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Akshardham: Revival of Ancient Temple Art & Craft

A nation is celebrated in its art. A nation's art reveals its innermost character to shape succeeding ages and generations. India is a great land of art, culture and spirituality. The Indian art tradition is one of the oldest living art traditions in the world. For thousands of years Indian culture and heritage have survived, been sustained and flourished through mandirs. The grandeur and ornateness of these mandirs reflect a glorious tradition of art, sculpture and spirituality that has survived till today. One such mandir is Swaminarayan Akshardham.

Swaminarayan Akshardham, located on the banks of the sacred river Yamuna in New Delhi, a holy place of pilgrimage is a supreme example of India's magnificent art and architectural tradition. Everywhere there is a breath-taking display of art which generates pride for Indian Art and Culture. The main mandir is made up of 300,000 intricately carved stones, which are assembled and interlocked like a giant 3-D jigsaw puzzle. It's built without structural steel or any other corrosive materials, since it is meant to last thousands of years like the Pyramids of Egypt or the temples of Angkor Wat. Swaminarayan Akshardham also houses I-Max-like giant-screen film, audio-animatronics dioramas that depict universal values, an educating boat-ride, musical fountains based on Vedic theme and Bharat Upvan with sculptures of India's luminaries. Built as a tribute to the life and work of Bhagwan Swaminarayan, Swaminarayan Akshardham Complex is a priceless gift to mankind from HDH Pramukh Swami Maharaj.

According to Shanti Swarup the Indian art of stone carving displays an amazing range of human achievement reaching a perfection hardly ever reached elsewhere. He says, 'SCULPTURE is one of our immortal glories and perhaps our strongest claim to pre-eminence in the domain of art'. (29)

Among all forms of art architecture stands as the best. The magnificent stone structures of mandirs have very special relevance in the development of art, culture and civilization.

Humayun Kabir believes,

Of all forms of art, architecture is most dependent on a social feeling for beauty. The poet can launch into individual voyages after the ideal. The painter also may achieve perfection in isolation. Music may transcend the individual but has its origin in individual ecstasy. Architecture must depend on social factors at every stage. Only the co-operative endeavour of many can build up great architectural mandirs. Not only the master builder but his associates must have a feeling for craftsmanship. The whole of society must be informed by a sense of common purpose and endeavour. It is only when there has been a deep communal sense that great architectural mandirs have been raised. (151-152)

Swaminarayan Akshardham is a unique example of original, traditional stone Indian architecture which has attracted over 30 million visitors in past eight years. No such structure has been built in the last

800 years. It is built of pink stone and white marble and comprises 234 *sthambhs*, 9 *ghummats*, 20 *samvaranshikhars*, 143 elegantly designed windows, 1078 ft long *Gajendra Peeth* with 148 life-sized sculptured elephants (each from 20 tonne blocks of pink stone), *mayurdwar* bearing a total of 1738 sculpted peacocks, and 20,000 *murtis* and other ornate carvings and sculptures. The mandir is surrounded by nearly two kilometres long two-storey *parikrama*. It was a great challenge to carve and assemble the *parikrama* having 155 *samvaranshikhars*. World renowned artist and architect Satish Gujral visited Swaminarayan Akshardham on 27th Oct. 2005 and expressed his views about this great architectural marvel thus:

I am not only an artist but an architect myself, and I have seen projects being built. And seeing the limitations and style in India, I think normally it would have taken 50 years to build such a thing. But it's not just the time they took that is admirable but what is created. It is a very beautiful place, very well planned and, as I told you before, it can make a nonbeliever become a believer...In this place I found there was somewhere the hand of Providence that worked and is still working. Every pillar, every canopy is a masterpiece and made with such craftsmanship that is incomparable. I think this will become the most important piece of architecture as well as of faith for the city. What I will take with me is an image that I cannot describe in words. It has dumb stricken me. I am not a stranger to such things; I have seen the world, I have seen great mandirs. It made me very proud that such a place exists just a few miles from where I live. (Swaminarayan Bliss: 91)

The making of Swaminarayan Akshardham was a mammoth undertaking and many experts in this field said that it would take 40-50 years to build such a thing. How did the colossal Swaminarayan Akshardham take shape in only five years with limited human and financial resources? The story of its creation is as fascinating and phenomenal as its magnificent character and impact. It's a saga of divine inspiration and human endeavour, out of which, like the unfurling of the petals of a flower, Akshardham blossomed in all its beauty and magnificence.

