



AN AFTERNOON IMMERSED IN HINDU CULTURE

By Gale Horton Gay

On a Sunday afternoon in early February, I left my home in Stone Mountain, traveled a few miles by car and when I parked I was in India. At least that's what it looked like and felt like. Before me was the most amazing structure, rising high above Lawrenceville Highway and Rockbridge Road in Lilburn, that reminded me somewhat of the famed Taj Mahal. Young boys apparently of Indian descent played a spirited game of soccer on the expanse of grass beside a large reflecting pool while mostly Indian families came and went.

The uninformed might call this massive, ornate building a temple, but it is, in fact, a mandir—a Hindu house of worship. This is the BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir also known as the Atlanta Mandir. It attracts devotees of the Hindu faith from throughout metro Atlanta and the region.

Those who drive by and wonder about what takes place inside need only drive to the gates, give the gatekeeper their name and mention that they would like to tour the property. Visitors are graciously welcomed daily from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m.

There are actually three buildings on the 30-acre property—a family life center, which was completed in fall 2008,

the mandir and a smaller building where seven sadhus (monks) reside.

Our tour guide, **Deepa Patel**, explained that all activities such as Sunday school, festivals and conferences take place in the family life center, and the mandir is the site of individual prayer and worship. Prior to the opening of the mandir, activities were held in a converted skating rink in Clarkston from 1988 to 2007. Patel led me, my friend and my daughter into a welcome center where we watched a video that explains the origins of BAPS, a social and spiritual organization founded in India. BAPS is short for Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sansth. In the video, a mandir is further defined as “a place where the mind becomes still.”

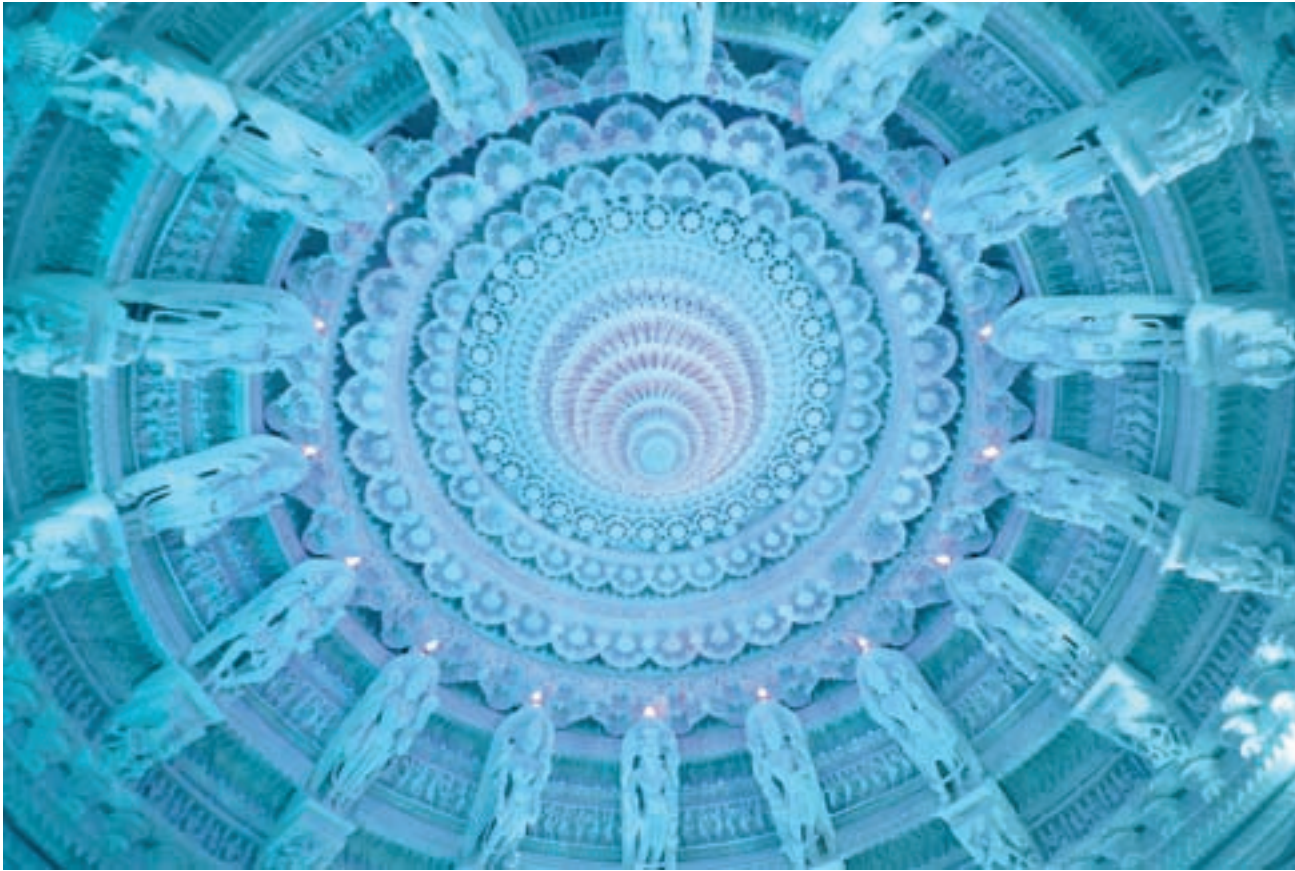
According to their Web site www.baps.org, BAPS was conceived by **Bhagwan Swaminarayan** beginning in 1781 and established in 1907 by **Shastriji Maharaj** and strives to “care for the world by caring for societies, families and individuals.” The five principles are: no alcohol, no addictions, no adultery, no meat and no impurities of body and mind.

