Parabrahma, one who is capable

of liberating everyone who has his darshan and has faith in him. The words to this *arti* spread throughout the *sampradaya* over time. It is the official *arti* of the Swaminarayan Sampradaya. Muktanand Swami's faith in Shri Hari was forever solidified, and thereafter, Muktanand Swami kept *divyabhav* in all of Shri Hari's *lila charitras*.

5

Stories of Ekantik Dharma

It seems as if at the very time when the people of this land were passing forever from the ancient and medieval Aryavarta to a new world, God summed up all that was the best in the past and manifested it before India and the world for them to know what it was like. In it the bhagavata [ekantik] dharma appeared once more in one of its purest and noblest forms.

- **Bhai Manilal C. Parekh,**

Indian Christian Theologian and
Founder of Hindu Church of Christ

The Next Phase

Bhagwan Swaminarayan spread word of his incarnation on Earth through the *samadhi prakran*. Now that more people were flocking for his darshan in the Sorath region of Gujarat, Shri Hari decided to implement *samadhi* on a regular basis to achieve his primary purpose for incarnating on Earth – to establish *ekantik dharma*. Shri Hari narrates to Gopalanand Swami the reason for his manifestation on Earth: “My avatar is for the purpose of eradicating *vasana* in the form of *maya* that is attached to the *karan sharir* of the *jiva*. It is for this objective that, I, Purushottam, have manifest on Earth in human form.”

At several festivals and gatherings, Shri Hari spoke of the need

for imbibing *ekantik dharma*: the precise integration of dharma, *jnan*, *vairagya*, and bhakti, enhanced by understanding the *mahima* of Bhagwan and his *ekantik* sadhu. There were many who opposed this *ekantik dharma* prescribed by Shri Hari in order to satisfy their ego, lust, and greed. Shri Hari undertook the necessary steps to marginalize those individuals' influence on the satsang community. Harbai and Valbai were two of Ramanand Swami's female disciples who opposed the need for bhakti to Parabrahma and proclaimed themselves as one with Parabrahma. They ignored the tennets of *brahmacharya* in order to satisfy their bodily needs. Shri Hari immediately excommunicated them to avoid the spread of vices in the satsang community. Raghunathdas was also excommunicated for falling from the path of *ekantik dharma* and for inciting hatred and internal bickering within the satsang community.

Shri Hari reintroduced *ahimsak yagnas*. Many *brahmin* and Vedic ritualists were misinterpreting shastras to sanction their gluttony. Bhagwan Swaminarayan organized large, sacrificial festivals that were completed without the killing of any animals. He encouraged wealthier devotees and landowners within the satsang community to host these *yagnas*.

The villagers in Akha and Piplana requested Shri Hari to host the first such grand Maha Vishnu Yagna in their village. Shri Hari directed both of the villages to prepare for the sacrificial ritual. Preparations were made for hundreds of devotees in each village. Surprisingly, Shri Hari told each of the village's devotees that he would come to their village on the same day and at the same time. Shri Hari traveled in the direction of the villages, and when the road split between Akha and Piplana, Shri Hari and the three hundred sadhus and devotees in his entourage assumed two forms. The devotees from Piplana and Akha welcomed the party into their respective villages and celebrated a grand *yagna* for the next thirty days. It was only towards the end of the month that devotees from each village visited the other to discover Shri Hari and his sadhus simultaneously present at both locations! After spending approximately forty days in each of the villages, Shri Hari left both villages at the same time, and the retinue merged into one form at the

intersection of the roads. The townspeople were mesmerized by Shri Hari's miracles, love for his devotees, and commitment to reestablishing Vedic, *ahimsak* *yagnas*.

The rapidly spreading fame of Shri Hari and his sadhus invited trouble from several notorious elements of society. Several of the ascetics and mendicants who felt robbed of their fame and attention harassed Shri Hari's sadhus verbally and, at times, physically. They attacked the lone sadhus who ran the *sadavrats* established by Ramanand Swami. Many of the *sadavrats* were located in remote areas and dense jungles. Taking advantage of the isolation, the mendicants made attempts on the Swaminarayan sadhus' lives. Often, they were successful in their evil plots—several of the sadhus were killed.

Shri Hari wrote to his sadhus encouraging them to retaliate with only their saintliness. "Remember that your past lives as *kshatriyas*, warriors, and forceful mendicants are no more. Now, you must retaliate with a dagger sharpened with forgiveness, a shield made of patience, and a sword crafted from detachment. Show your opponents that saintliness can and will prevail in the long run."

Shri Hari's sadhus confronted such attacks, as instructed, with an abundance of forgiveness and patience.

The Second Meeting

Shri Hari organized a feast for the *brahmins* in Meghpur for one month. He also visited nearby villages to fulfill the desires of several devotees. He traveled to Manavadar, Bhader, Jamnavad, Kalavad, Vanthali, Moda, and Allaiya. In Allaiya, Mulji Sharma of Bhadra came to invite Shri Hari to his village, which was just a few kilometers away. Mulji came with Lalji Suthar, a dear friend from Shekhpather. Every night, Mulji and Lalji would travel ten kilometers from each of their villages and meet at an old mandir between Bhadra and Shekhpather to relish in Shri Hari's *lila charitas* and *mahima*. At dawn, they would walk back to their respective towns, bathe, do puja, and head to the fields to tend to their crops. Impressed by their resolve to engage in *bhakti* and *jnan*, Shri Hari accepted Mulji's invitation with a smile. After all, Mulji was his Aksharbrahma. He promised to celebrate Vasant

Panchmi¹ in Bhadra.

Shri Hari spent six days in Bhadra. One afternoon, he walked with Mulji and Lalji to the banks of the Und River. He asked Lalji to bring a small raft so that the three of them could float with the current. Lalji pensively scanned his surroundings, unable to find a raft on such short notice. Shri Hari realized that Lalji felt distressed by his unsuccessful search for a raft. Shri Hari laughed and asked Lalji for the coarse blanket that was on his shoulders. Lalji handed over the blanket and watched as Shri Hari laid it out on the waters of the Und River. To Lalji's surprise, the blanket remained afloat! Shri Hari then asked Lalji and Mulji to sit with him on the blanket as they floated downstream. Lalji and Mulji cherished every second they spent with Shri Hari and kept this particular *lila charitra* close to their hearts.

The next afternoon, Shri Hari decided to have lunch at Mulji's house. He walked into Mulji's courtyard and asked for him. Mulji's mother, Sakarba, frantically started making arrangements for the afternoon meal. Shri Hari calmed her down and asked her to prepare a quick and simple meal.

Mulji was out in the fields and would not return for another hour. Shri Hari utilized that time to hear about Mulji's childhood stories from Sakarba. Sakarba spoke of Mulji's constant communion with Shri Hari. "Every so often, Mulji would tell me that his Bhagwan is traveling through a particular jungle or is climbing the Himalayas. Once when he was thirsty, he forced me to give him the milk I had saved for the *murti* of Thakorji. After he was done drinking the milk, I noticed a small white line above the *murti*'s lips—a milk moustache! That is when I realized that my son was no ordinary child."

Shri Hari laughed and said, "Mother, you have yet to recognize his true *mahima*. He is my divine abode. I cannot live for a second without him. He is the sustainer, creator, and destructor of the entire universe. He is above *maya* and is the only pathway to Akshardham for my other devotees."

¹ Vasant Panchmi marks four significant events in the Swaminarayan Sampradaya: the advent of the Shikshapatri (a *dharma shashtra*) and the births of Brahmanand Swami, Nishkulananand Swami, and BrahmaSwarup Shastriji Maharaj. More generally in the Hindu tradition, this festival marks the onset of spring (*vasant*), symbolic of new beginnings.

Mulji returned from the fields. He washed up and sat in front of Shri Hari with folded hands. Aksharbrahma is always present with folded hands to serve Parabrahma. Today was no different—Mulji fed Shri Hari with loving insistence.

Lalji Becomes Nishkulanand

Shri Hari celebrated Vasant Panchmi in Bhadra and left for Shekhpath that afternoon. Shri Hari insisted on celebrating Vasant Panchmi in Shekhpath again for it was also Lalji Suthar's birthday.

The next morning, Shri Hari instructed the sadhus and devotees that were traveling with him to return to Loj. He had already selected a companion for his trip to Kutch. Shekhpath fell silent as the singing crowds of devotees and sadhus made their way to the outskirts of town. Shri Hari turned to Lalji and said, "I want to leave for Kutch today, but I am not familiar with the roads. Would you happen to know of someone that could accompany me as a guide?"

Lalji was familiar with the route and was eager for a chance to travel with Shri Hari. He immediately offered his services. "I can accompany you. When do you want to leave?"

Through this journey, Shri Hari intended to teach Lalji lessons, lessons that would transform him forever. Shri Hari expressed his wish to leave immediately. Lalji tried to quickly assemble supplies for the journey, but Shri Hari was in a rush. He was only able to gather a small water costrel, snacks in a metal container, a walking stick, and a couple of gold coins to purchase necessities along the way. Lalji thought that he had sufficiently stocked up for the trip. However, Shri Hari had other plans for Lalji.

A few kilometers after they started walking, Shri Hari and Lalji came upon a beggar who had not eaten for many days. Shri Hari convinced Lalji to give away all of their snacks. Lalji reluctantly agreed. Farther down the road, they came upon a thirsty traveler in need of water. Shri Hari again instructed Lalji to pour the water out from their costrel for the pilgrim. A few hours later, a band of bandits approached Lalji for money. Shri Hari was walking a few steps behind Lalji and noticed that the robbers could not find any money on Lalji. He called out to them from behind, "It looks as if you have not perfected the skills of your trade. You

do not know where to look for his money. Check his shoes. You should find a couple of gold coins there.”

Lalji was flabbergasted. Why was Shri Hari giving everything away? But he knew better than to question Purna Purushottam Narayan. He continued walking—hungry, thirsty, and covered with the sand from the deserts of Kutch. Lalji could not muster enough strength to continue the trek. He needed to drink some water. The desert sun reflecting off the sand dunes scorched his skin. He turned to Shri Hari for assistance. Shri Hari immediately offered to help. “Lalji, there is a large body of water nearby. Why not go and fill our costrel with its water?”

Lalji replied, “Shri Hari, the large body of water is filled with salt water. It is not potable.”

Shri Hari insisted. Lalji went a little farther and found green vegetation. He dug a small trench with his hands, and to his surprise, fresh water sprung out from under the sand. He tasted the water and breathed a sigh of relief—the water was as sweet as coconut water! He washed the vessel and filled it with water for Shri Hari. He walked back to where Shri Hari was sitting and offered him the water. Lalji drank the remainder of the water and then ran back to the trench to fill his vessel again. He tasted the water and spat it out immediately—the water was no longer sweet.

The two traveled a few more kilometers and arrived on the outskirts of a small village on the border of Kutch. Shri Hari was hungry, but where was Lalji to find food for him? Shri Hari was omniscient and knew that Lalji’s in-laws lived in this village. He smiled at Lalji and said, “Lalji, would you mind begging for alms in this town for me? I am starving.”

Lalji was hesitant. “Shri Hari, everyone knows me in this village. I cannot beg for alms here. They will mock me and my family.”

Shri Hari offered a solution with a slight smirk. “What if I changed your appearance so that no one would recognize you?”

Shri Hari asked a passerby entering the village to send the local barber to the outskirts of the village. When the barber arrived, Shri Hari asked him to shave Lalji’s hair, beard, and mustache, leaving only a fine tuft of hair in the center of his bare scalp. Next, Shri Hari requested Lalji to replace his householder’s clothes with a saffron garb. Looking into

Lalji's eyes with a sense of pride and admiration, Shri Hari rewarded Lalji's courage to leave his worldly relations behind and named him Nishkulanan Swami, or one who is without a family or familial ties. Shri Hari told Nishkulanan Swami to go to the village and beg for alms from his in-laws. Nishkulanan Swami knew that this would be a daunting task, for his wife, Kankubai, was visiting her parent's home with their two children. He took a deep breath and entered the village with a smile on his face. After all, he had to live by his new name. Nishkulanan Swami set out to illustrate the ultimate example of detachment, one that would be marveled at by renunciates and householders for generations.

Nishkulanan Swami walked to the courtyard of his in-laws' house and confidently hailed for alms as any saffron-clad, bhakti-sampradaya monk would. His mother-in-law was cooking by the fire and looked towards the vaguely familiar face of the monk. She waited for him to call out again to confirm her suspicions. She immediately realized that this monk was her daughter's husband. Petrified, she covered her head with the veil of her sari and rushed into the house to warn her daughter. They devised a two-step plan to soften Nishkulanan Swami's resolve. First, they sent both of Nishkulanan Swami's children to greet him in the courtyard. Watching from a distance, they realized that Nishkulanan Swami was unfazed at the sight of his two children tugging at the corners of his saffron garb. Kankubai dressed in a red sari and her wedding jewelry and followed her children into the courtyard. She looked into Nishkulanan Swami's eyes and noticed a pristine flame of detachment, one that was bold yet gentle. She realized that there was nothing she could do to convince her former husband to return to his home. Nishkulanan Swami was direct in his purpose: "I have come to your home to beg alms for Shri Hari. He is seated under a tree on the outskirts of the village. Prepare a meal and bring it to him. This is the chance of a lifetime; do not pass up this opportunity."

Mother and daughter hastily gathered everything they had prepared for their meal and rushed to the outskirts of the village. They served the meal to Shri Hari with love. After Shri Hari completed his meal, the women spoke to him with tears in their eyes. "We know that Lalji was meant to join your seva, but he leaves behind two, young children. How

are we to provide for their upbringing?"

Shri Hari spoke in a comforting tone. "It would seem that Nishkulanand Swami is leaving his responsibilities behind, but in reality, he is taking on the responsibilities of serving society. He has left enough gold and wealth to meet your family's financial needs in Shekhpath. As far as caring for the children, I assure you that they will be looked after. I take upon their responsibility. They will come of age in no time. It is an honorable thing that you have done, Kankubai. It takes a great deal of understanding and sacrifice to let your husband walk this path. You, too, will reap the merits of his deeds."

Shri Hari turned towards Nishkulanand Swami. "Now, I will go to Kutch alone. You will stay behind and write a text for my devotees. This text will describe the perils and conditions of *Yamaloka*. I will arrange for your needs in the town with some of Ramanand Swami's elderly disciples."

Nishkulanand Swami's voice slightly trembled as he tried to reason. "Shri Hari, would it not be best for me to write in another village? Plus, I have never seen *Yamaloka*. How will I know what to write?"

Shri Hari responded, "Well of course you can write elsewhere, but then how would we test your renunciation? Close your eyes. I will send you to *Yamaloka* through *samadhi*."

Nishkulanand Swami closed his eyes, and Shri Hari transported him to the underworld. Nishkulanand Swami began composing a text describing the condition and sufferings of the sinners sent to *Yamaloka*. Thereafter, Shri Hari walked towards Kutch, alone.

Visiting Kutch for the First Time

Shri Hari arrived in Kutch in August of 1804. The air was muggy and smelled of the rains from across the dry plains. He spent the first few days at King Raidhansinh's palace in Dhamadka. The king was a disciple of Ramanand Swami. He was overjoyed to see Shri Hari in his kingdom. Joined by his family and courtiers, the king served Shri Hari. Shri Hari then traveled in a carriage drawn by oxen to Kanthakot, Anjar, and, finally, Bhuj. He spent many days traveling from village to village, blessing *bhaktas* and gracing their homes. In Bhuj, Shri Hari decided to spend time at Sundarji Suthar's home.

Sundarji was an affluent social entrepreneur. He was respected in the community and was privy to the ruler's ear and resources. Ramanand Swami had established several charity centers and guest houses for pilgrims, ascetics, and the needy. One of the largest centers was in Sundarji's home. One afternoon, while Shri Hari was playfully dallying on a swing, two young ascetics arrived at Sundarji's residence for alms. As they sat down to eat, they stared into Shri Hari's eyes and could not break their gaze. Shri Hari's *thal* was brought out soon thereafter. Shri Hari smiled at the young ascetics and invited them to join him. They sat across from Shri Hari and enjoyed his darshan as he ate small portions of *halva* and *puri*. The ascetics felt as if they had seen this beautiful *murti* elsewhere, in another form with a long tuft of hair, clad with a deerskin, and waving a staff in one hand. They dismissed that feeling of familiarity as an infatuation with the divinity gleaming from Shri Hari's face. They asked if they could spend a few days with him. Shri Hari could not refuse such a pure-hearted desire for darshan.

One evening after having dinner, Shri Hari sat with both ascetics and asked about their origins, native villages, and journey to Kutch. The youths shared their story. "We are *Sarvariya brahmins* from Uttar Pradesh. We left our families and homes in search of Bhagwan or his true sadhu. Our travels brought us to Jagannath Puri. One morning, we noticed a young celibate lost in meditation. We stayed in Jagannath Puri for a few weeks to relish in the darshan of his *murti*. One day, a fight erupted between two warring factions of ascetics. The young celibate was caught in the middle of the argument. An ascetic, envious of the attention and praise being given to the young ascetic, asked the child to pluck some greens for him. The young ascetic, discerning the elder ascetic's true intentions to indulge his ego, refused as it was the purposeless killing of innocent life. Within minutes, the older ascetics picked sides, giving rise to widespread conflict. Thousands of *bawas* fought, some even unsure of the reason for hurling their spears and wielding their maces. We ran from Jagannath Puri for fear of our lives and traveled across the Gangetic Plain and came to Dwarka in Gujarat. Though it has been years, we still wonder what happened to that charming, young ascetic. We hope...."

Shri Hari interrupted them mid-sentence and narrated the details

of the incident—the number of warring ascetics, the exact location, and the cause of the argument. The youths were stunned. Shri Hari grinned and revealed, “I am that young ascetic.”²

His words sent the ascetics into *samadhi* in which they witnessed the universe’s animate and inanimate beings doing Shri Hari’s puja. That young ascetic was none other than Purna Purushottam Narayan.

The two ascetics’ eyes welled up with tears as they awoke from *samadhi*. They prostrated at Shri Hari’s feet and expressed their desire to spend the rest of their lives in his service. Shri Hari gave them his consent and initiated them as sadhus with the names of Krupanand Swami and Virbhadranaand Swami. They joined Shri Hari as he traveled around Kutch.

Many devotees, such as Bhagwanji Thakkar, Gangaram Malla, and Ladhibai, basked in Shri Hari’s bliss during his first visit to Kutch. He shared memories with each while accepting different forms of their *seva*. From Bhagwanji Thakkar he accepted gold ornaments to fulfill a promise made to Ramanand Swami. Gangaram, the wrestler, massaged Shri Hari’s legs and back but often felt his own limbs lose the ability to apply force while doing so. This was Shri Hari’s way of reminding Gangaram that even his own strength was dependent upon Shri Hari’s will.

Ladhibai’s tale is a colorful one. Ladhibai was an elderly widow. She was one of Ramanand Swami’s oldest and most devout disciples. *Sampradayik* texts state that although Ladhibai’s physical body had withered with time, her bhakti for Shri Hari was forever in full bloom. Once Ladhibai was asked by Shri Hari to dress up as a married woman and joyously dance in the streets of the city. Ladhibai donned her brightest sari, intricate jewelry, and largest red *bindi*. She walked through the streets of the city singing her divine lover’s praise. When a young woman scolded her for this untimely and taboo behavior, Ladhibai replied with confidence, “I have married the Lord of the Three Worlds. Purna Purushottam Narayan has accepted me as his wife.” Shri Hari was overjoyed to see Ladhibai’s conviction and zeal for following his *agna*.

Traveling through Kutch, Shri Hari arrived in Mankua. The ruler of

2 Refer to Chapter 2 with subtitle ‘In Jagannath Puri’ for a detailed discussion of Bhagwan Swaminarayan’s encounter with the mendicants at Jagannath Puri while traveling as Nilkanth Varni.

the village, Adabhai, was known for his hatred of ascetics and religious leaders. When Adabhai heard of Shri Hari's visit to his village, he grabbed a sling and stones and headed to where Shri Hari was resting. He tried to hurl a stone at Shri Hari but failed to reach his target. He moved closer and tried harder but was unsuccessful. This continued for several minutes, but Shri Hari barely noticed his efforts. Finally, Adabhai realized that he was not dealing with an ordinary ascetic. He ran and prostrated at Shri Hari's feet. Shri Hari accepted him as a disciple. Adabhai's bold personality and candid approach was later helpful in spreading satsang in Kutch.

Shri Hari stayed in Kutch until the following June and then traveled by sea to the port of Jodiya in the Jamnagar District. He passed through Rajkot and made his way towards Mangrol.

Macha Khachar – The Celibate

Shri Hari spent the monsoon in Mangrol. One day, the ruler of Kariyani, Macha Khachar, was visiting his relatives in Mangrol. He decided to have the darshan of the new Bhagwan about whom everyone had been whispering. He walked into the assembly and was struck with amazement as Shri Hari called to him, "Macha Khachar, welcome. We have been waiting for you for a while now. How have you been?"

On hearing Shri Hari's greetings, Macha Khachar responded, "Bhagwan, how do you know my name? I am well, but why have you been waiting for me? We have never met."

Shri Hari knew Macha Khachar through his bhakti and *brahmacharya*. Shri Hari replied, "Bhaktaraj, I have come on this Earth to establish *ekantik dharma*. You are a true celibate. Celibacy is the key to progressing on the spiritual path. Control over one's senses is the only way to ensure Bhagwan's grace. A householder practices celibacy by staying faithful to his or her spouse. All other women should be treated like mothers, sisters, and daughters. A sadhu practices *brahmacharya* by following the prescribed tenets of eight-fold celibacy. I know you since I have been accepting your bhakti in the form of *brahmacharya*. Your bhakti is dear to me."

Macha Khachar bowed his head in reverence to Shri Hari and further strengthened his resolve to imbibe *ekantik dharma* in his life.

He invited Shri Hari to Kariyani. How could Shri Hari refuse such a *bhakta*'s loving invitation? A date was fixed for Shri Hari's departure for Saurashtra.

Taming the Great – Nrusihanand Swami and Svayamprakashanand Swami

Shri Hari was resting in Sardhar on his way to Saurashtra when an elderly sadhu came asking for him. Shri Hari met with the old sadhu. The sadhu introduced himself as the mahant of the well-known Ramji mandir in Ayodhya. He shared his story:

"Bhagwan, one afternoon as I was resting in my residence, I heard a few pilgrims speaking of you. Each time they uttered the word 'Swaminarayan,' I noticed a glow of light in my room. This continued for quite some time. I came out of my room and asked them about you. They pointed me towards Gujarat. Leaving my ownership of the mandir and all of its property, I sped west looking for you. They were right. No amount of description does justice to the beauty of your *murti*. Please accept me as your disciple and initiate me into the sadhu-fold."

Shri Hari was moved by his dedication and sacrifice. He initiated the mahant and named him Nrusihanand Swami.

Svayamprakashanand Swami's sacrifice was of equal greatness. As mahant of the Radha-Krishna mandir in Bengal, Svayamprakashanand Swami traveled with an entourage—three camels, ten horses, and scores of disciples. While traveling to Gujarat for a pilgrimage to Dwarka, the elderly mahant heard of Shri Hari's forgiving and redemptive nature. He prostrated at Shri Hari's feet and asked to be initiated as a sadhu. He handed over the reins of his duties to an experienced disciple and accepted Shri Hari's spiritual authority. Many of Svayamprakashanand Swami's disciples followed his example and also joined Shri Hari's *seva* as sadhus and *palas*. These sadhus toured Gujarat, Saurashtra, Kutch, Khandesh, Madhyapradesh, Konkan, and regions even further south and east. Their pure character and lifestyle left a bold impact on the villagers. They followed *brahmacharya*, begged for alms, and showed an intense dislike for monetary possessions. They spoke of living a life that resonated with practical spirituality. Their teachings to imbibe vice-

free and ethical lives furthered the practice of rituals and restored faith among the weak. Bhagwan Swaminarayan's emphasis on a code for morality predated the wave of colonial moral enforcement in Gujarat and the surrounding regions.

Soon the sadhus and the devotees grew into a community of dedicated devotees. Shri Hari spoke of universal brotherhood and instructed members of the community to support each other in times of difficulty. Soon thereafter, a family bound by the values and practices of *ekantik dharma* developed. Bhoja Charan's story exemplifies the solidarity and unity within this family. Bhoja Charan had been instructed by Shri Hari to travel from village to village and spread his *mahima*. The local ascetics were not fond of Bhoja's growing popularity with the villagers. In Dhrangadhra, these ascetics beat Bhoja until his back broke. Ajabhai learned of this persecution and immediately rushed to rescue Bhoja. He scared the ascetics off and took Bhoja into his home. He nursed and cared for him as he would for a member of his family. Megha, Ajabhai's brother, invited the ascetics who had beaten Bhoja to his home for dinner. Ajabhai immediately severed all ties with his brother, saying, "Bhojabhai and all of Shri Hari's devotees are part of my family. If one tries to harm them or even associates with those who have harmed them, I will sever all ties with such menaces, even if they are my relatives."

Ajabhai's fidelity to Shri Hari and his satsang family illustrated the continual growth of a strong and united bhakti community.

Sadhus Tortured

Shri Hari sent letters to call all of his sadhus back to spend the remaining months of the monsoon in Sardhar. Anandanand Swami, who was once the mahant of the renowned Ramgalola Ashram in Ayodhya, described the pain and suffering of the traveling sadhus. One story followed another. Shri Hari's eyes filled with tears as each subsequent story was shared. Advaitanand Swami and other senior sadhus narrated accounts from their travels. The sadhus administering the alms shelters also depicted the violence inflicted upon them by bands of ascetics.

Shri Hari asked Anandanand Swami to describe the ordeals in

detail. Shri Hari's heart welled up with sorrow as he heard the stories of torment. Anandanand Swami began with an incident from Kanam, Gujarat:

"We arrived in a village called Visnagar. A band of *ganja*-smoking ascetics cornered us with the intentions to harass us. We told them that we did not carry any money or costly objects. They laughed and smashed our *potla*. They beat us until some of them could not stand the sight of our blood. Their tridents pierced our skin. Yet, we stayed calm and chanted the Swaminarayan mantra. From there, we traveled to Dhrangadra. We decided to rest in a public mandir built by King Amarsinh. The chief pujari of the mandir was not fond of our vows of celibacy. He immediately went on a hunger strike. We were driven out of the town in no time. It had been days since we had food or shelter. However, we kept our spirits up and meditated on your *murti* while moving from one village to another. On the outskirts of a nearby village, a group of sword-wielding ascetics attacked us until they became bored of beating a defenseless enemy. Aja Patel saved us from further attacks and took us into his home. He fed us and tended to our wounds. After hearing of our plight, he approached the local ruler and asked him to punish the ascetics. The king replied, 'What can I do if cows clash among themselves?' Aja Patel was infuriated and retorted, 'Well, what if mad bulls are attacking cows? Would you find it necessary to do something then?' We discouraged him from attracting any more attention to our plight. It was then that Magniram asked me for permission to beat the shameless ascetics. He pledged to defeat them in a matter of minutes. I was aware of his background as a tantric and weapon-wielding warlord. I immediately calmed him down and instructed him to meditate on your *murti*."

Shri Hari pressed, "What did Magniram do?"

Anandanand Swami replied, "He followed my instructions and maintained his composure. He agreed with me, Bhagwan. We have all become sadhus to please you. Come what may, we will never falter in the *niyams* you have prescribed for us."

Shri Hari stood up and embraced Anandanand Swami and the other senior sadhus. He knew that he was asking a great deal from these sadhus. They were suffering physical torture for his sake. He would never forget.

Shri Hari then instructed the sadhus to shut down the almshouses in order to limit their interactions with these violent ascetics.

Shri Hari's First Visit to Saurashtra

The Shrimad Bhagavata Purana describes the manner in which Bhagwan manifests on Earth.³ Such events do not occur by mere chance. Each devotee is selected and placed by Bhagwan to serve a purpose or function during his avatar or manifestation on Earth. Similarly, it was not a coincidence that Bhagwan Swaminarayan would decide to settle in Saurashtra for a major part of his life. He had brought a group of his *muktas* with him and placed most of them within this region of Gujarat. This was a historic occasion; Shri Hari was entering Saurashtra for the first time. Accepting Macha Khachar's invitation, Shri Hari arrived in Kariyani in October of 1805.

Macha Khachar understood the significance of Shri Hari's arrival. Shri Hari graced his home before visiting any of his other *muktas*. It was as if the ruler of Kariyani had opened his heart, home, and coffers to serve Shri Hari and his sadhus. Macha Khachar had prepared well in advance to feed and accommodate hundreds of sadhus and *bhaktas*.

The next morning Macha Khachar spoke candidly to Shri Hari, "Bhagwan, I have saved 100,000 rupees over the past few decades. Now that you have come to my village, we can make good use of this savings. Please accept my humble offering and do whatever you please with it. It is for you to use as you please."

Shri Hari accepted his offerings and carefully evaluated the possible uses of the funds. After a few days, Shri Hari called Macha Khachar and expressed his desire to dig a freshwater reservoir on the outskirts of the village. Shri Hari had noticed that there were no nearby freshwater sources. Women had to travel several kilometers to a neighboring village every morning to fetch water. Farmers had difficulty farming, and their cattle often suffered from dehydration.

3 The *shloka* from the Shrimad Bhagavata Purana, 10.87.19, reads: "Svakruta-vichitra-yonishu vishanniva hetutaya taratamatash-chakassyandalavat svakrutanuk-rutih," which translates to "Bhagwan creates and enters the various types of life forms as their cause and as their *antaryami*, and he inspires them to a greater or lesser degree."

Shri Hari called hundreds of devotees from around the satsang community to help in this great, humanitarian deed. For the next twenty-one days, Shri Hari sat under a tree on the outskirts of the village and supervised the construction efforts. In the afternoon, He served lunch to those devotees that had left their homes to assist with the digging. A spirit of unity and service sprung forth from this community effort. *Satsangis* and non-*satsangis* alike worked together to contribute to their village. To celebrate the completion of this large reservoir, Shri Hari organized a Maha Vishnu Yagna. Thousands of *brahmins* were invited. Shri Hari ordered the making of special ghee-soaked *churma ladus* for the ritual feast. Shri Hari instructed Macha Khachar to give the *brahmins* more alms than for which they asked. Macha Khachar wholeheartedly served Shri Hari and the community members with all the means available to him. The *brahmins*, villagers, and *satsangis* spoke far and wide of Bhagwan Swaminarayan's generosity. This was the first festival of this magnitude in the *sampradaya*.

Shri Hari celebrated Vasant Panchmi in Kariyani. Abhel Khachar, the ruler of Gadhada, came for Shri Hari's darshan. Captivated by Shri Hari's beautiful *murti*, Abhel Khachar invited Shri Hari to his village. Shri Hari accepted his invitation with a warm smile. After all, Gadhada is where he would settle for the next thirty years.

At Abhel Khachar's Residence

Upon entering Saurashtra, Shri Hari adopted the local customs, traditions, and mannerisms. At the insistence of Macha Khachar, Shri Hari accepted a well-bred horse and started to travel on horseback. It only added to the splendor of his entourage. The thumping of the horse's hoofs fused with the jingling of its anklets was sound enough to sway one's mind. Shri Hari mounted the horse with beautiful, gem-studded ornaments around his neck, wrists, and arms. Dangling earrings swayed to the rhythm of the horse's gallops. Gold rings on the fingers of both his hands glittered under the sun. Shri Hari's amber-stitched garments and *kesari* headdress with gold lining became the subject of many *bhakti pads* later written by the *ashta kavis*.

Shri Hari traveled on horse surrounded by a group of singing sadhus

and dancing devotees. Shri Hari soon arrived on the outskirts of Gadhada. There, Abhel Khachar and his cousin, Jiva Khachar, awaited Shri Hari's arrival. Villagers played the *dhol* and *jhanjh*, while women sang welcome songs typical of the Saurashtra and Marvad regions.

Abhel Khachar welcomed Shri Hari with a garland of roses and a chest of gold ornaments. He insisted that Shri Hari wear the ornaments before entering the village. Determined to please his devotees, Shri Hari put them on and proceeded into the village. The sweet sound of the wailing peacocks and the gushing of the Ghela River's waters immediately enraptured Shri Hari. Jiva Khachar's daughters, Amulabai and Amribai, fixed their gaze on Bhagwan's divine *murti*. Abhel Khachar's children, Laduba, Jivaba, and Dada Khachar, stood silently, soaking in Bhagwan's *murti* in their hearts and minds.

Gadhada was a small kingdom of twelve villages. Jiva Khachar and Abhel Khachar each ruled over half of Gadhada and six corresponding villages. Shri Hari stayed at Jiva Khachar's residence for the first half of his visit. There, he celebrated the Fuldol (Feb.-Mar.) festival in the month of Fagun. Jiva Khachar and his family served Shri Hari with their body, mind, and soul. Once, when Shri Hari cut his finger while walking in the village, Jiva Khachar tore off a piece of gold-threaded fabric from his headdress and bandaged Shri Hari's gash. In another instance, when Shri Hari was suffering from dysentery, Jiva Khachar constructed a temporary toilet inside his house so that Shri Hari would not have to walk to the village outskirts. Both of these instances illustrate Jiva Khachar's conviction for Shri Hari and his *charitras*. Shri Hari was immensely pleased with Jiva Khachar's *seva*.

Abhel Khachar's *seva* was equal to, if not greater than, his brother's. When Shri Hari moved to Abhel Khachar's home, Abhel Khachar opened his entire home and its resources in the service of the satsang community. Devotees from all over Gujarat came for Shri Hari's darshan. Abhel Khachar cared, fed, and accommodated them all in his home. The sadhus and devotees endlessly praised Abhel Khachar and his family. Shri Hari, too, decided to spend an extended amount of time at Abhel Khachar's home. A combination of both factors bothered Jiva Khachar. He continued to serve the satsang community, but he did so

to surpass Abhel Khachar's fame. Jiva Khachar's bhakti and seva were tainted with jealousy and ego. In his heart burned a constant flame of insecurity and envy. His bhakti changed course. It now flourished for one purpose only: to gain more recognition than Abhel Khachar and his family.

Satsang, however, continued to progress. Shri Hari decided to make Gadhada the center of all satsang activities in Gujarat.

Brahmanand Swami Born Again

In the Marvad region of Rajasthan, there is a small village named Khan. That small village was the birthplace of one of the greatest poets and scholars of the eighteenth century. On Vasant Panchmi (Feb.) of 1772, Ladudan was born to Shambhudan and Laluba. He was betrothed at an early age to Bhojbai, one of the twin daughters of Svarupdan of Peshwa. Ladudan was born with an innate ability for poetry, metrics, and literary creation. Recognizing his skill, the King of Sirohi, a neighboring city, sent Ladudan to the acclaimed Bhuj Brajbhash Pathshala. This Pathshala is recognized by scholars as one of the foremost places of literary and poetic study in northern and western India in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In just ten short years, Ladudan studied *Pingal*, *Dingal*, and *Braj Bhasha*. He earned the titles of Shigrakavi, Shatavadhani, and Mahamahopadhyaya at the tender of age twenty-three. He was invited and honored by rulers of several cities in Rajasthan, Gujarat, and Saurashtra, including Sirohi Dhrangadra, Jamnagar, Junagadh, and Bhuj. His poetic fame earned him a great deal of affluence as well. He was often gifted gold ornaments.

Hearing of his poetic genius, the King of Bhavnagar, Vajesinh Thakor, invited Ladudan to his court. Ladudan made his way to Bhavnagar with an entourage of disciples and servants. The next morning, Ladudan presented a poem describing the glory of the king. The king was pleased and immediately summoned the royal goldsmith to adorn Ladudan's body with a new set of gold ornaments. The goldsmith started to measure the poet's body. When the goldsmith looked up to measure Ladudan's head, Ladudan was surprised to see a sandalwood *tilak* centered with a vermilion *chandlo* on the goldsmith's

forehead. Ladudan immediately asked of the goldsmith's *sampradayik* affiliation. Before he could answer, the king interrupted and said, "In my kingdom, there is a small regional kingdom with twelve villages. The ruler of that region, Abhel Khachar, has provided a residence to a North Indian *brahmin* who calls himself Bhagwan. He sends people into *samadhis*, shows them the abodes of the devas, and speaks of a moral and spiritually-charged bhakti. In fact, who is better equipped than you to test this *brahmin's* story? Please do tell me whether he is truly Bhagwan or a fraud."

Ladudan jumped at the opportunity. He said, "These types of people are usually frauds. However, I can check for your satisfaction."

The goldsmith could not hold his tongue and responded, "Oh, Great Poet. Be careful. A salt statue is not capable of measuring the ocean's depth. You may not return." Ladudan shrugged off the comment and prepared to depart for Gadhada.

On his way to Gadhada, Ladudan was lost in thought. He needed to devise a full-proof way to measure Swaminarayan's divinity. He devised a four-part plan. He thought of four wishes or desires in his mind. If Swaminarayan was able to fulfill all four of them, then he must be Bhagwan, for the greatest *aishvarya* of Bhagwan is to be omniscient. The first wish was to be called by his name. Second, Swaminarayan should greet him with a garland of red roses. Third, Ladudan wanted to see the sixteen symbols of divinity on Swaminarayan's feet. Lastly, Ladudan wanted to walk in while a *parayan* of the Shrimad Bhagavata Purana was taking place. The shastra should be wrapped in a black cloth instead of the auspicious, red-colored cloth that is commonly used.

In Gadhada, Shri Hari was seated on a cot with decorated pillows under a neem tree in Abhel Khachar's courtyard (see photo 27). At the sound of thundering horse hoofs, Shri Hari ordered the *purani* to halt the *parayan*. Ladudan descended from the horse and walked towards the assembly. Shri Hari called out to him from a distance, "Welcome, Ladudanji! How was your journey? Not too tiring, I hope."

Ladudan was startled, but this was just the beginning. Ladudan was about to take a seat at the back of the gathering when Shri Hari called

him to the front and greeted him with a garland of red roses. Before Ladudan could process what was happening, his eyes fell on the Shrimad Bhagavata Purana being read in the *parayan*. It was wrapped in a black cloth. This series of events started to feel less like a coincidence. He walked over to Shri Hari's cot and bent down to touch Bhagwan's feet. Shri Hari smirked and extended his feet. Now, Ladudan was in shock. He saw the sixteen symbols on the soles of Shri Hari's feet. The goldsmith was right; there was no going back from here. If Shri Hari was Bhagwan, why would anyone leave him for the pleasures of the world? Ladudan immediately composed a *bhakti pad* describing the feelings of his heart at that very moment:

*Aaj ni ghadi re dhanya aaj ni ghadi,
me nirkhya Sahajanand dhanya aaj ni ghadi...
Ladu Sahajanand nirakhta thari aankhdi...*

*Blessed is this moment, blessed is this moment,
I have seen Sahajanand, blessed is this moment...
Says Ladu upon seeing Sahajanand, my eyes have found rest...*

Ladudan sent the royal retinue back to Bhavnagar and devoted himself to Shri Hari's *seva*.

One day, Shri Hari called Ladudan and asked him for a favor. "Ladudanji, Abhel Khachar has two daughters. Both live at their parents' home though each is married to a respectable suitor. They do not care for social norms and spend their day in *bhakti* and *seva*. Please go speak to them about social customs and the appropriate moral code for householders."

Ladudan was delighted. He said, "Bhagwan, I am the perfect person for this assignment. I will speak to them about the various responsibilities of a householder and the need to balance social duties and spirituality in one's life."

Shri Hari smiled and said, "I am sure you will do just fine. Please tell them that this is my wish too."

Ladudan sat down to speak to the two sisters with a curtain between them. Ladudan spoke about a married woman's responsibilities. He quoted

from the dharma shastras and various *shringar rasa* texts.⁴ The sisters listened attentively. When Ladudan paused to take a breath, Jivuba, the elder sister, spoke in a polite and confident tone.

“Ladudanji, thank you for sharing these words of wisdom with us. Neither of us is as learned as you are, but I would like to present our thoughts to you. There is absolutely nothing wrong in dressing the way you just described. But, we ask, what is the point? If we have already met the love of our lives, Bhagwan, the ruler of all things animate and inanimate, why waste our time and energy in caring for the physical appearance of this body? Would it not be wiser to spend that time in the bhakti and *seva* of Shri Hari?”

Ladudan was lost for words. The points they raised seemed logical. Ladudan realized that if he was going to spend his life in Shri Hari’s *seva*, why then was he still bothering to dress up in silk garments and gold ornaments?

Laduba continued the conversation where her elder sister stopped. “Ladudanji, I am sure that you must have thought about your spiritual welfare. Will anything you mentioned in your talk help either of us on our spiritual journey? Is it not true that the materialistic pleasures of this world are temporary? They only pleasure the mind and body but do nothing for the *atma*.”

Ladudan now understood the real reason why Shri Hari had sent him to meet the sisters. It was clear that he was meant to listen and not to lecture today. He folded his hands and bowed his head from behind the curtain. He then rushed back to Shri Hari, prostrated at his feet, and said, “Shri Hari, please initiate me as a sadhu. I do not want to live the life of a householder. I will renounce my wealth, luxury, and influence. I want to make the most of my life in your bhakti and *seva*.”

Shri Hari initiated Ladudan into the sadhu-fold and named him Shri-

⁴ The Indian *rasa* theory, or aesthetics theory, was introduced by Bharat Muni in the *Natyashastra* (c. 200 BCE – 200 CE). *Shringar* is one of the principal *rasas*. It is associated with romance, love, lust, beauty, and splendor. Several *shringar rasa* texts have been written in Sanskrit and the vernacular languages. Many of these texts describe the different types of *nayikas*, or high-society women, and their characteristics and functions within communities. Ladudan referenced these texts to convince Laduba and Jivuba to embrace their roles and fulfill their responsibilities as women in a royal household.

rangdas. Shrirangdas began writing and singing bhakti *pads* immediately. His mellifluous voice and poetic genius helped devotees focus their mind on Shri Hari's radiating beauty. Since Shrirangdas was a difficult name to incorporate in the signature, or *chhap*, of a verse, Shri Hari soon changed his name to Brahmanand Swami. Today, we find manuscripts of poetic texts with both names in the last verse of the *pad*. Brahmanand Swami is one of the most celebrated poets of Braj, Hindi, Marwadi, and Gujarati bhakti poetry. His *pads* are sung today both within and outside of the Swaminarayan Sampradaya in folk and classical genres.

The King of Bhavnagar was still waiting for Ladudan's return when he received word of his initiation as a sadhu. He realized that the salt statue had dissolved in the waves of the ocean. He alerted Ladudan's maternal uncle and family in Marwad. Ladudan's uncle arrived with Ladudan's young bride, Bhojbai, to change Ladudan's mind. However, when they tried to convince Ladudan of returning to a householder lifestyle, the newly-initiated Brahmanand Swami sang out "*Re sagpan harivar nu saachu*," which means "Wedlock (spiritual union or association) with Shri Hari is the only true relationship."

Shri Hari granted Brahmanand Swami permission to meet his wife for the last time. Brahmanand Swami took the opportunity to convince his wife to follow in his footsteps. "I have found Purna Purushottam Narayan and given my life to him. I suggest you do the same. That is the only way to attain *moksha*."

His wife and relatives bowed to the great poet, an elevated soul, and returned home. Brahmanand Swami joined Shri Hari in his travels around Saurashtra.

The Gold Shovel

Shri Hari's *mahima* spread in the villages and towns of Saurashtra. Deha Khachar, a close friend of Abehl Khachar's, invited Shri Hari to Kariyana. Deha Khachar's daughter, Minbai, was only a teenager, yet she had matured spiritually well beyond her years. Her mind and *atma* had become one with Shri Hari. She would close her eyes and witness Shri Hari's *lila charitras* in Gadhada while sitting at home in Kariyana. Shri Hari graced their home and bathed in the Kalubhar River.

Kalu Makvana was a laborer in Kariyana. He dug trenches and wells as his occupation. He asked Shri Hari to grace his home. Shri Hari's affinity for devotees was beyond the bounds of caste and financial status. He immediately accepted Kala's invitation. Kalu and his family jumped with joy at the sight of Bhagwan in their humble home. Kalu wanted to offer monetary *seva* to Shri Hari but had nothing to give. He hesitantly asked Shri Hari for a favor, "Bhagwan, I want to serve you but have no means. Would it be possible to acquire some gold so that I may offer something at your feet?"

Shri Hari was pleased with Kalu's intentions. He instructed Kalu to bring him metal. Kalu was a digger, and the only metal he had at home was a shovel. He brought the shovel and placed it at Shri Hari's feet. Shri Hari touched it with his right hand, and instantly, the metal shovel transformed into one made of gold.

Kalu prostrated at Shri Hari's feet and expressed his gratitude. That evening, Kalu took the shovel to the goldsmith to have it cut into small pieces. The goldsmith turned him away fearing theft in the middle of the night. He told him to return in the morning. Kalu and his wife guarded the gold burden all night. Even the sound of a cat's pur or a mouse's scuttle unsettled their nerves. In the morning, he covered the shovel with a golden cloth and ran to Shri Hari. He confessed, "I have never known fear in my life. For the first time, I was afraid. I do not want gold, Shri Hari. Please give me back my metal shovel."

Shri Hari was pleased with Kalu for quickly learning the negative consequences of acquiring unnecessary materialistic wealth. He touched the gold shovel with his left hand and returned it to its original form.

Shri Hari addressed the *sabha* and said, "Kaliyuga lives in four things: gold; violence and carnivorous environments; vices and intoxicants such as alcohol; and adulterous environments. If you would like to succeed on the path to *moksha*, live according to the tenets prescribed by the dharma shastras. Fear and unhappiness will find no place in your minds and hearts."

Shri Hari stayed at Deha Khachar's home for a month. He then traveled to Lakhanka and Kundal. Macha Khachar's sister lived in Kundal. She had three sons: Mamaiya, Rama, and Hothya. Her husband, Amra

Patgar, was the village's ruler. He also dedicated his life to serving Shri Hari.

Vicharan in Saurashtra

From Kundal, Shri Hari departed for Sarangpur. Upon arriving in Sarangpur for the first time, Shri Hari decided to stay at Rathod Dhadhal's place. Rathod Dhadhal was Ramanand Swami's disciple. Sarangpur's ruler, Jiva Khachar, and his wife, Panchaliba, soon became Shri Hari's disciples. Shri Hari graced their home as well.

After settling into Jiva Khachar's *darbar*, Abhel Khachar and a group of devotees arrived from Gadhada. They came bearing a beautiful, silver gourd and placed it at Shri Hari's feet. It had been months since Shri Hari had come to Gadhada. With tears in his eyes, Abhel Khachar and his family begged Shri Hari to return to Gadhada. Shri Hari yielded to their selfless love. He promised Jiva Khachar and Panchaliba that he would return soon.

Before leaving for Gadhada, Shri Hari wished to resolve a property dispute that had been plaguing Jiva Khachar's finances for quite some time. Jiva Khachar had 250 acres of land on the outskirts of Sarangpur. He shared ownership of this property with four partners. These partners would steal crops and reap the benefits of Jiva Khachar's hard work without sharing a penny with him. Shri Hari called a meeting with all of the partners and spoke to them regarding the importance of ethical business practices. More than his instruction, it was Shri Hari's divine presence that transformed their minds. They vowed never to steal or take advantage of Jiva Khachar's kindness.

On his way back to Gadhada, Shri Hari stopped in several villages. First, he arrived in Botad. The town's leading merchant, Bhaichandbhai Doshi, was a Jain Baniya. His son, Bhaga Doshi, took a liking to Shri Hari's enchanting *murti*. No matter how much his father convinced him to stay away from Shri Hari and his devotees, Bhaga Doshi could not be separated from satsang. One day, Bhaga's father followed his son for Shri Hari's darshan. Reluctantly, Bhaichandbhai invited Shri Hari to his home for a *padhramani*. Shri Hari was delighted. He knew that the Doshi family would become pioneers in establishing satsang in the future.

Sura Khachar of Loya had also invited Shri Hari to his own village when they met in Kariyani. Shri Hari kept his promise and graced the small village of Loya.

When Shri Hari returned to Gadhada, he noticed that Abhel Khachar was being led astray from satsang by his peers. He began to perceive *manushyabhav* in Shri Hari. He thought of Shri Hari as an ordinary *brahmin*, who had been exiled from his village in northern India. He also started to doubt his daughters' love for Shri Hari and the small *murti* of Thakorji, believing it to be an excuse to escape their social obligations. One afternoon, he followed Laduba into Thakorji's chambers and threatened her with an unsheathed sword. "You claim that your Thakorji accepts your devotion. If he does not drink all of the milk in your little bowl today, I am going to sever your head from your torso."

Laduba and Jivuba possessed an immense amount of love for Shri Hari. Laduba closed her eyes and prayed to Shri Hari. Shri Hari accepted her devotion and emptied the vessel of milk, after which he dropped the vessel with a crashing sound to the floor. Abhel Khachar was dumbfounded. A few minutes later, Shri Hari entered the room. Shri Hari sent Abhel Khachar into *samadhi*. There, Shri Hari showed Abhel Khachar his *mahima* as the Lord of infinite universes. All of the creatures and devas of the universes folded their hands and joined in prayer to Purna Purushottam Narayan Bhagwan Swaminarayan. As soon as Abhel Khachar's eyes opened, he prostrated at Shri Hari's feet. He realized his mistake and begged Shri Hari to forgive him and to protect him from such evil company in the future. Shri Hari granted him this wish.

Shri Hari stayed in Gadhada until Prabodhini Ekadashi and then left for the Sorath region.

Breaking a Leg in Agatrai

This was Shri Hari's second visit to Agatrai. The dry, winter wind was enough to turn away the bravest of wayfarers, but Shri Hari was not discouraged. He traveled from house to house pleasing his devotees. On one such *padhramani*, a *bhakta* offered Shri Hari a well-bred mare. Shri Hari mounted the mare but with a latent intention. Bhagwan tests his *bhaktas* by participating in certain human actions. If the *bhakta*

maintains *divyabhav* within these *charitras*, he is worthy of *moksha*. Shri Hari started to ride the mare with speed and agility. Suddenly, Shri Hari let go of the reins and fell crashing down to the ground. The devotees rushed to his side and tried to help him stand. However, Shri Hari was unable to stand due to a broken bone in his right leg. The devotees carried Shri Hari home in a makeshift, cloth stretcher. The village healer arrived to treat Shri Hari's fracture. After setting Shri Hari's bone, the healer instructed Shri Hari to keep off the leg and refrain from eating yogurt and tamarind until the bone healed. Shri Hari nodded in agreement.

The next day when the healer came to check on his patient's recovery, he noticed that Shri Hari was eating sour yogurt. He angrily exclaimed, "I told you not to eat yogurt. If you do not listen to my advice, you will not have a right leg. And without a leg, no one will call you Bhagwan."

Saying this, he went to open Shri Hari's bandaged leg to check on the healing progress. To the healer's surprise, it was as if Shri Hari's bone had never been fractured. He checked numerous times for the crack in the bone but was unable to find it. He looked up at Shri Hari who was staring back at him with a mischievous smile, a smile that sent the healer into *samadhi*. The healer awoke after some time and asked Shri Hari, "Bhagwan, you are the Divine Being I saw in Akshardham. Why have you left Akshardham to come down on Earth with us mere mortals?"

Shri Hari was pleased with the healer's question and responded, "I never leave Akshardham. Wherever I travel, Akshardham follows me. I cannot live without Akshardham for even a second." The healer did not understand the hidden significance of these words, but Shri Hari would later clarify this message for the satsang community: Akshardham was present on Earth in the form of the Gunatit Satpurush.

Soon thereafter, Shri Hari departed for Bhuj to celebrate Vasant Panchmi with his devotees and sadhus. Brahamanand Swami and Muktanand Swami brought their *mandals* to Bhuj as well. Shri Hari went to bathe with the sadhus and devotees in Hamirsar, a large, man-made lake in the center of Bhuj. Shri Hari splashed water on the sadhus, giving them a lifetime's worth of memories. From Bhuj, Shri Hari traveled to

Mankua and then continued to northern Gujarat. He came to Unjha, the agricultural and trading hub for cumin seeds and fiber husk.

The Bundelkhandi Scholar: Nityanand Swami

Dinmani Sharma of the Bundelkhand region of central India was fortunate enough to have been blessed with both wisdom and wealth. Born to a Gaud *brahmin* scholar named Vishnu Sharma in the village of Datiya in present-day Madhya Pradesh, Dinmani inherited forty thousand rupees. He was wealthier than many of the smaller kingdom states in the region. He traveled to Kashi and studied Sanskrit, Nyaya, Vedanta, Mimamsa, and the philosophical stances of other theologians. While reading these texts, he interpreted these philosophies as suggesting that the only way to benefit from studying these texts was to think of one's own *moksha*. He traveled throughout India looking for a true guru or the manifest form of Bhagwan on Earth.

He met a few wandering ascetics who suggested that he travel to Gujarat for Shri Hari's darshan. Rushing to Sorath, Dinmani tirelessly searched for Shri Hari. There, he bumped into Prabhutanand Swami, who directed him to Unjha. In Unjha, Dinmani waited patiently for Shri Hari's arrival. He met Shri Hari and decided to join the growing sadhu community. On the day of the Mahashivratri festival, Dinmani requested Shri Hari to initiate him into the sadhu-fold. Shri Hari promised to do so when they reached Sorath.

Siddhpur and Bhaguji

Shri Hari made the seven-mile journey to Siddhpur to organize a Maha Rudra Yagna and *chaurasi* feast for *brahmins*. *Brahmins* attended from all over Gujarat and Rajasthan. Shri Hari lovingly fed them and generously offered them *dakshina* at the end of the festival. Several *kshatriya* devotees from Saurashtra and Sorath also came to Siddhpur for Shri Hari's darshan. Shri Hari began to distribute their well-bred horses to the *brahmins* in *dakshina*. Kakabhai of Methan came running to Shri Hari and said, "Bhagwan, all of our clothes, eating utensils, and bedding are on those horses. Our horses are also adorned with gold and silver for the festivities. At least let us take all of that back."

Shri Hari smiled and said, “Kakabhai, you are a *kshatriya*. You are well aware of the rules of *dakshina*. There is no taking back once you give. Do not worry about your clothes and eating utensils. You can dress in the saffron robes and eat in the wooden bowls that our sadhus use.” Kakabhai and his cohorts folded their hands and happily accepted Shri Hari’s *agni*.

Although there were no *bhaktas* living in Siddhpur, Shri Hari spent a few days there to fulfill the bhakti of a young woman named Chaturi. Her parents were *satsangis*. She had married a trader in Siddhpur and had spoken to her in-laws about Shri Hari’s *mahima*. Shri Hari ordered Bhai Ramdas Swami, one of Ramanand Swami’s senior sadhu-disciples, to make the necessary arrangements as the devotees were new to the customs and traditions of the *sampradaya*. Devotees from Dandhavya helpfully prepared for Shri Hari’s stay and the festivities for the *yagna* and feast.

After spending a few days in Dandhavya, Shri Hari traveled to Jetalpur. Shri Hari rode into the village on his horse in the scorching summer sun of Ashadh (June-July) in 1806. This was Shri Hari’s first visit to Jetalpur. Bhai Ramdas Swami made preparations for Shri Hari’s arrival. After all, Bhai Ramdas Swami was looking after the satsang activities in this region. There were several leading *bhaktas* in the region as well: Aashjibhai, Madhurdas, Purushottamdas, Nathji, Hansraj, and Gangama. With their enthusiasm to spread Bhagwan Swaminarayan’s *mahima*, the satsang community grew swiftly.

Shri Hari sent all of the *kshatriya bhaktas* from Saurashtra and Sorath back to their homes. In Jetalpur, Sukhanand Swami brought a Rajput *bhakta* from Morsam, a village on the border of Gujarat and Rajasthan, for Shri Hari’s darshan. Bhaguji, or ‘Valiant Bhaguji’ as he soon came to be known in the satsang community, closely adhered to *niyam dharma*, especially celibacy. Shri Hari praised Bhaguji at their first meeting. Bhaguji prostrated at Shri Hari’s feet and said, “Bhagwan, I am nothing without you. I do not wish to go home. Please keep me in your *seva*.”

Shri Hari knew that Bhaguji was a *mukta* who had come to serve him. Shri Hari stood up and embraced Bhaguji. He accepted Bhaguji’s

seva as his personal attendant.

At Bhai Ramdas Swami's insistence, Shri Hari came to Ahmedabad. He met the leading devotees, whom Bhai Ramdas Swami had groomed for years. He accepted their *seva* and nourished their bhakti.

It was time again to travel to Gadhada. Shri Hari arrived in Gadhada and noticed that many of the devotees had observed a fast for several days in anticipation of his arrival. In order to give the devotees the opportunity to serve him while he was out of town, Shri Hari installed a *murti* of one of his forms, Vasudevnarayan Dev, in Abhel Khachar's *darbar*. He ordered the *bhaktas* to offer their *seva* and bhakti to this *murti* as they would to him. Shri Hari performed the first *murti pratishtha* ceremony in the *sampradaya* in the month of Fagun in 1806.

In Central Gujarat

Shri Hari remembered and fulfilled the promises he made to his *bhaktas*. In April, Shri Hari initiated Dinmani Sharma into the sadhu-fold in Meghpur and named him Nityanand Swami. Nityanand Swami was one of the foremost scholars of the time. His commentaries on various philosophical texts have been studied and analyzed by pandits and scholars in India and abroad. Nityanand Swami's greatest attribute was his firm conviction in Shri Hari's supremacy. He was later named as one of Shri Hari's *sadguru* sadhus.

Shri Hari made his way to Bochasan in central Gujarat. Shri Hari was familiar with the village and its people for he had accepted the bhakti of Kandas, Nanibai, and their teenage son, Kashidas, while traveling through Gujarat as Nilkanth.⁵

Kandas and his family were not able to forget Shri Hari's *murti*. Nanibai often spent hours meditating on Shri Hari's *murti*. Kashidas, too, waited patiently for Shri Hari's return. Shri Hari came to Bochasan and accepted the family's bhakti and *seva*. One afternoon, Kandas was walking home from the fields and noticed scores of people offering prostrations and praying in the direction of his house. Kandas approached the royally-clad individuals and asked, "Kind sirs, who are you? Where are you from?

⁵ Refer to Chapter 2 with subtitle 'Gifting Kashidas with a Mandir' for a detailed account of Nilkanth's encounter with Kandas' family.

Why are you in Bochasan? You look out of place here with your gold ornaments and crowns.”

The celestial beings addressed Kandas, “Purna Purushottam Narayan manifested on Earth. He is at Kandas’ house. We are offering our *seva* and *bhakti* to him from a distance.”

Kandas realized that Shri Hari was the Supreme Being to whom the celestial beings referred. He rushed home with a firm resolve to spend his life serving Shri Hari.

Kashidas’ love for Shri Hari was unrivaled. In order to make Shri Hari’s travel convenient in Gujarat, Kashidas commissioned the construction of a chariot. The chariot was pulled by four bullocks. It was adorned with various precious metals and gems. With this chariot, Shri Hari traveled from village to village, accepting every devotee’s invitation. He even met with the notorious Takho Pagi. Takho lived in Bamroli. He was a dacoit, one that even the authorities feared. Shri Hari sent Takho into *samadhi*. In the *samadhi*, Takho realized that all of his past deeds would cause him immense suffering in his next life. Shri Hari even showed Takho the specific punishments that he would have to bear at the hands of Yamraj. Takho immediately woke up from his *samadhi* and prostrated at Shri Hari’s feet. He asked to be forgiven for his past misdeeds and accepted the *niyam dharma* of the *sampradaya*. He vowed to never steal, commit adultery, or harass another soul again. Shri Hari was pleased with Takho’s resolve.

That day in Bamroli, Shri Hari addressed the *satsang sabha*. “My devotees should consider the wealth and assets of others as worthless. One should never think of taking or usurping another’s possessions. We should be content with what Bhagwan has given us. That is one of the most important tenets by which to live a lawful and spiritual life.”

Shri Hari departed from Bamroli and arrived in Budhej. Shri Hari visited the homes of many *bhaktas* while traveling as Nilkanth. At Khodabhai’s house, the servants and Khodabhai’s family profusely apologized for the insolent behavior of one of Khodabhai’s servants many years ago.⁶ Shri Hari behaved as if the incident had never happened.

⁶ Refer to Chapter 2 with subtitle ‘The Brazen Maid and the Overflowing Well’ for a detailed account of Nilkanth’s interaction with the maid-servant at Khodabhai’s house.

Forgiving his devotees was imbedded in Shri Hari's compassionate nature.

One afternoon, Shri Hari simultaneously ate in dozens of homes around the village. The villagers were astonished, but those that knew of Shri Hari's *bhaktavatsal* character folded their hands and bowed to Shri Hari.

Traveling from house to house in Budhej, Shri Hari realized that there was no source of fresh water in the village. She Hari ordered the devotees to dig a freshwater reservoir on the outskirts of town. Shri Hari surveyed the land himself. The devotees dug for five straight days. On the fifth day, they witnessed a miracle. Fresh water rose from under the top soil. The devotees were astonished. Water usually did not appear until after several weeks of digging. Shri Hari smiled and encouraged the devotees to finish the excavation. The newly-made body of water was named Lake Hari. That evening, Shri Hari bathed in the reservoir with the devotees and then departed for Gadhada.

En route to Gadhada, Shri Hari stopped at the farm where he had raised the level of the well's water to avoid drinking from the farmer's leather bucket.⁷ The farmer recognized Shri Hari and prostrated at his feet. He exclaimed, "Prabhu, I have been looking for you since the day you left. I have not been able to forget your charming beauty since that day. Why did you leave?"

Shri Hari smiled and placed his hand on the farmer's head. Shri Hari graced the farmer's village and several others on his way to Gadhada.

Rath Yatra and Janmashtami – 1806 CE

Shri Hari placed special emphasis on the celebration of festivals. He invited *bhaktas* from across Gujarat to partake in festivals several times a year. The devotees likewise received each invitation with great enthusiasm. Entire communities prepared for the trip to receive Shri Hari's darshan. Some walked, while others traveled by horse or bullock cart. These festivals provided a forum for the community to meet and appreciate one another's *mahima*. Shri Hari stressed the need for the

⁷ Refer to Chapter 2 with subtitle 'The Brazen Maid and the Overflowing Well' for a detailed account of Nilkanth's interaction with the farmer and his leather water bucket.

bhaktas to empathize with one other and their commitment to Satsang. This would foster *divyabhav* and cultivate satsang in distant and remote communities. Lastly, Shri Hari recognized that such celebrations permitted devotees to have *smruti* of his *lila charitras*. In Vachanamrut Gadhada I 3, Shri Hari explains why he organized these festivals: even a brief recollection of Bhagwan Swaminarayan's glance, smile, walk, or hand gesture at the time of one's death is enough to grant *moksha*.⁸

In Gadhada, Shri Hari celebrated the Rath Yatra festival for the first time in the Saurashtra region. The people of Saurashtra were unfamiliar with the custom, but Shri Hari's travels throughout northern and eastern India had acquainted him with the tradition. He gave the festival life in Gujarat. Shri Hari also celebrated Dev Podhi Ekadashi and Rakshabandhan in Gadhada before leaving for Agatrali to observe Janmashtami at Parvatbhai's home.

Parvatbhai was a wealthy farmer, but his status was not the reason for his privileged place among Shri Hari's disciples. Parvatbhai had immense *divyabhav* in all of Shri Hari's *lila charitras*.

Upon Shri Hari's arrival, Parvatbhai handed him the keys to a warehouse full of grains, sugar, flour, and other expensive food items. He prayed to Shri Hari, "Bhagwan, my life and its possessions are at your disposal. Please use them to feed and care for the sadhus and devotees that have come with you."

Shri Hari immediately ordered the sadhus to prepare *churma*, an item usually served with warm ghee and handfuls of powdered sugar. Once prepared, Shri Hari ordered Nityanand Swami to serve the *churma* and Brahmanand Swami to carefully navigate through the rows of sadhus and devotees with powdered sugar. Shri Hari grabbed the vessel of ghee and began serving the first sadhu at the beginning of the row. Shri Hari bent low and tilted the vessel of ghee, pouring large amounts into the sadhu's wooden bowl. As he moved to the second sadhu, he kept the vessel tilted, pouring a continuous stream of ghee between both of

⁸ In Vachanamrut Gadhada I 3, Shri Hari states, "That is why I perform grand Vishnu-yags; annually celebrate Janmashtami, *Ekadashi* and other observances; and gather *brahmacharis*, sadhus and *satsangis* on these occasions. After all, even if a sinner remembers these occasions at the time of his death, he will also attain the abode of God."

their wooden bowls. This continued until Shri Hari reached the last sadhu in the row. He moved over to the next row and continued the same *charitra* while feeding the devotees. Parvatbhai watched Shri Hari spill large quantities of ghee on the floor, an expensive commodity in those times. Rather than become angry, Parvatbhai danced, overjoyed by watching this *lila charitra*. When others approached Parvatbhai and advised him to tell Shri Hari to be more careful while serving the devotees, Parvatbhai smiled and said, “That ghee and everything else of mine is Shri Hari’s. He may use it however he chooses. Besides, would even Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva have the pleasure of witnessing such a *lila charitra*? ” As explained by Shri Hari, this *charitra*, if remembered, would guarantee *moksha*.

On the day of Janmashtami, Shri Hari encouraged everyone to observe a *nirjala* fast. He gathered the sadhus and devotees under the cool shade of the mango grove. He started to sing bhajans and kirtans and encouraged others to do the same. He also instructed sadhus to read the Shrimad Bhagavata Purana, especially the *charitras* of Shri Krishna in the tenth canto. They celebrated Krishna Janmahotsav at midnight while dancing and cheering to the tune of bhakti.

The next day, Shri Hari sat in the mango grove. A young boy was playing under the shade of a nearby tree. Shri Hari called the boy and asked him for his name and his ancestry. The boy replied, “Swamiji, I am a harijan.”⁹

Shri Hari smiled and said, “No, dear boy. You are not a harijan. You are *atma*.” Shri Hari then asked again, “Who are you, dear child?”

The boy replied with renewed vigor, “I am a harijan.” This exchange continued for several minutes at the end of which the boy replied, “Swamiji, I am *atma*. But, I am only saying this because you are so persistent. In fact, I am nothing but a lowly-born harijan.”

⁹ The term used in many of the hagiographies was ‘dhedh’. It refers to a person belonging to the lowest class of the caste system. Their work often deals with carrying animal carcasses and performing tasks related to leather and animal hides. With the stratification of the caste system over time, they were largely classified as ‘untouchables’ and were looked down upon with resentment by members of the higher ranks of society. Today, the term is considered an offensive slur. However, it was often a means of self-identification prior to colonial interaction. In the narrative, the term ‘harijan’ has been used in accordance with the Atrocity Act of 1989.

Shri Hari was satisfied with the little progress he had made. He patted the boy on his head and gave him a handful of sugar to enjoy. The boy skipped his way home without fully grasping the importance of that morning's lesson.

Shri Hari then turned to the sadhus and devotees that had gathered in the mango grove and spoke to them about the importance of *atmajnan*. "Nothing is more important on the spiritual path than recognizing one's self as the *atma*. Even *bhakti* is tainted unless it is participated in with the true knowledge of one's self. I am *atma*. You are *atma*. Everyone else is *atma*. We are not this body. If we are not the body, how then can we be proud of our birth, class, gender, financial status, and possessions? All of this is temporary and destructible. The only part of us that lives on is the *atma*. Remember yourself to be *atma* and you will always experience happiness and satisfaction. No external factors will be able to govern your happiness. You will enjoy heat and cold, pleasure and pain, happiness and sorrow, and praise and insult alike. It is my inner wish that all of you enjoy the happiness of the *atma*. That is the only way you will experience Akshardham on Earth. By becoming *atma*, one becomes worthy of serving Parabrahma. I, Parabrahma, will then grant you *moksha*. This is my blessing to all of you."

Shri Hari spent a few days in Agatrai. Each morning and evening, he would sit in the mango grove and share such pearls of wisdom.

When he was preparing to leave Agatrai, Shri Hari asked Mayaram Bhatt of Manavadar to join him. Mayaram was overjoyed, but he had one reservation. "Prabhu, the millet has grown ripe in my farm. If I do not harvest it, I will lose my crop."

Shri Hari immediately offered to help. "Why don't you go to Manavadar. We will come tomorrow. With all of these sadhus and devotees, we will have your millet harvested in no time."

Shri Hari served and assisted his devotees with a sense of genuine love and helpfulness. As promised, Shri Hari arrived in Manavadar and helped the young *brahmin* harvest the millet on his small farm. Shri Hari, now accompanied by Mayaram, departed for Gadhada.

First Annakut

A beautiful *annakut* was being prepared in front of the *murti* of Vasudevnarayan Dev in Abhel Khachar's *darbar*. The *annakut* festival is celebrated widely by Vaishnav traditions. Many historians cite Shri Krishna's Mount Govardhan *lila* as the origin of the *annakut* celebration.¹⁰ However, this was the first time the *annakut* festival was celebrated during the Diwali festivities. On the first day of the New Year, Shri Hari advised all of his devotees to offer an *annakut* to Bhagwan to show their appreciation for the blessings they have received in their lives. Shri Hari personally took interest in the arrangements for displaying the hundreds of items prepared by the female devotees. The sadhus sang to the accompaniment of *jhanjh*, *mrudangs*, and other instruments. Shri Hari performed the first *annakut arti*. Shri Hari then requested that each devotee approach the *annakut* to have the darshan of the magnificent offering to Vasudevnarayan Dev.

Once the male devotees completed their darshan and took their seats in the *sabha*, the female devotees gathered around the *annakut* for darshan. While having darshan, one of the devotees noticed a light emanating from a lady clad in white, silk garments who was also engaged in darshan of the *annakut*. The light emitting from her body gradually increased in radiance. The lady devotees ran to Shri Hari and described this phenomenon. Shri Hari instructed them to ask the maiden her name and to tell her to stay for the satsang *sabha*. The ladies rushed back to the lady and asked her name. She replied, "My name is Bhaktimata. I am Shri Hari's mother."

The ladies were overjoyed. They wrapped the ends of their colorful saris around their heads, as a customary sign of respect, and bowed in reverence to Bhaktimata. They recalled Shri Hari's *agna* and politely invited her to the New Year's *sabha*. Bhaktimata smiled and said, "I came for a quick glimpse of this *annakut* and Shri Hari. I cannot stay for long. I am a *pativrata* lady. I only stay where my husband, Dharmadev, resides. If all of you imbibe *ekantik dharma* in your lives, I will be sure to remain among you."

10 This episode is described in detail in the Shrimad Bhagavata Purana, 10:25:15-30.

Before the lady devotees could respond, Bhaktimata disappeared. The ladies returned to the *sabha* and narrated the incident to Shri Hari. Shri Hari smiled and asked them to sit. Today, Shri Hari would speak of *ekantik dharma*.

Shri Hari began by saying, “Bhakti follows dharma. True bhakti and dharma should not be differentiated from one another. *Ekantik dharma* encompasses dharma, bhakti, *jnan*, and *vairagya*. It is only by imbibing the moral and spiritual tenets, understanding one’s self to be *atma*, serving Bhagwan and his Gunatit Satpurush, and detaching one’s self from all material possessions, can one attain my Akshardham.”

The lives of exemplary sadhus and devotees, such as Muktanand Swami, Gordhanbhai of Mangrol, and Parvatbhai of Agatral, assured devotees that they too could attain such success on the spiritual path and please Shri Hari.

Changing the Social Landscape: Female Infanticide, Sati, and Social Equality

Several immoral and inhumane practices had crept into societal practices under the guise of tradition in eighteenth-century India. Shri Hari resolved to remove such oppressive practices from society.

The first such practice was female infanticide. It was referred to as *dudh piti*. The name literally means ‘the drinking of milk.’ A newborn daughter was drowned in a pot of milk, viewed as a means to alleviate the financial burden of a daughter’s future wedding dowry. Shri Hari explained to his devotees that such practice, according to the dharma shastras, would subject a person to four different sins: the killing of a child, a female, an innocent being, and a helpless being.

Shri Hari convened a *sabha* of his devotees from all over Gujarat. He logically explained why the practice was harmful to their spiritual progress and to the social health of the community. One devotee interjected by saying, “Prabhu, once our daughters grow up, we cannot find worthy suitors. The average man cannot afford the dowry for worthy suitors. What about all these problems?”

Shri Hari lovingly explained, “I have thought through all of these problems. I am working to raise a society in which men respect

women. People are adopting lives free of addiction and vices. By the time your daughter is ready for marriage, I assure you that there will be several worthy suitors available. I have also instructed all of you to avoid charging dowries in marital customs. Lastly, I will organize mass-wedding ceremonies. This will ensure that the disadvantaged can afford to have their daughters married. I give you my word. I will look after the well-being of your daughters and their future. Your daughters are my daughters. But, please, I urge you to stop accruing the sin of killing your innocent daughters."

Shri Hari continued, "I also feel extreme sorrow and distress over the sati custom in which widows are burned at their husband's funeral pyres. How is that justice? For what fault is she being punished?"

Shri Hari was again interrupted by one of the devotees. "Bhagwan, a widow is cursed. It is the misfortune of her fate that usually causes the death of her husband. Why should she deserve to live? Looking at such a *rand*'s face would bring peril to those around her."

Shri Hari immediately cut him off. "How dare you refer to a woman, the mother of creation, as a *rand*? Women run your households, they bear you children, and they are often the reasons why many of your homes and finances remain afloat. They are the regenerating *shakti* of Bhagwan. Do not ever utter such disrespecting words about them in my presence again."

The devotee apologized profusely. Shri Hari spoke candidly, "I know that several of you feel strongly about this tradition. It was different when the brave Rajput queens chose to burn themselves at their husbands' pyres, but you are often forcing young women to prematurely end their lives. I have found a resolution to this problem. I will build special mandirs for women who do not wish to remarry. Rather than offering them *diksha*, they can wear white clothes and spend their days in *bhakti* and *seva*. If they wish to remarry, I will assist them in finding worthy partners. I need your support to eradicate this cruel and thoughtless practice."

The devotees raised their voices in support of Shri Hari's *agna*. Shri Hari also instructed his sadhus to spread this message as they traveled the length and breadth of Gujarat, Saurashtra, and other parts of India. Though these practices seem irrelevant in today's society, historians and scholars of gender studies have credited Bhagwan Swaminarayan

for bringing about a wave of gender equality and eradicating these barbaric practices that would have otherwise destroyed the community. Contemporary colonial authorities and missionary priests have described Bhagwan Swaminarayan's contributions to nineteenth-century India in many of their journals and official records.¹¹

The British were also pleasantly surprised to see Shri Hari's disciples from different castes and social classes work together for the betterment of humanity. Shri Hari was a proponent of social equality. One such story illustrates his zeal to improve society's orthodox beliefs. One evening, the sadhus and devotees gathered for a satsang *sabha* in Abhel Khachar's courtyard. Just as Shri Hari was about to address the *sabha*, an uproar resonated from the ladies' section. Shri Hari stood up and went to the back of the *sabha* to investigate the reason for the commotion. There, he found Gangabai, a female devotee from the lower rungs of the social structure, sitting in the satsang *sabha*. The other female devotees were shouting, agitated by her presence. Shri Hari silenced them with a gesture of his hand and then asked, "What seems to be the problem here?"

One of the *kshatriya* devotees, or *kathis* as they were called in Saurashtra, replied, "Bhagwan, this woman here is an untouchable. We cannot sit next to her."

Shri Hari retorted, "Who cleans your homes for you? Who comes to your homes to care for your ill cattle and horses? Hasn't she been to all of your homes to carry away your dead livestock?"

The ladies were quiet. Shri Hari continued, "Why is it that today, when she has come for my darshan in my *sabha*, you are causing this commotion and turning your faces away? There is no distinction between my devotees. You are *atma*. Behave as such. Here, everyone is an equal. Yes, there are certain social norms and customs that we have to honor,

11 The following are a few sources noting Bhagwan Swaminarayan's contributions to nineteenth-century India.

Parekh, Hiralal T., *Reports of Bhagwan Swaminarayan's Edifying Effects in Kathiawad Reaching the British*. 90.

Parekh, M. C., *Letters Written by Blane (& Williamson, Secretary) to Bhagwan Swaminarayan*. 3rd ed. Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan Bombay: 1980. 254-256.

Dave, Harshadrai, *Letter Sent by Sir John Malcolm*. Vol. V 455.

Dave, Harshadrai. *Letter Sent by Sir John Malcolm: Meeting with*. Vol. V. 475-478. Briggs, Henry George, *Bombay: The Times Press*. Cities of Gujarat. 1849. 242.

but in our satsang community, all are equal.”

Shri Hari’s contributions were universal in application and influenced all facets of life: spiritual, domestic, cultural, and, as seen here, social.

The Potter’s Bhakti

The King of Gondal heard of Shri Hari’s *mahima* and sent a messenger to invite Shri Hari to his palace. The royal lineage of Gondal is known for its humanitarian efforts and contributions to the literary archives of Gujarat. Shri Hari accepted the invitation and graced the king’s palace. The king welcomed Shri Hari with a garland of pearls and prostrated at his feet. Shri Hari spoke to the king about continuing to nourish the intellectual development of his subjects. The king bowed his head in humility and accepted Shri Hari’s *agnas*.

There was a poor potter in the village who was a devout *bhakta*. He strictly followed Shri Hari’s *agnas*. When he heard that Bhagwan had arrived in his town, he immediately went to Shri Hari and said, “Prabhu, will you not grace my humble hut?”

Shri Hari told the potter that he would have lunch with him at his home. The potter ran home and told his family the exciting news. He was in shock. Contrary to all societal norms, Bhagwan Swaminarayan would be eating in his little hut.

The potter’s wife prepared millet *rotla* and a spicy chili pickle. They made *chaas* from sour yogurt and waited for Shri Hari’s arrival.

Shri Hari arrived at the potter’s modest home and lovingly spoke to the potter’s son and daughter. He summoned the sadhus and devotees to huddle around him. And, then, with the same enthusiasm that he had exhibited at the king’s palace, Shri Hari enjoyed the chili pickle and dry *rotlo*. Shri Hari did not simply preach equality; he exemplified such principles through his actions.

A Conversation with Brahmanand Swami and Muktanand Swami

Not far from Gondal is a small village named Mevasa located on the banks of River Champarvadi. Shri Hari sat under a tree on the banks of the river on the outskirts of Mevasa. The sound of the flowing water

crashing against the rocks resembled the reverberations of a flute and the strokes on a *dhol*. Shri Hari requested the devotees from Mevasa to make arrangements for lunch under that tree. Just as Shri Hari finished giving instructions, a large *mandal* of sadhus approached the group of *bhaktas* under the tree. Shri Hari was surprised to see Brahmanand Swami and Muktanand Swami in Mevasa. He stood up and embraced the senior sadhus and then asked the devotees to prepare more food for the sadhus.

Brahmanand Swami and Muktanand Swami walked down to the riverbank and sat a few yards from Shri Hari. Shri Hari then walked over to the sadhus and sat next to them. He asked, “Brahmanandji, please do share the state of our satsang community. How do you find the development of Satsang?”

Brahmanand Swami reported the positive progress. “Bhagwan, Satsang is growing steadily. Devotees are eager for your darshan everywhere we go.”

Shri Hari posed a follow-up question. “How is your personal satsang? How much have the two of you progressed?”

Brahmanand Swami and Muktanand Swami thought for a second before replying. “Prabhu, we have progressed on the path to *moksha* as well.”

Shri Hari gently smiled and said, “Then please answer the following: Where have I come from? Why have I come? And, where am I going?”

Both of the senior sadhus looked down and remained silent. They did not have the answers to Shri Hari’s questions. Shri Hari waited for them to reply.

Muktanand Swami mustered the courage to respond. “Shri Hari, we have yet to become such *satsangis*. Please show us mercy and the path to becoming such *satsangis*.”

Shri Hari laughed, “Brahmanandji and Muktanandji, have I not shown enough mercy? I have come down to Earth from Akshardham. I eat, play, and speak to you as if I am a simple human being. What more is there left for me to do? Listen, there are such *satsangis* in our midst, who can answer these questions. Gordhanbhai and Parvatbhai are two such devotees. They see me in all three states. They believe themselves to be *atma* and behave with disregard for their bodies and desires.”

Brahmanand Swami listened attentively and then asked, “Prabhu, what can we do to become such *satsangis*? We, too, would like to attain such spiritual heights, but a layer of *maya* blocks our progress.”

Shri Hari immediately threw off the shawl covering the upper half of his body and exclaimed, “Is there any *maya* obstructing your progress now?” Shri Hari’s symbolic gesture illustrated that by his grace alone, one can overcome all obstacles on the spiritual path.

Brahmanand Swami and Muktanand Swami folded their hands and bowed their heads. Shri Hari instructed, “Believe your self to be *atma*. Understand the *mahima* of my *swarup* and the *mahima* of all my devotees. There are only two entities above *maya*: Parabrahma and Aksharbrahma. I am that Parabrahma. Aksharbrahma is my abode and is also manifest on Earth. Surrender your body, mind, and soul in my *seva*. Overcoming *maya* will then become a simple task.”

Shri Hari used this exchange between Brahmanand Swami and Muktanand Swami as an opportunity to address all of the sadhus and devotees present about overcoming *maya* and attaining *moksha*. The two senior sadhus were overjoyed to receive such personal and direct instruction from Shri Hari. Neither of them was the slightest bit hurt or discouraged by the candid exchange. Such was the spiritual appetite of Shri Hari’s sadhus.

Assisting Jiva Joshi

Shri Hari looked after his *bhaktas’* spiritual, social, and financial well-being. When he heard that Jiva Joshi was struggling with the costs of the *upavit sanskar* for his two sons, Govardhan and Shivaram, Shri Hari came to Jetpur and assumed the responsibilities of organizing the ceremony. He asked a wealthy merchant to loan Jiva Joshi the supplies needed to prepare for the feast. Shri Hari dressed in silk clothes and mounted his horse to give darshan to the villagers. Dozens of villagers gathered and offered various amounts of financial *seva*. Shri Hari instructed a devotee to collect the donations and offer it to Jiva Joshi.

The next morning, Shri Hari invited all of Jetpur’s *brahmins* to celebrate Jiva Joshi’s sons’ *upavit sanskar*. While eating, several *brahmins* were heard whispering, “The father is supposed to handle the

responsibilities of this ritual. If he does not do so, he will not gain the merit of his sons' *pind* offerings¹² when he passes away."

Shri Hari overheard the gossiping *brahmins* and laughed, "That means that I will get the offerings from the *pinds*. Is that not a good thing? If I receive the merits, I will distribute them among the *jivas* of the entire world. What is more fruitful for Jiva Joshi?"

The *brahmins* said nothing further. That evening in the *sabha*, Shri Hari spoke of Jiva Joshi's conviction and the merit of helping a true *bhakta*.

The next morning, Shri Hari traveled to Faneni. In the *sabha* that evening, Shri Hari again spoke of Jiva Joshi's commendable *seva* and *bhakti*. Haridas Baba's wife was sitting in the assembly. She immediately went home and dug up a pot of 1,200 coins she had saved. She brought the pot to Shri Hari and placed it at his feet. Shri Hari was pleased with her sacrifice. He asked, "Mother, have you asked Haridas Baba?"

She replied with confidence, "Bhagwan, there is no reason to ask. He is out of town, but when he returns he will be overjoyed by my decision. I am sure of it."

Shri Hari kept five hundred coins and returned the rest. That sum was used to pay back the merchant's loan in Jetpur. When Haridas Baba returned, he said to his wife, "I wish that you had convinced Shri Hari to keep all 1,200 coins. When will we have the opportunity to perform this type of *seva* again?"

Shri Hari then instructed Jiva Joshi to move from Jetpur to another village, where other *satsangis* could care for his needs.

Shri Hari's heart brimmed with compassion when he heard of his devotees' sorrows. Kadvibai's husband caused her great distress. He beat her everytime he caught her worshiping Shri Hari. Every night, he placed one leg of his sleeping cot on her chest. His objective was to cause her enough misery to become discouraged and abandon Shri Hari's name forever. However, Kadvibai's conviction was strong, and she was unrelenting. Shri Hari eventually inspired her husband to let her leave

¹² Hindus believe that the liberation of their ancestors is directly related to the ritual of offering *pinds*. *Pinds* are small, oblong-shaped balls made of rice and oat flour. Offering *pinds* to one's ancestors in the pilgrimage center of Gaya symbolizes the washing away of their sins.

to freely engage in worship. Kadvibai came to Sarangpur and joined Shri Hari's *seva*. Shri Hari kept her as a *sankhyayogini* with Jivuba. She spent the rest of her years in *seva* and bhakti in Gadhada.

Shri Hari constantly guarded the welfare of his devotees, ensuring they did not suffer. After all, they had given their lives to serve him.

Rangotsav in Dhoraji

Shri Hari celebrated the Fulldol celebrations of 1807 in Dhoraji. Thousands of devotees arrived from all over the satsang community. Over one thousand sadhus also gathered to partake in the celebrations. Hathibhai and other devotees in the town assembled bullock carts full of *gulal* for the festivities. The event took place under the shade of an enormous tree.

