



Premesh, Hindu

Being invited to be a Hindu representative at the Golden Jubilee Young People's Faith Forum made a deep impression on Premesh.

Before I went to the forum I never really wanted to know about other faiths. It made me understand that you have to respect other religions. If I were to say to someone, 'You have to be a Hindu', no one is going to turn into a Hindu, because you can't be forced. If you listen to people of other religions, then it won't change your religion, but there are things you can gain.

Premesh explains the origins of Swaminarayan Hinduism:

The Swaminarayan movement or *sampraday* came into being on earth with the embodiment of Lord Swaminarayan on Chaitra Sud Nom, Vikram Samvat 1837, Ram Navmi (3 April 1781).

During Bhagwan Swaminarayan's life he had initiated many aspirants into the *sampraday*, and inspired them to live a moral and saintly life. Most importantly he established many *sadhus* (renunciants) into the fold, who worked generously for society and God. Lastly, he gave assurances that he would remain ever-present on earth through a constant lineage of spiritual successors.

When Bhagwan Swaminarayan returned to his eternal abode (*Akshardham*), his work was continued by Gunatitanand swami, then Pragji Bhakta (also known as Bhagatji Maharaj) and then Shastri Yagnapurushdas (or Shastriji Maharaj).

The organisation was properly formalised by Shastriji Maharaj, who registered it, and who also established five Hindu temples. He started the first temple (or *mandir*) in Bochasan, Gujarat, and inaugurated it on June 5 1907. Subsequently, this day marked the formal creation of the Bochasanwasi Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha or BAPS.

Premesh explains the meaning of BAPS:

Bochasan was where Shastriji Maharaj had inaugurated the first mandir, therefore the word *Bochasanwasi*, also meaning 'based in Bochasan'.

Akshar Purushottam signifies the teaching in Hinduism of worshipping God (*Purushottam*) with his perfect devotee (*Akshar*). For example, like Sita along with Rama, Radha along with Krishna.

The organisation is referred to as the *Sanstha*, which is a Sanskrit word. The main aims and objectives of BAPS today are that it:

- **inspires** – this is to give everyone a better way of life through benevolent values of discipline, tolerance, love, service, and purity. Also to realise oneself to be *atma* and to experience the eternal joy of *Purushottam*.
- **promotes** – peaceful co-existence and harmony together with all communities through co-operation and understanding.
- **sustains** – roots of Hindu culture and everything moral that it represents.
- **energises** – making the effort to stop dowry, drugs, smoking, alcohol, and other harmful addictions.
- **develops** – to create and construct activities for children and youth to direct their energy, to promote social services and education.

BAPS is growing in numbers. This BAPS Sanstha has over one million followers (or *haribhaktas*), and 700 trained *sadhus*.

There are over 45,000 active volunteers, out of the million followers. Customarily, anyone who attends weekly assemblies or daily *arti* at the nearest Swaminarayan mandir, and respects the codes of conduct and precepts prescribed by Lord Swaminarayan, is considered to be a follower of BAPS.

University life has presented Premesh with challenges and opportunities.

It is hard being at university. So much depends on what sort of groups you get into. It doesn't matter what sort of person you are. People are telling you what to do – like going clubbing and so on. If you go to a club you might get drawn into doing things such as smoking and drinking, so not going is avoiding temptation.

Instead, I choose to go to the temple, where I know so many people who are at the same stage as me and there are lots of things to do.

Premesh, Hindu



In the temple it is peace. I know that for myself I am following the rules, the *dharma*.

Every day I do *puja*, and read the *Vachanamrut*, a foundational scripture. It contains the words of holy Lord Swaminarayan, words about the past and the future.

Bhagwan Swaminarayan gave the *Vachanamrut*, during the last 10 years of his life (1819–1829). It contains 273 discourses (sermons). There are ten sections and the teachings are presented in the form of answers to questions raised by Lord Swaminarayan's disciple saints. The discourses encapsulate the principles and entire philosophy of Lord Swaminarayan, so this is a foundational text.

The topics covered include: overcoming depression, identifying real friends, controlling anger, removing jealousy, developing faith, recognising a true Guru and realising God.

Other important texts are:

- the *Shikshapatri* (a code of conduct of Lord Swaminarayan);
- *Swamini Vato*;
- the *Satsangjivan Granth*;
- the *Shri Hari Lilamrut*;
- the *Bhakta Chintamani*.

Premesh is proud of his religion.

I often wear the *tilak chandlo* symbol because I am an ambassador for the faith. I am not ashamed of my religion, but sometimes I choose not to wear it. Some people wear it all the time. People are always going to ask questions about it. If you explain to them what it is, then I'm sure they won't criticise. I also wear a *kanthi*.

Tilak chandlo is the spiritual symbol of the Swaminarayan Faith. The U-shaped symbol (*tilak*) comprises of yellowish orange sandalwood paste. Also, in the centre of the *tilak* is vermillion – kum-kum powder, in the form of *chandlo*.

The *tilak* represents *Bhagwan Swaminarayan* (the God Supreme), while the *chandlo* symbolises the ideal devotee (*Akshar brahman Gunatitanand Swami*) who is eternally at the feet of the Lord.

The male devotees during the morning worship wear the *tilak chandlo* on the forehead, while female devotees put on the red *chandlo* only.

The *kanthi* is a necklace of sacred beads, which is given in the ceremony of *vartman*. It is a short ceremony where water is placed on the right palm and a mantra is spoken to cleanse away all past sins and wrongs, which enables the devotees to begin a fresh and pure life. Once the *vartman* is taken and the *kanthi* is worn, the devotees have to obey the voluntary taking of five vows:

- No theft;
- No meat or non-vegetarian products;
- No alcohol and addictions;
- No adultery;
- No impurity.

Premesh greatly admires and respects Pramukh Swami Maharaj:

Pujya Pramukh Swami Maharaj is the fifth spiritual successor of Lord Swaminarayan and the present leader of Bochasanwasi Shree Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha (BAPS), the tradition of Hinduism to which I belong.

He has inspired thousands with his mere presence, and transformed them into developing a good character. Also, he has inspired people to give up addictions to lead a better life.

He leads an austere life of lifetime celibacy, without personal wealth or comfort. Representing the essence of Hinduism, his compassion for humanity, universal wisdom and striking simplicity have touched many world religious and national leaders. But most important is his quiet, undisturbed love for God which rises beyond all borders of nation, race and religion.

Regardless of faith or no faith, the values taught in Hinduism apply to anyone. These are the values of service, love, sacrifice, humility, duty, fidelity, tolerance and other values that help perfect the individual.