Forty days in Divine Sānnidhya of the Guru - Our Uttar Bhārat Yātrā

A Report by Vinay Kalyāṇpur

Preparations for the Uttar Bhārat Yātrā started months in advance! The very thought was a bit overwhelming for me – 6000 kms to cover by road in 40 days with seven unknown destinations to visit! But I made up my mind to join only because it was initiated by H.H. Swāmījī and we would be travelling along with Him. In retrospect now, I am so happy I decided to go – my first yātrā with our Mat͟͟͟͟͟h team and I enjoyed every moment of it!

18 of us yātrī-s got together at Kārlā where our travel companions from Shirālī had already arrived with Animay and Mañjū in a comfortable 25 seater bus. These two young drivers would be in charge of driving us around throughout this long but well planned yātrā. 12th February 2023, the historic day arrived none too soon and we started our yātrā following H.H. Swāmījī’s convoy at 8.58 a.m. from Kārlā.

Our first destination – Shaṅkarāloka, a very serene and beautiful Ᾱshram managed by Saṁvit Sādhanāyana, with a temple dedicated to Bhagavan Shaṅkar along with Devī Pārvatī, a Navagraha sanctuary where the Navagraha vigraha-s reside among their respective vanaspati.

H.H. Swāmījī and His entourage arrived at Shaṅkarāloka by 11.30 p.m. on the 12th. While H.H. Swāmījī was accommodated at Shaṅkarāloka Ᾱshram itself, the entourage was put up at the comfortable Trimandir, a short distance away.

Over the next three days followed informal interactions, Swādhyāya, Ᾱshīrvachana-s, soulful Bhajana-s, etc. in the divine sānnidhya of our beloved Guru. These precious moments continued to pervade the entire yātrā at every single destination, in addition to pre-planned programmes by the local sādhaka-s.

For me personally, there were many ‘Firsts’ in this yātrā - my first time in a yātrā with H.H. Swāmījī and His team and my first-time attendance at Swādhyāya, too! To my utter delight, Pūjya Swāmījī took up the lovely Gaurī-Dashakam stotram for Swādhyāya on two days – I learnt that ārādhanā of Shakti is important for a sādhaka because without Her Anugraha, one cannot hope to reach Shiva, his ultimate goal.

On both these days, post Swādhyāya, an engaging Sanskrit Sambhās͟haṇam session was conducted by Shilpā Mudūr pāchī. She narrated, nay, acted out a mythological story in simple Sanskrit followed by a question-answer round. In spite of not knowing Sanskrit at all, I was amazed that all of us could understand it very well indeed! Kudos to Shilpā pāchī’s immense prowess!

The evenings were invariably precious with the deep messages delivered in simple words by H.H. Swāmījī in His Upadesha, be it an informal Satsaṅga or the formal Ᾱshīrvachana.

Our erudite Dharmaprachāraka – Dr. Chaitanya Gulvāḍy mām presented a Kīrtana on Sant Nāmdev. It was a pleasant surprise to most of us who were unaware of this wonderful aspect of his humble personality. He came dressed to the part and left us spellbound with his skillful and soulful narration. Another highlight at Shaṅkarāloka was the presentation on the Kailāsh Mānasarovar Yātrā (2002) undertaken by H.H. Swāmījī along with 96 yātrī-s that Chaitanya Gulvāḍy mām showed through a PPT in his very engaging, inimitable style full of devotion.

I would recommend anyone and everyone even remotely interested in Kailāsh to see this presentation whenever possible as it gives a first-hand perspective of the crises, challenges, progress and finally success of the entire journey made in a span of 20 days which should make us Chitrāpur Sāraswat-s very proud. Personally, I found this talk taking a similar trajectory to one’s everyday life which is colourful, going through its own unpredictable ups and downs, but with our firm faith in our Guru and Lord Bhavānīshaṅkar, we too can overcome any difficulty and the end result shall be memorable!

On 15th February, our last day at Shaṅkarāloka, concluded with the Dharma Sabhā –a fulfilling occasion for the local sādhaka-s to offer Pādukā Pūjana and be blessed with an illuminating Ᾱshīrvachana by both Swāmī Nārāyaṇ Girijī Mahārāj and H.H. Swāmījī. It was indeed a moment of joy and pride for us to hear Swāmī Nārāyaṇ Girijī recounting his days at Sant Sarovar witnessing the dedicated tapas and sādhanā that Pūjya Sadyojāt Shaṅkarāshram Swāmījī underwent joyfully to reach this unparalleled stature of an ideal Sanyāsī and move on to become an ideal Mat͟hādhipati. Our Pūjya Swāmījī’s Ᾱshīrvachana of course was a lesson for all of us in humble, but mindful abhivyakti.

Destination two of our yātrā was Shrī Ḍūṅgargarh in Rājasthān, a journey covered in 14 long hours on 16th February. This phase of the yātrā was exciting for all of us as firstly, this was the first time that all of us had come to Shrī Ḍūṅgargarh. No one knew what to expect. Second, a Shobhā Yātrā had been planned by the local Sāraswat-s. Third, the Chār Yāma Shivarātri pūjana by H.H. Swāmījī was going to be held here for the first time.