Shri Hari spoke to the devotees for many hours. At the end of his *katha*, Shri Hari hid behind the sadhus and senior devotees and surprised them by throwing *gulal* on them. In return, the sadhus then surrounded Shri Hari and gently threw gulal on him. It was a breathtaking scene. Not an inch of Shri Hari's body was left uncolored. In fact, so much *gulal* was thrown that the tree appeared to bear red leafs in place of their usual green color. That tree has since been referred to as the 'Red Tree.'

Thereafter, the sadhus and devotees took Shri Hari to bathe in the river. They washed off the *gulal* from Shri Hari's body and returned to the town. Shri Hari accomplished more than simply coloring the devotees' clothing and limbs. Shri Hari drenched their hearts in his color, in his *mahima*.

Anandanand Swami, one of Ramamand Swami's disciples, was overjoyed by the day's festivities. He observed, "Bhagwan, our satsang has grown quite a bit. It is really large."

Shri Hari smiled and said, "Swamiji, this is just the beginning. Our satsang will have grown to its potential when 100,000 devotees follow each sadhu within our *sampradaya*. That is when we will know our satsang community to have grown large. I want to fill one billion large sea vessels with the *jivas* of this world and take them to Akshardham. I will take even those devotees that have not become *brahmarup*. I will patiently work to eradicate their desires and base instincts and then take them to my abode."

Shri Hari's compassion and patience were boundless. He constantly thought of liberating the souls of this universe suffering from the illusion of *maya*. Shri Hari spent a few weeks in Dhoraji before leaving for Junagadh to celebrate Chaitra *sud* Nom—Ramnavmi. He had already sent Anandanand Swami to prepare for the festival.

Ramnavmi in Junagadh

Junagadh was under the rule of a Muslim Nawab. Nawab Hamid Khan was a god-fearing man. He treated his subjects fairly and cared for their well-being. Jinabhai, the ruler of Panchala, paid tribute to the Nawab's court and was, therefore, acquainted with him. At Shri Hari's behest, Jinabhai visited the Nawab with Anandanand Swami. Anandanand Swami spoke of Bhagwan Swaminarayan's *mahima*. Inspired by such a description, the Nawab announced, "It would be my pleasure to welcome Bhagwan incarnate in my kingdom. Please accept my assistance and support as you prepare for Bhagwan Swaminarayan's arrival."

The Nawab's ministry was filled with Nagar *brahmins*. Nagars were known for their verbal prowess, poetic splendor, and political diplomacy. They were also known for their enmity towards Shri Hari's devotees. The Chief Minister immediately warned the Nawab, "Oh King, Swaminarayan travels with a large troop of armed mercenaries. It would not be wise to let him into your kingdom. What if he tries to overthrow your authority and take over your kingdom?"

Jinabhai interjected, "Nawabji, what the Chief Minister refers to as mercenaries are mere devotees. Some of them were dacoits, lawless warlords, and paid mercenaries, but Shri Hari transformed their lives. Today, they are examples for the other devotees. They maintain moral lives and follow the tenets prescribed in the dharma shastras."

The Nawab nodded his head in agreement. He knew that the minister had malicious intentions. He thanked Jinabhai and Anandanand Swami for coming to his royal palace.

Shri Hari arrived in Junagadh with a large following of sadhus and *bhaktas*. They stayed in the gardens on the outskirts of the city. The next day, the devotees requested Shri Hari to sit on an elephant and tour the streets of the city. Shri Hari accepted their invitation. As the procession

passed through the streets, city dwellers gathered at their windows and balconies to have a glimpse of Shri Hari's enchanting *murti*. Just as the procession was about to pass the Nawab's palace, Shri Hari's attention was drawn by a young boy waving his arms. Shri Hari looked at him and smiled. The boy pointed at the cucumber in his hand, hoping Shri Hari would accept his simple offering. Shri Hari signaled the boy to throw it up at him. The boy gladly obliged. Shri Hari caught the cucumber and ate it in front of thousands of spectators.

The Nawab was watching this scene from his window. He was mesmerized. Bhagwan was beyond societal norms, and only Bhagwan could eat a cucumber while sitting on an elephant passing by the king's palace. The king's Chief Minister tried to take advantage of the situation. He retorted, "Oh King, how can this imposter be called Bhagwan? He does not even know proper public etiquette."

The Nawab laughed and said, "Minister, only Khuda or God can stoop to such a level to fulfill his *bhakta*'s bhakti. You will not understand this. Leave it to me. I have now understood Swaminarayan's true glory."

The Chief Minister was disheartened. The following day, Shri Hari visited the Nawab's palace. Shri Hari spoke to the Nawab about satsang and the community. The Nawab's eyes welled up with tears, overjoyed that Bhagwan had graced his palace. He offered his bhakti by scenting Shri Hari's clothes with fragranced oils from Baghdad.

The sadhus and devotees celebrated Ramnavmi that night to the sounds of *jhanjh*, *pakhawaj*, and the powerful resonance of Brahmanand Swami's voice. Shri Hari also arranged for Muktanand Swami, Brahmanand Swami, and Nityanand Swami to sing bhakti *pads* and to deliver discourses every day at the Nawab's palace.

Shri Hari stayed in Junagadh for one week. Before leaving, it is said that Shri Hari promised to take the Nawab to Akshardham when he breathed his last. Shri Hari's care and willingness to grant *moksha* surpassed all bounds of class, creed, and religious affiliation.

Five Hundred Paramhansas

Shri Hari called a meeting of all of his sadhus. Over the past few months, Shri Hari had been receiving disturbing news from all around

Gujarat and Saurashtra that his innocent and peace-loving sadhus were being beaten and even killed. In all, more than six hundred sadhus were killed by corrupt and insecure renunciates. The reason for this gruesome genocide: Shri Hari's sadhus lived pure and admirable lifestyles. They did not horde material possessions and did not indulge in vices, gossip, and adultery. They followed eight-fold celibacy and spent their days engaging their minds and souls in the bhakti and *seva* of the community and Bhagwan. Such a noble way of life was commendable given the then current, degenerating state of the religious environment in Gujarat. The *brahmins* were diminishing society under the pretext of ritualistic requirements. They would charge exorbitant amounts of money and order the believer to provide intoxicants, meat, and the illicit company of women. The bands of wandering ascetics also acted wantonly under the false guise of Bhagwan's name. The ascetics used indiscriminate force to suppress kings, merchants, and the poorest members of society. They stomped their tridents on the ground and wailed battle cries at the top of their lungs. Their objective was to incite fear and collect massive amounts of wealth. They harassed all those with whom they came into contact. Taking advantage of the superstitious minds of the elders, they threatened to destroy entire families and villages. It was both a heartbreakingly pitiful scene.

This immoral, socio-economic arrangement was disturbed when Shri Hari's sadhus traveled from village to village unsettling its foundations and erecting moral standards in its place. They preached against superstition. They respected women and advocated for women's rights. They never asked for money, let alone threaten violence to acquire material possessions. Shri Hari's sadhus restored meaning to the definition of a true renunciant. This was one of the main causes for the violence afflicted upon these defenseless sadhus. They, however, continued to selflessly serve society, all the while chanting "Swaminarayan, Swaminarayan, Swaminarayan..."

In Kalvani, Shri Hari carefully thought about the plight of his sadhus. His eyes were red from tears, and his mind was filled with thoughts of justice. Seated before him were the five hundred sadhus that had survived wave after wave of unrelenting violence. Muktanand Swami broke the

deafening silence. “Shri Hari, please do not worry about us. We have become sadhus to look after society and to serve you. We are not worried about our physical bodies so as long as we are able to engage in bhakti and *seva*. Do not think of punishing these sinners. You are all-forgiving and compassionate. These are your innate characteristics. Do not, for a moment, think of responding to their senseless acts of violence.” The rest of the *paramhansas* showed their support in seconding Muktanand Swami’s voice.

Shri Hari’s frown softened for the first time that evening. There was still the matter of survival. Shri Hari could not bear to see the sufferings of animals and of even his enemies; how was he to remain idle and witness the murder of his own sadhus?

Shri Hari arrived at a conclusion. On Monday, 30 June 1807, Shri Hari initiated his surviving five hundred sadhus into *paramhansas* (see photo 26). It was a historical event. These sadhus, many of them *brahmins*, had spent their entire lives wearing their sacred threads and shaving their heads, leaving only a small tuft of hair. They openly performed bhakti, satsang *katha*, and *murti* puja. Now, Shri Hari was asking them to behave differently.

Shri Hari instructed the five hundred *paramhansas*, “Starting tonight, all of you are *paramhansas*. You will take off your saffron garments and wear white *dhotiyas* in their place. You will shave your heads and tufts of hair. You will not wear *kanthis*, perform puja in public, or even chant the name of ‘Swaminarayan’ out loud. *Murti* puja, rituals, and bhajans should be performed in one’s mind. *Mansi* puja will replace all of the rituals you practice. Practice your *niyams* to the best of your ability, but do not fast if a woman touches you. Do not worry about spreading satsang or my *mahima*. For now, travel the lands with Bhagwan in your hearts and minds. Your actions will spread my *mahima*.”

Nityanand Swami, a *brahmin* from a long lineage of ritualists and scholars, asked, “Bhagwan, is this not a violation of our dharma, of our traditions?”

Shri Hari smiled and replied, “What I am asking of you is not easy. But, at the moment, it is necessary for survival. Living like the rest of the ascetics will help you travel without attracting unwanted attention and

misery. Follow my *agna* for now. Besides, *seva*, *bhakti*, *puja*, and *atmajnan* are imbibed in all of your hearts. Do not change who you are or how you live from the inside. This is just an external step to accommodate the circumstances of our troubled times.”

Each sadhu bowed his head and waited for Shri Hari to pass by his seat. Muktanand Swami followed Shri Hari with a gourd of water in his hands. Shri Hari initiated each of the sadhus into the *paramhansa*-fold before dawn. This would be the last time the sadhus publicly chanted the Swaminarayan mantra out loud for quite some time.

Shri Hari traveled through the Sorath region making his way to Gadhada. He spent a few days in Gadhada while accepting the selfless services of Laduba, Jivuba, and Dada Khachar. He then left for Bhadra before the start of Sharad Purnima and Diwali (Oct.-Nov.).

Shri Hari always found a reason to travel to Bhadra. After all, it was his Akshardham’s village. Mulji Sharma, later known as Gunatitanand Swami, was born in Bhadra. Shri Hari celebrated Gunatitanand Swami’s birth festivities on Sharad Purnima in Bhadra and stayed to celebrate Diwali and the New Year’s *annakut*. Devotees from neighboring villages such as Shekhpather gathered to celebrate the New Year with Shri Hari. The highlight of the festival was Shri Hari’s insistence to bathe daily with sadhus and devotees in the Und River. These memories and *lila charitras* would change the lives of many devotees in the years to come.

Eighteen Plus One

On the last day of the five-day Diwali festival, sisters show their brothers appreciation by inviting them for a meal on Bhai Bij, or the Brother’s Second Day of the Month, and in return, brothers renew their promise to protect their sisters.

On Bhai Bij, Shri Hari asked for paper and a quill. He wrote:

“*Shri Shri Shri...* To: Oh Great Jewels of Satsang: Mulubhai of Bandhiya; Macha Khachar of Kariyani; Alaiya Khachar of Jhinjhavadar; Sura Khachar of Loya; Somla Khachar of Botad; Hathiya Patgar, Mamaiya Patgar, and Amra Patgar of Kundal; Matra Dhadhal of Sarangpur; Naja Jogiya of Lakhanka; Aja Patel, Kala Patel, Vira Patel, Verabhai, Jivrajbhai, and Kamalshibhai of

Methan; Dosabhai and Ladha Sheth of Bandhiya; and others:

Please accept the Narayan of Sahajanand Swami from Bhadra. I am writing this letter to ask all of you to renounce your families and livelihoods. Proceed to Jetalpur. There, Bhai Ramdas Swami will initiate you into the sadhu-fold. Proceed on a pilgrimage to Kashi-Varanasi and then return for my darshan in Kutch. Remember, leave whatever it is that you are doing once you read this letter. If you are at your farms, do not go to the village. If you are in the village, do not go to your homes. Follow my *agna* and proceed immediately to Jetalpur.”

Shri Hari sent a messenger from village to village with this letter. The messenger would wait for the recipient to read the letter and would then proceed to the next village. The devotees listed in the letter left their businesses unlocked and their farms untilled. Their aim was to follow Shri Hari’s *agna*: to proceed to Jetalpur.

Macha Khachar was sitting in his court tending to administrative affairs when he received the letter. He read it and immediately stood up to leave. His mother asked, “Macha, where are you going?”

Macha explained the content of Shri Hari’s letter. His mother replied, “You can go wherever you want as long as you take care of the fifty acres of *kapas*, or unginned cotton, that is ready for harvest.”

Macha Khachar thought for a moment. How was he to follow Shri Hari’s *agna* and please his mother? His mother asked again, “What of the crop, Macha?”

Macha replied, “Mother, I have taken care of the matter.” He immediately sent a servant to tell the village’s cowherders to graze their cattle in his lush fields. That would make good use of the crop and not further delay his departure.

The messenger then reached Methan. The entire village was decorated with flowers and streamers as one of the village’s wealthier traders was celebrating a wedding in the family. The messenger asked around town and made his way to Ajabhai Patel’s residence. Ajabhai was occupied with wedding festivities. He was hosting his nephew’s wedding. Ajabhai read Shri Hari’s letter and immediately announced his departure. The groom, Kalyandas Patel, asked to see the letter. Expecting resistance from

Kalyandas, Ajabhai started to explain the importance of Shri Hari's *agnā* and that it would not be wise to interfere. Kalyandas silently read the letter and proclaimed, "Uncle, I must come too. Shri Hari has ordered me to leave my home as well."

Ajabhai was surprised by Kalyandas' response. He snatched the letter from his nephew's hands and carefully read it again. There were only eighteen names, and his nephew's was not among them. He asked, "Where do you see your name?"

Kalyandas replied, "Uncle, do you not see the end of the salutation? It says 'and others.' Am I not that 'other'?"

Ajabhai was speechless. Ajabhai insisted that Kalyandas seek approval from his mother, his in-laws, and his wife. Kalyandas spoke to his mother and in-laws in a confident yet polite tone. "This is the opportunity of a lifetime. Shri Hari has given me the *agnā* to renounce the world and serve him. Please do not hold me back."

His mother placed her hand on Kalyandas' head. His in-laws took a pinch of vermillion in their fingers and applied a *tilak* on Kalyandas' forehead. His wife gave her permission by bowing her head in reverence to Kalyandas' selfless sacrifice.

As the wedding drums beat to the rhythm of sacrifice and flutes hummed the tune of detachment, both uncle and nephew left for Jetalpur together.

Kushal Bhatt Initiated as Gopalanand Swami

Kushal Bhatt was a learned *brahmin*, one with the discerning qualities of bhakti, *jnan*, and *vairagya*. He was born to Kushala Devi and Motiram Bhatt in Torda, Gujarat. Kushaldas' Krishna-bhakti was remarkable, even during his childhood. It is said that the *murti* from the famous Shyamaji mandir would join Kushaldas to play sports and games every evening. One morning when the pujari opened the doors to the mandir's inner shrine, the *murti* was missing. The pujari assembled the village leaders and caused a commotion on account of the missing *murti*. When everyone returned to inspect the shrine, the *murti* of Shyamaji had returned. The entire village was perplexed by the sudden disappearance and return of Bhagwan's *murti*. Later that afternoon, Motiram came from Torda to

return one of Shyamlaji's gold anklets. Shyamlaji must have left it in Torda while playing with Kushaldas! The pujari called Kushaldas to the mandir and bowed at his feet, for those who win over the love of Bhagwan with their bhakti are worthy of great honor.

Kushaldas eventually settled in the village of Idar, located about thirty kilometers from Himatnagar. One afternoon, a messenger came into town with a letter from Gadhada. Shri Hari had just returned to Gadhada from Bhadra and planned to stay there for one week. Kushaldas read the letter informing him that Shri Hari was going to initiate him into the sadhu-fold. He departed for Gadhada with lightning speed. On Monday, 23 November 1807, Shri Hari initiated Kushaldas as Gopalanand Swami. Gopalanand Swami rose among the ranks of the senior sadhus. Shri Hari valued Gopalanand Swami's opinion. It is said that Gopalanand Swami was the first person within the Swaminarayan Sampradaya to write a commentary on the Shrimad Bhagavad Gita. He was also later entrusted with the responsibility of looking after both the Vartal and Ahmedabad *gadis*.

After initiating Gopalanand Swami into the sadhu-fold, Shri Hari departed for Kutch. He was expecting nineteen sadhus from Jetalpur.

Shri Hari Meets the Nineteen Sadhus

Shri Hari rushed to Kutch and stayed at Sundarji's bungalow. He summoned Muktanand Swami, Brahmanand Swami, Nityanand Swami, and nearly all of the touring *mandals* of sadhus. Bhai Ramdas Swami brought the nineteen newly-initiated sadhus to Kutch. Upon receiving Shri Hari's *agnya*, Bhai Ramdas Swami instructed the newly-initiated sadhus to follow him to Kutch and to delay their pilgrimage to Varanasi.

Shri Hari was seated in a satsang assembly when he received word that Bhai Ramdas Swami had entered the city. He stood up and asked for his horse. He saddled the horse and instructed all of the sadhus and devotees to join him in greeting the newly-initiated sadhus. Their sacrifice and detachment was exemplary. An entire procession filled the streets of Bhuj. The sadhus danced to the rhythm of a *jhanjh*, *pakhawaj*, and Brahmanand Swami's thundering voice. Rooftops and windows filled up quickly with curious spectators attracted to this bhakti-filled environment.

Shri Hari waited for the sadhus on the city's main street. As soon as Bhai Ramdas Swami and the sadhus were within sight, Shri Hari started doing *dandavats*. Bhai Ramdas Swami rushed to stop him. Shri Hari embraced Bhai Ramdas Swami and each of the nineteen sadhus.

When Kalyandas approached Shri Hari, Bhai Ramdas Swami narrated the young groom's story. Shri Hari uttered words of exclamation, "Adhbhut, adhbhut, adhbhut..."¹³ and fittingly named him Adhbhutanand Swami. Shri Hari spoke to the sadhus with love and admiration in his tone. "You have followed my *agna* without a second's delay. This is no small achievement. Your names will forever be praised."

Shri Hari selected Bhuj for his first meeting with the newly-initiated sadhus for a specific reason. A few years prior, Shri Hari had asked Sundarji to immediately leave his householder life to be initiated as a sadhu. Sundarji shaved his head and moustache and adorned the orange garbs of the sadhu-fold. Muktanand Swami convinced Shri Hari to allow Sundarji to resume his duties as a member of high society in Kutch. Sundarji put on the clothes of a householder and bowed to Shri Hari. However, when Sundarji was leaving, he mistakenly allowed his ego to flare. Prior to his departure, he said, "Shri Hari, I passed this test, but do not set yourself up to fail. No one else is willing to do as I did." Shri Hari acknowledged the remark with a silent nod.

Today, however, Shri Hari finally responded to Sundarji's retort with nineteen different examples. Sundarji prostrated at Shri Hari's feet and begged for forgiveness. "Shri Hari, please pardon my arrogance. There are thousands of devotees willing to give their lives at your word. Please give me the strength to understand their *mahima*."

Shri Hari blessed Sundarji and then began preparing for his journey through the villages of Kutch.

Defeating the Shakta Brahmins and Khaiyaram

Shri Hari's compassion was both endless and universal. He could not bear to watch the killing of an insect; how could he silently watch the slaughter of sheep and goats? While traveling through Kutch, Shri

¹³ The English translation of this phrase is "Astounding, astounding, astounding" or "Wonderous, wonderous, wonderous."

Hari heard of a grand *yagna* being organized by the Rao of Kutch. The Rao's ministers were all Shakta *brahmins*.¹⁴ They encouraged the ruler to sacrifice innocent animals in order to please Goddess Shakti. Shri Hari arrived on the day of the *yagna* and called out to the *brahmins* ready to slaughter the animals, "Stop, cruel *brahmins*. *Brahmins* are supposed to protect the innocent through their knowledge and wisdom. Here you are killing these innocent animals for the pleasure of your personal desires. You are misinterpreting the verses from the Vedas for your personal gain and wishes.¹⁵ Do not commit a sin that Bhagwan will never pardon."

The commotion attracted the Rao's attention. To avoid conflict, he immediately ordered the release of all the animals. The *yagna* was postponed indefinitely.

Jagjivan, the Rao's Chief Minister, held his tongue for the moment. He would, however, devise a plot to redress the feeling of embarrassment caused by having to cancel the *yagna*. Shri Hari also knew that Jagjivan would only temporarily remain silent.

The Advaita *brahmins* also mislead society by misconstruing Adi Shankaracharya's Advaita doctrine. These Vedantins, a name given to one who studies the end section of the Vedas or the Upanishads, negated the idea of bhakti to Parabrahma, a principle that Shankaracharya had propagated through his *kavyas* and Sanskrit *stotras*. Shri Hari spoke out against their false, atheistic views and propounded the belief in bhakti, *seva*, and one supreme, *sakar* Bhagwan.

Shri Hari arrived in the port city of Mandvi. Mandvi was a strong-hold of the Vedantins. Their guru, Khaiyaram, heard of Shri Hari's arrival. He immediately sent his disciples to challenge Shri Hari to a public debate. Shri Hari gladly accepted. He called Brahmanand Swami to his room in the village guesthouse and explained his strategy. Brahmanand Swami was to pose as Shri Hari during the debate. Brahmanand Swami was

¹⁴ Followers of the Shakti *panth* or sect were known as Shaktas. Shaktas worship a form of the devi Shakti. Overtime, the consumption of meat and alcohol and illicit behavior was sanctioned by leaders within the religious community.

¹⁵ Shri Hari was referring to a verse from the Vedas which states that one should sacrifice *aja* to complete the *yagna*. Though *aja* can also mean 'goat' in Sanskrit, Shri Hari clarified that *aja* was to be interpreted as a type of grain similar to sesame seeds. In this way, Shri Hari was able to correct the Shakta *brahmins'* misinterpretation of the shastra.

initially reluctant to take Shri Hari's place on the *asana*, but eventually accepted Shri Hari's *agna*.

That evening a grand procession passed through the streets of Mandvi. Shri Hari walked on foot with the sadhus and devotees. Brahmanand Swami had doned Shri Hari's silk clothing and rode atop the horse. The people of Mandvi, too, assumed that Brahmanand Swami was Shri Hari.

In the assembly hall, Brahmanand Swami sat on the platform across from Khaiyaram. Khaiyaram and his forty disciples gathered around Brahmanand Swami. Brahmanand Swami was unperturbed. He confidently called out to Khaiyaram, "Listen, oh wise Khaiyaram! Would you like to ask or answer first? Remember, the format of the debate will be as such: whoever asks the first question will have to ask one hundred questions at once. The responder must reply to all the questions at once and in the same order. Thereafter, the responder will have his turn to ask the questions."

Khaiyaram had already publicly proclaimed that he would accept Swaminarayan's discipleship if he lost the debate. Now, his confidence was waning. How would he remember all one hundred questions? Hesitantly, he started asking questions one after another. Once he finished, Brahmanand Swami laughed and said, "These questions are an insult to my intelligence. One of my younger disciples is capable of answering them." He then pointed to Shri Hari.

Shri Hari turned to face Khaiyaram. It was then that Khaiyaram caught a surge of divinity from Shri Hari's eyes. Khaiyaram remained silent. He could not afford to lose in front of his disciples and the entire city. Shri Hari answered Khaiyaram's questions swiftly. Khaiyaram could not keep pace and complained, "Oh Child, slow down. Let me make sense of your answers."

Shri Hari replied, "Keep up, oh Wise One. I have yet to ask my questions."

Khaiyaram started to wonder about the guru's abilities if the disciple was this capable. His thoughts were interrupted by his mother's voice from the back of the assembly. "Khaiya, the boy replying to your questions is the real form of Bhagwan. The one seated across from you on the platform is a fraud!"

Shri Hari chuckled and looked at Brahmanand Swami. Their strategy had been uncovered. Khaiyaram stood up and prostrated at Shri Hari's feet. Shri Hari sent him into *samadhi*. Khaiyaram had darshan of Akshardham. He noticed that all the devas and *ishvars* were praying to Shri Hari in Akshardham. When he awoke from *samadhi*, he asked Shri Hari to accept him as a disciple. Shri Hari placed his hand on his shoulder and educated him on the true path of bhakti and *jnan*. Khaiyaram listened attentively. Khaiyaram's disciples tried to stop him, but Khaiyaram instructed, "If you desire *moksha*, Swaminarayan is the manifestation of Parabrahma on Earth. Accept his refuge." Upon hearing this, the disciples also prostrated at Shri Hari's feet.

Although, Shri Hari came to Mandvi without accommodations and without means to feed the sadhus and devotees traveling with him, he stayed for forty days—one day at each of the homes of Khaiyaram's forty disciples.

Overcoming Gluttony

Shri Hari was now traveling in Kutch with all of his disciples. After a few days, Shri Hari reached the village of Tera. Shri Hari asked the sadhus to huddle around him as he explained a new *niyam* they were to follow. Shri Hari instructed the sadhus to ask for alms in the village, dip the donated food in water, and then combine the soaking food items into a ball. The sadhus were to then break off a piece and place it near a stray dog. If the dog did not sniff or eat the piece, then the food was worthy of being eaten by the sadhus. The idea was to eat food that even a stray dog would consider tasteless or lacking aroma.

Leading by example, Shri Hari begged for alms, soaked the food in water, and placed a piece near a dog. When the dog retreated from the ball of food, Shri Hari enjoyed the unscented and tasteless food item for lunch. The sadhus were left speechless. If Bhagwan himself could eat such food, who were they to complain? They immediately followed in Shri Hari's footsteps.

This was one of the 114 rotating *niyams* prescribed by Shri Hari. Shri Hari would end one *niyam*, or *prakran* as they were later termed, and replace it with another. These were not simple *niyams* that could

be followed by anyone. They required an elevated spiritual conviction in Shri Hari's *agna*. Examples of these *prakrans* included: to stay where one was embarrassed, insulted, and beaten; to sleep or rest in an open field outside of a village regardless of the climate; to sleep without the shade of a tree, wall, or straw hut; to become one with Bhagwan in meditation and lose all recognition of one's physical body, even if a serpent or scorpion were to bite one's body repeatedly; to only accept alms from a householder who would listen to one's talks about Bhagwan's *mahima*; and to avoid begging alms from a home that was known to give generously.

Shri Hari ordered all of the senior sadhus to travel in different parts of Gujarat with a group of fifty or more sadhus: He sent Atmanand Swami to Surat, Muktanand Swami to Ahmedabad, Swarupanand Swami to Jamnagar, Nityanand Swami to Saurashtra, and Brahmanand Swami to central Gujarat. Mulji Brahmachari and the nineteen newly-initiated sadhus remained with Shri Hari so that each could receive *prasad*, personal *seva*, individual *katha* and direct guidance from him.

One afternoon, Shri Hari ordered the nineteen newly-initiated sadhus to return to their homes. "All of you have passed the test of faith and conviction. Such opportunities present themselves once in a lifetime. You have shown that you are willing to sacrifice all that you own to follow my *agna* and to secure your *moksha*. I will always remember your sacrifice. Now, it is my *agna* that you return to your homes and resume your lives as householders."

Macha Khachar felt as if a bolt of lightening had struck him. He begged Shri Hari to reconsider. Shri Hari was resolute in his decision. "I assure you that none of you will be bound by your actions as a householder. You will become models for *bhaktas* within our community. Do not consider this to be a punishment. I am ordering this only for the benefit of our satsang community."

Shri Hari then placed his hand on young Adhbhutanand Swami—nineteenth of the newly-initiated sadhu, or the 'other' referred to in Shri Hari's letter—and ordered him to stay. Ajabhai, Adhbhutanand Swami's maternal uncle who was also summoned in Shri Hari's letter as one of the nineteen sadhus, asked Shri Hari to let him spend the rest of his

life as a renunciate. Shri Hari agreed to the elderly devotee's request. Seventeen of the nineteen householders returned home as per Shri Hari's *agna*. Both uncle and nephew faithfully served Shri Hari for the rest of their lives.

Sarangpur and Kundal

Shri Hari spent the monsoon of 1809 in Sarangpur and Kundal. In Sarangpur, Shri Hari organized an eight-day feast to feed the *brahmins* from the region. Hundreds of *brahmins* attended with their families. Shri Hari instructed Sura Khachar to care for all of them and to offer them *dakshina* at the end of the feast. The *brahmins* left singing the praises of Shri Hari, the Protector of *Brahmins*, an epithet given to Bhagwan in the Upanishads and Puranas.

In Kundal, three members of the Patgar family recently returned with the seventeen householder-sadhus from Kutch. Shri Hari graced their home and sang their praises in front of the entire satsang community. Shri Hari gave a tremendous amount of *smruti* to their mother, Raibai. Raibai often entered into *samadhi* and had Shri Hari's darshan. Shri Hari extolled her bhakti and *seva* to the female devotees.

During the monsoon, Shri Hari prescribed the *khatras prakran* to the sadhus. For this *prakran*, the sadhus ate food without any of the six types of taste: sweet, salty, sour, bitter, pungent, and astringent. Raibai would prepare scrumptious meals for Shri Hari everyday but would not partake in any of the leftovers. In fact, the entire family followed the *khatras niyam*. When Shri Hari asked them to stop, they replied, "Shri Hari, how is it fair if these innocent sadhus of yours are starving themselves in our homes while we feast on such delicious food items? We simply cannot do this."

Shri Hari smiled and praised their love and *mahima* for the sadhus. He called the sadhus and changed their *prakran*. "Starting today, you shall eat all the food that is given to you in alms or *seva*. Mix it in a wooden bowl with a few drops of water. Enjoy the food while meditating on my divine *murti*."

Shri Hari bowed to the *bhaktas'* genuine love and *mahima* for the sadhus.

Swarupanand Swami in Jamnagar

Swarupanand Swami left Kutch with a large group of sadhus. Jamnagar was a difficult place to travel with sadhus. Previous experiences suggested that the alms were meager and the people's attitude hostile. Yet, Swarupanand Swami arrived in Jamnagar with a firm resolve in mind: come what may, he would follow Shri Hari's *agna*.

As the days passed, however, the other sadhus' morale started to decline. The townspeople offered paltry alms, and when they did, some gave old *rotla*. Others would throw dead mice, onion, garlic, and cow dung into the sadhus' begging bowls. These inedible items would spoil the alms suitable for eating. The sadhus went hungry for many days. One evening, a few of the younger sadhus, unable to contain their hunger, ate some rotten weeds and green bulbs. Swarupanand Swami heard of the sadhu's mistake and lovingly reminded them, "Sadhuram, it is not Shri Hari's *agna* to eat roots and weeds. We must strive to follow his *agna*."

A few more days passed, but this time the sadhus could not endure the hunger burning through their stomachs, unsatiated after days of constant fasting. They went to the bed of a dried lake, found thin flakes of dry mud and placed it in their mouths. Swarupanand Swami's eyes teared up at the sight of this heartbreaking scene. He immediately wrote to Shri Hari pleading for the next course of action.

Shri Hari replied with a letter of strength and motivation:

"Dear Paramhansas,

Once, a disciple came to study with a guru. The guru agreed to take him under his wings but explained that there was hardly anything to eat. The guru only ate once a day. There were rarely leftovers. The disciple said, 'I will survive by eating the husk of the grains used to prepare your meals.' A second disciple came and expressed his desire to study with the guru. He said, 'Do not worry about my meals. I will survive by drinking the water with which the grains are washed.' A third pledged to survive by drinking the water with which the guru washed his hands after meals. And, a fourth pledged to survive by consuming air. You are lucky that you are able to get rotten roots and dried mud flakes. It has not come down to just air, has it?"

Shri Hari's letter brought about a renewed sense of vigor to the sadhus' spirits. Not once did they question why Shri Hari was so firm. Their aim was to please Shri Hari in spite of any obstacles encountered by them.

A few days later, the ruler of Jamnagar was riding through his city on a horse-drawn buggy. He noticed that several of the sadhus could barely stand. Their bodies were emaciated and colorless. He immediately instructed his minister to arrange for their alms at his palace. At the ruler's invitation, Swarupanand Swami took his sadhus to beg for alms at the palace. Since word of the *khatras prakran* change had yet to reach Jamnagar, the sadhus gathered the scrumptious sweets, dipped them in water, and ate them according to Shri Hari's *agna*. Though the food was tasteless, the sadhus filled their stomachs.

Swarupanand Swami called the sadhus later that night and instructed, "It is time we move on. Shri Hari has instructed us to avoid staying in a place where alms are plentiful. Pack your *jholis*!"

When the sadhus did not come to the palace on the following day, the ruler inquired about their whereabouts. When the ruler learned why they had left, his eyes brimmed with tears.

Mulji Sharma and the Mahant of the Pirana Panth

As Mulji Sharma was tilling his fields one afternoon, Shri Hari appeared in front of him. Mulji was elated. He prostrated at Shri Hari's feet and started to do *dandavats* in the mud fields. Shri Hari stopped Mulji and embraced him. Shri Hari insightfully asked, "Mulji, why are you still tilling these lands? There are vast, spiritual fields that need to be tended to and sowed. Leave home at once and meet me in Gadhada." Shri Hari's analogy of the vast fields that had yet to be tilled referred to the satsang community in need of Mulji's guidance and spiritual nourishment. Mulji left his fields and made his way directly to Gadhada.

Shri Hari welcomed Mulji with open arms and asked about his family. Mulji immediately replied, "Bhagwan, you are well aware of my detachment from my worldly family. I only care to serve you as I do in Akshardham."

Shri Hari smiled and instructed Mulji to travel with him. Since Mulji

was a *brahmin*, he prepared meals and served the sadhus and devotees. All of the sadhus and *bhaktas* were pleased with this young sadhu's *seva*.

Shri Hari left Gadhada and traveled to a village near Ahmedabad called Ronya. Ronya was the seat of the Pirani sect, an Ismaili Sufi subgroup founded by Imam Shah. Shri Hari walked into the ashram and immediately sat on the founder's seat. The sadhus and devotees were astonished, but the Pir of the ashram recalled Imam Shah's words. The founder of the sect had foreshadowed the arrival of Bhagwan, revealing "Whoever walks into the ashram and sits on my seat will be the manifestation of the Supreme Being. Know him to be Bhagwan."

Since the day of that prophecy, a ghee-lit candle continuously burned on the founder's seat. Shri Hari pushed the candle aside and casually sat on the seat. The Pir asked Shri Hari to initiate him as a sadhu. Recognizing the Pir's unflinching faith and bhakti, Shri Hari agreed. He gave him a saffron robe and initiated the Pir as a *paramhansa*.

The followers of the sect came running to Shri Hari and expressed their dilemma. "Bhagwan, if you take our Pir, who will look after us? How will this sect survive? Please have mercy on us. Leave the Pir with us to guide us on the path to attaining *Nurani Didar*."¹⁶

Shri Hari sympathized with the devotees. He instructed the Pir to give back the saffron robes and to stay in Ronya. Shri Hari then directed the Pir to chant the Swaminarayan mantra and to instruct others to do the same. He would grant the Pir *moksha* when he breathed his last.

Muktanand Swami's Travels in Ahmedabad

Shri Hari spent December in Gadhada. Muktanand Swami journeyed from Ahmedabad to Gadhada for Shri Hari's darshan. Shri Hari had not seen Muktanand Swami in months. Upon Muktanand Swami's arrival, Shri Hari stood up and ran to embrace him. After the nearly fifty sadhus settled into Gadhada, Shri Hari asked Muktanand Swami to share his experiences from his travels in the Ahmedabad-Shrinagar area.

Muktanand Swami folded his hands and began speaking. "Bhagwan, we reached Ahmedabad after taking your leave in Kutch. The city was too

¹⁶ This phrase can be translated as 'vision of light' or 'enlightenment,' a central belief of Piranis and other sects within the Sufi tradition.

crowded to inhabit. We would not have been able to follow your *agna*. Therefore, we settled under a tree on the banks of the River Sabarmati near a graveyard. The townspeople warned us not to spend the night there because ghost-like spirits troubled passers-by and inhabitants in the middle of the night. Sometimes the spirits even killed people. We were not afraid of death. It was more important for us to follow your *agna*. Night fell soon thereafter, and the howling of the jackals added to the fear which churned in some of our stomachs. We sat deep in meditation with your *murti* governing our minds. A few hours later, a large spirit appeared. It raised the winds and produced many sounds. I opened my eyes and glanced in its direction. It started to cry and prostrated at my feet. The spirit shared its tale of devastation. I pitied its plight. I chanted the Swaminarayan mantra and sprinkled water on the spirit and its cohorts. In minutes, the sound of the Swaminarayan mantra transformed the spirit and its cohorts into heavenly creatures. They bowed to the sadhus and departed for Badrikashram. The next morning when the townspeople saw that we were alive and unharmed, they bowed to us. They also offered to give us alms."

Muktanand Swami continued speaking of another incident. "Another experience that increased our reputation and facilitated the spread of your *mahima* in Ahmedabad also involved a miracle. One afternoon, after eating our water-drenched balls of alms, we sat down to meditate on your *murti*. It just so happened that a snake slithered over our bodies while we were in meditation. A group of merchants noticed that we had not flinched. They immediately bowed to us and invited us into town for discourses and alms. We stayed for one additional day. I then instructed the sadhus to pack their *jholis*. We could not live there any longer because we were being honored and appreciated; and, this was against your wishes."

Shri Hari reached over to touch Muktanand Swami's feet upon hearing this tale of humility. Muktanand Swami, however, stood up and prostrated to Shri Hari.

Mulji Sharma of Bhadra was sitting next to Shri Hari listening to Muktanand Swami's story. He too shared an experience of one of Shri Hari's *paramhansas*. "Bhagwan, one winter morning, I heard loud banging

on my door. I opened the door and saw a frenzied villager. He was on his way to the fields when he saw one of our *paramhansas* lying in the frost, face down. He was unconscious. The villager immediately summoned me. My younger brother, Sundarji, and I ran to the fields and tried to wake up the sadhu. We carried him to my house and lit a fire. We wrapped him in warm blankets and sprinkled cold water on his face. We soaked his legs in buckets of warm water. The sadhu regained consciousness after a few hours. He looked around and realized that he was inside the city limits. He immediately got up to leave, but I forced him to stay and eat something. He dipped the food in water and had enough to satisfy his hunger. As soon as he finished, he ran back into the fields again! I was lost for words. The villagers applauded the sadhu's willingness to follow your *niyams*, though it may have cost him his life."

Shri Hari's eyes welled up with tears.

Muktanand Swami picked up where Mulji left off. "One day in Ahmedabad, someone had thrown a small fish in the alms *jholi*. Unaware of this, the sadhus drenched the alms, made small balls, and ate the food. Since the water had washed away the taste and scent, we did not notice that there was fish present in the alms. We only realized it when the sadhus' bodies broke out with skin rashes a few days later."

Mukundanand Brahmachari, one of Shri Hari's personal attendants, interjected. "Swamiji, do you remember in what month that unfortunate event took place?"

Muktanand Swami replied, "It occurred last January or February."

Mukundanand Brahmachari replied, "Swamiji, Shri Hari was suffering from blisters in his mouth during that same time!"

The sadhus realized that Shri Hari was one with their bodies, minds, and souls. He suffered alongside his sadhus and devotees. Shri Hari's spiritual union with his sadhus and devotees brought tears to the *bhaktas* seated in the satsang *sabha*.

The Great Yagna in Jetalpur

On 23 December 1809, Shri Hari arrived in Jetalpur with the plan to organize a Maha Vishnu Yagna, one that would forever remain etched in the annals of Gujarat's history. Shri Hari called upon the leading devotees

and expressed his desire to host the *yagna* in Jetalpur. The devotees were ecstatic about the opportunity to serve Shri Hari.

The planning began immediately. The key ingredient for the *yagna*'s success was pure ghee. Ghee was needed to feed *ladus* to the *brahmins* and to offer into the sacred fire. The devotees suggested using 20 kilograms of ghee, but Shri Hari pushed the number up to 1,200 kilograms. The ghee would be ordered from Ahmedabad. The second most important raw material was wheat. In those days, wheat was freshly-ground based on demand. Shri Hari called Bhai Ramdas Swami and asked him to acquire the wheat flour. He folded his hands and said, "Prabhu, I will do my best. However, even if I continuously run all the bullock-run grinders, it would still take us four days to grind all the wheat flour we need."

Shri Hari thought for a moment and then replied, "I have an idea. I will fill our bullock-carts with wheat and go from home to home in the village tomorrow. The villagers will help us grind the flour. I will give them Akshardham in return for their service."

Shri Hari mounted the bullock cart and traveled through the streets of Jetalpur. The village women gathered and asked for the opportunity to partake in the preparations of this great sacrifice. Some women took twenty kilograms, others forty kilograms, and a few even took sixty kilograms.

A courtesan named Lakshmibai heard that Bhagwan Swaminarayan was organizing a grand *yagna* and was asking the villagers for their help. She rushed to Shri Hari and asked for an opportunity to participate in the *yagna*'s preparations. The villagers whispered under their breath, and some even turned their faces away. Shri Hari's love was universal, and he did not discriminate between *bhaktas*. He asked Lakshmibai, "Sister, will you grind the wheat with your own hands? If so, take as much as you please."

Lakshmibai was overjoyed. "Yes, Bhagwan, I will grind it with my own hands. I will stay up all night and return the flour to you tomorrow."

Shri Hari turned to the devotees and instructed them to give Lakshmibai forty kilograms of wheat grain. Lakshmibai hauled the sack on her back and carried the grain home.

Lakshmibai maintained an affluent lifestyle. She had a palace-like bungalow and several servants. She was not accustomed to doing

household chores with her own hands. When she walked into the bungalow, the servants ran and tried to take the sack from her shoulders. Lakshmibai resisted. She carried the sack to the hand grinder. She sat down and used the mortar and pestle for the first time in her life. It took her some time to familiarize herself with it, but she worked tirelessly through the night. By morning, her hands were covered with blisters.

Lakshmibai carried the sack of flour back to Shri Hari. Shri Hari was seated in a satsang assembly discussing the plans for the *yagna*. He noticed Lakshmibai entering the assembly and greeted her with a smile. She offered the ground wheat at Shri Hari's feet. The assembly again started to softly whisper their doubts about Lakshmibai's *seva*. Shri Hari asked the courtesan, "Sister, did you grind all of the flour with your own hands?"

Lakshmibai nodded and showed her blister-covered hands to Shri Hari. Shri Hari's eyes welled up with tears. He said, "Go, sister. I will liberate you in the same manner that I will liberate Muktanand Swami."

Lakshmibai asked, "Bhagwan, have all my sins been burned?"

Shri Hari replied with confidence, "They have been burnt to ashes."

Lakshmibai felt a sudden change in her heart. She gave up her profession and devoted her life to bhakti and *seva*. Shri Hari transformed Lakshmibai's life.

Shri Hari ordered the *kshatriya* devotees of Dandhavya to mount their horses and guard the sacrificial grounds and the festival's cooking and foodstock sites. Shri Hari was expecting interference and mischief from opposing *brahmins* and ascetics.

Similarly, Shri Hari expected price gouging by the *baniyas* in Ahmedabad. Shri Hari gave darshan to several leading devotees in Ahmedabad and instructed them to purchase all of the raw materials from different vendors at the same time. By the time the vendors realized that such large quantities were being purchased for a festival in the neighboring village, all of the purchasing had been completed and the items were already on the way to Jetalpur by bullock-cart.

In just two short days, the preparations for a grand *yagna* that would feed hundreds of thousands of individuals were completed. This event set a precedent for *ahimsak yagnas* in nineteenth-century Gujarat.

The festival began on 25 December 1809 and continued for eighteen

days until 11 January 1810. Shri Hari called the sadhus traveling all over Gujarat, Saurashtra, and Sorath. Swarupanand Swami's *mandal* arrived from Jamnagar. Shri Hari praised Swarupanand Swami for his firm conviction and leadership and embraced him. Some of the sadhus in the *mandal* had gone blind due to the malnourishment and hardships they endured. Shri Hari ordered the devotees to prepare a nutritious meal with sweets, vegetables, rice, and *rotlis*. Shri Hari personally fed each sadhu with love. He discontinued all of the *prakrants* for the sadhus from that day onwards. The devotees were pleased to hear this news as they could now feed the sadhus to their heart's content.

The *yagna* began with great pomp and enthusiasm. The devotees served selflessly, and the sadhus supervised the cooking and the rituals being performed by the *brahmins*.

However, problems did arise. Some of the food preparation and rituals were being performed by Shakta *brahmins*. A few of them were resentful of Shri Hari's successful organization of this sacrifice, especially after the debacle made of their *yagna* in Kutch, and decided to impede the *yagna*'s progress. The *brahmins* performing the *yagna* rituals poured gallons of ghee into the sacrificial altar. The *brahmins* in the kitchen stole hundreds of kilograms of ghee and distributed it to their relatives. They even managed to throw several thousand *ladus* into the river.

Food was running out, and the ingredients were nearly exhausted. On the morning of the fifth day, Anandanand Swami frantically rushed to Shri Hari's residence. He prostrated at Shri Hari's feet and expressed his concerns. "Prabhu, there is not a single drop of ghee left. The food is yet to be prepared. The rituals must go on. How are we to manage? I have ordered more ghee from Ahmedabad, but the Peshawar ruler's Suba is envious of your accomplishments. He has ordered that the carts be barricaded within the city walls. What are we to do? All of our hard work will be discredited if we fail to keep the *yagna* going. Please do something, Bhagwan."

Anandanand Swami's prayers moved Shri Hari. He stood up and grabbed his silver staff. He walked to the storage area and tapped the clay pots with his staff. Initially, the pots resonated with a hollow echo indicating that they were empty. After a few seconds, however, the pots made a deep, reverberating sound as Shri Hari's staff hit the pots. Shri

Hari looked at Anandanand Swami and said, “Swamiji, are you sure that these pots are empty? They sound full.”

Anandanand Swami immediately understood that Shri Hari had answered his prayers. Shri Hari directed the sadhus and *brahmins* to cover the pots with a red cloth and to only remove the cloth to take ghee from the pots. He also advised them to never look inside the pots. Shri Hari lit a small *divo* by the side of the pots and instructed Anandanand Swami to keep the *divo* lit until the end of the *yagna*. Walking away from the storage area, Shri Hari said, “Anandanand Swami, you can feed all of the souls in the universe with this ghee and still have ghee leftover.”

More *brahmin* devotees were summoned to supervise the use of the ghee and wheat flour. The Shakta *brahmins* used the ghee to their hearts' desire, but they could not deplete the supply of ghee. They were losing hope in their plan to discredit Shri Hari's efforts.

Brahmins from around the region attended the festivities. On one occasion, the sadhus recorded 100,000 *brahmins* being fed at once! More than five thousand *brahmins* were serving the food. Female devotees of Dandhavya were constantly grinding wheat grain on four bullock-drawn grinders.

News of this event quickly spread beyond Jetalpur. *Brahmins* were heard saying that Shri Hari was converting water into ghee. Those that attended the feast also told their relatives and neighbors that Shri Hari was serving as much ghee as one could eat. In fact, he even allowed some *brahmins* to drink ghee to their stomach's content. Shri Hari's *mahima* spread across the region. *Brahmins* left bellowing the calls of ‘Jay Swaminarayan.’

On the eighteenth day, the *yagna* and the feast ended with great fanfare. Many historians have cited this *yagna* as the largest *ahimsak yagna* in the history of Gujarat.

That evening, Shri Hari organized a special *sabha* for the sadhus. He praised each of the senior sadhus. He announced, “All of you have given your lives for my sake. You have suffered physical harassment and torture. Even I have tested you severely. Yet, you have maintained *divyabhav* in my actions and stood firmly by my side. Today, I would like to honor your sacrifice and *bhakti*.”

Shri Hari smeared sandalwood paste on the bodies of the senior sadhus. They hesitated, and some even stood up to leave. However, Shri Hari held them with his *agna*. After smearing their bodies with sandalwood paste, Shri Hari adorned them with beautiful headdresses made of scented flowers and with garlands of rose and jasmine. The sadhus closed their eyes and accepted Shri Hari's appreciation as a form of *prasad*.

Shri Hari later called the devotees and thanked each of them for their *seva* and *bhakti* in organizing and hosting the *yagna*. He spoke that night in the sabha about ahimsa, determination, and unflinching faith.

Jivan Bhakta's Half-cooked Rotlo

Shri Hari stayed in Jetalpur for several days after the *yagna*. During this time, he would sit with a group of his devotees near the palace on top of the hill. Jivan Bhakta was a poor laborer who lived in Jetalpur. Shri Hari noticed that Jivan Bhakta would attend the *sabha* every morning with an earthen plate in hand. The plate was covered with a tattered cloth. Jivan Bhakta would stand by a pillar in the front of the satsang *sabha* for a few minutes before the *sabha* started and then would retire to a corner in the back. At the end of the *sabha*, he would again come to the front for a few moments before silently returning home. Shri Hari noticed this for four consecutive days. On the fifth day, Shri Hari called out to Jivan Bhakta and asked, "Jivanji, what do you have in that plate? I am hungry. Bring me some of that delicious food."

Jivan Bhakta's heart began to beat rapidly. How could he offer Shri Hari his half-cooked *rotlo* made of *math*? Ashamed of his offering, Jivan Bhakta hesitated to walk to the front of the assembly. Shri Hari repeatedly called out to Jivan Bhakta and left him no choice but to approach the front of the assembly. Shri Hari removed the torn cloth from the plate and started to eat the *math rotlo* in front of the assembly. He praised the taste of the *rotlo* with each bite. Shri Hari's personal attendants were worried that the lowly grain would hurt Shri Hari's stomach. They rushed to Shri Hari and asked for a piece of the *rotlo* as *prasad*. Shri Hari gave away half of the *rotlo* in *prasad* but kept the other half for himself. Tears streamed down Jivan Bhakta's cheeks. Shri Hari ate his meager offering with the same love that he had for the bountiful offerings from the town's

wealthiest merchants and farmers.

Shri Hari traveled from house to house in Jetalpur thanking the villagers for their support in the grand *yagna*. He even visited the home of Lakshmibai. Muktanand Swami and other sadhus waited outside as Shri Hari graced her home. Muktanand Swami wrote a bhajan about the *padhramani*, one that is extremely popular in the *sampradaya* today.¹⁷ This *padhramani* depicts two forms of bhakti. First, Muktanand Swami and the sadhus possessed complete *divyabhav* in Shri Hari's *charitra* of visiting the courtesan's house alone. The *padhramani* also illustrates Shri Hari's bhakti towards his devotees. Shri Hari's love was beyond the barriers of caste, creed, and status. Shri Hari favored genuine devotion and rewarded such devotion indiscriminately.

At the Fort in Ahmedabad

The *yagna* in Jetalpur invoked a change of heart in many of those opposing Bhagwan Swaminarayan's social and religious reform. However, it also increased the animosity among the Shakta *brahmins* around the region. The Shakta *brahmins* poisoned the opinions of the Peshwa ruler's Suba in Ahmedabad by attributing the recent death of his father to the *ahimsak yagna* performed in Jetalpur.

When the Suba, Vitthal Rao, heard that Shri Hari was in Ahmedabad, he immediately jumped at the opportunity to invite Shri Hari to his palace. His intentions were to capture or hurt Shri Hari. The Suba sent a buggy drawn by two horses and a royal envoy to pick up Shri Hari.

The devotees warned Shri Hari of the Suba's rash and vengeful nature. They pleaded with Shri Hari to decline the Suba's invitation. Shri Hari remained calm and quelled everyone's fears. "There is nothing to fear. I will go alone with Devanand Dandi."¹⁸ Remember, all that happens

17 This popularly known bhajan was written by Muktanand Swami when Bhagwan Swaminarayan entered Lakshmibai's palace: "Kode aanand maare gher Shriji padhaaryaa...," means "Joy is abound, as Shriji Maharaj has graced my home...."

18 Devanand Dandi, the *paramhansa*, is not to be confused with Devanand, the poet. According to *sampradayik* sources, there were three sadhus named Devanand Swami in Bhagwan Swaminarayan's time. Devanand Dandi, named appropriately because of the *dand* or staff that he carried in his left hand, was an Advaita sannyasi.

in this world is due to Bhagwan's grace. I am that Bhagwan. I know what the Suba is thinking. I know what to expect at the Suba's palace."

Though Shri Hari refused, several armed *parshads* followed the buggy to the Suba's palace. Shri Hari and Devanand Swami sat in the buggy. The Suba ordered his guards to close the gates once the buggy entered the palace grounds, separating the armed *parshads* from Shri Hari. Devanand Swami was stopped at the gate too, but he snuck in staying close to Shri Hari's side.

Once inside the palace, the Suba welcomed Shri Hari and requested him to sit on a beautifully-decorated, royal throne. Shri Hari smiled and said, "Oh King, I am a sadhu. It would be not be appropriate for me to sit on this royal throne. It would be best if you sat on it."

The Suba insisted quite forcibly. Amidst the exchange, Shri Hari pushed the seat of the throne with his silver staff. The seat caved in to reveal a large pot of sweltering oil. The Suba's plot was exposed. Devanand Swami was infuriated. His body started to tremble with fury. He screamed, "Treachery, treachery!"

His hand reached for his water gourd. Shri Hari immediately held Devanand Swami's hand before he could pour water on the Suba and curse him. Shri Hari calmed Devanand Swami and turned his attention to the Suba.

The Suba was both angry and embarrassed. His face turned red, and he was ridden with shame. He defended, "You are a fraud, Swaminarayan. What makes you think you can perform *ahimsak yagnas*? Your *yagna* has brought trouble to my kingdom. No one knows who you are. Where are you from? Why are you pretending to be Bhagwan? It is time you leave my kingdom and never return."

Shri Hari remained poised. He looked at the Suba and asked, "When can I return?"

The Suba shouted, "You can return when I am not the ruler of this land."

Shri Hari replied as if granting a boon, "So be it; so be it." On that Tuesday, 17 January 1809, the Suba foreshadowed the end of his rule in Ahmedabad.

Shri Hari and Devanand Swami swiftly left the palace grounds.

The Suba ordered Shri Hari to leave the city immediately through the North Gate. Shri Hari mounted his horse and traveled through the entire city passing all of its gates. He wanted to give darshan to the people of Ahmedabad before leaving the city for several years. Shri Hari, his sadhus, and the devotees departed from the North Gate later that afternoon.

Mahanubhavanand Swami and Devanand Swami

Sajjankunvarba and her son, Bapubhai, invited Shri Hari to their village. Sajjankunvarba was a leading devotee in the village of Macchiav. Shri Hari valued her opinion and considered her to be a senior devotee. He lovingly called her Faiba, or paternal aunt. The satsang community followed Shri Hari's example and also called her by that name. Shri Hari surrendered to her bhakti and stayed in Macchiav to celebrate the Fuladol festival. During the festival, Shri Hari initiated Lalji, a *Shavite* from Rethal, into the sadhu-fold. Shri Hari named him Uttamanand Swami, but he later came to be known as Dayanand Swami. Dayanand Swami was one of Shri Hari's *ashta kavis*. His prose and verse works added invaluable, literary masterpieces to the growing archives of Muktanand Swami, Brahmanand Swami, and Nishkulanan Swami.

Shri Hari arrived in Unjha and met Swarupanand Swami's *mandal* of sadhus. A youth from northern India was traveling with Swarupanand Swami. He too wanted to be initiated at Shri Hari's hands. Shri Hari named him Mahanubhavanand Swami, who also later became a *sadguru* sadhu. Mahanubhavanand Swami was responsible for spreading Shri Hari's *mahima* in many territories outside of Gujarat.

One evening, Shri Hari was riding through the village on a chariot drawn by bulls. As he was giving darshan to the villagers, a few of the village women rushed home and mixed some *chaas* with flour and sugar and offered it to Shri Hari. Shri Hari drank it in front of the entire village. He drank the *chaas* so quickly that it dripped down his chin and elbows. Watching from a distance, Devidan, a young teenager from a lineage of acclaimed poets, sat mesmerized by Shri Hari's *lila charitra*. He immediately approached Shri Hari and asked to be initiated as a sadhu. Shri Hari instructed the boy to obtain his parent's permission. The youth ran to his parents who were also captivated by Shri Hari's darshan. He

expressed his desire to enter the sadhu-fold, and his parents consented. Shri Hari named him Devanand Swami and placed him under the care and tutelage of Brahmanand Swami. Devanand Swami composed beautiful poetry about Shri Hari's *charitras* and instructional poetry guiding spiritual aspirants on the path to enlightenment. He earned a distinguished place among Shri Hari's *ashta kavis*. Most importantly, he is known as the guru of the legendary Gujarati poet Dalpatram Kavi.

In Khokhra-Mehmdavad

The second week of May of 1809 is forever remembered in the satsang community as one of tolerance, faith, and sacrifice. Shri Hari had reached the outskirts of Ahmedabad on the shores of the Kankaria Lake in Khokhra-Mehmdavad. The summer sun parched the earth and scorched the skin. In order to keep cool and the devotees' minds focused, Shri Hari organized a satsang assembly on the shores of the lake. One afternoon, a Shakta *brahmin* disguised as a wandering ascetic came and bowed in front of Shri Hari. Shri Hari asked the ascetic his name. The man fumbled for a bit before spouting out a false identity. Shri Hari's personal attendants realized that there was something peculiar about this man. At about that time, Agraji noticed a large, curved dagger hidden in the man's belt. Agraji pounced on him like a wild cat. The ascetic hit the ground hard. Bhaguji grabbed the fraud and shook him violently. The dagger rattled onto the ground. Bhaguji placed his death grip around the man's neck. The man desperately looked to Shri Hari and begged for his life with his eyes. Shri Hari ordered Bhaguji to release his grip. The *brahmin* gasped for air. After several minutes of deep breaths, he fell at Shri Hari's feet and confessed the entire scheme aimed at taking Shri Hari's life.

Not too far from the lake was the hermitage of a group of untamed and weapon-wielding mendicants. The leader of the band was named Lolangar. He was a dangerous man. He had a band of seven hundred equally violent disciples. They spent their days intoxicated with alcohol and ganja instead of in bhakti. They blackmailed community leaders and merchants and controlled the trade market, town council, and much of the farming land in the neighborhood. They were only interested in increasing their influence and material wealth. Shri Hari's saintliness

further tarnished their image. Shri Hari's increasing influence also encouraged the community to stand up against Lolangar's tyranny.

Annoyed by Shri Hari's renaissance, Lolangar plotted Shri Hari's death and sent the Shakta *brahmin* to carry out the plan. He offered the Shakta *brahmin* hundreds of gold coins as a reward for killing Shri Hari. The *brahmin* warned Shri Hari, "Prabhu, thank you for sparing my life. My error was not worthy of pardon. However, I must warn you. Please watch out for your life. Lolangar will attack again."

Shri Hari mercifully released the assailant. Shri Hari's personal attendants and the *kshatriya* devotees of Saurashtra and Methan tightened their security around Shri Hari.

That afternoon four of Shri Hari's sadhus, Yoganand Swami, Kalyananand Swami, Chidrupanand Swami, and Arihantranand Swami, were in the village begging for alms. Lolangar's disciples attacked them in the middle of the village square. They beat them with rods, tridents, and clubs. The sadhus were bleeding profusely from their wounds. Lolangar's men dragged them through the streets of Khokhra to their hermitage. A passerby noticed the condition of the four *paramhansas* and ran to tell Shri Hari at the lake. Shri Hari immediately sent Laldas Gora to Lolangar's hermitage. Laldas was clever and knew exactly how to get Lolangar's attention. He went inside the hermitage and addressed Lolangar, "Babaji, I would like to feed *ladus* to all of the ascetics in your group. How many of you are there?"

Lolangar's eye's lit up. He answered, "There are seven hundred of us. You can make enough *ladus* for eight hundred. Most of my disciples have a voracious appetite."

While speaking to Lolangar, Laldas' eyes scanned the hermitage grounds for a sign of the four *paramhansas*' location. After a few minutes, Laldas noticed four sadhus huddled in a corner, injured and wrapped in bloody garbs. Laldas inquired of Lolangar, "Looks like you have got your hands on Swaminarayan's sadhus. What did they do this time?"

Lolangar was silent. The sadhus had not done anything to attract his wrath, but how could he be so forthcoming? He replied, "I am going to let them go soon. There isn't much to do with them. We have already punished them for their misdeeds."

Laldas bargained, "How about you let them go now? As soon as you release them, I will start making preparations for the feast."

Lolangar was more interested in feeding his disciples. He immediately ordered his commander to release the sadhus and throw them out in the streets. Laldas hurried out behind them and called the village healer to treat their wounds. The sadhus were brought to Shri Hari. Shri Hari's face turned red and his hands started shaking with anger. How could anyone hurt his innocent, docile sadhus?

Later that evening, Muktanand Swami and a few of the sadhus in his *mandal* were sitting under a tree speaking of Shri Hari's *mahima* with villagers. A band of mendicants attacked the group with tridents and clubs. The sadhus ran away trying to escape, but some of them were badly beaten. The attackers chased Muktanand Swami thinking that he may lead them to Shri Hari. However, Muktanand Swami fled into a narrow alley and locked himself inside the premises of an aged, *brahmin* widow's compound.

The mendicants threatened to knock down the widow's front gate. Meanwhile, Agraji arrived in the alley. He realized that these mendicants were pursuing one of Shri Hari's sadhus. He attacked the mendicants with an unsheathed sword. The mendicants fought back, but they retreated as soon as Bhagaji and a few *kshatriyas* arrived to assist Agraji. Meanwhile, a couple of mendicants snuck inside the widow's house and attacked Muktanand Swami with their tridents. Muktanand Swami was badly beaten and bleeding from his face and eyes.

Agraji and Bhagaji made their way inside the home and saved Muktanand Swami. The *kshatriyas* carried Muktanand Swami in a hammock to Nathu Bhatt's house. Shri Hari was waiting for Muktanand Swami. Upon seeing Muktanand Swami's injured face, Shri Hari bent his brows, and his eyes seemed to emit a red flame. Shri Hari commanded loudly, "Dear Kshatriyas, tomorrow is the test of your power and faith. Be prepared to attack those dissidents who attempt to harm us. We shall not attack first, but if they cross our paths, we will release the fury of Yamraj on them. Do not fear defeat. Bhagwan is on your side."

Bhagaji, Agraji, Sura Khachar, and Somla Khachar prepared for the day that awaited them. In the middle of the night, Shri Hari ordered the

sadhus to leave town and head towards Surat.

The next morning, just as Shri Hari was about to leave to bathe in the lake, a horde of the mendicants were heard approaching Nathu Bhatt's residence. Khokhra's village leader tried to interfere and reason with the mendicants, but they threatened to kill him too.

As the mendicants descended upon the house for their attack, they were countered by the *kshatriyas*. Mounted on their battle horses, the *kshatriyas* attacked the mass of seven hundred mendicants with unmatched valor and vigor. The mendicants were taken aback. Though there were almost ten times as many mendicants as *kshatriyas*, the mendicants could not face these skilled fighters and retreated. Lolangar attempted to calm his disciples and motivate them not to run, but his words were no match for the *kshatriyas'* abilities. After nearly an hour of nonstop battle, the mendicants retreated to their hermitage. The *kshatriyas* escorted Shri Hari and the remaining four sadhus to the neighboring village of Vehlal. Jaisinghbhai and his wife, Vakhatba, were pleasantly surprised to see Shri Hari at their home. They treated the *kshatriyas'* wounds with medicinal herbs and offered them food and water to recuperate from the battle.

Shri Hari decided to test Vakhatba's faith. He said, "Mother, I am scared. What if those mendicants follow me here and decide to attack again?"

Vakhatba resolutely answered, "Shri Hari, you are the all-doer. I know that you are not afraid but are only doing a *lila charitra* for my sake. Yet, if they attack I would hide you inside the home, and I would gather the rods and fire torches in our home and fight the mendicants. I would not let them touch a single hair on your head." Shri Hari was pleased with her conviction and asked that she prepare a meal for him.

Shri Hari wanted to leave for Kutch on the following day. That evening, the male devotees from the eighteen satsang households in the village asked Shri Hari to grace their homes for lunch and dinner. Shri Hari told each of them to prepare lunch at their homes. The next morning, Shri Hari assumed eighteen different forms, as did the *parshads* and sadhus, and had lunch at eighteen different homes at once.

After lunch, Shri Hari departed for Kutch.

Kutch in 1809

Shri Hari arrived in Kutch and spent a few days in Rampar. He spoke extensively about *divyabhav* in Bhagwan's *charitras*, foreshadowing imminent events. Shri Hari made his way to Bhuj and stayed at Sundarji Suthar's house. Shri Hari hurt his toe while riding on his mare. Sundarji and his brother, Hirji, bandaged Shri Hari's wound and asked him to rest at their place. They requested, "Shri Hari, we are going to hide you here from Jagjivan. Do not leave unless we say it is okay for you to do so. Until we say you can leave, you are to stay here." Shri Hari nodded his head in agreement.

Jagjivan, the Chief Minister, was envious of Shri Hari's growing influence in Gujarat. He was searching for Shri Hari all around the city. Shri Hari did not like to stay hidden in one place. There were several devotees in Bhuj, and he wanted to give all of them the opportunity to serve and worship him. That afternoon Shri Hari inspired Jagjivan to come looking for him at Sundarji's house. Jagjivan stormed inside the house and asked Hirji, "Where is your Swaminarayan?"

Hirji replied, "He is in Mankua."

Before Hirji could finish his sentence, Shri Hari popped his head out of the inner room and said, "Here I am. I am Swaminarayan. What may I do for you?"

Jagjivan was flabbergasted by Shri Hari's boldness. He started to insult Shri Hari. His insults turned into threats. He then directed his threats to Sundarji and Hirji, warning, "I am going to bring the cannons down on your house. I am going to blow you all into pieces."

Shri Hari smiled and watched Jagjivan walk out of the house. Sundarji and Hirji were dumbfounded by Shri Hari's actions and asked him why he blew their cover. Shri Hari replied, "Oh, was that the Jagjivan that was looking for me? I completely forgot. What are we going to do now?"

Sundarji and Hirji both concluded that it would be best for Shri Hari to hide at someone else's house. Shri Hari agreed, "Well, now that I have your permission to leave, I am going to hide at the wrestler's, Gangaram Malla, home."

As Shri Hari was stepping outside of the house, Jagjivan's wife, Prabhavati Devi, came for Shri Hari's darshan. Shri Hari sat in her chariot

and made his way to the home of the wrestler Gangaram Malla. There, the wrestler and his cohorts promised to protect Shri Hari until their last breath.

The next morning, Jagjivan sent an army of Arab mercenaries to capture Shri Hari. Fateh Mohammad was their commander. Shri Hari sent the commander into *samadhi*. There, he witnessed several devas praying to Shri Hari in Akshardham. He woke up and prostrated at Shri Hari's feet. He turned back to Jagjivan's palace empty-handed. Infuriated by the violation of his orders, Jagjivan shot at the commander in the streets of Bhuj. However, the commander was a seasoned warrior. The commander survived the foolish minister's assault and beheaded him.

Shri Hari's *charitras* were difficult to comprehend for the human mind. However, the true *bhakta* understood that Shri Hari was performing these *lila charitras* merely to test the devotee's faith and conviction.

Mulji and Krishnaji

Shri Hari made his way to Mankua from Bhuj. There, two best friends, Mulji and Krishnaji, had taken a liking for Shri Hari's charming *murti*. They would follow Shri Hari simply to gaze at his *murti*. One afternoon, Shri Hari was sitting on a cot and murmured, "Does anyone want to be a sadhu? I am looking for someone to initiate into the sadhu-fold."

Krishnaji and Mulji jumped at this opportunity. They asked Shri Hari to initiate them into the sadhu-fold. Shri Hari warned, "This is not an easy task. Are you sure you are ready to become sadhus? Maybe you should think it over: are you ready to tolerate mistreatment and oppression?"

Krishnaji and Mulji sat on the outskirts of the village for several days. They came to understand that the body and its relations were temporary. In order to attain *moksha*, one needs to follow Bhagwan's *agna*. After a few days, both of them returned to Shri Hari and again expressed their desire to be initiated. Shri Hari again asked if they were ready.

Krishnaji started to untie the knot of his top. Mulji ripped open his garment and said, "Why waste time in untying something I am never going to wear again?"

Shri Hari smiled and said, "I see that both of you have already become sadhus from the inside. I now order you to remain as householders."

The friends were heartbroken. The villagers ridiculed them for being foolish and making a premature decision. Yet, Krishnaji and Mulji stood firm on their path. They would do whatever it took to become sadhus. For the time being, they would stay in Mankua and spend their days in Shri Hari's dhyan and bhakti.

Appreciating Shivdan Barot

Shri Hari traveled into Saurashtra from Kutch and decided to spend a few days at Jiva Khachar's *darbar* in Sarangpur. Shivdan Barot of Botad, a devotee of Shri Hari, was invited to the court of King Vajehsinh in Bhavnagar to present his poetry to the court. Shivdan was a talented poet, but having written about Bhagwan's splendor, he had difficulty speaking about mere mortals. When asked by Vajehsinh to recite poetry praising the king, Shivdan immediately recited this verse:

I bow to the one who rides, unmoved among the entire creation, one who is unborn, without fault, and the Lord of all the other incarnations.

The king's eyes reddened with anger as the bard in his court sang the praises of another. Though the king did not express his discontent to Shivdan at that moment, he made a mental note of the insolence.

At the end of the poetry festival, the king distributed mementos to all of the poets who had participated. When Shivdan approached the king, the king retorted, "Oh Great Bard, your rewards should be given by Swaminarayan. After all, you only found words to praise him. Why not ask him for your prize? I have nothing for you."

Shivdan replied swiftly, "Oh King, Bhagwan Swaminarayan is the ruler of the entire creation. Anything that you give me is worthless in his eyes. What he can give is beyond any amount of gold, silver, or jewels. He can give me *moksha* and *Akshardham*."

En route from Bhavnagar to Botad, Shivdan stopped to rest for the night in Sarangpur, unaware that Shri Hari was in Sarangpur as well. Upon finding Shri Hari, Shivdan stood at a distance and enjoyed Shri Hari's darshan in an ongoing *sabha*. Shri Hari noticed that something was bothering his devotee, but he did not get a chance to speak to the bard. That night, Shivdan retired to Rathod Dhadhal's residence. Once

in his room, Shivdan took out his *sarangi* and started to sing nighttime ragas such as Malkauns, Chandrakauns, and Bihag. Shivdan was hurt by Vajehsinh's insulting words. Though he kept his composure at that moment, his heart was now burning with a fire of retaliation and insult. As the night passed, Shivdan's singing evoked an increasingly sorrowful and despairing tone.

Shri Hari, too, could not sleep that night. Shri Hari turned restlessly in his bed from side to side. He stood up and walked towards Rathod Dhadhal's house. He pressed his ear against the wall of Shivdan's room and carefully listened to his devotee's prayers. After an hour, Mulji Brahmachari noticed that Shri Hari was not in his bed. He woke up Naja Jogiya, and they set out to search for Shri Hari.

After a few minutes, they reached Rathod Dhadhal's house and noticed a dark silhouette leaning against the wall attentively listening to the sounds of a *sarangi*. Brahmachari ran to Shri Hari and inquired, "Prabhu, what are you doing here in the middle of the night? You have not covered the upper half of your body. Nor have you worn your footwear. What if something was to happen to you?"

Shri Hari cut him off and instructed, "Brahmachari and Naja Jogiya, I am glad both of you are here. Listen to what I say carefully. Prepare my horse, Rojho. Adorn him with the finest of adornments—do not forget his silver-belled necklace, gold saddle, and gem-studded headdress. Once you have prepared Rojho, I want you to bring my finest ornaments—the gold-threaded, silk garments recently sent from Surat, my gold crown, and even the pearl necklace."

Brahmachari wondered where Shri Hari was going so late at night dressed in royal attire. However, he did not have the chance to ask Shri Hari. Brahmachari scurried off and returned with the requested items. By now, the sun had risen in the cool, winter sky. Shri Hari returned to Jiva Khachar's *darbar* and again listened attentively to the tune of Shivdan's *sarangi*.

The sadhus and devotees gathered around Shri Hari, yet none of them were willing to ask him why he stood vigil outside of Rathod Dhadhal's house all night. Jiva Khachar finally mustered the courage. Shri Hari replied, "Jiva Bapu, please go and call Shivdanji from Rathod

Dhadhal's house."

Jiva Khachar rushed to the neighboring house. He stood still for a moment captivated by the bard's voice and compositions. He finally snapped out of *samadhi* and said, "Bhaktaraj, Shri Hari is calling you. Please come quickly."

Shivdan placed his *sarangi* on the side and hurried away with Jiva Khachar. He found Shri Hari waiting for him. Shivdan prostrated at Shri Hari's feet with tears in his eyes. He wanted to share his feelings, but Shri Hari's eyes suggested that he had already read the poet's mind. Shri Hari said, "Shivdanji, get ready. You have to leave for Bhavnagar at once. Change your clothes and put on the clothes that Brahmachari gives you. Ride my Rojho, and go meet the king. Ask him whether I have rewarded you sufficiently and whether he thinks I have left something out. If so, tell him that I can offer whatever he suggests. For me, my devotees and their needs are a chief priority. Also, do not forget to tell him that I have given you something that no other mortal or deva can offer: *moksha* and *Akshardham*. I am sure that he cannot emulate this."

Shivdan's joy was boundless. He went to prostrate to Shri Hari again, but Shri Hari embraced the poet. Shri Hari grabbed the reigns of the horse and placed them in Shivdan's hands. The *kshatriyas* sighed, aware that the horse was one of a kind. Although valued at one thousand rupees at the time, the stallion was truly priceless. Yet, Shri Hari's face gleamed with joy as he was able to provide for one of his *bhaktas*.

Shivdan rode off on Rojho and reached Bhavnagar by afternoon. He walked into the court and attracted the gaze of all of the courtiers. Even the king did not recognize Shivdan. Shivdan bowed to the king and said, "Oh King, my Bhagwan was asking if this was an appropriate reward for my poetic prowess. Would you recommend that he add more?"

The king's eyes could not meet Shivdan's. He realized his mistake of allowing his arrogance to challenge the incarnate form of Bhagwan. He immediately replied, "Shivdan, your bhakti is commendable and your Bhagwan's compassion for his devotees even more so. Please offer my apologies to Swaminarayan. I should have known that Bhagwan cares for his devotees selflessly. I would have never been able to give you what Shri Hari has given you."

Shivdan rode off to Botad with memory of that night etched in his mind and heart forever.

Shri Hari's love outweighed the kilograms of gold and silver that he gifted his devotees. His love satisfied both the spiritual and emotional needs of his devotees. His compassion nudged devotees to embark on the path to attaining *ekantik dharma* and, ultimately, transformed the lives of many.

6

Stories of His Aksharbrahma

*Aise param purush Parameshvar, Akshardham ke dhaami ho
Maya kaal aadi ke prerak, Premanand ke Swami ho...
Vandu Sahajanand charanraj...*

*Such is the Supreme Being and Bhagwan,
who is the Lord of Akshardham,
The inspirer of maya, death, and other such forces,
is [none other than] Premanand's master...
I bow to the dust on Sahajanand's feet...*

- **Sadguru Premanand Swami (1784-1855 CE),**
Poet, Musician, and Theologian

Initiating Mulji Sharma in Dabhan

Bhagwan Swaminarayan manifested on Earth to establish *ekantik dharma*, to liberate countless souls from the influence of *maya*, and to take them to his abode, Akshardham. In order to make *moksha* more accessible to spiritual aspirants, Shri Hari brought his Akshardham in human form to Earth as well. Shri Hari narrated this objective repeatedly to his sadhus and *bhaktas*. He announced that Mulji Sharma of Bhadra was his Akshardham manifest on Earth. Shri Hari clearly identified this relationship during the Dabhan *yagna* when he initiated Mulji Sharma

into the sadhu-fold.

Shri Hari instructed Bhai Ramdas Swami, Muktanand Swami, Swarupanand Swami, Anandanand Swami, Gopalanand Swami, and Nityanand Swami to prepare for the *yagna* in Dabhan. These sadhus had garnered experience from the previous *yagna* in Jetalpur. They reached Dabhan and prepared for the festivities.

Shri Hari arrived in Ghodasar and rested at Jalamsinh Bapu and Keshaba's residence. Jalamsinh Bapu was the ruler of the village and its surrounding areas. He greeted Shri Hari with a garland of fragrant flowers. Shri Hari sat in the king's court and spoke to Jalamsinh Bapu. "Bapu, I want you to assume the responsibilities of protecting the sacrificial grounds in Dabhan. There are several conspirators that are waiting for the chance to hurt my sadhus and devotees. Please be cautious and question anyone that seems suspicious."

Jalamsinh offered all 100,000 of his tribal guards in Shri Hari's service. Shri Hari instructed the king to bring 1,500 guards to Dabhan. The king also gifted Shri Hari with a horse draped in a golden cloth to ride to Dabhan.

Thousands of devotees gathered in Dabhan, each bringing an item to present to Shri Hari. Bhagwan accepted their offerings with love and returned their bhakti with the promise of granting *moksha*. Shri Hari scanned the crowds and made a mental note of those devotees that were missing. Shri Hari wrote letters to each of them and invited them to the festivities. He even wrote a letter to the infamous Lolangar! Shri Hari wrote, "Bawaji, we would like to invite you to the Maha Yagna we are organizing in Dabhan. You were unable to attend the Vishnu Yagna in Jetalpur. Please do come this time. We have no animosity towards you or your disciples. In fact, we only defended ourselves when you attacked my *kshatriya* devotees. My sadhus do not hold the slightest grudge in their hearts and minds against you. Let the past be forgotten. Please do accept our invitation and bring all seven hundred of your disciples."

Though Lolangar did not come to the *yagna* festival, he must have had a change of heart. It is said that after reading this letter, Lolangar never attacked Shri Hari's sadhus again.

The *yagna* was organized on a four and a half acre plot of land to

the west of the city. Vishnudas and Raghudas of Dabhan and Kashidas of Bochasan served as the three main *yajmans*. Several *brahmins* from Halvad, Ahmedabad, and Umreth officiated the *yagna*.

Thousands of *brahmins* were fed *ladu* and *churma* as part of the *chaurasi* feast ritual. The *kshatriyas* and tribal warriors guarded the kitchen and preparation sites to prevent anyone from stealing the cooking utensils and ingredients. When a Shakta *brahmin* attempted to steal some *ladus*, the *kshatriyas* fired their guns into the air. The *brahmin* dropped the *ladus* and immediately retreated. The *kshatriyas* laughed as the *brahmin* ran away holding the loose end of his dhoti in his hand.

As the festival progressed, Shri Hari changed the lives of hundreds of individuals and drew them towards *bhakti*, *seva*, and *satsang*. Foremost among them was Joban Pagi. Joban Pagi was a fearsome dacoit. His men controlled trade routes from Pune to Kolkata. Even kings succumbed to Joban's appetite for theft by paying him the ransom he demanded.

In a recent encounter with the authorities, Joban lost his beloved mare. He was informed that Swaminarayan owned a beautiful mare that galloped with great speed and nimble agility. Joban decided to steal Shri Hari's mare in the middle of the night from the stables in Dabhan.

One night, Joban made his way to the stables. The stable boy was asleep and the *kshatriya* guards were away on patrol. He rushed inside the stables and found the mare. The mare was of unparalleled breed and beauty. When he bent down to untie the mare from the peg, he was startled by the sight of Shri Hari standing in the stables smiling down at him. Joban ran and hid behind a nearby barrel. After a few minutes, he checked again to see if someone was standing by the mare. He walked up to the mare, and Shri Hari again suddenly appeared. This continued for the rest of the night. Exhausted by dawn, Joban gave up and quietly snuck out of the stables. Dumbfounded by the incident, Joban wondered if the rumor that Swaminarayan was Bhagwan was true.

The next morning Joban covered his face with a cloth and went for Shri Hari's darshan. Though no one recognized him as he sat at the rear of the *sabha*, Shri Hari called out to him. "Come Joban. Why do you look so tired? I am terribly sorry for keeping you up all night."

Upon hearing Joban's name, the *kshatriyas* jumped to their feet and

drew their swords. Shri Hari calmed them down and said, “Joban is here for a different purpose today. All of you relax and take your seats.”

Joban walked up to Shri Hari and prostrated at his feet. Shri Hari forgave all of his sins and accepted him into the satsang community. After speaking to him about *niyams*, dharma, and bhakti, Shri Hari turned his attention to the planning of the *diksha* ceremony on the following day.

On Saturday, 20 January 1810, amidst the sounds of the Vedic-chanting *brahmans* and the beating *dhols*, Shri Hari initiated Mulji Sharma as Gunatitanand Swami (see photo 29).¹ After the ceremony, Shri Hari addressed the devotees and sadhus: “Gunatitanand Swami is very dear to me. He is my abode, my Akshardham. I am extremely pleased to have initiated him into the sadhu-fold. He will teach lessons of dharma, bhakti, *jnan*, and *vairagya* to all of you. His life will stand as a testament to his metaphysical state as Aksharbrahma. I will forever be present on Earth through my Akshardham. Gunatitanand is my Akshardham. He will guide my disciples on the path to *moksha*. By making him one’s ideal on the spiritual path, one will then be able to progress on the path to *moksha*. One struggles with spiritual endeavors to please such a sadhu. *Moksha* is only granted if this sadhu is pleased with you and blesses you. His *mahima* is unfathomable. All the glory that the Upanishads attribute to me is but Aksharbrahma’s *mahima*. He is the controller of the universe and all things transient and fixed. I am Parabrahma. My only *mahima* is that Aksharbrahma is dependent on me. Aksharbrahma serves at my will.”

Upon hearing Shri Hari extoll Gunatitanand Swami’s *mahima*, the sadhus and devotees, young and old, bowed their heads and silently paid their respects to this great sadhu.

Though many devotees were unable to physically attend the festival, they experienced the bliss of the festival through the *divyadrashti*, or divine vision, provided by Shri Hari. *Sampradayik* texts note that several sadhus and devotees were able to witness the festivities in Dabhan in distant villages due to Shri Hari’s grace. After the *yagna* concluded, Shri Hari accepted Joban Pagi’s invitation and graced Vartal. Shri Hari had previously

¹ *Sampradayik* sources state that Gunatitanand Swami was initially named Nirgunanand Swami at the time of his *diksha*. However, Shri Hari chose to address him as Gunatitanand, or ‘one who experiences the joy of being above all three *gunas*.’

been to Vartal during his journey through central Gujarat as Nilkanth Varni. Shri Hari's visit to Vartal fostered the budding satsang community.

Shri Hari in Kutch

Shri Hari celebrated the Fulidol festival of 1810 in Bhuj. With the death of Jagjivan the prior year, thousands of devotees from Gujarat and Saurashtra gathered for Shri Hari's darshan in Bhuj.

After spending a few days with Shri Hari, a group of devotees asked Shri Hari for permission to return to their homes. Shri Hari requested, "Please keep your grace and compassion on me."

The devotees did not make much of the comment and departed. Once they reached the outskirts of Bhuj, they discussed the meaning of Shri Hari's odd request. The devotees could not contain their curiosity and returned to Bhuj to ask Shri Hari the true meaning of his words. Shri Hari smiled and said, "When all of you work with unity, do not quarrel, and understand each other's *mahima*, you have kept your compassion and grace on me. When you keep your heart and mind free from vices, base instincts, desire, and attachment, you have kept your grace on me."

The devotees accepted Shri Hari's explanation as his *agna* and departed for their homes.

That evening Shri Hari spoke to Nishkulananand Swami and Paramchaitanyaanand Swami about the importance of spreading Parabrahma and Aksharbrahma's *mahima*. He instructed the sadhus on the need to realize one's self to be the *atma*. The strength and conviction drawn from such *atmajnan* was matchless. He instructed all of them to think of themselves as *atma* in all three states—awake, dream, and deep sleep.²

The Kutchi Muslim

Shri Hari came to Tera and promised Nondha Suthar to celebrate Ramnavmi at his residence. Shri Hari organized satsang *sabhas* twice a day and visited the homes of many villagers. The villagers of Tera stopped tending their fields and spent their days in Shri Hari's divine presence.

² That in which the *jivatma* dwells when it indulges in the *vishays* is known as an *avastha*, or 'state.' There are three states: awake, dream, and deep sleep. The *jiva* no longer experiences the influence of the three states when it becomes *brahmarup* and transcends *maya*.

That night, after all of the *sevaks* fell asleep, Shri Hari stole away from his bed and hurriedly walked in the moonlight towards Kalatalav, a nearby village. Mulji Brahmachari and Dungarji heard the ruffling of Shri Hari's bed sheets and followed him. After quietly following him for a few minutes, the two realized that Shri Hari had noticed their shadows in the open fields. They begged Shri Hari to return to Nondha Suthar's home. Shri Hari reasoned, "I have a better idea. It is late into the night. Why not just rest here for a bit? We can talk about returning in the morning."