And she points out that community service is also essential in the Hindu faith and that BAPS is involved in relief



All the carvings of the mandir were done by hand by artisans in India.

See Mandir on Page 12B



The reflecting pool of the BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir



Mandir

Continued From Page 1B

efforts throughout the world as well as in the United States, such as providing assistance after Hurricane Katrina. In the foyer of the welcome center are barrels for food donations for the Atlanta Food Bank.

Virtually every operational aspect on the campus is handled by volunteers—from maintenance to food preparation to leading tours, according to Patel, who has helped polish the stone inside the mandir and regularly leads tours. There is no paid staff, she said.

Outside women in fluttering colorful Indian attire and their husbands, parents, children and friends milled about, some taking photos, others quietly climbing the five flights of stairs leading to the mandir. The skill of the artisans who hand-carved the stone is everywhere—on the columns surrounding the base of the mandir as well as railings surrounding its terrace and almost every exterior surface.

Patel explained that three types

of stone went into the construction of the mandir—Indian pink sandstone, Italian marble and Turkish limestone. All the raw materials were shipped to India where they were hand-carved reflecting Indian culture as well as scenes and prominent people. Ancient Hindu scripture spelled out how the mandir was to be constructed. She said all the pieces were then shipped to the United States and assembled on site. That assembly, Patel explained, was much like putting together pieces of a puzzle

Patel said that thanks to volunteers who gave 1.3 million volunteer hours the mandir was completed in 17 months instead of several years.

As we entered the mandir, we joined the other visitors and worshippers and removed our shoes, placed them onto a shoe shelf and ascended the white marble stairs. A man at the top held a sign telling the arrivees to be quiet.

The heart of the mandir was an awesome sight. Columns of white, intricately carved stone connected with detail-rich stone overhead and on the walls. Three-dimensional images of sacred deities—16 in all in the main room—are housed in nine displays built into the walls of the room. At 4 p.m. one of the monk unlocked the teak doors of the shrine and those who had been sitting on large circular rugs, rose, brought their hands together close to their chins and appeared to pray. Men could be seen walking before different deities and stretching out prostrate on the marble floor, then rising and moving in front of another deity and doing the same.

Patel said that she remains awestruck by the art and architecture of the mandir, even though she's well acquainted with it. She pointed out that no metal was used in the construction of the mandir and that all of the pieces are made to fit in only one place.

I noticed that when some worshippers approached others they would bend down and touch the other's feet. Patel explained that this is a greeting to show humility and respect, usually with a younger person touching the feet of an older person but also between people of about the same age. Patel was constantly smiling, speaking (softly) and touching the feet of friends she encountered while we toured.

Photography is permitted outside of the mandir, however, not beyond the landing of the first flight of stairs leading to the place of worship. No photos can be taken inside the mandir.

Three other mandirs exist in North America—one in Houston, one in Chicago and one in Toronto, Canada.

For more information, visit www.baps.org.