Next day the Shobhā Yātrā started at 2.00 p.m. Interestingly, eight of our Ᾱmchī sādhaka-s were given the privilege (a doubtful one, as it turned out!), to ride four horses and four camels. Pūjya Swāmījī was seated in a chariot drawn by two majestic white horses for the long procession around town. The scorching bright sun did not deter the enthusiasm and hundreds turned out on the streets, joyously celebrating the arrival of their Guru. After the hour-long Shobhā Yātrā, a Dharma Sabhā organised by the Local Sāraswat sādhaka-s commenced with Dīpa-Prajwālana and Shrī Guru Pādukā Pūjana, and concluding with the much-awaited Ᾱshīrvachana by H.H. Swāmījī.

The next day (18th February) was Shiva Rātri with the Chār Yāma Shiva pūjana by Pūjya Swāmījī scheduled from 10 p.m. to 5.30 a.m. and we considered ourselves fortunate to participate in that. The same morning all our ladies were invited to put on the traditional mehendī on their palms – a traditional custom of the land. The local sādhaka-s - participating in this pūjana for the first time, were very excited. They had several queries which were very patiently answered by our senior sādhaka-s.

By evening, the stage was all set. Lord Bhavānīshaṅkar was ceremonially brought on to the dais and our Vaidika-s made all necessary preparations. Quite a few local sādhaka-s joined, performing the pūjana alongside Pūjya Swāmījī. Our Parama Pūjya Swāmījī started the first Yāma pūjana at 10.00 p.m. The Presence & Grace of H.H. Swāmījī performing the pūjana, left everyone mesmerised. The atmosphere was very divine and everybody thoroughly enjoyed every moment in spite of the cold night.

After the first Yāma pūjana, Pūjya Swāmījī observed Mauna for the next three Yāma -s. This gave a very special opportunity to Srīkar Baljekar mām, Varuṇ Mallāpur mām & Sameer Māsurkar mām, who took turns reciting the mantra-s effortlessly, synchronising very well with Pūjya Swāmījī performing the upachāra-s. I was personally very happy and impressed with the tremendous amount of effort that went into this all-night Jāgaraṇa and Shiva Ᾱrādhanā. On completion of the fourth Yāma, all of us were blessed with receiving the Tīrtha at the Divine Hands of our Beloved Guru.

On the evening of 19th February, a visit to the nearby sand dunes was scheduled along with a visit to a farmhouse. It was pure joy to climb up and slide down the sand dunes! Later, we were all taken to a sprawling farm at Biggā Bāss. It was a huge farm cultivating spinach, tomato, cauliflower, radish, mustard, etc. It was unbelievable to see so much greenery spread over such a vast area in Rājasthān. We were witness to the making of typical Bājrā Roṭlā (Bhākrī) which were served for dinner, of course with farm-fresh vegetables. All of us thoroughly enjoyed this meal at sunset, consisting of fresh Bājrā Roṭlā, sweet Chūrmā, Gawār bhājī and the oh-so-spicy change to chili-chutney, downing it all with gallons of fresh buttermilk.

Our sādhikā-s performed Navarātri Nityapāt͟ha and Shrī Devī Anus͟ht͟hānam the next morning while we sādhaka-s-did Gāyatrī Anus͟ht͟hānam, with a few local sādhikā-s joining in the upāsanā. The evening saw us visiting the Ḍūṅgargarh Market where most of us took in a bit of authentic Rājasthānī shopping experience. On return, a talk on “Kailāsh - Mānasarovar Yātrā” and “Chitrāpur Heritage” was presented by Dr. Chaitanya Gulvāḍy mām. Both talks were very engaging and had the audience enthralled throughout. The local sādhaka-s were very impressed with the sheer number of 96 yātrī-s going to Kailāsh along with H.H. Swāmījī. They also had many questions on the weather, distance, etc. which were well-answered by Chaitanya Gulvāḍy mām.

Next evening, an interaction with almost 200 school children was organised for H.H. Swāmījī along with Sanskrit Sambhās͟haṇam conducted by Shilpā Mudūr pāchī. Shilpā pāchī beautifully enacted the story of a lion cub and his young deer-friend, Imlī, with a hand-puppet. It was so heartening to see that the children immediately grasped the story answering her questions quite correctly! Children from a local Gurukul recited quite a few Sanskrit shloka-s. Of course, all children received chocolates from Pūjya Swāmījī. At the behest of H.H. Swāmījī, a prasāda bhojana was arranged by the organisers and enjoyed by all children.

Next morning (22nd February), we were taken to see “Gopāl Goshālā” located at Aḍsar Bās, Shrī Ḍūṅgargarh which housed a few dozen Gīr cows. Pūjya Swāmījī had quite a few queries which were promptly answered by the owner. We returned in time to attend the concluding Dharma Sabhā and were blessed by a wonderful Ᾱshīrvachana from H.H. Swāmījī.