Dungarji spread his upper garment onto a flat stretch of land. Using his arm as a pillow, Shri Hari fell asleep. After the *sevaks* dozed off, Shri Hari quietly snuck away and resumed his walk to Kalatalav. Shri Hari was intent on giving darshan to one of his *bhaktas*, a Muslim devotee.

Later that morning, Shri Hari reached the fields of the Muslim farmer outside of Kalatalav. The farmer tilled the land while he chanted the name of his Bhagwan. "Oh Swaminarayan, Oh Khuda, when will you grace me with your darshan? Grant me this one wish, Prabhu."

Shri Hari heard him praying from a distance. He walked over to the farmer and asked for some drinking water. The farmer's eyes were caught on Shri Hari's charming *murti*. He snapped himself out of what seemed to be a captivating trance and said, "Sadhuram, I have water in my leather container under that tree. You probably will not drink from a leather container. However, just a few hundred feet down the path is a small pond. You can find fresh drinking water there. Thanks to my compassionate Bhagwan Swaminarayan, water is in abundance here."

Shri Hari smiled and thanked the farmer for his assistance. When Shri Hari left, the farmer noticed that the Hindu sadhu's *murti* was still standing in front of him. No matter how hard he tried, the farmer could not shake the *murti* from his sight. He tried everything—tilling the land at a faster pace, praying to Swaminarayan, and even resting under the shade of the tree. Out of frustration, he shouted, "Oh, Wretched Sadhu! Who are you? Why is your *murti* still in front of me? Surely, this is my Bhagwan Swaminarayan's doing."

He ran to the pond where Shri Hari was resting. The farmer prostrated at his feet and said, "Sadhuram, who are you? Why won't your *murti* leave my eyes? Please give me an answer. Keep me with you. Were you sent

by my Shri Hari?"

Shri Hari replied, "I have to get to Kalatalav. If you care to find me, come to Bhimji Suthar's home in the village."

Shri Hari summoned his sadhus and devotees from Tera to Kalatalav. That night, hundreds of devotees crowded the streets near Bhimji Suthar's compound. The Muslim farmer made his way to Bhimjibhai's house with great difficulty. There, he asked someone the name of the young sadhu seated on the cot. The villagers revealed, "That is no sadhu. That is Bhagwan Swaminarayan."

The farmer's eyes brimmed with tears from the realization that his Bhagwan had come to his farm and to Kalatalav just for him. He ran and prostrated at Shri Hari's feet and turned to address the *sabha*. "This is my Khuda. He is Allah incarnate. He is merciful. He came to Kalatalav for me. If you care to liberate your souls, surrender yourself at his feet, and do not waste another moment of your life elsewhere."

The *sabha* was astounded by the Muslim farmer's conviction. Shri Hari blessed the farmer and promised to take him to Akshardham when he breathed his last.

That evening Shri Hari spoke of social equality and religious harmony. He stressed that an individual's character, moral code of conduct, and faith in Bhagwan were more important on the spiritual path than his religious identity or sectarian affiliation.

Shri Hari returned to Tera and celebrated Ramnavmi. He then spent a few days in Mandvi before boarding a boat to cross the Gulf of Kutch to the famous port city of Jodiya near Bhadra.

Feast in Kandorda

The summer of 1810 was a particularly difficult season. The sun bore down on Gujarat and Saurashtra mercilessly. The people, feeling parched and frustrated, spent as much time as possible near bodies of water and in the shade of mango or tamarind groves. Shri Hari arrived in Kandorda to bless Gopal and Dosa Barot. Both devotees were financially poor, but their hearts were rich with Shri Hari's bhakti.

After bathing in the lake, Shri Hari rested in the shade of the tamarind grove. Shri Hari sat on a small, wooden stump and observed, "It is cool

under these tamarind trees. They will shade us from the scorching heat of this summer sun.”

A *brahmin* from the village was passing by the grove. He stopped in his tracks and said, “Swaminarayan, *ladus* for the *brahmins* would complement this shade, as if a golden flower was infused with the aroma of a jasmine.”

Shri Hari asked the *brahmin* how many people should be fed. The *brahmin* answered that there were one hundred *brahmin* families in the village. Shri Hari told him to pass along the message that Shri Hari was hosting a *chaurasi* feast for the *brahmins* of Kandorda tomorrow morning.

The *brahmin* rushed off to the village to spread the news. Shri Hari arrived at Gopal Bhatt’s residence and asked him to prepare for the feast. Gopal Bhatt did not have the financial means, but he had faith in Shri Hari’s words. He thought of possible ways to acquire the needed supplies. He learned that the king of the region canceled his visit to Bhada Patel’s home. Now that the event had been cancelled, Bhadabhai had heaps of unused groceries. He explained the situation to Shri Hari. Though Bhada Patel was out of town, Shri Hari was confident that Bhadabhai’s wife, Ratnabai, would be willing to assist.

Ratnabai was a Vaishnav and a follower of the Vallabha Sampradaya. She had heard of Swaminarayan and agreed to provide the leftover ingredients. Gopal Bhatt passed along Shri Hari’s message. “Sister, Swaminarayan has asked me to tell you to take over the responsibilities of the feast. Clean the grove, prepare the stoves, collect firewood, deliver the groceries, and supply the cooks with the ingredients to make *ladus* tomorrow morning.”

Ratnabai immediately accepted the *agni*. She instructed her servants and her two sons to rush to the grove and prepare for the morning’s feast. She, too, joined them in organizing the feast.

That night, Shri Hari left Gopal Bhatt’s residence and walked to the grove. He hid behind a large tree and watched Ratnabai and her family prepare for the feast. Late into the night, when the arrangements were almost complete, Ratnabai let out a sigh, “Oh Swaminarayan.”

Shri Hari responded to her prayer with a soft murmur. Ratnabai was startled by the sound. She repeated her prayer and received a louder

murmur in response. She looked behind the tree and saw Shri Hari standing there without footwear. She asked, “Bhagwan, how long have you been standing there like this?”

Shri Hari replied, “For a few hours. How could I let your bhakti go unheard? I came here to give you darshan.”

Ratnabai spread the end of her *sari* on the ground and bowed in front of Shri Hari. Her sons touched Shri Hari’s feet and asked for his blessings.

Later that morning, Shri Hari supervised the feast as five hundred *brahmins* were served scrumptious, ghee-soaked *ladus*.

When Shri Hari sent Gopal Bhatt with three hundred coins to reimburse Ratnabai for the provisions, Ratnabai refused to accept the money, saying, “Brother, how can I accept a paisa? None of the groceries have been used. Swaminarayan has blessed us with a miracle!” In fact, not a single item of the ingredients had been used for the feast.

At Shri Hari’s insistence, Ratnabai kept three coins. Shri Hari promised to take her to Akshardham when she breathed her last.

Villagers say that when Ratnabai was preparing to leave her body, she shouted, “Look! Look! Swaminarayan has come to take me to Akshardham. Do not pass up this opportunity for his darshan.”

Shri Hari kept his word and rewarded those who selflessly served him with *moksha*.

Relocating Bhaktas from Gorviyali to Pithvadi

During Shri Hari’s *vicharan* in the Sorath region in 1811, five Patel devotees from Gorviyali requested Shri Hari to grace their village. Shri Hari was pleased with the devotees’ bhakti and accepted their invitation. He sent Gunatitanand Swami and the sadhus in his mandal to Gorviyali to prepare for Shri Hari’s arrival.

Gorviyali is a small village near Junagadh. The village was torn apart by violence between the bards and farmers. The bards violently opposed the entrance of any sadhus. They would harass sadhus and chase them to the outskirts of the village.

Gunatitanand Swami and the five *satsangi* Patels decided to organize a *satsang sabha* and a feast in the gardens near the outskirts of the village.

Shri Hari arrived surrounded by dozens of sadhus and devotees.

The village women sang bhajans in a melodious tone, and the devotees showered flower petals and rice on Shri Hari and the devotees.

Shri Hari sat under a tree and spoke to the satsang *sabha* about the importance of tolerance and forgiveness on the path to spiritual enlightenment. Thereafter, the sadhus and devotees enjoyed the feast prepared by the *satsangis* of the village. Shri Hari was pleased by the dedication and efforts of the five devotees and their families. He requested Gunatitanand Swami to take his *mandal* of sadhus to visit the homes of the devotees in the village. Shri Hari would join them in the evening.

Gunatitanand Swami and the sadhus walked towards the village. However, the bards had plans to thwart their entry. They sent their children to attack the sadhus with balls of cow dung and hardened mud. Their wives chased the sadhus, forcing them to fast upon the transgression of their celibacy vows. When the sadhus tried to retreat to the gardens on the outskirts of the village, the bards ran after them with sticks and stones.

Gunatitanand Swami and his *mandal* endured the assault with tolerance in their minds and the Swaminarayan mantra on their lips. Shri Hari was pleased with their saintliness and praised their self-control. He encouraged them to pray for the bards and instructed the sadhus to forgive them. Gunatitanand Swami folded his hands and said, “Bhagwan, we do not have the slightest recollection of what happened. Our minds and hearts bear no ill-feelings towards the villagers.”

Shri Hari was extremely pleased with the young sadhu’s understanding. That night, Shri Hari wrote a letter to the devotees of Gorviyali from Pithvadi and instructed them to meet him in Junagadh the next day. He ordered the five Patel devotees in the village to pack their belongings to relocate to Pithvadi, advising, “Gorviyali is not fit for bhakti and seva. Move to Pithvadi. I will grant you prosperity in this world and the next.”

The devotees happily obliged. They packed their belongings and followed Shri Hari to Pithvadi. The devotees from Pithvadi were overjoyed to have new members join their satsang community. They embraced the devotees from Gorviyali and invited them to their homes. Shri Hari was pleased to see such *samp* and *atmabuddhi* within his devotees.

Having sent the devotees to Pithvadi, Shri Hari left for Panchala. He spent one month at Jinabhai and Gagabhai’s home. Their father, Manubha,

was a *bhakta* of Ramanand Swami. Shri Hari was very fond of Jinabhai. He also trusted Jinabhai with confidential satsang matters.

Shri Hari ordered the devotees in Panchala to eat *rotla* made of barley in order to control their sense of taste. Shri Hari wished to make them *nisvadi*. Many of Shri Hari's sadhus and devotees accepted these *niyams*. In fact, many of the female *sadhvis* ate only a single roasted chestnut all day. The sadhus passed through several *nisvadi niyam prakrangs* as well. However, many devotees were unable to take on the *niyams*, and some refused. Allaiya Khachar was one such devotee. Shri Hari was disappointed by Allaiya Khachar's lack of self-control caused by *dehabhiman*. He was compassionate though and forgave Allaiya Khachar's transgressions.

Jetha of Gondal – The Disadvantaged Brahmin

One evening, at the request of his younger brother, Devji Bapu invited Shri Hari to the royal palace in Gondal. The palace was elaborately decorated for Shri Hari's *padhramani*. The Bapu invited Shri Hari to stay with his family. Shri Hari celebrated the Shaakotsav festival on the following day. He ordered the devotees to prepare 1,200 kilograms of brinjals in 160 kilograms of ghee. Shri Hari served all of the sadhus, devotees, royal family members, and courtiers with his own hands. All those present were satisfied with the delicious taste of the brinjals and were stuffed with Shri Hari's overflowing love.

Standing in the corner was a short, obese *brahmin* named Jetha. He was bald, and his round belly peered out of his upper garment. He spoke slowly and through his nose. He had difficulty enunciating Gujarati and Sanskrit words. Everyone in the town, including his family, ridiculed his demeanor and intelligence. Shri Hari noticed poor Jetha standing in the corner by himself. Shri Hari lovingly called out to Jetha, "Come, dear friend. Why have you not eaten? Let me serve you some brinjal."

Tears rolled down Jetha's cheeks. Shri Hari wiped the tears with his garment. Jetha stuttered, "Prabhu, people call you Bhagwan. Why don't you fix my situation and rid me of my problems?"

Shri Hari replied patiently, "Jethabhai, do not worry about the world. Focus on your own well-being. Worry about following *niyams* and doing Bhagwan's *bhakti* and *seva*."

Jetha engraved these words in his mind. The next day, Shri Hari again called Jetha and said, “Bhagat, why don’t you speak to your family about my *mahima* and our satsang?”

Jetha replied, “Bhagwan, no one takes me seriously. How can I?”

Shri Hari looked at Jetha with a sharp glance and said, “From this day onwards, Jetha, people will respect you for your knowledge and wisdom. You will speak verses from the Vedas and Upanishads. You, my dear friend, will be respected in the entire region.”

True to Shri Hari’s words, Jetha later became known as Jetha Maharaj, one of the wisest *brahmins* in the kingdom of Gondal. He was often invited to officiate *yagnas* and scholarly debates. Shri Hari rewarded Jetha’s conviction and bhakti.

Shri Hari at Vajiba’s Residence

Shri Hari returned to Gadhada after traveling through Sorath. Shri Hari’s travels had increased in distance and frequency to protect and support his devotees, many of whom suffered physical torment from misinformed mendicants and ruthless rulers.

Laldas, the Suba of Visnagar, repeatedly misdirected his animosity for Shri Hari onto his devotees. He often beat them, locked innocent villagers in confinement, and forced them to stand outside unshielded from the summer sun for lengthy amounts of time. Shri Hari resolved to put an end to such unjustified practices forever.

One night, while all of Gadhada slept, Shri Hari snuck away from Akshar Ordi and started walking to Visnagar. Though Shri Hari wanted to be alone, Mulji Brahmachari followed Shri Hari for a few kilometers. Shri Hari noticed that he was being followed and ordered, “Brahmachari, go back to Gadhada. I command you.”

Brahmachari replied confidently, “Prabhu, I am your shadow. I follow you wherever you choose to go. May I ask where are we going?”

Shri Hari turned around and started pelting Brahmachari with stones and pebbles. Brahmachari walked into the line of fire with his head covered. He shouted, “Prabhu, if you hit me, you are going to have to care for me. If you let me follow you, I will care for you. It is your choice.”

Shri Hari stopped and said, “Then follow me to Visnagar. I want to

meet Laldas, the Suba.”

Brahmachari froze and pleaded with Shri Hari. “Prabhu, Laldas is a wretched fool. He will try to have you killed. Let’s turn back.”

Shri Hari smiled and asked, “Brahmachari, who makes the leaves ruffle?”

“The wind,” responded Brahmachari.

“And, who causes the wind to blow?”

“Bhagwan causes the wind to blow.”

“And, who am I?”

“You are Bhagwan.”

“Then you must stop worrying and follow me to Visnagar. But hurry up! I have to stop at a devotee’s home on the way.”

Shri Hari decided to rest at night in Bijapur in the Dandhavya region. After asking around town, Shri Hari made his way to Vajiba’s home, the only person in town who allowed ascetics and sadhus to rest at her residence. Vajiba was a *bhakta* whose faith was driven by true conviction. She had yet to have Shri Hari’s darshan, but her *pativrata* bhakti surpassed even Shri Hari’s expectations.

Shri Hari called out to Vajiba from the outer gate of her courtyard. “Mother, we need a place to spend the night.”

Vajiba immediately responded, “Go away. I am not allowing ganja-smoking mendicants into my home. My heart and home belong to Bhagwan Swaminarayan.”

Shri Hari was pleased but decided to push her a bit further. “Mother, I will sleep out here in the courtyard on the floor. I will not be a nuisance.”

Vajiba eventually agreed. “Sure. No drinking or smoking ganja. If you do either of the two, I will throw you out in the middle of the night.”

Brahmachari spread a sheet on the floor and requested Shri Hari to sit on it. After a few minutes, Shri Hari called out to Vajiba again. “Mother, the floor is hard. May I have a cot?”

Vajiba was annoyed by the request. “I do not have a spare cot. Sorry.”

Shri Hari instructed, “Mother, do not lie. There is a new cot in the second room. Please give it to me for the sake of your Swaminarayan.”

Vajiba was flabbergasted. How did this mendicant know about the cot? She dismissed it as a coincidence and gave him the cot and went

back to sleep. A few minutes later, Shri Hari called out again, “Mother, may I have a blanket? It is getting cold out here.”

Vajiba lied again, curious to see what response her lie would solicit. “Bawaji, go to sleep. I do not have a spare blanket.”

Shri Hari responded, “Mother, you are lying again. The spare blanket is in the third room. There is a pile of them. I just want one. Please give it to me for the sake of your Swaminarayan.”

Vajiba could not sleep for the rest of the night. She wondered how the mendicant knew about the presence of the cot and the blanket and why he referenced Swaminarayan. Although she was curious, her faith in Shri Hari was resolute. This mendicant could show her a hundred miracles, but her faith was firmly fixed in Shri Hari.

An hour before dawn, Vajiba stood up to peer outside the window of her room. She noticed that Shri Hari’s feet extended off the cot and touched the peepal tree near the well, which was several feet away from the cot. Vajiba was speechless, but she prayed to Shri Hari for the strength to keep her *pativrata* bhakti firm.

Shri Hari left for Visnagar in the morning, but he was deeply moved by Vajiba’s faith. No amount of miracles could shake her conviction in him.

Laldas the Suba in Visnagar

Shri Hari arrived in Visnagar later that morning. Shri Hari stayed at the home of Laldas’ sister, Udaykunvarba. Udaykunvarba and her son, Baldevkumar, were Shri Hari’s *bhaktas*. They were elated to see Shri Hari outside their home. Shri Hari expressed his desire to meet the Suba. Both mother and son discouraged Shri Hari from doing so, but Shri Hari calmly sent news of his arrival to the Suba.

Shri Hari’s arrival in Visnagar presented a fitting opportunity for the Suba to capture Shri Hari. He advised his military commander to ready the armed forces. While the Suba was making plans to imprison Shri Hari, Shri Hari sent the Suba’s Muslim commander into *samadhi*. When he awoke, he refused to capture Shri Hari. Laldas was furious with the commander’s defiance, but before he could gather his weapons to confront Shri Hari, Shri Hari arrived at his doorstep. Shri Hari tried to explain righteousness and the dharma of a ruler, but Laldas was blinded by his ego.

Shri Hari sent Laldas into *samadhi*. In the *samadhi*, Laldas saw the different pits of *naraka* in which he was destined to burn. Shri Hari showed Laldas his form as Bhagwan in Akshardham. This sight alone was enough for Laldas to have a change of heart. He prostrated at Shri Hari's feet and asked for forgiveness. Tears of repentance fell upon Shri Hari's feet.

After forgiving the Suba, Shri Hari blessed all of his devotees in Visnagar who had suffered at the hands of the Suba.

Now, Shri Hari was off to save yet another *bhakta*.

Protecting Naja Bhakta

Shri Hari left Visnagar that evening and traveled to Bhoyra. The trip to Bhoyra was an arduous trek, especially to complete in one night. However, Shri Hari traveled through the monsoon rains and reached Bhoyra in the morning.

Naja Bhakta was one of Shri Hari's foremost *bhaktas*. The ruler of Bhoyra, Vasur Khachar, was a cruel and merciless man. He had threatened to break both of Naja's kneecaps if Swaminarayan failed to appear the following morning.

Shri Hari knocked on Naja's door in the morning. Naja had been awake all night praying to Shri Hari to save him. Shri Hari stood in front of Naja, drenched and tired from the journey. Naja instantly began to cry at the sight of Shri Hari in his doorway. Between sobs, he asked, "Shri Hari, why did you suffer so much for my cause? I would have survived without legs. You should not have traveled such a great distance in one night."

Shri Hari was moved by Naja's bhakti. He grabbed Naja by his arms and sped to Vasur Khachar's home. The ruler was surprised to see Shri Hari and was forced to rescind his threat. Shri Hari was not satisfied. He heard wails coming from behind the stables. He asked, "Who is crying so loudly?"

Vasur Khachar chuckled and with a grisly tone said, "Those are my offenders. I capture them and break their kneecaps. Your Naja would have been crying with them if you had not come to show your face."

Shri Hari could not ignore such ghastly behavior. He tried to reason with the ruler. "This sort of punishment has not been prescribed in any

of the dharma shastras. Why then are you punishing them?"

Vasur Khachar replied, "This is my village. I rule by my shastras. What are you going to do about..."

Before Vasur Khachar could finish the sentence, Shri Hari sent him into *samadhi*. Yamraj's attendants heavily beat him, replicating the pain he had inflicted on his victims. Vasur Khachar could not bear the pain. Upon seeing Vasur Khachar's plight, Shri Hari brought the ruler out of *samadhi* and consoled him. The ruler crawled to Shri Hari's feet and wept profusely. Shri Hari forgave him and ordered him to care for his subjects according to the dharma shastras and to nourish, not diminish, them.

Shri Hari ordered the king to release the wailing prisoners immediately. Shri Hari liberated the innocent prisoners and the king, exemplifying the wide breadth of his compassion.

Sarvagnanand Swami and Ghanshyamanand Swami

Over a year ago, Krishnaji and Mulji of Mankua, Kutch, had begged Shri Hari to initiate them into the sadhu-fold. After instructing them to prepare for the initiation, Shri Hari ordered them to live as householders, inadvertently causing them to become a source of ridicule in their village. However, their passion to renounce the world remained strong. Instead of returning home, the two went to Gadhada and lived in Ladha Thakkar's home. They worked for a short period but could not convince themselves to live as householders. Only after a year, when Krishnaji and Mulji's relatives wrote to Shri Hari asking him where the two were, did Shri Hari realize that they never returned home.

Shri Hari immediately called both friends to Dada Khachar's residence and asked them why they had not gone home. They expressed their passion to become sadhus. Shri Hari replied, "I need written permission from your families. Go home and get a signed note from them. Once they give their consent, I will give you *diksha*."

With Shri Hari's blessings, Krishnaji and Mulji departed for Mankua. As expected, their families rejected their appeal for consent. Their families refused to give them permission since they wanted the young men to assume householder lives to continue the family lineage. The two friends were devastated. One fateful evening, they decided to take matters into

their own hands. They defied their families' request to continue the family lineage by dismembering their organs. Though this action may be interpreted as impulsive and unwise, Krishnaji and Mulji understood this as the only way to prove their futility to their families and secure their family's permission to renounce the world. Their passion for renunciation was intense and unwavering.

Shri Hari received news of this extreme move in Gadhada. He immediately wrote a letter to the satsang community in Mankua and ordered them to avoid Krishnaji and Mulji. He explained, "They have acted rashly without my *agna*. Do not care for their well-being. Do not look after them. Do not associate with them at all. This is my *agna*."

The devotees shunned Krishnaji and Mulji. Adabhai, a *kshatriya* in Mankua, read Shri Hari's letter and thought to himself, "I am going to look after these two devotees. I will apologize to Shri Hari for this mistake when I go to Gadhada. They have no one to look after them; as a *satsangi*, it is my responsibility to care for them."

The satsang community spurned Adabhai as well. Once they recovered, Krishnaji, Mulji, and Adabhai attempted to attend a satsang *sabha* but were driven out of the assembly. Instead, they sat on the dirt road in the bazaar to listen to the *katha* and *kirtan* from a distance. The devotees even chased them away from the dirt road. The three *bhaktas* were treated worse than stray dogs. However, they maintained their composure and tolerated each insult without a word of repudiation. Krishnaji and Mulji's fervor to become sadhus grew with each passing day. One day, writhing with agony, they donned orange garbs and sped to Gadhada. Shri Hari was visibly upset upon seeing them. He asked the *parshads* to forcefully remove the two youths from the *sabha*.

Krishnaji and Mulji went to the banks of the Ghela River and sang bhajans as loudly as possible. That night, Shri Hari tossed and turned in his cot at the sound of the bhajans emanating from the riverbanks. Yet, the test was not complete. He complained to the *parshads*, "These two pests will not leave me alone. Tell them to stop singing."

The *parshads* rushed to the river and scolded the youths. Their eyes remained shut and their hearts fixed on Shri Hari's *murti*.

Hearing of their tolerance, Shri Hari decided to stop testing Krishnaji

and Mulji. He said, “The sound of their bhajans and kirtans are pulling me towards them. Bring them to me and treat them with kindness. They deserve to be treated as sadhus.”

Upon seeing Krishnaji and Mulji enter Dada Khachar’s courtyard, Shri Hari immediately stood up and performed *dandavats*. He then repeatedly embraced Krishnaji and Mulji.

The sadhus and devotees watching this scene from a distance also had tears in their eyes. These two young devotees passed the test of *divyabhav*. Despite all of the insults and hardships they suffered, their conviction in Shri Hari was unflinching. They bowed to Krishnaji and Mulji in their minds. Shri Hari, too, shared their *mahima* with all of the devotees present.

Shri Hari initiated both of the young devotees into the sadhu-fold as Sarvagnanand Swami and Ghanshyamanand Swami. Sarvagnanand Swami served as the mahant of the Ahmedabad mandir. Ghanshyamanand Swami served in Junagadh with Gunatitanand Swami.

Vira Sheladiya's Faith

Shri Hari stayed in Gadhada for a few months. One afternoon, a simple-looking farmer came for Shri Hari's darshan. His clothes were too big for his frame from the waist and shoulders, but his pants were tight and too short. Shri Hari recognized the man as Virabhai of Mitiyala. Mitiyala was a small town near Junagadh. The village ruler, Hada Khuman, was envious of Shri Hari's growing fellowship. He mistreated Virabhai and his family out of spite for Shri Hari.

Virabhai prostrated at Shri Hari's feet. Shri Hari put his hand on Virabhai's head and blessed him. He spoke to Virabhai affectionately. “Virabhai, stay strong. When hardship befalls you, remember that Bhagwan always looks after his devotees in the end. Tolerate insult and abuse. A true devotee never retaliates or thinks of vengeance. Be patient. There is always redemption at the end.”

Virabhai listened attentively and nodded in consent. After spending a few days in Gadhada, Virabhai went back to Mitiyala. Hada Khuman renewed his efforts to harass Virabhai and his family. He made false accusations and even incited villagers against Virabhai. Amidst the

harassment, Virabhai returned to Gadhada for more of Shri Hari's *samagam*. Upon returning to his village, Virabhai sensed that something was terribly wrong. A neighbor came running to Virabhai and said, "Friend, while you were away, your entire house burned down in a fire. Your family is okay, but nothing survived the fire."

Virabhai smiled and replied, "Whatever Bhagwan does is for my own good. I am not worried."

The next morning Virabhai passed by Hada Khuman's courtyard. The village ruler retorted, "Vira, Swaminarayan did not protect you after all. You went to Gadhada for his darshan while your house burned down here. What kind of Bhagwan lets his devotees suffer?"

Hada Khuman's evil laughter echoed through the town's alleys. Virabhai replied, "Shri Hari is Bhagwan. At least my grains are safe. More importantly, my family is safe. I am not the least bit worried about my future. It is all in his hands. Whatever he has planned for me will be in my best interest. Please do not worry about me either."

Hada Khuman was both surprised and bothered by Virabhai's steadiness. Virabhai was not disturbed by these events. He was not even curious about the cause of the fire. In retaliation, Hada Khuman increased his harassment, but Virabhai's faith was unflinching.

Shri Hari ordered Virabhai and his family to move to Samadhiyala. There, Virabhai prospered economically and thrived spiritually. He was gifted the valuable *samagam* of Aksharbrahma Gunatitanand Swami and his senior disciple Balmukund Swami.

Bhakta Galuji

Galuji was a Rajput devotee who lived in Dadusar. He was brave, in both a traditional and non-traditional sense. One morning a messenger arrived at Galuji's doorsteps with news of Shri Hari's arrival. Shri Hari had left Gadhada and was traveling through Dadusar. He was a few kilometers away and decided to grace Galuji's village. Galuji bid the messenger farewell and started to prepare for Shri Hari's arrival. Galuji called upon the village *brahmins* to prepare a meal. He informed the villagers and ordered drums, horns, and *jhanjh* to be played upon Shri Hari's entrance into the village.

Shri Hari arrived in two hours. Galuji was overjoyed. He sprinkled *gulal* and danced in front of Shri Hari. Shri Hari was pleased with Galuji's bhakti and placed his hand on Galuji's head. Galuji had prepared a full meal of *ladu*, *shaak*, *dal*, *bhat*, pickle, and yogurt. He instructed the *brahmins* to serve all the sadhus and devotees. Muktanand Swami, Gunatitanand Swami, Nityanand Swami, Sura Khachar, and Somla Khachar ate generous portions, while focusing their minds on Shri Hari's *murti*.

After lunch, Shri Hari asked to take Galuji's leave. Galuji replied, "Prabhu, stay for a few days. I would be more than delighted to have the opportunity to serve you and your devotees."

Shri Hari expressed his desire to reach the next village by evening. Galuji escorted Shri Hari to the outskirts of Dadusar and performed a *dandavat*. Shri Hari smiled and said, "Bhaktaraj, now you must go home and finish that partially completed task of yours."

Galuji bowed to Shri Hari and the sadhus before heading home. When Galuji was out of ear's reach, Muktanand Swami asked Shri Hari, "Prabhu, what unfinished business were you referring to?"

Shri Hari replied, "Muktanand Swami, minutes before we sent word of our arrival, Galuji's mother passed away. Galuji wrapped her body in thick sheets and stored her body in the attic. He danced, served, and celebrated in our presence. He has imbibed *atmajnan* in his life. He did not show the slightest sorrow or remorse. He is a true *bhakta*."

Muktanand Swami was shocked. As a member of a community deeply rooted in ritual and tradition, Galuji rose above the social stigma of defying such customs to celebrate the arrival of Bhagwan despite the death of a family member. Galuji was truly one of Shri Hari's bravest devotees.

Understanding Shri Hari's True Mahima

In January of 1811, Govind Swami and other leading *bhaktas* began planning another *yagna* festival in Jetalpur. Shri Hari expressed his desire to cancel the *yagna*. Govind Swami, however, continued the preparations.

The Shakta *brahmins* were waiting for another chance to incite the Suba of Ahmedabad against Shri Hari. They immediately rushed to Ahmedabad and again poisoned the Suba's perception of Shri Hari. "The last time Swaminarayan performed a *yagna* in Jetalpur, your father

passed away. This time he is aiming for you. Please stop him at any cost.”

The Suba saw this as an opportunity to avenge the prior insult to his ego by Shri Hari at his royal court.³ He immediately sent an army to capture Shri Hari in Jetalpur. Fortunately, Shri Hari had left Jetalpur the prior day. Shri Hari ordered Govind Swami to send the food items for the *yagna* to Dabhan. On Vasant Panchmi, Shri Hari invited devotees from across the region for a *yagna* in Dabhan. Upon their arrival, Shri Hari distributed the resources and said, “Darshan and *samagam* are as great as the *yagna*. There is no need to perform another *yagna*. Remember my *murti* and make your way back home.”

On Chaitra sud Nom, or Ramnavmi, Shri Hari was in Vartal at Narayan Giri’s home. Many senior sadhus came for Shri Hari’s darshan. In the evening assembly, Shri Hari asked a question. “How do you perceive my *swarup*? How do you understand my *mahima*?”

The sadhus remained silent. Shri Hari continued, “Take some time to think about my questions. You may answer tomorrow.”

The next day when Shri Hari asked again, many of the sadhus replied, “You are as great Dattatreya and Kapil.” Others replied, “Prabhu, you are as great as Narasimha avatar and Vaman avatar.” Some also replied, “Bhagwan, you are as great as Shri Rama and Shri Krishna avatars.”

Shri Hari quickly replied, “Only Gunatitanand Swami and Nityanand Swami have understood my true form.”

The sadhus turned to Nityanand Swami and asked him to elaborate. Nityanand Swami said, “I understand Shri Hari as Purna Purushottam Narayan, as Parabrahma. He is the lord of all the avatars. There is no one greater than him in the entire cosmos. He is the controller of Aksharbrahma. Aksharbrahma is above all of the avatars you mentioned. Only Aksharbrahma and Parabrahma are above *maya*. Shri Hari is greater than any manifested form of the past or any form that will manifest in the future.”

Nityanand Swami continued to cite references from the Upanishads

3 Refer to the chapter entitled ‘At the Fort in Ahmedabad,’ which tells the story of how the Suba attempted to harm Shri Hari by asking him to sit on the royal throne which concealed a pot of hot oil. Much to the Suba’s dismay, Shri Hari foiled the Suba’s attack. He ordered Shri Hari not to return to Ahmedabad so as long as it was under his rule.

and other texts. The sadhus and devotees bowed to Nityanand Swami and committed their minds to rise to such an elevated understanding of Shri Hari's *swarupnishta*.

Gunatitanand Swami's Thirst for Darshan

Shri Hari arrived in Gadhada in the midst of the scorching summer months. The sadhus and devotees tried to hide from the burning sun on the riverbanks or under trees on the outskirts of the village. Shri Hari decided to implement an important project. He gathered all of the sadhus and devotees and set up camp in Abhel Khachar's farmland. Abhel Khachar had 450 acres of profitable farmland that he never tilled. Shri Hari engaged all of the sadhus and devotees in cleaning and tilling the land. Abhel Khachar was astonished by Shri Hari's concern for his land and well-being. Since the monsoon was fast approaching, the devotees' efforts would yield lush, green crops.

The monsoon clouds huddled over Gujarat. The monsoon of 1811 delivered record rainfalls. On one thunderous night, Gunatitanand Swami stood under a roof waiting for something. The night was pitch black, except for brief moments when the sky was lit by abrupt flashes of lightning. Muktanand Swami awoke to the sounds of the clouds roaring and stepped out of his room to observe the rainfall. A short distance from his room appeared the dark silhouette of a person. Muktanand Swami was almost certain that it was a sadhu. He called out, "Who is there?"

The sadhu replied, "Gunatitanand."

Muktanand Swami was surprised and asked, "Why are you standing there under a stream of water flowing from the roof? Are you not cold, wet, and tired? Get some rest, Sadhuram!"

Gunatitanand Swami replied, "Swamiji, Shri Hari has gone to Laduba and Jivuba's quarters. After he finishes speaking in the women's assembly, he will return to Akshar Ordi. I am hopeful that I will catch a mere glimpse of him passing, given that the lightening favors my desire."

Muktanand Swami was stunned. Such was this sadhu's intense desire for Shri Hari's darshan, despite his ability to constantly envision Shri Hari's *murti* in his mind. Muktanand Swami commented, "You are great, Gunatitanand. You are great." Muktanand Swami retired to his room

thinking about Gunatitanand Swami's intense love for Shri Hari.

Several minutes later, Shri Hari passed by where Gunatitanand Swami stood waiting patiently. Time stood still for but a moment: the clouds grew silent; the leaves stopped rustling; the rain, too, seized to fall. In that moment, the lightening flashed just long enough for the young sadhu to catch a glimpse of his beloved Shri Hari. Nature resumed its course, satisfied by witnessing this moment of consummate bhakti.

Torrential Rains in Sarangpur

Shri Hari spent a majority of the monsoon in Gadhada. One afternoon in July of 1811, Sura Khachar and the *kshatriyas* took Shri Hari to the neighboring village of Minapar. Manubhai Bapu was out of town, but his young daughter, Monghiba, offered the beautiful mare Manki in Shri Hari's service. Many years ago, Monghiba had offered the young mare to Shri Hari, but the mare was too young. Today, the mare was fully grown and ready to be gifted to its rightful owner. Monghiba put a *tilak* on the mare's forehead and handed its reigns to Shri Hari. Shri Hari was pleased with Monghiba's bhakti and promised her *moksha*. From that day onward, Shri Hari only rode atop Manki.

Manki was one of a kind. It was as if she shared a connection with Shri Hari from a previous life. She rode without being directed. Her speed and grace surpassed that of even Garuda.⁴ The mare rode in a way such that Shri Hari could rest while traveling. Manki was a *mukta*, one that manifested on Earth as a celestial mare to serve Shri Hari diligently and carefully. Shri Hari accepted Manki's *seva* with appreciation and love.

Later that month, Shri Hari mounted Manki and rode to Sarangpur. Jiva Khachar welcomed Shri Hari with garlands and vermillion powder. The rains in Sarangpur were sparse, so the devotees prayed to Shri Hari. He responded with a silent smile.

That evening, the rains surprised the villagers. Shri Hari was at

⁴ Garuda is a large, celestial, eagle-like bird, which serves as Shri Vishnu's vehicle. Garuda is said to have traveled at sonic speeds through hail storms, fire shields, and even an attack of celestial weapons, all the while protecting Shri Vishnu. Garuda is also described in the *Ramacharitmanas* and the *Shrimad Bhagavata Purana* as an ideal *bhakta* who traveled according to Shri Vishnu's wish without any direct instruction. Manki is also known to have served Shri Hari with this spirit of perfect unity.

Jiva Khachar's residence. When Jiva Khachar's servants prepared the fire to cook Shri Hari's *thal*, they realized that all of the firewood was wet and therefore not usable. Jiva Khachar went inside his bedroom and disassembled his new wooden cot for firewood. The *brahmin* cooks prepared millet *rotlo* and offered it to Shri Hari with spiced yogurt. Shri Hari was pleased with Jiva Khachar's love for him.

Shri Hari spent that night at Deva Khachar's house. In the middle of the night, Shri Hari heard a cry, "Swaminarayan, protect us. Oh Swaminarayan, where are you?"

Shri Hari stood up and ran outside. He located the direction of the voice and followed it to the house of a farmer named Lakha Deva.

The main beam supporting the roof of Lakha's house had collapsed. Chaos filled the house, along with water from the torrential rains. Several people and animals were trapped under the weight of the large beam. Shri Hari lifted the beam and placed its weight on his shoulders. Raising the beam with his shoulders, Shri Hari reassured the farmer and instructed, "Get help, and get all the animals out from under this part of the roof. I am holding it; nothing will happen. Hurry!"

The farmer saved all of the livestock. In the meantime, two other farmers arrived and shifted the weight of the beam off Shri Hari's shoulders. The weight of the enormous beam bruised Shri Hari's shoulders. The next morning, only after Brahmachari noticed the bruises, did the sadhus and devotees learn of Shri Hari's selfless midnight rescue. Shri Hari's nature was compassionate and merciful. He could not tolerate the suffering of any living being.

That afternoon, Shri Hari begged alms in the village alongside his sadhus. His only purpose was to grant *moksha* to villagers who offered even a single grain to feed his sadhus.

Towards the end of the monsoon, Shri Hari invited all the *brahmins* from the Saurashtra and Jhalavad regions for a *chaurasi* feast. After the feast, hundreds of *brahmins* departed for their homes while hailing 'Bhagwan Swaminarayan ni jay!'

The Unpaid Feast at Bhimnath Mahadev

Shri Hari took special interest in feeding sadhus and *brahmins*.

In what seemed like routine incidents, he often conducted special *lila charitras* to test and strengthen the faith of devotees. More importantly, he performed these *charitras* to give *smruti* to devotees, paving the road to their *moksha*.

Shri Hari left Sarangpur and traveled towards Dhandhuka. Near Dhandhuka sits the renowned Bhimnath Mahadev mandir, which is associated with the travels of the Pandavas in the Mahabharata. Shri Hari stopped at the mandir to have darshan. The mahant of the mandir was an old, god-fearing man. Realizing that Shri Hari was not an ordinary human, the mahant greeted Shri Hari and offered him a seat next to his own raised platform. Shri Hari had darshan of Mahadevji and then asked Bhaga Doshi, a wealthy merchant from Botad, to offer a *seva* of twenty-five rupees to the mandir. The mahant ordered his disciples to prepare a *thal* for Shri Hari and a meal for the sadhus and devotees.

Shri Hari decided to feed the *brahmins* from the Bhal region at this auspicious location. Shri Hari addressed the mahant and said, “Mahantji, we would like to feed the *brahmins* in this region. Would you be able to organize a *chaursi* feast?”

The mahant replied, “Prabhu, you are the protector of cows—the mother of humankind—and *brahmins*. I can organize a feast as early as tomorrow, but I need your financial support. I do not have extra funds here.”

Shri Hari immediately told Bhaga Doshi to assume responsibility for his expenses with the mahant. The mahant sent messengers to invite *brahmins* from across the region. The cooks started preparing a full meal—*ladus*, *dal*, *bhat*, and *shaak*. Shri Hari, too, helped prepare for the following day’s festivities. Shri Hari assigned his personal clerk, Hira Kothari, to work with the mahant to keep a ledger of the expenditures.

The next day, Shri Hari supervised the feeding of hundreds of *brahmins*. After the *brahmins* were fed, Shri Hari offered *dakshina* to each of them with a generous hand. That afternoon, Shri Hari sent the sadhus away with Bhaga Doshi. Shri Hari called five of His *kshatriya* attendants and shared his plan to leave without being noticed. The *kshatriyas* prepared for the silent departure.

A few hours before sunset, Shri Hari and the *kshatriyas* rode off to

Kundal. Hira Kothari was left balancing the ledgers for the feast with the mahant. The mahant and Hirabhai waited for Shri Hari, but they did not hear from him. They assumed that Shri Hari was resting after the day's activities.

It was late into the evening, but Shri Hari was nowhere to be found. The mahant felt that he had been deceived and yelled at Hirabhai, "Your Swaminarayan amassed a bill of ten thousand rupees and vanished. All he left me with is you. You are worthless to me."

The mahant placed Hirabhai under a watch to make sure that he did not escape. The next morning, Hirabhai went to the riverfront to bathe. He could not stop thinking about why Shri Hari had left him behind. As he sobbed, Hirabhai noticed a horse-drawn buggy approaching him. The door opened, and a wealthy merchant stepped out of the carriage. He asked, "Sir, why are you crying?"

Hira Kothari explained his predicament. "Is that all?" asked the merchant. "I have known Swaminarayan for a long time. I will leave you with ten thousand rupees for now. I will get my money from him when we meet again."

The merchant ordered his servant to unload ten bags of rupees, each filled with one thousand rupees. The merchant smiled at Hirabhai and reassured him, "Do not cry. Swaminarayan never leaves his devotees to suffer."

Hirabhai called out to the merchant, "Kind sir, what is your name?"

The merchant shouted as his horse-drawn buggy departed, "I am Vishvambhar."⁵

Within minutes, the mahant arrived at the riverbank to announce his punishment for Hirabhai. Hirabhai smiled and said, "Mahantji, I am glad you came. Shri Hari left the money here. I will not be able to carry all these bags. Would you be kind enough to give me a hand?"

The mahant deposited all of the cash within the mandir's treasury and allowed Hirabhai to leave.

Wandering from village to village, Hirabhai eventually reached Kundal. Shri Hari, too, was in Kundal. Shri Hari smiled upon seeing

⁵ Vishvambhar is another name for Bhagwan. It literally means 'one who is the supporter of the universe'.

Hirabhai. "Kothariji, you made it. How are you?"

Hirabhai was upset and asked, "Bhagwan, why did You leave me? The mahant would have imprisoned me. If it was not for your merchant-friend, Vishvambhar, I would have been in a serious situation."

Shri Hari replied with a smile, "I do not know any Vishvambhar."

Hirabhai Kothari considered himself to have been the recipient of a fortunate circumstance, but the sadhus and devotees listening to this exchange between *bhakta* and Bhagwan knew that Vishvambhar was none other than Shri Hari himself.

At the Fair in Vautha

Shri Hari celebrated Kartik Punam in Vautha. A large fair with thousands of participants from Saurashtra and Gujarat gathered on this day in Vautha. Shri Hari enjoyed attending festivals as it gave him the opportunity to give his darshan and share unique *smritis* with hundreds of people. Another of Shri Hari's preferred *charitras* was to organize large feasts and distribute items to the poor, *brahmins*, and ascetics.

In Vautha, Shri Hari traveled through the fair attracting the gaze of thousands of individuals. He shared *prasad* and exchanged fond glances with each of these individuals. Shri Hari arrived at the Shiva mandir in Vautha and decided to make a donation to the pujari at the temple. Shri Hari removed his gold-threaded clothes and offered them to the pujari. Shri Hari also wanted to give away his gold bangles. He tried to pull them off, but they were too tight. One of the *kshatriyas* in the crowd volunteered to skillfully maneuver the bangles off Shri Hari's wrists. Instead of handing them to the pujari, the *kshatriya* dashed away with the bangles. The devotees searched for the *kshatriya*, but he was nowhere to be found.

Shri Hari returned to his residence to rest. It was then that Mulji Brahmachari removed the bangles wrapped in a piece of cloth and handed them to Shri Hari. Shri Hari was startled. "How did you track down that *kshatriya*? I thought we lost these bangles forever."

Brahmachari smiled and said, "Prabhu, you are too generous when you give *dan*. That pujari would have easily been pleased with five rupees. These bangles are worth ten thousand rupees. They are solid gold. Besides, giving these bangles away would hurt the devotee who

spent his life savings to offer this *seva* to you. The devotees' faces light up when they see you wearing the items they have offered in *seva*. I had one of our devotees donate five rupees to the pujari. I was the one that told the *kshatriya* to take the bangles and disappear. He then came to our residence and returned them."

Shri Hari laughed and was impressed with his attendant's wit.

The next day Shri Hari organized a *chaurasi* feast and fed the *brahmins* before departing to Kheda. There, four British officers, Colonels Walker, Douglas, Sir Heron, and Roll, came to meet Bhagwan Swaminarayan. They had heard a great deal about Shri Hari and his social and spiritual reforms. They removed their hats and bowed as a sign of respect. Walker initiated the conversation. "Swaminarayanji, we are fortunate to have your darshan in person. Your reputation precedes you. Please do tell us if there is anything we can do to assist in your contributions to reform society."

Shri Hari acknowledged their request and blessed them with his right hand.

Kanoba's House Arrest

Vadodara was ruled by Govindrao Gaekwad. His second queen's son, Kanhojirao, was infuriated by his step-brother, Anandrao, being chosen as the heir apparent. Kanhojirao staged a coup, but his brother learned of his ploy and exiled him from Vadodara. Thereafter, Kanhojirao lived with a group of royal outlaws in the nearby village of Padra. He took up the lifestyle of a dacoit: endless looting and violence.

In December of 1812, Shri Hari was traveling through Padra to the village of Sarasvani. Kanhojirao sent an invitation to Shri Hari to grace his palace in Padra. His objective was to capture Shri Hari and demand a ransom from the satsang community.

Shri Hari sought input from the satsang elders in Padra about whether he should accept the invitation. He then consulted with Muktanand Swami. The unanimous vote was to respectfully decline the invitation. Shri Hari reasoned, "What can that poor soul do to us? We will oblige his request."

Shri Hari left his mare Manki in Sarasvani and instructed the

kshatriya disciples to meet him with the mare in Salki, a village near Bamangam. Shri Hari made his way to Padra in a carriage with Muktanand Swami, Brahmanand Swami, Atmanand Swami, Mulji Brahmachari, and two devotees. Kanhojirao welcomed Shri Hari in the village bazaar and walked Shri Hari to his palace. There, Kanhojirao attempted to restrict the householder devotees from coming inside the palace. Shri Hari insisted that Kanhojirao allow them to enter. “These two are my personal attendants. They look after my health and meals.”

Kanhojirao did not want to make a scene and yielded to Shri Hari’s request. In his court, Kanhojirao staged a theological debate with the intention of defeating Shri Hari; however, the opposing scholar surrendered at Shri Hari’s feet after having only a glimpse of his *murti*.

Kanhojirao then implemented an alternative strategy. He led Shri Hari and the devotees into a small room in the inner quarters. There he said to Shri Hari, “I oppose the way the British are killing cows in our land. If you arrange to give me 100,000 rupees, I will have the British removed from our lands forever.”

Shri Hari laughed and said, “You only need 100,000 rupees? I can collect that for you at the next *yagna* ceremony I organize. As of now, I have no money. I will collect it and send it to you.”

Kanhojirao was hesitant to let Shri Hari leave. He locked Shri Hari and the sadhus in the room so he could ponder his next steps. He instructed a guard to keep watch on their whereabouts.

Later that night, Shri Hari called out to Brahmanand Swami, “Brahmanandji, are you asleep?”

As Brahmanand Swami’s stomach growled, he asked, “Shri Hari, we haven’t even had dinner. Besides, how are we to fall asleep while being held as prisoners?”

Shri Hari devised a plan. The next morning, Brahmanand Swami knocked on the door and asked the guard to open it so that he could use the toilet. The guard opened the door, and all of the sadhus and Shri Hari stepped out under the pretext of going for their morning bath in the river. The guard let them out with the understanding that they would return. Once outside of the palace gates, Shri Hari instructed Brahmanand Swami and the sadhus to bathe in the river and return to the palace. Shri Hari

left for Salki and waited there to rejoin the sadhus.

The palace guard let the sadhus back into the room and waited for Kanhojirao's arrival. When Kanhojirao arrived later that morning, he was furious to see that Shri Hari was missing. He yelled at the guard, who then explained, "I only let the disciples out for their morning rituals. Swaminarayan never left the room."

Kanhojirao was speechless and wondered how Shri Hari escaped from the room. Brahmanand Swami reasoned, "Kanhojiroa, Shri Hari is Bhagwan. He must have slipped out of the room after we went for our morning rituals. Bhagwan can appear and disappear as he pleases. Give up your greed and malice for your own good."

Although Kanhojirao was not convinced, Brahmanand Swami and the sadhus no longer served a purpose for his ploy. He was forced to release them.

Historical accounts indicate that Kanhojirao was later arrested by the British government for his crimes. He was sentenced to life imprisonment in Chennai, where he remained until his death.

Meeting Swarupanand Swami in Loya

Shri Hari traveled through several villages in Gujarat and Saurashtra before arriving in Loya. Swarupanand Swami had just returned to Saurashtra after spending several months in Madhya Pradesh spreading Shri Hari's *mahima*. Shri Hari embraced Swarupanand Swami with both arms. The sadhus gathered around the senior sadhu to hear his experiences. Swarupanand Swami said, "Prabhu, the people are different; their customs are different; their language and even their food are different. It was as if there were no humans as I had expected."

One of the younger sadhus then played off Swarupanand Swami's word choice and said, "Swamiji, if there were no humans, who did you speak to about our beloved Shri Hari's *mahima*?"

Shri Hari interjected and said, "Swarupanand Swami's darshan alone is enough to convince people of my *mahima*. He is a gem among sadhus. I have tremendous respect for Swarupanand Swami." Though Swarupanand Swami was always traveling in distant lands and rarely in Shri Hari's proximity, the senior sadhu remained ever-present in the close

vicinity of Shri Hari's heart.

Shri Hari traveled to Gadhada and graced the newly constructed sadhus' residence. Abhel Khachar expended a large amount of time and his personal resources for the construction of this building so that the sadhus would have appropriate accommodations to sleep and rest. Shri Hari was extremely pleased with Abhel Khachar's bhakti.

The residence soon became a favorite place for Shri Hari to gather his sadhus and to speak to them about the *mahima* of Aksharbrahma and Parabrahma. Shri Hari spoke about his oneness with Gunatitanand Swami and described it as an ideal example of the relationship a *bhakta* should maintain with Bhagwan. He also spoke to them about the *niyams* prescribed for sadhus, which is perhaps the reason why Shri Hari's sadhus were exemplars among the rest of the saffron-clad ascetics of that time.

Fuldol Festival in Sarangpur

The Fuldol festival of 1812 was celebrated in Sarangpur. Shri Hari accepted Rathod Dhadhal's invitation to celebrate a grand festival by inviting thousands of devotees from Gujarat and Saurashtra. Shri Hari intended to share his Akshardham's *mahima* with all of the sadhus and devotees.

Shri Hari traveled to Sarangpur on his mare and led the preparations for the festival. Cart loads of *abil*, *gulal*, and *chandan* were stored in Rathod Dhadhal's courtyard. The sadhus designed a beautiful *hindola* of various flowers.

Shri Hari was seated inside the house. The doors opened to reveal sadhus and devotees dancing and singing to the tune of their bhakti for Shri Hari. Several devotees snuck into the room with *pichkaris*. Shri Hari grabbed them by their arms and led them outside. Once outside, the sadhus and devotees drenched Shri Hari with colored water and colored powders. It was as if a rainbow had colored the sky above Sarangpur.

The female devotees were watching from a distance. They, too, wanted to play with Shri Hari. One of the female devotees asked, "Prabhu, you are Bhagwan. You are above the gender distinction of male and female. We are all equal in your eyes. Then, why won't you play Holi with us?"

Shri Hari stopped the festivities and spoke to the sadhus and devotees. “Yes, I am above the distinction of gender, but everyone else is not. I set an example for my devotees and other humans. Listen to what I am about to share with you. Within society, many people have used *atmajnan* as an excuse to shy away from following the *niyams* of *brahmacharya* prescribed by the dharma shastras. All the festivals we celebrate are to be done in accordance with the *niyams* prescribed in the dharma shastras. Do not think for a second that *niyams* are secondary to bhakti. Bhakti grows on the foundation of dharma. Wherever men and women celebrate festivals or participate in bhakti rituals without following the *niyams* of the dharma shastras, there is bound to be decay in the spiritual, social, and moral environment. There are many examples before us today. I manifested on Earth to share this *ekantiki* bhakti, that which is built on the foundations of dharma, *vairagya*, and *jnan*. Those who do not follow my *agna* in this matter will never be able to attain *moksha* and earn a place in my Akshardham.”

The male and female devotees bowed their heads and accepted Shri Hari’s *agna* with enthusiasm.

Shri Hari gathered the sadhus and devotees and walked to Falgu River. After bathing in the river’s warm waters, Shri Hari headed towards the village. On the outskirts of the village, Shri Hari met Gunatitanand Swami and Nishkulanand Swami. They were returning from their *vicharan* in Gujarat. They were carrying baskets of flowers, garlands, and flower-made ornaments. Shri Hari embraced each sadhu. He succumbed to their bhakti and asked Mulji Brahmachari to adorn him with the flower ornaments they brought.

Later that evening, as the sun set on the small village and a full moon took its place, Shri Hari played *raas* with the sadhus. The sounds of the *dhol*, *jhanjh*, and horns could be heard in neighboring villages. As Shri Hari played *raas* with Gunatitanand Swami, sadhus and devotees gathered around the two *raas* partners. With his stare fixed upon Gunatitanand Swami, Shri Hari sang Kabir’s *pad*:

*Jug jug jiyo ye jogiyaa, Sadguru khele vasant
Koti Vishnu name maath, Koti Krishna jode haath
Koti Brahma kathe jnaan, Koti Shiv dhare dhyaan*

*Jogiyaa taarat janam ka faasla...
Jug jug jiyo ye jogiyaa, Sadguru khele vasant*

*Long live such a sadhu, where the sadguru plays Vasant
Innumerable Vishnus bow their heads, Innumerable Krishnas fold their hands
Innumerable Brahmans recite their wisdom, Innumerable Shivas meditate
Such a sadhu eradicates the cycle of birth and death...
Long live such a sadhu, where the sadguru plays Vasant*

Shri Hari sang this verse and encouraged all to repeat after him. In the middle of singing the verse, Shri Hari asked the sadhus, “Who is Kabir speaking of in this *pad*? Who is such a sadhu?”

Muktanand Swami folded his hands and said, “Shri Hari, who but you can grant us *moksha*? You are the subject of Kabirji’s *pad*.”

Shri Hari shook his head disapprovingly and clarified, “Swamiji, this Gunatitanand is such a sadhu. He is my Akshabrahma. I am Parabrahma, beyond even Aksharbrahma. Aksharbrahma is dependent on Parabrahma (see photo 30).”

Shri Hari touched his *raas* stick to Gunatitanand Swami’s chest and sang, “Long live such a sadhu; such a sadhu eradicates the cycle of birth and death.”

Shri Hari then sat on the *hindola* made of flowers by the sadhus and continued to share Gunatitanand Swami’s *mahima*. “Gunatitanand Swami is my Akshardham. He serves me in all three states. His darshan is equal to my darshan. By serving him, my devotees can attain *moksha*. It is through his grace that my devotees can become *brahmarup* and rise above the powers of one’s base instincts and faults. By recognizing the *mahima* of Gunatitanand Swami, all of you will better understand my *mahima*.”

Muktanand Swami writes of this exchange in one of his *bhakti pads*:
Bhaagya bade sadguru main paayo, mana ki duvidha dur nasaai...

Great is my fortune that I have met such a sadguru, my mind’s doubts have been cast aside...

Shri Hari was pleased to see the female devotees observing this divine *charitra* from a distance. After Shri Hari spoke about the *niyams* of *brahmacharya* during the Fuldol festivities, the female devotees happily watched from a distance without insisting that they receive closer darshan of Shri Hari. Shri Hari turned to look at the ladies and said, “I am pleased with your willingness to follow my *agna*. Ask for *fagva* today. I will give you what your heart desires.”

Jatanba of Vahelal and other female devotees from northern Gujarat asked Shri Hari for a spiritually-charged *fagva*. “Dear Prabhu, your *maya* is extremely powerful. It has overpowered men and women. Give us the boon today so that we may rise above its influence. Do not give us the company of evil persons. Keep us away from ego, lust, and greed, through which we may forget you. Instead, give us the company of sadhus and your true *bhaktas*. This is what we ask for on this day. Please keep your word and grant us this boon.”

Shri Hari’s eyes’ brimmed with tears. His female devotees fully grasped the true essence of satsang and spiritual progress. He raised his right hand and granted Jatanba and others their boon. To this day, this *prarthana* is sung in mandirs and during Fuldol festivities. Nishkulanan Swami also included the *prarthana* in his Bhaktachintamani in verse form.⁶

The next morning, Mahanubhavanand Swami arrived in Sarangpur with his *mandal* of sadhus. He heard of the Fuldol festival, the *raas* episode, and the *fagva* blessings. He was disappointed to have missed this memorable occasion. He went to Shri Hari’s room and performed *dandavats*. He then bent down and extended his right hand to touch Shri Hari’s foot. Shri Hari retracted his feet under the blanket. Mahanubhavanand Swami was startled. “Prabhu, to this day, we have followed your every *agna*. We have been beaten by ascetics and evil individuals. Our families, friends, and community members have admonished us for accepting your vows. Yet, we have remained firm in our resolve. Are we yet not worthy to even touch your feet?”

Shri Hari answered Mahanubhavanand Swami’s question with a short story. “Swami, there was once a wealthy merchant. A poor servant cleaned

⁶ This prayer, “*Maha balvant maya tamaari...*,” is found in the Bhaktachintamani, 64.

the merchant's courtyard and approached the merchant to collect his pay for the task. The merchant asked him what he wanted. The servant asked for ten kilograms of gold. What you are asking for today is equivalent to that which was asked by the servant. I have come from Akshardham and manifested on Earth for the sake of my devotees. Is that not mercy enough? What you are asking for is ten kilograms of gold."

Mahanubhavanand Swami realized his mistake. He performed more *dandavats* while asking for forgiveness from Shri Hari. Shri Hari stood up and embraced him with affection. He then permitted each sadhu to touch his feet.

Foretelling the Future—A Warning

Shri Hari was sitting in front of an assembly of sadhus and devotees in a satsang *sabha* in Sarangpur. Shri Hari looked up towards the sky and raised his right hand. The sadhus and devotees were perplexed by this gesture. Muktanand Swami asked Shri Hari the reason for this *charitra*. Shri Hari replied, "A devastating famine will strike Saurashtra and Gujarat next year. Shivaji, the deity of destruction, asked me for permission to bring about such havoc, and I consented. I am hereby alerting all the devotees to prepare for this famine. Sell your excess jewelry and material possessions. Use the money to purchase grains and store them wisely. Sell your cattle and livestock. It will be difficult to care for them without fodder and grains. Take my words seriously. It will be a difficult year."

Shri Hari mounted his mare the following day and traveled from village to village warning his devotees. He arrived in Panchala and shared this warning with his beloved *bhakta*, Jinabhai. Jinabhai was devastated. He had no money left to purchase grains. The Ahir tribe that worked for him in the fields had looted all of his barley and millet. They refused to return even a small portion of the crops back to Jinabhai.

That night, Shri Hari gave darshan to Colonel Walker in his dream. Shri Hari spoke to the Colonel about Jinabhai's predicament. Colonel Walker promised Shri Hari to have his troops in Panchala in four days.

Four days later, the loud rumble of cannon wheels and the beating of horses' hoofs shook Panchala as Colonel Walker's troops arrived. The Ahirs were terrified by the sight of the British army's weapons. Realizing

that the British army arrived in response to Shri Hari's beckoning, the Ahirs immediately asked Shri Hari for forgiveness. Shri Hari ordered them to return all of Jinabhai's grain stock. He also warned them against future transgressions. "All of you took advantage of Jinabhai's kindness. You have stolen his grains for several years. If you do so again, we shall have all of you arrested by the *firangis*."

The Ahirs returned the grains the next day and promised to work for Jinabhai in a diligent and honest manner. It was only then that Colonel Walker's troops rolled their cannons out of town. Soon thereafter, the Ahirs of Panchala became Shri Hari's disciples and imbibed the *Sampradaya*'s principles in their lives.

Jinabhai was able to store enough grains for the following year. Shri Hari also ordered Jinabhai to purchase eighty thousand kilograms of grains and store them in order to open a relief center at the peak of the famine.

At the start of the famine, Shri Hari changed his appearance. He grew his hair long and tied a *rudraksha* bead around his neck. He instructed the sadhus to do the same.

Despite Shri Hari's warnings, many devotees failed to procure the necessary grains to endure the hardships of the famine. Shri Hari protected those that followed his *agna* and even those who ignored it. In the form of humanitarian services, his compassion showered rains on the parched earth and the suffering people of Gujarat.

Eleven Days of Illness

The monsoon of 1813 quenched the earth's thirst. People felt an overwhelming sense of relief as the land once again grew fertile and the wind vernal. Shri Hari was traveling in the Sorath region. Wherever Shri Hari went, devotees insisted that he spend a couple of weeks in their village. Shri Hari would ask, "Would you like for us to stay in your village while we are ill or healthy?" It was only natural that everyone wanted Shri Hari to stay with them while in good health. Shri Hari would shake his head and counter, "Then, we shall come back another time."

When Shri Hari arrived in Jaliya, Hira Thakkar and his wife Kalubai extended their homes to Shri Hari in illness or health. Kalubai said,

"Prabhu, stay with us. If you choose to take on an illness, we will serve you with our mind, body, and wealth."

Shri Hari was pleased with this answer and shortly thereafter became sick with a serious illness. Shri Hari's forehead burned with fever. The devotees were heartbroken to see their beloved Shri Hari suffering from such an illness. Mulji Brahmachari massaged Shri Hari's limbs to alleviate body aches. The fever led to a loss of appetite. Shri Hari often lost his temper and avoided speaking with those around him. However, Hira Thakkar and Kalubai served Shri Hari through each *lila charitra* with *divyabhav*.

One afternoon, Shri Hari expressed his desire to bathe in cold water drawn from the well. His cot was placed in the open courtyard. The village women brought pot after pot of water from the well. Shri Hari had vowed to keep bathing until the stream of his bathwater reached the nearby Venu River. Brahmachari was worried. Shri Hari's body was still blazing with a fever, and bathing with cold water outside would only aggravate his condition. Brahmachari engineered a plan through which he could follow Shri Hari's *agna* while also caring for his physical condition. He placed an empty pot under Shri Hari's cot and drained some of the bathwater into it. He sent a devotee with the filled pot to Venu River and instructed him to empty it into the river. Once the devotee returned, Brahmachari said to Shri Hari, "The stream has reached the river. It is time to stop this *lila charitra*."

Shri Hari was satisfied and returned indoors. Later that night, Shri Hari expressed his desire to enjoy warm *jalebi*. It was well past midnight. Where was Hira Thakkar to find *jalebis*? He rode to the neighboring town and woke up the confectioner. He waited until the *jalebis* were made and then rode back to the village with them. It was nearly dawn when Hira Thakkar returned home. Shri Hari ate a few *jalebis* and then went back to sleep.

The next morning, Shri Hari slept late into the morning. After waking up, he gathered the devotees and spoke of Gunatitanand Swami's *mahima*. "Last night, I traveled to the different heavenly abodes to find a suitable place for my sadhus to stay. I went to Shvetdvip, Badrikashram, Vaikunth, Golok, and even Kailas, but I was not satisfied anywhere. After traveling

through the abode of Prakruti Purush, I went to Akshardham, my abode. It was only there that I felt complete peace and serenity. There was no difference between men and women. Everyone was *atma*. I realized that it was only here that my sadhus would be able to worship me without being burdened by the influence of *maya*. Though the *muktas* in all of the other abodes insisted that I stay there, I kept moving on. Those devotees that worship me without understanding my true *mahima* remain in these abodes. Those *bhaktas* that understand my *mahima* as Purna Purushottam Narayan attain Akshardham. My Akshardham is manifest on Earth through Aksharbrahma. I will always remain present on Earth through the *satpurush*. Aksharbrahma is the pathway to *moksha*. Without pleasing him, one's soul never attains Parabrahma. Gunatitanand is my Aksharbrahma. Through his association, my devotees will attain me."

Shri Hari rose up from his cot and expressed his desire to shed his illness. After eleven days of worry and sorrow, the sadhus and devotees rejoiced. Shri Hari blessed Hira Thakkar and Kalubai for their *seva* and *divyabhav* before departing for Gadhada.

Premsakhi Premanand

On Prabodhini Ekadashi in 1812, Shri Hari initiated the talented and versatile Premanand Swami into the sadhu-fold. Premanand Swami was later also known as Premsakhi, his poetic pen name. Several years ago, when Shri Hari accepted Ramanand Swami's request to assume his seat as the spiritual leader of the *sampradaya*, a young boy had been mesmerized by Shri Hari's *murti*. The procession in Jetpur had changed that young boy's life. He begged Shri Hari to initiate him into the sadhu-fold. Shri Hari agreed but first sent the young boy to Ujjain to study *sangeet*. The boy returned after twelve years of training as a singer, poet, and instrumentalist. Shri Hari greeted the musically-trained and bhakti-driven boy by embracing him. Shri Hari's love and admiration for Premsakhi's bhakti grew with each passing day.

Premanand Swami is celebrated as one of the foremost poets among Shri Hari's *ashta kavis*. The tradition credits Premanand Swami with creating approximately twelve thousand bhakti *pads*. Today, four thousand of the *pads* are found. Half of these *pads* are written in the language of

bhakti, *Braj Bhasha*. Many of these *pads* are also written in Persian, Urdu, Punjabi, and Marvadi, making Premanand Swami one of Shri Hari's most versatile *ashta kavis*.

Abhel Khachar's Demise – A Test of Dada Khachar's Faith

Abhel Khachar's age led to frequent bouts of illness. Soon enough, Shri Hari took Abhel Khachar to Akshardham and thereafter assumed the responsibilities of his funeral rites. Abhel Khachar's son Uttam Khachar, also known as Dada Khachar, was only fourteen years of age. Dada was one of Shri Hari's ideal *bhaktas*. His faith in Shri Hari had matured at an early age, more so than that of some of the senior devotees.

Shri Hari took Dada Khachar under his guardianship. He instructed Dada on matters of state, politics, trade, and warfare. Shri Hari assigned his personal clerk to look after Abhel Khachar's estate. It was as if Bhagwan, himself, had taken on the kingship of this small town. Shri Hari tied a headdress around Dada's head, gifted him a sheathed sword, and marked his forehead with a *rajtilak*. Dada's coronation was an occasion of great fanfare in Gadhada.

Jiva Khachar, Abhel Khachar's younger cousin, also yearned for the status and wealth of such a position. He wanted to exploit young Dada's inexperience to seize his land and cheat him out of his share of the crops. Shri Hari had anticipated such enmity from Jiva Khachar well in advance. He assigned his personal *kshatriya* attendants to guard Dada's fields and to ward off any looters sent by Jiva Khachar.

Gadhada's borders led into the lands of the nearby village of Bhadli. Bhan Khachar of Bhadli had a fickle mind. Jiva Khachar convinced Bhan Khachar to take advantage of Abhel Khachar's death to usurp part of Dada's property. Bhan Khachar sent two Sindhi mercenaries to attack Bhaguji, the chief protector of the fields.

The Sindhi warriors attacked Bhaguji. Though Bhaguji was badly wounded, he tied the cloth of his headdress tightly around his limbs and prepared to attack the mercenaries. He lunged at the older attacker with his left hand. It is said that Bhaguji's single blow was enough to tear the attacker's body into two halves. The second attacker fled in fear of a similar death. Shri Hari was pleased with Bhaguji's bold courage and dedication.

Jiva Khachar then decided to instigate two brothers from the nearby village of Mandavdhar to kill Dada and divide his property and kingdom among themselves. Jiva Khachar promised to send Swaminarayan out of Gadhada for a few days. This would give the brothers enough time to take care of Dada.

Jiva Khachar fixed a time to speak with Shri Hari. At the meeting, he began with a threat of possible violence. "Prabhu, I tried to warn those two brothers against attacking you and Dada, but they have made up their minds. I strongly advise you to take your sadhus and leave Gadhada for a few days. Things will settle down and then you can return."

Shri Hari listened patiently and nodded in approval. He called Naja Jogiya and instructed him to prepare a carriage for travel. He instructed Dada to grab his sword and get inside the carriage. When Jiva Khachar and the devotees came to see Shri Hari off to the outskirts of the village, Shri Hari pretended to be taking the north road out of the village. After the villagers returned to their homes, Shri Hari instructed Naja to take the carriage to Mandavdhar. Shri Hari arrived at the *kshatriya* brothers' door steps and bashed the head of the carriage against the front of the house. The crash set off a tumultuous, ringing noise. The two brothers suspected that Shri Hari had come to capture them with British cannons. They fled out the rear door of their house. As they attempted to escape, Shri Hari wielded a sword in the air and shouted, "You are taking advantage of Abhel Khachar's absence and my Dada's young age. I will not let you take a single inch of Dada's property. Do not think that the men in our village have died. If need be, I too shall wield a sword in battle to protect my *bhaktas*."

The brothers galloped away on their horses in fear. This incident presented unique darshan of Shri Hari. His eyes were red, and his brows were bent, akin to the arch of a bow. His frown caused wrinkles on his forehead, and his hands waved a large sword in the air, resembling the image of Yamraj.

The brothers' wives came running out of the house and laid out the ends of their saris on the ground to welcome Shri Hari to their home. They wept, saying, "Shri Hari, you are Jivuba's Bhagwan and, therefore, are our Bhagwan. Please do not worry about our foolish husbands. They

have been instigated by Jiva Khachar. We will reason with them and bring them back to their senses. Rest assured that they will never again cause trouble to young Dada or Gadhada."

Shri Hari's anger settled. He sheathed the sword and calmed his face. The wives laid out a cot and offered saffron milk to Shri Hari and the *parshads*. Their husbands' misdeeds had granted them the fortune to serve Bhagwan. Shri Hari's compassion was incomparable. He even liberated his enemies.

Shri Hari returned to Gadhada before dawn. The following morning, Jiva Khachar was surprised to see Shri Hari. Shri Hari smirked and said, "Jiva Bapu, didn't you threaten Dada with those two young *kshatriyas* from Mandavdhar? They fled town when I challenged them to a dual. Apparently, they are not as valiant as you made them out to be."

Jiva Khachar's face blushed red with embarrassment. He was speechless.

A few days later, Raghavanand Swami and Rushabhanand Swami came to Gadhada on the eve of Ramnavmi. These sadhus traveled tirelessly to spread satsang in the Bhal region of Gujarat. Shri Hari embraced them and asked them to introduce the devotee they had brought with them. Raghavanand Swami explained, "Prabhu, Vastabhai is from Khokhra. A large part of his village was torched in a catastrophic fire. Yet, Vastabhai's faith has remained unshaken. He speaks to other villagers of your *mahima* and Bhagwan's *sarva karta-harta*⁷ powers. In fact, the villagers blamed him for the fire, saying that his faith in Swaminarayan had brought the flames to the village. They tortured and harassed him, but Vastabhai's faith is unshakeable. His plight brought tears to my eyes, but Vastabhai has yet to shed a single tear."

Shri Hari was pleased with the spread of satsang and the growing depth of understanding among his devotees. Shri Hari asked Vastabhai to stand up and share his experiences with the satsang *sabha*. Shri Hari then lovingly placed his hand on Vastabhai's head.

⁷ In the Aksharbrahma-Parabrahma doctrine, *sarva karta-harta* is one of the four attributes of Purna Purushottam Narayan. *Sarva karta-harta* refers to Purna Purushottam Narayan's attribute as the all-doer and the cause and supporter of all animate and inanimate beings in all of creation. The other three attributes are *sarvopari*, *sakar*, and *pragat*.

The King's Guard on the Farms

The June sun was beating down on Dada Khachar's fields. The wheat was ripe and ready to be harvested, but there was one obstacle. Jiva Khachar had convinced the King of Bhavnagar, Vakhatsinh Bapu, to send a small army of Arab mercenaries to barricade Dada's fields in Gadhada. Vakhatsinh was a fair king, but he was gullible. He rushed to conclusions based on unconfirmed information. Jiva complained about Dada's disruptive behavior in Gadhada and also accused him of not paying taxes. Hearing such allegations, Vakhatsinh instructed the army to restrict Dada's men from accessing the fields.

Dada faced difficult times as his food supply in the granary was exhausted. Shri Hari learned of the shortage and decided to travel towards Surat with the sadhus. Jivuba and Laduba were in tears at the thought of Shri Hari leaving Gadhada. Shri Hari, too, could be seen wiping tears from the corner of his eyes.

Meanwhile in Bhavnagar, Jiva was trying to convince the king to confiscate Dada's farmland. Vakhatsinh listened to Jiva's reasoning. He then said, "Jiva, my men in Gadhada tell me that Dada has never engaged in any disruptive behavior in their presence. In fact, they say that Dada spends his entire day in Swaminarayan's *seva*. How can you bring me these false reports? I am not willing to be the object of Swaminarayan's wrath. He is known to protect his devotees. I am sending a letter to Gadhada to lift the hold on Dada's crops."

Jiva offered, "I can take the official letter and deliver it to Dada."

The king was perplexed by Jiva's sudden generosity. He replied, "Jiva you are a crafty, deceitful man. Do not show your face here until I send for you. Now, leave!"

Jiva returned home sulking in defeat and insult. His daughter, Amulaba, advised him to change his ways and to ask Shri Hari for forgiveness. This advice, however, went unnoticed.

The court order reached Gadhada just as Shri Hari prepared to leave. Laduba and Jivuba prepared *shiro* in celebration of the good news. Shri Hari blessed Dada Khachar and his family for their firm faith and conviction in his *sarva karta-harta* powers.

Swarupanand Swami's Demise

Shri Hari repeatedly praised Swarupanand Swami, a sadhu from Ramanand Swami's time. The sadhus and devotees were often curious as to the reason for Shri Hari's affection for Swarupanand Swami.

One evening, Shri Hari asked Anandanand Swami, Muktanand Swami, and Swarupanand Swami a question. "When I ask you to follow an *agna* or to carry out a *seva*, what do you think of in your minds?"

Anandanand Swami replied, "Prabhu, I have constant awareness of following your *agna* to the smallest detail. I never fail to carry out your commands."

Muktanand Swami then answered, "Bhagwan, before carrying out any *agna*, I concentrate my mind on the task at hand. After completing the *seva*, I withdraw my mind and senses from the external world and focus again on your *murti*."

Swarupanand Swami was the last to reply. "Oh Prabhu, whenever I carry out a *seva* assigned by you, my mind begins to engage in the *seva*, but soon, it is as if the *seva* does not exist. All that remains in my mind is your divine *murti*."

Shri Hari tested Swarupanand Swami's spiritual prowess. "How is that possible, Swamiji?"

Swarupanand Swami responded, "I can give an analogy to explain. Imagine taking an arrow and placing a lemon on its tip. After taking aim, the marksman shuts one eye and focuses on the target. Soon, all he sees is the lemon on the tip of the arrow. With that sort of concentration, the marksman is able to pierce any target. I, too, have made your *murti* the target of my mind and *atma*. That is all I see in all three states."

Shri Hari stood up and embraced Swarupanand Swami. He turned to the other sadhus and said, "Anandanandji, you should listen to Muktanand Swami's *katha*. And, Muktanandji, you should make time to listen to Svarupanandji's *katha*."

Swarupanand Swami had understood Shri Hari's true *swarup* and *mahima*, yet when he was nearing his final moments, he felt uneasy. Shri Hari visited Swarupanand Swami to give him darshan. Shri Hari instructed Swarupanand Swami to remember the incidents in which he shared the *mahima* of his Akshardham.

Swarupanand Swami closed his eyes and focused on Shri Hari's *murti* while recollecting those incidents. Shri Hari recalled the divine *charitras* of his birth in Chhapaiya and his journey to Loj. Swarupanand Swami breathed his last in Shri Hari's physical presence. Shri Hari granted Swarupanand Swami *moksha* for his unflinching faith in him and newly acquired faith in his Akshardham, Gunatitanand Swami. Shri Hari performed Swarupanand Swami's funeral rites and then departed for central Gujarat.

In Valasan, Shri Hari was resting on a cot when he heard several sadhus discussing a theological principle. Shri Hari walked over to the group of sadhus and expressed his desire to participate. The sadhus explained the point of contention. "Prabhu, several of us are debating whether you can be won over by a devotee's actions and efforts or whether you are won over merely by your grace?"

Shri Hari listened to the sadhus debate and then asked Muktanand Swami to answer the question. Muktanand Swami stood up and folded his hands. "Prabhu, you can only be won by your grace. There is nothing we can do to attain the pleasure of your *murti* and company. All of our efforts and actions fall short."

Shri Hari nodded in consent and added, "All of you, indeed, are fortunate to have an association with the manifest form of Bhagwan. There is nothing that a *bhakta* can do to earn *moksha*. All of his efforts are geared at pleasing Parabrahma and Aksharbrahma. And, yet, I have granted all of you this blessing of my own accord. My mercy and grace is without reason or justification. I have granted this boon to you out of the compassion of my heart. Therefore, do not let this opportunity slip from your hands. Work diligently to eradicate your base desires. Follow my *agna*. I shall reward your efforts with my grace and Akshardham."

The sadhus assembled in front of Shri Hari understood the magnitude of His compassion. They strengthened their resolve to efficiently use this rare opportunity granted to them in the form of a human birth.

An Able Horse Rider: 1814 and 1838

Shri Hari settled in Saurashtra with the intent to spread *ekantik dharma* from the village of Gadhada. However, the people of Saurashtra

did not appreciate theological debate, classical *sangit*, or ritualistic prayer. Shri Hari would have to seek acceptance for satsang in this community through his communication skills and his ability to satisfy his devotees' interests.

Kshatriyas in Saurashtra were fond of horses. Capitalizing on his expert riding skills, Shri participated in their riding tournaments and expressed interest in stories about their mares and riding adventures.

There were many well-bred stallions and mares in Dada's stables, but Manki stood out as one of a kind. She was of the finest breed. Her speed and agility earned her the title of the manifest form of Garuda on Earth. Shri Hari frequently visited the stables and assisted Naja Jogiya in caring for the celestial mare. These *charitras* captivated the *kshatriyas*. Shri Hari loved to play with Manki as well. He would grab the gem-studded reigns dangling from the mare's neck and dance her around in Dada's courtyard or in Lakshmivadi. The sounds of her hoofs would produce an echo similar to the music of the celestial drummers.

One afternoon, Shri Hari dressed in his royal attire, saddled Manki, and rode her to Jiva Khachar's *darbar*. He galloped Manki onto a 110-meter-long veranda in front of Jiva Khachar's front door. The veranda contained diagonal beams supporting the roof and several short mud walls separating the entrances to different rooms. Shri Hari jumped over the obstructions and simultaneously bent his torso, as if hugging the mare, to avoid hitting His head on the wooden beams. The devotees watched in awe as Shri Hari completed the obstacle course several times with ease. This routine seemed impossible to perform given the height of the mare and the complexity of the task. Premanand Swami wrote a *bhakti pad* about Shri Hari's riding *charitra*.⁸ In the last verse, Premanand Swami sings that despite riding his mare with such skill and agility, Shri Hari would turn his head to look at me and to smile at me. Shri Hari's intentions in engaging in such *charitras* were to provide his devotees with *smrutis* to aid them on the path to *moksha*.

On another occasion, Shri Hari challenged the *kshatriyas* to jump

⁸ "Ghodala khelaave Ghanshyam re bai mare anganiye re..." is the *bhakti pad* written by Premanand Swami during Shri Hari's riding *charitra* on Jiva Khachar's veranda. This verse translates into "Shri Ghanshyam is playfully riding a mare, oh friend, on my veranda."

over the Raypur road between the court premises and Lakshmi Vadi. The *kshatriyas* knew that this was an impossible task, even with a well-bred mare like Manki. They challenged Shri Hari to perform the feat first. Shri Hari saddled his mare, lovingly patted her head, and prepared for the jump. The sadhus and devotees held their breath, and some even closed their eyes. Shri Hari was not the least bit nervous. He reversed the mare to gain momentum and did not order her to jump until just inches before the wall. Manki hugged her front legs tightly to her body and made the jump. Shri Hari landed in Lakshmi Vadi to a roar of applause, cheers, and *jaynaads*. The *kshatriyas* prostrated at Shri Hari's feet. In this manner, Shri Hari's *charitras* won the affection of his disciples.

On yet another occasion, Shri Hari placed a red handkerchief in the middle of Dada's courtyard. He rode the mare to the other end of the courtyard. He then closed in on the handkerchief with great speed. Inches before reaching the red handkerchief, the mare bent low as if embracing the ground. Shri Hari extended his left hand and grabbed the cloth with a swift swipe of a hand. In seconds, the mare had reached the other end of the courtyard. Consumed with amazement at this feat, the *kshatriyas* were unable to even cheer as they silently stood there in shock.

Although she was a mare, Manki was truly a *bhakta*. Her sentiments were tied closely to the female devotees of Dada Khachar's court. Once when Jivuba and Laduba insisted that Shri Hari not leave for Vartal, Manki assisted their efforts by freezing and becoming unresponsive to Shri Hari's tugs at the reins. This non-verbal dialogue continued for several minutes. Shri Hari then turned and looked at Laduba and Jivuba. The female devotees realized that Shri Hari immediately needed to depart and understood his wish. Laduba and Jivuba spoke to the mare and gave her their consent to ride away. The mare then soared towards Vartal. This incident was also captured in Premanand Swami's *bhakti pad*: '*Manakie chadiyaa re mohan Vanmaali*', or 'Shri Hari has saddled his beloved Manki.'

Sheikhji's Debacle

The commander of the Gaekwad army in Vadodara came to Vartal for Shri Hari's darshan. Sheikh Ahmadkhan Pathan stood fixed for several minutes staring at Shri Hari's *murti*, struck by his splendor. The

commander asked Shri Hari to initiate him as a devotee. Shri Hari placed a double-stringed *kanthi* around the Muslim warrior's neck. Shri Hari spoke to the Sheikh about the *niyams* and dharma of the Swaminarayan Sampradaya. The Sheikh agreed to diligently follow all of the *niyams*. Shri Hari was pleased and asked the Sheikh to return to Vadodara. The Sheikh protested, "Prabhu, I do not want to leave you for a second. I want to spend the rest of my life in your *seva*."

Shri Hari convinced the Sheikh to at least return to Vadodara and turn in his resignation. In Vadodara, the king tried to convince the Sheikh to remain as his commander. He warned, "You are making a hasty decision. You will regret it later."

The Sheikh replied with confidence, "Oh King, how can one ever regret being in the company of Bhagwan? Swaminarayan is Bhagwan. There is no better use of my mind and body but to serve him until my last breath."

The Sheikh left for Gadhada and then traveled with Shri Hari from village to village.

One afternoon, Shri Hari participated in a *charitra* in front of his devotees. He exclaimed, "I am tired of being Bhagwan. If I were to find a capable person to handle my responsibilities, I would gladly give them my powers and retire to a life of peace and meditation."

Sura Khachar decided to play along. He said, "Prabhu, our Sheikhji is a suitable replacement. He is tall, handsome, mature, and wise. He knows how to carry himself in public and is also well-spoken."

Sheikhji was waiting for someone to nominate him. He chimed in, "Shri Hari, Sura Khachar makes a valid point. I would be able to wield your powers with ease. Why not let me assume them?"

Shri Hari smiled and agreed with a nod. He said, "Sheikhji, this sounds like a good idea. I am going to give you five simple *niyams*. As long as you follow them, you will not have a single problem with wielding my powers. If you lapse in following even one of them, you will regret your decision for the rest of your life." The Sheikhji listened attentively.

"First, never engage in useless banter or private conversation with women. Follow *brahmacharya* fit for a householder. Second, only use these powers in the Sindh region. Third, never dress in silk or gold-threaded

cloth. Fourth, never eat an excess of ghee, sweets, and sugar. Fifth, do not look inside the hearts and minds of other people. If you must, then never look at the faults of other individuals, and do not gossip about them with other individuals. This will cause you to wander from your own spiritual path.”

Sheikhji agreed to all of the conditions and asked, “Bhagwan, how do I send other individuals into *samadhi*? I want to be able to perform miracles too.”

Shri Hari replied, “Ask those that you would like to send into *samadhi* to meditate on your beard. Your beard will send dozens of people into *samadhi*.”