In December 1992, Pramukh Swami Maharaj planted seeds of the Akshardham project for New Delhi. He wished that Swaminarayan Akshardham should have a spiritual look and be built in consonance with the *sthatyashastras*. With this in mind the Akshardham team of sadhus travelled to the excavated sites of ancient mandirs at Oshiya in the desert of Rajasthan, the Kailas Mandir in Ellora and the famous Vishnu Mandir in Angkor Vat in Cambodia etc. They studied Indian architecture dating back from the 8th century to 12th century CE. Subsequently, Swaminarayan Akshardham was designed in accordance with the Nagaradi style of architecture, with unique additions and changes to the *ghummats*, *samvarans*, *sthambhs*, *mandovar*, *peeth*, *up-peeth* and other parts.

After profound studies, observations and discussions, significant changes were introduced into the original mandir design and once royal, palatial design of the mandir was transformed into a breath-taking structure that would spiritually impress and inspire people for thousands of years.

1. It was decided to have *Mandovar* to be designed according to the ancient Nagaradi style with ornately carved layers. The *kanpith*, *kumbhs*, *kalashes*, *jangha*, *chhaja* would also be carved profusely.
2. Besides having carved layers of the *mandovar* another decision was to have *murtis* installed in the *jangha*. The recesses for the *murtis* would be decorated with ornate pillars. After due research the *murtis* of India's *rishis*, *acharyas*, *avatars* and great personalities would be made and installed.

3. In the *mandapams* of the nine domes, six types of different carved pillars were designed by the Akshardham team to provide different experiences. The team of sadhus decided upon the designs in alliance with ancient Indian architecture, namely: (1) the small dome by the main entrance to the mandir would have octagonal pillars and the recesses of the pillars would have beautiful *murtis*, (2) the central dome area and porch of the main entrance would have quadrangle pillars and its recesses would have ornate *murtis*, (3) the dome behind the central dome would have ornately carved octagonal pillars with no *murtis* carved into them, (4) to the right of the central dome there would be thin pillars and quadrangle pillars with delicately carved *murtis* installed in them, (5) to the left of the central dome the pillars would have less broad layers with small carved *murtis* in them. The 25 ft high pillars would be ornately carved at their corners and middle parts.
4. It was decided to have two tall profusely carved pillars in front of the main entrance with *samvarans* on top. There would also be pillars and *samvarans* on the two side porches of the mandir. The pillars would be carved similarly to the pillars at Oshiya and Modhera mandirs.
5. It was decided to have an intricately carved *kakshasan*.
6. No *kamans*, *torans* or brackets were to be placed on top of the upper base of the pillars. Instead, *murtis* of the 500 *paramhansas* would be installed.
7. It was decided that the inside of four of the domes be saucer-shaped with traditional ornate designs. And the inside of the other domes be decorated with in-depth carvings of the symbols of Sanatan Dharma.
8. The pink sandstone mandir would have marble stone inside. The pillars and its upper bases would be made of marble. The floors would also be of marble, while the beams would be made of pink stone. Later Pramukh Swami Maharaj suggested that the beams and all the domes be made out of marble.
9. Instead of the norm of having one plinth in ancient mandirs it was decided to have two plinths. The lower plinth would comprise of stone elephants. After extensive research the Akshardham team of sadhus designed a creative and unique plinth supported by stone elephants.
10. Everyone felt that instead of having a low mandir with a royal palatial look it would be better to have a higher structure. Following several detailed discussions, the Akshardham team of sadhus presented a mandir design with the alternative heights of 121 ft, 123 ft, 127 ft, 129 ft and others. Shrijiswarup Swami had all the heights designed on a computer, from which Pramukh Swami Maharaj chose the design with its present height of 141 ft.
11. After due research on ancient mandirs it was decided to have a 30 ft high *parikrama* (colonnade) bearing in mind the height of the Akshardham mandir. From the observation of a portion set up at the workshop in Pindvada it was decided to have galleries and *samvarans* to crown it.