On 23rd February, H.H. Swāmījī and the entourage departed to Haridwār, a distance of approximately 561 kms and 12 hours away by road amidst a tearful farewell by our Sāraswat Bandhu Bhaginī-s by road.

Enroute to Haridwār, all of us ate our packed lunch at the temple premises near Bhiwanī and reached Haridwār at 9.45 p.m. After a welcome Ᾱmchigele dinner at Vyās Ᾱshram belonging to Kāshī Mat͟h Saṁsthāna, the yātrī-s retired to their allotted rooms.

The main temple at Vyās Ᾱshram is dedicated to Bhagawān Vedavyās. The Vṛndāvan Samādhi of Pūjya Shrīmat Sudhīndra Thīrtha Swāmījī of Shrī Kāshī Mat͟h Saṁsthāna is situated next to it. The Ᾱshram is located in a beautiful garden with various colourful flowers in full bloom, a treat to the eyes after the dry lands of Rājasthān. This entire Ᾱshram is situated on the banks of River Gaṅgā with its own Gaṅgā Ghāṭ enabling devotees to take a dip in the sacred Gaṅgā waters at any time of the day. Couple of temples dedicated to Shrī Gaṅgā Mātā and the Navagraha-s stand guard at the private ghāṭ with an Ashvattha guḍī under a huge Ashvattha tree nearby. The Vyāsāshram has acres of agricultural land where many crops, vegetables and fruit trees are cultivated. We got to see two fully grown rudrāks͟ha trees laden with raw rudrāks͟ha fruit close to the main temple. The entire Ᾱshram premises with its divine temples amidst greenery, is very scenic, peaceful and serene.

The next morning, after witnessing the Nirmālya visarjana pūjā and Ᾱratī performed by the current Mat͟hādhipati of Kāshī Mat͟h, Shrīmat Samyamīndra Thīrtha Swāmījī, we visited the Ᾱshram Goshālā. The goshālā is spread on a 5-acre land, with a cowshed on one side with approximately 40 Jersey cows and a dozen cute calves. Beside the cowshed, a huge farm is devoted to the cultivation of grass for cows as well as for growing vegetables. It also includes a shed to store dry grass. The milk from this goshālā is used at Vyās Ᾱshram for all purposes including pūjana. The Kāshī Mat͟hādhipati accompanied our Pūjya Swāmījī and showed Him around. The place was well maintained and clean. In the evening, at an informal interaction, all yātrī-s and a few visitors to the Vishwa Sāraswat Confluence got to meet H.H. Swāmījī.

The next two days, 25th & 26th February, were packed with the programmes organised under the auspices of the Vishwa Sāraswat Confluence at Vyās Ᾱshram. This event saw approximately 350-400 visitors from across India. We completed the registration formalities by 10.00 a.m., when both Sāraswat Mat͟hādhipati-s - our H.H. Swāmījī and the Kāshī Mat͟h Swāmījī arrived for the inaugural session comprising of Veda-Ghos͟ha, Dīpa-Prajwālana and Live art demonstrated beautifully by the artist, Shrī Vilās Nāyak. Post tea-break, our own Shrī Nitin Gokarṇ (Principal Secretary, Govt. of UP) spoke at length on the ‘Glory of Sāraswat Heritage - Tradition, Qualities and Culture’. This was a very engaging session with participants asking questions at the end. The next speaker was Major General GD Baks͟hī who spoke energetically on the history of Saraswatī River. Post-lunch, a session was conducted by Professor Amitābh Maṭoo on ‘Kashmīr and Sāraswat-s’ to trace the history of migration of Sāraswat-s from Kashmīr. Next session was by Shrī Siddhārth Pai on ‘ The Role of Sāraswat Youth in Taking Indian Economy Forward’ which kept the youth at the conference pretty engaged. Later, Shri Dinesh Kāmath conducted a session on ‘Sanskrit Being an Essential Part of Our History’. The talk explained how the world’s oldest language had such a profound influence on Indian culture for so many centuries. Post-tea session had our Shrī Durgesh Chandāvarkar, Chairman of SVC Bank highlighting the value and impact of Sāraswat-s in the Banking Sector in providing many opportunities for employment and in the process, creating a huge revenue for so many decades. Next, there was a quiz session related to ‘Know Your History’ conducted by Shrī Nandmohan Sheṇoy. The quiz was quite unusual and a lot of fun since it was a completely digital experience using smartphones. Later, Smt. Smitā Sheṇoy and Smt. Māyā Rohit pāchī-s presented a joint session on ‘Jewellery and Dresses of North and South India Sāraswat-s’.

After this, all our Ᾱmchī Sādhaka-s and some delegates gathered near the Gaṅgā Ghāṭ for Gaṅgā Pūjana by both the Mat͟hādhipati-s. The Vyās Ᾱshram Ghāṭ was brightly lit up for the occasion. The Vaidika-s chanted the mantra-s and both Swāmījī -s performed the pūjana in sync. It was indeed a once in a lifetime experience seeing Them do the Gaṅgā Ᾱratī at the Gaṅgā Ghāṭ. The onlookers at the event were mesmerised by this rare opportunity, feeling both fortunate and blessed. The evening programme concluded with Ᾱratī at the temples.