Sheikhji was eager to test out his new powers. He traveled with Shri Hari for a few days. Devotees soon swarmed to Sheikhji. Upon taking Shri Hari’s leave, Sheikhji decided to postpone his trip to Sindh. He traveled in the villages near Gadhada and quickly gained popularity both within and outside of the satsang community. People began to refer to him as the ‘new Swaminarayan.’

After a few months, Sheikhji returned to Gadhada. Instead of coming to Dada Khachar’s courtyard for Shri Hari’s darshan, Sheikhji went into the Ahir colony and sent many of its community members into *samadhi*. He gathered large crowds of individuals and blessed them with promises of children and wealth.

One of Shri Hari’s Ahir devotees ran to Dada’s courtyard and narrated the incident to Shri Hari. Shri Hari was puzzled by Sheikhji’s behavior. Upon further investigation, Shri Hari learned that Sheikhji never went to Sindh. In fact, he was sharing secrets from people’s minds with each other. He was allowing women to massage his limbs and to serve him delicious delicacies in his private quarters after nightfall. Deeply disturbed by Sheikhji’s behavior, Shri Hari sent Brahmanand Swami to convince Sheikhji to come for his darshan.

The next day, Brahmanand Swami, Dada Khachar, and Harji Thakkar made their way to the Ahir colony. Dada Khachar requested Sheikhji to send his female disciples to the other end of the courtyard so that Brahmanand Swami could speak to him. Sheikhji complied with the request. Brahmanand Swami then asked, “Sheikhji, have you forgotten

the promises you made to Shri Hari? What happened to traveling in Sindh and following *brahmacharya*?"

Sheikhji was annoyed with Brahmanand Swami's comments and said, "Swamiji, Shri Hari is not the only one who can send people into *samadhis*. Nor is he the only one who can perform miracles. I have all those powers."

Brahmanand Swami decided to try a different approach and appealed to Sheikhji's pride. "Of course, Sheikhji! In fact, Shri Hari also wants to have darshan of your infamous beard. Would you be kind enough to come to Dada Khachar's court tomorrow?"

Seizing the opportunity to indulge his ego, Sheikhji replied, "I will come tomorrow morning."

The next morning, Sheikhji entered the courtyard with several disciples. He was wearing gold-threaded, silk garments and gold ornaments. However, none of the devotees or sadhus even glanced in his direction. He stood in front of Shri Hari to flaunt his beard, but Shri Hari barely noticed his beard. Shri Hari asked, "Sheikhji, why did you decide not to follow the *niyams* I gave you? You have caused much unrest and disturbance in the satsang community. Most importantly, you have betrayed my trust."

Filled with embarrassment, Sheikhji could not face Shri Hari. He stood in the middle of the courtyard with his eyes lowered. Shri Hari convinced Sheikhji to look into his eyes. Suddenly, Sheikhji's body began to tremble. His eyes turned red, and his limbs ached. Feeling as if his body had been drained of life, Sheikhji's face turned pale. His body quivered as he came to realize the reason for this supernatural experience—Shri Hari had withdrawn and taken back his powers.

Sheikhji fell to the floor, trying to catch his breath. Within seconds, Sheikhji returned to being a mere mortal again.

Shri Hari addressed the satsang *sabha*. "Let it be known that from this day onwards, I excommunicate Sheikhji. No one is to speak to him or assist him. He is cast out of our community for disobeying my *agna* and his satsang *niyams*."

Sheikhji fell at Shri Hari's feet and begged for mercy, but Shri Hari was resolute in his decision.

Later that night, Sheikhji knocked on the door to Brahmanand

Swami's room. Brahmanand Swami was preparing to retire for the day. He asked, "Sheikhji, why are you here? I cannot help you anymore. If anyone sees me speaking to you, I may be excommunicated too."

Sheikhji responded with a silent sob. Brahmanand Swami felt sympathy for Sheikhji. He proposed, "I have a plan. Shave your head and your beard and come to see Shri Hari tomorrow morning. I will take care of the rest."

Brahmanand Swami shared this conversation with Shri Hari. Shri Hari was pleased to hear that Sheikhji was remorseful.

The next morning, Sheikhji arrived early and prostrated at Shri Hari's feet. The sun's rays reflected off Sheikhji's bald head, and his face looked different without the beard. Shri Hari commented, "Brahmanandji, what happened to Sheikhji's beard?"

Brahmanand Swami replied, "Prabhu, the beard had become the stairway to Akshardham. Since so many people climbed that stairway, the beard must have been worn away by their footsteps!"

The *sabha* laughed and Sheikhji joined them. Shri Hari was pleased with Sheikhji's humility. He announced, "Sheikhji, I forgive all your sins. I will grant you my Akshardham. Follow the *niyams* prescribed in satsang, and I will take care of the rest." Sheikhji's face lit up again.

Shri Hari took this opportunity to speak to the satsang *sabha* about humility and the metaphysical difference between mere *jivas* and Parabrahma. "Many philosophers claim that the *jiva* can become one with Parabrahma. This is false. Sheikhji's situation is a prime example. He may have wielded my powers, but he was still bound by *maya*. Sheikhji was not able to handle the powers. Even Muktanand Swami can be called Bhagwan, but that is because he is my devotee and is associated with me. The devotee that makes the mistake of thinking himself to be equal to Aksharbrahma or Parabrahma suffers the worst fate of all. Let this be known to all of the sadhus and devotees in the satsang community. Let it be a lesson to all."

The sadhus and devotees asked Shri Hari for a boon. "Prabhu, may our minds and hearts never make the mistake made by Sheikhji." Shri Hari raised his right hand and blessed the satsang *sabha*.

Liberating the Brahmarakshas

Shri Hari was in Jetalpur. Sadhus and devotees gathered around their Bhagwan to laugh, joke, and have his darshan. Shri Hari was in a playful mood. He innocently teased each sadhu about his demeanor or habits.

A messenger arrived to deliver the news that Muktanand Swami and Gunatitanand Swami were fast approaching Jetalpur for Shri Hari's darshan. Shri Hari sent the sadhus and devotees to greet the two senior sadhus at the outskirts of the village. Shri Hari ventured outside the village to meet his sadhus as well. He sat under a large banyan tree and awaited their arrival. The devotees started to hear loud shrieks and howls from the direction of the arriving sadhus. The eerie sounds quickly changed the environment.

Muktanand Swami and Gunatitanand Swami bowed to Shri Hari. Shri Hari greeted each of them with a warm embrace. Muktanand Swami then turned Shri Hari's attention to a devotee named Ishvarbhai from Mahudha. Ishvarbhai was a young man in his thirties who, until a few years ago, was living a normal life. Ishvarbhai had seemingly been possessed by a violent spirit. Muktanand Swami said, "Prabhu, the spirit speaks to us but refuses to leave. He said that he would only speak to you. Therefore, we brought Ishvarbhai along with us. Please have mercy on him. His family and children have all suffered a great deal."

Shri Hari looked at Ishvarbhai, and a voice emanated from within his body. "Bhagwan, I cannot come near you. Your glance is too powerful. It burns me."

Shri Hari motioned for the sadhus to bring the devotee closer. At that moment, Ishvarbhai's body ran away in the opposite direction, surprising everyone by the speed of his flight. The *parshads* ran after him but were unable to catch him. Shri Hari sent men mounted on horses to retrieve Ishvarbhai. The riders saddled their horses and took off after him. Once they reached Ishvarbhai, they grabbed him with a lasso and tackled him to the ground. They then carried him back to Shri Hari.

Shri Hari offered the man cold water. Ishvarbhai drank pots and pots of water. The sadhus and devotees were amazed by the amount of water the young man was able to drink. Shri Hari addressed the spirit

inside Ishvarbhai's body, "Who are you? And, why have you possessed our devotee's body?"

The spirit replied, "Bhagwan, I am a Brahmarakshas. I was Ishvar's paternal uncle before being turned into this state. I was extremely attached to a khirni (*rayan*) fruit tree that I had planted years ago. I would spend my entire day nourishing and grooming that tree. Eventually, I fell ill and died due to old age. However, my mind and heart were still extremely attached to that tree. I could not stop thinking about it. I was unable to reach the heavenly abodes with the celestial messengers due to my intense desire for that tree. I was turned into a Brahmarakshas by the celestial messengers. From that day onwards, I lived in the khirni tree. One day, my nephew, Ishvar, decided to chop down my khirni tree. I was infuriated. I attacked Ishvar's body and made it my home. Now, even if I want to leave, I see no place to go. There is nothing to eat or drink. I am constantly mocked by other spirits and celestial beings. Please save me. Liberate me."

Shri Hari was moved by the Brahmarakshas's plight. He turned to the satsang *sabha* and advised, "This is what happens to you if your heart and mind are stuck in material objects before leaving this mortal body. It is for this reason alone that we organize grand festivals and *yagnas*. If even a glimpse of a sadhu or a devotee comes to mind, one can be released from one's desire for material possessions."

Sura Khachar asked, "Shri Hari, are there any other causes for such a bleak ending to one's life story?"

Shri Hari replied, "Yes, Sura Khachar. If one does not believe in Bhagwan or if one thinks of himself to be worthy of being Bhagwan, he is turned into a Brahmarakshas. Lastly, if one believes Bhagwan to be *nirakar* or formless, he too must suffer in this species."

With a glance, Shri Hari sent the Brahmarakshas to Badrikashram to repent for his sins through penance. Ishvarbhai's body collapsed as the foreign invader vacated its place from within its host. Shri Hari summoned for more water to be brought to the young man. This time, Ishvarbhai only drank three cups. Shri Hari smiled and asked Ishvarbhai how he felt. "Brother, are you okay? How does it feel to be back in control of your own mind and body?"

Ishvarbhai bowed to Shri Hari and expressed his gratitude. “Bhagwan, if it were not for you, I would have suffered in that condition for my entire life. You have saved me.”

Shri Hari replied with another question. “Ishvarbhai, tell me. Why did you cut that tree down?”

Ishvarbhai answered, “Shri Hari, my uncle would punish anyone that ate a fruit off the tree without asking for permission. It was a constant reminder of the unnecessary harm my uncle inflicted on others, and I could not tolerate the sight of it any longer.”

Shri Hari was pleased with the young man’s brave choice. He turned to address to the satsang *sabha*. “There is much to be learned from today’s episode. Never let your infatuation for material objects get in the way of your bhakti for Bhagwan. Always put your interests second to that of those around you. Ishvarbhai’s decision to end the misery of wayfarers who ate fruits off the khirni tree is commendable. Lastly, never pluck even a flower or fruit from a garden without the express consent of its owner. Stealing things that do not belong to you yields bad results.”

Shri Hari ended the *sabha* with the hail of ‘Jay Sachchidanand’ and proceeded inside the village to have dinner at a devotee’s home.

Dosabhai Becomes a Sadhu

Shri Hari returned to Gadhada in January. Each afternoon that month, a marriage procession would pass by the village. Many of the families would come inside the village to have Shri Hari’s darshan. On one such occasion, Shri Hari’s eyes lit up when the groom mentioned that the marriage procession was from the village of Bandhiya. He inquired, “How is my devotee Dosabhai? Does he remember me?”

The groom chuckled and said, “Prabhu, if we are nearly drowning in this samsara, then Dosabhai has drowned completely. His business is booming, and his profit margin is high. He barely has time to brush his teeth and shower. I highly doubt that he remembers his own family, let alone you.”

Shri Hari listened attentively and then asked, “What if I initiated Dosabhai into the sadhu-fold?”

The merchants from Bandhiya smiled and said, “Bhagwan, with all due respect, that is not possible.”

Shri Hari made a mental note of that remark. He turned to the groom and blessed him with his right hand. He addressed the members of the procession saying, “Do me a favor; stop by to see me before you return to Bandhiya.”

The merchants bowed their heads in consent and then continued their procession. Shri Hari called Bhaguji and said, “Leave for Bandhiya at once. In the morning, you will find Dosabhai in his shop. Give him this note and a pair of these saffron clothes. He will know what to do. Bring him back to Gadhada with you.”

Bhaguji mounted his mare and rode all night. He reached Bandhiya at eleven o’clock the next morning. He found Dosabhai at the shop taking inventory of a new lot of gur. His *datan* was tucked above his right ear. Bhaguji questioned whether such a busy and passionate businessman would follow Shri Hari’s *agna*. He approached Dosabhai. Dosabhai immediately bowed down to Bhaguji and said, “Do you have word from my beloved Shri Hari?”

Bhaguji handed Dosabhai the note and saffron clothes. Dosabhai intently read the note. He disappeared to the back of the shop and did not even turn to look at the shipment as he passed it. He returned dressed in the saffron clothes and said to Bhaguji, “Well, what are we waiting for? Off to Gadhada we go.”

Once in Gadhada, Shri Hari was elated to see Dosabhai. Shri Hari embraced the merchant with joy and gave him *prasad* from his *thal*.

The next morning when the merchants of Bandhiya were heading home, they came for Shri Hari’s darshan. Shri Hari pointed to a freshly-shaved head sitting among the sadhus and asked, “Do you recognize that sadhu?”

The merchants had a closer look and gaped in disbelief when they realized that the sadhu was none other than Dosabhai. They turned to Shri Hari and said, “Prabhu, this is impossible. Only you can perform such a miracle. We were wrong. Behind this face of an able and passionate businessman lies Dosabhai’s true nature—a renunciate of the highest order.”

After the procession departed, Shri Hari blessed Dosabhai and ordered him to return to his householder lifestyle. “Dosabhai, whether

you live with me in Gadhada or with your family in Bandhiya, you are one of my greatest sadhus.”

Dosabhai bowed to Shri Hari and said, “The credit is all yours. It is your *samagam* that has taught me to live a life of detachment.” Dosabhai then left for Bandhiya.

Shri Hari celebrated Vasant Panchmi and traveled to Macchiav to celebrate Ful Dol. He sent word to the sadhus to gather in Macchiav. Bhai Ramdas Swami, Muktanand Swami, Brahmanand Swami, Atmanand Swami, Nityanand Swami, Gunatitanand Swami, Paramchaitanyanand Swami, Krupanand Swami, Nishkulanan Swami, Gopalanand Swami, Devanand Swami, and Premanand Swami arrived in Macchiav. Shri Hari seized this opportunity to speak to all of them at once. “It is important to recognize my true *swarup*. I am not just an avatar. I am the cause of all avatars. I am Purna Purushottam Narayan, and Akshardham is my abode. It is only with this understanding can a *bhakta* attain *moksha* and earn a seat in my abode.”

The Epidemic and Free Meals

A large satsang *sabha* gathered in Dada’s courtyard in the summer of 1813. Shri Hari spoke to the sadhus and devotees for a few minutes. In the middle of his speech, Shri Hari looked up at the sky and started waving his hands and moving his lips. Everyone looked towards the sky to see with whom Shri Hari was speaking. Yet, there was not a single cloud in the sky, let alone a living being. The sadhus shrugged their shoulders, dismissing it as another one of Shri Hari’s *charitras*.

A few minutes later, Shri Hari looked towards Gunatitanand Swami and asked, “He is asking whether he should administer an epidemic or a dreadful famine.”

Swami folded his hands and replied, “Prabhu, ask him to lighten the earth’s load by bringing down the epidemic.”

Shri Hari raised his left hand and then resumed speaking to the assembly. The sadhus and devotees wondered about the exchange. As soon as the *sabha* ended, they approached Gunatitanand Swami and asked, “Gunatitanandji, what were you talking about? Who wants to bring an epidemic? Why did you not tell Shri Hari to give permission for

neither catastrophe? Thousands of people will die due to the epidemic.”

Gunatitanand Swami explained the conversation. “Shivaji, himself, had come to ask Shri Hari’s permission. He wanted to lessen the presence of evil on the earth. He asked whether he should bring a famine or epidemic. I suggested the epidemic because it was Shri Hari’s inner wish. I know that thousands will perish, but I had to answer according to Shri Hari’s inner wish. If I had said to not bring either, Shri Hari would have agreed, but I would not have followed his wish. I answered according to his wish.”

The sadhus and devotees now understood why Shri Hari had consulted Gunatitanand Swami for his opinion. His oneness with Shri Hari was unfathomable. They bowed to Gunatitanand Swami and went their way.

The cholera epidemic wreaked havoc on Saurashtra in the monsoon.⁹ It spread from village to village claiming thousands of lives. The bacterial infection plagued Gadhada and tightened its grip on the village with each passing month. It is said that every household lost at least one member. Shri Hari remained in Gadhada and offered support and encouragement to the villagers. The sadhus also helped console devotees as they mourned their deceased family members.

Dada Khachar asked Shri Hari how to save his villagers from this calamity. Shri Hari responded, “There is a way, Dada. If we feed the *brahmins* and conduct a small Rudra Yagna,¹⁰ Shivaji will ease his anger on the village.”

Dada Khachar folded his hands and complied. “Prabhu, whatever you command, I will do. I will open the treasury and granary. Please use whatever is necessary for the *yagna* and *chaurasi* feast.”

Shri Hari asked Sura Khachar to summon Bechar Maharaj, a *brahmin*

⁹ Several colonial historians cite a widespread cholera outbreak in Europe and Asia from 1813 to 1826. Sir James H. Annesley’s *Sketches of the Most Prevalent Diseases of India: Comprising a Treatise on Epidemic Cholera of the East* (London, 1825) discusses the effects of this epidemic in western and southern India. The epidemic is said to have claimed over 100,000 lives.

¹⁰ The Rudra Yagna is considered to be the most sacred and powerful of all *maha yagnas*. It is performed in reverence of Shivaji. It was often performed by rulers and kings to wash away one’s sins and afflictions to maintain peace, prosperity, and happiness.

cook in the village. Sura Khachar went to call the *brahmin* but soon realized that Bechar Maharaj was vigilantly caring for his dying wife's health. He would not come to meet Shri Hari.

Shri Hari decided to visit Bechar Maharaj himself. Just as Shri Hari was about to enter Bechar Maharaj's compound, the neighbor's wife called out to him. "Sahajanandji, Bechar Maharaj has gone to the village to collect items needed for his wife's funeral rites. They just pronounced her dead. Turn back! There is no point of going inside the home."

Shri Hari questioned, "I am not sure she is dead. Let me have a look for myself."

Shri Hari walked to where the woman's body lay and lifted the sheet covering her head. He placed his right thumb on the woman's forehead and pressed down. Then he asked, "Mother, why are you laying on the ground? Stand up! You are worrying everyone."

In a matter of seconds, the woman miraculously sat up and bowed to Shri Hari! Bechar Maharaj walked into the compound and saw his wife alive and well. He prostrated at Shri Hari's feet and exclaimed, "Prabhu, you have given me reason to live. You have saved me from taking my own life."

Shri Hari smiled and said, "How could we let you give up so easily? We still have to accept your *seva*. Now, bathe and come to Dada's residence. We are feeding hundreds of *brahmins*, and we need you to prepare the meals."

Bechar Maharaj bowed his head at Shri Hari's feet and hurried to bathe in the river.

News of the phenomenon rapidly spread in the village. A group of merchants approached Brahmanand Swami and said, "Swamiji, we heard that Shri Hari brought Bechar's wife back from the dead. Will you speak to Shri Hari on our behalf? He is the only one who can protect our families from this treacherous epidemic. Please put in a good word for us."

Brahmanand Swami replied, "I will try, but it will be difficult. Not a single morsel of your food has found its way to a *brahmin* or sadhu's stomach. You have never given to charity or supported humanitarian efforts. How will I make a case for your families to Swaminarayan?"

The merchants realized their mistake. They were wealthy enough

to give back to society, but they had failed to do so. They begged Brahmanand Swami to ask Shri Hari to forgive them. Brahmanand Swami brought the merchants in front of Shri Hari later that afternoon. Shri Hari heard their prayers of remorse and said, “If you feed all my sadhus and the less fortunate villagers at your homes, I will protect your homes and families.”

Brahmanand Swami then winked at Shri Hari and thanked him for playing along with his plan.

The next day, Shri Hari awoke to find the sadhus’ residence and courtyard empty. He asked Brahmanand Swami where everyone had gone. Brahmanand Swami replied, “Prabhu, our plan worked perfectly. The merchants and their relatives have invited our sadhus to their homes for a meal. I am sure this will continue for months. There is a waiting list of merchants’ homes for the sadhus to eat!

Shri Hari smiled coyly. His *charitra* earned the sadhus and the less fortunate members of society a meal, decreased the burden on Dada Khachar’s coffers, and even granted *moksha* to the merchants and their families.

A few days later, Shri Hari fed the *brahmins* in a *chaurasi* feast. Everyone praised Bechar Maharaj’s culinary expertise—the food was scrumptious. The Rudra Yagna was also a success. Even more noteworthy, the epidemic in Gadhada was loosening its deadly grip.

“There is an Elephant in My Hut!”

Sagram was a *vaghri* by caste. He lived in Limli, a town between Gujarat and Saurashtra. The famine of 1813 had made Limli uninhabitable. There was no food, water, or work. In order to survive, Muktanand Swami suggested that Sagram and his wife relocate to Surat in southern Gujarat.

Walking the lengthy, dirt path towards Surat was an arduous trek. Sagram and his wife had not eaten in days. Even potable water was hard to find. Sagram and his wife encouraged each other to continue walking in the scorching sun with the hope that life would improve in Surat. One afternoon, as he walked ahead on the parched mud flakes of what was once a lush riverbed, Sagram noticed a piece of metal a few yards in front of him. He bent down, and concealed the silver bangle with dirt.

Sagram's wife noticed that he was covering a metal object with dirt. She ran up to him and asked, "What are you doing in the dirt?"

Sagram hesitated but responded candidly, "I noticed a piece of silver on the floor. I assumed that you may be tempted to pick it up. That silver bangle would have fed us for a month. However, Shri Hari has instructed us not to take objects that do not belong to us. I did not want your mind to waver, and hence, I covered the silver bangle with dirt."

His wife listened patiently. "You wasted your time, dear husband. I did not even think of it as silver. I saw it from a distance as well. I, however, just thought of it as dirt. Another individual's possessions are as good as dirt to me. So what is the point of covering dirt with dirt? Shri Hari's *agna* is more important than a few days of food."

Sagram and his wife exemplified the moral and spiritual code of conduct of Shri Hari's devotees. Even those belonging to the lower stratas of the social hierarchy lived in a manner that was superior to members of the higher and more affluent social classes.

Shivram Bhatt experienced Sagram's bhakti and *jnan* first-hand. Bhattji was a scholar. He would travel from village to village and deliver discourses to the villagers. Once, the villagers of Sayal invited Bhattji to their village. Bhattji began a seven-day *parayan* on the *Shrimad Bhagavata Purana*. One evening, Sagram attended the *parayan*. Having heard from several villagers about Sagram's knowledge, Bhattji decided to examine Sagram's knowledge for himself. Given Sagram's lowly caste as a *vaghri*, Bhattji had low expectations.

Sagram politely declined the invitation from Bhattji to ask a question, but Bhattji persisted. After much persuasion, Sagram asked, "Bhattji, do the senses and mind reside in the material desires or do the material desires reside in the senses and mind?"

Bhattji thought for a few seconds but could not formulate a satisfactory answer. His face was flushed with embarrassment. The villagers whispered, "This *brahmin* has studied the shastras his whole life. Yet Sagram, a *vaghri*, stumped him."

Bhattji concocted an excuse and left the village. At home, his wife consoled him, "Why don't you just go to Gadhada and ask Swaminarayan for the answer?"

Bhattji left the following morning and reached Gadhada. He stood up in the morning satsang *sabha* and asked Shri Hari the question. Shri Hari answered, “The senses and mind are stuck in the material desires and base instincts.” Shri Hari explained his answer in detail in front of the entire *sabha*.

Bhattji returned to Sagram and answered the question. Sagram smiled and observed, “Bhattji, I am sure that Swaminarayan or one of his sadhus must have answered the question for you!”

Bhattji bowed to Sagram and sought inspiration from his life. Bhattji became a devotee of Bhagwan Swaminarayan and then a sadhu by the name of Akhandanand Muni. Akhandanand Muni was a disciple of Gunatitanand Swami. He wrote several *bhakti pads* about Gunatitanand Swami’s *mahima*.

Sagram’s transformation garnered attention both within and outside of the satsang community. Even the King of Bhavnagar, Vajesinh, invited Sagram to his court to personally experience Sagram’s wisdom after hearing people in his kingdom rave about Sagram’s qualities. However, the greatest reward that Sagram reaped was the love and appreciation shown by Shri Hari.

One night, Shri Hari knocked on the door of Sagram’s straw hut. Agitated by the noise, Sagram came to the door with a stick in his hand. He threw open the door and was completely startled. He rubbed his eyes to confirm what he saw. Shri Hari was standing outside of his straw hut. There was barely enough room for a third person to stand in the hut. Shri Hari sat on a wornout cot. He asked Sagram’s wife, “Sister, I am hungry. Do you have anything to eat?”

Sagram rushed to the well, drew a bucket of water, and then filtered the water. His wife prepared millet *rotlo* and served it with cooked aubergines and yogurt. Shri Hari ate to his heart’s satisfaction. Despite the social stigma of the time, Shri Hari ate food prepared by the hands of an ‘untouchable’. This *charitra* itself was enough to satisfy all of Sagram’s spiritual endeavors. Consumed with pure bliss, Sagram danced and sang, “There is an elephant in my straw hut... How is this possible, dear friend?”

Shri Hari’s selfless love for his devotees trumped all societal barriers and overcame any obstacles of prejudice.

Teja Bhakta of Chhani

Shri Hari's efforts to initiate social and religious reform are evidenced by the actions and spiritual heights of his devotees.

Nishkulnand Swami prepared a list of devotees from various social and economic backgrounds. In it, he mentions 3,700 devotees from over 750 villages and 55 sub-castes. The diversity of this list illustrates Shri Hari's universal compassion towards devotees from all strata of society. The caste system, which was initially designed as a means of organization and functionality for the prosperous growth of society, had become an oppressive tool used by members of higher classes to maintain their affluence and prominence over the others. Shri Hari instituted sweeping reforms to negate the effects of this oppressive influence from the public domain. Shri Hari also paid attention to devotees belonging to the lower classes. He kept them in his *seva*, graced their homes, and shared meals with them, actions considered against the then-current societal norms. Ultimately, Shri Hari provided all members of society a platform through which to achieve equality.

Shri Hari's wave of social reform is exemplified by an incident from the life of Teja Bhakta, a *vankar* or weaver belonging to a lower caste. Chhani, a village near the city of Vadodara, was ruled by a *brahmin* administrator. The administrator was preparing to celebrate the wedding of his only daughter. A full meal for hundreds of invited guests was already cooked.

Unfortunately, the sudden and untimely death of a close family member on the morning of the wedding cast a dark shadow over the day's events. Having to cancel the wedding ceremony, the administrator decided to give away the prepared meal to the members of the *shudra* caste in the village. Teja Bhakta, however, refused to accept the feast. Enraged by the lowly laborer's disrespectful behaviour, the administrator called Teja Bhakta to his residence. "How dare you refuse to accept the meals prepared for my daughter's wedding? You are a *shudra*. You are supposed to eat my leftovers."

Teja Bhakta responded politely, "That may be true, dear sir, but I have a *niyam* from Swaminarayan. We are only supposed to eat meals prepared with filtered water, oil, and ghee. The grains must be sifted and cleaned

before consumption. I am unsure if your men diligently followed this practice. This is why, with a heavy heart, I must refuse your invitation."

The *brahmin* was left speechless. It soon became known in the region that Teja Bhakta's *niyams* and *jnan* surpassed that of rulers, *brahmins*, and scholars.

Sura Khachar the Celibate

It was nearing midnight as Shri Hari sat in Dada Khachar's courtyard. It was past Shri Hari's usual time for bed, but he remained alert, seemingly waiting for something or someone. Later, the rumbling of horse's hoofs hitting the ground was heard from a distance. Dada Khachar stood up to see who was riding in on the horse. To everyone's surprise, it was Sura Khachar. They wondered where he came from and why at such an untimely hour.

Shri Hari stood up to embrace his devotee and said, "Come, oh celibate! You have shown the strength of your *ekantik dharma*."

The sadhus and devotees were puzzled. Aware of everyone's confusion, Shri Hari asked Sura Khachar to share what had transpired in Jasdan. Sura Khachar began his story:

"The Thakur of Jasdan was insisting that I stay the night today in his village. He had been asking for a while, but I had been turning down the invitation with excuses. Something told me that he wanted to soil my character. After dinner, he again asked me to spend the night. I gave into his persistence to put an end to the matter. One of his servants servant led me to a residence in the village. As I sat in my bed turning my *mala*, I heard a knock on the door. I asked who it was. I heard a female's voice on the other end. I asked, 'Mother, how may I help you?' The young lady responded, 'I have left my medicine in the house. May I please retrieve it? Please open the door, Suraji!' My instincts told me that this was an attempt to tarnish my image. I lit a candle and opened the door. The lady walked in and talked about trivial matters instead of looking for her medication. I suggested that she come back in the morning after I left. Before I could plot my next move, she tried to put her hand around my neck. I immediately grabbed the handle of my sword and shouted, 'Mother, my Bhagwan Swaminarayan has instructed me

to protect unarmed women and children. However, if you take another step in my direction, I will be forced to draw my sword.' The woman was frightened and cried hysterically. She revealed that the Thakur had sent her to my room in an attempt to break my *brahmacharya* vows. If she was successful in her task, the Thakur would have rewarded her with a heap of gold. I kindly asked her to leave the room. I gathered my belongings, saddled my horse, and rode to Gadhada. What is the point of spending another moment in a place where we could possibly falter in our *niyams*?"

Shri Hari spoke about Sura Khachar's resolve as an ideal example of imbibing such principles in one's life.

Jhamkuba of Chittor

Chittor, located within Udaipur, is one of the most renowned fort cities in India. It stands as a symbol of freedom, courage, and nationalism.

Jhamkuba was one of the queens of the Rao. One morning, a *brahmin* from Gujarat came to the court with a marriage proposal for one of the Rao's distant cousins. The *brahmin* causally mentioned 'Swaminarayan' in his brief conversation with Jhamkuba. At the sound of Swaminarayan's name, Jhamkuba felt a sudden jolt in her body. It was as if she was charged with a bolt of detachment, faith, and bhakti.

She spent the next few months praying to Shri Hari in her mind. However, as time passed, she was unable to bear the separation. One night, she climbed out of her window using a rope made of her saris. Once outside of the palace grounds, Jamkuba covered as much distance as possible under the disguise of night. During the day, she hid inside the carcass of a dead camel. The Rao's army searched all of Mewar for four days. On the fourth day, Jhamkuba heard the hoofs of the cavalry heading back towards the fort. She came out of the carcass, bathed, and continued on to Gujarat. On the way, she met a family of drifters and traveled with them to Visnagar in northern Gujarat.

After bathing in a lake, Jhamkuba joined a group of ladies headed towards Saurashtra. She arrived in Gadhada with the ladies and joined in the *seva*. She wore a simple white sari and performed all of the menial chores.

One afternoon, Jivuba was passing by Shri Hari's cot. Shri Hari called

out to her, "Jivuba, do you know that young lady?"

Jivuba answered, "Yes, Prabhu. She is a diligent worker. She spends her days and nights caring for the cattle. The rest of her free time is spent singing your kirtans. She accepts every *seva*; the word 'no' is not in her vocabulary."

Shri Hari chuckled and said, "Jivuba, that young lady is a queen from Mewar. She had several servants that were as wealthy as you are! Do not assign such menial tasks to her. Look after her."

Jivuba was aghast. She ran and grabbed the vessel of cow dung from Jhamkuba's hands. Thereafter, Shri Hari sent Mataji, a name he used to call Jhamkuba, to Bhuj with Ladhibai. There, Mataji played a central role in the development of satsang in and around Kutch. The *mahima* of Shri Hari's name was enough to draw a queen from a distant land to renounce her royal lineage for a life of bhakti, celibacy, and *seva*.

Shri Hari then celebrated Janmashtami in Nardipur and arrived in Vartal to prepare for the Diwali and Annakut festivals.

The Greater Path

Shri Hari called all of the senior sadhus traveling in Gujarat and Saurashtra to the Annakut festival of 1816 in Vartal. The presence of Shri Hari and the sadhus enlivened the town, like a moonlight sky spotted with the glow of glittering stars. After the festival, Shri Hari spent several days speaking to the sadhus about their *niyams*, understanding his *swarup*, and the importance of Aksharbrahma on the path to *moksha*. Shri Hari's lectures often spanned late into the night.

Shri Hari also planned feasts to share *smritis* with the sadhus. One afternoon, Shri Hari served *dudhpak* to all of the sadhus. He poured the sweet milk dessert from one sadhu's bowl to the other without lifting the tip of the vessel. The sadhus and devotees etched these divine *charitras* in their minds and hearts, rekindling their flame of bhakti.

After the *dudhpak* feast, Gunatitanand Swami asked Shri Hari a question in the presence of all the senior sadhus. "Prabhu, what is the greatest means to please Bhagwan and his Gunatit Sadhu? Is it meditation, knowing one's self to be the *atma*, caring for the ill and impoverished, or speaking to others about Your *mahima* and the *mahima* of your

Aksharbrahma Sadhu?”

Although Gunatitanand Swami knew the answer to this question, Shri Hari replied for the benefit of the other sadhus and devotees present in the assembly. Shri Hari turned to Muktanand Swami and asked him to answer. Muktanand Swami said, “Prabhu, meditating on your *murti* is probably the best means.”

Shri Hari retorted, “Muktanandji, have you forgotten how King Daksha’s ten thousand sons were liberated?”

Muktanand Swami immediately realized his mistake and folded his hands apologetically.

Shri Hari said, “The greatest means to please Bhagwan and his Gunatit Sadhu is to speak of their glory. The reasoning behind this is simple: whereas all of the other means only benefit the one person engaging in them, speaking to others reaffirms the conviction and bhakti of both the speaker and the listener.”

Shri Hari spoke for several hours on the importance of *katha* and speaking of Bhagwan’s *swarup* and *mahima* within *katha*. He often pointed at Gunatitanand Swami and sang the praise of his Gunatit Sadhu.

The sadhus sat as if in a trance, focusing on Shri Hari’s *murti* and listening to his instructions.

Rajabhai to Aksharanand Swami

The Swaminarayan sadhus reached the village square of Khorasa, a town near Junagadh, and waited for an invitation from Rajabhai’s house. Rajabhai was a *kshatriya* devotee who always arranged for the sadhus’ accommodations and meals when they came to Khorasa. One of Rajabhai’s friends went to his home and asked Rajabhai’s wife, “Sister, Swaminarayan’s sadhus are in town. Will you send the groceries for their meals or will you have the meals made at your home?”

Rajabhai was out of town on business. His wife took advantage of his absence and retorted, “These sadhus are always at our doorsteps asking for food and lodging. Don’t they have anywhere else to go? Has your own house burned down, brother? Why not feed them yourself for once?”

Rajabhai’s friend was taken aback. He did not mention anything to the sadhus and prepared a meal at his own home. When Rajabhai

returned, his friend shared the story with him. Rajabhai was heartbroken to learn that in his absence, his wife mistreated the sadhus. He called the village clerk and asked him to draft a letter. The letter was addressed to his wife and made to look as if sent from her brother. The letter described the ailing health of her father and instructed her to immediately return to her village to see him. After reading the letter, Rajabhai's wife packed her bags and rushed to the village with her children.

In the meantime, Rajabhai sold all of his property, including many acres of farm land, and kept only a few acres to provide for his family. He then stuffed the profits from the sale of his land in a bag and headed for Gadhada. In Gadhada, Shri Hari was surprised to see him. "Rajabhai, what are you doing here right now? And, what is all this money for?"

Rajabhai placed the sack in front of Shri Hari's cot and performed *dandavats*. He narrated the incident and said, "Prabhu, what is the point in living with people that will not let me serve you or your sadhus. Please make me a sadhu."

Shri Hari thought for a few minutes and then gave Rajabhai a difficult *agna* to follow: "Rajabhai, Parvatbhai's son is young. Parvatbhai cannot take care of his farmland because he is always with me. Go to Agatrali and tend to his fields and manage his finances until I send for you."

For thirteen years, Rajabhai, a land-owning *kshatriya*, worked as a day laborer on a small farm just to please Shri Hari. Shri Hari eventually initiated Rajabhai as a sadhu and named him Aksharanand Swami. Aksharanand Swami was appointed the mahant of Vartal mandir. His experiences with Bhagwan Swaminarayan and Gunatitanand Swami are shared in a text entitled *Aksharanand Swami ni Vato*.

Lakshmichand Sheth and the Two Bottles of Scented Oils

Lakshmichand Sheth was a Bengali scribe and merchant. He moved to Vrindavan and built a massive Radha-Krishna mandir. Today, that mandir is known as the Sri Rangam Mandir and is one of the most visited pilgrimage sites in Vrindavan. Lakshmichand Sheth administered alms to *brahmins* and sadhus every afternoon in his mandir. One afternoon, he noticed a sadhu sitting on the side and then joining the queue for alms

only after all of the men and women had passed. The sadhu walked up to the counter at the end and took whatever was left. Lakshmichand was surprised. He asked the sadhu, “Swamiji, why didn’t you join the line earlier? There was much more to be distributed a few hours ago.”

Sukhanand Swami, a disciple of Ramanand Swami, explained the *niyams* given by Shri Hari. “Our Bhagwan Swaminarayan has instructed us to follow eight-fold celibacy. Standing in that queue often leads to brushing shoulders with or speaking to women. I can eat whatever is left over. My *niyams* as a sadhu, however, cannot be compromised.”

Sukhanand Swami continued to speak of Shri Hari’s *mahima*. Lakshmichand was enamoured by Shri Hari’s *mahima* and *charitras*. He handed Sukhanand Swami two bottles of scented oils for Shri Hari. He promised to make his way to Gadhada as soon as he could transfer the responsibilities of the mandir and the alms-giving administrative duties to a qualified individual.

Sukhanand Swami headed for Gwalior to tell his relatives and friends that Bhagwan had manifested on Earth in Gujarat. In Gwalior, he convinced his brothers and relatives to leave for Gujarat. Sukhanand Swami, however, fell ill and passed away in Gwalior.

Sukhanand Swami’s two brothers came to Gadhada with the two bottles of scented oils. They offered them to Shri Hari and expressed their desire to become sadhus. Shri Hari initiated them and named them Ramanujanand Swami and Chota Gopalanand Swami.

Meanwhile, Lakshmichand Sheth had transferred his responsibilities at the mandir to his relatives and rode away in the middle of the night towards Gadhada. Unfortunately, his mare slipped in the dark, and Lakshmichand fell on his own dagger, fatally wounding him.

When Shri Hari heard of this news, he noted, “It takes a certain amount of *punya* to attain the darshan and *samagam* of Bhagwan and his Gunatit Sadhu. Lakshmichand Sheth did not have that level of *punya* in this birth. However, he will now be born as Nathu Patel in Kariyani and will obtain my *seva* and *bhakti*.”

Shri Hari’s *seva* and *bhakti* were not easily obtainable, but rather only made available to those on whom Shri Hari showered his grace.

Kushalkunvarba's Bhakti

Paramchaitanyanand Swami left Gadhada due to friction with a few sadhus, but his love for Shri Hari would not let him leave the satsang community. He traveled from one village to another until he reached the kingdom of Dharampur. The Queen Mother of Dharampur, Kushalkunvarba, was a devout, elderly lady. She lost both her husband and son to untimely deaths. She ruled the kingdom of five hundred villages with the help of her grandson, Vijaydev.

Paramchaitanyanand Swami was sitting among the other ascetics in the state-sponsored sadhu guesthouse when Kushalkunvarba came to offer her respects to all of the sadhus. Kushalkunvarba proceeded from one ascetic to another. When she reached Paramchaitanyanand Swami, he pulled his legs in and turned the other direction. Kushalkunvarba was surprised by this behavior and asked her minister to find out more about the sadhu. The minister returned that afternoon and explained, "Mother, he is one of Swaminarayan's sadhus. They follow eight-fold celibacy. This is why he pulled his legs away from you. He did not mean it as an insult."

Kushalkunvarba sent Vijaydev to invite Paramchaitanyanand Swami to her palace. Vijaydev welcomed Paramchaitanyanand Swami and asked him to address the royal court. The lectures became a daily occurrence: Paramchaitanyanand Swami spoke to the grandson and the members of the court, while Kushalkunvarba listened from behind a curtain.

When Shri Hari learned that Paramchaitanyanand Swami had settled in Dharampur, he sent Muktanand Swami and Gunatitanand Swami to convince him to return to Gadhada. Muktanand Swami was successful in convincing the senior sadhu to return. Muktanand Swami and Gunatitanand Swami then remained in Dharampur and discussed various religious subjects with Vijaydev and the courtiers for a few more days.

After the sadhus left, Kushalkunvarba continued to listen to *katha* from a local scholar. One day after the *katha* session she said, "Panditji, all this talk about Bhagwan's *lila charitra* in the past is not enough. We will only make spiritual progress if Bhagwan Swaminarayan comes and

grabs our wrists as Shri Krishna did for Rukminiji.”¹¹

Kushalkunvarba sent an invitation to Gadhada to invite Bhagwan to her kingdom, and Shri Hari gladly accepted. That January, Shri Hari left with a large procession of sadhus and male and female devotees. He was received in Dharampur with a salute of roaring cannons and firing muskets. Shri Hari was seated on an elephant and paraded through the streets of Dharampur, an image that thousands of townspeople gathered to see.

Kushalkunvarba opened up her treasury and granary to the sadhus and devotees. Laduba and Jivuba were astonished by the level of bhakti she developed for Shri Hari in just a few weeks. Kushalkunvarba had one desire: to serve Shri Hari. At the age of ninety-two, she knew that she was nearing the end of her life. She asked Shri Hari if he would allow for her to ornament him with her own hands. Shri Hari rarely approved such *seva* requests. However, he yielded to her selfless bhakti and consented. The frail woman prepared gold belts, bangles, and anklets. She sewed gold-threaded silk and tailored it to Shri Hari’s body. She dressed Shri Hari in the ornaments and touched his feet. Shri Hari’s eyes teared at the sight of the elderly woman’s bhakti.

After spending fifteen days in Dharampur, Shri Hari departed for Gadhada. Two days after Shri Hari left for Gadhada, a messenger from Dharampur delivered a letter bearing the royal insignia: the Queen Mother had passed away. It seemed that Kushalkunvarba was just waiting for a chance to offer her bhakti and *seva* to Shri Hari before leaving her mortal body.

Enroute to Gadhada from Dharampur, the sadhus and devotees stopped on the banks of the Narmada River. Shri Hari bathed and performed his morning meditation. Muktanand Swami called out to Shri Hari, “Prabhu, please awaken from meditation. We are all waiting for you. Breakfast is ready to be served.”

Shri Hari opened his eyes and said, “Sure, we can have breakfast, but I want to talk to all of you today about a very important matter.”

11 Shri Krishna married Rukminiji, the Vidarbha princess who was an avatar of Goddess Lakshmi, by abducting her at her request from her proposed arranged marriage to King Shishupal of Chhedi. This abduction was later viewed as symbolizing the protection of a *bhakta* by Bhagwan.

Muktanand Swami and the sadhus stood up and gathered around their Bhagwan. Shri Hari began, “It is difficult to maintain *divyabhav* in a Bhagwan that lives, travels, and speaks to you. However, the greatest sadhana for spiritual progress is having *divyabhav* in the *pragat* form of Bhagwan. Thinking of Bhagwan and his Gunatit Sadhu as ordinary humans is the fastest way to fall from the path of *moksha*. There is a metaphysical difference which prevents the *jiva* from becoming Aksharbrahma or Parabrahma.”

Muktanand Swami asked, “Prabhu, then by what means can one stay on this path and remain focused?”

Shri Hari answered, “*Swarup nishta*. If you can understand that the individual who eats, sleeps, and laughs with you is Purna Purushottam Narayan, then nothing is left to be done. All of you are extremely fortunate to have the company of Bhagwan and his Gunatit Sadhu. Do not ever take this association for granted. You must accrue a tremendous amount of *punya* from your previous births before enjoying my *samagam*.”

After speaking to the sadhus and devotees about his own *mahima*, Purna Purushottam Narayan Bhagwan Swaminarayan sat with his devotees and enjoyed breakfast.

Shri Hari celebrated the Fuladol festival of 1817 in Vartal at the invitation of Joban Pagi. Nishkulanand Swami created an architectural masterpiece in the form of a revolving *hindola*. The *hindola* had twelve different doors, allowing the sadhus and devotees to simultaneously have darshan of Shri Hari’s *murti* from all twelve directions. Joban Pagi selflessly served all those who had gathered for the festival, earning praise from Shri Hari. Muktanand Swami later composed a bhajan describing the festivities.

Laage Vaikunththi rudu Vartal, hindole Hari jhultaa re...

Fuladolno utsav rasaal, hindole Hari jhultaa re...

Vartal looks more beautiful than Vaikunth today, for Shri Hari is dallying on a hindolo...

The Fuladol festival is filled with various rasas and joys, for Shri Hari is dallying on a hindolo...

Ramanujanand Swami, Sachchidanand Swami, and Shukanand Swami

Despite increasing acceptance of the philosophies of the Swaminarayan Sampradaya, Shri Hari's sadhus were still targeted by resentful ascetics and bitter villagers. They were often verbally abused and even beaten. Surviving without food for several days was a common occurrence. Shri Hari was aware of these difficulties as were the new sadhus who asked to be initiated. Surprisingly, the number of sadhus kept growing.

Bhimjibhai lived in the small village of Kelod near Bharuch. He was a devotee of Shri Rama but was curious about Swaminarayan after hearing about him several times. One day, he decided to travel to Gadhada for Swaminarayan's darshan.

The path to Gadhada was deserted and ridden with assailants. Bhimji feared for his life. Suddenly, he heard ruffling in the bushes. A gang of dacoits jumped out of the bushes and started to chase him. He rode east but saw more coming from that direction. He pulled the horse's reigns and rode in the opposite direction. There, too, the dacoits had surrounded him. He had no place to go. He closed his eyes and chanted the Swaminarayan mantra five times. When Bhimji opened his eyes, he noticed a man on a white horse thrashing the dacoits. The dacoits begged for mercy and fled. Once Bhimji was safe, the white horse and its rider immediately disappeared.

Bhimji rushed to Gadhada and shared his experience with the satsang assembly. He realized that the white horse belonged to none other than Shri Hari. He asked Shri Hari to be accepted into the sadhu-fold. Shri Hari initiated Bhimji and named him Chota Ramanujanand Swami.

During this period of history, tantric practices were prevalent in many parts of Gujarat. Motabhai of Moda was one of Shri Hari's staunch devotees who had not succumbed to such tantric practices. A local tantric in the village wanted to embarrass those who did not believe in tantric practices. He harassed Motabhai with several tantric curses. However, Motabhai was steadfast in his faith for Shri Hari. Annoyed by Motabhai's resolve, the tantric invoked Goddess Shakti to attack the Swaminarayan devotee. Shri Hari suddenly appeared between Motabhai and the devi. The devi bowed to Shri Hari and then disappeared.

Motabhai immediately left his village and traveled to Gadhada. Shri Hari assigned him the *seva* of tilling and managing Dada Khachar's farmland for several years. Pleased with his dedication to *seva* and bhakti, Shri Hari initiated Motabhai into the sadhu-fold and named him Sachchidanand Swami.

Shukanand Swami, also known as Shukmuni, was initiated in 1817. Prior to *diksha*, his name was Jagannath, and he was a *brahmin* from Dabhan. Shri Hari asked Muktanand Swami to initiate him into the sadhu-fold. He later became one of the four compilers of the Vachanamrut and Shri Hari's personal secretarial attendant.

A Day on the Farm – Teaching Domestic Harmony

Shri Hari arrived in Loya from Gadhada during the monsoon of 1817. Hetba was new to satsang but a faithful devotee. Though she devoted her life to Shri Hari's *seva* and bhakti, her husband, Sangabhai Patel, was a cruel man. He would beat Hetba without reason. His temper was ignited by the slightest action or word from Hetba. Hetba, however, was patient. She never complained about her circumstances to Shri Hari, for she was preoccupied with relishing in Shri Hari's divine *murti*.

When Shri Hari came to Loya, he visited Hetba. Hetba was preparing a meal to take to the fields for her husband. Shri Hari asked Hetba to prepare a meal for him too. She replied, "Prabhu, these *rotla* are too thick and heavy for you. They are difficult to digest. As farmers, we are used to eating them. Once I come back from the fields, I will cook separate *rotla* for you."

Shri Hari suggested an alternative idea, "Why don't I deliver your husband's meals? In the meantime you can prepare my meal. I will be back in no time."

Shri Hari grabbed the bag of food and walked to Sangabhai's fields. He met the farmer and asked, "Are you Sangabhai?"

The farmer responded with the nod of his head. Shri Hari gave him the food and explained why he was there. The farmer was infuriated. "That lazy woman! If she came to the fields, she could have helped me with the farming chores. What are you good for?"

Shri Hari chuckled and said, "Patel, I know how to farm. Tell me

what I have to do.”

Sangabhai eagerly rattled off a list of tasks to be completed by Shri Hari. While Sangabhai was still eating his meal, Shri Hari finished all of the chores. Shri Hari then used the rest of the afternoon to speak to the farmer about his temper, abusive habits, and disrespectful attitude towards women. Shri Hari explained, “Your wife is a great devotee. She is the embodiment of Lakshmi. By abusing her, you are incurring the wrath of the devas. Treat her with respect. Calm your temper. If you can effectively communicate your emotions instead of raising your hands, you will achieve more in your relationship with both your wife and the satsang community.” The farmer accepted Shri Hari’s counsel.

Meanwhile, Hetba was worried that Shri Hari was still in the fields without having eaten lunch. She packed Shri Hari’s lunch and came to the fields. She was surprised to see all of the farm’s chores completed. They all then walked back to the house. There, as a changed man, Sangabhai served Shri Hari a meal of *rotli*, *dal*, *bhat*, and *shaak* with his own hands.

Shri Hari’s instruction offered pragmatic spirituality, spirituality which improved the social and religious lives of aspirants.

Muktanand Swami’s Qualm

Reading and interpreting the shastras to establish theological doctrine has been a long-standing tradition within the Indian intellectual and religious domains. The Mimamsakas, Buddhists, Jains, Shankara, Ramanuja, Madhva, Nimbarka, Vishnu Swami, Vallabha, and Chaitanya, among others, are examples of such intellectuals who have propounded philosophies through the interpretation of three central texts: the Upanishads, the Shrimad Bhagavad Gita, and the *Brahmasutras*. This exegesis was carried out through oral and written commentaries. Bhagwan Swaminarayan’s sadhus also participated in this tradition. Gopalanand Swami authored a commentary on the Shrimad Bhagavad Gita. Many other treatises are found within the *sampradaya*. The culmination of these compositions is found in the commentaries of Sadhu Bhadreshdas (2007), written nearly two hundred years after the first commentary was produced within the tradition. Sadhu Bhadreshdas’ treatise expounds the first complete theological doctrine of Aksharbrahma and Parabrahma in

commentary form within the *sampradaya*.

In Gadhada in 1817, Muktanand Swami and Nityanand Swami were reading commentaries on the Shrimad Bhagavad Gita found within the Ramanuja tradition. Nityanand Swami, a well-read and renowned scholar, was explaining the Ramanuja commentaries and clarifying the differences between the Swaminarayan and Ramanuja doctrines. The more that Nityanand Swami explained the differences, the more Muktanand Swami doubted the position of the Swaminarayan doctrine. They both agreed to ask Shri Hari to mediate their dispute.

Shri Hari was sitting in Akshar Ordi in the rear of Dada Khachar's courtyard. Muktanand Swami and Nityanand Swami walked into the small room and took their seats near Shri Hari's feet. Shri Hari looked at Muktanand Swami and sensed the tension on his face, in contrast to the serenity on Nityanand Swami's face.

Muktanand Swami broke the silence. "Shri Hari, in the Shrimad Bhagavad Gita Shri Krishna states that he is Purushottam or Bhagwan. Nityanandji was interpreting this verse differently than I have ever heard. He claims that you are Purna Purushottam Narayan. Where is that written in any of the shastras? How can that be true? Please help to resolve this confusion, Bhagwan."

Shri Hari smiled and said, "Muktanandji, when Shri Krishna showed his Virat Narayan *swarup* to Arjun, Arjun said, 'Oh Keshav, I recognize this form of yours to be Purushottam.'¹² Despite, Arjun's proclamation, Shri Krishna never responded to his statement. The reason for this silence was Shri Krishna's knowledge of the fact that Purushottam was beyond him."

Shri Hari then used several verses from the Shrimad Bhagavad Gita and Upanishads to substantiate his supremacy and to illustrate that he was Purna Purushottam Narayan. Muktanand Swami, however, was still unwilling to concede to this point of view.

It was then that Shri Hari said, "Muktanandji, is it not enough that I, your Bhagwan, am telling you to interpret these texts accordingly? What is greater: the prior commentaries on these texts or Bhagwan?"

Muktanand Swami immediately realized his mistake. He prostrated at Shri Hari's feet and apologized profusely. That evening, Shri Hari

¹² Refer to the Shrimad Bhagavad Gita, 11:15-31, for further discussion.

addressed the satsang *sabha* in Loya and said, “When reading and interpreting the shastras, even great scholars fail to make sense of the verses’ true meaning. Therefore, when reading the shastras, it is best to read them in accordance with the theological doctrine prescribed by me and explained by my *ekantik bhakta*.¹³

Muktanand Swami and Nityanand Swami bowed to Shri Hari and continued their studies of the religious commentaries authored by Ramanuja.

Akshardham in Return for a Datan Stick

Shri Hari left the Bhal region one evening to venture to Saurashtra. Night fell, so Shri Hari instructed Sura Khachar to set up camp in a nearby village. Unfortunately, Sura Khachar could not find a *datan* stick for Shri Hari’s morning ablutions. Sura Khachar and Shri Hari rode farther along to the next village of Sodhi.

Shri Hari rested under a tree on the outskirts while Sura Khachar went inside the village to find *datan*. Generally, the babul tree, from which *datan* is made, is not grown inside the home compound. However, an aged Muslim woman had grown a babul tree in her courtyard with the intentions of offering a single stick to a great sadhu. Each morning, she would trim the tree and water it with the hopes of finding a sadhu to gift with a stick. Sura Khachar spotted the babul tree and called out to the woman, “Mother, my Bhagwan Swaminarayan is sitting on the outskirts of the village. He needs a *datan* for tomorrow morning. Would you be willing to spare a stick?”

The lady was overjoyed. She grabbed a handful of *datan* sticks that she had cleaned and prepared earlier that day. Sura Khachar brought her to Shri Hari, as she was eager to meet him. She handed them to Shri Hari and asked, “Are you Swaminarayan?”

Shri Hari nodded affirmatively. She said, “What do I get for giving you this *datan*, Khuda?”

Shri Hari smiled and said, “I will give you *moksha*; I will give you my Akshardham.”

13 In Vachanamrut Gadhada I 66, Bhagwan Swaminarayan says, “Besides, the words of the scriptures cannot be understood in their true context by anyone except an *ekantik bhakta*.”

Shri Hari's compassion was uncomparable—granting Akshardham in exchange for a few *datan* sticks.

Shri Hari then traveled from Bhal and Saurashtra to Vartal. In Vartal, Shri Hari celebrated the Diwali and Annakut festivals.

Nityanand Swami brought with him several sadhus that were learning Sanskrit and studying the philosophies of various sects. Shri Hari blessed them by saying, “All of you should have the *samagam* of Nityanand Swami or Gunatitanand Swami. They have understood my true *swarup*. If at any point you feel confused or troubled, ask them to clarify my theological doctrine. I give you my blessings. All of you will understand my *mahima* and never falter in your *upasana*.”

Shri Hari spent the next few hours speaking of his own *mahima* and that of Aksharbrahma. Adharanand Swami recorded this discourse in verse form in a bhakti *pad*: ‘*Purushottam bolyaa prite*.’

Fighting Superstition and Misguided Tradition

Shri Hari traveled tirelessly after Diwali. He decided to return to Gadhada for Ramnavmi. A few days after Ramnavmi, devotees from the nearby village of Rampur invited Shri Hari to their village. Shri Hari saddled his mare and rode to Rampur. This time of the year saw many weddings. As part of a corrupted tradition, the village women would sing folk songs containing profanity and describing promiscuity. Unable to tolerate such vulgar speech, Shri Hari immediately rode back to Gadhada with a heavy heart. He called Muktanand Swami and Premanand Swami to his residence and ordered them to compose *pads* of Rukminiji’s wedding to Shri Krishna and of Tulsi Vivah.¹⁴ Within a few months, these ‘wedding songs’ grew increasingly popular. Women from all over the satsang community substituted the use of the offensive

¹⁴ Tulsi Vivah is the ceremonial marriage of the tulsi plant, which is believed to be an incarnation of Goddess Lakshmi, with Shri Vishnu in the form of a *murti*. It is celebrated on the twelfth day of the bright half of the month of Kartik. Brinda was the chief queen of the demon King Jalandhar. King Jalandhar became invincible due to the power of Brinda’s *pativrata brahmacharya*. To protect the three worlds, Shri Vishnu took the form of Jalandhar and caused Brinda to break her *pativrata brahmacharya*. Shivaji was then easily able to vanquish King Jalandhar. Brinda cursed Shri Vishnu for deceiving her, and Shri Vishnu transformed into a *shaligram*. Shri Vishnu then turned Brinda into her namesake, the tulsi plant.

folk songs with these beautiful, bhakti-fused *pads* written by Muktanand Swami and Premanand Swami.

Shri Hari left Gadhada for central Gujarat the following day. He spent the night in Kariyani. The following morning a group of pilgrims were passing by Kariyani. Ganesh Sheth, the leader of the pilgrims, bowed to Shri Hari and asked for blessings for their pilgrimage. Shri Hari put his hand on Ganeshbhai's freshly-shaven head and noticed there was no *chotli*. He asked Ganeshbhai why he had not left a tuft of hair in the center of his head. Ganeshbhai replied hesitantly, "Prabhu, there is a curse within our community. Whoever keeps a tuft of hair loses members of his family to an illness."

Shri Hari laughed at the superstition that had consumed the community. He spoke to Ganeshbhai about the importance of keeping a tuft of hair as conferred by the shastras. He then turned his attention to the entire group and said, "We are followers of Bhagwan. Whatever happens in our lives is to be considered his will. Superstition, tantra, and luck have no control over our destiny and future. Remember that superstition weakens our ability to perform effectively. It also weakens our faith. From this day onwards, strengthen your faith in Bhagwan and his will, not in superstition."

Ganeshbhai accepted Shri Hari's *agnya* and departed with his group for the pilgrimage. Ganeshbhai later become one of Gunatitanand Swami's foremost disciples. His faith in Shri Hari and Gunatitanand Swami continues to be an example for the satsang community.

A Test of Faith

Shri Hari convened a grand satsang *sabha* in Jetalpur. Brahmanand Swami and his disciples were singing a bhajan accompanied by a *tanpura*, *sarangi*, and *pakhawaj*:

Samaj mana, hari bhajataa sukh hoi...

Listen, oh mind! Happiness only comes from bhakti to Shri Hari...

While the bhajan was being sung, two groups of devotees arrived: a carriage from Ahmedabad and a newlywed couple from the nearby village of Gamdi.

The devotees from Ahmedabad brought Nathu Bhatt with them.

Nathu's wife had suddenly died, and Nathu was still in shock over the events. He had not eaten a morsel of food in twelve days and had not spoken to anyone. The devotees brought him to Jetalpur hoping that Shri Hari's darshan would provide him solace.

Nathu sat in the satsang *sabha* with his eyes closed. Shri Hari wanted to quell Nathu's sorrow and teach him the true meaning of *atmajnan*. Shri Hari called the newlywed couple from Gamdi to the front of the satsang *sabha*. Instead of giving them blessings for their wedding, Shri Hari asked, "Would you do anything I asked of you to secure your *moksha*?"

They nodded in consent. Shri Hari proposed to the bride, Rudibai, "Sister, what if I said that I was going to initiate your groom as a sadhu?"

Rudibai instantly replied, "That would be a great opportunity for him to serve you. I would join Laduba and Jivuba and spend my days in *seva* and *bhakti*. When we were walking into the *sabha*, Brahmanand Swami was singing, 'No person and no relationship are permanent.' Why then brood over a lost husband or wife?"

Shri Hari was pleased and said, "I am not going to do such a thing. It is important for both of you to live as householders, follow the tenets prescribed by the shastras, and spread my *mahima*. I was just testing your faith, and you surpassed all my expectations."

The newlyweds touched Shri Hari's feet and took their seats in the satsang *sabha*. Shri Hari then turned to Sura Khachar and said, "These newlyweds are fresh in satsang. I have older devotees who have traveled with me for years and listened to my *katha* for decades. Yet they have not understood themselves to be the *atma* and are therefore unable to move past the death of a family member."

Nathu Bhatt immediately realized that Shri Hari was referring to him. He snapped out of his grief and came to receive Shri Hari's blessings. Shri Hari gently patted his head and provided him relief.

That day in the satsang *sabha*, Shri Hari spoke about the importance of understanding the temporary nature of this material existence. "Everyone and everything is destructible. Only our *atma* lives on. If we realize our true form to be the *atma*, we would not feel such depression over the loss of a loved one or material possessions. Yes, it is normal to feel sorrow after losing a loved one, but that sorrow should be extinguished using *atmajnan*."

Diwali Festival in Vartal, 1818

Shri Hari ordered the devotees to construct a large tent in the fields outside of Vartal. Thousands of devotees from Gujarat and Saurashtra gathered for the Diwali festival. Shri Hari celebrated each day of the festival according to the traditions set forth in the shastras. On *Dhanteras*, individuals worship and offer prayers to Lakshmi, the Goddess of Wealth, for ethical economic prosperity and success in their careers. They wash and anoint gold and silver coins with vermillion and sandalwood. Shri Hari further instructed the devotees to offer prayers to their livestock, reasoning, “We live in an agrarian society. Cows and their calves are our true wealth. Without cows, the farmer would be unable to earn a living. The Vedas also consider cows to be the highest and purest form of wealth. Our dharma shastras instruct humans to give their own lives to protect the life of a cow. Cows are sacred to us because they give selflessly to fulfill our needs. Therefore, on *Dhanteras*, we should honor the cows within our households.”

The devotees followed Shri Hari’s *agni* and sprinkled vermillion, rice, and sandalwood on their cows.

On the day of Diwali, the sadhus sang a beautiful bhakti *pad* in front of the satsang *sabha*:

*Raaj maare din din Diwali re,
vhaarala maltaa tamne vanmaali re...*

*Oh Bhagwan, every day is Diwali,
now that I have met you, Oh Vanmali...*

Shri Hari was pleased with Brahmanand Swami’s understanding. He addressed the satsang *sabha* after the sadhus finished singing. “The sadhus have sung this verse correctly. Every day is Diwali for the devotee who believes that he has met Purna Purushottam Narayan. We do not celebrate festivals for the sake of gathering crowds and enjoying each other’s company. We come together in these festivals because manifest Bhagwan gives us darshan and the Gunatit Sadhu guides us towards Bhagwan.”

Shri Hari also celebrated Prabodhini Ekadashi in Vartal. He spoke of Aksharbrahma’s *mahima* to the thousands that had gathered for the

event. “I am Parabrahma and the Gunatit Sadhu is Aksharbrahma. I have manifested on Earth for your sake. Remembering my *charitras*, even if unintentionally, will lead one to *moksha*.¹⁵

The sadhus and devotees listened attentively and followed Shri Hari’s *katha* with the singing of the Swaminarayan dhun in unison.

The Measured Cloth Prakran

Shri Hari constantly tested his sadhus’ faith through various *prakrans*. These *prakrans* were also a way to show devotees that Shri Hari’s sadhus far exceeded the traits of wayward ascetics.

After arriving in Gadhada, Shri Hari initiated a new *prakran*. In this latest test of faith, Shri Hari ordered that all sadhus be given a four arms-length piece of coarse cloth. The sadhus were to tie the cloth around their waist and leave the rest of their body bare.

The sadhus approached Shri Hari one by one and collected their piece of cloth. Soon, it was Brahmanand Swami’s turn. He took the cloth and tried to wrap it around his portly body. It was one arms-length too short. If he tried to cover the front, there was a gaping hole in the back. If he tried to cover the back, there was noticeable opening in the front. He folded his hands and asked Shri Hari for a longer piece of cloth. Shri Hari refused saying, “Why don’t you lose some weight?”

Brahmanand Swami reasoned with Shri Hari, “I will, but it will not happen overnight. It will take me months to lose several inches off my waist. Please try to understand, Shri Hari.”

The debate continued for a few minutes until Shri Hari gave his ultimatum. “Brahmanandji, a rule is a rule. I cannot make an exception for you. If you want to stay here, you will have to subsist with that piece of cloth.”

Brahmanand Swami walked out into the courtyard with the piece of cloth on his head. He looked at the sky from one direction to the next. Shri Hari called out to him, “Brahmanandji, what are you looking for?”

Brahmanand Swami answered, “Prabhu, I was searching the skies to find another Bhagwan. If I found a Bhagwan anywhere else, I would have

15 The *mahima* shared by Shri Hari during the Diwali and Prabodhini Ekadashi festivals is recorded by Nishkulanand Swami in the Bhaktachintamani, chapters 77 and 79.

gone to him so that I would not have to haggle for a piece of cloth with you. Unfortunately, there is no Bhagwan but you in the entire creation. I will have to manage with this small piece of cloth.”

Shri Hari ran to Brahmanand Swami and embraced him tightly. He exclaimed, “Brahmanandji, your conviction is commendable and an ideal for all of the other sadhus.” Pleased with Brahmanand Swami, Shri Hari ordered the *parshads* to distribute the cloth according to each sadhu’s physique.

The *prakran* proved to be tough on the sadhus’ health as it exposed their bodies to the elements. The devotees begged Shri Hari to discontinue the *prakran*. Although Shri Hari was worried about the sadhus’ *atmas* and not their physical bodies, he finally yielded to the devotees’ requests and discontinued the *prakran* after several months.

The Young Widow’s Sacrifice

A great amount of time had passed since Shri Hari’s last visit to the Sorath region. Devotees from Sorath came to Gujarat to invite Shri Hari to their homes. Shri Hari accepted their invitation and headed to Sorath after spending months in central Gujarat and Kutch.

Kanubai, a poor widow in the village of Sutrej near Mangrol, had previously invited Shri Hari to her home many months ago. Shri Hari remembered her invitation and visited Sutrej along with his sadhus and devotees. The woman was overjoyed at the sight of Shri Hari’s arrival. She sent all four of her sons to greet Shri Hari. The sons then completed Shri Hari’s puja.

Kanubai asked Shri Hari, “Prabhu, what shall I offer at your feet on this occasion?”

Shri Hari smiled and said, “You can offer whatever you value the most.”

Kanubai answered, “I love my sons more than my own life. I offer all four of my sons in your *seva*. You may take them with you.”

Shri Hari was surprised with Kanubai’s offer. He questioned, “Mother, all four of them? You are still young. You are a widow. Who will look after you? You should keep two of them for your sake.”

Kanubai replied, “Prabhu, I will join Laduba and Jivuba in your *seva*

and bhakti. Please do not worry about me.”

Shri Hari’s eyes brimmed with tears. He turned to the sadhus and said, “This is the ultimate sacrifice. She gave away her past, present, and future. She does not worry the slightest about her well-being. She is my true *bhakta*.”

Shri Hari initiated the two younger sons into the sadhu-fold as Daharanand Swami and Prasadanand Swami.

Brahmanand Swami and Muktanand Swami Captured

Shri Hari often sent Brahmanand Swami and Muktanand Swami to different towns to speak to senior devotees and leaders. Once while returning from a satsang *sabha*, Brahmanand Swami and Muktanand Swami were coaxed into an ashram by a mendicant. As soon as they entered the ashram, the mendicant locked them up in a cell and began to sharpen his knife, threatening to cut off their nose and ears. Brahmanand Swami was terrified and nervously uttered, “Muktanandji, I would rather die than have my ears and nose cut. It is embarrassing to walk around in society with such noticeable disfigurements.”

Muktanand Swami remained composed and unaffected. “Swamiji, we have cut our nose and ears innumerable times in previous births for worldly pleasure. This time we will have the opportunity to lose them in Shri Hari’s *seva*.”

Raghav Jat, the village thug, came to visit the mendicant. He asked the mendicant why he was sharpening the knife. The mendicant shared his plan for the sadhus. Raghav saw two docile sadhus chanting the Swaminarayan mantra inside the cell. Raghav was touched and inspired by their purity. Shri Hari gave him darshan and instructed him to help the sadhus. Raghav immediately walked up to the mendicant, and said, “What have those sadhus done to you? Let them go immediately, or I will kill you with your own knife.”

Fearing for his own safety, the mendicant released Brahmanandji and Muktanandji from the cell. Raghav escorted them to the outskirts of the village, bowed to the sadhus, and took their leave.

When Shri Hari heard of this incident in Gadhada, he praised

Muktanand Swami and Brahmanand Swami's *sthitapragna*.¹⁶ Shri Hari's sadhus personified the ability to remain equipoised and resolute in one's faith despite any adversity, a principle also mentioned by Shri Krishna in the second chapter of the Shrimad Bhagavad Gita.

The Ekadmal Sadhus

Following Shri Hari's *agnas* and *prakrans* was an arduous task. Sadhus faltered from following *agnas* and therefore wandered on their own. However, they could never truly divorce Shri Hari from their minds. They chanted the Swaminarayan mantra wherever they went. Their *katha* always extolled Shri Hari's *mahima* as Shri Hari continued to rule their hearts. These sadhus were known as *ekadmals* or 'lonely ones.'

Hiradas Swami was an *ekadmal* sadhu who traveled around Gujarat. Once Hiradas Swami traveled to Gadhada and staggered into Dada Khachar's courtyard. He bowed to Shri Hari and fell to the ground. As he was attempting to stand up, Hiradas' upper garment slid off his body. The entire satsang *sabha* gasped in horror at the sight of the scars and wounds covering the sadhu's body.

Shri Hari stood up and walked to Hiradas Swami. He put his hand on Hiradas Swami's head and asked him what had happened. Hiradas replied, "I was traveling in Gujarat when a few wandering mendicants heard me chant the Swaminarayan mantra. They cornered me and took turns beating me with iron rods, heated iron clamps, and chains. I cannot bear this suffering anymore. Either leave my heart and mind or keep me in your *seva*."

Shri Hari was moved by Hiradas Swami's bhakti and conviction. He personally supervised the care expended for Hiradas Swami's recovery in Gadhada. Shri Hari rewarded Hiradas Swami's conviction by accepting him back into the sadhu-fold.

Return to Ahmedabad

It had been ten years since Shri Hari was asked to leave Ahmedabad.

¹⁶ 'Pragna' means mind, intellect, and wisdom, and 'sthita' means stable. Thus, *sthitapragna* is a person whose mind has stabilized in its entirety. One who is *sthitapragna* can see the presence of Bhagwan not only in the good and noble but also in the wicked and ignoble. A *sthitapragna* individual is indifferent to pain or discomfort, joy or sorrow, and praise or insult.

The Peshawar Suba was vanquished by the British East India Company's forces. The Company handed over the city's rule to the Gaekwad rulers in Vadodara. Sir Heron, who had Shri Hari's darshan in Kheda in 1817, was appointed as the officer in charge of Ahmedabad.

The *sampradaya*'s texts state that Sir Heron was an avid hunter. Once, Sir Heron had a near-death experience when hunting for tigers. Sir Heron spotted a tiger but misfired. The tiger then lunged at Sir Heron's throat. Shri Hari appeared in his Virat Narayan *swarup* form and saved Sir Heron's life. From that day onwards, Sir Heron was keen on meeting Swaminarayan again.

Sir Heron sent an invitation to Shri Hari through Kuberdas, and Shri Hari accepted the invitation. On 15 May 1818, Shri Hari arrived in Ahmedabad amidst great fanfare and celebrations. Sir Heron arranged for the streets and gates of the city to be decorated. Shri Hari rode into town on his mare to the sounds of bellowing instruments and under a shower of flower petals.

Shri Hari graced Sir Heron's home. Sir Heron also donated land in Ahmedabad for the construction of a mandir. Shri Hari built a temporary building and instructed several sadhus to live there. The sadhus spread the *mahima* of Shri Hari in Ahmedabad and prepared for the construction of a majestic mandir.

Conquering 'Fort Tolerance'

Shri Hari preached to his sadhus and devotees to tolerate any animosity, even when they had the power and ability to retaliate. One afternoon, Shri Hari was passing by the city of Anand in central Gujarat. Shri Hari gathered his sadhus and *kshatriya* devotees. "Today, we are going to pass through a city where misinformed individuals may insult us or mistreat us. We will not be welcomed. I want all of you to stay calm. Not a single person should retaliate."

He then looked at his personal attendants and instructed, "Do not unsheathe your swords!" The *parshads* lowered their heads in acceptance.

As they passed through the streets of Anand, townspeople climbed onto the roofs of their homes and started to pelt Shri Hari and his devotees with dried cow dung and hardened mud. The *kshatriya* devotees were

more than capable of scaring away the dissidents, but they did not react for they had given Shri Hari their word.

The procession reached the outskirts of the city. Their clothes and headdresses were filthy. Shri Hari rode to a river and washed off the cow dung and mud. The *kshatriyas* felt ashamed for their lack of retaliation fearing that people would accuse them of having lost their valor and gained cowardice. Shri Hari read their minds and said, “Do not think that we have lost a battle today. The self-control we practiced helped us conquer ‘Fort Tolerance’!”

Shri Hari rode to Vartal. The next day the town elders from Anand came to Vartal to apologize for the misconduct of some of their townspeople. They invited Shri Hari to Anand. This time, Shri Hari was welcomed with rose petals, vermillion, and the sounds of *dhol*s and *jhanjhs*.

Appointing Twelve Sadgurus

Shri Hari’s sadhus were invited to a theological debate in Vadodra at the court of the Gaekwad ruler. Many sectarian scholars were present. Each of them hoped to defeat the Swaminarayan scholar, with the added benefit of limiting the growing influence and presence of the Swaminarayan Sampradaya.

Shri Hari sent Muktanand Swami to represent the Swaminarayan Sampradaya. Muktanand Swami presented the Aksharbrahma and Parabrahma philosophical doctrine for the first time at a scholarly conference in Vadodra. The scholars accepted defeat. Even the Gaekwad ruler offered *seva* in the form of a financial reward at Muktanand Swami’s feet.

Shri Hari was elated after receiving word of Muktanand Swami’s victory and ordered Dada Khachar to distribute sugar cubes in the village. Amidst the joy and celebration, Nirvikalpanand Swami and Haryanand Swami were overcome with a feeling of envy and insecurity. Shri Hari heard the two saying, “What is the big deal? The two of us would have won that debate too. Muktanand Swami has not accomplished anything extraordinary.”

Shri Hari was devastated to hear such words from two younger sadhus for Muktanand Swami, the mother-like nurturer of the satsang community. Shri Hari at once made the decision to leave the satsang

community and retire to a life of seclusion.

Dada's residence was cast under a spell of sorrow and confusion. Others worried about what would happen to the satsang community if Shri Hari was to leave. Brahmanand Swami and Nityanand Swami convinced Shri Hari to gain the consent of the entire satsang community before leaving.

Invitations were sent to sadhus and devotees residing all across the region to attend the Annakut festival in Adraj, a small town near Jetalpur. Bhai Ramdas Swami, Brahmanand Swami, and Nityanand Swami begged Shri Hari not to leave. After much persistence and prayer from the sadhus and devotees, Shri Hari agreed to stay. He noted, "I am still upset by the disorder among the sadhus and devotees. In order to preserve respect for the senior members in our community, I will establish *sadgurus* among the sadhus."

In Adraj, Shri Hari appointed four *sadgurus*: Muktanand Swami, Nityanand Swami, Paramchaitanyanand Swami, and Brahmanand Swami. He explained the role and function of the *sadguru*. "A true *sadguru* leads by example. His life should inspire the other sadhus and devotees to maintain lifestyles infused with bhakti and *seva*. The sadhus and devotees should respect them and follow their *agna* as if it were my own. This is my *agna* to you all."

Shri Hari also distributed wooden bowls called *pattars* for the sadhus to eat in. A carpenter named Gangadas decided to make fifty bowls in Shri Hari's *seva*. When Shri Hari came to Gangadas' village of Mansa on 8 November 1818, Gangadas placed fifty hand-crafted wooden bowls at Shri Hari's feet. Shri Hari was pleased with the carpenter's bhakti. Shri Hari took the bowls and started passing them out to the senior sadhus. He handed the first one to Gunatitanand Swami.

Shri Hari then traveled to Ahmedabad to handle administrative issues relating to the land donated by Sir Heron. From Ahmedabad, Shri Hari traveled to Jetalpur, where he named another eight *sadgurus*. Now, there were twelve.

The devotees of Vartal built a small mandir for daily prayer. Shri Hari instructed Hirjibhai, the sculptor, to create two beautiful *murtis* of Nar-Narayan Dev. Shri Hari consecrated the *murtis* in the small mandir.

Bhai Ramdas Swami asked why two *murtis* were installed when there was only one manifest form of Bhagwan on Earth. Shri Hari smiled and explained, “Bhai Ramdas Swami, I have come on Earth to establish the bhakti of Bhagwan along with his ideal *bhakta*. Nar sits in the place of my Gunatit Sadhu, and Narayan sits in my place.”

Shri Hari left Vartal and traveled through the villages of Vaso, Dholka, Koth, Vagad, Adval, Loya, and Nagadka before arriving in Gadhada. Shri Hari celebrated Vasant Panchmi in Gadhada and the Fuladol festival in Botad.

After an extended absence, Shri Hari finally came back to stay in Gadhada for a lengthy period of time.

The Arrogant Allaiya Khachar

In the following weeks, Shri Hari rested in Gadhada. In the afternoons, he gathered the sadhus and devotees for *goshti*. One afternoon, Shri Hari asked Muktanand Swami, “Muktanandji, I have many excellent householder devotees. Who do you think is the greatest among them?”

Muktanand Swami replied at once, “Prabhu, Dada Khachar is the greatest. He has given his life, home, and family to you. His only objective is to serve you.”

Shri Hari pressed Muktanand Swami further, “Swamiji, who is the second greatest?”

Muktanand Swami named Sura Khachar.

“And, third?” asked Shri Hari.

Muktanand Swami thought for a second and named Parvatbhai.

Allaiya Khachar, who was sitting a few feet from Muktanand Swami, could not bear the insult of not being named in this list. His left hand searched for the handle of his sword. He was about to draw the weapon when Shri Hari interjected. “Muktanandji, you are mistaken. Allaiya is Allaiya. No one can be compared to him.”

Allaiya Khachar chimed, “You are right, Shri Hari. Muktanand Swami does not know my greatness. If you had not saved him, he would have lost his head today.”

Shri Hari immediately changed the topic. However, the sadhus and devotees realized that ego can lead one to quickly fall from satsang and

even to the brink of murdering a sadhu as great as Muktanand Swami.

A few days later, Shri Hari took all of the sadhus and devotees to bathe in the Ghela River. Amidst the fun and games, Shri Hari participated in a *charitra* to test Allaiya's *divyabhav* in him. Shri Hari surfaced in the water near Allaiya and tugged at Allaiya's waist cloth with his right toe. The waist cloth slid off Allaiya's waist. Shri Hari then dragged the cloth to the bank of the river and shouted, "Allaiya, come out to collect your clothes!"

Allaiya's face turned red from both embarrassment and anger. He looked away from Shri Hari but vowed to seek revenge. Shri Hari came out of the water and left for Dada's residence. Allaiya Khachar sat in the river until sunset. He exited the river at night shivering from the cold water, collected his clothes, and left for his village.

Allaiya ultimately chose to protect his ego over Shri Hari and left satsang. It is said that Allaiya spoke to two thousand individuals about Shri Hari's *mahima* and brought them into satsang. When he left, he took four thousand individuals out of satsang with him!

Shri Hari performed these *charitras* to test the faith and *divyabhav* of his sadhus and devotees. Some passed these tests, while others, such as Allaiya, failed.

Oneness with Gunatitanand Swami

One afternoon, Shri Hari was seated in Akshar Ordi speaking to a few senior sadhus and devotees. In the middle of their conversation, Shri Hari grabbed his right leg and started shouting, "Help! My foot is stuck. If I don't get it out, it will break."

Mulji Brahmachari rushed to Shri Hari's side but did not know what to do. He observed, "Prabhu, you are sitting on your cot inside Akshar Ordi. Look around you. Your foot is not stuck anywhere."

After a few minutes, Shri Hari was heard saying, "Swamiji, do not pull the leg too hard or it may break."

Sura Khachar asked, "Shri Hari, who are you speaking to?"

Shri Hari breathed a sigh of relief and said, "My Akshardham, Gunatitanand Swami, was bathing in the Ghela River. His foot slipped and was caught between two large rocks. I felt the pain in my foot. I

had to instruct him to wiggle the foot out carefully or else it would have broken. Gunatitanand Swami is my Akshardham. He is Aksharbrahma incarnate. I live within him. If my devotees offend him, I am offended. If they please him, I too am pleased.”

The sadhus and devotees were surprised by Shri Hari’s oneness with the young sadhu. Gopalanand Swami was in Shri Hari’s room as these events transpired. He noted this incident and shared it with the sadhus and devotees in the satsang community.

Daily Puja Niyam

Shri Hari noticed that many of the devotees failed to offer puja or worship for many days. *Mansi puja*¹⁷ was too abstract of a concept to be fully grasped by the average householder of those times who was occupied with labor-intensive chores. Shri Hari surmised that it would be beneficial to add structure to the routine. He called Hirji Suthar from Bhuj and instructed him to prepare two painted *murtis*. The first *murti* was of Shri Hari with Bhaktimata and Dharmadev on either side. The second *murti* was that of Shri Hari, depicted to represent his present, manifest form.

Hirjibhai painted the *murtis* and then made a wooden seal based on the *murtis*. The seal functioned as a stamp. The stamp was then impressed upon a piece of cloth and distributed to the sadhus and devotees to keep in their daily morning pujas. This was the first time that Shri Hari introduced the concept of daily *murti* puja to his followers. As the demand for the *murtis* became overwhelming, Shri Hari handed over the production of the *murtis* to Narayanji Suthar. Adharanand Swami was also a skilled painter. He helped with the creation of the molds. He hand-painted several hundred *murtis* as well.

Shri Hari sent messengers all over Gujarat and Saurashtra. He summoned Chidrupanand Swami from Kutch, Brahmanand Swami from Junagadh, Atmanand Swami from Mahuva, Shrigurucharanand Swami from Jamnagar, Svayamprakashanand Swami from Sardhar, Mahanubhavanand Swami from Ahmedabad, Govindanand Swami from

¹⁷ *Mansi* puja translates to ‘worship performed within or by the mind’. It is a form of worship in which one devoutly performs puja, offers *arti* and *thal* to Bhagwan, and engages in other rituals mentally just as one would do physically.

Surendranagar, Adbhutanand Swami from Kheda, Sadanand Swami from Bhavnagar, and Vyapkanand Swami from Surat. One can easily discern the importance that Shri Hari placed on this daily ritual from the efforts he made to convene the large volume of sadhus from vast distances. This daily morning puja soon became an integral component to the identity of the Swaminarayan Sampradaya and its bhakti.

Devji Bhakta of Nenpur

For five days now, Shri Hari's afternoon and evening *thal* consisted of dry barley *rotlis* and yogurt. Once a day, Shri Hari was also served *khichdi* and spicy, pickled green chili. Shri Hari enjoyed simple food, but it was rare for Laduba and Jivuba to cook such simple food for two consecutive meals, let alone five days.

Shri Hari called Mulji Brahmachari and asked him the cause for this extended period of simple meals. Brahmachari explained, "Prabhu, Panchuba, a five-year-old maiden in Dada's extended family, passed away. The royal family is in mourning and cannot prepare delicacies. This is the custom in this part of Gujarat. This is what we will be eating for some time to come."

Shri Hari chuckled and said no more. Later that evening, a farmer's wife carrying a large clay pot entered the satsang assembly and stood at a distance awaiting Shri Hari's approval to approach. Shri Hari called out, "Sister, have you come from Nenpur alone? Where is my Devji *bhakta*? And, what is in that pot?"

The lady placed the pot at Shri Hari's feet, sat down, and laid out the loose end of her sari across her lap to bow down to Shri Hari. Shri Hari blessed her with his right hand. She said, "Prabhu, Patel has sent me here with this pot of ghee. He is in the fields and passes his day in your bhakti and puja. A few days ago, our one and only son died. He was only twenty years of age. Our son was one of a kind. He too spent his days in bhakti and *seva*. Not a day passed when you did not give him darshan. He did not care for the things that most boys his age enjoyed. He would work at the farm and spend the rest of his day at home turning the *mala* or singing your bhajans. So when he passed away, Patel and I accepted it as best for him. What if he was enticed by the material world and trapped

under the influence of *maya*? Bhagwan saved him. We distributed sugar cubes in the entire village. After completing his funeral rites, we left our home. Staying at home would only prolong the mourning period. Hundreds of relatives came from all over Gujarat to express their sorrow and grief. We, however, are not saddened by his death. We know that he is closer to you. For this reason, I came to Gadhada, and Patel is in the fields. He sends his most humble greetings to your lotus feet, Prabhu. He also instructed me to arrange for a feast of *sata* and *ghebar* for all of the sadhus and devotees in Gadhada.”

