

## International Youth Retreat : Journey of transformations

~ Rutvik Rana (USA)

**2023** was a pivotal year for Anoopam Mission devotees. We came together on so many occasions, starting with *Akshardhamgaman* of Sadguru Sant P.P. Shantidada, and later during the celebrations of Los Angeles *Murti Pratistha Mahotsav* (MPM), Canada MPM, UK *Aum* Crematorium construction, and finally, International Youth Retreat (IYR). December brought together youth and adult devotees from USA, UK, Canada, and Australia to participate in IYR. **Purpose:** To please Sant Bhagwant Sahebada, and live a life with *nirdoshbuddhi*.

After LA MPM, Sant Bhagwant Sahebada called a few youths in his *puja* and expressed his wish to invite youth to come to India and visit *Tirth Sthans* (pilgrimage places) that are important in our *satsang*. This set the wheels in motion of a two-phase *Yatra* of pilgrimage places throughout Gujarat, as well as

Ayodhya, Chappaiya, and New Delhi. Rather than sharing a traditional report of the places visited, I want to share the transformation that happened during the *Yatra*. This *Yatra* was nothing short of transformations at every stage. I could see and experience lives being changed, people growing, old traditions and rituals evolving, and much more. To say that this *Yatra* was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity is an understatement.

During the *Saurashtra yatra*, we visited *Sarangpur*, where the samadhi sthan of *Shastriji Maharaj* and *Pramukh Swami Maharaj* are erected. We learned how *Pramukh Swami Maharaj* had chosen the location of his samadhi sthan in such a way that it couldn't be built higher than *Shastriji Maharaj*, so that his sight would be always on *Swaminarayan Bhagwan* and *Shastriji Maharaj's* sight would be on



International youth (Yuvati) offering devotion at Shri Chhapaiya Dham- Shri Ghanshyam Maharaj Pragatya Tirth



him. Later, we visited Gadhpur mandir. *Swaminarayan Bhagwan* Himself envisioned the construction of this *mandir*, including the location, direction, number of gates, etc. *Shastriji Maharaj* started the work; *Yogiji Maharaj* did the Pran Pratistha; and *Pramukh Swami Maharaj* beautified the mandir to maintain the integrity, purity, serenity, and tranquility of the location. At times it felt like we were really in Maharaj's time, and he will walk by us any second. By this time, the schedule that was set had already been altered several times; lunch time came and passed without eating lunch. Being brought up in America, we are used to following a schedule and agenda unless there's a major issue that would disrupt it, but here, we experienced a glimpse of the first transformation. Attendees of the Yatra quickly adhered to schedule changes, no complaints of missing lunch. Everyone understood the *mahima* (glory) of the *sthans* and why our guru wanted us to visit them, and that remained the only focus. Just like how *Pramukh Swami Maharaj* pleased *Yogiji*

*Maharaj*, who himself had pleased *Shastriji Maharaj*, we aimed to please our guru. I believe that being fluid with constant changes made *Sahebdada* happy.

Next, the *Chhapaiya* Tirth and the journey leading up to the *Tirth Dham* was noteworthy. For some yatris, it started on 31<sup>st</sup> December via train, and it concluded 35 hours later. The main reason they took on this journey so they can bring ice cream, *srikhand*, clothes to distribute in the village as *sevas* and other useful items for yatris arriving by flight. Meanwhile, for others, the journey was split into three flight groups, and the total travel ranged from 5 hours to 14+ hours (flight cancelation and delays). This set the tone for the *yatra*: sleep will be very minimal and wait will be long. And thus, this experience inspired the transformation of letting our physical comforts go and doing what our *Guru* wanted us to do. After 4 mere hours of sleep, everyone gathered to do one hour of *dhun* at *Ghanshyam Maharaj's* pragatya sthan in the presence of *Sahebdada* and *Ashvindada*. No one cared that it was freezing cold, with no comfortable



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seating, in a dimly lit space, while sleep-deprived. Everyone's focus was on how we can experience the aura, divine bliss, and spiritual vibrations that are surrounding the campus. This is the exact location where Maharaj was born, the very place where He ran around playing and took baths in the pond. We were all transformed from individuals that made personal choices into devotees who listens to their God and Guru.

Sahebdada : "Wake up early to do dhun."

Bhakta : "Ji Sahebdada."

Sahebdada : "Make sure you do pradakshina of the Narayan Sarovar."

Bhakta : "Ji Sahebdada."

Sahebdada : "When doing darshan of the prasadi sthans, don't do other chit chat and just keep thinking of Bhagwan."

Bhakta : "Ji Sahebdada."