The next morning at the Sammelana, the first session was by Smt. Shefālī Vaidya on ‘Sāraswat Āsthā and Temples’. It was an interesting presentation depicting and recollecting the history of all the Sāraswat temples mostly in and around Goā region. The next session by Shrī Sāhil Kiṇi, ‘Building a Digital India - A Sāraswat Perspective’, talked of his experiences with Shrī Nandan Nīlekaṇi during the build-up of the Aadhār cards. This gave a very interesting perspective on the projects involving Government officials and private company employees working together and the success they achieved despite coming off different routes. Next session was on ‘Yoga and Happiness’ by Yogāchārya Shrī Rāghvendra Pai who elaborated on Yogā, the ancient Indian way that helps enrich the happiness quotient of people. Later, there was a panel discussion on ‘Sāraswat Identity and Unification’ in which our Shrī Praveeṇ KaḍῙe, Shrī Uday Gurkar, etc. participated. This was followed by another panel discussion ‘Involvement of Sāraswat Youth and Way Forward’. Post-tea, both the Swāmījī-s were invited on stage for the concluding Ᾱshīrvachana-s. The Sammelana came to an end with melodious Hindustānī Classical and devotional music.

On 27th February morning, our yātrī-s were taken on a visit to Manasā Devī Temple located high on a mountain and also accessible by a rope-way. A short trip to Ṛs͟hikesh was also planned where our yātrī-s travelled to Shatrughna Ghāṭ for Gaṅgā-darshan and Rām jhūlā. We did proks͟haṇa with the divine Gaṅgājal and chanted Shrī Gaṅgā Stotram. Later, we visited the Ṛs͟hikesh market place, had a sumptuous lunch and got back to Haridwār in the evening to attend the evening Ᾱratī at Vyās Mandir.

On 28th February morning, the yātrī-s felt blessed to witness both our H.H. Swāmījī and Kāshī Mat͟h Swāmījī performing pūjana at the Navagraha Mandir, Gaṅgā Mandir & Ashvatha-Nārāyaṇa Temple. A few of our sādhaka-s (especially Mahilā Varga) got to volunteer for cutting vegetables and fruits and serving lunch at the bhojanashālā. In the evening, we were scheduled to see a few temples in Haridwār. We got into the yātrī bus by 4.00 p.m. and first visited the Daks͟heshwar Mahādeva Temple at Kanakhal dedicated to Lord Shiva. This is a beautiful and popular temple (also believed to be a Shakti pīt͟ha) which was built by Ranī Dhankaur in 1810. Next, we visited the Harihar Ᾱshram belonging to Shrī Avadheshānandjī Mahārāj located at Kanakhal. The main deity at the Ᾱshram is a Pārad Shiva-liṅga (made of Mercury), which weighs approximately 150 kgs. The last stop for the evening was Har kī Paurī (meaning feet of Lord Vis͟hṇu), a ghāṭ on the banks of river Gaṅgā which is a very popular destination in Haridwār for the beautiful Sāmūhika Gaṅgā Ᾱratī in the evening. Although we could not stay back for the Ᾱratī, the place itself has such peaceful and divine vibes that one can spend hours without ever getting tired. On return, we had an informal interaction with our H.H. Swāmījī with a few bhajan-s.

1st March was a truly divine saṁyoga – our Pūjya Guruswāmī’s Shis͟hya Swīkāra Divasa co-incided with the Vardhantī of the pratis͟ht͟hā of the Bhagavāna Vedavyāsa vigraha at the Vedavyāsa Temple! In the early morning, Navarātri Nityapāt͟ha and Devī Anus͟ht͟hānam as well as the Gāyatrī Anus͟ht͟hānam were offered respectively by our Mahilā and Purus͟ha varga-s. Post-breakfast, we all witnessed the ceremonial divine Abhis͟heka and Pūjana of Bhagavān Vedavyāsa performed by both the Mat͟hādhipati-s. The Gandha-lepita Vīrāñjaneya at the Samādhi of H.H. Sudhīndra Thīrtha Swāmījī was a visual treat. This was followed by offering of ‘Paṭṭa Kāṇika’ and receiving Blessings from H.H. Swāmījī and the Kāshī Mat͟h Swāmījī. Pūrṇāhuti of Laghu Vis͟hṇu Havana at Shrī Vedavyāsa Mandir in the presence of both Swāmījī-s was scheduled for 12.30 p.m. We had falāhāra at the bhojanashālā followed by Mahā Ᾱratī and lunch. In the evening, there was Dharma Sabhā at Vyās Ᾱshram in the divine presence of both Swāmījī-s.