Shri Hari’s eyes were moist with tears. He turned to the *sabha* and reiterated the woman’s tale. The *sabha* was shocked by the parents’ understanding and faith in Shri Hari. Shri Hari then addressed Laduba and Jivuba. “Compare your satsang *samjan* with that of this uneducated farmer’s wife. She lost the only source of support in her old age, as opposed to the loss of a five-year-old girl in your extended family. With this understanding, your family should not mourn the child’s death.”

The sisters were surprised by this retort. They asked, “Prabhu, we are Panchuba’s relatives. Who else would mourn her death?”

Shri Hari responded, “Panchuba was Hirji Thakkar’s mother in her previous birth. She desired to serve me food by her own hands. However, because of the strict social stigma associated with a *brahmin* eating from the hands of a Muslim, I was unable to accept her *thal* in public. In order to satisfy this wish of hers, I gave her birth in your extended family and allowed her to bring me *thal* one afternoon. Since her wish to serve me was fulfilled, I granted her a seat in my abode. Yet, you do not see Hirji Thakkar shedding tears, do you?”

With this explanation, Shri Hari proved two points to those present. We mourn for those around us because we do not comprehend the temporary nature of this body and its relationships. Second, if our faith in Shri Hari and our satsang *samjan* have matured, we will understand the difficulties that enter our lives to be for our own benefit.

Nishkulanan Swami was also sitting in the *sabha*. He stood up and asked Shri Hari for permission to speak. Shri Hari consented. “Prabhu, Gunatitanan Swami and I were traveling around Nenpur for satsang activities. We decided to spend the night with Devji Patel in Nenpur. We

sat and talked about your *mahima* until midnight. He then stood up and folded his hands, saying, ‘Swamiji, do rest. I will see you in the morning.’ We asked him, ‘And, where are you off to?’ He replied, ‘I will go to the fields and complete 250 *malas*. Sleep will come to me two hours before dawn. If I allow it to, it will stay with me for two hours. If I decide not to sleep that night, sleep will accept my decision, bow, and return the next night.’”

The sadhus and devotees in the *sabha* were flabbergasted by Nishkulananand Swami’s story. Shri Hari understood their shock and clarified, “If one believes his or her self to be the *atma* and not the body, this too is possible. Devotees such as Devji Bhakta and his wife have earned a place in my *mala*. While all of you chant my name while turning your *malas*, I remember such dedicated and spiritually-elevated *bhaktas* when I turn my *mala*.”

More than Just a Personal Attendant – Mulji Brahmachari

Shri Hari introduced a new *prakran* in Gadhada. This time it applied to both the sadhus and devotees. Anyone caught sleeping in the assembly was hit with a *berkho* made of large beads. Then, one was to stand up and immediately return the *berkho* to Shri Hari so that the entire satsang *sabha* would know of his misdeed. Despite this embarrassing yet comical consequence, some still managed to fall asleep.¹⁸

One afternoon, Mulji Brahmachari, who always sat beside Shri Hari’s cot, fell asleep. Brahmachari dreamt that he was in a village with Shri Hari and that the house Shri Hari was sitting in caught fire. Fearing for Shri Hari’s welfare, Brahmachari lifted Shri Hari off the cot and ran to safety with him. However, Brahmachari failed to realize that he was simply dreaming and that Shri Hari was safely seated on his cot in the middle of the *sabha* in Gadhada. The sadhus and devotees were startled by this

¹⁸ Brahmanand Swami’s incident is particularly well-known in the *sampradaya*. Once in a satsang *sabha*, Shri Hari noticed Brahmanand Swami sleeping and threw a *berkho* at him. In his defense, Brahmanand Swami asked, “Why, Prabhu, did you strike me with the *berkho*?”

“Because you were dozing,” replied Shri Hari.

“Prabhu, I was composing poems, not dozing.”

Shri Hari was pleased with Brahmanand Swami’s witty reply. He ordered Brahmanand Swami to recite the *bhakti pad* immediately. In the spur of the moment, Brahmanand Swami sang, “*Taaro chatak rangilo chhedalo alabelaa re....*”

erratic behavior. Several sadhus and devotees followed Brahmachari and tried to wake him up from his nightmare. Brahmachari's sleep was finally startled by the commotion. He woke up and placed Shri Hari under a tree on the outskirts of the village. Shri Hari laughed and asked, "Brahmachari, what happened? Why are you behaving strangely?"

Brahmachari explained his dream. Shri Hari returned to the satsang *sabha* and explained Brahmachari's behavior to the devotees and sadhus. Shri Hari praised Brahmachari's constant union with him. "This Brahmachari is not just a personal attendant. He is a *bhakta* of the highest caliber. He sees my *murti* in all three states."

On the eve of the Sharad Purnima festival, thousands of devotees gathered in Gadhada. One afternoon, Shri Hari handed Brahmachari his *mojdis* and asked him to buff and soften them. "Brahmachari, the leather is tough on my feet. Please try to soften them by massaging them with some oil."

Brahmachari immediately took up the task. A few minutes later, Vashram Suthar from Bhadra walked by Brahmachari. He observed, "Swamiji, you always tend to Shri Hari. Give us the opportunity to serve him too. Here, give me those *mojdis*. I assure you that I will do a good job."

Brahmachari could not refuse the *bhakta*'s sincere offer. He handed the *mojdis* to Vashram. Shri Hari happened to also walk by a few minutes later. He looked at Brahmachari and said, "I gave those *mojdis* to you. Why did you pass the *seva* off to poor Vashram. If it is too much to ask for, then I can relieve you of my *seva*. From this day onwards, do not eat sweets, ghee, oil, or dairy products. Do not wear shoes or any form of footwear. Now, leave! I cannot bear the sight of you."

Brahmachari was not given the chance to explain himself and did not argue back in self-defense. He bowed to Shri Hari and immediately left Gadhada for Dabhan. In Dabhan, he held *katha* every evening and explained Shri Hari's *mahima* through personally-witnessed incidents. Six months passed in Dabhan in this manner.

Ramdasbhai Patel had hand-selected and ripened a large basket of mangoes for Shri Hari and the sadhus in Gadhada. Brahmachari jumped at the opportunity to deliver the mangoes in Shri Hari's *seva*. He started from Dabhan and walked barefoot to Gadhada. The relentless April sun

caused blisters on his soles. Brahmachari, however, rushed to Gadhada only stopping for a few hours of rest a day.

In Gadhada, Brahmachari was greeted by the sadhus and devotees with much affection. Shri Hari, however, turned and looked away. He did not even return Brahmachari's 'Jay Swaminarayan'. Brahmachari left Dada's residence and walked through Gadhada's bazaar looking for something to eat. The village carpenter's wife spotted Brahmachari wandering in the bazaar and approached him. "Brahmachariji, I have not seen you by Shri Hari's side in months. Where have you been?"

Brahmachari shared his tale. The lady was touched by his experience. She invited Brahmachari to her home and gave him ghee, milk, sugar, and flour. Brahmachari prepared a *rotlo* from the flour and returned all the other ingredients. It was then that the carpenter's wife learned of the *niyams* that Shri Hari had given Brahmachari before excommunicating him. She was infuriated by the harsh *niyams* prescribed to Brahmachari. She took Brahmachari to Dada's residence and confronted Shri Hari. "Prabhu, when did you become so callous? This Brahmachari has served you like a son. He walked barefoot to Gadhada from Dabhan carrying all of those mangoes in the scorching summer sun, and you haven't acknowledged his arrival with a 'Jay Swaminarayan'. He followed all of the *agnas* you gave him even after being excommunicated. Did you bother to listen to his side of the story? Where is the justice in all of this?"

Shri Hari was startled by the lady's boldness. He said, "I never refused him any *seva*. Call him! Where is he? I have been waiting for him to return."

Brahmachari ran from behind the wall and prostrated at Shri Hari's feet. Despite all of Shri Hari's *charitras*, Brahmachari did not harbor the slightest dislike or *manushyabhav* towards him. The next morning, Brahmachari prepared *ras* from the mangoes and served it to Shri Hari with ghee-covered *rotlis*.

One evening during the satsang *sabha*, Shri Hari praised Brahmachari in the presence of all the sadhus and devotees. It started with a question asked by Nityanand Swami. "Prabhu, how does one become *nirvasnik* – by listening to such talks or strengthening one's *vairagya*?"

Shri Hari replied, "Swamiji, *vairagya* alone does not allow for an

individual to be free of all desire and attachment. The most efficient way is to recognize Bhagwan's *swarup* and keep *divyabhav* in all of his *charitras*. Look at this Brahmachari. He stays with me day and night. He witnesses all of my *charitras*, yet he has the firm conviction that I am Purna Purushottam Narayan. He believes me to be as pure as the sky. He understands my true *mahima*, and he too has many divine qualities. He looks like a simple attendant, but the Bhagwan that resides in Brahmachari's heart is witness to the fact that there is not the slightest deficiency in his spiritual state."

Shri Hari then ordered Brahmachari to stand up and address the satsang *sabha*. Brahmachari clapped his hands and said, "Listen, dear brothers and sisters! This *brahmin* sitting on the cot is no other than the Lord of the Three Worlds. He is Purna Purushottam Narayan. Know his true *swarup*, and do not be fooled by his human appearance."

It was only then that the sadhus and devotees fully understood Brahmachari's satsang *samjan*. Shri Hari was so moved by and impressed with Brahmachari's bhakti that he mentions him in one of his discourses recorded in the Vachanamrut.¹⁹

The First Vachanamrut

On Monday, 21 November 1819, four senior sadhus initiated a coordinated effort to record all of Shri Hari's offerings of divine nectar in the form of words. Shri Hari's discourses were recorded by each of the sadhus and then compiled into the *sampradaya*'s canonical text – the Vachanamrut.

The Vachanamrut is divided into sections based on Shri Hari's geographic location at the time of the recorded discourse. The Gadhada section is further divided into three subsections. Discourses were also recorded in the towns of Sarangpur, Kariyani, Loya, Panchala, Vartal, and Ahmedabad. There are an additional 12 Vachanamrut discourses unassociated with the previously mentioned sections that can be found in the text as well.

The Vachanamrut provides historical context to Shri Hari's words.

19 In Vachanamrut Ahmedabad 3, Shri Hari states, "Even though Mulji Brahmachari and Ratanji are not extremely intelligent, they have an intense yearning for liberation. So they do indeed know how to do whatever pleases Bhagwan."

It captures a cultural memory in written format. Each discourse begins with an introductory paragraph, which states the location, date, time of day, and those devotees in attendance. There is also a brief description of Shri Hari's *murti* at that particular time. Special festivals and events are also typically mentioned in this paragraph.

This introductory paragraph is followed by a question and answer exchange between the sadhus and devotees and Shri Hari. This format continues the theological lineage of Hindu texts that are presented through a dialogue between two individuals or groups.²⁰

The Vachanamrut discusses many of the religious doctrines that Shri Hari repeatedly stressed in satsang *sabha*, such as: the *mahima* of his own *swarup*; the *mahima* of his Aksharbrahma—the Gunatit Sadhu; *ekantiki bhakti*; *ekantik dharma*; *brahmacharya*; faith and conviction; the *mahima* of Bhagwan's *bhaktas*; association with the Gunatit Sadhu and keeping distance from evil company; and overcoming one's desires and base instincts.

Shri Hari placed particular emphasis on the presence of Bhagwan on Earth through the Gunatit Sadhu or the *satpurush*. By associating with the *satpurush*, the *jiva* rises above *maya* and is worthy of attaining *moksha* and forever residing in Akshardham.

This compilation of Shri Hari's infinite knowledge is the foundation for the Swaminarayan Sampradaya's religious philosophy. Even in the company of a rich collection of several other prevalent commentaries and *lila charitra* texts, the Vachanamrut retains the central place within the *sampradaya*'s textual corpus as Bhagwan's gift to humanity of divine nectar ('*amrut*') in the form of words ('*vachan*').

The Dead Mare and the Mosquito

Vyapkanand Swami could not bear the sight of the town's ruler, Hamir Khachar, profusely crying as if he were a little child over the loss of his beloved mare. Vyapkanand Swami tried to console Hamir Khachar, but the *kshatriya*'s grief was beyond control. Hamir Khachar begged Vyapkanand

²⁰ The Upanishads, Mahabharata, Shrimad Bhagavad Gita, and several other historical and philosophical texts within the Hindu tradition are narrated as a dialogue between two or more individuals. It is a popular literary style within the written and oral traditions.

Swami to bring his mare back to life. He gave Vyapkanand Swami an ultimatum. "Swami, you either bring my mare back from the dead, or I too will take my life over the pain of this separation."

Vyapkanand Swami empathized with Hamir Bapu. He looked around the room and saw a mosquito nipping at the sadhu standing next to him. He grabbed the *jiva* out of the mosquito and threw it into the dead mare. Within seconds, the mare neighed, swung back its mane, and muzzled Hamir Khachar's hand.

News of Vyapkanand Swami's miracle rapidly spread throughout the town. Soon everyone sought out Swaminarayan's sadhus. Anticipating this type of reaction, Vyapkanand Swami left Botad that same hour.

Vyapkanand Swami and his *mandal* of sadhus traveled through Saurashtra and came to Gadhada a few days later. Shri Hari noticed Vyapkanand Swami approaching. He stood up and welcomed Vyapkanand Swami rather extravagantly, "Come, oh Vyapkanand! You are our Bhagwan. Someone set out a seat for our Bhagwan."

Vyapkanand Swami and the sadhus were startled. Realizing his mistake, Vyapkanand Swami started to perform *dandavats* from where he was standing and begged Shri Hari to forgive him.

The sadhus and devotees in Gadhada were still confused by Shri Hari's reaction. Shri Hari enlightened them. "Vyapkanandji brought a dead mare back to life in Botad. Hence, he is Bhagwan. Only Bhagwan reserves the right to decide who lives and dies."

By now, Vyapkanand Swami was kneeling by Shri Hari's feet and weeping. Shri Hari continued, "Vyapkanandji, we have come to Mrutyulok. People are born every day, and they must die, too. It is the limitation of this world. If we start making exceptions for certain individuals out of emotional attachment, how will we maintain the order of the universe? Therefore, it is best to console the individual. Speak to him about the temporary and destructible nature of the physical body and the permanent and eternal nature of the *atma*. It is only through this *atmajnan* that one can find solace in the departure of loved ones from this world to the next."

Vyapkanand Swami vowed to follow Shri Hari's *agna* in the future. Shri Hari recognized that able and resolute sadhus such as Vyapkanand Swami selflessly served him through their faith, bhakti, and *seva*. Shri

Hari raised the powerful sadhu and embraced him with both arms.

Shri Hari spent July through November of 1820 in Kariyani at Vasta Khachar's residence. Vasta Khachar and his wife, Sitabai, offered their full financial support to the sadhus and devotees. Scrumptious meals with ghee and sugar were served daily. Shri Hari celebrated Diwali and the Annakut festival in Kariyani that year.

A few days later, Sundarji Suthar and Hirji Suthar came to Kariyani from Bhuj. Sundarji asked, "Prabhu, how will we as devotees find *moksha* when you are not in this physical body on Earth?"

Shri Hari replied, "Sundarji, I will always be present on this Earth through my Gunatit Sadhu. My Aksharbrahma will remain on Earth to guide my devotees on the path to *moksha*. Submitting one's complete self to such a sadhu will assure your *moksha*."

The Six Purposes

Gopalanand Swami traveled from Vadodara to Kariyani for Shri Hari's darshan. He walked inside Shri Hari's residence and did *dandavats* at Shri Hari's feet. Shri Hari welcomed him and asked him to sit next to him. He ushered Nishkulananand Swami and Shukanand Swami out of the room. They followed Shri Hari's *agna* and left hastily.

Shri Hari turned his attention to Gopalanand Swami and said, "Swami, I am glad you came to Kariyani. I want to speak to you about an important matter."

Gopalanand Swami folded his hands and prepared to listen. Shri Hari continued, "Are you aware of the purpose behind my manifestation on Earth? I am Purna Purushottam Narayan. I have never manifested on Earth before. My manifestation on Earth is for six distinct purposes."

Gopalanand Swami listened attentively. "Prabhu, I am unaware of these purposes. Please do enlighten me."

Shri Hari then revealed: "I manifested on Earth:

1. To help mother Bhaktimata and father Dharmadev develop firm conviction in my *swarup*; to give them happiness and fulfillment through my childhood *charitras*; to free them from the torment of the asuras; and to gift them *moksha*.
2. To liberate the countless yogis performing austerities, engaging in

bhakti, imbibing detachment, partaking in pilgrimages, and fasting in order to meet Bhagwan on Earth and to bestow the fruits of their austerities upon them.

3. To liberate previous avatars and their devotees by helping them understand my true *swarup*.
4. To establish my Aksharbrahma and Parabrahma *upasana*.
5. To instruct my followers in the matter of *ekantik dharma*: dharma, bhakti, *jnan*, and *vairagya*.
6. To gift Aksharbrahma in the form of the Gunatit Sadhu or *satpurush* to spiritual aspirants, who will remain forever present on Earth to grant *moksha* to spiritual aspirants, and to establish mandirs and shastras.”²¹

Gopalanand Swami made a mental note of all of six purposes and meticulously recorded them after leaving Shri Hari’s residence. Although asked to leave the room, Nishkuland Swami suspected that Shri Hari was going to share a profound spiritual revelation with Gopalanand Swami. Nishkuland Swami listened to Shri Hari’s message through the crack in the door. He too transcribed these six purposes of Shri Hari’s manifestation and recorded them in the Bhaktachintamani.

Premabai’s Gift

The elevated ledge outside of Shri Hari’s room in Vasta Khachar’s residence was lined with delicately handcrafted, clay *divas*. In the middle of the row of *divas*, the sadhus and devotees placed a decorated cot on a raised platform so that everyone would be able to see Shri Hari’s elegantly ornamented *murti*. Shri Hari sat on that cot wearing a red and yellow trimmed upper garment with a contrasting black knit *surwal*. A soft, red headdress with dangling, golden threads adorned his head. A sky blue sash was tied snugly around his waist. A garland of yellow flowers around his neck provided a striking contrast to the hues of red, blue, and black of the other garments.

In the middle of the satsang *sabha*, Premabai of Divbandar came for

21 Shri Hari also narrated his six reasons for incarnating on Earth to the Nawab of Mangrol. Refer to Chapter 4 with subtitle ‘The Nawab’s Question–Six Answers’ for further discussion.

Shri Hari's darshan with a handful of ornaments, gold-threaded clothes, and scented oils. Shri Hari stood up and stepped off the platform to greet her. He accepted her offering and allowed her to do his puja in front of the satsang *sabha*. Shri Hari returned to his seat on the cot and addressed the satsang *sabha*. "Many devotees have brought me ornate attire and ornaments in the past. However, I have never come forth to accept any of their offerings. I have also never felt the same level of joy and happiness in my heart that I did today upon accepting one of my devotees' offerings. This Premabai has won my heart today."

Moments after Shri Hari took his seat on the cot again, Dinanath Bhatt, a poor *brahmin* devotee from the village of Amod, came to touch Shri Hari's feet. Shri Hari gifted all of the ornaments and gold-threaded clothes to the *brahmin* devotee. Premabai watched from a distance. Her heart was content to see that her Bhagwan did as he pleased with her offering.

Premabai's sentiment behind her offering was of even greater significance. Premabai had never seen Shri Hari before and had only heard of his *mahima* from a visiting group of sadhus. She decided to gift Shri Hari a set of priceless ornaments and gold-threaded, silk clothing. Moreover, she knit the entire outfit by herself, costing her thousands of rupees and several months in the process. Once she completed the outfit, she searched for ways to send the outfit to Shri Hari. Hearing of Premabai's undertaking, a charlatan tricked her into thinking that he was Shri Hari. Premabai offered the clothing and ornaments to the deceitful man. It was only days later that she realized her grave mistake. However, she did not lose faith. She started again, but this time, she hand delivered the offering to Shri Hari in Kariyani.

After hearing Shri Hari's praise for the female devotee, Muktanand Swami asked, "Prabhu, what qualities cause Bhagwan to be pleased with his devotee?"

Shri Hari replied, "Muktanandji, the devotee who worships Bhagwan after giving up anger, lust, greed, deceit, ego, and envy is worthy of earning my happiness. Envy is the most difficult to remove. I am sure that many devotees may have felt envy when I gave these priceless ornaments to Dinanath Bhatt."

Brahmanand Swami asked further, "Shri Hari, how are we to rid

ourselves of envy?"

Shri Hari answered, "To remove envy, one must walk on the path of saintliness. Those who do not walk on that path are never able to rid themselves of envy. Hence, Ved Vyasa Ji has stated that a Gunatit Sadhu who is free of such envy is the only one considered worthy of embodying *ekantik dharma*."

Shaakotsav in Loya

Winter was well under way. The farms were lush with soft, ripe aubergines. Shri Hari noticed the aubergines in the farms while traveling on his mare to Loya. That evening in Loya, Khengarbhai of Kholdiyad came for Shri Hari's darshan and offered 180 kilograms of ghee to Shri Hari. Shri Hari was pleased with his *seva*. From this offering and after having seen the bountiful brinjals crop, Shri Hari decided to host a *shaakotsav* for the sadhus and devotees. He ordered the devotees to gather another 620 kilograms of ghee and 1,200 kilograms of tender brinjals.

Forty pits were dug to be used as cooking stoves. The pits were filled with firewood and covered with huge pots. The brinjals were sliced vertically and stuffed with a mixture of spices and flour. Then, the stuffed brinjals were placed in the pots. Each batch of cooked brinjals consisted of thirty kilograms of brinjals and twenty kilograms of ghee.

Shri Hari prepared the *vaghari* for the brinjals in ghee. When the ghee reached the correct temperature, Shri Hari threw handfuls of mustard seeds, cumin seeds, fenugreek, and cloves into the pot. After the crackling stopped, he added shredded ginger, chopped chili, turmeric powder, and red chili powder with quick movements of his hands. Devotees and sadhus were standing by each stove. On Shri Hari's cue, they threw the brinjals into the pot on the stove.

Shri Hari moved with speed and agility from one stove to the next. The turmeric powder had stained his hands and clothes yellow. The heat from the stoves caused sweat to form on his forehead and gather on the tip of his nose. However, when combined with the splendor of his *murti*, the glow from his face resembled the beauty of a pearl. Shri Hari's enchanting *murti* attracted the devas and devis to gather in the sky for his darshan. Premanand Swami wrote a *bhakti pad* capturing the *lila* of

this Shaakotsav.²²

Shri Hari approached the last pit and noticed that there was an aged woman leaning on a stick near the pot. Shri Hari recognized her immediately. “Mother, do you remember me?”

The sadhus and devotees were curious as to how Shri Hari knew the elderly lady. Shri Hari continued before the elderly woman could respond. “Mother, I came to your house when I was traveling through Gujarat as Nilkanth Varni. You were commemorating the twelfth day after the passing of your mother-in-law. You fed me *khichdi* and milk. I spent the night in your fields.”²³

The elderly lady was in tears. “Prabhu, you remember me? You have thousands of devotees to remember. Why do You recall me?”

Shri Hari replied with a smile. “Mother, I never forget those who serve me, even if it is something as simple as a meal of *khichdi* and milk.”

The lady bowed down to Shri Hari. Her weeping eyes provided the water to wash Shri Hari’s feet. Shri Hari was moved by her bhakti.

Shri Hari turned his attention to the last pot of brinjals. Just as he was about to prepare the *vaghari* for this last batch, a group of devotees arrived from Buva. Kandas, an affluent merchant, was among these devotees. He had heard a great deal about Shri Hari’s *mahima* from the traveling sadhus but had never met Shri Hari in person.

Kandas was unsettled by his first impression of Shri Hari. Purna Purushottam Narayan looked like a simple *brahmin* cook. The spice-stained clothing and perspiration smeared over his forehead and arms was not befitting of Bhagwan. Kandas thought to himself, “What a waste of time! I might as well head back to Buva.”

Shri Hari read Kandas’ mind and asked Muktanand Swami, “Muktanandji, what is to be said of a person who travels to Banaras and fails to sip from the Ganga’s waters?”

Muktanand Swami smiled and said, “Shri Hari, such a man is a fool.”

Kandas immediately realized his mistake. Shri Hari glanced at Kandas yet again and sent him into *samadhi*. In the *samadhi*, Kandas witnessed all

²² “*Vali vakhaan lila Loya gaamni, suntaashravane paatak pralay thaay jo...*” was written by Premanand Swami to commemorate the *shaakotsav*.

²³ Refer to Chapter 2 with subtitle ‘Miracles: One after Another’ for further discussion.

of the previous incarnations offering their puja to this ‘turmeric-stained *brahmin*'. He awoke from *samadhi* and prostrated at Shri Hari's feet. Kandas stayed in Loya for several days and strengthened his conviction in Shri Hari's *swarup*.

Shri Hari Glances at the Vachanamrut Manuscript

In December of 1820, the creators of the Vachanamrut brought the handwritten manuscript of the discourses compiled and edited thus far to be reviewed and sanctified by Bhagwan Swaminarayan. Nityanand Swami led the group to Shri Hari with the manuscript in hand. Shri Hari perused several pages of the text in front of the satsang *sabha*. He was thoroughly pleased by the efforts and dedication of the four sadhus. He blessed each of them with his right hand, again.²⁴

Family from Ayodhya

While Shri Hari was in Loya, a group of spiteful individuals spread rumors about Shri Hari's birth, origin, and relatives. They claimed, “Swaminarayan is now one of the most popular religious figures in the region, but do we know who he really is? His devotees call him Bhagwan. He is, however, no more than a poor labor-hand with aspirations to become famous and influential. For all we know, he is probably a *shudra*. No one has seen or met his relatives.”

Shri Hari was not bothered by such rumors, but the senior sadhus quickly grew weary of hearing such insinuations about their Bhagwan. Nityanand Swami sent two messengers to Uttar Pradesh to bring Shri Hari's family to Gadhada. Ichchharam and Suvasini were among those who came to Gadhada for Shri Hari's darshan.

Shri Hari noticed his family members from a distance one afternoon. He was immediately shocked and equally upset. He turned his face away and refused to look at them. Nityanand Swami had warned the Dharmakul to expect such an initial reaction from Shri Hari. Ichchharam, Shri Hari's younger brother, could not contain his joy and ran to embrace Shri Hari.

24 In Vachanamrut Loya 7, Nityanand Swami presents an edited manuscript of several discourses to Shri Hari. Shri Hari examines the manuscript and is extremely pleased by the efforts made by the *sadguru* sadhus.

Shri Hari, however, simply glanced at him. Ichchharam's eyes welled up with tears as he watched Shri Hari walk away to serve the sadhus and devotees *ladus*. Nityanand Swami thought it best to leave the situation alone. He then seated the family within the satsang *sabha*.

When Shri Hari arrived in the satsang *sabha*, Ichchharam stood up and attempted to touch Shri Hari's feet. Shri Hari pulled his feet back with a sudden move causing Ichchharam to lose his balance. Nityanand Swami could no longer watch this interaction. He stood up and pleaded with Shri Hari, "Prabhu, I understand that you do not want to meet your blood relatives. You have taught us that once a sadhu renounces, he never looks back. You are Bhagwan and can behave detached from this material existence. However, your family members are mere *jivas*. They are here on a pilgrimage. They are here for your darshan. If they leave here without understanding your *mahima*, they will never be liberated. Please have mercy on them and grant them *moksha*."

Shri Hari faced the Dharmakul. Ichchharam spoke briefly about their journey to Gadhada. Shri Hari noticed that Rampratap was not in attendance. Ichchharam assured Shri Hari that he was just a few hours behind and would be in Gadhada by nightfall. After exchanging a few pleasantries, Shri Hari addressed the satsang *sabha*.

At first glance, Shri Hari's reaction seems harsh. Upon closer examination, Shri Hari teaches through this incident that one who has renounced the material world but remains attached to their familial relations is unable to overcome this obstacle on the path to *moksha*. Shri Hari later analogized this lesson of a flawed renunciant to a mixture of milk and *sakar* that is ruined by the addition of even the slightest amount of poisonous venom to the milk. This analogy is recorded in Vachanamrut Gadhada III 19.

Rampratap arrived later that evening. He, too, rushed to embrace Shri Hari. He grabbed Shri Hari with both hands and asked, "Ghanshyam, my dear brother, where did you run away to?"

Shri Hari shook free from Rampratap's grip and walked away.

Shri Hari's demeanor changed in a matter of hours. The smile on his face was replaced by a frown. He barely spoke to anyone. Nityanand Swami could not understand the error in his actions.

From Loya, Shri Hari departed for Panchala. He stayed at Jhinabhai's

residence. For the time being, Shri Hari cast aside His silence and prepared for the celebration of the Ful Dol festival. Thousands of devotees gathered for the Ful Dol celebrations of 1821 in Panchala. The sadhus and devotees sprayed each other with colored water and flung handfuls of vermillion, sandalwood, and other colored powders on each other. One of the sadhus requested, "Prabhu, please share the pleasure of your Akshardham with us."

Sachchidanand Swami laughed and said, "Sadhuram, Gunatitanand Swami, Akshardham manifest, has been spraying colored water this whole time. Is that not the pleasure of Akshardham?"

Shri Hari was pleased with Sachchidanand Swami's understanding of Gunatitanand Swami's *mahima*.

The mixture of the water and powder from this festival is said to have changed the color of the mud on the banks of the Sabarmati River. The river was infested with alligators. Shri Hari used his divine powers to remove this danger while the sadhus and devotees bathed in the river after the festival.

The next day, Shri Hari returned to bathe in the river. He handed the sadhus sticks of sandalwood for use in applying *tilaks* on their foreheads. The sadhus returned the next morning with marks of all sizes, shapes, and patterns. Some had even eaten the sticks considering them to be *prasadi*!

Shri Hari laughed and called Gunatitanand Swami to the front of the assembly. Shri Hari prepared some sandalwood paste and made a *tilak* with a *chandlo* in its center on Gunatitanand Swami's forehead. Shri Hari explained, "This here is our *tilak*. There is no sadhu like this Gunatitanand, and there is no Bhagwan like Myself. In the future, hundreds of thousands of devotees will flock for his darshan." Shri Hari seldom missed the opportunity to speak of his Aksharbrahma's *mahima*.

Shri Hari was not the same after the Dharmakul came to Loya. In Panchala, Shri Hari reverted to his prior demeanor and remained silent and ignored those around him. He stopped eating healthy meals. He would only drink *chaas* or eat dry *rotli* without ghee. Mulji Brahmachari was troubled by Shri Hari's behavior. Shri Hari lost weight, and his bones protruded from his thin frame. His hands and feet were feeble, and he required Brahmachari's support to stand. The senior sadhus worried about Shri Hari's health.

Brahmanand Swami, Nityanand Swami, and Muktanand Swami

gathered to discuss Shri Hari's *charitra*. It was then that Muktanand Swami remembered Ramanand Swami's words. "This is entirely my fault. My guru Ramanand Swami warned me to never speak of Shri Hari's blood relatives, let alone bring them to him. Ramanand Swami had gone so far to say that Shri Hari would leave Satsang if we ever made such a mistake. Shri Hari is a true sadhu. He would never want to associate with his relatives after renouncing ties with them."

Muktanand Swami wept profusely. Brahmanand Swami then advised, "Muktanandji, you are twenty-three years older than Shri Hari. He respects you as he respected Ramanand Swami. Please go inside and convince him to forgo this unhappy and sorrowful state."

Muktanand Swami walked into the room and put his head by Shri Hari's feet on the cot. He continued to wail as if a small child. Shri Hari was moved by this sincere show of remorse. "Muktanandji, please sit up closer to me. Do not weep. What is troubling you?"

Muktanand Swami spoke softly. "Prabhu, this is my fault. I should have never allowed Nityanandji to call your relatives. Our guru Ramanand Swami warned me. I should have heeded his words. You, however, are compassionate. Pardon my mistake. Please cast aside this unhappiness. Look at your body; it is frail and unhealthy. The entire satsang community is worried about your well-being."

Muktanand Swami continued to pray and sob for several minutes. Gopalanand Swami, Brahmanand Swami, Nityanand Swami, and Gunatitanand Swami were listening to the conversation with their ears to the door. They could not bear this burst of emotion any longer. Brahmanand Swami walked into the room and said, "Prabhu, looking at your frail body makes me wonder if you have decided to leave the satsang community and return to Akshardham. Even the common ascetic leaves the world with a spiritual lineage and an ashram. You are Purna Purushottam Narayan. How can you leave this world without building a permanent, physical place of worship—a mandir? What of your legacy?"

Shri Hari carefully reflected on Brahmanand Swami's words. His heart melted at the sight of these senior sadhus with tears in their eyes. Seeing Gunatitanand Swami's moist eyes convinced him to consider the sadhus' appeal.

“Muktanandji and Brahmanandji, you are right. I have come on Earth to establish *ekantik dharma* and to pave the way to *moksha* for *jivas* until the end of time. Though I had the thought of leaving my mortal body and returning to Akshardham, I will stay for a few more years.”

Shri Hari then made three *sankalps* in the presence of the sadhus:

1. To construct beautiful mandirs as a testament to the bhakti tradition;
2. To create canonical texts for the satsang community; and
3. To gift *moksha* to countless *jivas* for eternity through the association of his Aksharbrahma.

The sadhus’ faces lit up as these words flowed from Shri Hari’s mouth. They rushed out of the room and shared the news with the satsang community. Jhinabhai prepared *ladus* for Shri Hari’s *thal*. Shri Hari and the senior sadhus then served the *ladus* to the sadhus and devotees.

Shri Hari stayed in Panchala for one month. He engaged in various *charitras* to give *smruti* to the sadhus and devotees. Shri Hari’s sadhus and devotees were steadfast in their faith and conviction. No type of *charitra* shook their belief that Shri Hari was Purna Purushottam Narayan manifest on Earth.

On Friday, 2 August 1821, Shri Hari spoke to the satsang *sabha* about securing their *moksha*. “The easiest path to *moksha* is to associate one’s *jiva* with Aksharbrahma and attain his qualities to participate in the bhakti and *seva* of Parabrahma. Only the *bhakta* that becomes *aksharrup*—one whose *jiva* attains the qualities of Aksharbrahma—is worthy of *moksha* and earns a place in my abode, Akshardham.”

Shri Hari repeatedly extolled his Gunatit Sadhu’s *mahima*. For Shri Hari, grasping such a concept was as important as understanding his own *mahima*.

Shri Hari: King or Sadhu?

The orange-red hue of the evening sun reflected off Shri Hari’s white clothes. Shri Hari sat on a newly-strung cot outside of the chamber in which Vasudev Narayan’s *murti* was consecrated in Dada Khachar’s residence. The sadhus and devotees that had gathered for darshan were whispering softly about a debate. Shri Hari listened attentively but could not hear the subject of their friendly debate. He asked, “What is it that

all of you are whispering about amongst yourselves?"

Brahmanand Swami replied, "Shri Hari, we are debating whether we should understand you in the form of a sadhu or in the form of a king. Previous incarnations have represented themselves in both forms."

Shri Hari replied with a *lila charitra*. He stood up and started to take off his ornaments and clothes. He threw his diamond-studded earrings, gold bangles, and pearl necklaces in the sadhus' laps. He took off his headdress, silk upper garment, and sash and threw those items into the ladies' section of the satsang *sabha*. The sadhus and devotees were rendered speechless by this mesmerizing *charitra*. Each of them tried to absorb every detail of this *divya charitra* into their memory.

Brahmanand Swami exclaimed, "Prabhu, what are we to make of this? You are throwing these gold ornaments at us, but we have no use for them. Similarly, you are throwing your men's clothing and attire to the female devotees. What are they going to do with them?"

Shri Hari was not yet finished with the *charitra*. He started to dress himself, partly as a sadhu and partly as a king. He wore a saffron upper garment and a silken bottom. He took up a *mala* in one hand and a jewel-studded sword in the other. Everyone was perplexed.

Shri Hari finally broke the silence. "Now, tell me. How do you understand my *swarup*, as a sadhu or a king?"

The satsang *sabha* did not respond.

Shri Hari continued, "My *swarup* is unique. Do not compare my *murti*, *swarup*, or *charitra* with previous incarnations. They were all avatars. I am Purna Purushottam Narayan, the *avatari*."

With those concluding remarks, the satsang *sabha* finally understood that the purpose behind Shri Hari's *charitra* was to strengthen their resolve in his supremacy.

Shri Hari Accepts a Niyam

Shri Hari instructed the satsang community by abiding by his own words. Often, he would use himself as an example. One afternoon after lunch, Shri Hari asked the satsang *sabha*, "Who is the most arrogant of all people?"

The sadhus remained silent. Shri Hari continued, "It is said that a

king is the most arrogant in the land for all beings in his land bow to him. However, is it not true that the king bows to the learned scholar and *brahmin*? Yet, I must say that I have seen *brahmins* and scholars rub the heels of a sadhu. The sadhu, then, must be the most arrogant.”

Shri Hari sat silently for a few seconds staring at the branches of a tree overhead. He interrupted the silence again. “After thinking even more carefully, I find that all of you sadhus bow to me. This makes me the most arrogant person among all of you.”

Observing the silence, Shri Hari continued, “Then from today onwards, I take a *niyam*. Whenever a sadhu comes to me, I will stand up and greet him in humility with folded hands.”

In the following weeks, each time a sadhu entered Shri Hari’s residence or the satsang *sabha*, Shri Hari stood up with folded hands and greeted the sadhu.

One afternoon, Gunatitanand Swami walked into Shri Hari’s residence while he was having lunch. Gunatitanand Swami brought a younger sadhu with him for a personal consultation with Shri Hari. Shri Hari immediately stood up while having his meal and said, “Welcome, Sadhuram. Please take a seat.”

Gunatitanand Swami was taken aback. He immediately prostrated before Shri Hari and said, “Why are you standing up to greet us, Prabhu? It is embarrassing.”

Shri Hari narrated the incident from the satsang *sabha* a few weeks ago. Gunatitanand Swami interrupted, “Prabhu, you are Bhagwan. You are above *maya* and all of the characteristics ascribed to the *jiva*. You have no ego, greed, lust, gluttony, or attachment. Any *charitra* you perform is *divya*—above the judgment or scrutiny of the human eye. Please do not stand up to greet your sadhus.”

Shri Hari grinned. “No one cared to tell me that in the satsang *sabha*. Gunatitanandji, you have understood my *swarup* like no other. From now on, I will follow your *agna*. I will not stand up to greet my sadhus.” Shri Hari then sat down on the cot and resumed his meal.

As Nishkulananand Swami has aptly described, “*Jenaa nirmaani Bhagwan tenaa bhakta ne shi rite ghate maan*,” which means “When one’s Bhagwan is this humble, how does arrogance befit his *bhakta*?”

The Unique Quality

Shri Hari spent numerous months in Gadhada in the year of 1821. During these months, he often wrote to the senior sadhus and asked them to gather in Gadhada. On one such occasion, Shri Hari asked all of the senior sadhus a peculiar question. “What is the one unique quality or power that sets you apart from the entire world?”

Muktanand Swami answered first. “Prabhu, due to your grace I can control the mind of the wildest, most infuriated individual with a mere showing of my face. His anger subsides, and then he prostrates at my feet. Again, this is only possible through your grace.”

Brahmanand Swami was next. “Bhagwan, if one was to gather the world’s greatest poets, linguists, and musicians and ask me to respond to their literary and musical prowess, I would be able to do so instantly. There is not a single poet in the land that can outshine my lyrical genius. It goes without saying, of course, that this only possible with your grace and blessings.”

Shri Hari agreed with Brahmanand Swami’s response. He then asked Nityanand Swami and Gopalanand Swami.

“Prabhu, I can defeat all of the scholars in our land singlehandedly. Even their combined efforts would fall short of stumping me in a scholarly debate,” said Nityanand Swami.

Shri Hari turned to Gopalanand Swami, the yogic master.

“Shri Hari, if you were to give me the *agni*, I could dissolve the entire material creation in a matter of seconds.”

The other sadhus and devotees looked on in amazement. Shri Hari’s senior sadhus were capable of being worshipped as forms of divinity themselves.

Brahmanand Swami turned and looked at Gunatitanand Swami. Shri Hari’s Aksharbrahma was still silent. Gunatitanand Swami lowered his eyes when asked to speak in front of the satsang *sabha*. Brahmanand Swami asked him repeatedly to offer his response.

Shri Hari spoke for his Aksharbrahma. “Brahmanandji, this sadhu’s powers are unfathomable. You will understand his *mahima* when I am no longer here. Millions of followers will flock to him as they flock to me now. He is my Akshardham.”

Shri Hari never missed the opportunity to speak for his humble Gunatit Sadhu.

Pativrata Bhakti for Shri Hari

Shri Hari's *lila charitas* and words were personified by the lives of thousands of male and female devotees. It is worth noting that female devotees played a central role in the spread of Shri Hari's *mahima* in their family as well as the family into which they married, thereby influencing two communities. Their bhakti rivaled that of Radha and Rukminiji. Rukbai, a female devotee from Pithvadi, married into a family from Halyad. Her husband, Kalyanbhai, showed little interest in domestic matters and instead delegated such matters to his parents. The domestic harmony of the home was further complicated by the fact that Rukbai's in-laws were tantric practitioners. The day she arrived in Halyad, she bowed to her mother-in-law and father-in-law. She, however, refused to bow to the red- and black-robed mendicant sitting in their courtyard.

Her mother-in-law explained, "Rukbai, this ascetic is our family-guru. Bow to him. You will not be able to sleep peacefully in this house unless you accept his discipleship."

Rukbai responded with confidence. "Mother, I do not intend to disrespect you with my words, but I already have a guru. In fact, Swaminarayan is my Bhagwan, not just a guru. I cannot accept the discipleship of another guru. Please forgive me. Please give me permission to begin the household chores."

Rukbai's polite demeanor and tone did not give her in-laws reason to reprimand her publicly. The mendicant, however, felt insulted and was determined to harass the young bride. He would sit in the courtyard staring inappropriately at her as she carried out her daily chores. Rukbai continued her household chores chanting the name of Swaminarayan. The mendicant also incited her in-laws against her. He advised them to throw pieces of onion and garlic into the pot of drinking water. Rukbai went days without eating a meal or even drinking water. Yet, she refused to give up her *pativrata* bhakti.

The mendicant was furious. He decided to escalate his efforts. He convinced the family to leave the young bride in his care to change her

ways. The family agreed. The mendicant then said to Rukbai, “I will leave you alone if you submit your body in my service. I will even convince your in-laws to let you worship your Swaminarayan.”

Rukbai responded, “My body is bound to the company of my mortal husband and my mind to the company of my Bhagwan. You are neither and have no claim on my body or mind.”

The mendicant locked up the young bride in a room. Seven days passed without food and water. However, Rukbai’s resolve grew stronger with each passing day. She sat in the room with her heart and mind glued to the *murti* of Bhagwan Swaminarayan.

On the eighth day, Shri Hari arrived from Gadhada riding on his mare. He called out, “Rukbai, I am here. Do not worry.” He went inside the house and released Rukbai. He sent Rukbai to Gadhada with a group of female devotees from a neighboring village.

Shri Hari rode to Pithvadi and met Rukbai’s brother, Rudabhai. He explained the situation to Rudabhai. Rudabhai was in tears. “Prabhu, I am her brother, and I was not aware of this situation. How did you know? You rode to Halyad to help her. You are her true brother, father, and guardian.”

Shri Hari advised Rudabhai to travel to Halyad and convince Rukbai’s husband to visit him in Gadhada. Once Kalyanbhai realized that his family’s torture had driven Rukbai to Gadhada, He agreed to ride to Gadhada with Rudabhai.

In Gadhada, Shri Hari kept Kalyanbhai in his company for seven days. During that week, Shri Hari explained the importance of domestic harmony, mutual respect between spouses, and a healthy environment for both the in-laws and the newlywed bride.

Kalyanbhai realized his mistake. He apologized profusely to Shri Hari and to Rukbai. Pleased with the transformation in Kalyanbhai’s demeanor, Shri Hari instructed Rukbai to return home and live in harmony with her husband and in-laws.

It is said that the newlyweds then happily spent their lives worshiping Shri Hari and serving his sadhus.

Shri Hari’s devotees stood firm in the face of opposition and harassment. Shri Hari reciprocated their bhakti with love and care, remaining ever loyal to his *bhaktas* just as they were to him.

7

Stories Carved in Stone

After all, a devotee is required to pick flowers and tulsi for Bhagwan; he is required to bring various types of vegetables and to cultivate gardens for Bhagwan; he must also build mandirs. Therefore, one who sits idly, maintaining extreme renunciation and compassion, is unable to offer bhakti to Bhagwan. When bhakti diminishes, the upasana of Bhagwan is also destroyed, and a lineage of blind followers results. That is why I have had mandirs built – for the purpose of preserving Bhagwan's upasana forever.

- **Vachanamrut Gadhada II 27,**
Bhagwan Swaminarayan (1781-1830)

Murti-pratishtha in Ahmedabad

Recovering from the illness in Panchala launched a new period in Shri Hari's *charitras* on Earth—an era of establishing *ekantik dharma* and the Aksharbrahma-Parabrahma doctrine through the construction of striking and humbling mandirs. These mandirs were more than mere stone wonders. These mandirs breathed the spirit of bhakti through the activities it hosted and the emotions it evoked. A continuous course of rituals, *katha*, *bhajan*, and *seva* made these mandirs different from the average pilgrimage center. These mandirs were epicenters of social and spiritual reform within local communities. Shri Hari built six mandirs and started

the construction of another two before returning to Akshardham. This chapter leads the reader through a journey of Bhagwan Swaminarayan's *lila charitras* from 1821 to 1829.

Shri Hari sent a large group of sadhus under the leadership of Anandanand Swami to Ahmedabad. Anandanand Swami was to build a mandir on the land procured with the assistance of the British almost two years before in 1819.

On 24 February 1822, Shri Hari visited the construction site of the mandir for the first time. Just a few days were remaining before the *murti-pratishtha* festival. Shri Hari observed every corner of the newly-constructed mandir. He made suggestions to Anandanand Swami and left for Jetalpur. He returned a day later amidst a large procession and great fanfare, surrounded by hundreds of sadhus and devotees. People lined up along the road and on rooftops to catch a glimpse of Shri Hari. Shri Hari organized a *chaursi* feast and *yagna* sacrifice on the eve of the *murti-pratishtha*. Sir Dunlop arranged security services to prevent disruption of the events. Shri Hari accepted Sir Dunlop's invitation and graced his bungalow.

108 *brahmins* administered the *yagna* ritual at 108 separate *vedikas* the day before the *murti-pratishtha*. That night, Shri Hari came inside the *garbhagruh* to examine the placement of the *murtis*. He took special interest in the direction, angle, and height at which the *murtis* were to be installed.

The next morning, Ahmedabad rose to the sound of bellowing horns and beating drums. Thousands of devotees from Saurashtra and Gujarat gathered at the mandir grounds. Shri Hari did *abhishek* and *puja* of the *murtis* before performing the *murti-pratishtha*. The *murti-pratishtha* ceremony concluded with the *arti*, which was followed by thousands of individuals chanting "Shri Nar-Narayan Dev ni jay! (see photo 31)"

The crowd pushed and shoved for a glimpse of the *murti*. Shri Hari could not come out of the mandir without being pulled into the waves of people. Shri Hari held onto Anandanand Swami's arm and managed to escape the rush of devotees.

Shri Hari was startled that many devotees quickly forgot that Purna Purushottam Narayan was present among them. He turned to

Anandanand Swami and said, “Swamiji, tens of millions of Nar-Narayan Devs float on each pore of my body, yet these poor *jivas* fail to recognize my *swarup*. I have made this mandir to establish the Aksharbrahma-Parabrahma theological doctrine and to give the local community a place to engage in *bhakti* and *seva* in my absence. It seems to me, however, that these souls have misunderstood my objective.”

Anandanand Swami made a mental note of Shri Hari’s words and shared them with the other senior sadhus in the coming days.

The following day, Shri Hari officiated the *chaurasi* feast in the forest-gardens surrounding Kankaria Lake. Thousands of *brahmins* drank bowls full of ghee, while also enjoying the ghee-soaked *ladus* specially prepared for the feast. Shri Hari served all of them with love and generosity. He gave each of them befitting *dakshina* and saw them off to their respective villages.

Three days later, Shri Hari departed Ahmedabad and arrived in Dholka. His mind was still at unrest from the incident that occurred after the *murti-pratishtha*. He fell ill with a blazing fever. The sadhus and personal attendants tenderly cared for Shri Hari, yet the fever would not subside. Shri Hari expressed his sorrow, “It pained my heart to see the weak foundation of the devotees’ *upasana* and conviction. The sadhus and devotees must strengthen their faith in *pragat* Bhagwan. This is the only way to attain *moksha* and earn a place in my abode. I feel like saying that we never went to Ahmedabad and never celebrated the *yagna*, *murti-pratishtha*, or *chaurasi* feast. *Sankhya-vichar*¹ is necessary to overcome this disappointment.”

Shri Hari’s *charitra* was meant to teach his sadhus and devotees that a weak foundation of *upasana* and conviction permeating the satsang community pains Bhagwan and the Gunatit Sadhu. Shri Hari’s prescribed remedy of *sankhya-vichar* is an equally important lesson. By negating all that exists around us, one is able to strengthen *atmajnan* and love

¹ *Sankhya-vichar* stems from the school of Sankhya (Samkhya), which is considered one of the six *darshanas* in Hindu philosophy. *Sankhya-vichar* is the belief that the material world and all of its components are temporary and unreal. The only reality is Aksharbrahma and Parabrahma. One who has imbibed *sankhya-vichar* believes himself to be detached from this body and its material possessions. He is unaffected by pleasure, discomfort, insult, and praise.

for Bhagwan and his Gunatit Sadhu.

Stone Laying in Vartal

Shri Hari Jayanti and Ramnavmi of 1822 were celebrated in Vartal. The sadhus and devotees celebrated Shri Hari's *pragatya utsav* while dancing and singing to the sounds of Premanand Swami's bhakti *pads*. The day after the festival, Joban Pagi, Ranchoddas, Kuberdas, Narayan Giri, and other senior devotees approached Shri Hari with a proposal to build a grand three-*shikhar* mandir in Vartal. Four days later, Shri Hari laid the first stone and commenced the construction of a mandir in Vartal. Shri Hari spent several weeks in Vartal following the celebration.

During the summer months of April and May, eighteen sadhus simultaneously fell ill in Vartal. Shri Hari placed Gunatitanand Swami in their *seva*. Gunatitanand Swami single-handedly cared for their physical and dietary needs. One afternoon, Shri Hari noticed that Gunatitanand Swami was walking back from the lake to the sadhus' residences with several dozen drenched blankets. He walked towards Gunatitanand Swami to give him darshan. Shri Hari had only taken a few steps when Gunatitanand Swami locked his gaze onto Shri Hari's *murti*. Shri Hari was bound by Aksharbrahma's love-filled bhakti. Gunatitanand Swami held Shri Hari's *murti* fixed in place with his love. Shri Hari tried to take a step in another direction, but it was as if he was being held captive by Gunatitanand Swami's eyes. Shri Hari started to perspire. He gasped, "Sadhusram, that is enough. Let us move forward."

Gunatitanand Swami immediately bowed and shifted his gaze from Shri Hari's *murti*. Shri Hari walked back to his residence sweating and breathing heavily. When his personal attendants attempted to help him breathe, Shri Hari instructed, "Not me. Help that sadhu with all of those heavy blankets on his shoulders. Alleviate his burden; then I will feel better too."

The personal attendants ran to reduce Gunatitanand Swami's load. It was only then that Shri Hari was able to breathe with ease.

In the evening satsang *sabha*, Shri Hari addressed Muktanand Swami and Brahmanand Swami. "Do you know the greatness of this sadhu?" asked Shri Hari as he pointed to Gunatitanand Swami.

They replied, “Prabhu, he is constantly singing your praises. He also sings bhajans all day and relishes in your *lila charitras*. The sadhus and devotees enjoy his company, and his *katha* touches the hearts of devotees everywhere he goes.”

Shri Hari smiled and clarified, “These are his external qualities. His greatest quality is that he has fixed his heart and mind on my *murti*. Not a moment passes when he is not enjoying the pleasure of my *murti* in his heart. He holds my *murti* in his heart as tightly as a charmer grabs hold of a snake with a metal prong. I cannot escape, even if I wish to.”

Mahanubhavanand Swami immediately shouted at Gunatitanand Swami, “Swami, let go of Shri Hari. You should not do anything to harm him or cause him pain!”

Shri Hari laughed at this naïve interpretation of his words. “He does not cause me pain. He is a sadhu of a different caliber. His mind desires nothing more than my *murti*. If you peer inside the human exterior of his body, you will see that he is my Aksharbrahma. I reside within every inch of his being. That being said, I believe that it would be a grave sin to make him serve you if you were not ill. I had placed him in the ill sadhus’ *seva* to demonstrate his qualities. Many of the healthy sadhus were also assigning their personal tasks to Gunatitanandji. And, here he was gladly accepting such additional burdens. This is the Gunatit Sadhu’s true greatness.”

Muktanand Swami chimed in, “Prabhu, while we are on the subject, I must also share an incident that shows Gunatitanandji’s greatness. While we were traveling in Surat, we set up camp in a garden outside of the city’s boundaries. Every morning when we sat to meditate or during the morning *katha*, a monkey would climb onto the roof of a shed across from us. It would howl, jump, and often throw things in the air. Each of the sadhus would lose focus and stare at the monkey. Even I was distracted by the monkey’s antics once. When I asked the sadhus if there was anyone among them who had not once wavered from meditating on your *murti*, Gunatitanandji stood up. His control, discipline, and focus on your *murti* is unparalleled by any other sadhu in our *sampradaya*, and on Earth.”

Shri Hari stood up and embraced Gunatitanand Swami saying, “Swamiji, you are worthy of sitting next to me. Come near.”

Muktanand Swami often gave Gunatitanand Swami *prasad* from his own *thal*. After hearing Shri Hari’s praise for Gunatitanand Swami on this day, Muktanand Swami stopped offering *prasad* to him.

The Monkey and the Mala

Shri Hari would gather the sadhus and devotees in the gardens by the lake for satsang *sabha*. In one such *sabha*, a monkey was dangling from the main branch of a tree, attracting the attention of the *kshatriya* devotees visiting from Saurashtra. One of the devotees called out to Shri Hari, “Prabhu, monkeys helped Shri Ram cross the ocean by building a bridge. They also fought against the *rakshas* with maces and swords. How can such a small monkey build a bridge across the ocean or fight with a mighty *rakshas*?”

Shri Hari replied, “With Bhagwan’s strength, any creature is capable of accomplishing any task. It was with Shri Ram’s *agni* and *shakti* that the monkeys defeated Ravan.”

The *kshatriyas* were not convinced. “Prabhu, show us Bhagwan’s power. Make that wild monkey perform an act typically reserved for human beings.”

Shri Hari glanced at the monkey. It then suddenly hopped into the middle of the satsang *sabha*. It curiously approached Shri Hari and touched his feet. Shri Hari raised his right hand and blessed the monkey. The monkey took the *mala* from Shri Hari’s hand and started to turn it while chanting the Swaminarayan mantra. The *kshatriyas* were speechless. As if that was not enough, the monkey started to chant verses from Tulsidas’ *Ramcharitmanas*.

The *kshatriyas* folded their hands and bowed to the monkey and Shri Hari. The monkey handed the *mala* to Shri Hari and vanished within seconds. The satsang *sabha* felt as if Hanumanji himself had come for Shri Hari’s darshan.

A Pearl in Shri Hari’s Mala – Uka Khachar and His Wife

In 1823, Shri Hari spent several months in Gadhada. Hundreds of

sadhus and devotees would gather from Saurashtra and Gujarat for Shri Hari's darshan. They would walk past the tree in Dada Khachar's courtyard straight to Akshar Ordi for Shri Hari's darshan.

One warm summer morning, a stray dog wandered into the courtyard and spoiled the grounds under the tree where Shri Hari typically sat. Every sadhu and devotee that passed by the tree frowned upon seeing the feces and rushed past the tree.

Uka Khachar walked by the tree and immediately fetched a *savarni* and a bucket of water. He cleaned the platform under the tree, returned the cleaning supplies, and then proceeded to bathe again in the river. He came back to the courtyard and silently sat in the back of the assembly to avoid attention. Shri Hari, however, wanted to praise Uka Khachar's *seva* today.

"Bapu, you are usually on time for *katha*. Why did you arrive late this morning?" asked Shri Hari.

Uka Khachar remained silent. Shri Hari probed further. A devotee sitting in front of Uka Khachar responded for him. "Prabhu, Uka Khachar cleaned the area under the tree and went to bathe in the river."

Shri Hari immediately jumped at the opportunity to praise his devotee. "Was he the only one that noticed the spoiled area on the way to my residence?"

The sadhus and devotees looked down in silence. Shri Hari continued, "Uka Khachar has one addiction. And, that addiction is for *seva*. Only one who has *mahima* for my *swarup* can do *seva* with the passion that Uka Khachar and his wife carry."

This is only one example of the many that describe Uka Khachar's passion for *seva*. Uka Khachar and his wife woke up before sunrise every day. They swept the road to the Ghela River so that the sadhus and devotees were not troubled by the thorns and sharp stones on the way for their morning bath. In the summer months, they would sprinkle water on the path so that the devotees did not burn their feet on the way to the river. Despite being a *kshatriya*, Uka Khachar engaged in what was considered to be menial *seva* to please Shri Hari.

Shri Hari praises Uka Khachar in a Vachanamrut Gadhada II 25 for his compulsion for *seva* and for the maturity with which he understood

Shri Hari and devotees' *mahima*, thus earning him a place in Shri Hari's *mala* of pearl-like devotees.²

Visiting Bhaga Doshi in Botad

Shri Hari's love for his devotees was best illustrated through the difficulties he tolerated to care for them. One evening, Shri Hari was addressing the satsang *sabha* in Gadhada. A *parshad* came running and announced, "Bhagwan, Bhaga Doshi of Botad is suffering from a fatal illness. He may not make it through the night."

Shri Hari immediately excused himself from the satsang *sabha* and saddled Manki. Jiva Khachar called out to him, "Prabhu, I just received word that Bhaga Doshi has already left this world. Do not take the trouble to ride to Botad."

Shri Hari sharply retorted, "Jiva Bapu, how could he have already left this world? I have not taken him to Akshardham yet."

Naja Jogiya also mounted a horse and accompanied Shri Hari. It started to rain lightly when Shri Hari reached the outskirts of Gadhada. By the time Shri Hari reached Jotingada, his silk clothes and Manki's saddle blanket were drenched. Shri Hari stopped to catch his breath. Naja Jogiya was already annoyed by how much trouble they were going through to meet this one devotee. "Prabhu, the effort you are expending to reach Bhaga Doshi is too much."

Shri Hari immediately interrupted him. "Bhaga Doshi is a great *bhakta*. I would do this over a hundred times to reward him for the *bhakti* and *mahima* that he has imbibed in his life."

Naja Jogiya thought it was best to remain silent. Shri Hari reached Botad and went to Godad Khachar's residence. He changed into a pair of borrowed clothes and immediately left for Bhaga Doshi's house.

There, on his cot, Bhaga Doshi lay thirsting for a final glimpse of Shri Hari's *murti*. Shri Hari sat on Bhaga Doshi's cot and lovingly caressed his head. Bhaga Doshi opened his eyes and was delighted to see Shri Hari

2 In Vachanamrut Gadhada II 25, Shri Hari says, "Just as Uka Khachar has become addicted to serving the sadhus, in the same way, if one becomes addicted to serving Parabrahma and his Sadhu to the extent that one would not be able to stay for even a moment without serving them, then all of the impure desires in one's *antahkarana* will be destroyed."

in front of him.

“Bhaga Doshi, you were asking for us in your prayers, were you not? I have come for you.”

Bhaga Doshi replied, “Prabhu, now that I have had your darshan, I am not worried about this mortal body.”

Shri Hari smiled and said, “I am not letting you leave. You still have to do darshan of the mandir in Gadhada.”

Shri Hari turned to Bhaga Doshi’s family and instructed, “Feed him *raab* with ground *sakar*. Bhaga Doshi will completely recover in a few days.”

Shri Hari blessed Bhaga Doshi’s family and returned to Godad Khachar’s residence. He had dinner with the ruler’s family and departed for Gadhada later that night.

Assisting the Devotees of Burhanpur

Swarupanand Swami and Mahanubhavanand Swami had traveled tirelessly in Burhanpur in present-day Madhya Pradesh. Satsang was flourishing in the region, which caused anxiety among the ascetics and mendicants residing in that province. They were waiting for an opportunity to seek revenge upon the Swaminarayan devotees in retaliation for curtailing their profitable business model of deceiving innocent believers through superstition and tantra.

That year, the rains failed to fall in Madhya Pradesh. Riverbeds were covered with dry dirt, and the fields began to resemble deserts. Capitalizing on the poor weather conditions, one of the mendicants tried to negatively influence the king. “I know why there is no rain in your land, oh King. These Swaminarayan devotees are capable of making it rain, but they are purposefully withholding the rain. Force them to make the clouds have mercy on your subjects. If they refuse, order them to surrender their *kanthis* and *pujas*. After all, what kind of Bhagwan cannot cause it rain?”

The king was desperate under the tightening death grip of the famine. He called the devotees and asked them to surrender their *kanthis*. They refused and were immediately jailed.

Shri Hari received news of the difficulty that had befallen his devotees in Burhanpur. He wrote a letter to the devotees and asked Mulji

Brahmachari to find someone to deliver the letter. Brahmachari called Govindram into Akshar Ordi. Shri Hari handed him the letter and told him to leave immediately.

Govindram had just returned that morning from a long trip. He accepted Shri Hari's *agni* and left for Burhanpur. Govindram began to slow his pace as he reached the outskirts of Gadhada. The pain from the blisters on his feet and the heaviness from his sleep-deprived eyes prevented him from continuing. He decided to rest for an hour inside the Shiva mandir on the banks of the Ghela River.

Govindram was so tired that he slept the entire night on the outskirts of Gadhada. In the morning he woke up to an unfamiliar scene. He looked around in a confused daze. There was a river, but it was dry. There was a Shiva mandir, but it was larger than the one in Gadhada. He mustered the courage to ask a traveler, "Brother, where am I?"

The traveler responded, "That is a silly question. This is Burhanpur, dear friend."

Govindram was bewildered to suddenly find himself in Burhanpur. Shri Hari had pitied Govindram's physical exhaustion and transported him from Gadhada to Burhanpur while he slept to spare him from the tiring journey. After the initial shock wore off, Govindram delivered the letter and promised the devotees that it would rain in less than two days. Shri Hari had given his word. After delivering the message in the royal prison, Govindram returned to the banks of the Tapi River to bathe before starting towards Gadhada.

Govindram dipped his head into the Tapi River a few times. After shaking his hair dry, he opened his eyes to another surprise. He was standing in front of the Shiva mandir in Gadhada. Shri Hari had again spared Govindram from the arduous journey from Burhanpur to Gadhada.

Kashidas of Bochasan experienced a similar abundance of mercy. Kashidas was transported to Gadhada when bathing in the Vatrak River while falsely detained for a crime he did not commit. After coming out of the river in the morning, he noticed that the prison guards were missing. He recognized the familiar scenery. These were the banks of the Ghela River in Gadhada, not the Vatrak River in the Kheda region of Gujarat.

Shri Hari showered his compassion on those devotees that followed

his *agni* and served selflessly.

‘Sahajanandi Surya’

Shri Hari celebrated the Fuladol festival of 1823 in Panchala. Shri Hari ordered Jhinabhai, the ruler of Panchala, to prepare food for the entire village. *Shelan* was a delicacy enjoyed by the villagers in Saurashtra. It is overcooked rice mixed with jaggery and ghee. Shri Hari personally served the sadhus and devotees. He walked through the rows of villagers with a vessel of ghee in his hands. He asked the sadhus to refill the vessel and then continued serving where he left off. The devas and devis gathered in the sky thirsting for a morsel of that *shelan*. Today, the villagers were more fortunate than these celestial beings; Purna Purushottam Narayan was serving them.

Shri Hari was about to put the vessel down and return to his residence when he noticed that there were several individuals on the other side of the river. Shri Hari called Jhinabhai and asked, “Bapu, has the entire village been fed?”

Jhinabhai nodded in approval. Shri Hari asked again, “Then who are those individuals on the other side of the river? I have not seen them seated in the rows with the villagers.”

Jhinabhai frowned. “Prabhu, they are of the *vaghri* caste. They are untouchables. They eat meat and drink alcohol. There is no need to feed them.”

Shri Hari was saddened to hear such words. “Bapu, the sun rises for every being on the face of this planet. It does not discriminate between poor and wealthy or good and evil. I will serve them. Call them here. The sun has risen today in the form of Sahajanand – ‘Sahajanandi Surya’.”

Shri Hari served each of the *vaghris* with the same enthusiasm with which he served the senior sadhus. Shri Hari’s love was beyond the worldly limits of caste, creed, and religion.

Murti-Pratishta in Bhuj

Several senior devotees, including Sundarji and Hirji Suthar, played a central role in the construction of the mandir in Bhuj. Shri Hari departed for Kutch with a large group of sadhus and devotees in May of 1823. Shri

Hari was returning to Kutch after a long absence. Devotees from villages throughout Kutch gathered to relish in Shri Hari's darshan. His return brought tears to the eyes of his devotees. Shri Hari embraced and spoke to each devotee, alleviating the pain felt from so many years of separation.

The devotees carried Shri Hari onto a chariot and took him around the city in a magnificent procession. The next morning, Shri Hari completed the *murti-pratishtha* of Nar-Narayan Dev in the mandir (see photo 32) followed by a *yagna* supervised by Gopalanand Swami. Shri Hari expressed his desire to feed the *brahmins* in a customary *chaursi* feast. Sundarji and the devotees sprang into action to prepare for the feast. Hundreds of *brahmins* were fed the following day.

After the festival was completed in Bhuj, the devotees invited Shri Hari to their villages around Kutch. Shri Hari visited their homes and farms with genuine interest and appreciation. After traveling in Kutch for a few weeks, Shri Hari departed for Gadhada.

Protecting the Millet in Akha

Shri Hari spent the monsoon months in Gadhada. Brahmanand Swami was supervising the construction of the mandir in Vartal. Shri Hari had approved plans for a one-*shikhar* mandir in Vartal. However, Brahmanand Swami dug a foundation for a much larger, three-*shikhar* mandir. He used 900,000 bricks in the foundation alone.

Shri Hari sent Brahmanand Swami a note advising him to spend within the budget for the project. Brahmanand Swami replied with a verse:

*Sahib sarikhaa sethiyaa, base nagar ke maahi;
Taake dhan ki kyaa kami, jaaki hundi navkhand jaahi?*

A merchant like Bhagwan, lives within the village;

*What shortage of wealth for him, whose treasury extends through all nine continents?*³

Shri Hari traveled to Vartal to inspect the mandir construction and to celebrate the Prabodhini Ekadashi festival. He was extremely pleased with Brahmanand Swami's efforts to build a stunning, lotus-shaped mandir.

³ Hindu Puranic texts state there were originally nine continents. However, in later texts *navkhand* became a generic term referring to the Earth.

Shri Hari embraced each of the younger sadhus working in the mud laying the foundation. One of them warned, “Prabhu, our bodies are soiled with mud. It will stain your clothes.”

Shri Hari smiled and said, “This is not mud. Your selfless seva has turned it into sandalwood paste.”

Shri Hari noticed that Gunatitanand Swami was standing a few feet away enjoying his darshan. Shri Hari walked up to Gunatitanand Swami and embraced him. Gunatitanand Swami objected, “Bhagwan, I was not working on the foundation. I have just come from a nearby village.”

Shri Hari laughed, “Gunatitanandji, I do not need a reason to embrace you. You are my Akshardham. Is that not reason enough?”

On the night of Prabodhini Ekadashi, the sadhus and devotees sang bhajans and shared incidents of Shri Hari’s kindness. Shri Hari snuck out from the satsang *sabha*, mounted his mare, and rode towards Akha.

Savji Mehta of Akha left his fields full of millet ripe for harvest. His mother warned him not to go to Vartal for the festival because the dacoits would harvest the crop and sell it before his return. However, Savji was craving to have darshan of Shri Hari’s *murti*. He ran off to Vartal despite his mother’s protests. On the night of the *ekadashi* festival, the dacoits from a neighboring village descended on Savji’s fields with a few laborers and harvested all of Savji’s millet within hours. They decided to rest for a few minutes before carrying off the bundled crop to their village. A few minutes before dawn, they heard the beating of horse hoofs. As Akha was a closely-knit town, they could not afford to be caught. They stood up to see who was approaching. They saw a figure dressed in royal attire riding towards the fields with his hands waving and shouting with vigor. The dacoits assumed it was the local ruler’s person. They left the bundled crop and ran for their lives.

Shri Hari unsaddled Manki and sat by the crops until dawn. In the morning, Savji’s mother came to check on the fields. She let out a loud wail. “I am finished. The dacoits have taken my entire crop.”

Shri Hari smiled and noted, “Mother, look over here. Your crop is secure. In fact, the dacoits were kind enough to harvest it for free!”

She prostrated at Shri Hari’s feet asked why he was in Akha. Shri Hari explained the reason for his midnight ride to Akha. The elderly

woman was in tears. Shri Hari rode off to Vartal before she could invite him into the town.

A few years later, Shri Hari was riding through the dacoit's village. One of the dacoits recognized Shri Hari and called out to his accomplice, "Khan, is that not the man from Savji's fields?"

Khan stood up for a closer look. Shri Hari approached the dacoits, and they immediately prostrated at his feet.

Khan explained, "Babaji, you saved our lives. Since that day you scared us away from Savji's fields, we have been unable to loot and rob even if we want to. It is as if an inner voice stops us from committing crimes."

Shri Hari chuckled, blessed them, and rode away.

Shri Hari's *charitras* were redemptive for both the victim and the culprit.

The Unique Brahmin and the Ox

Shri Hari frequently visited Lakshmi Vadi, a small field of farmland near Dada Khachar's residence. One afternoon, Shri Hari noticed a three-legged ox sitting in the corner of the field. It looked at peace. The ox had seemingly accrued *punya* in its past births. Shri Hari asked the caretakers about the ox. One of them responded, "Prabhu, this ox is unique. It does not eat anything on *ekadashi* days. Anytime sadhus or devotees come into the *vadi*, it hobbles towards them and places its head at their feet. The poor thing lost a leg while we were farming a few months ago."

Shri Hari placed his right hand on the ox's back as if comforting its pain. The devotees asked Shri Hari how an ox could be so aware of *niyams* and appreciate the presence of sadhus and devotees. Shri Hari narrated the ox's story: "This ox was a farmer in its previous birth. He was a staunch devotee. However, one day he had an argument with a *brahmin* from a nearby village. In a fit of anger, the farmer picked up an axe and chopped off the *brahmin*'s leg. As soon as the axe struck the *brahmin*'s leg, the farmer knew that he had committed a grave sin. He was full of repentance. He prayed to me every day. He even spent the rest of his days looking after the injured *brahmin*. I wanted to take him to Akshardham, but the consequences of wronging Bhagwan's *bhakta* are grave. He would have to suffer the consequences of karma."

The sadhus and devotees were stunned by the ox's plight. They resolved to never offend, insult, or wrong Shri Hari's devotees. Shri Hari later had the ox moved to Dada's courtyard, where it could listen to the *katha* and bhajans delivered by the sadhus.

One evening, an old *brahmin* with only one foot from the village of Sajeli hobbled into Dada's courtyard for Shri Hari's darshan. Shri Hari immediately welcomed the *brahmin* and arranged for him to sit on a cot across from him. The sadhus and devotees asked the *brahmin* how he had lost his foot. The *brahmin* shared the story of his argument with the deceased farmer, Lakha Kanbi.

Shri Hari interrupted him, "Bhattji, would you like to see Lakha Kanbi?"

The *brahmin* explained, "Prabhu, Lakha is no more. You took him to Akshardham. I am glad you took him. He spent each day repenting for his sin."

Shri Hari questioned, "Bhattji, how do you know whether he is in Akshardham? He is sitting right next to you. That injured ox is Lakha Kanbi. Forgive him for his sins so that I can liberate him."

The *brahmin* looked at the ox with tears in his eyes. He implored, "Bhagwan, I have forgiven him ten times over. Now, please pardon his sins and take him to Akshardham. I cannot bear to see his condition."

Shri Hari was pleased with the *brahmin*'s *satsang samjan*. He blessed the *brahmin* and promised to liberate the farmer-ox in a few days. True to his word, Shri Hari liberated the farmer-ox in one week. The sadhus and devotees witnessing this *charitra* learned to never cause harm to Bhagwan's *bhaktas* and developed a deeper understanding of the power of karma.

Shri Hari's Love for Aksharbrahma

The dry Gadhada winter can often lead one to dream of tropical climates. The frigid winds off the Ghela River's waters and the penetrating cold are enough to keep many wrapped inside their homes next to a comforting fire. On one such winter morning, a devotee brought a coarse blanket for Shri Hari. The blanket was made of a thick and metal mesh-like material. If not used carefully, it was capable of irritating and even scratching one's skin. Mulji Brahmachari let Shri Hari use the blanket for

a few hours and then tried to pull it off him. Shri Hari resisted because he wanted to keep the blanket. The devotee's love soothed the discomfort caused by the blanket's texture.

Brahmachari sent senior sadhus and devotees to ask for the blanket as *prasadi*. Shri Hari refused to give it away. Muktanand Swami decided to send in Shri Hari's chosen one, Gunatitanand Swami.

When Gunatitanand Swami asked for the blanket, Shri Hari could not decline his request. "Gunatitanandji, I cannot refuse you. Besides, you are worthy of such a blanket. After all, you are my Jadbharat."⁴

Shri Hari showed his partiality towards his Aksharbrahma on many occasions.

Himraj Sheth's Three Sons and Nephew

The Vaishnav leaders of Sundariyana were threatening to boycott the *barmu* feast on the twelfth day after the passing of Himraj Sheth, a renowned merchant. Himraj Sheth was a Vaishnav, and his parents and grandparents were followers of the Vallabha Sampradaya. Himraj Sheth was impressed by the pure character and transparent demeanor of Shri Hari's sadhus. He accepted Shri Hari's discipleship. He possessed firm faith, rivaled only by the conviction displayed by his three sons and nephew, Vana Shah, Jetha Shah, Punja Shah, and Bhagabhai.

Himraj Sheth's acceptance of Bhagwan Swaminarayan's *niyams* and *kanthi* was opposed by the Vaishnav community in Sundariyana. However, no one was able to say such disparaging remarks directly to the merchant. After Himraj Sheth's passing, the community leaders decided to take advantage of his children's young age and easily-influenced beliefs. Their attendance at Himraj's funeral was contingent upon two demands. "Take off your *kanthis*, forget Swaminarayan, and reassume the sectarian identity of your forefathers. Second, publicly denounce your father's acceptance of the Swaminarayan Sampradaya. Acknowledge it

⁴ 'Jad' means extremely unaffected. Jadbharat was the third avatar of King Bharat, who was born again in the form of a deer because of his attachment to a fawn that he had saved from a lion in his first avatar. Bharatji realized his mistake of becoming attached to a fawn instead of Bhagwan's *swarup*, and in repentance, he lived his life in the third avatar as 'Jadbharat'—avoiding all worldly obligations that would obstruct him from attaining *moksha*.

as his blunder. If both of these conditions are met, we will lift the ban on attending your father's *barmu* feast."

The four children refused to accept these conditions. The village elders met with them and suggested that they take off their *kanthis* for just that one day to avoid shaming their father's legacy. The brothers echoed their firm resolve, "We will not remove our *kanthis* for even one second, let alone an entire day. If no one comes to the feast, we will consider that to be our Bhagwan's will. We do not care for what the community thinks or says about us."

News of this incident reached Shri Hari in Gadhada. Shri Hari gathered five hundred sadhus and scores of devotees and headed towards Sundariyana. Upon Shri Hari's arrival, he embraced each of the brothers. He said, "We are here to celebrate your father's life. You have shown the other sadhus and devotees that one's true relatives and community members are Bhagwan and his *bhaktas*. The relations of this world are temporary and as fickle as those with whom they are knit."

Himraj Sheth's *barmu* feast was celebrated by hundreds of sadhus and devotees. Shri Hari, himself, served *ladus* to all those present.

Murti-Pratishtha in Vartal

The *murti-pratishtha* of the nine-*shikhar* mandir in Vartal was planned for Wednesday, 2 November 1824. Shri Hari had previously decided to install the *murtis* of Lakshmi-Narayan Dev buried in Amichand's courtyard in Vadodara. When Shri Hari was traveling as Nilkanth Varni, he had promised Amichand that he would install these *murtis* in a majestic mandir in the heart of Gujarat.⁵ The time had come to fulfill that promise.

In the monsoon months, Shri Hari sent Madhavanand Swami, Tadrupanand Swami, Trikamanand Swami, and Kevalatmanand Swami to transport the *murtis* from Vadodara to Vartal. The sadhus set off in a carriage pulled by bullocks. On their way back, the sadhus' carriage became stuck in the wetlands outside of the village of Bhalaj near Bochasan. Kashidas of Bochasan came running with his own carriage and helped the sadhus store the *murtis* safely in Bochasan until the rains passed.

⁵ Refer to Chapter 2 with subtitle 'Nasik, Surat, and Vadodara' for a detailed account of Nilkanth's visit to Amichand's residence in Vadodara.

The *murti-pratishtha* date for the Vartal mandir was nearing, but Kashidas was unwilling to return the *murtis* to the sadhus. He wanted to build a mandir in Bochasan and install these *murtis* of Lakshmi-Narayan Dev in it. Shri Hari traveled to Bochasan and tried to reason with his old friend. “Listen, Kashidas. The invitations for the *murti-pratishtha* in Vartal have been sent. The date is also set, and the mandir is complete. Please let me take the *murtis*. I assure you that one day a mandir will be constructed in Bochasan. I will sit in the central shrine along with my Akshardham. I give you my word.”⁶

These words consoled Kashidas. He bowed to Shri Hari and delivered the *murtis* to Vartal in his carriage.

Shri Hari also had one more objective in mind for the mandir in Vartal. He wanted to install his own *murti* in the first shrine. Muktanand Swami was not comfortable with this idea. He worried about the public criticism of this bold move and the ramifications on the *sampradaya*'s growth. After all, none of the previous avatars had gone so far as to install their own *murti*. However, Muktanand Swami was forgetting that Shri Hari was not an avatar. He was the manifest form of Purna Purushottam Narayan, the *avatari*.

Shri Hari and Muktanand Swami rode towards Vartal together. Muktanand Swami wanted to stay with Shri Hari through the *murti-pratishtha* so that he could dissuade Shri Hari from installing his own *murti*. However, on the way there, Muktanand Swami fell off his horse and broke his leg. He was forced to stay behind and miss the *murti-pratishtha* festival.

Shri Hari performed the *murti-pratishtha* in Vartal with thousands of devotees and sadhus at his side. He installed the *murti* of himself and called it Harikrishna Maharaj (see photos 34 & 35). The *murti* was made of *panch dhatu*.

After the *murti-pratishtha*, the devotees of Vartal pleaded with Shri Hari, “Bhagwan, you have lived in Gadhada for a long time. Please accept

6 Shri Hari fulfilled His promise to Kashidas when his Gunatit Sadhu, Brahmaswarup Shastriji Maharaj, consecrated the first mandir with Bhagwan Swaminarayan and Gunatanand Swami (Akshar-Purushottam Maharaj) in the central shrine in Bochasan on 5 June 1907. It marked the beginning of a new era, one where the true *upasana* of Akshar-Purushottam could be freely expounded and celebrated.

our service and make Vartal your home now.”

Shri Hari responded, “I have installed my *swarup* in the form of Harikrishna Maharaj. I will live here now through this *murti*. Serve it as if you are serving me. I will accept your bhakti and seva through this *panch dhatu murti*. However, if there is a violation of the *niyams* established by me for the sadhus or devotees, I shall leave this *murti* forever.”

Brahmanand Swami constructed the mandir fused with architectural splendor and his bhakti for Shri Hari. The foundation of the mandir was designed in the form of a lotus. Hence, an aerial view of the mandir would resemble the shape of a lotus. After the three-day inauguration festival, Shri Hari appointed Aksharanand Swami as the mahant of the Vartal mandir. Shri Hari then departed for Surat taking Brahmanand Swami along with him.

Shri Hari in Surat

The devotees in Surat had been inviting Shri Hari to their city for many years. In fact, when Shri Hari was on his way to Dharampur to grace Kushalkunvarba’s palace, the devotees tried to persuade Shri Hari to stop in Surat. Shri Hari, however, wanted to reach Dharampur in time for the Vasant Panchmi festival.

In November of 1824, Shri Hari traveled to Surat with a large group of sadhus and devotees. Shri Hari was greeted by Ardesharji, the Kotwal of Surat. The Kotwal was the city’s administrator. Ardesharji was a Parsi and a disciple of Muni Bawa.⁷ He was a charismatic public servant who had earned the title of kotwal at the tender age of twenty-two. He was both well-respected and feared in the city and among the circuit of British officers. He had unflinching faith in Shri Hari and his *charitras*. Several historical accounts confirm the importance Ardesharji placed on serving Shri Hari and the satsang community.

Ardesharji made arrangements for Shri Hari to stay in Surat for as long as he desired. He organized a grand procession down the city’s main street. Shri Hari graced Ardesharji’s home. The Muslim Nawab,

⁷ Muni Bawa was Brahmanand Swami’s Sanskrit guru. Brahmanand Swami had brought Muni Bawa into satsang. Eventually, Muni Bawa regarded Shri Hari to be as great as Shri Krishna and asked to be initiated as a sadhu. Shri Hari initiated him and kept his original name, Muni Bawa.

Afzulluddin Ahmad Khan, invited Shri Hari to his palace as well. Shri Hari accepted the offerings of gold-threaded clothes and jewel-studded ornaments sprinkled with scented-oils from Arabia.

Returning from the procession, Shri Hari asked Naja Jogia about Premanand Swami's whereabouts. Naja Jogia looked around the procession and found Premanandji standing still as throngs of sadhus and devotees passed him. Premanand Swami's ears had drawn him to the sounds of a *sarangi* accompanied by a flawless rendition of Raga Malkauns by two sisters. Naja Jogia called out to Premanand Swami, "Premanandji, hurry up! Shri Hari is remembering you."

Premanand Swami ran to the front of the procession. Shri Hari deliberately asked, "Premanandji, what caused you to leave our side and lose track of time and your surroundings?"

Premanand Swami silently admitted his mistake. As a *brahmachari*, he should have restrained himself from listening to the music performed by the women, regardless of how melodious it was. Shri Hari ordered him to undertake the *chandrayan* fast as a form of repentance for straying from his vows of eight-fold *brahmacharya*.

Shri Hari spent fifteen days in Surat. Ardesharji and the other devotees arranged scrumptious meals for the sadhus and devotees each day. Shri Hari also graced the homes of the British officials in Surat, Sir Heron and Sir Anderson.⁸

When Shri Hari was leaving Surat for Gadhada, he gifted Ardesharji his headdress and promised to take him to Akshardham in his final days.

Ground-breaking Ceremony in Sarangpur

Shri Hari's mind was set on building a mandir on a beautiful hill in Gadhada on the banks of the Ghela River (see photo 43). Unfortunately, there was an impediment to realizing this goal. The hill was jointly owned by Dada Khachar and Jiva Khachar. Dada Khachar had already transferred ownership of his half of the property to the mandir. Jiva Khachar, however, was delaying the construction with a series of empty promises.

⁸ Professor Raymond Brady Williams and Sadhu Paramtattvadas are two of the many scholars researching moments and sites of colonial interaction between the Swaminarayan Sampradaya and the colonial authorities. Much of that which has survived in the Sampradaya's public memory has yet to be found in colonial sources.

One evening, Shri Hari gently spoke to Jiva Khachar, “Bapu, Dada has already signed over his part of the hill. You keep avoiding the inevitable. That land is destined to be used for a mandir. What are you waiting for? Sign it over to the mandir.”

Jiva Khachar snapped back at Shri Hari, “Dada does not have any sons. I have my family to provide for. I cannot sign over the land. Sorry.” Saying this, Jiva Khachar stormed out of Shri Hari’s residence.

Shri Hari could not tolerate such insults about his devotees. He did not want Dada Khachar to be known as the ‘heir-less ruler.’ He immediately sent senior sadhus and devotees to Bhatvadar to speak to Nagpal Varu about offering his daughter Jasuba’s hand in marriage to Dada Khachar.

Jasuba immediately gave her consent and agreed to Shri Hari’s *agna*. Shri Hari took personal interest in the wedding festivities. Shri Hari drove Dada’s chariot to the wedding. Shri Hari’s love for Dada Khachar was witnessed by all those attending the wedding.