Foundation

For thousands of years, the Yamuna had flowed on the land where Akshardham has been created. Now, the challenge was to build a stone edifice that would stand for thousands of years on its soft bed. The scientific analysis of the soil was done. Since New Delhi is located in Earthquake Zone 4 (meaning, there are high chances of large earthquakes) earthquake-resistant features were incorporated. With this in mind, Tehri Dam, Uttarkashi, Koyana Dam and others, that have had earthquakes, were studied.

Finally, it was decided to use the 'steel-less' method to prepare the foundations for the enormous 141 ft high, 316 ft wide and 356 ft long Swaminarayan Akshardham. Thus, the technique used to build the

foundations for the mandirs at Konark, Somnath, Dwarka, Jagannathpuri, Bhuvaneshwar, Mahabalipuram and other coastal mandirs was chosen. For this, a leading foundation technologist and devotee, Shri Maheshbhai Desai, and structural consultant for the project, Shri B.V. Chaudhary, designed the foundation.

First, a 961,874 cu. ft (285 ft wide x 225 ft long x 15 ft deep) foundation pit was dug in which, using gabions of geomatrix and geofilters, 11 separate layers of sand and stones were laid. In the event of any earthquake or other geological movement, the fluidity of the foundation would enable it to absorb the disrupting waves of ground movement. On top of these layers, a five-feet thick raft of plain cement concrete (P.C.C.) was laid. Then, numerous concrete cubicles, measuring 36 sq. m, were arranged like a jigsaw puzzle around the raft. Bearing in mind the expansion and contraction properties of concrete, a special concrete curing process was carried out. The special feature of this entire process was that not a single piece of metal was used.

On top of this foundation, Swaminarayan Akshardham's main plinth was built using five million specially prepared and tested Meerut bricks. Normally, these bricks have a weight bearing capacity of 35 kg/cm², but here bricks with a weight bearing capacity of 100 kg/cm² were rigorously tested and used.

On such a meticulously designed foundation the mandir structure was built with beautifully carved stone pieces. The steps involved in carving stones were as follows:

1. According to the purpose and size of the required stones, appropriate stones were mined from the quarry. The stones, weighing up to 20 tons, were retrieved with the aid of cranes and then numbered.
2. The stones were then transported by tractor or truck to the assigned workshops. There, they were checked and separated if they were of a different colour.
3. Then each stone was cut by large stone cutters into different sizes. Care was taken that the stone was cut in such a way that its wastage was minimum.
4. To cut stones that were 16 ft to 18 ft long giant dresser and gensaw machines were used.
5. Then the designs on paper were drawn or impressed upon the stones. Thereafter the stones were cut accordingly before they were assigned to the stone artisans and sculptors. This saved time and effort for the sculptors.
6. The stones were then checked to see whether the impressed designs were correct.
7. The first artisan would then chisel out the large unwanted chunks of stone. Then the second artisan would 'dig' out the design, giving it the required depth. The date and time on which the chiselling and carving were done were noted on a daily basis.
8. Further, more skilled craftsmen would work on the stone to give it a proper shape as per the design.
9. The stone work would be checked again. Then the stone was sent to be polished.
10. Again, the stone would be checked, and if required, appropriate changes would be made. Then again it would be sent for abrasion and polishing. The time required to carve one stone would be worked out. And, if necessary, the pace of work would be increased.
11. To protect the sculpted stones from being damaged they would be packed in grass, jute cloth, rubber tyres and polystyrene. An assigned number would be printed on each final sculpted stone before it was sent to the store for storage and transportation.
12. The stones were then transported by the Sanstha's trucks to New Delhi. Here the stones were assembled as per their numbers.

It's really very interesting to know about how the lost tradition of *Gajendra Peeth* has been revived and also about how the unique *mandovars* at Akshardham were created and also about how around 6,000 people were taught to become artisans?