On 2nd March morning, all yātrī-s attended Prāṇāyāma and Nināda sessions taken by Chaitanya Gulvāḍy mām for Purus͟ha varga and Sharayū Hal̄dipur pāchī for Mahilā varga. All the yātrī-s enjoyed these excellent sessions with simple but effective stretching exercises, Kapālabhāti and Bhastrikā Prāṇāyāma followed by Nināda, well-demonstrated and explained. Later, H.H. Swāmījī was shown around the vegetable farm at Vyās Ᾱshram temple premises by the Kāshī Mat͟hādhīsha. There were no programs in the evening and all yātrī-s got ready to pack their belongings to resume the yātrā next morning.

On 3rd March, all yātrī-s after an early breakfast, loaded our luggage in the yātrī bus and followed H.H. Swāmījī’s convoy on the next long journey to Pus͟hkar 665 kms and 11 hours away.

On our first morning 4th March in Tīrtha Sthal̄ī Pus͟hkar, we visited the Inderghāṭ at the Pus͟hkar Lake. After a dip in the cool waters of the sacred Pus͟hkar sarovara, Pūjya Swāmījī performed pūjā at the banks. Thereafter, we had darshan at the three nearby temples walking through the quaint narrow lanes -The Aṭmateshwar temple, the Old Raṅgjī temple and the New Raṅgjī temple.

All of us travelled along with H.H. Swāmījī the next morning to Bhīlwārā, about 150 kms away, at the invitation of the local Sāraswat-s. H.H. Swāmījī was given a rousing welcome by an ecstatic crowd of approximately 250-300 Sāraswat devotees. A befitting formal reception followed on stage ending with a beautiful Āshīrvachana by H.H. Swāmījī in which Pūjya Swāmījī lucidly explained the Vidyayā, Shraddhayā, Upanis͟hadā mantra to the congregation of brāhmaṇa-s who take pride in their brāhmaṇatva. The devotees were obviously thrilled with the newly established connect with “Hamāre Sāraswat Gurujī.”

Our third day at Pus͟hkar saw us all by 4 a.m. at the much-awaited morning puja at the precincts of the holy Brahmā temple said to be the only Brahmā temple in the world. This temple is a 14th century structure with a statue of Chaturmukha Lord Brahmā with Devī Gāyatrī beside Him. Pūjya Swāmījī arrived at the temple after Snāna at Pus͟hkar Sarovara in the brahma muhūrta. The Mahant of the Brahmā temple received Pūjya Swāmījī and briefed us on the history of this temple. Our Pūjya Swāmījī performed āratī and all sādhaka-s received prasāda with a cup of welcome kulhaḍ vālī chāi!

The same evening, H.H. Swāmījī was felicitated by the local organisers and a few dignitaries of Pus͟hkar. Pūjya Swāmījī concluded the function with a short but potent Āshīrvachana explaining the importance of learning from the Guru, from co-sādhaka-s, then by doing chintana, absorbing the learnings in time. The attentive listeners were very happy with the explanation of the three Devī Anus͟ht͟hānam mantra-s too! At the end, Pūjya Swāmījī blessed everyone with Tīrtha-Vitaraṇa.

Next day (7th March), early morning, Pūjya Swāmījī and all yātrī-s travelled to Jodhpur, 180 kms and approximately 5 hours away. After freshening up, in the evening, H.H. Swāmījī was accorded a warm reception at Saṁvit Dhām in the Dharma sabhā organised by the Saṁvit sādhaka-s. In His Āshīrvachana, Pūjya Swāmījī explained the meaning of the bhajana ‘Jayati Girirājeshwarī’ – Devī Girirājeshwarī being the Adhis͟ht͟hātrī deity of Saṁvit Dhām. He emphasised the need for Guru Anusandhāna with constant anusmaraṇa in and through vyavahāra to receive new inspirations. The sabhā concluded with Tīrtha-Vitaraṇa by Pūjya Swāmījī.

On 8th March, all sādhaka-s reached Saṁvit Dhām early in the morning with great excitement as the much-awaited Atirudra yāga was to begin. Quite a few of our Āmchī Sādhaka-s had signed up for Shākalya Sevā and Saṅkalpa Sevā. The first process was to seek ‘Guru-Ājñā’/Anumati. We were witness to this as Panḍit Navaratna Agnihotrījī informed our H.H. Swāmījī and Nārāyana Giri Swāmījī the details regarding conduct of Atirudra and sought their Anumati to start the Yajña. Next was the Shuddhikaraṇa (cleansing) process for all participating Yajamāna-s/Sādhaka-s with ten dravya-s e.g. Bhasma, gandha, sand, haldī, kuṅkuma, Pañcha-gavya, etc. Next was the Maṇḍapa Pravesha when all Mahājana-s/Yajamāna-s who had registered for Shākalya Sevā were requested to enter the Yajña-shālā. The Yajña process began with ‘Araṇi-Manthana’, the very interesting traditional ritual to kindle the agni for the yajña. This was performed in the presence of both H.H. Swāmījī and Nārāyaṇa Giri Swāmījī. On this first day, one āvartana of the Rudrī was completed in the afternoon. H.H. Swāmījī conducted Swādhyāya on select shloka-s of ‘Shivānandalaharī’ which immediately made our minds more focused and set the tone for participation in the pavitra yajña for the five days.