Shri Hari tried to reason with Jiva Khachar again but to no avail. Disappointed with Jiva Khachar’s attitude, Shri Hari rode off to Sarangpur on his mare. Jiva Bapu, the ruler of Sarangpur, showed several plots of land to Shri Hari. Shri Hari selected one of the plots and decided to build a mandir there.

Shri Hari then saddled a wild horse and rode it for several minutes to tame it. The *kshatriya* devotees watched in awe as Shri Hari skillfully managed to tame the horse without being thrown from its back. Shri Hari unsaddled the horse after several minutes and proclaimed, “Here, I have just performed the ground-breaking ceremony for a beautiful, three-shikhar mandir.”

Jiva Bapu was overjoyed that Shri Hari was going to build a mandir in Sarangpur. The next morning, Dada Khachar, Jivuba, Laduba, and the entire royal family of Gadhada came to Sarangpur. They pleaded with Shri Hari to return. “Prabhu, so what if Jiva Khachar does not give his share of the hill? Our entire court and residence is at your disposal. Build a mandir there.”

Shri Hari could not ignore such sincere and heartfelt requests, especially those of Dada Khachar and his devout family. He agreed and prepared to ride back to Gadhada.

Jiva Bapu was dismayed by Shri Hari's decision. "Bhagwan, what about the memorable ground-breaking ceremony you performed here yesterday? What about building a mandir in Sarangpur?"

Shri Hari responded with a smile, "Bapu, my Gunatit Sadhu will build a large and magnificent mandir here in the future. He will install my *murti* along with my Akshardham in the central shrine. Your town will become a great pilgrimage site."⁹

Jiva Bapu was overjoyed. Putting everyone's minds at ease, Shri Hari returned to Gadhada with Dada Khachar's family.

Dosa Tai

Shri Hari celebrated the Fulldol festival in Ahmedabad in 1825. A beautiful procession, with Shri Hari riding at its center accompanied by singing and dancing sadhus, traveled from the north end of the city to the south. On the southern tip of the city was a small village named Sarkhej. Dosa Tai, a Muslim, was watering his fields when Shri Hari's procession passed by his farm.¹⁰ He could not shift his eyes from the charming *murti* riding on the mare. He immediately realized that this was the 'Swaminarayan' that he had heard others praising. He followed the procession back to the mandir and asked Shri Hari to initiate him into the satsang community. Shri Hari wanted to test his faith. "Dosa Tai, you will not be able to follow all of our *niyams*. It will be too difficult for you. Instead, go home and chant my name. Remember my *murti*. I will give you darshan whenever you remember me."

Dosa was overjoyed to receive such personal instruction from Shri Hari. He returned home and spent his days chanting the Swaminarayan mantra and meditating on Shri Hari's *murti*.

Dosa's family was upset by this sudden change in behavior. They beat

9 The mandir in Sarangpur was built by Brahmaswarup Shastriji Maharaj on the same land where Shri Hari had promised Jiva Khachar that he would adorn his village with a mandir expounding the Akshar-Purushottam *upasana*. Shastriji Maharaj worked diligently and with great enthusiasm to create this beautiful, three-pinnacled mandir. The mandir was inaugurated in May of 1916. It is one of the tallest mandirs in Gujarat.

10 Some *sampradayik* texts state that Dosa Tai was Premanand Swami's foster-father.

him, but he was unaffected by such persecution. They locked him up, starved him, tied him to a wooden beam inside the house, and even hit him with a rod. Dosa Tai's lips uttered the Swaminarayan mantra with even more conviction. Shri Hari was deeply disturbed by the torment inflicted upon Dosa. He gave Dosa darshan and said, "Dosa, your plight brings tears to my eyes. Starting today, you will never feel pain or suffer from physical torture. Your body will rise beyond all sensation."

Dosa folded his hands and bowed down to Shri Hari. Feeling desperate, Dosa's family decided to bury Dosa alive. They dug a hole, threw Dosa into the pit, and covered him with dirt. After three days, Dosa was still alive. The family accepted this as a sign of his unflinching faith. They took Dosa to Gadhada and left him in Shri Hari's care. Dosa spent the rest of his life in Shri Hari's *seva* and *bhakti*.

Meeting Bishop Heber in Nadiad

Reginald Heber, the Lord Bishop of Calcutta, was an English clergyman and missionary (see photo 39). With the growing influence of the British East India Company, the Anglican Church was increasing the number of missionaries being dispatched to South Asia. Bishop Heber worked with great zeal to spread Christianity in northern and eastern India. He was sent to Gujarat to devise a strategy for the missionaries to effectively convert Hindus in the region. Everywhere he went, Bishop Heber heard of Swaminarayan and his 'new' religion. He decided to employ an alternative strategy: convert Swaminarayan and use him to spread Christianity in Gujarat.

He sought out Shri Hari's disciple in the Gaekwad's court in Vadodara. Narupant Nana was an able administrator and a Swaminarayan devotee. Bishop Heber requested Narupant Nana to arrange a meeting with Swaminarayan. Narupant Nana wrote a letter to Shri Hari. A date and place was set for the meeting.

On Sunday, 26 March 1825, Bhagwan Swaminarayan and Bishop Heber met in Nadiad (see photo 40). Bishop Heber's hopes were crushed after seeing approximately two hundred of Shri Hari's sadhus and devotees in attendance. He even expressed sentiments of embarrassment upon meeting Bhagwan Swaminarayan. There were armed guards, scholars,

musicians, poets, and even working-class laborers among Shri Hari's devotees. There was no way that Bishop Heber could influence or impress Swaminarayan with his own reach and powers.¹¹

He asked Bhagwan Swaminarayan about the *sampradaya* and exchanged a few formalities. With a heavy heart, Bishop Heber decided to leave Gujarat to Swaminarayan. He left for Mumbai shortly after the meeting. He spent the rest of his life spreading Christianity in eastern and southern India.

Gunatitanand Swami's 'Presence' at the Debate

Shri Hari traveled to Vartal to celebrate Chaitri Punam and Hanuman Jayanti. In Vartal, devotees from Mehmdabad expressed their dilemma. "Prabhu, recently, the Advaita Vedantins in our town started harassing us. They mock us and our theological doctrine. They challenge us to scholarly debates, but none of us are scholars. They will not let us worship you peacefully. Please send a scholarly saint to put an end to this."

Shri Hari called Gunatitanand Swami and instructed him to leave for Mehmdabad at once. He comforted the devotees, "He seems like an ordinary sadhu, but Gunatitanandji is manifest Aksharbrahma. The Advaita Vedantins will try to confuse you with talks of Brahman, but they will not be able to face my Aksharbrahma. Rest assured, Gunatitanandji will end your troubles once and for all."

Gunatitanand Swami performed *dandavats* to Shri Hari and left for Mehmdabad with a group of sadhus. Once in Mehmdabad, the sadhus sang bhajans and delivered *katha* at public venues. The Vedantins were infuriated. They challenged Gunatitanand Swami to a scholarly debate.

Gunatitanand Swami arrived at the debate with the sadhus. The Vedantins laughed at the sight of Gunatitanand Swami. He looked like a simple sadhu, not a well-versed scholar. Gunatitanand Swami took his seat and addressed the Vedantins. "You claim that you are Brahman.

11 A detailed account of this meeting can be found in Reginald Heber's personal journal which he kept throughout his travels in India. For another source which attests to this meeting, refer to: Russell, R.V. and R.B.H Lai. "Tribes and Castes of the Central Provinces of India." *Asian Educational Services*. (1916): 328-329. 1 Mar. 2013. <[http://books.google.com/?id=P_t3zmwNQVwC&printsec=copyright&dq=swami meeting with heber](http://books.google.com/?id=P_t3zmwNQVwC&printsec=copyright&dq=swami%20meeting%20with%20heber)>.

Which one of you has experienced the power of Brahman? Shukdevji had experienced the power of Brahman and, therefore, was able to enter into all beings, animate and inanimate. Can any of you enter the pillars of this edifice?"

The Vedantins were startled. They looked at each other with blank stares. Gunatitanand Swami continued, "I have experienced the power of Brahman. In fact, I have helped others experience Parabrahma. I will enter the pillars and show you the power of Brahman."

The hall started to shake, and the pillars moved as if brought to life by a divine power. The Vedantins feared for their lives. They prostrated at Gunatitanand Swami's feet and begged for him to stop the building from shaking. Gunatitanand Swami retracted his powers from the pillars. The Vedantins realized that claiming to be Brahman out of arrogance and disregard for Parabrahma's existence was wholly different than, and far from, actually experiencing Brahman's powers as Aksharbrahma does.

The Vedantins pledged to stop eating meat and consuming intoxicants. Gunatitanand Swami's scholarly presence was, both figuratively and literally, moving.

Breaking Ground in Gadhada

The mandir construction project in Gadhada began in May of 1825. Shri Hari surveyed Dada Khachar's property and decided to break ground where Panchuba's residence stood on the south end of the residence. Panchuba's quarters were torn down and construction commenced.

Thousands of devotees from all over Saurashtra gathered to offer their financial *seva* for the mandir. Many of the *kshatriyas* donated their horses and property. Farmers donated oxen, cows, and bullocks. Female devotees offered their gold ornaments. Other devotees donated portions of their life savings. However, it was the contribution of a poor *brahmin* named Ranchhod Maharaj that drove Shri Hari to announce, "Gopinath Dev *ni jay!*"

Shri Hari announced the completion of the mandir construction project after the poor *brahmin*, also known as Dubli Bhatt, hobbled in front of the satsang *sabha* and placed thirteen meager coins at Shri Hari's feet. The sadhus and devotees were dumbfounded. How would thirteen meager

coins help the construction of such a magnanimous mandir? Shri Hari addressed their doubts. “Everyone made a sacrifice today. They donated a portion of what they own. However, Bhattji offered me everything that he owns—all thirteen coins. It is this type of sacrifice and contribution that will lead to the swift completion of the mandir in Gadhada.”

Bhattji’s offering stirred a new wave of dedication and *seva*, which inspired others to offer more than they had initially committed.

Mandir Construction Begins in Junagadh and Dholera

A year had passed since the commencement of the construction project in Gadhada. The satsang community in the Sorath region was growing at a steady pace. The sadhus and devotees urged Jinabhai to ask Shri Hari to build a mandir in the region. Jinabhai requested Shri Hari to build a mandir on his property in Junagadh. He transferred ownership of the property to the mandir. Shri Hari sent Brahmanand Swami to Junagadh to better understand the social and political climate of the Nawab-governed state.

Meanwhile, Pujabhai of Dholera requested Shri Hari to build a mandir on his land in Dholera. Shri Hari sent Nishkulananand Swami and Adbhutanand Swami to begin the construction project in Dholera.

Shri Hari had finished the construction of three mandirs: Ahmedabad, Bhuj, and Vartal. Construction efforts for three more mandirs were underway: Gadhada, Junagadh, and Dholera.

Now that three mandirs were built, the mandirs required supporting management for their maintenance. Shri Hari appointed several different administrators at the Ahmedabad mandir. However, there were flaws in the way each of them administered the mandir’s finances and resources.

First, Shri Hari appointed an able, *brahmin* householder named Gopi Bhatt. Bhattji was a shrewd administrator but lacked discretion in using the mandir’s property and resources. Soon, Gopi Bhatt was exploiting his powers to misuse funds and abuse the sadhus and devotees. Shri Hari replaced him with Vasudevanand Brahmachari. Brahmachari, too, was capable of managing funds and maintaining the mandir’s finances. Yet, there were limitations on a sadhu’s ability to supervise the daily tasks of other sadhus and the female devotees’ satsang activities.

There was a serious hole in the support system. The infrastructure lacked capable leaders to administer the ritual component and resources of these large mandirs. Nityanand Swami and Gopalanand Swami suggested that Shri Hari bifurcate the *sampradaya*'s administration responsibilities between the Dharmakul. Ayodhyaprasad and Raghuvirji were the sons of Shri Hari's elder and younger brothers, respectively. Shri Hari hesitated at the thought of having to involve his blood relatives within the *sampradaya*'s official activities. After all, Shri Hari was a renunciate and wanted no interaction with the family from which he had detached himself. The senior sadhus were persistent and convincing, and Shri Hari eventually agreed. He assigned the responsibilities of the Ahmedabad mandir to Ayodhyaprasad and the responsibilities of the Vartal mandir to Raghuvirji. These *acharyas*, as they were called, oversaw certain responsibilities within the mandir. They cared for the deities' rituals and resources. They collected funds for the mandir. They also managed the mandir's treasury, entrusted to care for the mandir's wealth as it belonged to Bhagwan.

Shri Hari also prescribed stringent tenets to avoid future transgressions and conflicts. The *acharyas* were to treat all women besides their lawfully wedded wives as mothers, daughters, and sisters. They were restricted from hoarding the mandir's property and finances. The *acharyas* were to remain in the company of senior sadhus and devotees. They were instructed to listen to the sadhus' *katha*. They were not to deliver discourses to women directly and were not to incur any debts. Shri Hari hoped that these *niyams* would avoid certain flawed practices that had arisen in other Vaishnav *sampradayas* by the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

It is also worth noting that certain scholars claim that the bifurcation of the *sampradaya* into two *gadis* and the appointment of *acharyas* occurred after Shri Hari left his mortal body in Gadhada. They claim that this management structure was created by Nityanand Swami and Gopalanand Swami and base this conclusion on the *Desh Vibhag Lekhs*. This *Lekh*, or official document of separation, is meant to prove that Bhagwan Swaminarayan mandated the separation into two *gadis*. However, each of the families presents a different copy of the *Desh Vibhag Lekhs*, and each copy contains conflicting details. The number of witnesses, the actual

text, and the date that the *Lekh* was written all vary in these different versions. These scholars also claim that the date of the appointment of the *acharyas* coincides with one of Shri Hari's discourses recorded in the Vachanamrut. Yet, there is no mention of the *acharyas* or the celebration of their appointment, whereas most major festivals and events have been mentioned in the introductory paragraph of the Vachanamrut discourses delivered on the corresponding dates.

For the purposes of this book, we will move forward accepting Shri Hari's appointment of the sons of his brothers as *acharyas* to solely administer the mandirs monetary and tangible resources. As we have seen and will continue to read, Shri Hari leaves the 'administration' of *moksha* to his Gunatit Sadhu, the *satpurush*.

At Sayaji Rao's Palace in Vadodara

After Muktanand Swami defeated the Advaita pundits in Vadodara, Sayaji Rao Gaekwad invited Shri Hari to his palace several times. Shri Hari sent the same reply each time, "We will come to your palace the next time we visit Vadodara."

Finally in November of 1826, Shri Hari started towards Vadodara with hundreds of sadhus and devotees. Sayaji Rao was elated to hear of Shri Hari's plans to visit Vadodara. He decorated the streets of the city and ordered the Divan, or Chief Minister, to make arrangements for Shri Hari's accommodations in his palace.

The Gaekwad ruler sent a large army with the Crown Prince of Vadodara, Ganpat Rao, to greet Shri Hari. The army waited for Shri Hari and his followers at the border of the Gaekwad Kingdom in the village of Chhani. Shri Hari's arrival was celebrated with the firing of muskets and cannons. Horses, elephants, and camels were paraded alongside Shri Hari throughout the kingdom into the heart of the city leading up to the king's palace. Shri Hari entered the palace with the prince and the sadhus by his side.

Sayaji Rao ran towards Shri Hari with tears in his eyes and touched his feet. Shri Hari raised the king and embraced him. Sayaji Rao welcomed Shri Hari with an elaborate garland of colorful flowers emanating various scents.

Shri Hari was moved by the ruler's bhakti. The ruler led Shri Hari to the Divan's palace. Shri Hari was to reside there while in the city. Shri Hari immediately asked about the Divan's whereabouts. Shri Hari was omniscient; he already knew that the Divan was plotting his next move to hurt Shri Hari. Yet, Bhagwan's compassion graces even those who worship him through enmity.

The Divan appeared after the king sent for him. He stood in front of Shri Hari with his hands crossed and face turned away. Shri Hari looked at the king and smiled. Shri Hari also thanked the Divan for shifting his own quarters and accommodating the satsang community in his palace. The Divan grunted and started to storm out of the room. Shri Hari called out to him, "Divanji, Bhagwan is omniscient. He knows all the merits and sins committed by a human's hands. Do not think for a moment that he is ignorant of even your plans. He is, however, compassionate and forgiving. There is still time."

The king apologized for his minister's behavior. Shri Hari barely noticed the Divan's disrespectful attitude as he was distracted by the ruler's overflowing bhakti.

Sayaji Rao organized three grand processions while Shri Hari was in Vadodara. He wanted all of his subjects to have the opportunity of Shri Hari's darshan. Shri Hari was the king's guest for three days. When Shri Hari was departing Vadodara, the king insisted that he pass through his kingdom on an ornately decorated elephant. Shri Hari accepted his bhakti and agreed. The king's army accompanied the procession to the outer limits of the kingdom.

Shri Hari was aware of the Divan's intentions to hurt him. The Divan planned to capture Shri Hari just outside of the king's jurisdiction. He would use his personal Arab mercenaries for the task. Oblivious to Shri Hari's earlier warning, the Divan failed to realize that Shri Hari was also ready to counter the attack with a plan of his own. He alerted Naja Jogiya of the Divan's plot and instructed him to prepare Manki. Manki was to pull up alongside the elephant at the same time the mahout lowered the elephant.

The mahout commanded the elephant and made it kneel. Manki suddenly appeared alongside the elephant. Shri Hari jumped off the elephant and landed on the moving mare. Manki sped off as if soaring

amidst the clouds. The Divan was left standing in the dust raised from the mare's stomping hoofs.

Sayaji Rao learned of the Divan's insubordination and had him removed from the office of Chief Minister.

Shri Hari then sped towards Vartal.

True Happiness in Shri Hari's Eyes

Shobharam Shastri was Sayaji Rao's royal pandit. Shobharam was extremely fond of Shri Hari's *murti* and *charitras*. He came to Vartal for Shri Hari's darshan and *samagam*. He often asked Shri Hari to use his divine powers to demonstrate a miracle. This would then make the king prostrate at Shri Hari's feet and become a *bhakta*. Shri Hari laughed and shook his head in disagreement with such requests.

One afternoon, Shobharam insisted quite forcibly. Shri Hari responded with an explanation, "Shobharamji, we have not manifested on Earth to perform miracles. Besides, how strong is a foundation built on miracles? True faith and conviction is built on a foundation of *mahima* and *upasana*. Quite frankly, I am not fond of rulers and socialites. They are interested in social formalities, lavish lifestyles, and hoarding large amounts of money. On the other hand, I am fond of those that relish in Bhagwan's *murti* and *charitras*, whose only objective is to engage in *bhakti*."

Shri Hari was Purna Purushottam Narayan manifest on Earth. However, instead of propagating the use of easily-performed miracles, he revealed a path that was mandatory for *jivas* to obtain *moksha*: the path of *ekantik dharma* and *bhakti*.

The Fruits of Serving a Sadhu

Tadrupanand Swami's *mandal* was traveling in the Kanam region of central Gujarat. Although the frequency of harassment from mendicants and assailants had decreased, Shri Hari's sadhus were not completely free from such troubles.

One day, Tadrupanand Swami's *mandal* was surrounded by a gang of mendicants. They started to tear the sadhus' saffron garbs and break their *kanthis*. The sadhus responded by chanting the Swaminarayan mantra. The mendicants had heard that many of the sadhus were *kshatriyas* and

were naturally predisposed to fighting. They tried to provoke the sadhus to retaliate. However, the sadhus were bound by Shri Hari's *agnā*. They kept their heads down and silently tolerated the abuse.

Frustrated by their futile attempts, the mendicants beat the sadhus with wooden staffs and iron rods. The sadhus' cries quickly became shrill utterances of the Swaminarayan mantra. This only spurred the mendicants to continue to senselessly beat the sadhus until many of the sadhus started to lose consciousness.

Soon enough, the mendicants grew bored of the sadhu's unwillingness to fight back. They left the sadhus curled up on the floor and victoriously paraded away as if they had defeated an army of gladiators.

The sadhus were rendered unable to move or even call for help. They lay on the ground lifelessly. It was then that a *brahmin* from Vadodara passed by. He noticed that these sadhus were in no condition to walk. He made room in his carriage and drove the sadhus to his farm. He sent for a healer and made beds of straw for the sadhus to rest on. Slowly, he helped the sadhus recover from their injuries. Each day, he brought the sadhus food and made special arrangements for their medical care. After several days, the sadhus were able to limp their way back to Vartal.

Though the *brahmin* was not a devotee of Shri Hari, he came for Shri Hari's darshan at Tadrupanand Swami's request. Upon meeting Shri Hari, the *brahmin* went into *samadhi*. Shri Hari granted him the happiness of Akshardham.

While the *brahmin* was in *samadhi*, Ramchandra, a devotee from Vadodara, came for Shri Hari's darshan. He noticed that the *brahmin* in *samadhi* was none other than his distant cousin. He immediately questioned Shri Hari, "Prabhu, that *brahmin* is a sinner. He does not follow any *niyams* nor does he behave in accordance with social standards. Why have you granted him your *divya* darshan in *samadhi*?"

Shri Hari addressed Ramchandra's frustration. "Ramchandrajī, this *brahmin* has served my sadhus. Tadrupanand Swami is a great sadhu. Serving a great sadhu can earn one enough merit to enjoy a hundred such *samadhis*. Also, who are you to judge whether he is a sinner or a good soul? Social standards measure one's external behavior and are rarely enough to judge the worthiness of one's *atma*. Leave the judging up to

Bhagwan and his Gunatit Sadhu.”

Ramchandra apologized profusely. Shri Hari called Ramchandra to the front of the satsang *sabha* and compassionately blessed him with a garland of roses.

Shri Hari Writes the Shikshapatri

On Vasant Panchmi, 11 February 1826, Shri Hari completed the Shikshapatri in Vartal. The Shikshapatri serves as a dharma shastra for the followers of the Swaminarayan Sampradaya. It is written in relatively simple Sanskrit and prescribes general tenets for all devotees to follow. It also describes specific responsibilities for householders, women, sadhus, *brahmacharis*, and *acharyas*. The Shikshapatri is comprised of 212 verses.

Shri Hari instructs his followers to read the Shikshapatri daily. For those who are unable to read it, they should listen to it being read by the learned. Those that are unable to listen to it daily should perform its puja with flowers and vermillion. Eventually, reading the Shikshapatri became part of the devotees' daily morning puja.

Shri Hari ordered Nityanand Swami to translate the Shikshapatri into Gujarati for the devotees' benefit. Today, the Shikshapatri has been translated in over twenty-five languages: Afrikaans, Arabic, Bengali, Chinese, Dutch, English, Finnish, French, German, Greek, Gujarati, Hindi, Italian, Marathi, Modern Hebrew, North Sotho, Portuguese, Russian, South Sotho, Spanish, Swahili, Tamil, Telugu, Udiya, Urdu, Braj, Xhosa, and Zulu. It has also been incorporated by Shatanand Muni into the Satsangijivanam.

Shri Hari's central tenet within the Shikshapatri instructs his devotees to think of themselves as *atma* and not the body. By imbibing this *atmajnan* in their daily lives, the devotees are instructed to engage in Parabrahma's bhakti. This verse is the foundation of the Aksharbrahma-Parabrahma theological doctrine. The devotee is to strive to become one with Aksharbrahma, to become *brahmarup*, and to engage in Parabrahma's *seva*.¹²

12 Refer to Shikshapatri, verse 116.

A Historical Letter

While in Vartal, Shri Hari wrote a letter addressed to Muktanand Swami, Atmanand Swami, and other senior sadhus. The letter discusses Shri Hari's *mahima* and reason for manifesting on Earth. Through this letter, it became readily apparent to the sadhus that Shri Hari's objective on Earth was unlike that of any previous avatar. Copies of this letter were circulated within the *sampradaya* and have been archived in several museums and mandirs. The letter has also been included by Nishkulanan Swami in the Bhaktachintamani. An excerpt from the letter is presented below:¹³

“...I have manifested today so that all beings can experience *dhyan-dharna-samadhi*. I have also manifested to liberate countless *jivas*. Those who chant the [Swami]Narayan name knowingly or coincidentally, when they breathe their last, have [my] darshan or the darshan of the one who is associated with [me] [the Gunatit Sadhu]. This darshan tears through the influence of *maya* and guarantees the attainment of [my] abode. I have manifested on Earth in order to liberate the *jivas*.

“Today, I have manifested to destroy *maya* in the form of illusionary ignorance. The words of the Vedas, ‘destroy ignorance,’ are [my] objective. I make these words come true. I destroy the ignorance of countless souls. Since [my] manifestation on this Earth, I have destroyed the ignorance of innumerable *jivas*. I give darshan to thousands of *jivas* amidst their *dhyan-dharna*. Those with the intellect of beasts do not understand this capability or power....

...[One] who does not understand [my] *swarup* does not overcome the ocean of doubt, and *kal* hovers over such a person’s head. When one has conviction in [my] *swarup*, then *kal* cannot utter his name. What is [my] *swarup*? I am the omniscient Lord of infinite Maha Vishnus. I am their [infinite Maha Vishnus’] place of refuge.... I have taken on the form of a human to grant liberation

13 For ease of readability purposes, the rendition of the letter contained in this text is not a direct translation. The entirety of this letter can be found in: Kothari, Madhavlal Dalsukhram. “Shriji Ke Prasadi Ke Patra.” p. 7.

to the *jivas*. Leaving this [my] refuge aside, if one takes refuge in another, then the alligator-like death, who is [also] a python that swallows all of material existence, will swallow him/her.”

Purna Purushottam Narayan’s Unparalleled Characteristics

Shri Hari celebrated the Fulldol festival of 1826 in Ahmedabad. The sadhus and devotees sprayed colored water on Shri Hari until Shri Hari raised his hands in submission. Shri Hari went to bathe in the Sabarmati River and returned to the mandir passing through the Shahibaug neighborhood located on the then-current outskirts of the city. He sat under a tamarind tree and sanctified the land, which later became the location of a beautiful mandir constructed by BrahmaSwarup YogiJi Maharaj.¹⁴

Two days after the Fulldol festival, Kubersinhji asked Shri Hari a question that would help aspirants strengthen their faith in Bhagwan’s *swarup* for generations. Shri Hari addressed the satsang *sabha* describing Purna Purushottam Narayan’s unparalleled characteristics. Shri Hari described his own *mahima* by listing three qualities. “No one except Purna Purushottam Narayan can control the *nadis* and *prans* of innumerable beings and grant them instant *samadhi*. Nor can anyone else influence hundreds of thousands of people by having them abide by *niyams*. Nor does anyone else have the power to control Akshar and the *muktas*. These are the characteristics of Purushottam Narayan.”

The *sabha* was humbled upon hearing Shri Hari extoll his own *mahima*. Kubersinh followed up with several questions concerning Bhagwan’s simultaneous presence in several continents and worlds and the *jiva*’s inability to detach its self from material pleasures to find solace in Bhagwan’s *murti* and *swarup*.¹⁵

Shri Hari responded with words of valor and *sankhya-vichar*. “If they have lustful desires, they should think, ‘If we look lustfully at another

14 In May of 1962, BrahmaSwarup YogiJi Maharaj consecrated the Akshar-Purushottam *murtis* in the central shrine of the Ahmedabad mandir in Shahibaug. Shri Hari had given darshan to Ashabhai and had expressed his desire to build a mandir embodying the true Akshar-Purushottam *upasana* in Ahmedabad. It was also BrahmaSwarup ShastriJi Maharaj’s wish that an Akshar-Purushottam mandir be built in Ahmedabad.

15 Refer to Vachanamrut Ahmedabad 5.

woman [being], we will have to pass through the cycle of 8.4 million life forms and suffer extensively. Besides, even dogs and donkeys indulge in this, whereas I have attained the incarnate form of Purushottam. It will be a great loss for me if he is displeased.' Reasoning in this manner, they should renounce such lustful desires and should desire happiness that is related to Bhagwan."

Shri Hari's answers convinced the *sabha* that they were indeed fortunate to have attained the company of Purna Purushottam Narayan Bhagwan Swaminarayan and his Gunatit Sadhu. There could be no greater attainment in all of the three worlds.

Murti-Pratishttha in Dholera

Shri Hari arrived in Dholera a few days before the *murti-pratishttha*. Nishkulananand Swami and Atmanand Swami supervised the project. Adbhutanand Swami and Dharmaprasadanand Swami had been stationed in Dholera since the beginning of construction. Shri Hari held onto both of their arms and climbed the steps of the mandir to observe the progress. Shri Hari was pleased with the quality of the construction. He blessed all four sadhus.

On 19 May 1826, Shri Hari performed the *murti-pratishttha* of the mandir in Dholera. Hundreds of *brahmins* officiated the *yagna* ritual. With the chanting of verses from the Vedas and the Swaminarayan *dhun* resonating in the background, Shri Hari completed the *murti-pratishttha* ritual of the *murtis* of Madan-Mohan Dev (see photo 33). This beautiful five *shikhar* mandir is situated thirty kilometers from the city of Dhandhuka.

Shri Hari sent Gunatitanand Swami to Junagadh after the *murti-pratishttha* and instructed him to settle there. He revealed to the accompanying sadhus, "Those of you who are going to Junagadh with my Aksharbrahma will obtain *moksha* in this life. I will eradicate all of your spiritual shortcomings in this lifetime, though they may have otherwise taken one hundred lifetimes."

A New Mahant in Junagadh: Gunatitanand Swami

Shri Hari spent the entire monsoon in Gadhada. He celebrated Prabodhini Ekadashi in Vartal and returned to Gadhada for Vasant

Panchmi. Thereafter, he again traveled to Vartal for the Fuldol festival.

The sadhus and devotees casually mentioned to Shri Hari that Lake Dharu dried up quickly during the summer months of March and April. Shri Hari coordinated the resources to dig a new lake for the community's benefit. Shri Hari supervised its creation and instructed the sadhus and devotees to dig deeper so that the lake would not dry up as quickly as Lake Dharu. The new, man-made reservoir was named Lake Gomti.

Shri Hari sent messengers to invite all of the senior sadhus and mahants of the existing mandirs to Vartal. On the night of Punam, Shri Hari convened a meeting with the sadhus. He spoke of the different mahants in the mandirs. "I have appointed capable mahants in all of the mandirs: in Ahmedabad—Sarvagnanand Swami, in Vartal—Aksharanand Swami, in Bhuj—Vaishnavanand Swami, and in Dholera—Adbhutanand Swami. Now, I have to appoint someone capable in Junagadh. By doing so, I will be able to secure the spiritual progress of the satsang community in the Sorath region."

Shri Hari then glanced at Gunatitanand Swami. Gunatitanand Swami immediately lowered his eyes. Shri Hari was firm in his decision and announced, "Gunatitanandji, I want to appoint you as the mahant of the mandir in Junagadh."

Gunatitanand Swami folded his hands and appealed, "Prabhu, I am a *sevak*. I am not capable of being the mahant of such a large mandir."

Shri Hari smiled and proclaimed, "Swami, this is your humility. You are capable of administering the entire creation. What is in one mandir?"

Gunatitanand Swami kept his eyes lowered and continued to refuse the responsibility.

Shri Hari conceded, "So be it. I will excuse you from this *seva*. However, you must find me a sadhu equal to you in spiritual and administrative capabilities."

Gunatitanand Swami remained silent.

Shri Hari laughed again, "Swami, there is no one like you. You are my Aksharbrahma—there is only one Gunatitanand."

Gunatitanand Swami accepted Shri Hari's *agna* and assumed the leadership of the mandir in Junagadh. Shri Hari was overjoyed by this decision. He stood up and embraced Gunatitanand Swami. He took off

His headdress and placed it on Gunatitanand Swami's head.

Seated a few feet away was Kurji Dave of Piplana. Shri Hari called out to him, "Kurjibhai, when I was traveling as Nilkanth Varni, I promised to gift you my Akshardham.¹⁶ You may have not understood my words then, but today it should become clear. I am appointing Gunatitanand Swami as the mahant of the mandir in Junagadh. He is my gift to you and the entire Sorath region. Strive to recognize his *mahima*. Listen to his *katha* and live in accordance with his *agna*. Gunatitanandji is my *sarvasva* (all). He will give you the spiritual happiness and satisfaction that I can give you. He will give you *moksha*."

Shri Hari spent the monsoon of 1827 in Gadhada again. He wanted to accelerate the construction of the mandir at Dada's residence. His physical presence provided the necessary motivation. Shri Hari helped the sadhus carry stones, fed them, and sat near the construction site while they worked through the scorching afternoon sun and late into the dark night.

The Frugal Brahmin

Punjabhai of Dholera was one of the leading devotees in the satsang community. He was getting married in a few weeks. He came to Gadhada to invite Shri Hari, the sadhus, and the devotees to his wedding in the village of Karmad. He also expressed his desire to have Shri Hari celebrate the Diwali and Annakut festivals of 1827 in Karmad. Shri Hari gave his consent to both proposals.

En route to Karmad from Gadhada is a small village called Ranpur. Sukha Maharaj was a *brahmin* from Ranpur who frequently visited Gadhada to listen to *katha* and, more so, enjoy the sweets offered to Shri Hari and the sadhus by other devotees. He would often tell Shri Hari, "Prabhu, you have never been to my home in Ranpur. Please do stop by one day. I, too, want the privilege of feeding you and your sadhus."

Shri Hari nodded his head and maintained a smile. He knew that Sukha Maharaj was just fulfilling a formality; the frugal *brahmin* had no intention of feeding Shri Hari and his devotees.

Shri Hari agreed to stop in the village of Ranpur on the way to Karmad

¹⁶ Refer to Chapter 3 with subtitle 'Meeting His Guru' for a detailed account of Nilkanth Varni's promise to Kurji Dave.

to feed the sadhus and devotees. A few days before his departure from Gadhada, Shri Hari sent Sukha Maharaj home to prepare for the meal.

Sukha Maharaj was frenzied by the thought of having to spend money to feed these sadhus and devotees. He came home and shared his dilemma with his wife. His wife furiously quipped, “Why did you have to boast in front of Shri Hari? You hardly have enough to feed yourself in the evenings. How are you going to feed all of the sadhus and devotees? This is what you get for eating other people’s offerings in Gadhada.”

Sukha Maharaj did not find a sympathetic ear with his wife. He devised a simple but effective plan in preparation for Shri Hari’s arrival in Ranpur.

Shri Hari rode from Gadhada and came to Ranpur. He asked around town for directions to Sukha Maharaj’s house. The doors to his home were tightly shut. Shri Hari knocked on the door with the chain across it. A young boy opened the door and repeated, as practiced before, “My father is not home.” The boy then slammed the door shut.

Sura Khachar and the other *kshatriyas* laughed until their stomachs ached. Shri Hari was also amused by Sukha Maharaj’s failed deception. He expected this type of behavior from the greedy *brahmin*. There was, however, a practical problem. Where would all of these sadhus and devotees eat?

Shri Hari remembered the sincere invitation of a devout Muslim. The Muslim devotee met Shri Hari in the village of Uga Medi. Shri Hari recalled the *bhakta*’s words, “Prabhu, if you ever pass by Ranpur, please grace my house. I would love the opportunity to serve you and your devotees.”

Shri Hari rode to the devotee’s house just off the corner of Molesalam Square. He knocked on the door, and a young boy named Alam opened the door.

“I am Swaminarayan. Where is your father, Child?”

The boy’s face lit up. “Are you Swaminarayan? My father speaks of you so often. Please come inside. My father has gone to Ahmedabad, but he has not taken the house with him. Please, Prabhu, take a seat. This is your home.”

Alam ran inside and shouted to his mother, “Come out, Mother. Bhagwan Swaminarayan has come to our house, the Khuda that father

speaks of so often. Hurry up! Come out, Mother!"

Alam's mother came running and prostrated at Shri Hari's feet. Her eyes were brimming with tears of joy. She dusted off a spare cot and set it in the courtyard. Shri Hari sat on the cot, while the sadhus and devotees gathered around him. The woman hurriedly called a few *brahmins* from the village and told them to prepare a meal for Shri Hari and his devotees. Lunch was served shortly thereafter. Shri Hari shared *prasad* from his *thal* with the child and his mother.

Shri Hari blessed the mother and child before saddling Manki to ride off to Karmad. As Shri Hari was leaving, Alam grabbed hold of Manki's stirrup and requested, "Prabhu, please watch over us." Shri Hari raised his right hand and rode off towards Karmad.

Though they came from different castes, creeds, and religions, Shri Hari's *bhaktas* all shared a common belief: unflinching faith in their Bhagwan.

Who Belongs to Swaminarayan?

Hundreds of sadhus and devotees gathered for the Diwali and Annakut festivals in Karmad. Shri Hari decided to serve everyone *ladus*. The sadhus arranged themselves in groups corresponding to the mandir in their region and named themselves accordingly. There were the 'Nar-Narayans,' 'Radha-Ramans,' 'Lakshmi-Narayans,' and 'Madan-Mohans,' among others. Shri Hari surveyed the division of the sadhus according to the deities in their mandirs and then asked, "Well, then who belongs to Swaminarayan? Where are the 'Swaminarayans'?"

The sadhus were embarrassed by their attachment to titles, regions, and mandirs. They folded their hands and apologized. After lunch, Shri Hari spoke to the sadhus and advised, "There is no need to form such groups and divisions. We are all Bhagwan's *bhaktas*. That is our identity. No one mandir or region is better than the other. We are all the children of Bhagwan. Dividing ourselves in such a manner increases the amount of discord within our satsang family. Besides, the titles you chose for yourselves were of avatars, but you belong to Purna Purushottam Narayan—the *avatari*. Be mindful of this in the future."

Premanand Swami wrote a *bhakti pad* based on this incident: "Shri

Hari taught us the true meaning of Diwali by lighting the lamp of unity and equality.”

A Stark Contrast: the Ruler and the Two Sadhus

Shri Hari bid Punjabhai and his in-laws farewell in Karmad. The sadhus departed for their respective destinations. The devotees also returned to their villages. A small group of sadhus and devotees remained with Shri Hari. He departed Karmad and traveled towards Gadhada.

En route, Shri Hari expressed his wish to shave his head in the village of Tavi. Apabhai called the village barber. The barber arrived and started to shave Shri Hari’s head. Halfway through the shave, the devotees noticed tears in Shri Hari’s eyes. The barber was drawing blood from Shri Hari’s scalp. Shri Hari asked the barber to stop and observed, “Your blade is dull. It is paining me. I will have the rest of my head shaved elsewhere.”

Shri Hari mounted Manki and rode off towards Gadhada. On the way, Jalamsinh Bapu requested Shri Hari to travel slowly. “Prabhu, my village is not too far from here. My barber is highly skilled. I will ride into town and bring him here for your seva.”

Jalamsinh Bapu rode off towards Devaliya. Shri Hari traveled half a mile and decided to wait for Jalamsinh Bapu under a tree.

The sadhus and devotees gathered around Shri Hari for a small satsang *sabha*. In the meantime, Purnanand Swami and Nirvikaranand Swami caught up with the group and walked up to the satsang *sabha*. They stood at a distance, waiting for a younger sadhu to offer them seats at the front near Shri Hari. The sadhus and devotees were so engrossed in Shri Hari’s *murti* that they did not notice the two senior sadhus standing in the back of the satsang *sabha*.

A few minutes later, Jalamsinh Bapu rode into the satsang *sabha* area with the barber’s toolkit strapped around his shoulder. The barber was running next to the horse with his hand holding onto the stirrup. The sadhus and devotees were humbled by the sight of the ruler of the town carrying his barber’s toolkit. It was against the then-current social norms for *brahmins*, *kshatriyas*, and *vaishyas* to assist with the menial tasks ascribed to the *shudras*.

Shri Hari addressed the *sabha*, “Does anyone want to see the manifest

form of ego? Look at those two sadhus standing at a distance waiting for one of you to offer them a seat at the front of the assembly. Apparently, a seat at the front is more important to them than listening to my *katha*. On the other hand, here is the ruler of the town riding next to a barber and carrying his toolkit. Who is the true sadhu in this situation?”

Rather than interpreting Shri Hari’s words as a means of instruction, Purnanand Swami and Nirvikaranand Swami were offended by Shri Hari’s statements. They left Shri Hari and the satsang *sabha* immediately.

The sight of Shri Hari sitting under a tree with a half-shaved head elevated the significance of his message on the downfalls of arrogance and the advantages of humility. He stressed that the correct way to offer bhakti and *seva* was with humility. Shri Hari praised Jalamsinh Bapu and accepted the barber’s *seva*. Shri Hari bathed after having his head shaved and decided to change course towards Ahmedabad.

Murti-Pratishtha in Junagadh

Shri Hari celebrated the Prabodhini Ekadashi festival of 1827 in Ahmedabad. He traveled to Gadhada to observe the Fuldol festival of 1828. Between these two festivals, Shri Hari traveled at Brahmanand Swami’s request to Junagadh. He inspected the mandir’s construction and helped collect funds for its completion.

The *murti-pratishtha* in Junagadh was set for Thursday, 1 May 1828. Brahmanand Swami met with Nawab Bahadur Khan of Junagadh to organize a grand procession down the city’s main street. The Nawab pledged the full support of his men. Unfortunately, the Nawab’s Divan, a *nagar brahmin*, created obstacles throughout the event.

The Divan secretly ordered all of the *tasa* players to boycott the procession. Jinabhai Thakor’s brother, Gagabhai, begged all of the *tasa* players in the town to participate in the procession, but none of them budged from complying with the Divan’s orders. Gagabhai scoured the neighboring villages for a *tasa* player, but not a single player was willing to play. Gagabhai was about to give up when an old, crippled man walked up to him and offered, “I know how to play the *tasa*, and I will play for your Bhagwan.”

Gagabhai brought the man to Junagadh in a carriage. The *tasa* player

was ridiculed by everyone in the community. Yet, the *tasa* player played a lively beat, one that even fifty *tasa* players would have trouble matching.

Shri Hari's eyes fell on the *tasa* player. He called Gagabhai during the procession and instructed, "Bring that *tasa* player to me at the end of the procession." Shri Hari wished to reward the *tasa* player with all that he asked of him.

The Divan ordered his men to keep an untamed mare for Brahmanand Swami to ride during the procession. The objective was to injure Brahmanand Swami, the builder of the mandir, to postpone the procession. Brahmanand Swami chanted the Swaminarayan mantra into the mare's ears and patted its back. Within seconds, the mare settled down and gracefully rode beside Manki.

The entire satsang community was pleased with the attendance and reception in the city. Despite repeated efforts to spoil the procession, the Divan's schemes proved futile. Shri Hari called the *tasa* player and observed, "You played with your heart. I am pleased with your bhakti. Ask me for any wish?"

The poor man admitted, "Prabhu, my heart is filled with lust. I have never inappropriately looked at or interacted with a woman. However, if I have done so unknowingly, please forgive me."

Shri Hari was moved by the *tasa* player's prayer. He placed his hand on the man's forehead. With this action, Shri Hari dissolved the lust in the man's mind and body forever.

Shri Hari performed the *murti-pratishtha* of a beautiful, five-shikhar mandir in the heart of the city the following day (see photo 36). Loud chants of "Shri Radha-Raman Dev ni jay" echoed throughout the city.

A satsang *sabha* was organized as part of the *murti-pratishtha* festival. All of the *sadgurus* were seated across from Shri Hari. Shri Hari called Gunatitanand Swami to sit beside him. Gunatitanand Swami was shy, and his face flushed with embarrassment. He refused to sit next to Shri Hari. Shri Hari grabbed Gunatitanand Swami's hand and pulled him onto the seat beside him. Gunatitanand Swami could not look up at the *sabha*. He was a *sevak* and accustomed to serving, not receiving acclaim.

Shri Hari spent the entire *sabha* praising Gunatitanand Swami. "A long time ago, I had decided to name Gunatitanand Swami the mahant of

the mandir in Junagadh. Today, I gift this city the most precious gift. This Gunatitanand is not an ordinary sadhu. He is my Akshardham. I live within him. I speak through him. I will fulfill all your desires and expectations through him. Think of being in his company as spending time with me in Gadhada. Today, I give an *agna* to all of the sadhus and devotees in our satsang community: you all should spend one month in Junagadh. Listening to Gunatitanandji's *katha* will ensure your progress on the spiritual path. It will help you rise above *maya* and attain Akshardham."

Shri Hari looked at Nityanand Swami, Gopalanand Swami, and the other *sadgurus*. "You all should also spend time in Junagadh. You should enforce this *agna* with the younger sadhus in your *mandals* and mandirs as well. This is my *agna* to you."

Shri Hari's *agna* was accepted by all those in the satsang community. Nishkuland Swami recorded this exchange in his Bhaktachintamani.

Nityanand Swami's Conviction

For the third consecutive year, Shri Hari spent the monsoon in Gadhada. On Thursday, 5 November 1828, Shatanand Muni began to write the Sanskrit text, Satsangjivanam. While composing its content, he encountered a theological dilemma: how was he to describe Shri Hari's *swarup*? The question was submitted to the group of sadhus and devotees in the satsang *sabha*. The senior sadhus also weighed in on the literary limitations of such a description. "Prabhu, how can we describe you as greater than Shri Krishna?"

Shri Hari listened silently. Nityanand Swami immediately interrupted the other sadhus. "I believe that you are misinformed. Shri Hari is Purna Purushottam Narayan. He is above Aksharbrahma. All the other avatars, or incarnations, are that of Virat Narayan. All of the incarnations are *ishvars* and, therefore, are under the influence of *maya*. Only Aksharbrahma and Parabrahma are above the influence of *maya*. Shri Hari is that Parabrahma, the controller of Aksharbrahma and the entire material existence."

All of the sadhus voiced their opinion against Nityanand Swami. Only Gopalanand Swami, Gunatitanand Swami, Nishkuland Swami, and Vidhatranand Swami defended Nityanand Swami. Brahmanand Swami

remained neutral. Shri Hari, however, was in the mood to perform a memorable *charitra*.

Shri Hari delivered the final verdict, “I agree with the majority of the sadhus. If Nityanand Swami is unwilling to accept his mistake and agree with the majority, he should be excommunicated.”

Nityanand Swami folded his hands and apologized, but he was unwilling to change his understanding of Shri Hari’s *swarup*. Thereafter, Nityanand Swami bowed to Shri Hari and left Dada’s residence.

The satsang *sabha* was in shock. One of the *sampradaya*’s *sadgurus* had been excommunicated. After two days, Muktanand Swami broke his silence and said, “I must say that our *sabha* is lifeless without Nityanandji. He was a scholar of unmatched wit and knowledge.”

Brahmanand Swami chimed in, “I agree with Muktanand Swami. I should not have remained neutral that day. Nityanandji may have been right. We should bring him back.”

Shri Hari’s eyes brimmed with tears. He exclaimed, “Well, someone go fetch him. Call him back!”

Sura Khachar and Naja Jogiya searched for Nityanand Swami. Shri Hari had not eaten anything since Nityanand Swami’s departure two days ago. Late into the night, Sura Khachar returned with Nityanand Swami by his side.¹⁷ Shri Hari ran and embraced Nityanand Swami. He took the garland of flowers around his neck and placed it on Nityanand Swami. He led Nityanand Swami by hand and asked him to sit across from his own seat. They then ate dinner together.

The following day, Shri Hari called a satsang *sabha* of all the sadhus and devotees. He praised Nityanand Swami’s conviction and *mahima* in Bhagwan’s *swarup*.

17 Some texts claim that Sura Khachar and Brahmanand Swami had foreseen Shri Hari’s *lila* and, thus, purposefully hid Nityanand Swami only a short distance away from Gadhada. The absence of such a pious sadhu did not go unnoticed, and Muktanand Swami reminded Shri Hari of the true understanding that Nityanand Swami possessed regarding his Purna Purushottam Narayan form. Hearing this, Shri Hari asked Sura Khachar and Brahmanand Swami to immediately bring Nityanand Swami back. At this command, Sura Khachar smirked at Brahmanand Swami as they knew Shri Hari could not stay apart from his beloved sadhu for too long. Sura Khachar and Brahmanand Swami then retrieved Nityanand Swami from where they had hid him.

"Nityanandji, was correct in describing my *swarup* as above *maya* and Aksharbrahma. I am Parabrahma. Never before have I manifested on Earth nor will I manifest ever again. I am not an avatar or incarnation of Virat Narayan. I am Purna Purushottam Narayan. To think of my *swarup* as above all other incarnations of the past, is the correct theological stance. It is the only stance that my followers should accept. All of you should strive to develop the *mahima* and *upasana* that Nityanand Swami has realized during the course of this birth."

The sadhus and devotees performed *dandvats* to Nityanand Swami in their minds.

Murti-Pratishtha in Gadhada

In preparation for the *murti-pratishtha* in Gadhada, Shri Hari consulted with Narayan Suthar of Junagadh to model a *murti* based on the exact dimensions of his own physique. Muktanand Swami and a few other senior sadhus opposed Shri Hari's decision, again. Shri Hari wished to avoid discussing the topic and called Narayan Suthar to Akshar Ordi.

"Narayanbhai, convert the *murti* we have been working on into a *murti* of Shri Krishna. Installing my *murti* will cause grief to Muktanandji."

Narayan Suthar was disheartened. "Prabhu, we are almost done. It will be a beautiful *murti*. How will the devotees in future generations remember your divine *murti* without a tangible tribute?"

Shri Hari consoled him saying, "Narayanbhai, do not worry. My Gunatit Sadhu will install my *murti* in the central shrine of majestic mandirs around the world. I will sit beside my Aksharbrahma and will be remembered by millions of individuals."

Narayan Suthar did not understand Shri Hari's prophecy but accepted Shri Hari's *agna*. The *yagna* ritual for the *murti-pratishtha* commenced several days before the actual *pratishtha*. Shri Hari sanctified the *murtis* with his hands. He did puja of the *murtis* with rice, flower petals, and vermillion.

The day before the actual *pratishtha*, Shri Hari called the sadhus and devotees and said, "Tomorrow is the *murti-pratishtha* festival in Gadhada. However, I will not be here. Jiva Khachar has poisoned the King of Bhavnagar's opinions against me. The king believes that we are

building an armory filled with weapons to stage a coup. He apparently regards the mandir to be a façade to hide these arms. The king has sent his cavalry to arrest me and search the grounds for weapons. Therefore, I will leave Gadhada with a few of my personal attendants.”

He turned and looked at Nityanand Swami. “Nityanandji, you will perform the *murti-pratishtha* of the *murtis*. Be sure to complete all of the rituals mandated by the shastras. I will be present omnisciently. After the *murti-pratishtha* is complete, sound your conch shell. I will hear it on the outskirts of the village and know that the *murti-pratishtha* has been completed without any obstructions.”

That night, Shri Hari rode out of Gadhada with Naja Jogiya and Dada Khachar’s immediate family. The next morning the king’s cavalry stormed into Dada’s residence searching for Shri Hari. They did not find Shri Hari nor were they able to locate any weapons. They asked about Shri Hari’s whereabouts, but the sadhus and devotees replied, “Shri Hari travels extensively. We are not sure where he is today.”

Nityanand Swami completed the *murti-pratishtha* ceremony with the tumultuous roar of his conch shell. The sounds of “Shri Gopinath Dev *ni jay*” reached Shri Hari’s ears on the outskirts of the village. A beautiful, three-shikhar mandir, the last of Shri Hari’s six mandirs, adorned Shri Hari’s adopted hometown (see photos 37 & 38).

The king’s men reported back to the king empty-handed, without Shri Hari and without any weapons. The king realized his mistake and suspended his search.

Shri Hari returned to Gadhada after a two-week absence.

8

Stories of His Legacy

Whenever a jiva attains a human body in Bharat-Khand, Bhagwan's avatars or Bhagwan's sadhus will certainly also be present on Earth at that time. If that jiva can recognize them, then he becomes a devotee of Bhagwan.

- **Vachanamrut Vartal 19,**
Bhagwan Swaminarayan (1781-1830 CE)

A Voice Against Vices: An Addiction-free Community

Shri Hari spent the last year of his time on Earth in his mortal body showering sadhus and devotees with *smrutis*. With six majestic mandirs completed, Shri Hari continued His quest to enhance society by transforming one life at a time. Shri Hari's social and spiritual reform was noted by British officials and Christian missionaries. He worked specifically to rid society of addictions, superstition, and flawed characteristics.

Shri Hari was preparing to leave for Vartal to celebrate the Fuladol festival of 1829. Mulubha, a *kshatriya* devotee from Khambhalada, came to Gadhada for Shri Hari's darshan. Shri Hari convinced Mulubha to join him for the festival in Vartal. "Bapu, saddle your horse. A large group of sadhus and devotees will be traveling with me to Vartal. You should join us. I will arrange for your accommodations in Vartal. It will be a memorable experience."

Mulubha did not grasp Shri Hari's latent message but accepted the invitation. The sadhus and devotees sang bhajans in unison and listened to each other's satsang *katha* while traveling to Vartal. Mulubha, however, was treated as an outcast. No matter how hard he tried to mingle with the devotees, many of them would find an excuse to wander away after a few minutes. Mulubha was perplexed. Why was everyone avoiding his company?

Halfway to Vartal, he noticed more criticism, this time from outside of the satsang community. Hundreds of villagers would gather for Shri Hari's darshan as the procession passed through each village. However, the villagers would point at Mulubha and whisper among themselves. Mulubha's uneasiness grew; what were they saying about him?

In one village, Mulubha pulled his horse close enough to the villagers to overhear their hushed whispers, "Look at that *kshatriya* disguised like a crane amidst these genuine swans. Swaminarayan's devotees never indulge in intoxicants. That fellow is riding with Swaminarayan in the procession while holding a hookah in his hand. He must be a fraud who is riding along just for the food."

Mulubha was shocked to hear that his hookah was inviting criticism upon him and Shri Hari. He threw his hookah against a large stone, smashing it to pieces. He looked at the sadhus and devotees and announced, "You will not have to worry about that addiction again."

Once in Vartal, Mulubha made a sincere effort to engage in the *samagam* of sadhus and senior devotees. However, the devotees still quickly slipped away after speaking to the Bapu for a few minutes. One of the devotees kindly shared the reason, "Mulubha, it is that opium you consume that drives people away. Most of the sadhus and devotees cannot stand the smell."

Mulubha angrily tossed his container of opium into the lake. The next morning, Shri Hari omnisciently applauded Mulubha's willingness to change. The sadhus and devotees invited Mulubha to join them in their morning *ghosti*. Shri Hari smiled as he watched from a distance. The group trip to Vartal was Shri Hari's way of changing his devotee's life without a single word of instruction.

Shri Hari's sadhus also played a direct role in fostering similar

transformations in towns all over Gujarat and Maharashtra. They traveled extensively, speaking to villagers from all walks of life about the benefits of living a vice-free life. Their efforts to reduce the consumption of tobacco, opium, and alcohol had a lasting impact on entire villages in central Gujarat and Saurashtra.

Serving Ladus on Shri Hari Jayanti in Gadhada

Dada Khachar's courtyard was lined with shimmering *divas* one warm, summer morning. Shri Hari stepped outside of Akshar Ordi to be greeted by the tumultuous roar of several hundred sadhus and devotees chanting, "Sahajanand Swami Maharaj *ni jay!* Bhagwan Swaminarayan *ni jay!*"

Sadhus and devotees from all over Gujarat and Saurashtra had traveled to Gadhada for Shri Hari's darshan. Shri Hari's *murti* was enchanting. Mulji Brahmachari adorned Shri Hari with gold-threaded, silk clothes and ruby-studded ornaments. Shri Hari's face shone with a smile resembling the crescent moon. His eyes glistened like large pearls, and his lips and hands were as red as those of Kama Dev.¹ Shri Hari's feet were adorned with silver anklets which produced music more melodious than the singing of the *gandharvas*.

Muktanand Swami led Shri Hari to the mandir and performed his *arti* simultaneously with Gopinath Dev's *murti*. After the *arti*, Muktanand Swami performed Shri Hari's puja with flowers, rice, and vermillion powder. Muktanand Swami tied two flower-woven *baju bandhs* on Shri Hari's arms and placed a garland of red and white flowers around his neck. Shri Hari lovingly accepted Muktanandji's bhakti.

The sadhus and devotees prayed to Shri Hari, "Prabhu, anyone who utters your name even once attains *moksha*. Your *mahima* is that which the Vedas and Upanishads cannot fully describe. You are the creator, protector, and sustainer of creation. Your *mahima* is beyond our full comprehension, yet today we pray to you so that we may understand your *mahima* and that of your Gunatit Sadhu. Bless us so that we may

¹ Kama Dev is the God of Love or the God of Desire. He is often represented as a youthful, handsome man and is considered the most attractive male in all of creation. Comparing Bhagwan's *murti* with Kama Deva's beauty is a popular trope in bhakti literature.

understand the *mahima* of all your sadhus and devotees. Bless us so that we may experience the joy and happiness of Akshardham here on Earth.”

Shri Hari raised his right hand and revealed, “I have manifested on Earth solely for this purpose. Through my *charitras*, you will come to experience my divinity. The attachment created through the time you spend with me and my Gunatit Sadhu will be enough to help you attain *moksha* and a permanent place in my Akshardham.”

The sadhus wept with tears of joy. Premanand Swami sang a bhakti *pad* describing Shri Hari’s *mahima*. The sadhus and devotees touched Shri Hari’s feet before Shri Hari returned to Akshar Ordi.

In the afternoon, the sadhus and devotees took Shri Hari to bathe in the Ghela River. Shri Hari dove into the river and gave a lifetime of *smruti* to the sadhus and devotees witnessing this incident. In the evening, Shri Hari returned to Dada’s residence.

That evening, devotees from Gujarat insisted on offering a *seva* of a feast of *ladus* for the sadhus and devotees. Shri Hari accepted their bhakti. He lifted the vessel of *ladus* and navigated through the rows of sadhus swiftly. The *ladus* were dripping with ghee. By the third round, not a single sadhu was willing to eat another *ladu*. Shri Hari decided to place a wager on the next round. He promised, “If a sadhu eats a whole *ladu*, I will imprint my *charnarvind* on his chest. If a sadhu manages to eat half a *ladu*, I will place my hand on his head.”

Though tempted by the generous offer, the sadhus could not eat one more bite. Brahmanand Swami managed to eat half of a *ladu* in order to have Shri Hari place his hands on his head. As Shri Hari was walking away, Brahmanand Swami called out, “Prabhu, what are you going to do with that other half? There is no point in wasting it. I will eat that too.”

Shri Hari realized that Brahmanandji’s clever actions had secured both boons: a hand on his head and the *charnarvind* on his chest. Shri Hari laughed loudly and lauded Brahmanand Swami for his wit and eagerness for *prasadi*.²

The feast was followed by a satsang *sabha* in the evening. Shuk Muni, also known as Shukanand Swami, asked Shri Hari to explain in detail the characteristics of a Gunatit Sadhu whom even Bhagwan is careful

² This incident is cited in detail in *Adhbhutanand Swami ni Vato*.

not to displease.

Shri Hari responded with excitement. “A true sadhu exemplifies the following six qualities. First, he always believes Bhagwan to be *sakar*, or with a divine, physical form. Second, he has imbibed *ekantik dharma* in his heart. His every action and thought is consumed by dharma, bhakti, *jnan*, and *vairagya*. Third, such a sadhu favors the association of Bhagwan’s *bhakta*. Though he may be introverted, he never shuns the company of Bhagwan’s true *bhaktas*. Fourth, this sadhu offers all the material objects at his disposal in the service of Bhagwan’s *bhakta*. He does not indulge in any of them. Fifth, this sadhu is transparent and consistent. He lives according to the words he preaches. Sixth, the sadhu avoids the company of *kusangis*, or those who do not engage in Bhagwan’s *bhakti*.”

This discourse was similar to the *katha* Shri Hari previously delivered on Prabodhini Ekadashi in April of 1829. Premanand Swami, Muktanand Swami, and Brahmanand Swami composed several *bhakti pads* extolling the greatness of a true Gunatit Sadhu after listening to Shri Hari’s discourses on this subject.

Premanand Swami sings, “*Eva a sant harine pyaara re, jethi ghadie na rahe vhaalo nyaara re*,” which translates to, “This *sant* is loved by Shri Hari to an extent where Shri Hari cannot stay apart from him for even a fraction of a second.”

Muktanand Swami writes, “*Ese mere jan ekantik, tehi sam aur na koi*,” which translates to, “Such is my *ekantik* devotee, there is not one like him.”

Brahmanand Swami notes, “*Soi sant sayaane, mamtaa tyaaagi, jin hari pragat pichaane*,” which translates to, “He, who sacrifices his attachment to the material world, and realizes Bhagwan’s *pragat swarup*, is the wise sadhu.”

Shri Hari and the Joke

June of 1829 was an especially hot month, with above-average temperatures and dust storms. The sadhus spent their afternoons under the shade of a tree in Dada Khachar’s residence. One afternoon, the sadhus gathered around Brahmanand Swami to hear him speak. There was rarely time for humor and recreation in Gadhada, but the sadhus made the most

of such breaks when the opportunity presented itself.

One of the sadhus teased, “Brahmanand Swami, being *paramhansas* was more relaxing. We did not have to worry about *mala*, *puja*, *arti*, or *darshan*. Everything could be done on our own schedule. There was no pressure to live according to the tenets and norms of a sadhu’s lifestyle.”

The sadhus laughed. Another sadhu chimed in, “Our Shri Hari has yet to experience the life of a wandering ascetic. It surely is better than following all of these *niyams*!”

Standing a few feet away from the sadhus, Shri Hari listened attentively to the sadhus’ sarcasm and humor. He realized that it was time to perform another *charitra* to teach them a lesson.

The following morning, the conch shells and the beating drums announced the beginning of the morning *arti*. Shri Hari punctually attended the morning *arti* daily. Today, however, he was missing. Later that morning in *katha*, Shri Hari sat on the cot with his head down and eyes fixed on the floor. Muktanand Swami could not bear the silence. “Prabhu, are you going to give us the *agna* to start bhajans or *katha*?”

Shri Hari responded with a grunt. Muktanand Swami asked again. Shri Hari replied, “Muktanand Swami, I wish to become a wandering ascetic.”

Brahmanand Swami recognized that this reaction was the result of the sadhus’ sarcasm from the prior day. He reasoned, “Prabhu, we were just having a laugh. Please do not take it to heart.”

Shri Hari was not in the mood for humor. He stood up and removed his ornaments. He tore his sash in half and wrapped it around his head. He cast aside all of his ornaments and ordered Mulji Brahmachari to bring saffron robes and a loincloth. The *sabha* watched silently.

When Brahmachari returned, Shri Hari instructed him to tell Laduba and Jivuba to stop cooking for him because he was going to beg for alms in the village. Muktanand Swami protested, “Prabhu, if you want to beg for alms, please do so in Dada’s residence. The food from the village will not be pure.”

Shri Hari shrugged his shoulders and consented. That afternoon, Shri Hari stood outside of Jivuba’s quarters and shouted, “*Bhavati bhikshaan dehi!*”

Jivuba came out and gave Shri Hari a wheat *rotlo* and *dal*. Shri Hari silently accepted the simple meal and sat down to eat his lunch on the ledge of Akshar Ordi. Muktanand Swami and Brahmanand Swami approached Shri Hari. “Bhagwan, the sadhus and devotees are terrified by this *charitra* of yours. Please forgive the sadhus for their joke. We are willing to do whatever you command as long as you end this *charitra*.”

Shri Hari looked at Brahmanand Swami for the first time that day and conceded, “Fine; summon the sadhus. I want to speak to them.”

The sadhus gathered in the courtyard. Shri Hari took his place on the cot and said, “I have traveled throughout the land. I have met many scholars, yogis, *brahmacharis*, sadhus, and mendicants. After observing the bhakti and dharma in hundreds of mandirs and ashrams, I came to the conclusion that there is no bliss like that of Bhagwan’s *murti*. There is no path to *moksha* like that of Bhagwan’s bhakti. All of you are fortunate to have been blessed with manifest Bhagwan’s association. Do not take it for granted. *Niyam*, dharma, and bhakti are essential to eradicating our desires. Even a sarcastic remark or a jest on this matter can lead to one’s downfall from satsang. Let this *charitra* be a lesson for the sadhus and devotees.”

Jhinabhai to Akshardham

Shri Hari was particularly fond of Jhinabhai of Panchala. Though he was the ruler of his village, Jhinabhai spent most of his time with Shri Hari in Gadhada. On one such occasion, Jhinabhai did not return to Panchala for months. His family sent a letter to Gadhada and addressed it to Jhinabhai. Jhinabhai received the letter and placed it under his seat without reading it. The letter was followed by a second and a third. Jhinabhai placed both of these letters with the first without reading them.

His family grew worried and wrote a fourth letter but addressed it to Shri Hari, asking, “Bhagwan, is Jhinabhai with you in Gadhada? He has not responded to any of our letters.”

Shri Hari called Jhinabhai. “Bhaktaraj, why haven’t you responded to the letters sent by your family?”

Jhinabhai replied, “Prabhu, how could I respond to them if I did not bother to read them?”

Shri Hari realized that Jhinabhai was not interested in the material objects or temporary relations of this world. His love and interests were governed by bhakti and satsang. Shri Hari often praised Jhinabhai's love and dedication to serve Bhagwan's *bhaktas*. In particular, Jhinabhai's dedication to serve Kamalshi, a barber from Mangrol, touched Shri Hari.

Jhinabhai had traveled to Mangrol for business. He went to Kamalshi's house to check on the barber. Happy to see Jhinabhai, Kamalshi poured his heart out to Jhinabhai. He wept as he shared details about his illness. Kamalshi also mentioned that no one in his family was willing to care for him.

Jhinabhai decided to take Kamalshi with him to Panchala. He went to the bazaar and hired three laborers to carry Kamalshi's cot to Panchala. He could not find a fourth laborer, so he carried the fourth corner on his own shoulders. The entire village stared at the ruler as he walked while lifting a barber's cot. A villager sent a fourth laborer to remove the load from the ruler's shoulders.

Jhinabhai brought Kamalshi home and personally cared for his physical and financial needs. Jhinabhai faced stark resistance from his own family, but he was unperturbed. One evening, Kamalshi was suffering from a terrible headache. Jhinabhai asked his sister for crushed black pepper to treat the headache. His sister replied, "Brother, there is no ground black pepper in the house."

The next day, Jhinabhai asked his sister for ground black pepper to treat his own headache. His sister rushed inside the kitchen, ground the pepper, and offered, "Brother, should I apply it to your forehead for you?"

Jhinabhai was furious. He pushed the black pepper away and shouted, "I thought we did not have any black pepper? I will not use anything that is not also available for Shri Hari's *bhaktas*."

Soon thereafter, Jhinabhai was diagnosed with a life-threatening illness. The healer withdrew care from the ruler. Shri Hari heard of Jhinabhai's failing health and rushed to Panchala. Shri Hari sat on Jhinabhai's cot and asked, "Is there anything you would like me to take care of? Does your son, Hathisinh, need a guardian to oversee his inheritance or education?"

Jhinabhai smiled faintly and said, "Prabhu, what is there to say? If

he remains your *bhakta*, you will always look after him. If he decides not to live according to your *niyams* and *agna*, then you will not care for his *moksha* even if I ask you to. Therefore, bless him with your satsang and *samagam*."

Shri Hari was moved by Jhinabhai's conviction. Shri Hari turned to Jhinabhai's mother, Gangaba, and asked, "Mother, what if I was to give Jhinabhai the kingship of Junagadh?"

Gangaba exclaimed, "Prabhu, that would be wonderful!"

Shri Hari continued, "Why stop there? I can make him the ruler of Vadodara or even Delhi."

"Bhagwan, that would be wonderful too."

"That is not enough, Mother. I want to grant him a place in the heavens, maybe Golok, Shvetdvip, Badrikashram, or Vaikunth? What if I gave him the kingdom of Akshardham?"

Gangaba was overjoyed and observed, "Bhagwan, there is not a soul that can rival your mercy."

Shri Hari raised His right hand and said, "So be it."

Jhinabhai left his mortal body and returned to Akshardham. Gangaba wept at her son's side. Shri Hari replied, "Mother, I gave you what you asked for. There is no need to cry. Jhinabhai is sitting in my Akshardham."

Shri Hari made the arrangements for Jhinabhai's funeral. The sadhus and devotees insisted that Shri Hari let someone else carry Jhinabhai's body, but Shri Hari was adamant. This request came as a surprise to all of the devotees, given that Shri Hari did not carry Jhinabhai's own younger brother's body to the pyre. Shri Hari carried Jhinabhai's body to the funeral pyre for several more steps than Jhinabhai had taken with Kamalshi's cot in Mangrol. He accompanied the funeral procession all the way to Damodar Kund. For Shri Hari, his devotees were his true family.

Jiva Khachar's Moksha

Shri Hari spent the next six months in Gadhada. During this time, Jiva Khachar fell ill. His health deteriorated with each passing day. One day, Amulaba, Jiva Khachar's daughter, came running to Dada Khachar's residence. "Prabhu, Jiva Bapu will not live much longer. Please pardon his mistakes, and give him darshan one last time."

Jiva Khachar's mistakes were not easy to overlook. He instigated the King of Bhavnagar to barricade Dada's arable fields for months. He was the source of the constant pestering by neighboring landlords. The scheme to capture Dada and Shri Hari the night before the *murti-pratishtha* in Gadhada was also his doing. However, the worst of Jiva Khachar's sins occurred when he paid a large sum of money to a *kshatriya* named Ram Khachar to murder Shri Hari.

One evening, Shri Hari asked Bhaguji to grab a lantern to light the toilet area. Bhaguji found the request strange since Shri Hari never asked anyone to walk in front of him into the toilet. Bhaguji opened the door and held the lantern up as he walked inside. He was startled to find Ram Khachar lurking in the dark with a sword. Bhaguji dropped the lantern and pounced on the assailant. Ram Khachar was no match for Bhaguji. Ram Khachar dropped his sword and surrendered to Bhaguji.

Ram Khachar confessed his transgression to Shri Hari. "Prabhu, please pardon me. I was desperate for the money that Jiva Kathar had promised me. Jiva Khachar has put a large bounty on your head."

Shri Hari smiled mercifully and ordered Bhaguji to release the attacker. Bhaguji argued, "Bhagwan, this man deserves to die. We cannot let him walk away unpunished."

Shri Hari insisted, "Bhaguji, let him go. His remorse will be his greatest punishment."

Ram Khachar was moved by Shri Hari's compassion. He became a devotee and spent his life engrossed in satsang, *seva*, and *bhakti*.

Today, the devotees realized that Shri Hari had forgiven Jiva Khachar too. Shri Hari stood up and walked with Amulaba to Jiva Khachar's residence. The aged Bapu was lying on a cot. His sins were tormenting his consciousness. Shri Hari sat beside him and said, "Jiva Khachar, I have forgotten each of your infractions. I will grant you *moksha*."

Jiva Khachar sobbed uncontrollably, "Prabhu, I am not worthy of *moksha*. I tried to have you captured and killed. I harassed your sadhus and devotees. I deserve to suffer at the hands of Yamraj."

Shri Hari placed Jiva Khachar's right hand in his own hand and revealed, "You are remorseful for your past deeds. This is enough for now. I will take you to Akshardham."

The sadhus and devotees watched in awe. Shri Hari's compassion even nourished those who tried to have him killed.

Shri Hari stood up and left for Akshar Ordi. Upon reaching his residence, Shri Hari received word that Jiva Khachar had passed away. Shri Hari ordered Dada Khachar to perform Jiva Khachar's funeral rites with the help of eighty *parshads*. Dada rushed to make the arrangements.

That evening, Shri Hari eased the concerns of all those who had witnessed the day's events. "I know many of you are wondering how I could liberate such a wretched *jiva*."

Muktanand Swami folded his hands and noted, "Prabhu, you are the redeemer of sinners. We are not surprised by Your actions."

Shri Hari continued, "Muktanandji, I redeemed Jiva Khachar for the two times he served me selflessly. Once, I had dysentery, and the monsoon had washed away all of the roads in the village. Jiva Khachar arranged for me to use his stove as a toilet. On a second occasion, I was ill with a fever. My body was shaking violently from the cold. There was not a single piece of dry firewood anywhere. Jiva Khachar tore apart a new cot made of rosewood and burned the wood to start a fire. When I asked him why he burned the expensive wood, he said, 'Prabhu, for you, I would tear apart all that I have, and even then I would not have done enough. These two incidents of selfless *seva* and *bhakti* were enough for me to grant him *moksha*.'³

The satsang *sabha* realized that Shri Hari never dwelled on his *bhaktas'* shortcomings but always remembered their sacrifices.

Shri Hari celebrated Vasant Panchmi in Gadhada. On the day of the festival, Shri Hari spoke to the satsang *sabha* about developing firm conviction in Bhagwan's *swarup* enhanced with *mahima* and *jnan*.⁴

3 This incident is documented in the Shri Hari Charitrachintamani (Junagadh, 2006) by Sadguru Sadhu Raghuvircharandas, published most recently by Shri Swaminarayan Mandir, Junagadh. Volume 2, Note 296.

4 A similar discourse has been shared by Bhagwan Swaminarayan in Vachanamrut Gadhada II 72, in which Shri Hari says, "If a devotee of Bhagwan has faith in Bhagwan coupled with the knowledge of his greatness and also thoroughly realizes the greatness of the sadhus and *satsangis*, then even if that devotee's karmas as well as *kal* happen to be unfavorable, both *kal* and karma combined are incapable of harming him due to the extreme force of his *bhakti*."

The King of Bhavnagar visits Gadhada

Hundreds of *kshatriyas* from all over Saurashtra gathered in Gadhada for Jiva Khachar's funeral. After the funeral, several of them came for Shri Hari's darshan at Dada Khachar's residence. Shri Hari called Jogidas Khuman to the front of the satsang *sabha*. Jogidas Khuman was an infamous dacoit. In fact, the King of Bhavnagar had attempted to capture Jogidas on several occasions, but Jogidas managed to elude the royal guards each time.

Shri Hari asked Jogidas a question in front of the sadhus and devotees, "Jogidas, I heard that you once put crushed chili in your eyes. Why would anyone do such a thing?"

Jogidas folded his hands and said, "Prabhu, I accidentally cast a lustful glance at a woman other than my wife. I knew that this was a grave sin. I needed to teach myself a lesson."

Shri Hari interjected, "How many times did you look at her with lust in your eyes?"

"Prabhu, it was for a brief moment. It has only happened once in my life. However, even once is inappropriate. My name is Jogidas,' the servant of a yogi; how can I let my senses fall prey to lust?"

Shri Hari was pleased with Jogidas' conviction to control his senses and base desires. The sadhus and devotees, too, were inspired by Jogidas' firm resolve to follow *brahmacharya*.

The King of Bhavnagar, Vajehsinh, received word that Jogidas Khuman and his associates had visited Shri Hari in Gadhada. He immediately sent for Dada to come to Bhavnagar. Dada accepted the King's request and rode to Bhavnagar with the royal messenger. Vajehsinh spoke to Dada with a sense of urgency, "Dada, I admit that I have harassed you quite extensively in the past. I apologize for listening to the late Jiva Bapu's lies, but you have to help me now. Now is the time to set aside our differences and think about the welfare of our kingdom."

Dada listened patiently. Vajehsinh continued, "Dada, the Khumans are raining fire on my kingdom. There is an ongoing dispute between our families over a few villages. They have now resorted to theft and murder. They pillage towns and destroy that which they cannot take with them. Jogidas and his men have defeated my army three times with the help of their as-

sociates from Palitana. My subjects are suffering, and I cannot do anything about it. Please convince your friends to sign a treaty with the royal court.”

Dada thought for a few moments and said, “I sympathize with the situation in our kingdom, your Highness. I will have to ask Bhagwan Swaminarayan for permission before agreeing to help you.”

The king’s messenger rode back to Gadhada with Dada. There, Dada informed Shri Hari about his conversation with the King. Shri Hari immediately consented. “Dada, as a citizen of the state, it is your duty to forget our disputes with the king and to assist the innocent villagers suffering in the crossfire.”

The messenger returned to the king with Shri Hari’s sanction. Vajehsinh was relieved to hear of Shri Hari’s approval. He sent a royal ambassador with the terms of the ceasefire to ride with Dada.

Dada’s men approached the Khumans’ stronghold. They were fired upon and lost a man in the crossfire. Dada waved a white flag to show that an ally was riding towards them. Jogidas and his men held their fire. As Dada approached, Jogidas was overjoyed to see him. Dada explained the terms and conditions of the truce and advised, “This is Shri Hari’s *agna*. It is for the good of the kingdom and your men. Sign the treaty, Brother.”

Dada and Jogidas rode to Rajkot to meet the British Officer, Sir David Anderson Blane. He consented to the treaty and sent the paperwork for final approval to the Governor in Mumbai. In a few weeks, the treaty was signed, and the Khumans paid reparations for the damage they caused in exchange for the return of their villages. Shri Hari and Vajehsinh Bapu praised Dada for his statesmanship.

This latest incident convinced Vajehsinh to ride to Gadhada and have Shri Hari’s darshan. The king arrived with his entourage. Shri Hari greeted him and showed him the mandir. The king was embarrassed for having believed the false accusations by the late Jiva Bapu and for harassing Shri Hari and Dada. When he was leaving, the king looked up at the *shikhars* of the mandir and said to Shri Hari, “Prabhu, bless me so that I may rule the land justly. I am sure that I will have your darshan again soon.”⁵

⁵ This incident is documented in the Shri Hari Charitrachintamani (Junagadh, 2006) by Sadguru Sadhu Raghuvircharandas, published most recently by Shri Swaminarayan Mandir, Junagadh. Volume 2, Note 216.

Atmaram's Dagli

A royal messenger from the King's court in Bhavnagar arrived in Gadhada a few weeks later. The king had sent the royal guard to invite Shri Hari to Bhavnagar. Shri Hari pardoned the king's past grievances and accepted his invitation. Shri Hari set off for Bhavnagar with hundreds of sadhus and devotees. The dust raised from the hoofs of their horses left a dust storm in their path.

The procession of devotees entered the city and passed through the main market and street. The king took a seat on the palace's balcony to witness this grand procession. The king noticed that all of the townspeople had gathered in the streets, on rooftops, and in the windows and doorways of homes and shops to catch a glimpse of Bhagwan Swaminarayan. The king's eyes fell on Shri Hari. He was captivated by Shri Hari's beauty and the appearance of his celestial horse. However, he was especially mesmerized by Shri Hari's silk-woven *dagli* and wanted to have a replica of it. He sent his men to find out the name of the tailor who had made that *dagli*.

After the procession, Shri Hari graced the king's palace. The king offered several gold ornaments to Shri Hari in *seva*. Shri Hari was pleased with the king's bhakti. He blessed the king and accepted his puja before leaving the palace.

The king learned that the *dagli* was stitched by a tailor named Atmaram. Atmaram was visiting Bhavnagar from Surat and recently had gifted the *dagli* to Shri Hari.

The king sent his men to summon Atmaram to the palace. Atmaram was presented in front of the king. The king spoke frankly, "I am in love with the *dagli* that you stiched for Swaminarayan. Make me one. Do not worry about the cost or the resources. You can spend as much as you need. I will sanction the cost from the royal treasury."

Atmaram admitted, "Your Highness, I have no objection to sewing a splendid *dagli* for you. However, it will be impossible to recreate the same one."

Annoyed, the king asked, "Why not? I am willing to pay any price."

Atmaram confidently replied, "That *dagli* is priceless. It is stitched with threads of devotion. My heart has been stitched into that *dagli* and

offered to Bhagwan Swamianrayan. Your Highness, you cannot put a price on such bhakti."

The king accepted such devout reasoning and settled for another stitched *dagli* by Atmaram.

Atmaram was an example of the hundreds of devotees throughout the Indian subcontinent that rendered their bhakti to Shri Hari in the form of objects and gifts. Farmers offered plush harvests from their lands; cowherders gifted pots of milk, yogurt, and ghee; jewelers donated gem-studded ornaments of gold and silver; and *kshatriyas* gave their horses. Irrespective of the monetary value of the offering, in Shri Hari's eyes, his *bhakta*'s gifts were priceless.

Shri Hari's Ashta Kavis

The Swaminarayan Sampradaya is a bhakti *sampradaya*. Bhagwan Swaminarayan's *ekantiki* bhakti highlights the *sampradaya*'s unique identity among the growing corpus of bhakti traditions. *Ekantiki bhakti* is a nexus of bhakti infused with dharma, *jnan*, and *vairagya*. According to Bhagwan Swaminarayan, worshiping Bhagwan is incomplete if practiced without following the tenets of the dharma shastras, understanding one's *swarup* as *atma*, and detachment from all worldly possessions. This notion of bhakti presented a novel approach in the way it was practiced in many of the *sampradayas* that were growing in southern and eastern India and those that later emerged in Vrindavan. Yet to claim that Bhagwan Swaminarayan did not appreciate his predecessors or place himself within this longstanding wave of the bhakti tradition is incorrect. The Ramanuja, Vallabha, and Gaudiya Sampradayas each contributed to the 'new' *sampradaya*'s philosophical doctrine and devotional rituals.

Music has been used to express bhakti for centuries. In addition to the long tradition of bhakti poets in India, Shri Hari's *ashta kavis* composed tens of thousands of bhakti *pads* in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Gujarat. Shri Hari's *ashta kavis* possessed many noteworthy qualities and merit recognition: Muktanand Swami, Brahmanand Swami, Premanand Swami, Nishkulananand Swami, Devanand Swami, Dayanand Swami, Manjukeshanand Swami, and Bhumanand Swami.

The poets' corpus of bhakti *pads* is one of the most diverse of any

group of sectarian poets with respect to theology, language, meter, and regional and folk genres. The *pads* describe Shri Hari's *charitras* and *murti* but also reenact the merry play of Radha and the Gopis with Shri Krishna in the forests of Vrindavan. Similar *pads* describing the *charitras* of Shri Rama, Hanumanji, Ganapatiji, Shivaji, and even different forms of goddess Shakti are found in manuscripts. The *pads* are written in multiple languages, Gujarati, Hindi, Braj, Avadhi, Punjabi, Sanskrit, Urdu, Farsi, and Marvadi, but are primarily recorded in the *devanagari* script. The *pads* are intended to be sung across various genres. The manuscripts state that certain *pads* are to be sung in *dhrupad*, *khayal*, *thumri*, and *kirtan*, and recited as *dohas* and *kavits*.

The tradition of disciples of many of these *ashta kavis*, along with the notation of ragas and their specific renditions in manuscripts, suggest that the sadhus were also musicians. One finds hundreds of different ragas documented in the manuscripts. Of all of the lineages, Premanand Swami's disciples are the most visible and active in terms of performance and instruction. The late Vallabha Swami built an ashram outside the city of Valsad and produced several *pads* according to the oral transmission of these *pads* within the *guru-shishya* tradition.

Today, many of Brahmanand Swami, Premanand Swami, and Nishkulananand Swami's *pads* are performed widely outside of the Swaminarayan Sampradaya. Noted Hindustani vocalists, *thumri* singers, and folk *bhajaniks* in Gujarat and Rajasthan sing these *pads* around the world, from small villages to the grand performance venues of metropolises.

The greatest contribution of these *pads* is their description of *pragat* Bhagwan. Most of the *pads* written about previous incarnations' *charitras* were composed several centuries after the avatar's life on Earth. However, the *ashta kavis* described Shri Hari's *charitras* while observing them firsthand. Their *pads* are charged with the conviction of certainty and an eyewitness guarantee. Many were also recorded in manuscripts while these poets were alive, often while they were singing them. As Raghuvir Chaudhry, a prominent Gujarati literary scholar and historian, has noted, "The *ashta kavis* rekindled the flame of bhakti poetry that was nevertheless present, yet fading in nineteenth-century India."

Monsoon of 1829: Sachchidanand Swami's Nudge

Shri Hari woke up to the sound of heavy rain thumping on the roof's shingles and to the smell of wet grass. He looked out the window and could not believe his eyes. Why was it raining? He had not permitted Indra to shower his blessings on Saurashtra this monsoon.

Children played in the rain, and peacocks danced to the steady beat of raindrops. Shri Hari smiled to himself; this was Sachchidanand Swami's doing. Though Shri Hari was glad to see the people of Gadhada rejoicing, He was upset with Sachchidanand Swami for using his yogic powers without his consent.

That evening, Shri Hari addressed the satsang *sabha*, "I know that many of you were thirsting for rain, but there is a set order in this universe. We cannot deny the authority of those responsible for creating, sustaining, and destroying the universe. More importantly, you cannot go against my desires."

The devotees folded their hands with tears in their eyes. "Bhagwan, please do not blame Sachchidanand Swami. We begged him to have mercy on our dying cattle and starving children. He could not bear our plight and agreed to help us. He sat in *samadhi* and went to meet Indra. He saw Indra sleeping on his throne. Sachchidanand Swami nudged Indra with his right leg. The God of Rain woke up and immediately fell at Swamiji's feet. Swamiji then instructed, 'It is the monsoon. Stop procrastinating. Make it rain in Saurashtra, now.' Indra showered us with the blessing of life."