In *Chhapaiya*, we also got Sahebdada's darshan when he happily obliged to visit a *bhakta* (no high status) and his family and showered his *rajipo* on them. He saw the *bhakta's bhav* and *seva* performed at the mandir. Then, there was a photo session arranged in front of the *Chhapaiya* mandir steps. After that was complete, one devotee asked *Ashvindada* to take a picture with them. On seeing this, another devotee thought, "I should also ask." 25 minutes later, *Ashvindada* was still standing there happily obliging requests to take pictures. It was well past time for lunch, but he felt the importance of fulfilling Sahebdada's devotees requests more to give them divine *smruti*. For the two days we stayed in *Chhapaiya*, we were encouraged to come for 4 am dhun. On both days, *Sahebdada* and *Ashvindada* were present with everyone; despite their busy schedules and late nights, they wanted to give this

divine *smruti* to everyone. These are the divine transformations presented to devotees to relive these moments, give strength and vibrations later.

While visiting the *Gondal* mandir, a special sabha was arranged in the presence of the mandir's *Mahantji*. Sadguru Sant P.P. Ashvindada was offered a *mala* and *prasad* specially prepared by *santo* residing in the mandir for all the *Yatris*. Similarly, a sabha was held in *Dhari*. In *Chhapaiya*, right in front of *Ghanshyam Maharaj's pragatya sthan* in a special sabha, Sant Bhagwant Sahebdada was presented with a garland by the mandir's *Kothari*, and other *sants* and *haribhakto* were also honored. In Delhi *Akshardham*, a *sevak* who did *Shastriji Maharaj's, Yogiji Maharaj's, and Pramukh Swami Maharaj's seva* gave a personal tour of the mandir to *Sahebdada*. The *Mahantji* of the *Akshardham* mandir came to receive Sahebdada at the entrance and offer a *prasadi ni mala* to him. The impact of these incidents isn't isolated to only human relations; the relations between mandirs also transformed. In the *Gondal mandir, Sahebdada, Ashvindada, and Shantidada* grew up offering *sevas* to *Yogiji Maharaj* and slept in the courtyard – and now, in that same mandir, they get honored. This is a divine transformation because of *Swaminarayan Bhagwan's krupa*. Our *satsang* is also transforming



Offering Dhun-Prarthana at Shri Ghanshyam pragatya sthan



where institutional identities are dissolving, “*Divya yug nav uday paame chhe.*”

I had the privilege of visiting some of these *tirth sthans* before, and after 15 years, I was able to do their *darshan* again. I couldn't help but stand in awe of the physical transformations that have taken place at the sites themselves. *Yogiji Maharaj's janam sthan* was a small hut and there was no mandir there. Now, there is a beautiful campus around his *janam sthan* and an exquisite mandir. Similarly, in Gadhpur, there's a grand mandir built according to the exact dimensions and locations given by *Swaminarayan Bhagwan* Himself, including *Jiva Khachar's darbar* where HE lived for three years and did many *leela charitra* (divine actions). Finally, in *Chhapaiya*, an amazing campus is being built around *Ghanshyam Maharaj's janam sthan*, including the cleansing and beautification of *Narayan Sarovar* where HE used to bathe. Around HIS *janam sthan*, there is ample seating arrangement for *sabha* and *dhun* and various rooms to showcase how he used to live, and on top is the *shikharbaddh mandir*. It is breathtaking to see these places come to life and give bhakto a true vision of how *Yogiji Mahraj* and *Swaminarayan Bhagwan* used to live at that time. Many *Yatris* confirmed that they felt divine vibrations at all these places. Preserving all these *janam sthan* is so important because it allows us to truly understand their importance and *mahima*.

*Samarpan* (dedication, sacrifice) was another transformation that was evident during the entire IYR. At the end of Phase 1, we were going to arrive very late to *Brahmajyoti*, and the next morning at 4 am, there was a plan to walk to *Vadtal Dhaam*. When given an option to sleep in and arrive later to *Vadtal*, no one chose that option; instead, everyone decided

to walk. While arriving back to *Brahmajyoti*, *Sahebdada* called and instructed everyone not to purchase anything or eat anything from vendors along the route. Everyone gave up their desires to try anything along the route and arrived back. In Delhi, there was a plan to visit historic locations, but instead, everyone expressed the desire to have a *gosthi sabha* with *Sahebdada*. This *sabha* was unique because during the *sabha*, all youth gave their handwritten promises in the form of sunflower petals on how they will transform (*samarpan*) their lives to live more according to wishes of *Sahebdada* and *Ashvindada*.

Divine, blissful, memorable, unforgettable: these are some of the words that one can use to capture IYR. Yes, some issues arose at times, including long traffic jams, flight delays (including *Sahebdada's* flight as well), flight cancellations, meal delays, schedule changes, less sleep, etc. However, everyone kept their positive attitude, willingness to adapt to change, and most importantly, their goal to please *Sahebdada*. Everyone would agree the best way to describe International Youth Retreat 2023: **Transformed Lives.**

#### International Youth Retreat in Numbers

Total distance	: 4020 Kms.
Tirth Sthans	: 14
Phase 1 Yatris	: 136
Phase 2 Yatris	: 192
Buses	: 20
Hotels	: 4
Flights	: 10 to 14 (based on delays 0)
Cars	: 24
Mandirs visited	: 28
Number of missing or misplaced luggage	: 0
Number of divine smrutis	: Countless
Number of lives transformed	: Countless