Gajendra Peeth(Elephant Plinth)

Our ancient *shilpashastras* like *Mayamtam*, *Shilpa Ratnakar*, *Diparnav* and others prescribe a *gajstar* for palaces and mandirs. This tradition is found in the ancient Kailas Mandir of Ellora which is 1500 years old and in Mahabalipuram Mandir that is 1700 years old. Prior to the 12th century many mandirs followed this tradition by having a one foot *gajstar*. But thereafter, the tradition had been almost lost. The large *gajstar* at Swaminarayan Akshardham is a wonderful revival of our long lost tradition. Through Pramukh Swami Maharaj's inspiration, the Akshardham team decided to develop a unique Gajendra Peeth. After a lot of extensive research and discussions on the stories of elephants in our Purans, *Panchtantra* and fables it was decided to present the Gajendra Peeth in three sections, namely: Elephants with Nature, Elephants with Man and Elephants with the Divine. The entire 10-ft high plinth around the Swaminarayan Akshardham would exude social and spiritual messages through 80 subjects or stories. After this decision, the important step of creating the Gajendra Peeth, followed.

First, an expert artist, Shri Vasudevabhai, made wonderful drawings of the elephant stories selected. Second, Shri Pradipbhai and his assistants made exquisite life-size models in clay. Though such a project would have taken years to complete, it was accomplished in a couple of years under the supervision of Vishvavihari Swami and Bhaktinandan Swami at Akshardham in Gandhinagar. The life-size models were sent by truck to Pindvada where the important and challenging third stage of carving 148 stone elephants started. The carvings continued round the clock. The elephants were decorated with carvings of ornate designs, drapery and skin contours. A total of 148 elephants, 125 human figures, 42 animals and numerous backdrops were carved. Sadhu Brahmaviharidas refers to eminent architect and thinker B.V. Doshi who said "These elephants that fill the Gajendrapeeth, kept coming in my dreams. Incredibly elegant and life-like! I was overwhelmed by the forms, scale and sheer artistic beauty." (11) For thousands of years people would relish and absorb the beauty of India's glorious art and values.

Akshardham Mandovar and Pillars

Mandovar means the outer wall of a grand building. The architecture of Swaminarayan Akshardham is based on the ancient Nagaradi style of North India. Among the Nagaradi style of architecture the *mandovar* of Akshardham is the largest and longest, stretching for 611 ft and with a height of 25 ft. Though the scriptures of ancient Indian architecture state the arrangement of *murtis* in the *mandovar*, very few mandirs have created *mandovars* with *murtis* in the last 800 years. The *murtis* are predominantly of *dikpals*, *dev-gandharvas*, *apsaras* and dancers. The *mandovar* of Akshardham has *murtis* which create a unique impression. Generally, in the *jangha* of the *mandovar* single *murtis* are arranged as is the case in Taranga, Oshiya, and the BAPS mandirs at Amdavad, London and Chicago. The Surya Mandir in Modhera is an exception where small and large *murtis* are arranged in groups of five. At Akshardham the arrangement is unique because one finds single *murtis*, five *murtis* and six *murtis* together. The *murtis* are in three sizes: 63 inches, 31 inches and 15 inches.

After extensive research and discussions, the Akshardham *mandovar* was planned to include the *murtis* of avatars, rishis and devotees from the Vedic, Upanishadic, Ramayan and Mahabharat periods, Panchratra and Agama shastras and the Middle Ages. The *murtis* of the first man, Manu, to Dalpatram, the famous Indian poet-devotee of the 18th century have been included in the *mandovar*. In all 200 deities and

characters have been established, namely: 10 *dikpals*, 10 avatars, *Bhakta-Bhagwan* couples, rishis, devotees, poet-devotees, *acharyas*(ancient and modern), *devas* and *devis*. Every *murti* has been established with significance and veneration. Inside, the pillars of the Swaminarayan Akshardham are embellished with 248 *murtis* of divine incarnations, rishis, devotees, and 500 *paramhansas* of Bhagwan Swaminarayan. The pillars also have 3 feet high carvings of 108 sadhus and devotees of Bhagwan Swaminarayan. The stone pillars of the main entrance door have the *murtis* of 10 avatars and nine *grahas*. In total, in the domes, ceilings and outside wall of Akshardham, there are 20,000 *murtis*. The attributes of all the *murtis* were derived from the descriptions given in the Hindu *shastras*. From these descriptions sketches of the individual *murtis* were made. In the history of India's stone architecture there is no record of such a profuse number of *murtis* and stone carvings at one place anywhere else. The characters of the *murtis* established in Akshardham will for millennia inspire millions of pilgrims and visitors.