Shri Hari looked at the sadhus and advised, "All of you are competent enough to change the course of nature, but you should not do so against my will. Indra was too afraid to tell you, but he was sleeping because I told him not to let it rain just yet. In the future, be mindful of my wishes. Everything that happens in this universe is dependent on the will of Purna Purushottam Narayan."

Sachchidanand Swami stood up with folded hands and humbly requested, "Bhagwan, have mercy on me. I will never again interfere with the course of nature. Please pardon my offense."

Shri Hari forgivingly glanced at Sachchidanand Swami and then asked Premanand Swami to sing a bhajan.

Punja the Cow Herder of Mandavdhar

Near Gadhada is the village of Mandavdhar, known for its large Ahir community. Punja was the group's leader. The Ahirs of Mandavdhar owned some of the finest cows and buffalos in the region. They also produced the highest volume of milk in the region. Punja and his people used to regularly bring milk to Gadhada for Shri Hari and his sadhus. However, the Ahir leader had been offended by a recent incident and vowed to never bring milk for Shri Hari again. Despite the attempts of various sadhus and devotees to change his mind, Punja refused to listen. He did not allow a single pot of milk to be taken to Gadhada from Mandavdhar.

Sura Khachar and Brahmanand Swami were known to jest with Shri Hari. One day, they decided to make Punja the subject of their joke. They approached Shri Hari and challenged, "Prabhu, Bhaktimata's *shraddh* festival is approaching soon. We are going to have to make *dudhpak* for the sadhus and devotees. If you are truly Bhagwan, you should feed all of us *dudhpak* prepared with milk from Mandavdhar."

Shri Hari laughed at Sura Khachar and Brahmanand Swami's joke and agreed to the condition. Brahmanand Swami knew that it would be impossible for Shri Hari to meet the stipulation, unless, of course, he used his divine powers. He decided to wait and watch Shri Hari's *charitra*.

The month before the *shraddh* festival passed quickly. Sura Khachar would remind Shri Hari of the wager every morning. Shri Hari would chuckle and say, "Bapu, you worry too much. I will take care of it."

Two days before the festival, Shri Hari saddled his mare in the middle of the night and rode to Mandavdhar. He tied the mare to a tree and walked to Punja's house. Earlier that afternoon, Punja and four of his associates left for northern Gujarat to buy cattle for their herd. Before leaving, Punja instructed his wife and sons, "Do not share a drop of our milk with Swaminarayan or his devotees. They might take advantage of my absence. Do not fall for their flattery or tricks."

Shri Hari approached Punja's house in the middle of the night. Before entering the courtyard, Shri Hari took on Punja's form by assuming a large belly, broad chest, and square chin and wearing thick, silver bangles with a thick bamboo chute over his left shoulder. Shri Hari grinned with satisfaction. Punja's wife would certainly mistake him for her husband.

'Punja' knocked on the door and wailed loudly for his wife. His wife woke up startled by the noise and rushed to open the door. His entire family gathered around him. 'Punja's' face was flushed red, and he was perspiring heavily. As they openly wondered what happened to their leader, 'Punja' explained, "I had to go to the toilet, so I urged my associates forward and told them that I would catch up with them. After I finished, I saw a cobra a few feet away from me. The deadly snake chased me into the forest. I feared for my life. I climbed a tree hoping that the snake would slither away. The reptile coiled up and sat under the tree waiting for me. It would hiss at me and threaten me with its fangs. I sat in the tree for hours. At last, I prayed to Swaminarayan, 'If you save me from this snake, I will deliver all of the milk from my cows and buffalos to Gadhada tomorrow morning.' In a matter of seconds, the snake slithered away. I cautiously climbed down the tree and ran home. Now, I must keep my word. Tomorrow, my sons must take all the milk from our community's cows and deliver it to Gadhada." 'Punja' then looked at his wife and said, "I am going to try to catch up with the other four cowherders, but make sure you send one hundred rupees as our *seva* to Swaminarayan for saving my life."

His wife readily agreed, thankful that her husband was alive. 'Punja' bid his family farewell and started for northern Gujarat.

The following morning, Punja's four sons came to Gadhada with several dozen pots of milk. Sura Khachar and Brahmanand Swami were surprised to see them. Shri Hari looked in their direction and smiled victoriously. Bhaktimata's *shraddh* festival was celebrated with *dudhpak* prepared with milk from Mandavdhar. Shri Hari then served all the sadhus and Punja's sons.

A few days later, Punja returned home from northern Gujarat. When he learned of the incident, he shouted at his wife, "How did you fail to recognize your own husband?"

His wife argued, "That was you. Ask our sons; ask the entire community. They all saw you."

Punja took ten of his most able men and rode off to Gadhada. In Gadhada, he confronted Shri Hari, "Why did you cheat my family into giving you milk?"

Shri Hari just smiled. Sura Khachar responded, “Punja, your sons brought milk, and it was given away in *prasadi*. You rightfully and fairly lost. Let it be.”

Punja retorted, “Yes, it is my wife’s fault. She could not recognize that man.”

Sura Khachar laughed, “Punja, that is the problem. Shri Hari is not a man. He is Bhagwan!”

Punja bowed down to Shri Hari and left for his village. From that day onwards, milk for Shri Hari, the *murti* of Gopinath Dev, and the sadhus was delivered to Gadhada from Mandavdhar several times a week.

Shri Hari celebrated the first Diwali and Annakut in Gadhada since the *murti-pratishtha* of Gopinath Dev’s *murti* and then prepared to leave for Vartal.

Prabodhini Ekadashi in Vartal

Shri Hari traveled to Vartal with a large group of sadhus and devotees to celebrate Prabodhini Ekadashi. Shri Hari was returning to Vartal after a seven-month absence. Thousands of devotees from central Gujarat crowded the city for Shri Hari’s darshan. Shri Hari had sent messengers around Gujarat and Saurashtra inviting all of the sadhus and devotees to Vartal. He instructed, “Tell everyone that Shri Hari is in Vartal and wants to serve all of the sadhus and devotees. There will not be many more chances where Purna Purushottam Narayan will serve all of you food. Do not miss this rare opportunity.” Sadly, this short message foreshadowed what was to occur in the near future.

Shri Hari gave all the sadhus and devotees darshan while riding into town on Manki. Although the *murti* was a familiar image, they could not satisfy their yearning for such darshan. In the coming days, Shri Hari ordered Narayanjibhai Suthar of Junagadh to paint a portrait of his left profile. Shri Hari was pleased with Narayanjibhai’s efforts. He gave all of the sadhus an *agna* to use a replica of that *murti* in their daily morning puja.

Shri Hari spent several hours speaking of his *swarup’s mahima* and his Akshardham’s *mahima*. In the days following *ekadashi*, Shri Hari wanted to serve all of the sadhus and devotees *motichur ladus*. He sped through

the rows serving *ladus* with his hands. The sadhus ate to their fill, not wanting to say no to Shri Hari, especially given the love with which Shri Hari was serving them.

There was something different about Shri Hari's gait today. He was slowing down as he served the *ladus*. Halfway through the second round, Shri Hari sat down amidst the sadhus, hampered by a dizzy spell. His face was perspiring, his limbs were weak, and his eyes were heavy. Brahmanand Swami immediately instructed a *parshad* to bring a chair. Shri Hari sat on the chair to catch his breath.

The sadhus and devotees watched with tears in their eyes. Their Bhagwan was suffering from physical exhaustion just to serve them. How would they ever repay his compassion, and would they ever truly be able to match his bhakti for his devotees?

The sadhus and *parshads* carried Shri Hari to his residence. After resting for two days, Shri Hari finally emerged and sat in a special *sabha* for sadhus. In the *sabha*, Shri Hari candidly spoke about his *swarup*—about Purna Purushottam Narayan. Sadguru Nishkulananand Swami recorded this exchange in his *Bhaktachintamani*.

After celebrating the festivals and attending the special *sabhas*, Gunatitanand Swami approached Shri Hari to take his leave for Junagadh. He proposed, “Bhagwan, I know that much of your illness stems from many of the sadhus and devotees' weak conviction in your *swarup* as Purna Purushottam Narayan. Please do not be troubled by this. I will live an extra twenty-five years, if I have to, to establish the true *mahima* of your *swarup*.”

Shri Hari was pleased to hear Gunatitanand Swami's resolve. He blessed the sadhu and gave him permission to leave for Junagadh. Shri Hari also departed for Gadhada a few days later.

Illness in Gadhada

In Gadhada, Shri Hari withdrew from his surroundings. He barely spoke to those around him. He would sit with his eyes closed as if meditating on his own *swarup*. A tone of melancholy seeped into his daily *charitras*. Sura Khachar, who was known to make Shri Hari laugh by simply showing him the rolls of his belly, could not improve Shri Hari's

mood. Not a soul in all of Gadhada could make Shri Hari crack even the faintest smile.

A face that used to shine with a smile celebrating bhakti was now rarely privy to an occasional grin. Mulji Brahmachari could not tolerate Shri Hari's *charitra*. One night, when Brahmachari was alone with Shri Hari, he asked, "Prabhu, this has gone on far too long. Why are you acting distant from the satsang community? It is as if you are physically with us but your mind is elsewhere."

Shri Hari spoke carefully. "Brahmachari, nine years ago I promised the senior sadhus that I would build mandirs, inspire the creation of shastras, and establish *ekantik dharma*. I have accomplished those goals and kept my word. Now, I wish to return to Akshardham. My Aksharbrahma has pledged to live twenty-five years longer to complete the rest of my goals."

Brahmachari fainted after hearing Shri Hari's intentions to return to Akshardham. Shri Hari stood up from the cot and sat on the floor next to Brahmachari. He caressed his personal attendant's head with his right hand. Brahmachari regained consciousness after a few seconds. His eyes took the form of the monsoon clouds as tears flowed incessantly. Shri Hari lovingly explained, "Brahmachari, I am not going anywhere. I was testing your bhakti for me. Now, please make me some warm *raab*. My stomach is growling."

Brahmachari stood up and wiped his tears. Feeling comforted, Brahmachari focused his mind on his *seva*. He brought a large vessel full of *raab* for Shri Hari. Shri Hari had a few spoons and turned away. Brahmachari insisted, but Shri Hari was not remotely interested in eating.

Two and a half months had passed since Shri Hari took on the illness. Shri Hari suffered a continuous fever from a growing nodule in his neck. The nodule grew larger with each passing day. The pain was unbearable at times. However, Shri Hari sat with his eyes closed and never uttered a complaint. The growth made it difficult to swallow or chew even the softest foods. Shri Hari would drink milk at Brahmachari's insistence but would put the vessel down after a few sips.

Muktanand Swami, Gopalanand Swami, Nityanand Swami, and Shukanand Swami spent each day in Akshar Ordi constantly on their feet tending to Shri Hari. Muktanand Swami changed the dressing on

Shri Hari's neck several times a day.

One afternoon, Shri Hari asked the four senior sadhus to huddle around his bed. He spoke softly but firmly, "I manifested on Earth to establish *ekantik dharma* and to liberate countless souls. Once I return to Akshardham, all of the sadhus will have to travel from village to village and continue to guide *jivas* on the path to *moksha*. I have kept my word to all of you: there are six magnificent mandirs, Sanskrit shastras are being written, and *ekantik dharma* and the Aksharbrahma-Parabrahma *upasana* have been established. Now, it is your responsibility to keep the *sampradaya*'s activities and morale alive and positive. I have made up my mind to return to Akshardham. I will leave my mortal body and return to Akshardham shortly."

Muktanand Swami and the other sadhus' hearts began to beat rapidly. Some even fainted next to Shri Hari's cot. However, Gopalanand Swami maintained his composure. He folded his hands and moved closer to Shri Hari. He appealed, "Prabhu, the satsang community needs you. Innumerable souls still thirst for your darshan. You are our lifeline. It is not befitting of you to think so morbidly. Please forget these thoughts and continue to live amidst the satsang communities for a hundred years."

Shri Hari calmly explained, "Gopalanandji, you are my *aksharmukta*, and you know that I manifested on Earth for certain causes. I have accomplished those tasks. Now, I must leave the rest up to my Aksharbrahma. I will always remain on Earth through the Gunatit Sadhu. The *satpurush* is now the means to attain *moksha* on Earth. It is your responsibility to spread this message in the satsang community."

Gopalanand Swami accepted Shri Hari's *agna* with his head lowered and with folded hands.

Word of Shri Hari's revelation and decision to return to Akshardham quickly spread. Tens of thousands of devotees streamed into Gadhada for a glimpse of their Bhagwan. One of King Gaekwad's ministers commissioned a special chariot to be made for Shri Hari, constructed with Shri Hari's ailing health in mind. The minister offered it in *seva* to Shri Hari. "Prabhu, this chariot is built to travel on uneven surfaces without causing discomfort to its passengers. Please accept it as a humble token of my bhakti."

Shri Hari blessed the minister. That afternoon, Shri Hari rode on the

chariot to Lakshmi Vadi. The satsang community was thrilled to see Shri Hari leave Akshar Ordi after months of recuperation.

An ayurvedic healer visited Shri Hari daily to check his vital signs. However, there was no improvement in Shri Hari's condition. Muktanand Swami was a healer as well. He convened a counsel of all of the healers to discuss various treatments and possible therapies. His eyes were moist with tears as it became increasingly clear that the healers had exhausted all the options. Muktanand Swami realized that the only way Shri Hari's health would improve was if he assumed responsibility for his care.

Muktanand Swami often sat in the corner of Akshar Ordi and sobbed with his head in his hands. He could not sleep at night and barely ate during the day. Shri Hari comforted him, "Muktanandji, I am the controller of the entire creation. Everything that happens is due to my own will. This is not your fault. Do not take it upon yourself. It is my own wish to return to Akshardham. Death cannot act without my *agni*. Please inspire others to live with the values of *ekantik dharma* after I am gone. After all, you are the satsang community's caretaker."

Shri Hari's body was emaciated because the nodule in his neck, coupled with his continuous fever, made it impossible to eat or drink. He was unable to get out of his cot without the support of two attendants. Shri Hari, however, remained positive without ever uttering a single complaint. He did not want to be the source of worry and sorrow for his sadhus and devotees.

Sir John Malcolm

When Shri Hari graced Sayaji Rao II's palace in Vadodara in the year of 1826, the king's Divan had tried to capture Shri Hari on the outskirts of the kingdom.⁶ Since he failed miserably, the Divan tried to manipulate British Officer James Williams' opinion about Shri Hari. Williams listened to the Divan's gossip. "Williams Saheb, Swaminarayan is going to take over the reins to Gaekwad's kingdom and use his *kshatriya* mercenaries to oust British traders and troops from the land."

Williams was unsure if he should believe the Divan. Meanwhile, Shri

⁶ Refer to Chapter 7 with subtitle 'At Sayaji Rao's Palace in Vadodara' for a detailed account of this incident.

Hari sent Narupant Nana and Bapu Saheb Gardar to Williams' residence. The Divan left the officer's bungalow from the back exit, careful not to be seen conspiring against Swaminarayan. Narupant Nana bowed his head out of respect for the British official and informed him, "Bhagwan Swaminarayan has sent us to tell you that he has no interest in Gaekwad's kingdom or in any of your territories. He is the ruler of all three worlds. Why would he bother with such a small kingdom?"

Williams quickly realized that there was something different about Swaminarayan. Williams assured the devotees that he would not be persuaded by the Divan's attempts to tarnish Swaminarayan's character and work. Narupant Nana also revealed, "Our Bhagwan also said not to worry about your captured son. He should be home in a short while. Keep faith in Bhagwan."

Williams' son, John, was the leader of a British battalion in Uttar Pradesh. The Nawab of Ayodhya had captured the small band of soldiers and imprisoned them for three months at an undisclosed location. Williams had traveled to Lucknow but was unable to find his son. Williams had almost given up hope when Swaminarayan sent this message of faith. A few weeks later, John returned to Vadodara with his battalion after being released by the Nawab. John revealed that Swaminarayan had given him and the Nawab darshan on the same night and had spoken about his release. The Nawab released John and his men the following morning.

Williams was overjoyed to be reunited with his son. He quietly thanked Shri Hari and felt indebted to Bhagwan.

Williams heavily praised Shri Hari's social and spiritual work to his colleagues in Gujarat and Mumbai. Williams also shared details about Swaminarayan's work to restore peace and social harmony among the people of Gujarat and Saurashtra to Sir John Malcolm, the Governor of Mumbai (see photo 41). Sir John Malcolm was also made aware of Swaminarayan's work by Thomas Williamson, the Minister and Collector of Vadodara, and Colonel Blane.

The Governor was curious about Swaminarayan's *sampradaya* and why an entire region was enthralled by his social and spiritual reforms. He asked Sir David Anderson Blane to write a letter to Swaminarayan asking him to meet the Governor in Rajkot.

Blane sent a messenger to Gadhada carrying the following letter:

"To the respected and revered Swami Sahajanandji in Gadhada, please accept the humble greetings of Political Agent Blane from Rajkot. I am writing on behalf of Sir John Malcolm, the Governor of Mumbai. The Governor has traveled to Rajkot for official matters and would like to meet [you] in Rajkot. He is thoroughly impressed by [your] work in the region and would like to meet [you] before leaving for Mumbai. Please accept our invitation and ride to Rajkot upon receiving this letter."

The letter reached Gadhada in a few days. Shri Hari read the letter in the presence of all of the senior sadhus. Shri Hari's emaciated body was not fit to make the journey to Rajkot. He immediately sent a letter in response to the Governor stating that his health would not permit him to make the trip to Rajkot.

The Governor received the letter and was disappointed. He wrote to Shri Hari a second time. This time, he sent the letter with Pirbhai. Shri Hari read the second letter and showed it to the *sadgurus*. The decision was unanimous again; Shri Hari was physically unfit to make the journey to Rajkot.

After receiving an unfavorable response to his second letter, the Governor was distressed. He was in a hurry to leave for Mumbai, but he wanted to meet Swaminarayan before his departure. He consulted his advisors. One of them called upon a clerk in his service named Chhotamlal. Chhotamlal suggested that the Governor send a third letter with one of Shri Hari's devotees from Rajkot. The Governor summoned Bhimbhai and explained the urgency of the matter. Bhimbhai agreed to ride to Gadhada with the Governor's letter for Shri Hari.

Meanwhile, Shri Hari summoned the *sadgurus* and said, "We have declined the Governor's invitation twice. It would not be appropriate to say 'no' a third time. The Governor is preparing to send a third letter. I think it is best that we prepare to travel to Rajkot."

Muktanand Swami pleaded with Shri Hari, "Bhagwan, you can barely get up off the cot. You are in no condition to travel to Rajkot. Please reconsider your decision."

Shri Hari sat up in the cot with a sudden movement. The sadhus were

surprised. It was as if Shri Hari had cast aside his illness within seconds. Shri Hari began preparing for the journey. He stood up and changed his clothes. He ordered Mulji Brahmachari to prepare a full meal. Shri Hari ate a healthy portion of everything that Brahmachari prepared. The sadhus were astonished and assumed that Shri Hari had changed his mind about returning to Akshardham. Now, they too insisted on preparing for the ride to Rajkot. It was decided that Shri Hari would ride on the chariot recently gifted by King Gaekwad's minister. Shri Hari dressed in gold-threaded clothes and pearl necklaces. The sadhus and devotees stared at Shri Hari, filling their hearts with His charming *murti*. It had been months since they had seen Shri Hari don such attire. Dada Khachar's family was overjoyed and distributed sugar crystals in the village to celebrate Shri Hari's recovery.

News of Shri Hari's trip quickly spread through the satsang community. The devotees gathered outside their villages to catch a glimpse of Shri Hari riding on the chariot. Shri Hari stopped to have lunch at Oghad Khachar's house in Khambhala. He spent the first night in Vankiya at Moka Khachar's residence. The next morning, Shri Hari's procession carried on towards Rajkot. Shri Hari insisted on reaching Rajkot swiftly. It was as if he was on a schedule.

On the second day, Shri Hari met two sadhus returning from Rajkot. They handed Bhimbhai's letter to Shri Hari. Shri Hari looked at Muktanand Swami and remarked, "Swamiji, did I not tell you that a third letter was on its way?"

Shri Hari sent a messenger to respond to Bhimbhai's letter and to alert the Governor of Shri Hari's trip to Rajkot. Shri Hari spent the second night in Amreli. Devotees from the neighboring village of Khokhra came for Shri Hari's darshan. They asked Shri Hari for a favor, "Bhagwan, give us your illness. Please do not suffer anymore."

Shri Hari smiled and said, "What illness? I am not ill anymore."

Shri Hari passed through Aniyali, Atkot, and Sardhar before reaching the outskirts of Rajkot. A messenger notified the British officials of Shri Hari's arrival in the city. Shri Hari entered Rajkot in his chariot surrounded by singing and dancing sadhus and devotees. Sir John Malcolm personally took interest in preparing for Shri Hari's arrival. A battalion of the British

army lined the main street of Rajkot. They welcomed Shri Hari with firing rifles, bellowing horns, and pounding drums. The streets of Rajkot swarmed with city dwellers curious to have a glimpse of Bhagwan Swaminarayan. Shri Hari repeatedly raised his right hand to bless the crowds.

The Governor had prepared a bungalow for Shri Hari to stay in. He also inquired about special dietary restrictions. Shri Hari asked for that seva to be given to Bhimbhai and the other devotees in Rajkot. The Governor respected Shri Hari's *agna* and accommodated his request.

The Governor expressed his wish to meet Shri Hari privately. He requested that Shri Hari bring a few devotees the following day. On the morning of Friday, 26 February 1830,⁷ Shri Hari met Sir John Malcolm in the bungalow inside the fort's compound (see photo 42). Sir John Malcom bowed to Shri Hari and asked him to sit on a carved, ivory chair. Chairs for the sadhus and devotees were placed behind Shri Hari's seat.

The Governor spoke first, "Narayan Swami, my persistence may have caused you pain. I would like to apologize for the inconvenience. I only wish for your good health and wellbeing."

Shri Hari responded with a soft smile. "I received all three of your letters. Your kindness forced me to cast aside my illness and come to Rajkot. It was not an inconvenience."

The Governor asked Shri Hari to explain the fundamental principles of dharma, bhakti, *jnan*, and *vairagya*. He asked to learn more about the theological doctrine of the Swaminarayan Sampradaya. Shri Hari answered the Governor's questions thoroughly.

The Governor then asked, "Swaminarayanji, do you have any complaints against our policies? Are you and your disciples looked after under our rule? Is anyone troubling or harassing you?"

Shri Hari was surprised by the question. "Harassment? Your officers are extremely accommodating. They protect my devotees from abuse and sectarian violence. Please accept our gratitude for this."

The Governor continued to praise Shri Hari's work in Gujarat,

⁷ The events leading up to the meeting are documented in the following letter: Dave, Letter Sent by Sir John Malcolm: Meeting with. Vol. V 475-478.

Another account of the meeting described in the Harililamrut (9.7-10), a sampradayic text, shows that Shri Hari met Sir John Malcolm on Sunday, 28 February 1830.

“Swaminarayanji, your *sampradaya* has restored peace and tranquility in parts of Gujarat and Saurashtra where law has failed.”

Shri Hari explained that this was due to the establishment of *ekantik dharma*. The Governor asked for a small book that incorporated all of the tenets laid out by Shri Hari for his *bhaktas*. Shri Hari gifted the Governor a copy of the Shikshapatri. The Governor accepted it with both hands and humbly bowed to thank Shri Hari.⁸

The Governor called for his attendants and asked them to bring flower petals, vermillion powder, and rice. The Governor wanted to do Shri Hari’s puja according to the Hindu tradition. He spent the next several minutes performing puja of Shri Hari.

Shri Hari instructed Dada Khachar to gift the Governor a well-bred horse. The Governor hesitated, “Swaminarayanji, your Shikshapatri is the best possible gift for which one can ask. There is no need for another.” Shri Hari insisted, and the Governor eventually conceded.

Shri Hari and the Governor spent more than an hour discussing the importance of fair rule within a governing body, after which Shri Hari asked to take the Governor’s leave. The Governor insisted that Shri Hari stay for a few more days in Rajkot. “Swaminarayanji, stay for a few days. Tell us your plans for the future. Tell us if you have any difficulties. Name your enemies so that we may remove them from our land. Tell me what I can gift you.”

Shri Hari laughed gently and reasoned, “Governor Saheb, we have no enemies. No one troubles us nor is there any need to remove those that oppose us. I have no desire or passion for material objects either.”

The Governor was impressed with Shri Hari’s universal compassion and detachment. He bowed to Shri Hari again. Shri Hari was pleased with the Governor’s pure heart as well. He offered, “Saheb, ask us for anything. We shall grant you any boon you desire.”

The Governor asked selflessly, “Bless us, and our enemies.”

The horns and drums beat softly, as Sir John Malcolm walked with Shri Hari to the chariot and saw him off to Gadhada.

⁸ The Shikshapatri presented by Bhagwan Swaminarayan to Sir John Malcolm is currently preserved in the Bodleian Library at Oxford University. The events leading up to the meeting are documented in the following letter: Dave, Letter Sent by Sir John Malcolm: Meeting with. Vol. V. 475-478.

A Festival without Shri Hari in Vartal

Shri Hari sped towards Gadhada from Rajkot. The sadhus and devotees thought that the worst was behind them as Shri Hari was laughing, speaking, and giving them darshan just like before. Shri Hari, however, had different plans. Upon returning to Gadhada, he took up the illness again. He lay on his cot and refused to leave Akshar Ordi.

The Fuladol festival of 1830 was celebrated in Gadhada, but for the first time, no colored water or powder was used in the festivities. The environment was tense. Everyone was troubled by Shri Hari's failing health.

Shri Hari sent all of the sadhus and devotees to celebrate Ramnavmi (April) and the *murti-pratishtha* of Ranchodrai Dev in Vartal. The sadhus and devotees left with a heavy heart. None of them wanted to leave Shri Hari behind, but they could not disobey his *agna*.

The *murti-pratishtha* in Vartal was performed by Raghuvirji Maharaj. Though thousands of devotees gathered for the festival, the event lacked its usual level of pomp because of Shri Hari's absence.

Meanwhile, Shri Hari instructed the devotees and sadhus not to come to Gadhada without his direct *agna*. Despite this *agna*, Shri Hari was pleased to see Gunatitanand Swami in Gadhada. He asked about the mandir in Junagadh. Gunatitanand Swami expressed his concerns about Shri Hari's health as tears fell from his eyes. Shri Hari consoled him, "Gunatitanandji, do not worry. I will call you before I leave my mortal body. You are my Akshardham. I will always reside in you. Go to Junagadh and send Brahmanandji to Gadhada. Now, stop crying and bring some warm water. I want you to help me bathe."

Gunatitanand Swami rushed to bring warm water. He bathed Shri Hari and then departed for Junagadh in the afternoon.

The growth in Shri Hari's neck swelled to an enormous size and caused a great amount of pain. Shri Hari once again stopped eating solid foods and resorted to drinking milk and *raab*. The devotees and sadhus cried at the sight of Shri Hari's thin body. Shri Hari proclaimed, "I am Parabrahma. This body's pains do not bother me. I am unaffected by this growth. This body will perish one day. My true *swarup* is that of Purna Purushottam Narayan."

Talks of *atma* and Paramatma *jnan* comforted the devotees. Their faces

lit up when they heard Shri Hari speak with such vigor and confidence. Shri Hari was worrying about his devotees' emotional wellbeing in the midst of suffering from such a painful illness himself.

Brahmanand Swami in Gadhada

Gunatitanand Swami traveled to Junagadh by foot. He delivered Shri Hari's message to Brahmanand Swami, who then immediately mounted his mare and rode to Gadhada.

Shri Hari was thrilled to see Brahmanand Swami. The sadhus and devotees felt a renewed sense of hope now that Brahmanand Swami had arrived in Gadhada.

Despite his best efforts, Brahmanand Swami could not get Shri Hari to smile. After several failed attempts, Brahmanand Swami sat by Shri Hari's cot and wailed loudly. Shri Hari sat up and comforted the *sadguru* as if he was comforting his own child. Shri Hari caressed Brahmanand Swami's head and said, "Swamiji, you are a great poet and theologian. You know that this body is perishable. I must leave it at some point. The time has now come. The ideal aspirant thinks of himself to be *atma* and disregards his own body."

Shri Hari continued to converse with Brahmanand Swami about *atmajnan* for several minutes. Mulji Brahmachari brought food for Shri Hari. Shri Hari drank a small amount of *raab* and fell asleep.

Shri Hari's body burned with a fever. Brahmachari soaked small pieces of cloth in salt water and placed them on Shri Hari's arms, legs, and forehead. The fever receded after a few hours. Shri Hari covered his head and fell asleep again.

The bright, morning sun rose to the lively chirping of birds. Shri Hari, however, was still fast asleep, and no one dared to disturb him. Brahmanand Swami went inside Akshar Ordi and sang a few bhajans. Shri Hari opened his eyes and feebly smiled at Brahmanand Swami. The attendants bathed Shri Hari and served him lunch. Shri Hari ate a few bites and lay down on his cot again.

Dada's courtyard was filled with sadhus and devotees. They sang the Swaminarayan *dhun* through the day and into the night. Nityanand Swami placed Akshar Ordi under strict surveillance. Only Brahmanand

Swami and Muktanand Swami were allowed inside to see Shri Hari.

The Last Feast: Ladus

The ninety-year-old Atmanand Swami, a disciple of Ramanand Swami, came to Gadhada for Shri Hari's darshan. He spoke to Shri Hari and even tried to make him laugh. Shri Hari sat silently and barely glanced in Atmanand Swami's direction. Finally, Atmanand Swami threatened, "Prabhu, if you do not give up this illness and get well soon, I will give up my life too."

Shri Hari shuddered at the sound of such harsh words but remained silent. Atmanand Swami continued, "Bhagwan, you endured great hardship to establish *ekantik dharma* on Earth. If you want to leave, that is fine. However, none of us will live after you leave. There was a man named Pitambar who used to call himself Bhagwan. When he passed away, twenty-seven of his disciples burned themselves on the pyre with him. You have hundreds of thousands of disciples. If you leave your mortal body, we will all burn our bodies at the pyre."

Shri Hari looked at Atmanand Swami and sternly cautioned, "Atmanandji, Pitambar was a fraud. I am Purna Purushottam Narayan. I will not allow a single *jiva* to leave its body after I return to Akshardham. I am the controller of this universe."

Atmanand Swami realized that he allowed his emotions to cloud his judgment. He apologized profusely. Shri Hari smiled at him forgivingly.

Shri Hari's *charitras* grew intense as the days passed. Often, when the attendants brought a meal despite being told not to, Shri Hari would toss the *thal* on the floor. Once when Mulji Brahmachari brought a small gourd of *raab*, Shri Hari took the vessel in his hand and flung it across the room. Shri Hari forced the sadhus to bathe him with cold water. When the attendants refused, he would walk to a nearby well and try to draw water from the well by himself. He would often collapse from the effort and shout for the attendants. Brahmachari and Naja Jogia would come running and lift Shri Hari by his arms. Shri Hari would then yell at them to not touch him. At times, when the devotees cried, Shri Hari would snap, "I am still alive; I have not died just yet. Why are you crying?"

Despite the intensity of Shri Hari's *charitras*, the sadhus and devo-

tees served him with firm conviction and *mahima*. Shri Hari's *charitras* only increased their resolve in his *swarup* as Purna Purushottam Narayan.

Brahmanand Swami remained silent throughout such *charitras*. He would not interfere or attempt to control Shri Hari's responses. Cognizant of the fact that Shri Hari's *charitras* always had a purpose, Brahmanand Swami did not voice his opinions and did darshan from a distance.

One afternoon, Shri Hari called Viraktanand Swami and instructed him to prepare *ladus* for a feast. The *ladus* were to have 500 grams of ghee in each of them.

Brahmanand Swami tried to bargain with Shri Hari, "Prabhu, we will prepare the *ladus* if you..."

Shri Hari cut him off in mid-sentence, "Brahmanandji, I have made up my mind. I must return to Akshardham."

Brahmanand Swami looked down and assumed a befitting silence.

Later that afternoon, Muktanand Swami came to Shri Hari after having lunch. Shri Hari asked, "Muktanandji, did you eat the *ladus*?"

Muktanand Swami replied, "Yes, Prabhu. They were delicious."

"And, how much ghee did they have?" pressed Shri Hari.

"Shri Hari, I am sure that they had one-fourth of 500 grams."

Viraktanand Swami had prepared the *ladus* with less ghee thinking that Shri Hari's illness may have caused him to confuse the correct measurement of ghee. Shri Hari was disappointed and thought that Viraktanand Swami was being frugal. The next day Viraktanand Swami made *ladus* again, but this time with 500 grams of ghee in each of them. Shri Hari, however, remained unsatisfied. Ultimately, Viraktanand Swami suffered extreme depression after Shri Hari returned to Akshardham for having perceived *manushyabhav* in Shri Hari's *charitra*. Some *sampradayik* sources state that this *manushyabhav* and the remorse that stemmed from it caused Viraktanand Swami to lose his sanity.⁹

Sending Brahmanand Swami Away

For the past few weeks, Shri Hari shared mild laughs and *prasad* with Brahmanand Swami. Unbeknownst to Brahmanand Swami, such

⁹ This incident is described in detail in *Adhbhutanand Swamini Vato*.

memories came at a steep price. Shri Hari finally asked Brahmanand Swami to leave, “Swamiji, go to Junagadh and send Gunatitanand Swami.”

Brahmanand Swami realized that Shri Hari was planning to leave his mortal body. He could not argue, for he was in Shri Hari’s debt from the *prasad* and *thals* Shri Hari had shared with him. Tears started to flow from Brahmanand Swami’s eyes.

Shri Hari was pleased that Brahmanand Swami accepted his *agni*. He called for Laduba and asked her to prepare soft *khichdi*. Laduba returned with *puranpoli*, *ladus*, and *khichdi*. Shri Hari ate a few spoons of *khichdi* and passed the entire *thal* to Brahmanand Swami. Brahmanand Swami wept for he did not want to leave Shri Hari.

Brahmanand Swami started for Junagadh that afternoon. After passing a few villages, Brahmanand Swami could not travel any further. He sat on a boulder and cried with great sadness in his heart. After a few hours, he regained his composure and continued to Junagadh.

In Gadhada, Shri Hari waited for Gunatitanand Swami. He would not speak to anyone. The April sun was beating down on Gadhada, but Shri Hari had not drunk water in three days. Nityanand Swami entered the room with a small gourd of sweet *raab*. He helped Shri Hari sit up and held him upright. He slowly brought the gourd to Shri Hari’s lips. Shri Hari turned his face away and tightly sealed his lips. Shri Hari remained adamant and did not want to have even one sip.

Nityanand Swami placed the gourd down on a nearby table and started to cry loudly. All the attendants rushed into the room. Upset by this, Shri Hari retorted, “Why are you crying? I am not yet dead. Who has died?”

Nityanand Swami could not control his emotions, “Prabhu, you are our lifeline. How are we expected to remain poised when you are not eating, drinking, or speaking to any of us? You have completely shut us out.”

Shri Hari felt sorry for Nityanand Swami and the other sadhus. He stood up from the cot without assistance. Mulji Brahmachari bathed him. Shri Hari put on a yellow *pitambar* and ordered the *sankhya yogi* devotees to prepare a *thal* of numerous sweets and vegetables. Shri Hari had not eaten solid food in months. Today, however, Shri Hari sat up on the cot

and ate an entire meal for Nityanand Swami's sake. Dada Khachar was overjoyed and again distributed sugar crystals in the village.

Two Sabhas and Visiting Kakabhai

Shri Hari began to show signs of improvement. That evening, he expressed his wish to attend the evening *sabha*. Supported by two attendants, Shri Hari made his way to the satsang *sabha*. Halfway there, Shri Hari looked at the attendants and said, "When I was traveling as Nilkanth Varni, I performed austerities for months. My body was as slim as a stick, yet I still managed to travel the length and breadth of this land. I do not need your support."

Shri Hari immediately let go of the attendant's hands and walked swiftly towards the satsang *sabha*. The attendants watched with amazement and relished in Shri Hari's *charitra*.

The following morning, Shri Hari asked the attendants to take him to the mandir for darshan. A *sabha* had been organized in Panchuba's quarters in the *darbar*, and Shri Hari expressed his desire to attend it. Panchuba had secretly prayed to Shri Hari to sanctify her new residence, and Shri Hari omnisciently heard her prayer.

The senior sadhus sat in the front followed by the devotees. The female devotees sat outside the residence. Shri Hari addressed the *sabha*, "*Ekantik dharma* has been established by the building of mandirs and the creation of these shastras. Now, it is your responsibility to abide by its precepts and spread its teachings. My words in the *Vachanamrut* are equal to my *swarup*. Muktanandji, Nityanandji, and the others have worked hard to compile this sacred text. Read the shashtra with faith and diligence. Try to imbibe its message in your life. If one lives by the discourses delivered in the *Vachanamrut*, one will surely attain my Akshardham. I have repeated my philosophy often. One must become *brahmarup* and engage in Parabrahma's bhakti. I will always remain present on Earth through my Gunatit Sadhu. All of my sadhus and devotees must go to Junagadh for one month out of the year and have Gunatitanandji's *samagam*. If you are not able to go one year, one must go for two months the following year. You will experience my divine presence in Junagadh. I have decided to leave my mortal body now."

The *sabha* was silent except for the intermittent sobs heard from the sadhus and devotees.

Gopalanand Swami was the first to speak, “Prabhu, please forgive us for our sins. You are compassionate. Please liberate us in spite of our flaws.”

Shri Hari clarified, “Gopalanandji, you are speaking as if I am going somewhere. I was just testing the satsang community’s faith. I am not going anywhere.”

During the *sabha*, a messenger bearing a letter from Kakabhai from the village of Rojka entered the courtyard. Shri Hari asked for the message. After reading the letter, Shri Hari decided to travel to Rojka. Nityanand Swami tried to stop him. “Bhagwan, it is not wise to travel now. You are weak. Please rest for a few more days before leaving for Rojka.”

Shri Hari paused and explained, “A few days will be too late. Kakabhai is on his deathbed. He has asked for my darshan. I must go. Look at me. I am not ill at all. There is not a trace of illness in my body.”

Shri Hari then dressed in beautiful silk clothes and traveled to Rojka in a carriage. Kakabhai was both surprised and delighted to see Shri Hari. He tried to sit up on his cot, but Shri Hari stopped him. Shri Hari placed his hand on Kakabhai’s head and blessed the ailing *bhakta*.

Kakabhai exclaimed, “Prabhu, you suffered great inconveniences for my sake. You traveled to Rojka despite being ill. You truly nourish your devotee’s faith and bhakti. Prabhu, I want to offer my all at your feet—gold, money, property, and soul.”

Kakabhai then donated all of his possessions in Shri Hari’s service. Shri Hari blessed the senior devotee repeatedly. Kakabhai’s shirt had become damp from his tears of joy.

Shri Hari ate lunch in Rojka. Seeing the vitality in Shri Hari now made his illness from only three days ago seem like a distant memory. Although previously unable to speak or drink water, Shri Hari cast aside his illness for his *bhakta*.

Meeting Gunatitanand Swami

On his way to Junagadh, Brahmanand Swami witnessed a herd of deer

run across his path, a sight which signifies a bad omen. He immediately began to cry loudly, for he knew this was a sign that Shri Hari would soon return to his abode.

Brahmanand Swami arrived in Junagadh and described Shri Hari's condition. He could barely relay the message as he cried each time he attempted to speak. Gunatitanand Swami gave him cold water and comforted him. Brahmanand Swami cautioned, "Gunatitanandji, rush to Gadhada. Shri Hari is waiting for you. He will not keep his mortal body for much longer."

Gunatitanand Swami left Junagadh immediately. He traveled tirelessly and arrived in Gadhada in a few days. The sadhus and devotees were relieved to see Gunatitanand Swami, hopeful that Gunatitanand Swami would be able to shake Shri Hari's resolve.

Gopalanand Swami sat with Gunatitanand Swami and described Shri Hari's present health condition. Shri Hari had been suffering from a severe fever for the last three days. He was too weak to speak or eat.

Gunatitanand Swami went to Akshar Ordi. Sura Khachar opened the door to the room and poked his head in. Shri Hari was annoyed to see Sura Khachar. Sura Khachar interrupted Shri Hari's rant and announced, "Gunatitanand Swami has arrived from Junagadh."

Shri Hari's demeanor immediately changed. He threw the blanket off his legs, sat up in bed, and then stood up. Gunatitanand Swami entered the room and did *dandavats* to Shri Hari. Shri Hari embraced Gunatitanand Swami and touched his head.

Gunatitanand Swami was heartbroken to see Shri Hari's significantly deteriorated physical condition. Even though he had heard Brahmanand Swami and Gopalanand Swami's descriptions, seeing Shri Hari's emaciated body was difficult. Shri Hari read his mind and explained, "Swamiji, you know that I am Parabrahma and that you are my Akshardham. I cannot be separated from you. Even when I leave my mortal body, I will always be present through you. Now, stop crying. I want to eat today. Bring a *thal*."

Gunatitanand Swami returned with several items in a large dish. Shri Hari allowed Gunatitanand Swami to feed him with his hands. Shri Hari gave the rest of the *thal* as *prasad* to Gunatitanand Swami.

After lunch, Shri Hari spoke to Gunatitanand Swami and Gopalanand Swami, "The time has come. I will not remain on Earth through my mortal body. Now, I will reside in Junagadh for a few decades."

Gopalanand Swami interrupted, "Oh Compassionate One, please send Gunatitanand Swami away to Junagadh. His attachment to you is incomparable. He will not be able to bear your departure to Akshardham."

Shri Hari laughed faintly. "Gopalanandji, Gunatitanandji is my Akshardham. I am not separate from him for even a second. He knows where I have come from and where I am returning to. I will not leave him for even a second. I will always be present through him."

Gopalanand Swami fully grasped the true nature of Shri Hari and Gunatitanand Swami's relationship. There were several senior sadhus but only one Gunatit Sadhu, one Akshardham, one Aksharbrahma, one Gunatitanand Swami.

Shri Hari's Last Words, His Last Gift

Shri Hari asked Gopalanand Swami to organize a *sabha* on 31 May 1830. All of the sadhus and devotees in Gadhada and the neighboring villages were invited. Shri Hari sat on a cot supported by pillows. His body was weak but his voice powerful.

"I have fulfilled the six reasons for manifesting on Earth. All of the previous avatars manifested on Earth for a particular cause or event. I manifested on Earth to eradicate the illusion that envelops countless jivas. I manifested on Earth to liberate these countless souls and take them to Akshardham. I will continue my work on Earth through the Gunatit Sadhu, my Aksharbrahma. The Aksharbrahma-Parabrahma *upasana* is the only means of *moksha*. By becoming *brahmarup* and engaging in Parabrahma's *bhakti*, your jivas will attain *moksha*. I have repeated this doctrine several times. Engrave it in your hearts forever. If you would like to make this your last birth, do not waver from this path that I have prescribed for all of my sadhus and devotees. Gunatitanand Swami is my Akshardham. Through his *samagam*, you will become free of all desires and instincts, and you will become *brahmarup*. I always reside in him. Remember this for as long as you live. Today is the ninth day of the bright

half of the month of Jeth (May-June). Tomorrow, I will leave my mortal body. No one is to even think about leaving their mortal bodies after I leave mine. This is my *agnा*."

The *sabha* sat in complete silence. Somewhere in the *sabha*, an anonymous devotee interrupted the silence with a loud sigh.

Shri Hari immediately asked, "Who just sighed?"

There was no response. Shri Hari continued, "This is not the time to mourn. I am not leaving. I will always be present through the Gunatit Sadhu. I am Purna Purushottam Narayan. I am beyond the bounds of life and death. Leaving this mortal body is simply another *charitra*."

That afternoon, Shri Hari had lunch with Gunatitanand Swami. Gunatitanand Swami placed small pieces of food into Shri Hari's mouth. Shri Hari ate a few bites and gave the rest of the *thal* to Gunatitanand Swami. Gunatitanand Swami stayed with Shri Hari in Akshar Ordi the entire day.

That evening, Shri Hari called a meeting of the senior sadhus and Ladha Thakkar, Dada Khachar's administrator. Shri Hari spoke solemnly, "How are our finances, Ladha? There are parts of the mandir that are incomplete. We have to finish them." Shri Hari then looked at the senior sadhus and gave them an *agnा* to finish the construction of the mandir.

Ladha interrupted, "Bhagwan, this will have to wait. We are in debt. We need to pay the debt off first."

Shri Hari asked, "How much do we owe to our creditors?"

"Approximately 1,500 rupees."

Shri Hari confidently advised, "That is it? I will have that paid off right away."

A *parshad* interrupted the meeting to announce the arrival of Khengarjibhai of Kholdiyad. Shri Hari asked the *parshad* to bring Khengarjibhai inside. The *bhakta* came into the room with a tray of sandalwood paste, flowers, and a small container.

Shri Hari smiled at Khengarjibhai and said, "Come in! I will let you smear sandalwood paste on me."

Muktanand Swami interjected, "Khengarjibhai, Shri Hari is not well. Please only smear the paste on his forehead."

However, Shri Hari was in a generous mood. “No, Khengarjibhai’s bhakti must be rewarded. You may smear the paste on my entire body.”

Khengarjibhai and the senior sadhus applied the sandalwood paste to Shri Hari’s body. Shri Hari looked at Khengarjibhai and asked, “Bhaktaraj, what is in that small container?”

Khengarjibhai replied, “Prabhu, this is my *seva*. It is customary to offer *seva* after completing your puja.”

Shri Hari inquired further, “How much is it?”

“Approximately 1,500 rupees.”

Shri Hari turned his head and looked at Ladha Thakkar, who was dumbfounded by this fortunate series of events. Shri Hari cleared the debt from the construction costs of the mandir in Gadhada the day before he returned to Akshardham.

That night, Gunatitanand Swami sat with Shri Hari in Akshar Ordi. Shri Hari admitted, “Swami, I have not been able to spread the *mahima* of my *swarup* to the extent that I would have liked. This is your primary responsibility. Tell the sadhus and devotees that Bhagwan Swaminarayan is Parabrahma and that you are Aksharbrahma. Share this principle openly with the entire satsang community. I leave this responsibility on your shoulders. Look after the sadhus and devotees.”

Tears fell from Gunatitanand Swami’s eyes as he pleaded, “Shri Hari, please stay with me.”

Shri Hari smiled faintly and said, “Swami, *Mithaa vahala kem visaru maaru tam thi baandhel tan ho*,” which translates to, “Oh sweet friend, how can I forget you? My [eternal] body is attached to yours.”

Gopalanand Swami was standing in the doorway and witnessed this exchange. Shri Hari called him and instructed, “Gopalanandji, look after my Akshardham. You have understood his *mahima* and *swarup*. Send other sadhus and devotees to Junagadh. Help in spreading the Aksharbrahma-Parabrahma *upasana*. This is my final *agnा* for you.”

Gopalanand Swami respectfully accepted Shri Hari’s *agnा*.

Purna Purushottam Narayan Returns to Akshardham

On Tuesday, 1 June 1830, the morning sun rose lacking its usual luster. The monsoon clouds filtered the few sun rays on this dreary,

summer day. The clouds grumbled, and flashes of light streaked across the otherwise dark sky. The birds frantically circled the skies adding to the despair that was now tightening its clasp on Gadhada and on all of material existence. Purna Purushottam Narayan Bhagwan Swaminarayan decided to leave his mortal body and return to Akshardham.

The chants of the Swaminarayan *dhun* emanating from different quarters of Dada Khachar's residence wove a blanket of tranquility, calming the tension in the air. Shri Hari awoke that morning to Premanand Swami's *sarangi* wailing morning ragas of sorrow. Shri Hari rose from His cot with the help of the attendants and completed his morning routine. He was calm and unaffected by the dismay that enveloped the rest of creation. He smiled at the sadhus and *parshads* with whom his eyes met. Mulji Brahmachari called Gunatitanand Swami to feed Shri Hari what would be his last meal. Gunatitanand Swami lovingly fed Bhagwan. Surprisingly, Shri Hari ate everything Gunatitanand Swami offered, accepting his *bhakta*'s final offerings.

After the meal, Shri Hari spoke to Gunatitanand Swami, "Swamiji, the time has come. I will return to my Akshardham today. I have increased your years on Earth. Complete the tasks that I leave on your shoulders. Spread the Aksharbrahma-Parabrahma *upasana*. Continue to liberate the *jivas* bound by the chains of *maya*. Through your *samagam*, they will recognize their own *swarup* and my *mahima*. I am not leaving this world. I will now remain present on Earth through you. I will remain present on Earth in Junagadh."

Shri Hari hesitated for a moment. After all, Bhagwan was dependent on his *bhakta* as well. "Gunatitanandji, please allow me to leave this mortal body now."

Gunatitanand Swami understood Shri Hari's will and could not transgress it. Tears welled up in his eyes. He opened his mouth to speak, but the words were caught somewhere between his heart and mouth. After a few minutes, Gunatitanand Swami folded his hands and said, "As you wish, Bhagwan. I am but your servant."

Gunatitanand Swami stood up to leave the room, but Shri Hari stopped him. "Swami, stay with me. Send a *parshad* to call Gopalanandji, Nityanandji, Shukanandji, and the rest of the senior sadhus."

The senior sadhus gathered around Shri Hari's cot. Shri Hari turned to Brahmachari and asked him to smear the ground at a particular spot in Akshar Ordi with cow dung. Brahmachari knew that this action signified the purification of the atmosphere.¹⁰ His body started to tremble and his heart beat rapidly. He looked for reasons to delay following his Bhagwan's *agni*. Shri Hari was touched by Brahmachari's love, yet he insisted that Brahmachari purify the room.

After the floor was smeared with cow dung, Shri Hari stepped outside of Akshar Ordi and gave darshan to the thousands of sadhus and devotees who had gathered in Dada's courtyard. The sound of the Swaminarayan *dhun* was deafening. It softened for a moment as Shri Hari raised his right hand to bless the sadhus and devotees. It then picked up with renewed vigor as Shri Hari turned around and walked away.

A week ago, Shri Hari had called Nishkulananand Swami and instructed him to build a palanquin to carry his mortal body to the cremation pyre. Nishkulananand Swami showed the palanquin to Shri Hari. Pleased by Nishkulananand Swami's bhakti and admirable craftsmanship, Shri Hari blessed the skilled sadhu with an embrace. Nishkulananand Swami's sobs were muffled in Shri Hari's tight hold.

Shri Hari returned to Akshar Ordi. He looked around the room and realized that many of the sadhus would lose their composure the moment he breathed his last. Shri Hari calmed their minds and hearts with his divine prowess. The mood in the room lightened, assuming an eerie peacefulness. *Kal* trembled in the far corner of Akshar Ordi, dreading having to witness Shri Hari's return to Akshardham and fearing one of the senior sadhus would curse him for Shri Hari's decision.

Shri Hari stood up with the help of two attendants. He folded his hands and looked around the room one last time. He folded his hands and said, "Jay Swaminarayan."

The sadhus in the room echoed with their own "Jay Swaminarayan".

¹⁰ Cow dung is used for various Hindu rituals, such as *yagnas*, as it creates a pure and holy atmosphere when burnt. Its fumes are a powerful disinfectant and anti-pollutant. For this reason, it was used to purify the area around Shri Hari before he left his mortal body.

With the sun overhead in the auspicious *madhyahan* position,¹¹ Shri Hari sat facing north on a bed of *darbha* grass¹² laid out on the ground. It was then, in the presence of the sadhus and devotees assembled in Gadhada and the *aksharmuktas* and devas gathered in the sky, and with his Aksharbrahma Gunatitanand Swami by his side, Bhagwan Swaminarayan left his mortal body of his own accord and returned to Akshardham at the age of forty-nine.

The sadhus and *parshads* in Akshar Ordi stopped breathing for a moment. Their breath returned at the sound of the heart-wrenching cry let out by Nityanand Swami. Thousands of devotees in Dada's courtyard echoed the cry with their own wails. Gadhada shook from the sound of these sobs.

The entire village was devastated by the news of Shri Hari's *svadhamgaman*. Children stopped playing. Merchants closed their doors and refused to conduct business. Women suspended their daily chores. Cows ceased giving milk. Birds sat in their nests grounded. And, even Gopinathji's *murti* in the central shrine of the mandir withheld the usual splendor of its darshan, hiding the sorrow on its face from the devotees.

The senior sadhus sat frozen in Akshar Ordi. Many of them cried, and others fainted. After a few minutes, Gopalanand Swami turned to Gunatitanand Swami and said, "Swamiji, the rest of the sadhus believe that Shri Hari has left this Earth. You and I both know that is not true. Let us prepare for the cremation rites of Shri Hari's mortal body."

Gopalanand Swami supervised the arrangements for Shri Hari's last rites. Shri Hari's body was bathed with water from the Ghela River. After having dried Shri Hari's body, Brahmachari dressed Shri Hari for the last time. Bhagwan Swaminarayan preferred to wear white. Brahmachari picked out a pair of white garments and dressed Shri Hari's body, stopping only to wipe his own tears. A garland of flowers was placed around Shri

11 The *madhyahan* position is the position of the sun, approximately at noon, when it is directly overhead in the sky. It is considered to be the most auspicious moment during the day, especially for a *jiva* to leave the world.

12 *Darbha* grass is a special type of grass used in Hindu rituals. It is considered to be extremely pure. It is also used during eclipses, or *grahans*, to keep grains and other food items pure and untouched by the harmful effects of the eclipsing sun or moon.

Hari's neck. The sadhus and the senior devotees did puja of Shri Hari's body. Shri Hari's body was placed on the palanquin to grace the streets of Gadhada for the last time. Gopalanand Swami, Nityanand Swami, Ayodhyaprasadji, Raghuvirji Maharaj, Mayaram Bhatt, and Dinanath Bhatt carried the palanquin through the village. Tens of thousands of devotees gathered for Shri Hari's darshan. The villagers showered flowers and vermillion powder from rooftops and balconies. It was as if the devas themselves were painting the ground with shades of red, white, orange, and pink as their final offerings to Shri Hari's mortal body.

The procession passed through the village and came to an end at Lakshmi Vadi, outside of Nishkulanan Swami's quarters. Gopalanand Swami sprinkled water from the Ghela River to purify the ground.¹³ Tall bamboo wood was constructed around the funeral pyre to act as a barrier between the devastated devotees and the burning pyre. The pyre was stacked with tulsi wood and sandalwood logs. Gopalanand Swami again took charge and placed Shri Hari's mortal body on the pyre. He held Raghuvirji and Ayodhyaprasadji's hands and led them to set fire to the pyre. In just a few moments, Shri Hari's mortal body made of the five natural elements fused back into air, wind, water, space, and earth. The elements readily accepted Shri Hari's mortal body as a form of *prasad*.

The satsang community was shattered. Reality had settled in that Shri Hari's mortal body was no more. Somla Khachar and Sura Khachar held onto Dada's shoulders, but Dada was shaking. His eyes were red and his face flushed. He grew weary of hearing everyone asking him to stay calm. Such requests failed to realize that Shri Hari meant more to Dada; Shri Hari was a father to Dada.

Dada could not tolerate it any longer. He shook free from the *kshatriya* devotees' grip and made a crazed dash towards the blazing pyre. He climbed over the bamboo walls and stared at the pyre for a second. Just as he was about to plunge into the flames, Gopalanand Swami grabbed Dada's torso. Gopalanand Swami held onto Dada with all his strength. Dada finally relented and fell into Gopalanand Swami's arms. Gopalanand

13 Nityanand Swami instructed the Acharyas to create a memorial at Lakshmi Vadi (see photo 44) and to install a consecrated form of Shri Hari's *charnarvind*.

Swami caressed the crying *kshatriya*'s head. He consoled him, "Shri Hari is waiting for you under the tree in your courtyard. Come with me. I will take you there."

Dada rushed to the courtyard, and to his surprise, Shri Hari was smiling at him from under the tree. Dada ran to touch Shri Hari's feet. Shri Hari placed his hand on Dada's head and said, "Dada, why are you crying? I have not left. I am present on Earth through my Gunatit Sadhu. I am present in the hearts of devotees such as you. I am present in Gadhada. I am present in every wood beam and brick stone in your residence. I am present in Gopinathji's *murti*. I am present wherever you look for me. I will always give you darshan." Saying this, Shri Hari placed a garland of red roses around Dada's neck and disappeared.

The sadhus and devotees were puzzled to see a garland of red roses around Dada's neck. Dada narrated the incident to them, providing a momentary reprieve of joy on this otherwise gloomy day.

Brahmachari returned to the courtyard. He paced around the courtyard aimlessly. What was he to do? Who would he cook for? Whose feet would he massage? Who would he attend to? How would he spend the rest of his days? These questions were gnawing away at Brahmachari. He started mumbling to himself. His body shook uncontrollably and burned with a fever caused by the separation from his beloved Shri Hari. The sadhus rushed to call Gopalanand Swami. "Swamiji, Brahmachari is losing his sanity. He will not survive until the end of the day. Please calm him down."

Gopalanand Swami rushed to the courtyard and grabbed Brahmachari's wrist. "Mulji, come with me. Bhagwan is asking for you in Akshar Ordi."

Brahmachari wailed even louder, "Swamiji, why would I ever set foot inside Akshar Ordi again? It will only remind me of Shri Hari's absence from my life."

Gopalanand Swami slowly pushed Brahmachari towards Akshar Ordi. Brahmachari was startled by the sight of Shri Hari sitting on the cot. Shri Hari stood up and tightly embraced Brahmachari. This divine embrace pacified Brahmachari's heart and mind. Shri Hari explained, "Mulji, you have spent so much time with me, yet you think of me as a mere mortal?

I live through my Gunatit Sadhu. I have not gone anywhere.”

Brahmachari shook free from Shri Hari’s embrace and attempted to grab his arm to help him onto the cot. However, his hand struck air. Shri Hari had disappeared.

This divine darshan was enough to convince Brahmachari and the others that Shri Hari would never leave. Shri Hari was always present in the hearts of his devotees. More significantly, Shri Hari was eternally present through his Gunatit Sadhu.

In just forty-nine years, of which only thirty were spent in Gujarat, Shri Hari established *ekantik dharma* through the construction of mandirs, the creation of shastras, and the proliferation of the Aksharbrahma-Parabrahma *upasana*. Shri Hari brought about a wave of spiritual and social reform that would be celebrated and appreciated, if not emulated, by others for centuries to come. Purna Purushottam Narayan Bhagwan Swaminarayan manifested on Earth for a mere forty-nine years; however, his legacy of bhakti, dharma, *atmajnan*, and *vairagya* would live on through the Gunatit Sadhu for eternity.

Shri Hari Present on Earth Forever

A few days after Shri Hari’s *svadhamgaman*, Gunatitanand Swami was walking to the fields for his morning ablutions. He noticed short, green grass gently dallying in the wind. It was growing on both sides of a flowing creek. He immediately thought, “The grass’ life depends on water. Shri Hari was my life, and he has now left us...”

With this thought, Gunatitanand Swami lost consciousness and stumbled to the ground. Shri Hari immediately appeared before him and gently stirred him. “Swamiji, why have you fainted? Have I really left you? I eternally reside within you. I eternally reside within you. I eternally reside within you!”¹⁴

Shri Hari took Gunatitanand Swami into his arms. Shri Hari’s touch quelled the fire of separation burning inside Gunatitanand Swami’s heart.

After a few days, Gunatitanand Swami returned to Junagadh

¹⁴ Shri Hari’s discussion with Gunantitanand Swami is further verified through the following source: Narayanpriyadasji, Purani, and Purani Haripriyadasji. *Shri Harinu Sachitra Jivancharitra*. Ahmedabad: Govindbhai Kalyanjibhai Parekh, 1974.

and followed Shri Hari's *agna* until he breathed his last. Junagadh became a pilgrimage site within the *sampradaya*. Gopalanand Swami, Nityanand Swami, and Shukanand Swami would visit Junagadh to listen to Gunatitanand Swami's *katha*. Gopalanand Swami sent a total of 110 of his sadhus and householder disciples to Junagadh and instructed them to follow Gunatitanand Swami's *agna*. Gopalanand Swami once told his disciple Malji Soni that, "Gunatitanand Swami is the manifest form of Akshardham. He is Aksharbrahma incarnate. Go to Junagadh and listen to his *katha*. Engage in his *samagam*. He will rid you of your vices and base desires. He will take you to Shri Hari in Akshardham."¹⁵

Also in praise of Gunatitanand Swami, Shukanand Swami often said, "I was one of the compilers of the Vachanamrut. I gave that task my heart and soul, but I only understood Shri Hari's theological doctrine after hearing Gunatitanandji explain it."

Though the sadhus and devotees did not publicly submit to their opinions, they felt that Gunatitanand Swami was the Gunatit Sadhu about whom Shri Hari so often spoke. Many of the mandirs built in the nineteenth century in the Sorath region stand as a testament to this widespread philosophy. These mandirs have *murtis* of Bhagwan Swaminarayan and Gunatitanand Swami installed side by side. Under Gunatitanand Swami's *murti*, the inscription reads 'Mul Aksharmurti Gunatitanand Swami'. Inscriptions in many of these mandirs were later removed.

Over the years, it became evident that Shri Hari's spiritual successor was the Gunatit Sadhu, and the Dharmakul was only an administrative power governing each of the *gadis* in Vartal and Ahmedabad. The idea was not solidified until Pragji Bhakta, or Bhagatji Maharaj (1829-1897 CE), took it upon himself to spread the glory of Aksharbrahma Gunatitanand Swami. Though he was a householder devotee, Bhagatji Maharaj's life and spiritual elevation attracted thousands of devotees

¹⁵ Brahmaśwarup Shastriji Maharaj, the founder of Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha and the third spiritual successor of Bhagwan Swaminarayan, went to Bhoika and heard Malji Soni narrate this incident himself, deepening his conviction in the Akshar-Purushottam *upasana*.

and senior sadhus from both the Vartal and Ahmedabad *gadis* to relish in his *samagam*. Bhagatji Maharaj tolerated an unfathomable amount of insult and abuse for one reason: to spread Shri Hari's Aksharbrahma-Parabrahma doctrine.

Sadhu Yagnapurushdas, or Shastriji Maharaj (1865-1951 CE), gravitated towards Bhagatji Maharaj and the beliefs he propounded. Shastriji Maharaj was acclaimed as one of the brightest scholars and administrators within the Vartal *gadi* sadhu community. Despite receiving offers to travel with Acharya Viharilalji Maharaj, serve with Gordhandas Kothari, and become a *sadguru*, Shastriji Maharaj accepted Bhagatji Maharaj's *agna* to advocate the Aksharbrahma-Parabrahma doctrine. After suffering a great deal of physical torture and verbal abuse at the hands of envious individuals, Shastriji Maharaj stood by Shri Hari's last wish: to further clarify his own *swarup's mahima* and the *mahima* of his Gunatit Sadhu. When it was no longer safe to continue to follow Bhagatji Maharaj's *agna* from within the Vartal *gadi*, Shastriji Maharaj left Vartal with five sadhus and a handful of devotees in 1905. In 1907, he established the Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha by building the first mandir in the village of Bochasan. Shastriji Maharaj built mandirs as a tribute to the Aksharbrahma-Parabrahma doctrine. The central shrine in these mandirs glow with the radiance of Bhagwan Swaminarayan and his Gunatit Sadhu.

Shastriji Maharaj's disciple Sadhu Jnanjivandas, or Yogiji Maharaj (1892-1971 CE), was Bhagwan Swaminarayan's fourth spiritual successor. The epitome of saintliness, Yogiji Maharaj was often praised as the embodiment of innocence, tolerance, positivity, and bhakti. As Peter Brent, a British scholar, once observed in Gondal, "Yogiji Maharaj was as if an enormous, innocent baby." Such virtues fueled the growth of the satsang community around the world. Yogiji Maharaj constructed mandirs in Africa and England, spreading the Aksharbrahma-Parabrahma doctrine to distant lands.

Bhagwan Swaminarayan's fifth and current spiritual successor, Shastri Narayanswarupdas, or Pragat BrahmaSwarup Pramukh Swami Maharaj (1921-present), has spread the Aksharbrahma-Parabrahma

doctrine to five continents through the construction of over 1,100 mandirs and the selfless sacrifice of over 900 sadhus and millions of householder devotees. Pramukh Swami Maharaj's universal love and humility have touched the hearts of millions of people from all walks of life. His determination to lead by example even at the age of ninety-two illustrates his unflinching union with the principles of *ekantik dharma* established by Bhagwan Swaminarayan. Pramukh Swami Maharaj's life personifies the Aksharbrahma-Parabrahma doctrine—he guides countless *jivas* on the path to *moksha* by teaching and exemplifying the ideals of *dharma*, *bhakti*, *atmajnan*, and *vairagya*.

In the *Satsangijivanam*, written by Shatanand Muni, in verse 5:68:72, the dialogue between Suvrat Muni and King Pratapsingh further clarifies the purpose of this hagiographical rendition of Bhagwan Swaminarayan's life: "Oh King, know the birth and death of this eternal Bhagwan on Earth as merely part of his divine *lila charitras*."

This notion, I believe, is the primary, if not only, purpose of this hagiography. In *Vachanamrut Gadhada II 10*, Bhagwan Swaminarayan says that a true devotee does not perceive *manushyabhav* in Bhagwan's worldly or mortal *charitras*. Progress on the path to *moksha* is to understand each of Shri Hari and his Gunatit Sadhus' *charitras* as completely divine. Though these *charitras* appear no different than our own actions, it is this author's understanding that these *charitras* are nothing like ours—for Aksharbrahma and Parabrahma are above *maya*. Perceiving *manushyabhav* in Bhagwan and his Gunatit Sadhu is certainly the fastest way to wander from the path to *moksha*. And, relishing in their divine *charitras* is certainly the surest way to indulge in the bliss and serenity of this world and the next.

A beautiful prayer embedded in one of Premanand Swami's *bhakti pads* comes to mind:¹⁶

"My senses are bound by *maya*. I lack the ability to see past its influence. All I see in you, my beloved, is tainted by this influence. Therefore, live in my eyes. Purify my vision so that I may be able to see Your true *swarup*; so that I may enjoy the true divinity of Your *charitras*; so that my love for You strengthens

¹⁶ *Premanand Kavya*, verse 1023.

indifferently each time I witness your love, anger, and injustice towards me....”

It is with this prayer that I leave the reader to immerse him or herself in the stories of Shri Hari’s *charitras*, again and again. I hope that the peace and serenity that have been the resting place for the author’s mind and soul, while writing this hagiography, are that which accompany the reader through his or her spiritual journey.

9

Stories of His Word

What is this discourse which I have delivered before you like? I have delivered it having heard and having extracted the essence from the Vedas, the [other] shastras, the Puranas, and all other words on this Earth pertaining to liberation. This is the most profound and fundamental principle; it is the essence of all essences. For all those who have previously attained liberation, for all those who will attain it in the future, and for all those who are presently treading the path of liberation, this discourse is like a lifeline.

- **Vachanamrut Gadhada II-28,**
Bhagwan Swaminarayan (1781-1830)

Though the Vachanamrut is not a *charitra granth* or a hagiography, every word in the Vachanamrut shares one of Bhagwan Swaminarayan's stories, a story of *jnan*, *upasana*, *bhakti*, and *ekantik dharma*, a story of *seva*, *nishtha*, and *mahima*, or a story of success and *moksha*. The Vachanamrut is a guidebook which helps us understand Bhagwan Swaminarayan's *charitras* and realize his true *swarup*.

Vachanamrut loosely translates to 'the nectar of [Bhagwan Swaminarayan's] words of wisdom.' It records the oral exchanges between Bhagwan Swaminarayan and his sadhu and householder devotees. The

text includes dialogue occurring between the years of 1820 and 1830 primarily in the villages of Gadhada, Sarangpur, Kariyani, Panchala, Vartal, Loya, Ahmedabad, and Jetalpur. The text was compiled by Muktanand Swami, Gopalanand Swami, Nityanand Swami, and Shukanand Swami.¹ In December of 1820, the draft manuscript of the Vachanamrut was shown to Bhagwan Swaminarayan, as documented in Vachanamrut Loya 7.

The text explicates Bhagwan Swaminarayan's Aksharbrahma-Parabrahma philosophy in a clear and accessible manner. It enables the reader to easily digest complicated theological ideologies such as *atmajnan*, *ekantik dharma*, *bhakti*, *nishchay*, *mahima* of the Gunatit Sadhu, the process and hierarchy of creation, and *swarup nishta*. Bhagwan Swaminarayan explains that the Vachanamrut is equivalent to His divine *swarup*. The Vachanamrut quotes verses from the Vedas, Upanishads, Shrimad Bhagavad Gita, Brahma Sutras, Shrimad Bhagavata Purana, and several dharma shastras. Numerous discourses recorded in the Vachanamrut reference the *bhakti pads* written by Tulsidas, Surdas, Kabir, Narsinh Mehta, and Mirabai. The text provides historical, social, and political contexts by including the date, time, and geographical location of the dialogue, among other details, in the introductory paragraph of each discourse. The detail and clarity of the Vachanamrut also illustrates Bhagwan Swaminarayan's insightful command of various other theological doctrines as cited in classical and vernacular texts. Most importantly, it is a testament to Bhagwan Swaminarayan's ability to explain and reiterate these complex theological doctrines in a simple manner with examples from everyday life.

For the readers' benefit, Pujya Ishwarcharan Swami has selected several droplets of this nectar in the form of excerpts, frequently cited by Yogiji Maharaj and Pramukh Swami Maharaj from the Vachanamrut. The purpose of presenting a taste of this nectar here is to inspire the reader to further explore the Vachanamrut and secondary literature about the text in thorough detail.² As Premanand Swami states in one of his bhakti

1 Some *sampradayik* sources also include Brahmanand Swami as one of the compilers of the Vachanamrut.

2 For a complete, introductory study of the Vachanamrut in English, refer to Sadhu Mukundcharandas' *Handbook to the Vachanamrut* (Ahmedabad, 2005), and for further study in Gujarati, refer to Sadhu Brahmadarshandas' *Vachanamrut Rahasya I-V* (Ahmedabad, 2005).

pads, familiarity with the Vachanamrut and Bhagwan Swaminarayan's discourses will expedite the aspirants' journey to Akshardham. The nectar of Bhagwan Swaminarayan's words grants immortality to the spiritual aspirant. The Vachanamrut is essential to inspiring, guiding, and ultimately attaining one's own success story on the spiritual path.

Excerpts from the Vachanamrut³

There is no greater attainment for a person whose mind's *vrutti* is constantly focused on the form of Bhagwan, because the form of Bhagwan is like a *chintamani*.

- **Gadhada I 1**

Maya is anything that obstructs a devotee of Bhagwan while meditating on Bhagwan's form.

- **Gadhada I 1**

In this satsang fellowship, a person who is wise increasingly finds flaws within himself and perceives virtues in Bhagwan and His devotees. Moreover, when Bhagwan and His *sant* utter harsh words of advice for his own benefit, he accepts them as beneficial and is not hurt by them. Such a person steadily attains greatness in satsang.

- **Gadhada I 6**

The [householder] also realizes, "The profound association of the *sant* that I have attained is like a magnificent *chintamani* and a *kalpavruksh*. My wealth, property, sons, and daughters are all merely like a dream, whereas the profound association of the *sant* that I have attained is the only true benefit of life."

- **Gadhada I 14**

³ The English translation of the excerpts are taken from the Vachanamrut (Ahmedabad, 2001) published by Swaminarayan Aksharpith. I am indebted to the sadhus involved in the translation project for their diligent effort over several years. I have replaced the word 'God' in the original translation with 'Bhagwan' to maintain consistency with the other chapters in this publication. Minor formatting changes have also been implemented to maintain consistency with the other chapters in the publication.

Now, what is this negative influence in satsang? Well, those who preach in satsang speak discouragingly. That is the negative influence in satsang. What do they say? They say, "Who can follow Bhagwan's commands thoroughly? Who can possibly observe the religious vows perfectly? No one. Therefore, we should observe only as much as we possibly can. After all, Bhagwan is the redeemer of even the wicked, and so He will grant liberation to us as well." Moreover, they say, "Attempting to behold Bhagwan's form in the heart is not possible by one's own efforts. It is only beheld by those whom Bhagwan helps out of compassion." With such complacent words, they discourage others from practicing dharma, *jnan*, *vairagya*, *bhakti*, and other spiritual endeavors for pleasing Bhagwan. Therefore, from this day onwards, no one in our satsang fellowship should utter such discouraging words. Instead, always speak courageously. Those who do speak such words should be known as impotents. In fact, on days when one speaks such discouraging words, one should observe a fast.

- **Gadhada I 17**

If one indulges only in pure *vishays* through the five *indriyas*, then one's *antahkaran* becomes pure. If the *antahkaran* becomes pure, one will be able to constantly remember Bhagwan. However, if the objects of indulgence of even just one of the five *indriyas* [are] impure, the *antahkaran* will also become impure. Therefore, the sole cause of any disturbance experienced by a devotee of Bhagwan during worship is the *vishays* of the five *indriyas*, not the *antahkaran*.

- **Gadhada I 18**

The *jiva*, which resides within the body, observes both the attractive and the unattractive. It witnesses childhood, youth, and old age, as well as a countless number of other things. However, the observer fails to observe its own self. The *jiva* looks at objects externally, but it does not look at its own self. Therefore, it is the most ignorant of the ignorant.

- **Gadhada I 20**

After such an *ekantik bhakta* leaves his body and becomes free of all influences of *maya*, he attains Akshardham via the *archimarg*. ...

That Akshar has two forms. One, which is formless and pure *chaitanya*, is known as Chidakash or Brahmanahol. In its other form, that Akshar remains in the service of Purushottam Narayan. ...Keeping this in mind, all of our *satsangis* should develop the following singular conviction: "We also wish to join the ranks of the *aksharrup muktas* and go to Akshardham to forever remain in the service of Bhagwan. We have no desire for the temporary and vain worldly pleasures; nor do we wish to be tempted by them in any way." Keeping such a firm conviction, one should offer *ekantik bhakti* to Bhagwan.

- **Gadhada I 21**

When one develops absolute faith in Bhagwan and thoroughly understands His greatness, all of one's vicious thoughts are eliminated.

- **Gadhada I 24**

However, these *vruttis* can be focused on Bhagwan only when desires for everything else are overcome and only a singular desire for the form of Bhagwan remains. Thereafter, those *vruttis* will not be deflected from Bhagwan's form by any means whatsoever...A devotee whose *chitt's vrutti* becomes focused on the form of Bhagwan masters ashtanga yoga without even attempting to master it.

- **Gadhada I 25**

He also possesses countless noble virtues such as *jnan*, *bhakti*, *vairagya*, etc. Bhagwan eternally resides in the heart of such a devotee. Consequently, by the grace of Bhagwan, that devotee attains countless types of powers and liberates countless beings. Despite these powers, though, he tolerates the praises and insults of other people. This itself is also a great feat, because to tolerate despite being so powerful is not easy for others to achieve. Therefore, one who tolerates in this manner should be considered to be extremely great. The powers of such a person are such that since it is Bhagwan who sees through his eyes, he empowers the eyes of all of the beings in the *brahmand*; and since it is Bhagwan who walks through his legs, he is also capable of endowing the strength to walk to the legs of all of the beings in the *brahmand*. Thus, since it

is Bhagwan who resides in all of the *indriyas* of such a *sant*, that *sant* is able to empower the *indriyas* of all beings in the *brahmand*. Therefore, such a *sant* is the sustainer of the world.

- **Gadhada I 27**

Thoughts which cannot be eradicated by any other spiritual endeavor can be removed by engaging in satsang. Therefore, one who wishes to rid the mind of base thoughts related to *rajogun* should sincerely practice satsang by thought, word, and deed.

- Gadhada I 30

The mind is saturated with desires for the world. ... The mind should constantly be entangled in a web in the form of these divine actions and incidents of Bhagwan, and thoughts of Bhagwan should be constantly conceived in the mind. [If the mind is left idle it harasses one like a ghost.]

- **Gadhada I 38**

Even if a person becomes *brahmarup*, that conviction [of Bhagwan eternally possessing a form] would never disappear. Moreover, even if he happens to listen to scriptures propounding the view that Bhagwan is formless, he would still understand Bhagwan to always have a form. Regardless of what is mentioned in the scriptures, he would only propound that Bhagwan has a form, never allowing his own *upasana* to be refuted. One who has such a firm understanding is considered to possess *upasana*.

- **Gadhada I 40**

One person is firm in all four [firmness in the observance of dharma, realizing one's self as *atma*, *vairagya*, and *bhakti*] he is known as Param-Bhagvat; and only he can be called an *ekantik bhakta*.

- **Gadhada I 47**

Antardrashti is to constantly look towards the form of the manifest Bhagwan that one has attained. Besides that form, even if one sees the six *chakras*, or Golok, Vaikunth, or other abodes of Bhagwan, it should not be considered to be *antardrashti*. Therefore, to look at Bhagwan's

form that one has beheld within one's heart, or to look at the form of Bhagwan visible externally, is known as *antardrashti*. However, wherever one's *vrutti* strays apart from Bhagwan's form is all *bahyadrashti*.

- **Gadhada I 49**

Purushottam Bhagwan ... transcends even Akshar. That Purushottam Bhagwan is the all-doer—responsible for the creation, sustenance and dissolution of everything—and is also the cause of all. It is this very Bhagwan who, out of compassion for the liberation of the *jivas*, gives darshan in a manifested form to all of the people on this Earth. ...At that time, if a person realizes this greatness of Purushottam Bhagwan by profound association with the *sant*, then all of his *indriyas* and *antahkarans* become divine like Purushottam Bhagwan's *indriyas* and *antahkaran*. Then, through those *indriyas* and *antahkarans*, he can develop the conviction of that Bhagwan.

- **Gadhada I 51**

Bhagvat dharma is upheld by maintaining profound love towards the *ekantik sant* of Bhagwan, who possesses the attributes of *svadharma*, *jnan*, *vairagya*, and *bhakti* coupled with knowledge of Bhagwan's glory. Maintaining profound love towards such a *sant* opens the gateway to liberation. Thus, Kapildev Bhagwan has said to Devhuti: "If a person maintains profound love towards the *ekantik sant* of Bhagwan just as resolutely as he maintains profound love towards his own relatives, then the gateway to liberation opens for him."

- **Gadhada I 54**

[To please a great *sant*,] first of all, he must be honest with that great *sant*. He must also forsake lust, anger, avarice, infatuation, *matsar*, egotism, jealousy, arrogance, and all desires and cravings. Moreover, he should behave as a servant of the *sant* and maintain a constant effort to eradicate egotism from one's heart. While doing so internally, he should physically continue to bow to everyone as well. As a result, [when he behaves in this way,] the great *sant* will become pleased with him.

- **Gadhada I 58**

The more one continues to imbibe the virtues of the great *purush*, the more one's bhakti begins to flourish. In fact, if one realizes the truly great *purush* to be absolutely lust-free, then, even if one is as lustful as a dog, one will also become lust-free. Conversely, if one perceives the fault of lust in the great *purush*, then no matter how lust-free one may be, one becomes full of intense lust. In the same manner, if one views the great *purush* to be full of anger or avarice, then one becomes full of anger and avarice. Therefore, if one understands the great *purush* to be absolutely free of lust, avarice, taste, egotism and attachment, one will also become free of all of those evil natures and become a staunch devotee.

- **Gadhada I 58**

If a person gradually decreases his worldly desires and increases his desire for Bhagwan, he begins to develop an understanding whereby he views all *vishays* as equal. After such equanimity has developed, honors and insults will appear to be the same to him. Moreover, pleasant and unpleasant types of touch will appear to be the same; attractive sights and unattractive sights will appear to be the same; a girl, a young lady and an old woman will appear to be the same; gold and refuse will appear to be the same as well. Similarly, pleasant and unpleasant tastes and smells will also appear to be the same. When a person can instinctively behave in this way, it should be known that his worldly desires have been overcome. In fact, to behave above the influence of worldly desires is the dharma of one who is *ekantik*. ...Such *ekantik dharma* can only be attained by following the commands of a *purush* who is free of worldly desires and who has attained the state of Bhagwan-realization; it cannot be attained merely by reading books.

- **Gadhada I 60**

[The key to] remain composed even under the influence of lust, anger, avarice and fear [is the certitude that one is *atma* and not the body.] "I am not the body; I am the *atma*, which is distinct from the body and is the knower of all." When such *atma*-realization becomes extremely firm, one never loses one's composure. On the other hand, a person without *atma*-realization may try many other means, but he

cannot remain composed. ...A river—in the form of the dualities of cold and heat, hunger and thirst, honor and insult, happiness and misery—may be crossed by a person with *atma*-realization; death, however, is like an ocean. In that case, both a person with *atma*-realization and a person without it require the help of a ship in the form of faith in Bhagwan. Therefore, only the firm refuge of Bhagwan is helpful at the time of death, whereas *atma*-realization is of no use whatsoever at the time of death. For this reason, one should firmly cultivate faith in Bhagwan.

- **Gadhada I 61**

With what understanding can a spiritual aspirant acquire the virtues of [a *satpurush* who has no desire for pleasure or affection for anything except Bhagwan]? ...A person imbibes the virtues of such a *purush* ... by believing, “This *purush* is extremely great. Despite thousands of people standing before him with folded hands, he does not have the slightest desire for the pleasures of the world. As for me, I am extremely insignificant, and I am solely attached to worldly pleasures. I do not understand anything at all about Bhagwan. Shame on me.” In this way, he feels remorse and imbibes the virtues of the great *purush*. He also feels remorse after realizing his own flaws. While repenting in this way, *vairagya* arises in his heart, and thereafter, he acquires virtues similar to those of that *satpurush*.

- **Gadhada I 67**

One who is to be executed on a *shuli* gets away with the suffering of a mere pinprick [if he practices satsang].

- **Gadhada I 70**

Other than the desire for the liberation of one’s own *jiva*, one should practice satsang having no other desires whatsoever. Only then will unfaltering faith develop.

- **Gadhada I 70**

A true *satsangi* is a person who has absolutely no flaws in the observance of the five religious vows and who remains totally undisturbed

until the end of his life regardless of whatever stern commands I may impose—even if I compel him to forsake his preferences and enforce my own. In fact, I effortlessly and naturally develop affection for such a devotee. On the other hand, I cannot develop affection for a devotee without such qualities, even if I try. This is because my nature is such that I can only develop affection for a person who possesses in his heart such perfect bhakti for Bhagwan.

- **Gadhada I 76**

If a person does not practice *manan* and *nididhyas* following the darshan of Bhagwan's form, then even if he does darshan for thousands of years, he will not attain *sakshatkar* of that form. ...Some devotees say, "We sit in meditation and try very hard to recall Maharaj's form, yet we cannot visualize even a single part. How, then, can we possibly envision the whole form?" The reason for this is the same as above—they merely do darshan of the form, without doing *manan* and *nididhyas*. How then can it be visualized? After all, if one has merely seen even a worldly object with one's eyes, or merely listened to it with one's ears, and it is not subsequently mentally recalled, it will be forgotten. How then can one expect to remember the form of Bhagwan—which is divine and not worldly—without doing *manan* and *nididhyas*?

- **Sarangpur 3**

Naimisharanya Kshetra should be known to be wherever Bhagwan's *ekantik sant* resides. [In the company of such an *ekantik sant*], the jagged edges of the *manomay chakra* are worn away, and no affection remains towards any of the *panchvishays*, i.e., sights, sounds, smells, tastes and touch. Then, even if one sees a beautiful woman or extremely enticing clothes, ornaments and other objects, a strong aversion develops towards them deep within one's mind. But never would the *indriyas'* *vruttis* cling to them. ...No matter how alluring the *vishays* may be, the *indriyas'* *vruttis* is not drawn towards them. Instead, they would rebound like the blunt arrow-shaft. When one is able to behave in this manner, the jagged edges of the *manomay chakra* can be said to have been worn away. ...Wherever one sees such a *Naimisharanya Kshetra*

in the form of the association of the *sant*, one should remain there with an absolutely resolute mind.

- Sarangpur 7

If one practices satsang with absolute sincerity, then no fault will remain in one's heart, and one will become *brahmarup* in this very lifetime.

- Sarangpur 9

Bhagwan and the abode of Bhagwan are not even an atom's distance away from a sadhu who believes ... that his *jivatma* is distinct from the three bodies—*sthul*, *sukshma* and *karan*—and that that Bhagwan forever resides within his *atma*. Such a *sant* is like a *mukta* of *Shvetadvip*. When one has the darshan of such a *sant*, one should realize, "I have had the darshan of Bhagwan Himself." A *sant* who has such an understanding has nothing more to attain. If a person is unable to attain such an understanding, then he should maintain profound association with such a *sant*. If that *sant* were to daily beat him five times with a pair of shoes, he should still tolerate such insults, but just as an opium addict cannot abandon his addiction, in no way should he abandon his association with the *sant*. Such a person should be known to be equal to the *sant* mentioned earlier. Moreover, whatever that *sant* attains, one who continues to profoundly associate with such a *sant* also attains.

- Sarangpur 10

He who abandons both laziness and infatuation has completely transgressed Bhagwan's *maya*. In fact, laziness and infatuation are *maya* itself.