9th March, the second day of Swādhyāya conducted by our Pūjya Swāmījī entered deeper levels and attracted many Saṁvit sādhaka-s to attend. The Swādhyāya had lots of practical guidance for sādhaka-s too, in and through the upadesha picked from the Shivānandalaharī shloka-s.

At the yajñashālā, the 2nd and 3rd āvartana-s were completed. The effect of a dozen Paṇḍita-s reciting the Rudrī with great speed and all 41 Havana kunḍa-s set up for the āhuti-s created an atmosphere that is really hard to describe. One just got engrossed in this entire experience. The evening concluded with a satsaṅga in the sānnidhya of H.H. Swāmījī.

On the morning of 10th March, we assembled quickly for the Swādhyāya session continued by H.H. Swāmījī. The Atirudra Yajña too continued as planned completing the 4th & 5th avartana-s of Rudrīpāt͟h in the morning. The 6th āvartana was chanted in the afternoon. In the evening, Pūjya Swāmījī performed Devī Pūjana in which Nārāyaṇa Giri Swāmījī also participated along with all sādhaka-s. The effect of the Pūjana spread a lot of positivity and warmth amongst all sādhaka-s. Later, all Mahātmā-s were requested to speak. H.H. Swāmījī emphasised that the Anugraha of the Āchārya is always there but it will manifest in our lives only when we make a diligent effort in our sādhanā.

In the early morning hours of 11th March, a stretching, prāṇāyāma & Nināda session was conducted for the Taru-s by Sharayū Hal̄dipur pāchī. At the Atirudra, the 7th āvartana was completed followed by the 8th āvartana in the afternoon. In the evening, a grand Nāgarik Abhinandana (Civic Reception) function was organised at Shrī Jūnākheḍāpati Hanumān temple in Jodhpur to honor our H.H. Swāmījī. The Vashis͟ht͟ha Saṅgeet Maṇḍalī offered a swāgat geet. The Mahārānī of Jodhpur, Rānī Hemalatā Rāje felicitated H.H. Swāmījī and Nārāyaṇa Giri Swāmījī. Thereafter followed felicitations by other local dignitaries and Heads of Institutions. The atmosphere was electric with representatives from many institutions present and keen to offer their respect felicitating Pūjya Swāmījī . The other Mahātmā-s attending the function were also felicitated.

After a moving tribute and pravachana by Nārāyaṇa Giri Swāmījī, a Mānapatra in Sanskrit was presented to H.H. Swāmījī, read out by a Sanskrit professor. The highlight of the evening was the offering to H.H. Swāmījī, of a scintillating, precious Sphaṭika and Rudrāks͟ha mālā which belonged to Pūjya Baḍe Swāmījī, by Nārāyaṇa Giri Swāmījī in humble remembrance of Pūjya Baḍe Swāmījī ’s wish. The Prāsādika Mālā was equally respectfully accepted by H.H. Swāmījī in utter humility. The grand function came to an end with Pūjya Swāmījī’s illuminating Āshīrvachana.

12th March, the last day of the Atirudra began with the 9th āvartana. The afternoon session was for āvartana to other Gods and Goddess and in total, 9 āvartana-s of the Rudrī were completed. 150 Paṇḍita-s, yajamāna-s offered āhuti, preceding the Pūrṇāhuti in the evening. Pūrṇāhuti was the solemn culmination of the unique and rare Atirudra Yāga. Pūrṇāhuti was offered at the Divine Hands of H.H. Swāmījī and Nārāyaṇa Giri Swāmījī in the presence of other invited Mahātmā-s. This was followed by Maṅgalāratī signifying the successful completion of the Atirudra Yāga saṅkalpa. The concluding Dharma Sabha began at Saṁvit Dhām with a welcome song by Vashis͟ht͟ha Saṅgeet Maṇḍalī. All the Local Dignitaries and Sponsors who had contributed to the 5 - day event, were given the privilege to felicitate H.H.Swāmījī and Nārāyaṇa Giri Swāmījī . On behalf of Shrī Chitrāpur Mat͟h, our Dharmaprachāraka Dr.Chaitanya Gulvāḍy mām and Kris͟hṇānand HebῙekar mām paid obeisance to Nārāyaṇa Giri Swāmījī and other Mahātmā-s present at the sabhā, followed by H.H. Swāmījī, Nārāyaṇa Giri Swāmījī and the other Mahātmā-s being honoured by the Adhyaks͟hā of Saṁvit Dhām, Smt.Vasant Us͟ha Rānījī. After the much-awaited concluding Āshīrvachana-s by H.H. Swāmījī and Nārāyaṇa Giri Swāmījī, Pūjya Swāmījī gave Prasāda to all key devotees involved in organising and successfully carrying out the Atirudra yāga. Nārāyaṇa Giri Swāmījī concluded the momentous event with a suggestion to plan for a Koṭi Rudra Yāga next. Thus, came to an end our very sacred, inspiring and educative sojourn at Saṁvit Dhām, Jodhpur.