How Time and Money is Saved?

Generally, 30-40% of the stone is wasted while it is cut, chipped and sculpted. Simple arithmetic – up to 40 paisa of every rupee is wasted! So, the makers of Swaminarayan Akshardham had to discover some innovative solutions that would save money and time. They formulated their own unique cutting system and saved a lot of stone. Firstly, they made Plaster of Paris models and calculated exact size and basic shape required for all 300,000 stones. Then these data was computerized and a unique identification number was created for each stone. Then as quarried stone blocks came from the mine, the experts calculated which of the 300,000 stone-blocks could be cut from this one huge stone to minimize stone wastage. So what would have been chipped off into useless waste was actually utilized as raw stone-blocks for smaller designs. Thus, the stone wastage was brought down from around 30% to 8%.

Then, designs were drawn on stones directly and again cut to their basic design by smaller machines. So, when the artists began to work, half of the work – the basic shape and design – was already done! For a huge elephant they could carve a stone block into basic design in just one day, whereas traditionally it could have taken around 20 days! Thus time and money both were saved!

Unique Monitoring System for Stone-Carving

Another practical problem was measuring progress, which can be very difficult in any work of art. So, BAPS developed a unique monitoring system for stone-carving. Each of the 300,000 stones' carving design was divided into small pieces of few inches, and then given as daily targets to all artisans. Their progress was noted every evening, so the project status could be monitored time-wise and budget-wise. Also, artisans had much more work-satisfaction because the tangible targets increased their productivity and perfection in work. As an example, *mandovars* of Akshardham required sculpting of 12,000 stones, and at the end of the task, only a nine-inch piece of stone was carved incorrectly!

After the stones were carved, they were arranged as per their number sequence, assembled together, tested and corrected for interlocking before transporting to Delhi. It reduced the redoing cost tremendously. Thus small innovations made a big difference in the final output!

Story of Survival of an Art and Artisans

During the planning of Swaminarayan Akshardham it was estimated that minimum 7,000 stone artisans were needed to complete the massive 850,000 cubic feet of stonework in just 5 years. But as BAPS searched the whole of Rajasthan and Orissa, all it could get was about 1,000 artisans! That would mean 35 years of carving. So, there was a big roadblock, as soon as BAPS started. And just when everyone was on the verge of accepting the 35 years reality, there came a very humble suggestion from Pramukh Swami Maharaj. He said that, “can we teach 6,000 more people to become artisans?” and everyone was stunned! How could you just teach someone an art overnight? He said that we can try with those people whose fathers and forefathers were stone craftsmen. They might pick up the art fast because it’s in their family...

And, so a search was begun again for those people who were in the lineage of stone artisans, and fortunately 6,000 people were found who were interested in learning the art! Most of them were working as labourers in farms but they had the art in their ancestry, which was dormant. So, some of the main artisans were engaged into teaching and transmitting their art of stone carving at 26 different places in Rajasthan; it was as if, in the process of creating Akshardham, BAPS created a stone carving University with 26 branches. And over a couple of years, there were 6,000 graduates with 100% employment!

It was a win-win-win situation. Winning for BAPS because it had 7,000 artisans needed for the job. Winning for the world of art and for the nation, because by generating so many artisans, the traditional art of stone carving was revived. And winning for those labourers-turned-into-artists, because it really empowered them, both skill-wise and also financially.

The making of Swaminarayan Akshardham by skilled artisans and sculptors is a story of survival and transformations. Out of the stone art they created, they earned their livelihood and rediscovered their hopes and confidence. The workshops were not only producing carved stones but also moulding people. Pramukh Swami Maharaj had declared in the beginning, “The artisans working for Akshardham should also be inspired towards a better moral life and become happier.” Subsequently, through Pramukh Swami Maharaj’s blessings and the efforts of sadhus and volunteers, the standard of living of the artisans improved and their lives were edified.