- Sarangpur 14

My zeal and principle is just this: One should strive to please Bhagwan by performing austerities. And realizing Bhagwan to be the all-doer, one should offer bhakti to him while maintaining a master-servant relationship. Also, one should not allow the *upasana* of that Bhagwan to be violated in any way. All of you should accept these words of mine as the most supreme principle.

- Kariyani 10

Shriji Maharaj said, "There are four types of devotees of Bhagwan who no longer fear death and who feel completely fulfilled. These four types are: first, one who has faith; second, one with *jnan*; third, one with courage; and fourth, one with affection. These four types of devotees do not fear death, and they feel fulfilled while still alive. ...Out of these four types of inclinations, if only one is predominant and the other three are subordinate, one still overcomes the fear of births and deaths. But if a person has none of the four, then his fear of death is not overcome." Thereafter, those who had the inclination of courage placed Shriji Maharaj's holy feet on their chests and bowed down at His feet.

- Loya 2

Only one who is *brahmarup* has the right to offer bhakti to Purushottam. ...One who does not offer bhakti to Parabrahma after becoming *brahmarup* cannot be said to have attained ultimate liberation.

- Loya 7

A devotee with *jnan* is one who thoroughly knows Bhagwan through the *indriyas*, the *antahkaran*, and experience. ...Such a devotee with *jnan* faithfully serves the manifest form of Bhagwan—who eternally has a form—realizing him as transcending Prakruti-Purush and Akshar, and as being the cause and supporter of all. Such understanding constitutes *jnan*, and such *jnan* leads to ultimate liberation.

- Loya 7

If the tongue is fully subdued, then all of the other *indriyas* can be subdued.

- Loya 8

One should only hear the sacred scriptures from a holy person, but never from an unholy person.

- Loya 11

Countless millions of *brahmans*, each encircled by the eight barriers, appear like mere atoms before Akshar. Such is the greatness of Akshar,

the abode of Purushottam Narayan. One who worships Purushottam realizing one's self to be *aksharrup* can be said to possess the highest level of *nirvikalp faith*.

- **Loya 12**

Rushabhdev Bhagwan had attained oneness with Vasudev, and ... when yogic powers manifested before him, he did not accept them because he wished to set an example for all renunciants. Also, the Shrimad Bhagavata states: 'Even an accomplished yogi should never trust his mind—even though he may have conquered it.' ...In this manner, I like a renunciant who does not trust his mind.

- **Loya 14**

A person may well be endowed with each and every virtue, but if he believes Bhagwan to be formless—not possessing a definite form—then that is a grave flaw. So much so, that because of this flaw, all of his virtues become flaws.

- **Loya 16**

One who is not intelligent only acknowledges his own virtues, but fails to realize his drawbacks. ...He should be known to be an utter fool, and his intelligence is futile for attaining his own liberation.

- **Panchala 3**

As long as the *chitt* is attracted by alluring *vishays*, infatuation cannot be eradicated. Moreover, if the *sant* or one's guru or one's Ishtadev—Bhagwan—should criticize a *vishay* towards which one's *chitt* has been lured, one would become upset with them and even malign them; one would not be able to accept their words. Such an experience in one's heart should be known as infatuation.

- **Gadhada II 1**

Brahma (Aksharbrahman) is not subject to change and is indivisible. Thus, it does not undergo change, nor can it be divided. When that Brahma is equated with all forms, it is because that Brahma is the

cause of all—Prakruti-Purush, etc. It is their supporter and pervades all through its *antaryami* powers. Furthermore, that which is the cause, the supporter, and the pervader cannot be distinct from its effect. It is in reference to this context that the scriptures equate that Brahma with all forms. However, one should not believe that that Brahma itself undergoes change and assumes the forms of all mobile and immobile beings. Transcending that Brahma is Parabrahma, Purushottam Narayan, who is distinct from Brahma, and is the cause, the supporter, and the inspirer of Brahma. With such understanding, one should develop oneness with one's *jivatma* and with that Brahma, and worship Parabrahma while maintaining a master-servant relationship with Him. With such understanding, Brahma-*jnan* also becomes an unobstructed path to attaining the highest state of enlightenment.

- **Gadhada II 3**

Muktanand Swami asked Shriji Maharaj, "A devotee of Bhagwan resolves in his mind, 'I do not want to retain a single *svabhav* which may hinder me in worshipping Bhagwan,' and yet, such inappropriate *svabhavs* do remain. What is the reason for this?" Shriji Maharaj replied, "If a person has a deficiency of *vairagya*, then even if he has the *shradhha* to eradicate his *svabhavs*, still they will not be eradicated." ...Muktanand Swami then asked, "If a person does not possess *vairagya*, what means should he adopt to eradicate those vicious natures?" Shriji Maharaj replied, "If a person lacks *vairagya*, but intensely serves a great *sant*, and obediently perseveres in his observance of the injunctions of Bhagwan, then Bhagwan will look upon him with an eye of compassion, and feel, 'This poor fellow lacks *vairagya*, and lust, anger, etc., are harassing him very much. So now, may all those vicious natures be eradicated.' As a result, they will be eradicated immediately. In comparison, if he were to endeavor in other ways, those *svabhavs* may be eradicated, but after a great deal of time and effort—either in this life or in later lives. If such vicious natures are eradicated instantly, then it should be known that they have been eradicated by the grace of Bhagwan."

- **Gadhada II 7**

Whenever Bhagwan performs divine actions, they appear divine to both a devotee and to one who is not a devotee. However, when Bhagwan performs human-like actions, a true devotee still perceives divinity in them, but by no means does he perceive flaws in such actions of Bhagwan. Having such understanding is known as having bhakti towards Bhagwan. ...[For instance,] the Gopis were devotees of Bhagwan, and they never, in any way, perceived flaws in Bhagwan. ...[Such] bhakti in which one perceives all of the actions and incidents of Bhagwan as being divine, as the Gopis did, and never perceives a flaw by understanding them to be human-like, is very rare. In fact, it is not achieved by merely doing good deeds for one or two lives. Rather, only when the pure *sanskars* of many lives accumulate, does bhakti like that of the Gopis develop. In fact, such bhakti is itself the highest state of enlightenment. It is this type of bhakti that is greater than *jnan* and *vairagya*.

- **Gadhada II 10**

Regardless of whether a person possesses intense *vairagya* or not, if he conquers his *indriyas* and keeps them within the *niyams* prescribed by Bhagwan, he can conquer the desires for the *vishays* more thoroughly than one does so with intense *vairagya*. Thus, one should firmly abide by the *niyams* prescribed by Bhagwan.

- **Gadhada II 16**

Only one whose mind has a craving for Bhagwan and which becomes neither ‘hot’ nor ‘cold’ by the *vishays* should be known as a sadhu.

- **Gadhada II 23**

Though a person has the refuge of the form of Bhagwan; though he narrates and listens to Bhagwan’s divine incidents; and though he chants the name of Bhagwan, if he does not observe dharma, he should be known to be as foolish as one who tries to cross the ocean carrying a stone slab upon his head.

- **Gadhada II 35**

If [a devotee of Bhagwan] were to have faith in charms, spells,

or witchcraft, then even though he may be a *satsangi*, he should be considered to be half-fallen.

- **Gadhada II 38**

To realize Bhagwan as being formless is a sin much graver than even the five grave sins. There is no atonement for this sin.

- **Gadhada II 39**

To deviate from these commands is the very definition of adverse circumstances. Therefore, only one who follows the commands of the *satpurush* is behaving as the *atma* [and can be said to be under the influence of favorable circumstances].

- **Gadhada II 51**

Only one who develops profound attachment for the *bhakta* of Bhagwan has realized satsang to be the most redemptive of all spiritual endeavors.

- **Gadhada II 54**

In the four Vedas, the Puranas, and the Itihas scriptures, there is but one central principle, and that is that only Bhagwan and His *sant* can grant liberation. In fact, Bhagwan's *sant* is greater than even Bhava, Brahma, and the other devas. So, when one attains Bhagwan or His *sant*, then, apart from this, there is no other liberation for the *jiva*; this itself is ultimate liberation. Furthermore, only those who have accumulated a great number of merits from performing good deeds receive the opportunity to serve Bhagwan's *sant*, but those who have a few merits do not. So, one should develop affection for Bhagwan's *sant* just as one has affection for one's wife, son, parents, or brother. Due to this affection, then, the *jiva* becomes absolutely fulfilled.

- **Gadhada II 59**

The *bhakta* of Bhagwan is indeed nothing but a form of Brahma. That is why one should never perceive human traits in him. ...If a person does develop a grudge with Bhagwan or His devotees, I do not even

like to look at him. In fact, my anger with such a person never subsides. Moreover, those in this world who commit the five grave sins can still be redeemed someday, whereas one who spites devotees of Bhagwan can never be redeemed.

- **Gadhada II 63**

Just as one performs the *mansi* puja of Bhagwan, if one also performs the *mansi* puja of the ideal Bhakta along with Bhagwan, by offering him the *prasad* of Bhagwan; and just as one prepares a *thal* for Bhagwan, similarly, if one also prepares a *thal* for Bhagwan's ideal Bhakta and serves it to him; and just as one donates five rupees to Bhagwan, similarly, if one also donates money to the great Sant—then by performing with extreme affection such similar service of Bhagwan and the Sant who possesses the highest qualities, even if he is a devotee of the lowest type and was destined to become a devotee of the highest type after two lives, or after four lives, or after ten lives, or after one hundred lives, he will become a devotee of the highest caliber in this very life. Such are the fruits of the similar service of Bhagwan and Bhagwan's Bhakta.

- **Vartal 5**

Intense love for the Satpurush is the only means to realizing one's *atma*; it is the only means to realizing the greatness of the Satpurush; and it is also the only means to having the direct realization of Bhagwan.

- **Vartal 11**

The *jiva* that develops firm faith in Bhagwan by profoundly associating with the Sant progresses spiritually day by day just like the waxing moon on the second day of the bright half of the lunar month. ...As a person develops faith coupled with the knowledge of Bhagwan's greatness, his *jivatma* progresses and becomes like the full moon of Punam. Thereafter, his *indriyas* and *antahkaran* are no longer capable of dislodging him from his faith. Regardless of the type of action Bhagwan performs, he does not perceive any fault in Bhagwan. In addition, one who has faith in Bhagwan coupled with the knowledge of His greatness, becomes a fearless devotee.

- **Vartal 12**

Whenever a *jiva* attains a human body in Bharat-Khand, Bhagwan's avatars or Bhagwan's sadhus will certainly also be present on Earth at that time. If that *jiva* can recognize them, then he becomes a devotee of Bhagwan.

- **Vartal 19**

The Shrutis state: "If a person develops conviction in the guru—who is the manifest form of Bhagwan—in the same way that he has conviction in the non-manifest devas, then, as a result, he attains all of the *arthas* [dharma, artha, kama and moksha] which are described as attainable."

- **Gadhada III 2**

For a person who desires his own liberation, nothing in this world is more blissful than Bhagwan and His Sant. Therefore, just as a person is profoundly attached to his own body, he should be similarly attached to Bhagwan and His Sant. One should also remain absolutely loyal to the *bhakta* of Bhagwan. But in no way should one abandon one's loyalty to Bhagwan and His Bhakta, even if while keeping that loyalty one's reputation increases or decreases, or one is honored or insulted, or one lives or dies. In addition, one should not allow an aversion to develop towards them. Furthermore, one should not have as much affection towards one's body or bodily relations as one has towards the Bhakta of Bhagwan. For a devotee who behaves in this manner, even extremely powerful enemies such lust, anger, etc. are unable to defeat him. ...When the devotee has kept his mind at the holy feet of Bhagwan in this manner, he does not have to die to attain the abode of Bhagwan—he has attained it while still alive.

- **Gadhada III 7**

Moreover, since we have offered our body, mind, and wealth to Bhagwan, then now, only the will of Bhagwan is our *prarabdha*; besides that, there is no other *prarabdha* for us. Therefore, regardless of whatever pain or pleasure we may encounter by the wish of Bhagwan, we should not become disturbed in any way; we should be pleased with whatever pleases Bhagwan. Thus, Bhagwan himself protects the dharma, *jnan*,

vairagya and bhakti of a devotee who has such intense love for Bhagwan.

- **Gadhada III 13**

If some prolonged illness were to overtake a person's body, or if he receives neither food to eat nor any clothes to wear; in fact, regardless of the extent of pain or pleasure that comes his way, if he still does not regress even slightly from the worship and bhakti of Bhagwan, *niyams*, dharma, or *shraddha*, but on the contrary, progresses with time—then he is called a true devotee.

- **Gadhada III 25**

Glossary

A

abhishek ritual of pouring water or milk on a *murti* for worship

abil white powder used in Hindu rituals

acharya leader of a diocese or sect within a *sampradaya*; one who establishes a religious doctrine or a school of philosophy

agna instruction, order or command

ahimsak yagna traditional Hindu ritual conducted without the sacrifice of an animal; a non-violent sacrificial ritual

aishvarya divine power; Bhagwan's prowess

Akshar the imperishable one; second highest of the five metaphysical entities; transcends all entities except for Parabrahma; the ideal devotee; abode of Bhagwan Swaminarayan; also referred to as: *Aksharbrahma, Brahma*

Aksharbrahma the second highest of the five metaphysical entities; transcends all entities except for Parabrahma; the ideal devotee; abode of Bhagwan Swaminarayan; also referred to as: *Akshar, Brahma*

Akshardham abode of Purna Purushottam Narayan Bhagwan Swaminarayan; the impersonal form of *Akshar*

aksharmukta liberated soul in Akshardham

aksharnivas one who has left the mortal body and has secured a place in Akshardham; leaving one's mortal body for Akshardham

aksharrup form of *Akshar*; that which has qualities similar to those of *Akshar*; the highest attainable spiritual state for an aspirant

annakut festival in which food items are prepared and offered to Bhagwan as a token of gratitude and a form of reverence; literally, 'a heap or mountain of grain'

antahkarana 'inner faculty.' The complete mind which is comprised of four aspects, each characterized by its individual functions, namely: *mana* (when generating thoughts and desires); *buddhi*

(when consolidating thoughts, making decisions and resolutions, forming convictions or discriminating); *chitt* (when repeatedly contemplating or focusing); and *ahamkar* (when forming a sense of being). Normally used in the singular since all four are aspects of the one *antahkaran*, but also referred to as being four different *antahkarans*.

arti worship ritual of waving lighted wicks before the *murtis* of Bhagwan

ashirvachan blessing in the form of an oral discourse

ashtakavi eight poets of the Swaminarayan Sampradaya. The ashtakavis composed thousands of *bhakti pads* (kirtans) describing Bhagwan Swaminarayan's *lila charitras*, the festivals he celebrated, and the glory of Bhagwan Swaminarayan's manifest form. They also composed *bhakti pads* which instructed aspirants to overcome the fleeting and miserable nature of a material temptation. The eight poets were Muktanand Swami, Brahmanand Swami, Premanand Swami, Nishkulananand Swami, Devanand Swami, Krushnanand Swami, Manjukeshanand Swami, and Bhumanand Swami.

ashtanga eight-fold. This term is often found prefacing the words *brahmacharya* and *yoga*.

atma pure *jiva*, distinct from the physical body and free of all worldly desires and ignorance

atmajnana knowledge of one's self as *atma* and distinct from the physical body

avatari Supreme Bhagwan who is the sole cause of all divine incarnations

B

Badrikashram celestial abode of Nar-Narayan Dev located in the Himalayas; where *jivas* are sent to meditate and cleanse their sins before proceeding to Akshardham

bauji bandh ornament made of gold, silver, or flowers worn on the upper arm, traditionally signifying royalty or divinity

baniya merchant

barmu observed on the twelfth day after the passing of a family

member, on which the family feeds *brahmins* and members of the community in commemoration of the deceased; observed so that the soul of the deceased may attain peace

bawa wandering renunciant; often used in the pejorative sense

berkho large strung beads made of betel nut; used to keep count of the number of *malas* or reciting cycles completed by a devotee or a sadhu

bhabhi sister-in-law

bhagat term of endearment for a devotee who has no liking for material pleasures or desires

Bhagwan God; literally, 'one who possesses divine prowess'

bhakta devotee of Bhagwan; also referred to as *bhaktaraj*

bhaktavatsal One (Bhagwan) who loves his devotees; a characteristic attributed to Bhagwan

bhakti pad poem praising Bhagwan; also referred to as bhajan

bhakti sampradaya faith or sect led by the prominent trait of bhakti, wherein the primary means to attain *moksha* is through offering devotion to Bhagwan

bhakti stotra devotional hymns that are typically written in Sanskrit; typically serves one of the following functions: veneration, prayer or ritualistic worship

bindi colored mark on the center of one's forehead, traditionally signifying the marital status of a woman

Brahman see *Akshar* or *Aksharbrahma*

brahmachari one who observes *brahmacharya*; a celibate. Initially, *brahmins* who were initiated as sadhus were called *brahmacharis*.

brahmacharya practice of eight-fold celibacy while immersing one's self in Parabrahma's devotion

brahmin term used to refer to the scholar caste in the traditional Hindu societies of India and Nepal; identifying a person who engages in attaining the highest spiritual knowledge by realizing one's self as *atma* and not the physical body; one who realizes the true form of Aksharbrahma

brahm Rakshas demonic spirit of a *brahmin* who has performed misdeeds in his life or has misused his knowledge

Braj Bhasha predominantly used as the literary language in northern, central, and parts of western India in the early modern period; a vernacular often recognized as ‘the language of bhakti’

C

chaap printed copy of a handmade painting

chaas thin, hand-churned curd mixed with water; buttermilk

Chaitri Punam full moon day of the sixth month of *Chaitra* in the Hindu calendar, normally occurring between March and April

chakor mystical bird that symbolizes intense love; known in classical Sanskrit poetry and in the later vernacular literature for its love and admiration for the moon’s beauty from a distance. The literary motif suggests that the *chakor* experiences union with the moon by just staring at the moon from a distance.

chandan sandalwood. Sandalwood paste is used to mark the *tilak* on a devotee’s forehead.

chandlo auspicious vermillion mark applied to the center of a devotee’s forehead

chandrayan form of fasting in which one’s intake of food in the form of morsels is regulated by the waxing and waning of the moon

charnarvind footprints of Bhagwan or a sadhu printed on a cloth or canvas and also carved out of marble

chaurasi grand feast in which *brahmins* are fed *ladus*

chintamani mystical wishing stone. One attains that which is desired while possessing the stone.

churma ladu sweet delicacy made from wheat flour and ghee; prepared in celebration of festive occasions

D

daan cash or in kind donation

dagli sewn, pleated upper garment worn by males

dakshina offering or gift given to *brahmins* or sadhus after a feast or sacrificial ritual

dandavat prostration in which the devotee’s entire body touches the ground, symbolizing total surrender

darbar court of residence belonging to a king or feudal ruler, customarily with a central courtyard surrounded by rooms with verandas

datan bark from the neem tree that is traditionally used as a mouth freshener or toothbrush

dehabhiman pride or arrogance caused by fixation for one's physical body

Dev Podhi Ekadashi eleventh lunar day of the bright fortnight in the month of *Ashadh* in the Hindu calendar, when Shri Vishnu falls asleep in Kshirsagar prior to the monsoon and rests there for the next four months (of *Chaturmas*); also known as *Shayani Ekadashi*

devanagari commonly used script to write Hindi, Sanskrit and Marathi. The script is recognized by a horizontal line that runs along the top of full letters. Maru Gurjar or 'early Gujarati' initially was transcribed in Devanagari script.

Dharma shastras genre of Hindu texts used to record laws and codes of social and civil conduct; corpus of sacred texts that provide the spiritual aspirant with injunctions for maintaining a moral lifestyle. Examples include the *Manu Smruti*, *Yagnavalkya Smruti* and, for followers of the Swaminarayan Sampradaya, the *Shikshapatri*.

Dharmakul refers to Bhagwan Swaminarayan's family; family of Dharmadev (Bhagwan Swaminarayan's father during his manifestation on Earth)

Dharmaraj *deva* within the Hindu pantheon, who is responsible for prescribing fruits for the positive and negative actions of all of the *jivas*

dharna concentration; fasting; sixth of the eight steps of *ashtanga yoga*

dhol double-sided drum made of wood and animal skin, which is widely used throughout the Indian subcontinent for rhythmic accompaniment in folk music

dhoti unstitched, long piece of cloth traditionally worn by males as a lower garment

dhotiya similar to dhoti

diksha initiation into the sadhu-fold or *brahmachari*-fold

dingal vernacular Indian language used primarily for verse in western India

divo lit ghee or oil-soaked wick, used as part of Hindu worship rituals

divya divine; divinity

divyabhav to believe that all actions of Bhagwan and his *ekantik sant* are divine and without flaws

dudhpak sweet delicacy made of boiled rice, milk and sugar; typically served during the *shraddh* festival

E

ekadashi eleventh day of the bright and dark halves of every lunar month in the Hindu calendar; considered to be a spiritually significant day on which Hindus, specifically Vaishnavs, observe a fast

ekantik dharma a collective term used for the four endeavors: *dharma, jnan, vairagya* and *bhakti*, coupled with the knowledge of Bhagwan's greatness

ekantik sant (sadhu) ideal sadhu possessing the qualities of *ekantik dharma*; also referred to as the *satpurush*

ekantiki bhakti concentrated or single-hearted devotion to only one object; form of pure *bhakti* which includes the other three endeavors: *dharma, jnan* and *vairagya*

F

Fagun month in the Hindu calendar; marks the arrival of spring; correlates with late February in the Western calendar

fagva *prasad* of dates, popcorn and baked grams that is typically distributed at the end of the *Holi* festival; also refers to the spiritual boons that are asked of Bhagwan at the end of the *Holi* festival. In the Swaminarayan Sampradaya, the women of northern Gujarat asked for a special prayer after celebrating *Holi* with Bhagwan Swaminarayan.

fento long piece of cloth twisted and tied around one's head into a specific type of turban

firangi foreigner

G

gadi seat of importance (political or spiritual); throne or comfortable seat

gandharva celestial beings who are well-versed in different forms of music, song and dance in the celestial realms

garbhagruh innermost sanctum of a Hindu mandir where the *murti* of Bhagwan resides

Gaud class or type of *brahmin*, typically referring to a geographic region in eastern India or present-day Bengal

ghebar sweet delicacy made of deep fried flour, which is coated in sugar

ghosti gathering at which attendees share perspectives on spiritual topics for mutual enlightenment and inspiration

gulal pink powder used in sacred Hindu rituals, particularly in the *Holi* festival

guna quality, characteristic or trait; attribute

Gunatit one who is above the three *gunas* of *rajas* (passion; materialism; experiencing karmas during the dream state), *tamas* (darkness; experiencing karmas during the deep sleep state), and *sattva* (goodness; experiencing karmas during the waking state); one who is above *maya*

guru mantra mantra given to chant by a guru to his disciple on the occasion of initiation or upon separation

H

halva sweet delicacy made in a variety of forms but whose primary ingredients are ghee, milk and sugar

Hanuman Jayanti day celebrating the birth or manifestation of Hanumanji, occurring on *Chaitra Shukla Purnima*

hindola swing made specifically to sway Bhagwan during the *Holi* festival or the month of *Shravan*

Holi widely celebrated festival in India to bid farewell to winter, commemorate good harvests and enjoy spring's vernal winds and crop-yielding climate; also known as the celebration of colors, in which devotees sprinkle colored water or colored powders on

each other and Bhagwan; the day on which Holika was burnt and Prahlad survived his father, Hiranyakashipu's, fatal plot

I

indriya senses through which one can know and perform actions

ishtadev one's favorable deity; Bhagwan or Purna Purushottam Narayan

ishvar fourth of the five metaphysical entities, infinite in number and bound by *maya*; a cosmic beings, i.e., Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva

J

jaamo men's stitched, clothing for upper part of body, worn specifically by royalty in Gujarat and Rajasthan

jaap the act of chanting Bhagwan's name

jalebi sweet delicacy made by deep frying wheat flour batter in circular shapes and soaked in sugar-syrup

Janmashtami day celebrating the birth of Shri Krishna, occurring on *Shravan vadi 8*

jay hail announced or sung in praise (of Bhagwan, his *ekantik sant* or a king)

jaynaad refer to *jay*; the sound caused by a simultaneous echoing of *jay*

jhanjh pair of metallic cymbals with a loud and deep tone

jholi sack made of jute or cloth; carried by sadhus or ascetics when begging for alms

jiva the soul in its state of ignorance, bound by *maya* and consequently undergoing the cycle of birth and death; first (lowest) of the five metaphysical entities; infinite in quantity

Jivanmukta one of Bhagwan Swaminarayan's names; one who has attained liberation while living in his mortal body; one who has inspired others to attain such liberation

K

kal time; death; the conveyer of death such as a calamity, catastrophe or epidemic

kalash small water gourd made of copper or gold, primarily used in Hindu rituals; a series of golden gourds placed near the spires of a *shikharbaddha* mandir

Kaliyuga fourth and present of the four ages that mark the time-scale of the world lasting 432,000 human years; literally ‘Age of Darkness;’ vices prevail in greater abundance than prior times. In the *Shrimad Bhagavata*, there is an account wherein King Parikshit grants *Kaliyuga* access to four things in the world: gold; violence and carnivorous environments; vices and intoxicants such as alcohol; and adulterous environments.

kalpavruksh mystical tree said to possess the magical ability to fulfill the wishes of anyone who sits under it

kanthi in the Swaminarayan Sampradaya, double-threaded, strung *tulsi* beads signifying one’s refuge at the feet of Bhagwan; also worn in varying shapes and forms in the Vaishnav *sampradayas*

Kartik Punam full moon day, or the fifteenth lunar day, of the month of *Kartik* in the Hindu calendar, occurring at the end of November or beginning of December; also known as Dev Diwali commemorating Shivaji’s victory over the demon Tripurasura

katha spiritual discourse; story or narrative

kesari color of saffron; red-orange; ochre

khirni tree tree native to south Asia that has a strong and dense timber and yields a sappy fruit that bears a sweet taste; scientific name: *Manilkarna hexandra*

krutya female demon

kshatriya term used to refer to the warrior or ruler caste in the traditional Hindu societies of India and Nepal; most kings in such societies were expected to be *kshatriyas*

L

ladu sweet delicacy made of flour, ghee and sugar or gur and shaped into small balls; typically served to *brahmins* at feasts

lila charitra divine actions of Bhagwan or his *ekantik sant*

loka world, region or realm; *Puranic* traditions state that there are fourteen *lokas*

M

Magha month in the Hindu calendar; marks the arrival of spring; correlates with late February in the Western calendar

mahamantra great mantra (sacred name of Bhagwan). In the context of this text, *mahamantra* refers to the Swaminarayan mantra.

mahapurana greatest *Purana*. Vaishnavs state that the *Shrimad Bhagavata* is the only great *Purana*

Mahashivratri Hindu festival celebrated to venerate Shivaji on the dark fortnight of the month *Magha* in the Hindu calendar (correlating with mid-February in the Western calendar)

mahayagna grand *yagna*

mahima glory or greatness

mala rosary

mandal group or cohort of sadhus or devotees

mandir Hindu house of worship

manjira pair of small cymbals with a high pitch sound

mansi puja method of worship which does not require physical offerings or objects; offering worship to Bhagwan in one's mind

manta belief; observance; to keep a vow until one's desires are fulfilled

manushyabhav perceiving human-like qualities or flaws in Bhagwan or his *ekantik sant*

marji wish; liking

math seat or *ashram* (of the *acharya*)

maya anything that distracts one from the worship of Bhagwan; third of the five metaphysical entities; power of Bhagwan used as the fundamental substance of creation

Mimamsa school of Hindu philosophy dedicated to reflecting on dharma based in the *Vedas*; literally, 'investigation'

mojdi traditional Indian footwear

moksha liberation from *maya* and the cycle of birth and death; attaining Akshardham

motichur ladu type of *ladu* made with a grainy texture

mrudang type of double-sided drum said to have originated in southern India; traditional Indian percussion instrument played

to supply rhythm in the singing of devotional songs and classical Carnatic music

Mrutyulok mortal realm or Earth; one of fourteen realms

mukhiya chief

mukta liberated soul

muni ascetic or *rishi*

murti sacred image of Bhagwan. There are eight types of *murtis*: stone, wood, metal, clay or sandalwood paste, sand, ink or paintings, gems and mentally visualized.

murti-pratishttha Hindu ritual for consecrating a *murti* of Bhagwan, after which the *murti* is not just a statue but the actual form of Bhagwan

N

nadi vein; pulse

Nawab title of paramount power awarded to a semi-autonomous Muslim ruler by the reigning Mughal emperor

nirakar one without form, typically used in context of defining Bhagwan without form

nirjala fast conducted without the intake of food or water for an entire day (of twenty-four hours)

nirvasnik one without the desire to indulge in material pleasures

nishchay conviction

nishtha faith (in Bhagwan and his *ekantik sant*)

nisvadi one who has conquered the sense of taste; one of the five vows prescribed for an ideal sadhu

niyam (niyam dharma) moral and spiritual disciplines, tenets or religious codes of conduct prescribed by Bhagwan, the *satpurush*, or the dharma shastras. Bhagwan Swaminarayan has outlined the basic *niyams* for spiritual aspirants in the Shikshapatri.

Nyaya one of the six philosophical schools of thought within the Hindu tradition, prescribing a well-developed system of knowledge based on logic and reason to relieve the aspirant from his sufferings; justice

P

pagh long, thin piece of cloth tied around the head to form a traditional headdress

padhramani tradition in which sadhus visit the homes of devotees with a *murti* of Bhagwan Swaminarayan

padmasana lotus posture, one of the eighty-four *asanas* of yoga

pakhawaj type of double-sided drum that is made of wood and animal skin; traditional Indian percussion instrument with a deep mellow sound, played to supply rhythm in the singing of devotional songs; used specifically in the Dhrupad and Haveli *sangeet* genres

pala armed guards who are kept in the service of royalty or a spiritual leader

panch-dhatu five elements used to make *murtis*: gold, silver, copper, zinc and iron

Parabrahma Bhagwan Purushottam, the Supreme Reality; *avatari*; first (and highest) of the five metaphysical entities, the supporter of the universe and the other four metaphysical entities

paramhansa literally, ‘greatest swan;’ a male sadhu of the highest order, characterized by his ability to discriminate between *sat* (truth) and *asat* (that which is false), just as swans were known to be able to separate milk from water in *Puranic* literature. Bhagwan Swaminarayan created this order of sadhus to help them survive the oppression of violent mendicants, who were opposed to the Swaminarayan sadhus’ *niyams* and public observances.

parayan sacred Hindu ritual during which *katha* is read aloud and Sanskrit or vernacular texts are interpreted; typically held over a period of three, five, seven or thirty days.

parshad male renunciant who was initiated as an ascetic wearing white garbs. Traditionally, *parshads* were from the lower strata of the caste system and were allowed to engage in *sevas* that sadhus were forbidden from doing, i.e., farming and caring for horses and cattle. Today, the *parshad*-fold is a training phase before an ascetic is initiated into the sadhu-fold.

Pashtu also spelled Pashto; language used in Central Asia; tribe of people in modern day Afghanistan; Iranian or Afghani official or

emissary in India

pativrata (bhakti) having the kind of loyalty and faithfulness for Bhagwan just as a married woman is said to have for her husband
patri literally, ‘letter;’ named from the *patra* or leaf that letters were written on in early modern times. Nilkanth Varni’s letter to Ramanand Swami from Loj was included in the Bhaktachintamani by Nishkulanan Swami and that portion of the text is referred to as the *Patri* in the Swaminarayan Sampradaya.

pattar wooden bowl in which sadhus eat their meals

pichkari hand-pumped water spray filled with colored water for use during the festival of Fuladol

Pingal shastra that prescribes rules for various meters in verse poetry; also known as *Chhand Shastra*

pitambar literally, ‘yellow clothing;’ a lower body garment tied around the waist, worn by male royalty

potla sacks or bags containing personal belongings used by sadhus and ascetics while traveling

Prabodhini Ekadashi eleventh day of the lunar month of *Kartik* in the Hindu calendar; believed to be the day when Shri Vishnu awakens after four months of rest (concluding *Chaturmas*)

pradakshina Hindu ritual of worship in which one circumambulates Bhagwan, the *satpurush* or their *murtis* in reverence

prakran episode or event; sequential list of commands and austerities given by Shri Hari to his *paramhansas*

pranam to offer obeisance; to show respect by bowing down; the act of folding one’s hands and lowering one’s head

prarthana prayer; to pray

prasad food sanctified by offering it to Bhagwan; also *prasadi*

pratyahar fifth of the eight steps of *ashtanga yoga*; involves the withdrawal of senses from worldly objects to engage with the higher consciousness

punya accrued merit from good deeds

Puranas set of eighteen shastras recording ancient Hindu narratives written by Veda Vyasa, the most popular being the *Shrimad Bhagavata Purana*

purani first degree in Sanskrit studies; someone who is qualified to deliver discourses on the Puranas; however, this term is now used to describe individuals qualified to deliver discourses on any sacred texts within the Hindu tradition

Puranic of or pertaining to the Puranas

puranpoli sweet flatbread made from a mixture of yellow pigeon peas, sugar and saffron, stuffed in wheat flour

puri fried item made of wheat flour

R

raab semi-solid sweet delicacy made of wheat flour and gur, considered to be nutritious and fed to those recovering from illness

raas traditional folk dance of Gujarat wherein the participants jointly hit wooden sticks to the beat of the *dhol*

raga combination or pattern of notes, having characteristic intervals, movements and embellishments; one of the melodic modes used in Indian classical music. Different ragas are associated with different times of day, seasons, and festivals.

rajtilak symbol of royal inheritance; typically drawn on the forehead of the crown prince as a foreshadowing of the later *rajyabhishek* ceremony which signifies the transfer of power to the new king

Ramnavmi day celebrating the birth of Shri Rama; occurring on Shukla Paksha Navmi, the ninth day of the bright half of the month of *Chaitra* in the Hindu calendar

rand uttered pejoratively to or for a woman referring to her as a prostitute

ras taste; sentiment; essence; juice

rotli also *rotlo*; basic, unleavened, bread-like staple food in many parts of Gujarat, made generally of millet, ground wheat or *jowar* flour that is kneaded and patted into a flat circular shape before being cooked on an earthen hot plate

rudraksha large, evergreen, broad-leaved tree whose seed is used for making Hindu prayer beads or *malas*. Rudraksha beads are often associated with the worship of Shivaji.

S

sabha spiritual assembly

sadavrat almshouse where food is distributed as charity to the underprivileged, sadhus and mendicants

sadhak one who is engaged in an endeavor to attain spiritual enlightenment; spiritual aspirant

sadhuta one who possesses the qualities of an ideal sadhu

sakar (in reference to Bhagwan) having a physical form

sakar (in reference to sweet) sugar

samadhi spiritual trance; the final and eighth step of *ashtanga yoga* wherein one experiences the darshan and divinity of Parabrahma

samagam association, typically with good and positive company, shastras or sadhus

samjan understanding, typically relating to spiritual or social maturity

sampradaya religious organization or fellowship; sect

sampradayik of or relating to *sampradaya*; belonging to a specific religious community

sangeet music

sankalp wish; desire

sankhyayogini literally, ‘female renunciant;’ term used for a devotee, typically a widow, who has renounced her worldly duties and is dedicated to the satsang community. *Sankhyayoginis* or *sankhyayogi bais* are still initiated in the Vartal and Ahmedabad dioceses.

sant reverential term for an ascetic or sage; Sanskrit term used to describe that which is ‘good’ or ‘real’

sarangi Indian stringed musical instrument made of wood, goat skin, and gut strings; played with a horsehair bow

zarvasva one’s mental, physical and financial possessions; one’s all

sat truth; relating to the truth

sata sweet delicacy made from ghee and wheat flour, dipped in sugar molasses

satsang the practice of spiritually associating with the *satpurush*, fellow devotees, one’s own *atma* and the sacred shastras of the fellowship; literally, ‘the company of or association with the truth’

satsangi one who is a member of the satsang community; one who

lives by the moral and spiritual codes prescribed in satsang

savarni broomstick used to sweep the floor

seva selfless service

Shaivite one who accepts Shivaji as the *ishtadev*; of or relating to the worship of Shivaji

shaligram small, sacred stone worshipped by Vaishnavs as a form of Shri Vishnu; typically smooth and black

sharir body; most often the physical body

shikhar pinnacle (of a mandir)

shiro hot, sweet delicacy made of sugar, flour, ghee and milk; often served at feasts and festive occasions

shraddh rites to honor one's ancestors; festival commemorating the lives of family members or spiritual leaders

shudra term used to refer to the worker or laborer caste in the traditional Hindu societies of India and Nepal

smruti also *smriti*; that which is 'remembered or recited'; genre of texts which were said to have been remembered by recitation

sukhdi sweet delicacy made from wheat flour and gur roasted in ghee

svadhamgaman departure towards the abode of Bhagwan, leaving one's mortal body

swarup form or ontological state of being; typically refers to Bhagwan or Aksharbrahma's greatness

swarupnishta having conviction in Bhagwan's *sakar* form and Aksharbrahma's form as being above *maya* and the other *ishvars*

T

tantra black magic, illusion, sorcery; a style of meditation and ritual that arose in medieval India in the fifth century

tantric one who engages in the practices of tantra; often used as a pejorative term to refer to a sorcerer

tanpura stringed musical instrument used to create a drone to help the singer sing in tune

tasa large bass drum, typically made from a mango tree, producing a deep sound; traditionally used in processions and festivals

termu observed on the thirteenth day after the passing of a family

member, on which the family feeds *brahmins* and members of the community in commemoration of the deceased; festival and ritual observed so that the soul of the deceased may attain peace

Thakorji Vaishnav term used to refer to a small *murti* of Bhagwan, believed to be the manifest form of Bhagwan; also called Harikrishna Maharaj in the Swaminarayan Sampradaya

thal food items offered to Bhagwan as a form of bhakti by devotees before having their own meals

tilak holy mark in the shape of a ‘U’ applied on the center of a male devotee’s forehead using sandalwood paste; sectarian mark associating a devotee with a *sampradaya*

U

Upanishads fourth and final portion of the *Vedas*; collection of profound texts revolving around the philosophical discussion of the nature of the *atma* and Parabrahma

updesh spiritual address or message; teachings

V

vadi garden or small farm

vaghari process by which most Indian vegetables or lentils are cooked; bringing oil or ghee to a boil and then adding mustard seeds, cumin, cloves and other spices prior to adding vegetables or lentils

vaghri one who does menial chores; pejorative term used to refer to laborers; referred to as ‘untouchables’

Vaishya term used to refer to the merchant or trading farmer caste in the traditional Hindu societies of India and Nepal

varni renunciant; ascetic, typically a young ascetic

vasana material desires

Vedanta various philosophical interpretations based on the Upanishads; literally, ‘the end of the Vedas,’ often used to refer to Shankaracharya’s monistic theology

vedantins one who engages with Vedanta; pejorative term used to address the dogmatic followers of monism

Vedas chief and most sacred set of Hindu shastras collated into four

parts: Rig Veda, Sama Veda, Yajur Veda and Atharva Veda; the authoritative texts of Hinduism

Vedic of or pertaining to the *Vedas*

vedika platform or plinth on which *Vedic* sacrifices are performed; one who restores knowledge

vicharan spiritual tour or pilgrimage; the act of traveling for spiritual or instructive purposes

vishay subject or topic; material pleasure or indulgence

vrutti also *vritti*; senses; one's nature or temperament; consciousness or mental awareness

Y

yagna sacrificial fire ritual accompanied by the chanting of *Vedic mantras*; act of offering obeisance to Bhagwan

yajman host or patron of a *yagna* or ritual

Yamlok Narak, the realm of Yamraj; the underworld, where *jivas* are sent to suffer the consequences of their sins

yoga art and science of concentrating the mind on the *atma* and Bhagwan, which helps the spiritual aspirant to ultimately realize and experience a divine union with *Paramatma*

yogabrashta one who has fallen from the path of *yoga* or spiritual progress; pious *jiva* who is sent back to Earth to rid itself of a few shortcomings before attaining *moksha*

yogi one who performs *yoga*; also generally used to address an ascetic

yogic of or pertaining to *yoga*

Index

The entries in this Index within each alphabetical subsection are sorted by words and not by letters. The names of the devotees are ordered according to their given names. The names of sadhus are ordered according to their initiation name, since “Swami” is a common title for each. This ordering system has been adopted for accessibility and ease of use.

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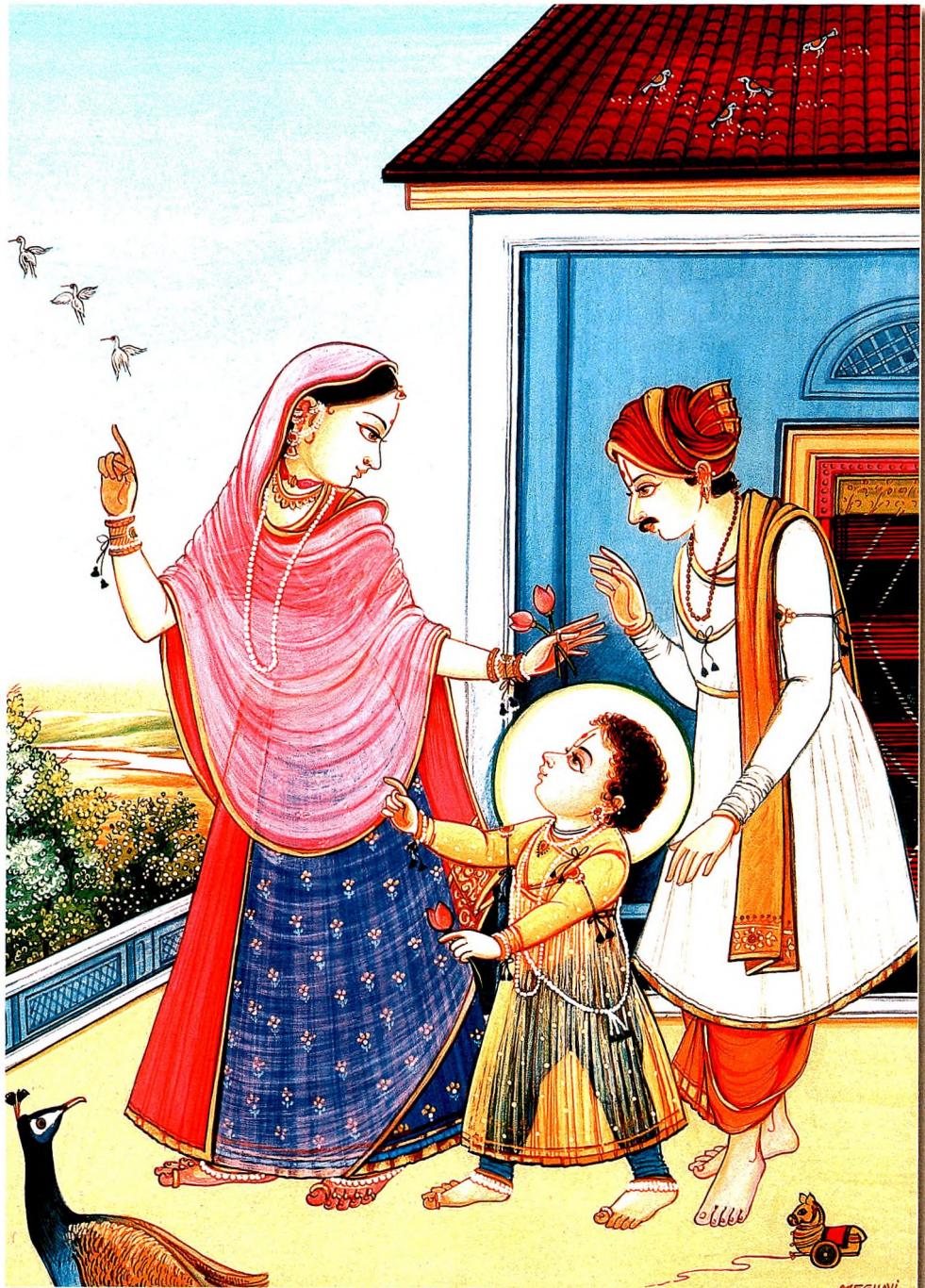
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1. Bhaktimata and Dharmadev are depicted here delighting in the joys of parenthood with their divine child, Ghanshyam

2. Ghanshyam Bhavan (shown here) is built on the site in Chappaiya, Uttar Pradesh,
where Bhagwan Swaminarayan was born (see p. 11)



3. This is the holy site of Bhagwan Swaminarayan's birth inside Dharmadev and Bhaktimata's home,
now located in Ghanshyam Bhavan (see p. 11)





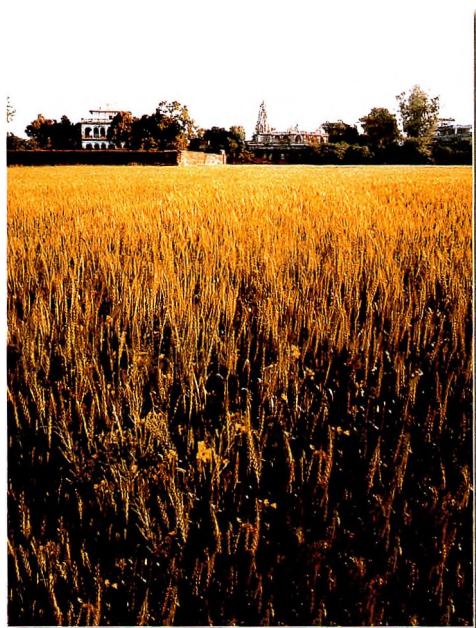
4. A three-shikhar mandir (shown here) was built in 1910 to commemorate Bhagwan Swaminarayan's birth in Chappaiya, Uttar Pradesh (see p. 11)



5. Ghanshyam regularly bathed in Narayan Sarovar in Chappaiya (shown here) during his childhood



6. This shrine on the banks of the Meen Sarovar marks where Ghanshyam resuscitated the dead fish and instructed the fisherman to practice ahimsa (see p. 26)



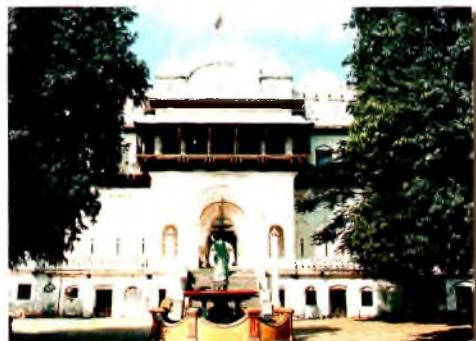
7. Tasked with the chore of keeping sparrows away from this farm, Ghanshyam sent the sparrows into samadhi to prevent them from eating the crops (see p. 27)



8. (Above) This shrine is built on the land where Ghanshyam liberated Kalidatta (see p. 16)



9. (Above right) Ghanshyam listened to *katha* daily at the renowned Hanumangadhi Mandir in Ayodhya (shown here – see p. 20)



10. (Bottom right) During his childhood, Ghanshyam had daily darshan of the *murtis* of Shri Rama and Sita at the Kanak Bhavan Mandir in Ayodhya (shown here), gifted to Sita by her mother on the occasion of Sita's marriage to Shri Rama (see p. 20)



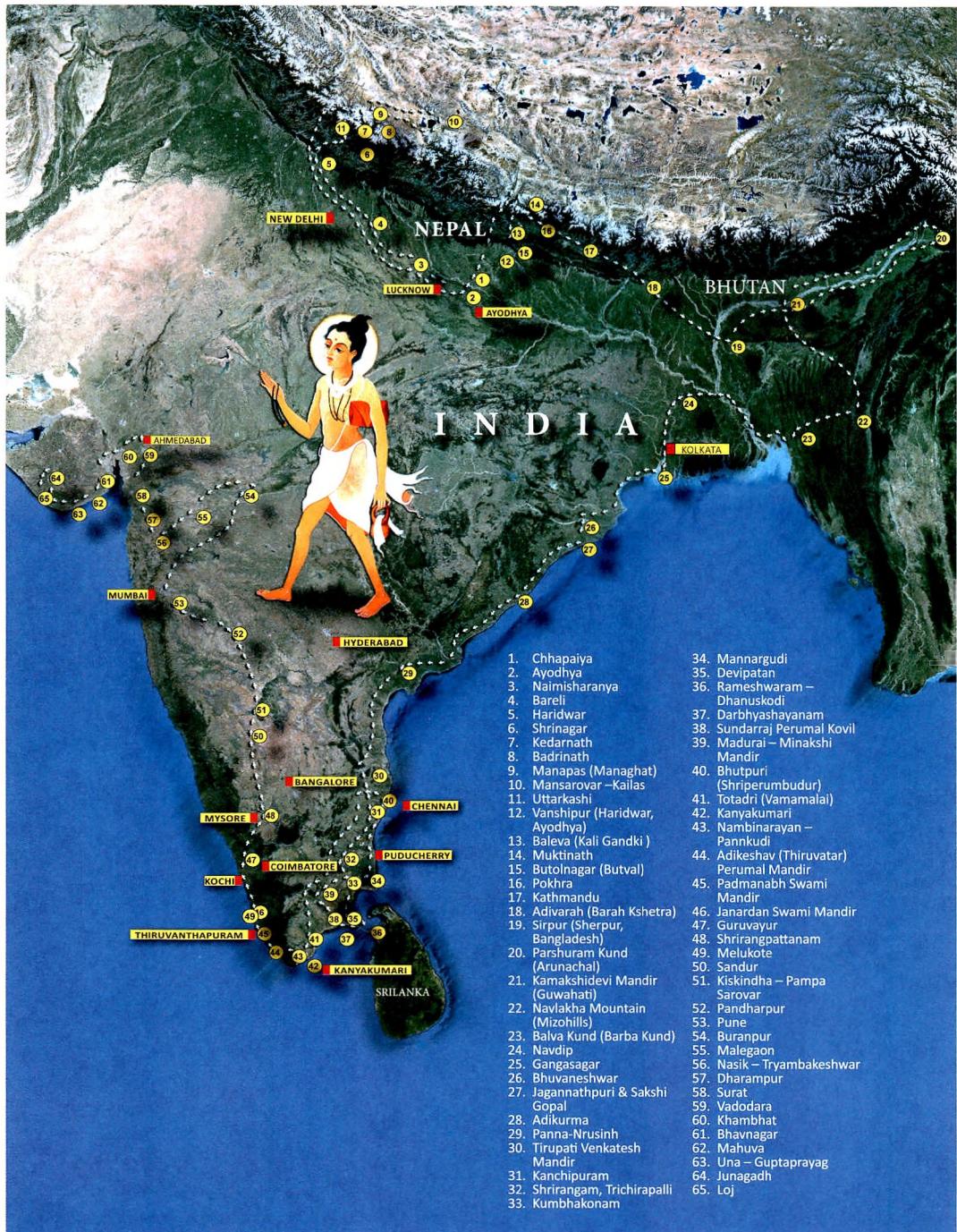
11. Ghanshyam meditated and rested in the afternoons during his childhood at the Chandrashekhar Mahadev Mandir in Ayodhya (shown here – see p. 29)



12. In exchange for Suvasinibhabhi's ring, Ghanshyam ate all of the sweets at this confectioner's sweet shop in Ayodhya (see p. 22)



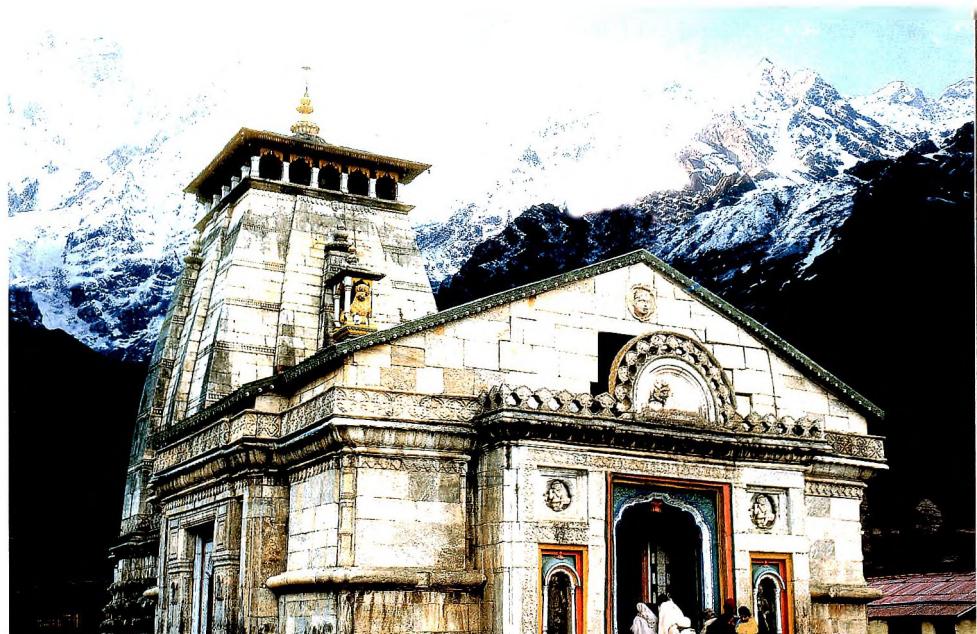
13. Ghanshyam visited the Kashi Vishwanath Mandir in Varanasi (shown here) with his father on the eve of the theological debate at Gomath Ashram in which he articulated for the first time the Aksharbrahma-Parabrahma doctrine (see p. 32)



14. This map shows some of the cities and pilgrimage sites that Nilkanth graced on his journey across the Indian subcontinent—from Chappaiya, Uttar Pradesh, to Loj, Gujarat



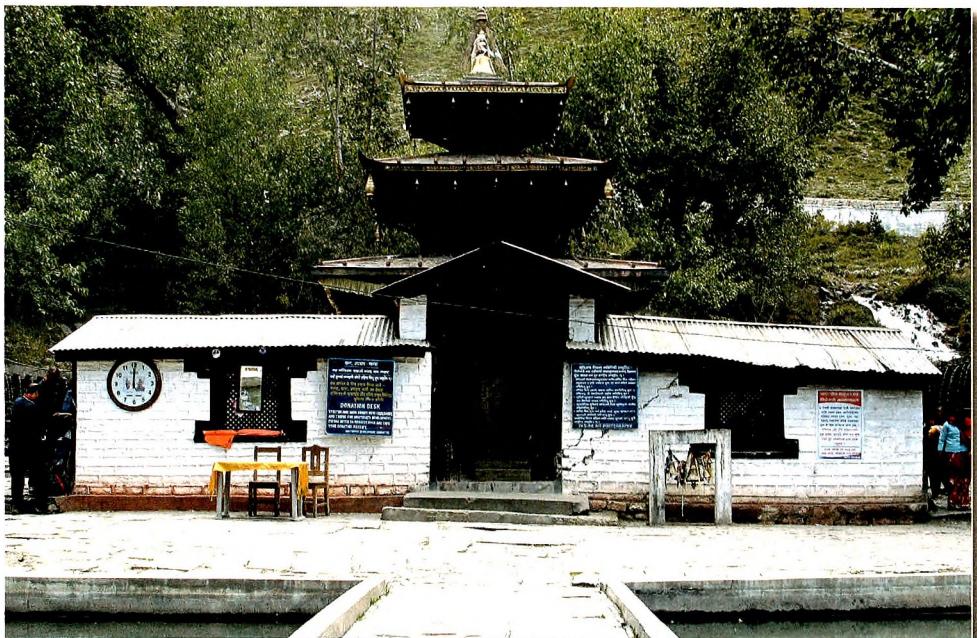
15. Nilkanth calmed the fierce, untamed lion with the gesture of his right hand in Shripur, Uttarakhand, outside of the Kamleshwar Mahadev Math (shown here – see p. 50)



16. Traversing the frozen terrain by foot, Nilkanth traveled from the Kedarnath Mandir (shown here – see p. 52) to Badrinath , one of the four main pilgrimage sites (Chardham) for Hindus



17. Nilkanth celebrated various festivals from Dashera to Annakut while traveling through Uttarakhand, including at the Shri Badri Vishal Mandir, Badrinath (shown here – see p. 53)



18. Nilkanth performed austerities for six months at Muktinath Dham (shown here), located in the Himalayas in Nepal (see p. 62)



19. Nilkanth had darshan at the Shri Jagannath Puri Mandir in Orissa (shown here) and remained in Jagannath Puri for more than six months (see p. 76)



20. Nilkanth instructed Jeeyar Swami on the importance of celibacy during his stay at the Totadri Pith (shown here – see p. 85), the chief seat of the Shri Vaishnav Sampradaya

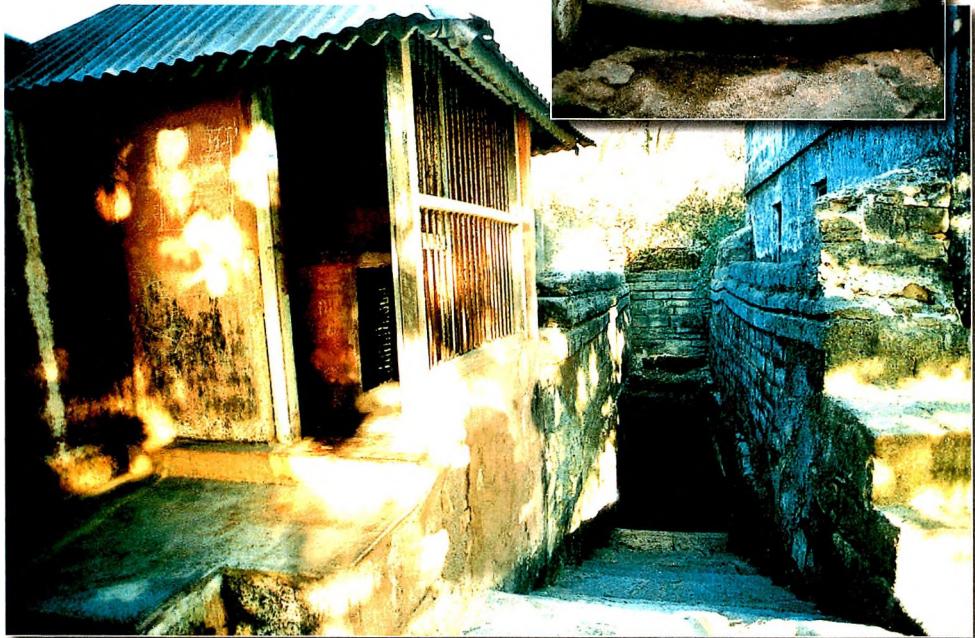
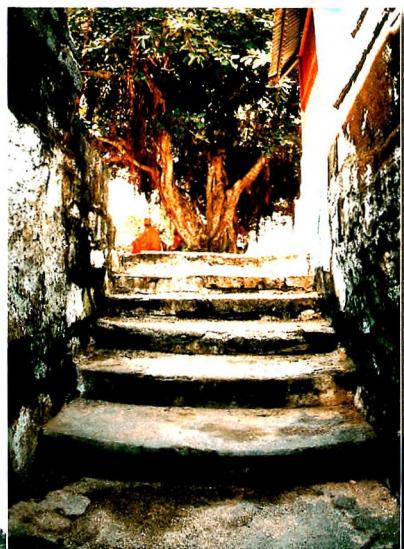


21. Nilkanth visited the Somnath Mahadev Mandir (shown here) near Veraval, Saurashtra, one of the twelve jyotirlingas in India (see p. 101)

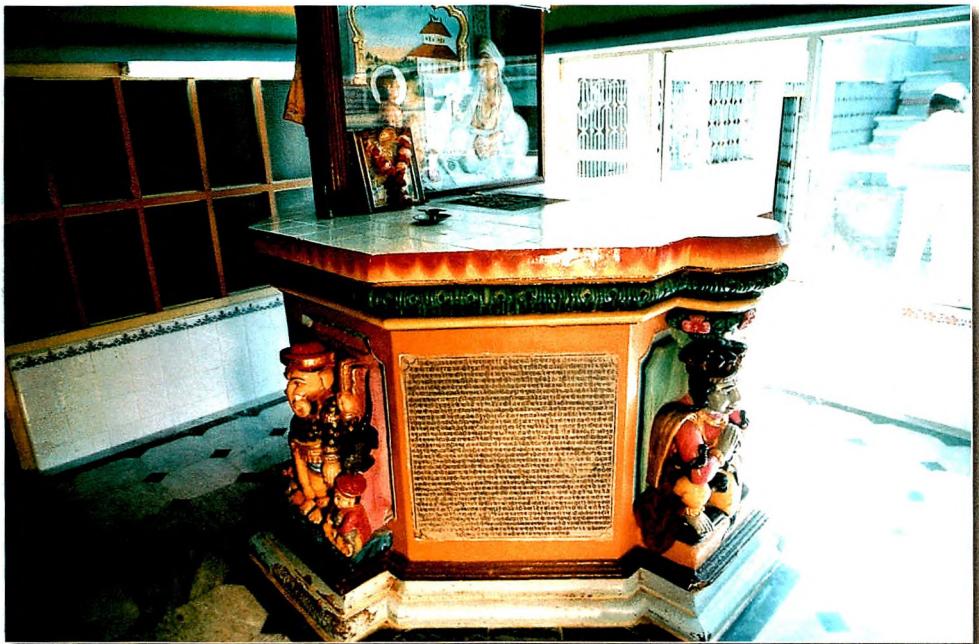
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22. This opening in the kitchen wall in Ramanand Swami's ashram in Loj, through which sadhus exchanged coals and ambers with neighboring women, was sealed by Nilkanth in furtherance of the sadhus' celibacy vows (see p. 120)



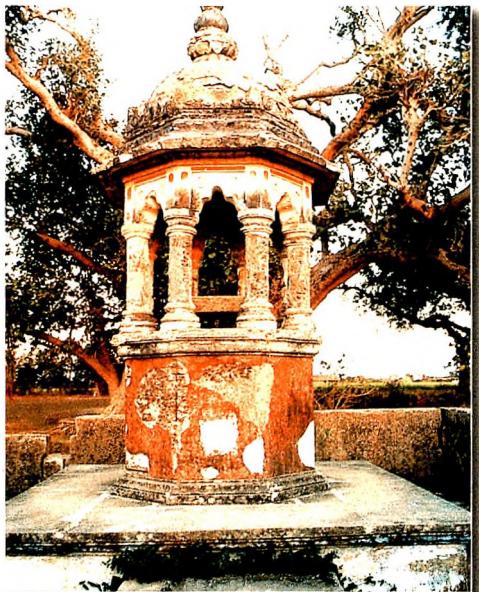
23. This is the stepwell in Loj where Nilkanth concluded his seven-year, 8,000 mile journey across the Indian subcontinent (see p. 108)



24. This shrine in Piplana, Saurashtra, memorializes the occasion of Nilkanth's initiation as a sadhu under the names of Sahajanand Swami and Narayan Muni by Ramanand Swami (see p. 127)



25. The Shri Swaminarayan Mandir in Jetpur (shown here) pays homage to the city town in which Ramanand Swami appointed Sahajanand Swami as his spiritual heir and leader of the Sampradaya (see p. 131)



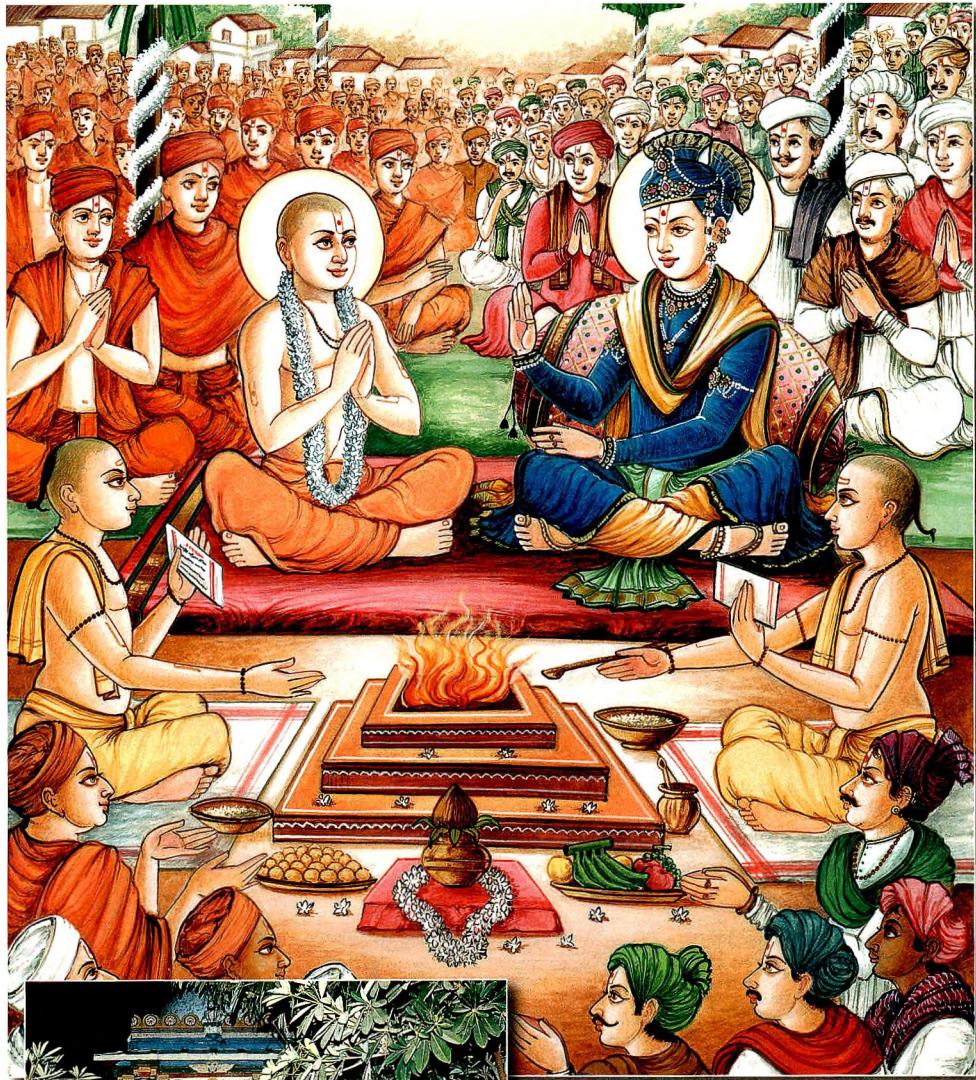
26. Bhagwan Swaminarayan initiated 500 *paramhansas* in one night at this historic location in Kalvani, Gujarat (see p. 207)



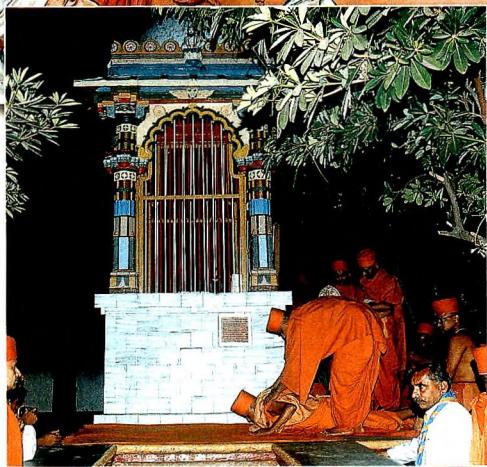
27. Bhagwan Swaminarayan often held *katha* under this tree in Dada Khachar's courtyard in Gadhada, Saurashtra (see p. 179)



28. Akshar Ordi, Gadhada, was the location of Bhagwan Swaminarayan's residence in Dada Khachar's courtyard, upon which a one-shikhar mandir was later constructed (shown here – see p. 1)

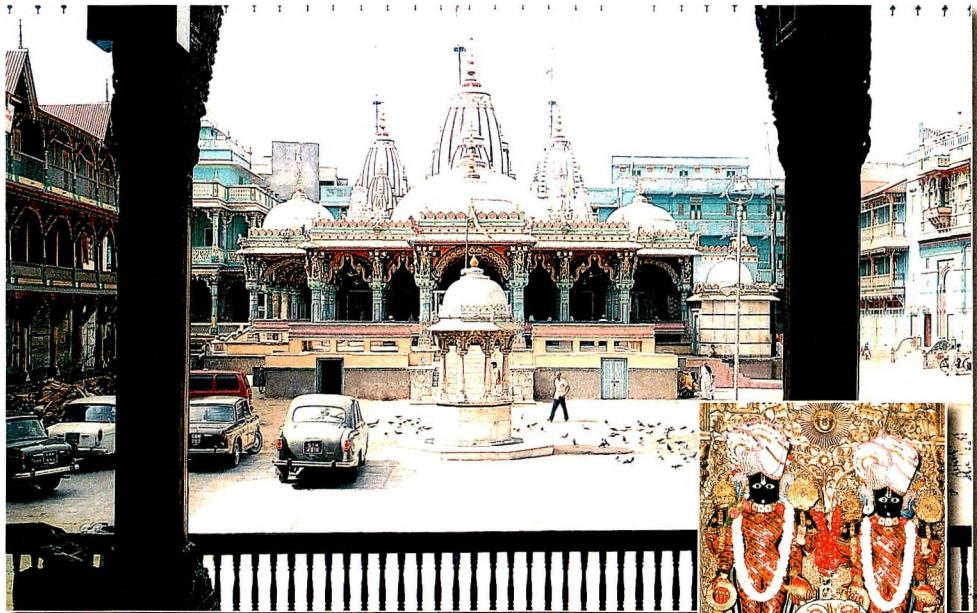


29. In 1810, in conjunction with a grand *yagna* in Dabhan, Bhagwan Swaminarayan initiated his Aksharbrahma, Mulji Sharma, as Gunatitanand Swami (see p. 244)
(Inset) The shrine memorializes the place of *diksha*





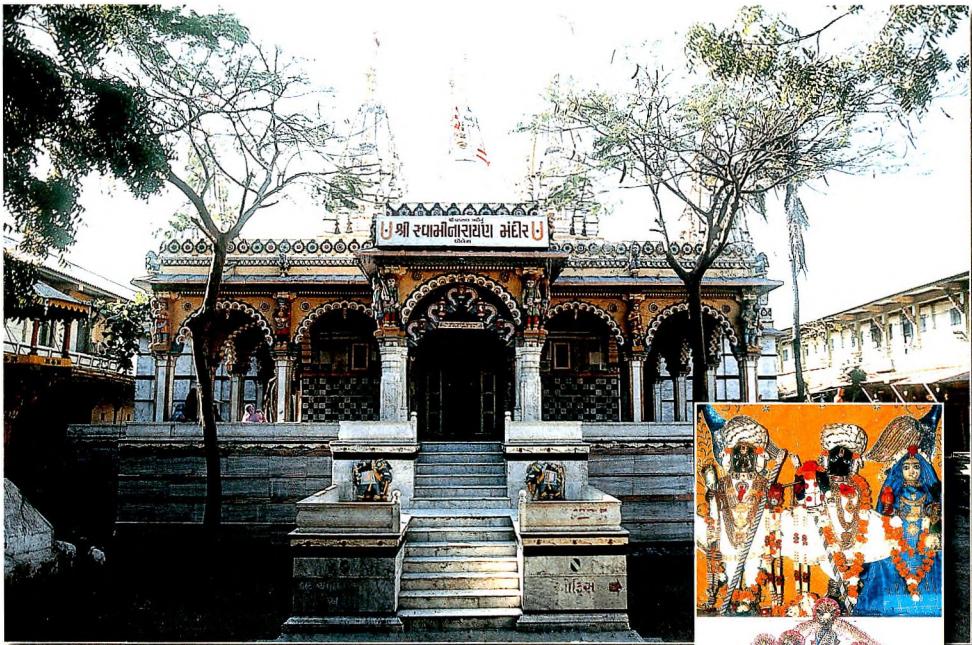
30. Bhagwan Swaminarayan is depicted here at Rathod Dhadhal's residence in Sarangpur playing *raas* with the *paramhansas*, during which Shri Hari touched Gunatitanand Swami's chest with his *raas* stick and revealed Gunatitanand Swami's *mahima* as Aksharbrahma (see p. 273)



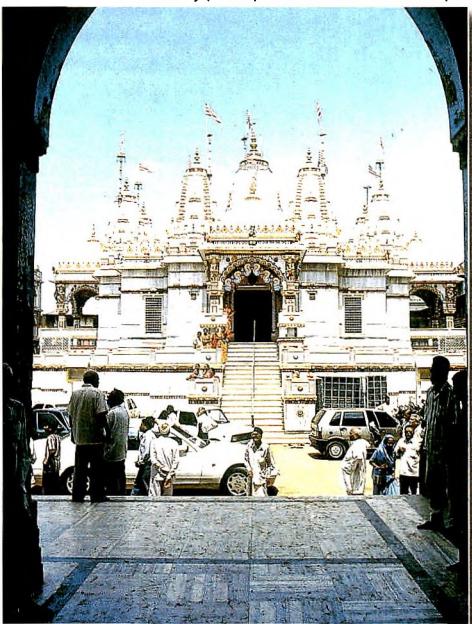
31. The three-shikhar Shri Swaminarayan Mandir in Kalupur, Ahmedabad (shown here), is the first mandir built by Bhagwan Swaminarayan, who installed the *murtis* of Nar Narayan Dev (inset) in the central shrine (see p. 354)



32. The Shri Swaminarayan Mandir in Bhuj, Kutch (shown here), is the second mandir built by Bhagwan Swaminarayan, who installed the *murtis* of Nar-Narayan Dev and Harikrishna Maharaj (inset) in the central shrine (see p. 364)



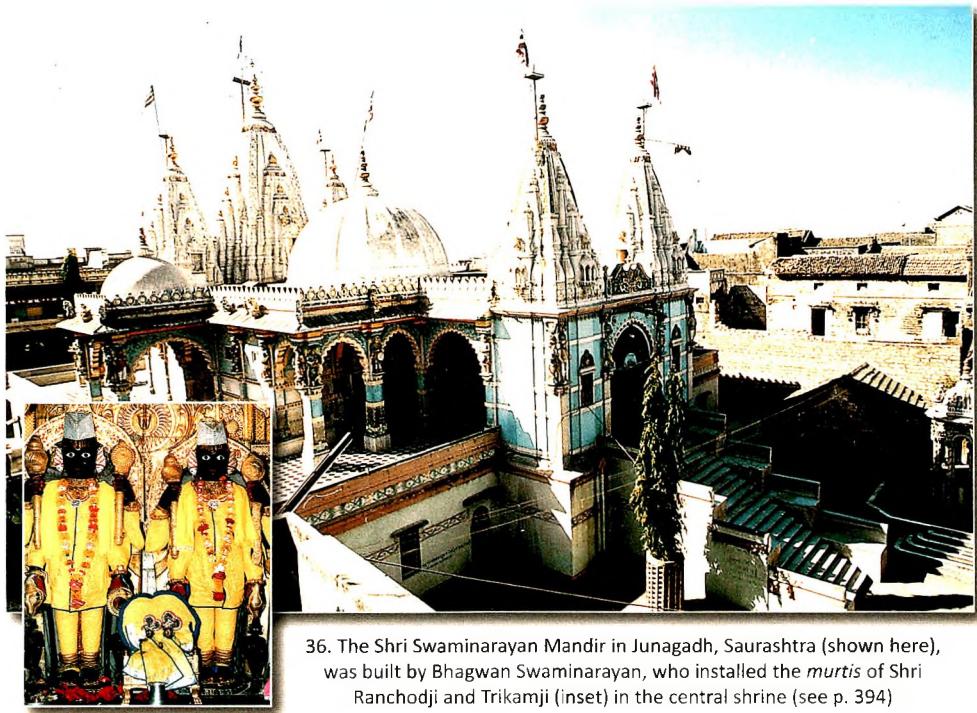
33. The Shri Swaminarayan Mandir in Dholera (shown here) was built by Bhagwan Swaminarayan, who installed the *murtis* of Shri Madan Mohan Maharaj (inset) in the central shrine (see p. 387)



34. The Shri Swaminarayan Mandir in Vartal (shown here) was built by Bhagwan Swaminarayan (see p. 370)



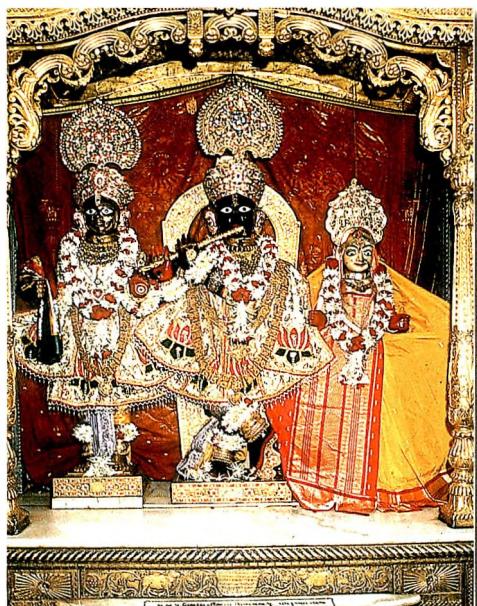
35. Bhagwan Swaminarayan installed this *murti* of Shri Harikrishna Maharaj in the first shrine of the Shri Swaminarayan Mandir in Vartal, marking the first time Bhagwan Swaminarayan installed his own *murti* in a mandir (see p. 370)



36. The Shri Swaminarayan Mandir in Junagadh, Saurashtra (shown here), was built by Bhagwan Swaminarayan, who installed the *murtis* of Shri Ranchodji and Trikamji (inset) in the central shrine (see p. 394)



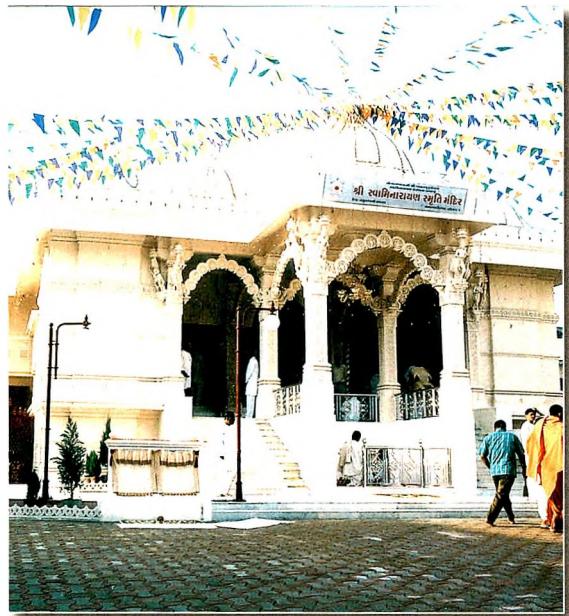
37. Compelled by Dada Khachar and his family's bhakti, Bhagwan Swaminarayan built this Shri Swaminarayan Mandir within their courtyard in Gadhada, Saurashtra (see p. 398)



38. *Murtis* of Shri Gopinath Dev (shown here) appear in the central shrine of the Shri Swaminarayan Mandir in Gadhada, in which the *murti* of Shri Harikrishna Maharaj was subsequently installed (see p. 398)



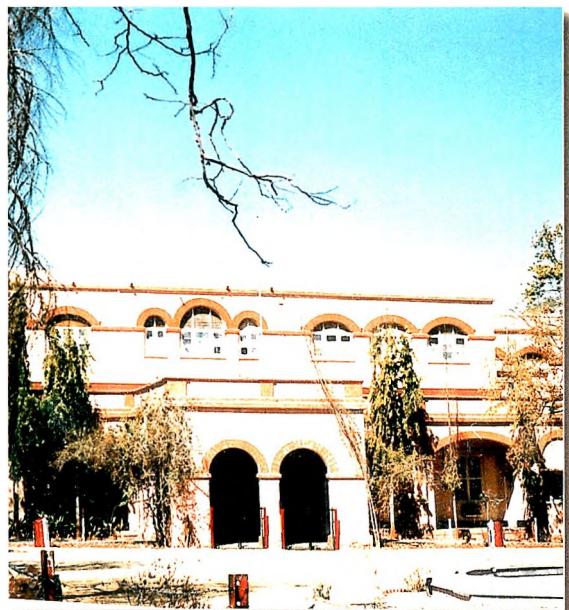
39. Bishop Reginald Heber (depicted here), Bishop of Calcutta and a Christian missionary, held a meeting with Bhagwan Swaminarayan in Nadiad in 1825 (see p. 375)



40. The Shri Swaminarayan Smruti Mandir in Nadiad (shown here), was constructed at the site of the historical meeting between Bhagwan Swaminarayan and Bishop Reginald Heber (see p. 375)



41. This marble sculpture of Sir John Malcolm (1769-1833), Governor of Mumbai (1827-1830), is displayed at the Westminster Abbey in London, United Kingdom (see p. 423)



42. This is the site of the historical meeting in Kothi Compound, Rajkot, between Bhagwan Swaminarayan and then Governor of Mumbai, Sir John Malcolm (see p. 426)



43. The Shri Swaminarayan Mandir in Gadhada, Saurashtra (shown here), was built by Brahmaswarup Shastriji Maharaj approximately one hundred years after Bhagwan Swaminarayan expressed his wish to construct a mandir atop the hill in Gadhada (see p. 372)



44. Bhagwan Swaminarayan's physical body was cremated in Lakshmi Vadi, Gadhada, upon which a beautiful mandir was subsequently constructed (shown here – see p. 442). As depicted here, after Bhagwan Swaminarayan returned to Akshardham, Gunatitanand Swami also considered leaving his mortal body in Lakshmi Vadi, but Bhagwan Swaminarayan consoled him by revealing, "I have not left you. I am forever present in you; I am forever present in you; I am forever present in you...."



45



46



47

Shown here is an upper garment (*jamo*), headdress (*pagh*), and water pouch used by Bhagwan Swaminarayan



48

Shown here is a spoon (*achamaniya*) and eating dish used by Bhagwan Swaminarayan

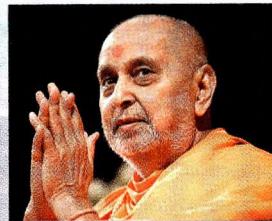


49

Shown here is wooden footwear (*chakhdi*) worn by Bhagwan Swaminarayan



Swaminarayan Akshardham,
New Delhi



H.H. Pramukh Swami Maharaj

BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha

BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha is a global socio-spiritual organization committed to building a better world, one individual at a time. The NGO is in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations. It was established in 1907 by Brahmaswarup Shastriji Maharaj in consonance with the bhakti tradition teachings propagated by Bhagwan Swaminarayan (1781-1830 CE). The Sanstha's global network of 1,100 mandirs, 3,850 satsang centers and 16,000 weekly satsang assemblies (children, youth, and devotees) shape the moral, social, cultural and spiritual landscape of thousands of communities. The BAPS volunteer corps of 55,000 youths and over 900 sadhus give back to these local communities through their diverse spiritual and humanitarian activities. Its world renowned cultural and spiritual complexes like the Swaminarayan Akshardham in New Delhi and Gandhinagar and the Swaminarayan Mandirs in London, Houston, Chicago, Atlanta, Toronto, Los Angeles and Nairobi are centers of inspiration for character, spiritual, and overall personal development for millions.

His Holiness Pramukh Swami Maharaj

Pramukh Swami Maharaj was born on 7 December 1921, in the village of Chansad, Gujarat. He is the fifth spiritual successor of Bhagwan Swaminarayan, and the present spiritual guru of BAPS. His life embodies the universal Hindu ideals revealed and celebrated in the tradition's canonical texts. His compassion for humanity has led him to make over 17,000 village, town and city visits and sanctified over 250,000 homes in India and abroad. He has read and replied to over 700,000 letters, and personally counseled over 810,000 people. He has inspired a cultural, moral and spiritual renaissance in India and abroad by establishing over 1,100 mandirs and grand cultural complexes like the Swaminarayan Akshardham in New Delhi and Gandhinagar. His simplicity, humility, and selfless love have touched the hearts of world leaders, religious pontiffs, and millions of lay individuals from various social and intellectual planes. Above all, his profound experience and realization of God is the essence of his success and divine presence.

Bhagwan Swaminarayan (1781-1830 CE) is hailed by many as one of the greatest social reformers of early modern India, and by millions more as the Supreme Being incarnate. Bhagwan Swaminarayan (Sahajanand Swami) changed the social and religious landscape of the Indian subcontinent in just under fifty years. Today, the Swaminarayan Sampradaya is a widely recognized bhakti sampradaya. This brilliantly-crafted narrative familiarizes the reader with the life and work of Bhagwan Swaminarayan and the bhakti milieu of nineteenth-century Gujarat. The author draws from various Sanskrit, Braj, and Gujarati texts and colonial sources, presenting the first such detailed, yet accessible hagiography of Bhagwan Swaminarayan in English. The stories presented aim to provide an account of Bhagwan Swaminarayan's life for various audiences, one in which historicity, public memory, and faith coexist.

Yogi Trivedi is a doctoral student and teaching fellow in the Department of Religion at Columbia University. Prior to pursuing his academic interests, he worked as a broadcast journalist in New York City and continues to lecture a teaching fellow at the Graduate School of Journalism at Columbia University. His doctoral project is enhanced by his experience as a lecturer and performer of bhakti poetry and classical and devotional Indian music.



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