The Atirudra Havana at Jodhpur

(8th to 12th March 2023)

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H. H. Shrimat Sadyojat Shankarashram Swamiji were invited by various Uttara Bharatiya Saraswat organizations to grace their cities with Their August Presence and shower Their Blessings on them. A five-week tour was therefore devised to visit Ahmedabad (Shankaralok), Shri Dungargarh in Rajasthan, Haridwar, Samvit Dham at Pushkar, Bhilwara, Jodhpur, and lastly Mt. Abu, Sant Sarovar. While each place had its own charm and left lasting memories, what follows is an account of the “Atirudra Swahakar" organized at the Samvit Dham - Jodhpur, conducted under the benign guidance of H.H. Swami Narayan Giriji Maharaj of Samvit Sadhanayana, Sant Sarovar, Mt. Abu, and, the reception and the honour accorded to our Pujya Swamiji.

Rudra or Rudra Prashna

Our vaidika-s chant Rudra Mantra-s at the time of Jalabhisheka and on many other occasions, in the Math, as you all must have often heard. Some of us know the Rudra by heart, and some of us have performed Laghu Rudra, Maharudra, etc. at the Math or elsewhere.

Rudra - also called Rudra Prashna, occurring in Yajurveda Samhita, is in two parts; “Namakam" so called because in each shloka of Namakam, the word " namo" occurs repeatedly. This part praises the terrifying forms of Rudra Devata to begin with, and later the myriad forms we see around us, and prays for our protection by Rudra from all evil around us. Namakam has 11 "Anuvaka-s" (paragraphs).

The second part is Chamakam, in which the word " Cha me" meaning, “to me” occurs in each shloka. For example, when Cha me is preceded by saying “बलशच म ओजशच म” it indicates a prayer for strength to me and vitality to me. Chamakam is full of requests to the Lord to grant us various material things which we aspire for. It also has 11 anuvaka-s.

Importance of Rudra Prashna

Rudra mantra-s are a powerful set of mantra-s. The regular chanting of these with Shraddha and bhakti, not only aid in ones spiritual journey, but are believed to have helped in curing specific severe ailments too.

Rudra Parayana - Laghurudra, Maharudra and Atirudra

Completing the Parayana of 11 Anuvaka-s of both Namakam and 11 Anuvaka-s of Chamakam at one go, is one “Avartana.” 11 Avartana-s of complete Rudra Pathana, constitute one "Laghurudra"; 11 Laghurudra-s make one Maharudra; 11 Maharudra-s make one Atirudra, i.e. chanting Rudraprashna 1331 times, with proper dhyana-avahana, parayana, abhisheka-Ahuti-s, and prescribed procedure is Atirudra. In all these, Ahuti offered to Agni by the Yajamana are important.

Atirudra performed at Jodhpur

At Jodhpur, elaborate arrangements were made to create a Yajnashala to accommodate 41 (that’s right forty-one!) Havanakunda-s (Altars). Each Kunda had 2 to 4 "Yajamana-s", and an assigned Acharya (Kundacharya). There were two types of yajamana-s - ghrta yajamana - ones offering Ahuti-s of ghee, and other yajamana-s "Shakalya" yajamana-s - offering Ahuti-s of Shakalya, a mix of various "dravya-s” consisting of rice, sugar, dry fruit, unhusked rice, black til, some herbs, berries, and so on. Volunteers were constantly on the move to replenish ghee, Shakalya, samidha-s and dried cow dung cakes, as needed.

There was one " Pradhana Yajamana", who performed yajna at the " Pradhana Kunda" which had a special place in the centre of the Yajnashala, decorated with flowers and had an " Akshaya Patra" hanging over the Kunda, through which a constant flow of "Ghrta" was maintained during Havana.

Five of us from Swamiji’s entourage participated on all five days, while a few of us participated for a day or so.

The Team

At the Jodhpur event, there was a team of 20 plus Acharya-s, led by Pt. Navaratna Shastri, to do the principal chanting. In addition, there were more than 30 priests appointed as " Kunda Acharya-s" who were assigned responsibilities of getting the Yajamana-s prepared with tilaka, etc. and sankalpa, and generally guide where needed.

Performing Atirudra

The priests chanted complete Namakam of 11 anuvaka-s, followed by one anuvaka of Chamakam. This was repeated till all 11 Chamaka Anuvaka-s were recited. At times, Namakam was interspersed with other Stotra-s. The cycle used to take about 2.5 hours. This would complete one Avartana. The yajna lasted for five days, starting every day around 8 am each day, and lasting till 5.30 to 6.00 pm with appropriate breaks.

The Start of the Ritual

On the first day, the team of priests led by Pt. Navaratna Shastri, a well versed Agnihotri Brahmin, began the procedures. Pt. Navaratna Shastri was initiated by Pujya Swami Ishwaranand Giriji Maharaj. Narayana Giriji Maharaj said about Shastriji that, in India, today there may be more “Mahatma-s" than "Agnihotri-s", and Shastriji is one of the Agnihotri-s. (Agnihotri-s are expected to perform the fire ritual without fail, twice daily plus seasonal observance as ordained.)

In the first half of day one, elaborate puja-s starting with Ganesha Pujana, Peetha Pujana, and other avahana mantra-s, navagraha pujana etc, were conducted by the priests through the Pradhana Yajamana.

At around 11.30 am, the traditional Agni avahana as prescribed in Vedic rituals, with appropriate Veda mantra-s was made, in the August Presence of our Swamiji and of Narayana Giriji Maharaj. Two wooden implements called "Arani” and “Uttararani" were used initially symbolically by the Pradhana yajamana and his wife, and then the priests took over to invoke and ‘kindle’ agni.