The workshops for Swaminarayan Akshardham also became centres for the emergence of a new generation of young artisans who would perpetuate their skills. “I did not know anything. I was a good-for nothing fellow. But Pramukh Swami blessed us. I learnt to work here and earned my daily bread. He has changed my life,” says a supervisor, Shri Munnalal Pandit, of Sikandra.

Eighteen-year-old Sitaram came to the Sanstha’s workshop in Sikandra to work as a dishwasher. His father was a chronic addict who wasted away his time. Sitaram was touched by the vibrations of *satsang* in Sikandra. One day, at the instance of the sadhus, he brought his father, Ramkaran, to the workshop. The sadhus inspired him to give up his addictions and to start working. “But who will give me employment?” he asked. “You can start working here from tomorrow,” the sadhus offered. The next day he was given a hammer and chisel. Initially he was given the task of chiselling out chunks of stone. Then, with the passage of time he became an expert in ornate carvings. His two sons, too, became expert carvers. The three of them started earning Rs 10,000- 12,000 each. Today, Ramkaran owns a small factory and earns handsomely. He thanks Pramukh Swami Maharaj for transforming his life. The artisans for the workshops in Pindvada were predominantly tribals from the Dungarpur and Sagvada regions. Previously, whenever they had worked they were exploited by the contractors. But when the tribals came to the Sanstha’s workshops they were filled with hope and faith. They felt that they would find satisfaction in their work and be paid accordingly.

When the site at Sikandra was set up the biggest problem was the poor quality of sculptors. Pramukh Swami Maharaj had instructed the artisans, "The carvings should be deep so that they last for a long time. The work should be clean and proper. See that it is not done shoddily and in haste, because it will spoil everything. So take care and give your proper attention." So, at Pramukh Swami Maharaj's instruction the Sanstha's workshops produced a new generation of fine craftsmen. There were many other workshops in Pindvada, but such meticulous and ornate carvings were never done. The same could be said of Sikandra. Today the artisans who had worked for the Swaminarayan Akshardham project say with pride, "By working for the Sanstha(BAPS) we have become highly trained and intelligent in our work. Whereas before we did superficial and shoddy work with the single purpose of getting it done quickly."

In an area of 100 to 150 km around Sikandra the BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha's workshops had a good name among the locals. "If you do Pramukh Swami's work you would get paid even in the middle of the night. But it must be precision work, millimetre by millimetre. No sub-standard work is allowed here." Many craftsmen advanced in their careers after working at the Sanstha(BAPS)'s workshops. Rameshbhai Sompura was an ordinary sculptor during the Gandhinagar Akshardham project, over 15 years ago. Then he became a supervisor, and today he is the proprietor of a large factory dealing in stones. So many ordinary polishers at the Sanstha(BAPS)'s workshops have become renowned and successful contractors today.

For the added benefit of the craftsmen the BAPS had not limited the sculpting of stones at one workshop but transported them to the villages of the artisans. Thus they earned their living at their doorstep, which helped them save more money and raise their living standards. The BAPS workshops were also a great blessing for 1500 tribal women who got employment. They had been jobless for the last three years because of the drought. All basic facilities of lights, fans and living quarters were provided for them. They were provided meals twice a day and taught how to polish stones. For them it was liberation from poverty and, with the moral and spiritual environment, from vices, too.

Earlier as labourers, these sculptors were earning 1200-1500 rupees a month, and now as stone artisans, they were earning 9000-10000 rupees a month! almost 7 times! Even their wives worked at stone polishing, which empowered them and made them self-sustaining. BAPS ran de-addiction programs to make them free of tobacco chewing, smoking, drinking, gambling... BAPS also tried to educate their children... these artisans were not mere employees, they were part of BAPS family. While they sculpted stone for BAPS, it tried to sculpt life for them.

Pramukh Swami Maharaj was so eager to meet these artisans, that in spite of his fragile health, he went to all 26 dusty hot sites of Rajasthan at the age of 83! He travelled from village to village, from artisan to artisan, meeting, greeting, thanking, each of the 7,000 artisans. He showered flower petals on their heads out of real respect and appreciation! Many of them were in tears... and they said that all our lives, we have been carving murtis and people put flowers on the murtis made by us, but nobody cares for us. Swami, you are the first one who has put flowers on artisans even before you put flowers on the murtis!