Next morning (13th March) saw us all move on to our last destination of this yātrā – Sant Sarovar at Mount Ābū following H.H. Swāmījī and Nārāyaṇa Giri Swāmījī. On the way, we had the good fortune to visit some beautiful monuments at Jodhpur. First on the list was Manḍore Gardens, a big garden with historical museums, temples, fountains and a lot of monkeys. It is said that Manḍore was the capital of Jodhpur before Mehrānagarh fort was built by Rāo Jodhā. We yātrī-s clicked a lot of pictures of temples, inscriptions, paintings and toys built during that era.

Our next stop was Meherāngarh Fort, a fort that Rāo Jodhā built on a hilltop at Jodhpur in 14th century on a 1200 - acre land. We could see this magnificent structure from our bus while still a few miles away. We spent a few hours here along with our hired guide (Ms. Shekhāwat) who gave us vivid descriptions and a glowing account of everything about the palace. A few of us also shopped for bangles, books and paintings at their souvenir store.

Finally, we visited the temple of Goddess Chāmuṇḍā who is the ‘Is͟hṭa Devatā’ or the Revered Deity of the Jodhpur Royal Family since several centuries. This temple is situated within the palace walls as Rāo Jodhā had brought the statue over from Manḍore Gardens to be installed in the new fort. All of us yātrī-s paid obeisance and prayed for the Devī’s blessings. After a sumptuous lunch at Mūc͟hawālā in Jodhpur, we started for Mount Ābū arriving there by night.

Then onwards, from 14th March to 19th March, every morning and evening, we were blessed to witness the Pūjana and Āratī at the Shrī Somnāth Mahādev Mandir at Sant Sarovar Āshram. We would then offer the Sādhanā Pañchakam along with Devī Anus͟ht͟hānam by our Mahilā varga and Gāyatrī Anus͟ht͟hānam by the Purus͟ha varga before lunch. One evening, we all participated in a Vimarsha on “Yātrā” conducted by Āshā Awasthī pāchī. The Vimarsha was very engaging, informative, interactive with experiences shared by all yātrī-s as we explored the meaning and reasons for undertaking a yātrā, along with many lessons learnt. For me personally, this was a revelation summarising why a yātrā was conducted and what was the purpose and objective of a yātrā. We were also fortunate to be granted an informal satsaṅga session with Nārāyaṇa Giri Swāmījī.

On 15th March, we travelled to the Dilwārā temple, a group of five Shwetāmbara Jain temples dating back to the 11 century, built mostly using white marble. All yātrī-s appreciated these beautiful and intricately carved structures. In the evening, we all visited Shrī Dhuleshwar Mahādev temple, which is dedicated to Lord Shiva. Before leaving the temple, all the yātrī-s were treated to a cup of delicious ice-cream by the grace of Nārāyaṇa Giri Swāmījī. On our way back, we found time to go shopping in the vicinity of the beautiful and scenic Nakkī Lake which was a great spot for boating, snacks and enjoying the colourful sunset.

The morning of 16th March was reserved for a visit to Gurushikhar and Achaleshwar Mahādev temple. At Gurushikhar Temple, we recited the Gurupādukā stotram and Shrī Parijñānāshrama Trayodashī. The Achaleshwar Mahādev temple constructed around 9th century is believed to be built around the toe of Lord Shiva and all yātrī-s got a divine opportunity to offer jalābhis͟heka. Our Chaitanya Gulvāḍy mām made a small contribution to the temple on behalf of all yātrī-s. Later in the day, we attended the very beautiful Swādhyāya on the Ardhanārīshwara Stotram conducted by Pūjya Swāmījī. The same evening, we visited Girīshwar Mahādev temple nearby and performed As͟hṭamūrti Upāsanā.

On 17th March, all Āmchī yātrī-s and a few taru Saṁvit sādhaka-s went on an uphill trek to the Table Top Forest Terrain, a walk of approximately 1.5 kms, to spend some time with nature. The view from the summit of the Table Top hill, was spectacular and we were tempted to sit quietly in meditation for a few minutes. It was a good opportunity for our young yuvā-s and taru-s to bond together. At the same time, I personally felt this was an opportunity to reconnect our body and mind with nature. All the sādhaka-s, regardless of age, enjoyed this short trek experience and returned feeling fresh and rejuvenated in time to attend the continuing Swādhyāya by Pūjya Swāmījī. A visit to the Arbudā Devī Temple was scheduled in the afternoon. This temple has 350 steps to climb up the mountain and a lot of naughty monkeys along the way trying to snatch things from passers-by. Once at the entrance, everybody had to bow down in order to enter the inner sanctum sanctorum. After praying for Arbudā Devī’s blessings, all of us reached Sant Sarovar for the evening Āratī.