The agni thus produced was placed by our Swamiji in the Pradhana Kunda to ignite the sacred fire and with the Agni from here, all other 40 Kunda-s were lit. The kunda-s were ready with samidha-s, specially brought for Havana.

In the second half of day one, the regular Rudra Avartana-s began at the appointed time of Muhurta which was around 12.15 pm. We, the yajamana-s, could start with Ahuti-s. After each mantra, before the Ahuti-s started, we all did agni avahana dhyana and elaborate "Nyasa". The yajnashala would resound with " Swaha" and we were to offer Ahuti-s in the Kunda.

The krama followed by Uttara Bharatiya priests is slightly different from what we follow in the Math. They chant additional stotra-s like Purusha Sukta, Durga Stuti, etc., in between, and some other stotra-s. Also, they chant the Rudra mantra-s at a very fast pace. They insist on Swaha being chanted by all while offering Ahuti-s. This created a resounding effect in the Yajnashala with over 150 persons performing the yajna. We also offered Ahuti-s for the other stotra-s chanted in addition to the Namaka and Chamaka mantra-s.

For couples who sat together for the yajna, the Kunda acharya performed "Gatha Bandhana" tying the "pallu" of the wife's saree with a pink and orange dhaga. In the pallu, a flower and some rice were placed, and a string tied around it. The string was then hung around the husband's neck. This probably obviates touching the husband's arm, while he performs Ahuti, which is the practice we follow.

They also tied a separate string around the wrists of each of us every day, chanting the well knows "Raksha mantra"- ‘yena baddho Bali raja,’ etc. These two constituted a part of the Sankalpa. Every end-of-day, we were expected to keep the rice safely and upon reaching home keep it in the place where we normally keep our money. For men, they also tied our tuft of hair with a string signifying “shikhabandha”.

At the end of the day, there would be a grand Arati, in front of the central kalasha-s established with the photo of ‘Pujya’ Ishwaranand Giriji Maharaj. From day two, the arati’s were performed at each Kunda, by the yajamana-s.

The Closing Ceremony

On the last day, purnahuti was to be offered, in the presence of our Swamiji, Narayan Giriji Maharaj and several other Mahatma-s, who were present. The purnahuti here was an elaborate procedure lasting two hours. Various Devata-s were invoked and offered arati-s. Ashtottara Shata swahakara-s were done, and the final Ahuti was offered. At the end, we all did Bhasma Dharana concluding the ritual, so well performed.

Reception accorded to our Pujya Swamiji’

The Uttara Bharata Yatra was verily a “Digvijaya Yatra” for our Swamiji. The honour, love and affection shown by all organizations was phenomenal, touching, and made us proud.

At Haridwar, Swami Samyamendra Teertha of Shri Kashi Math made a special request to Swamiji to extend Their stay by another three days, and be present for the Vardhanti of Vyasashrama. Our Swamiji were accorded the most honoured treatment with Kashi Math Swamiji giving them a place of preference in every Pujana. They did Ganga Arati, Ganga Pujana, Vyasa Puja, etc., together.

Swami Narayan Giriji Maharaj, acknowledged our Swamiji’s seniority at every stage, saying our Swamiji were His elder Gurubandhu.

Swami Vimarshanandji Maharaj, when asked to speak after our Swamiji’s Ashirvachana, said, “I am a “Batuk” in front of Swamiji and what can I talk after They have expressed so well.” Then He went on to elaborate the nature of Swamiji’s Ashirvachana in glowing terms . He said, “Today we have seen the Vyakta, Vyaktavyakta and the Avyakta swarupa of our Gurushakti through this Ashirvachana.” He exhorted the audience to listen to this Ashirvachana a hundred times, to be able to absorb the true meaning and internalize the same.

The response of the general public too was unbelievably warm and enthusiastic. One sadhaka from New Delhi said though he was not well “जहा सवामीजीका चरणसपरश होता ह, उस जगह कम स कम एक दिन तो हम आना ही था”| When we left Shri Dungargarh, after a few minutes our bus came to a halt because a vehicle stopped in front of the bus. A girl came in our bus and bid tearful farewell to the ladies with whom she was associated during the past four-five days. This affection was demonstrated by all the laity.

The Shobha yatra at Shri Dungargarh, for over about five km was a sight to be cherished, with people vying to receive Swamiji’s darshan.

On the concluding day of the Jodhpur sessions, Mr. Bharat, the M.C. said, “We asked Swamiji to come here every year, but Swamiji said, you too can come to Shirali.” He further said, “We have taken this आदश seriously.” Moreover he said Swamiji have asked them to spend some time at least once a week or fortnight in Samvit Dham to do Seva and thirdly, he said Swamiji have asked them to do regular Sadhana. He said we will follow the three आदश-s of “गरजी”. It’s important to mark the words here, as he referred to Swamiji as Guruji. That is the stature our Swamiji have reached amongst non-amchi Saraswat-s. The concluding Nagar Sammana function was overwhelming - organized at the behest of Swami Narayan Giriji Maharaj. Newspapers reported that 51 institutions honoured our Swamiji, but including all small organizations, the number was 125.

At this function Maharani Hemalata Devi of Jodhpur personally honoured our Swamiji. During the entire Atirudra function, Rani Vasant Ushaji of Jodhpur was present every day. She is also the Adhyaksha of the Samvit Dham Jodhpur. Our Swamiji honoured her with a shawl. She organised a Bhandara (annadana for the entire assembly) in honour of Pujya Swamiji. During this yatra, Many sadhaka-s took Diksha from H.H. Sadyojat Shankarashram) Swamiji. A real proud moment for Saraswat-s from Chitrapur, indeed.

Shubham Bhavatu