During an assembly of artisans and workers in Delhi Pramukh Swami Maharaj acknowledged their services, "The service you are doing is even rare for the gods to get. The work done by you will inspire people for thousands of years."

The sculptors were honoured on 12 October 2005 in the presence of thousands of devotees during the Akshardham festival celebrations in Delhi. They were called up on the main stage, offered shawls and blessed by Pramukh Swami Maharaj. The artisans voiced their elation, "Pramukh Swami Maharaj has taken so much care for us ordinary people. He has honoured us immensely. Firstly, he has provided us with our

daily bread and wages and secondly, given us honour and pride. He is the incarnation of Vishvakarma. What we have learnt here, we could not have done so in any university.” Yes, the workshops for the making of Akshardham were a university of India’s ancient stone craft and sculpture. The skill and talent of the artisans and the stories of their transformation resonate through the beauty and grandeur of Swaminarayan Akshardham. Everyday thousands of people visit Swaminarayan Akshardham and get overwhelmed by seeing the beautiful craftsmanship on stones. Some of these visitors are professional builders, businessmen and architects who find immediate inspiration and guidance from the mandir administration to create many more such architectural marvel. This is how the ancient temple art and artisans find hope for their revival.

GLOSSARY

Acharya - Head of a religious order, teacher of the Vedas and other branches of knowledge; spiritual guide or preceptor, one who initiates a person into mystic lore.

Akshardham – Divine abode of Lord Swaminarayan. Synonym for Akshar. Akshardham is the name given to the hi-tech cultural monument commemorated in memory of Lord Swaminarayan in Gandhinagar(Gujarat, India) and in New Delhi(India)

Apsaras - Celestial maidens.

Avatars – Incarnation of God. The Divine descends (takes birth) in a human (or animal) body to conquer evil and re-establish divine law, righteousness, duty, virtue, justice, goodness, truth etc.

Chhaja- Balcony

Devas – Gods.

Dev-gandharvas - Celestial beings.

Devis – Goddesses.

Dikpals - Custodians of the ten directions.

Gajendra peeth - Plinth of elephant carvings.

Gajstar - Plinth of elephant carvings.

Ghumrats - Large sculpted domes of temple.

Grahas – nine planets according to ancients

Jangha - Middle part of wall of the mandir.

Kakshasan - Rear wall of the mandir.

Kalasha – The crown of a temple shikhara, shaped as a series of consecutively smaller pots placed on one another. A temple is incomplete without the kalasha.

Kamans - Decorative arches.

Kumbhs – pitcher

Kumbhi – stone base of a pillar in mandir

Mandapam – Domed area from which darshan of the image enshrined in the inner sanctum of a temple can be had.

Mandovar - Exterior wall of the inner sanctum of a temple.

Mayurdwar – A gate decorated with sculptures of peacock

Murti – Consecrated or ‘self-born’ image of God or the Satpuruṣha that is worshipped by devotees.

Nagaradi style of architecture

Paramhansa – ‘Supreme Swan’. From ‘hansa’, meaning swan or, more precisely, the high flying Indian goose. A class of liberated renunciates. The renunciates of Lord Swaminarayan numbering five hundred senior, were of the highest spiritual calibre and were thus called Paramhansa. Popular mythology recounts that the supreme swan is a sacred bird, able to separate a mixture of milk and water with a mere peck of the beak. This alludes to the true spiritual aspirant’s ability to differentiate between good and evil, right and wrong, truth and falsity. The spiritual swan grazes only on pearls – spiritual knowledge.

Parikrama – Colonnade through which devotees walk clockwise around the temple.

Peeth – Plinth.

Sthapatyashastras – The science of pristine architecture of India. Set of treatises describing the methods of building a temple.

Rishi – seer (of Vedic hymns); a person to whom new philosophy or knowledge is revealed; sage; saint.

Samvarans - Quadrilateral sculpted stone pinnacles.

Samvaranshikhars - Quadrilateral sculpted stone pinnacles.

Shilpashastras - Ancient science of stone art and paintings etc.

Sthambhs - Sculpted pillars.

Torans - Stone garlands.

Up-peeth - Additional plinth.

Vishvakarma – architect of gods

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