The morning of 18th March was very special with a planned visit to Kacholī, the Samādhi Sthala of Pūjya Swāmī Īshwarānand Girijī Mahārāj. We drove for approximately 40 kilometres to reach Kacholī village. There we were met by Shrī Nirañjan Sonījī (Kālu bhāi), caretaker of the place. All of us sat in front of the divine Samādhi in silent meditation for a few minutes. The Samādhi is beautifully constructed in black Shāligrāma stone with eight carvings of Lord Shiva (As͟hṭamūrti) on all four sides and with pure white marble over it. Kālu bhāijī arranged an Āratī to be offered on behalf of us yātrī-s and helped take a few group photos. Later he explained the significance of this place as to how Baḍe Swāmījī would visit this place whenever he was in Ekānta or during winters. The place has the Arāvalli mountains on one side and one could see Dhuleshwar Temple from afar. Kālu bhāijī also informed us that this place was not known to everyone as Baḍe Swāmījī would always like to spend His time here alone and loved this place. Baḍe Swāmījī had selected this place for His Samādhi as He wanted people to visit and appreciate the beauty and serenity of this place. We were also informed how the design and details of the Samādhi including the overall Samādhi structure was carefully planned by Baḍe Swāmījī Himself.

I personally felt that if we were to do some manana on all this, it clearly shows us how all the learned Mahātmā-s think and how their vision is so different and their perspective so broad as compared to the rest of the people. Overall, the energy and vibes at this Samādhi was palpably on a different level. As Nārāyaṇa Giri Swāmījī says, “Baḍe Swāmījī is still around and it is for the sādhaka-s to find His Presence still out there and to feel it within.” After a sumptuous breakfast served to us at Kacholī, we returned to Sant Sarovar since the locals of Mt. Ābū were scheduled to meet H.H. Swāmījī and Nārāyaṇa Giri Swāmījī that morning. A Bhaṇḍārā for Mahātmā-s was also arranged the same afternoon. A few yuvā-s and taru-s volunteered to serve food at the Bhaṇḍārā. Our Maṅgesh Chickermane mām sponsored the Bhaṇḍārā and had the good fortune to welcome the Mahātmā-s by offering a customary Tilaka and Kāṇika to all Mahātmā-s who had graced the occasion. The Bhaṇḍārā began with our yuvā-s and taru-s doing a great job of serving food, constantly remaining on their toes, attending to everyone. After the Bhaṇḍārā, it was time for all the other sādhaka-s to partake of the delicious lunch. This was our last day at Sant Sarovar and that night we returned to our rooms with a heavy heart to start packing for our return journey back to Mumbaī and Kārlā the next morning.

On 19th March morning, we loaded our luggage in the bus and headed to Sant Sarovar. All yātrī-s, yuvā-s and taru-s bid goodbye to each other and our hosts at Sant Sarovar and were busy exchanging numbers to stay in contact going forward. Personally, I had a mixed feeling as on one hand our yātrā was in the final stage and we were headed home after 40 days. But on the other hand, all of us had stayed together for so long that we were all bonded practically as one family for the last 40 days with everyone caring, supporting, sharing and helping each other.

Finally, it was time for H.H. Swāmījī ’s departure from Sant Sarovar for His return journey to Kārlā. With a very heavy heart, all of us bid goodbye to our Pūjya Swāmījī in Whose constant Sānnidhya we had spent our last 40 days listening to His Upadesha-s, singing bhajana-s, interacting in informal satsaṅga-s and having lunch/dinner in His divine Sānnidhya at Sant Sarovar.

After Pūjya Swāmījī ’s convoy left, all of us yātrī-s felicitated our two bus drivers, Animay and Mañjū whom we addressed as our humble heroes. These two youngsters had driven the bus for the last 40 days, across states, spanning different times, different weather, always cooperating and polite, never once complaining. Perhaps the bus too took a cue from their friendly behaviour and never once caused any problem throughout the 6000 km yātrā over 40 days across 7 destinations! Our yātrī-s contributed a generous tip for both of them as a token of their appreciation, and this was handed over at the sacred Sant Sarovar before this final lap of our unforgettable yātrā.

Finally, our bus started on the return journey from Mt. Ābū to Kārlā with a resounding - Oṁ Namaḥ Pārvatī Pataye Hara Hara Mahādeva!

We left Sant Sarovar at 9.00 a.m. and reached Mumbaī at 12.30 a.m., where we dropped a few yātrī-s. The rest of us reached Kārlā at 3.45 a.m.- just 20 minutes after the arrival of H.H. Swāmījī ’s convoy. At 9.30 a.m., our bus left for Shirālī with three of our yātrī-s, arriving there at 1.00 a.m., thereby completing our Uttar Bhārat Yātrā – an overwhelming once-in-a-lifetime experience.

On behalf of all of us yātrī-s, I offer humble, immensely grateful praṇāma-s at the Lotus Feet of H.H. Swāmījī for this wonderful opportunity of exposure to varied cultures and experiences, for the many valuable lessons learnt in sevā and above all, for the loving Sānnidhya of our Beloved Guru every single day of this memorable Yātrā!

Oṁ Namaḥ Pārvatī Pataye Hara Hara Mahādeva!