



Editorial

India, a sacred land known for its rich culture, is recognized worldwide for its wide variety of unique traditions and customs. As a means to rejoice and deepen this prosperous heritage, thousands of *utsavs* (festivals) are held throughout the year. The vast numbers of festivals celebrated in India often awe the foreigners and natives alike. The rich cultural heritage of India attracts foreigners during the celebration of many popular festivals including *Diwali*, *Janamashtmi*, *Ram Navmi*, *Raksha Bandhan* and *Holi*. Through the vivid colors, displays and sounds, *utsavs* reflect not only the importance of celebrating the rich cultural background, but of celebrating life itself.

The vibrant festivals play an integral part in the life of each and every Indian. Breaking the

monotony of routine life, *utsavs* kindle a renewed sense of enthusiasm, vigor and resolve for all those in attendance. The cheerful and lively atmosphere associated with *utsavs* can provide the impetus to seize the moment and live our daily life to fullest. In turn, while each festival has its own origin and significance, the common basis of all Indian celebrations is that it celebrates human life.

One such festival is *Vasant Panchami*. The word *Vasant* signifies 'the spring season', while the word *Panchami* specifies the fifth day of the Indian month of *Magh*. Taken together, *Vasant Panchami* celebrates the first day of spring. With the blooming of nature after the dormancy of winter, this *utsav* is celebrated with great exuberance and festivity.

Significance of Vasant Panchami

Historically, the festival itself dates to ancient times, tracing its origins to the festival of 'Vasantotsava', which was an important celebration marking the beginning of the agricultural season. In Hinduism, *Vasant Panchami* is a day to celebrate the Hindu goddess *Saraswati*, who stands as a symbol of wisdom. Hence *Vasant Panchami* venerates the different facets of learning such as the sciences, arts & crafts and music.

In the Swaminarayan faith, *Vasant Panchami* marks a glorious occasion, celebrating two major events: 1) the advent of the *Shikshapatri*, and 2) the birth of *Shastriji Maharaj* (Shastri Yagnapurushdas). This Special Edition of Outreach will detail the **Significance of Vasant Panchami** in commemorating these two events.

Looking Back: Vasant Panchami was celebrated with great enthusiasm at the Haridham Temple, NJ on Saturday, Feb 12th 2011. There were five different bhakti-dramas performed by the youths of the temple. Be sure to check out the video recap of this great utsav @ <http://yds.org/haridhamnj/darshan/video-darshan/>

Recognizing the Lives of the Great

Shastriji Maharaj was born on Vasant Panchami in 1865 AD in Mahelav, a small village near Anand in Gujarat. His birth marked a major turning point in the history of the Swaminarayan faith. He had an inspiring childhood, different from most, which was evidenced by His devotion and religious deeds. Early in His youth, He was initiated into sainthood and named Yagnapurushdasji. His dexterity was second to none in saintliness and learning. He became a *Shastri* (master) in the Sanskrit scriptures, a degree that earned Him the name, Shastriji Maharaj.

Shastriji Maharaj was the third spiritual successor of the legacy of Lord Swaminarayan. He passionately propagated the dual form of worship of Shri Akshar Purushottam, which is the essence of the Swaminarayan sect; Akshar Purushottam - dual worship is a faith



which involves worshipping Purushottam (Lord Swaminarayan) with Aksharbrahma (Gunatitanand Swami). This philosophy simply does not stop at believing oneself as Brahma, but goes a step forward to propagate that one should believe oneself to be Brahma (Akshar) and always serve the Parabrahma (Purushottam).

The Life of Shastriji Maharaj

Propagating this philosophy was by no means trivial, but was truly revolutionary. Despite the vast contemptuous behavior from opponents and resistance from society, Shastriji Maharaj remained undeterred in His endeavor to establish the Akshar Purushottam worship, as propounded by Lord Swaminarayan. Striving in the dire hardships, He built five temples at different locations in Gujarat through which He spread the message of devotion to Shri Akshar Purushottam Maharaj. These five temples are the pinnacles of accomplishments in the history of Shri Akshar Purushottam worship. At the end of His mortal life, He indicated Guruhari Yogiji Maharaj as His successor, the manifestation of Aksharbrahm.

Shikshapatri: The Essence of Hindu Scriptures

In 1826 AD, on the auspicious day of Vasant Panchami, Lord Swaminarayan gifted mankind with The Shikshapatri, a scripture that distills the essence of all Hindu scriptures. The Shikshapatri contains 212 short verses that provide practical guidelines and techniques to achieve both social and spiritual prosperity. This sacred text, seen by many as a manual for mankind, instills a virtuous life leading to inner peace (shanti). It encompasses the essence for everyday life from the basics of hygiene, how to meditate, whom to honor, whose company to avoid, to the highest ideals of devotion. The Shikshapatri is also comprised of spiritual aspects of life such as following religious vows, devotion (bhakti), respecting all deities and devotees, and constant association with a saint.



Here are a few verses from the Shikshapatri:

- One should not commit murder, suicide, consume meat, drink alcohol, smoke, steal, or gamble (12-18)
- Expenses should never exceed income. Do not incur debt (145)
- Treat elders and revered people with due respect (68)
- Wake up early and perform morning prayer and pooja (49)
- Never associate with people who have bad habits (27)
- Constant association with a saint (36)
- The ultimate fruit of all noble deeds is to cultivate true bhakti (devotion) (114)
- Identify oneself to be the soul (Akshar) and worship parabhrama (Purushottam) (116)

Due to its universal message, simplicity and practicality, the Shikshapatri helped countless individuals attain peace and tranquility. Observing the vast improvement in public order and the boost in social reform in the region, Sir John Malcolm, the Governor of the Bombay Province, was greatly moved and appreciated Lord Swaminarayan's diligent endeavors in eradicating the evil natures of society. As so, Governor Malcolm expressed great desire to meet Lord Swaminarayan. Upon their meeting, the Governor explained that he will soon pass laws which prohibit wicked acts such as infanticide and sati (a ritual requiring the wife to be burned alive at her late husbands' funeral). Furthermore, Sir John Malcom earnestly asked for blessings of social prosperity, protection, and peace. Pleased with the Governor's earnest efforts, Lord Swaminarayan cheerfully blessed him and gifted him with a copy of the Shikshapatri. Sir John Malcom happily accepted the Shikshapatri, which is currently preserved in the Bodleian Library of the University Of Oxford (UK).

Out of divine grace and compassion, Lord Swaminarayan wrote the Shikshapatri to help all people regardless of caste, age, gender, and religion. Even though it was written about 200 years ago, the Shikshapatri continues to provide practical guidelines for any person who wants to avoid the pitfalls of society and live a blissful life. The Shikshapatri will be covered in greater depth in the next edition of Outreach.



Cool Fact

Have you ever wondered why the springtime brings so much joy? German researchers have recently found the weather profoundly affects our day-to-day moods. Children, on the other hand, do not depend on the changing weather to make them happy. Children laugh an average of 300 times a day, whereas adults laugh only 15 times! We have some catching up to do!



Lasting Thought

1. Wise men speak because they have something to say; Fools, because they have to say something. – **Plato**
2. "Manners are like the zero of arithmetic. They may mean nothing by themselves, but they add a great deal of value to everything else." – **Maurice Maeterlinck**