

## *Bhagvan Swaminarayan*



**Swaminarayan** (3 April 1781 – 1 June 1830), also known as **Sahajanand Swami**, is the central figure in a modern sect of Hinduism known as the Swaminarayan Hinduism, a form of Vaishnavism. The Uddhav Sampraday in which he was initiated by his guru became known as the Swaminarayan Sampraday. Swaminarayan developed a good relationship with the British Raj. He had followers not only from Hindu denominations but also from Islam and Zoroastrianism. He built six temples in his lifetime and appointed 500 paramahansas to spread his philosophy. Swaminarayan is also remembered within the sect for undertaking reforms for women and the poor, performing yajñas (fire sacrifices) on a large scale as well as performing miracles. Swaminarayan had an estimated 1.8 million followers when he died. By 2007, he had an estimated of 20 million followers.



### When & Where Born

Swaminarayan was born on 3 April 1781 (Chaitra Sud 9, Samvat 1837) in Chhapaiya, Uttar Pradesh, a village near Ayodhya, in a Hindi speaking region in India. Born into the brahmin or priestly caste of Sarvariya, Swaminarayan was named *Ghanshyam Pandey* by his parents, Hariprasad Pande (father, also known as Dharmadev) and Premvati Pande (mother, also known as Bhaktimata and Murtidevi). The birth of Swaminarayan coincided with the Hindu festival of Rama Navami, celebrating the birth of Rama.

### Brief Life History of Swami Narayan

Swaminarayan had an elder brother, Rampratap Pande, and a younger brother, Ichcharam Pande. He is said to have mastered the scriptures, including the Vedas, the Upanishads, the Puranas, the *Ramayana*, and the *Mahabharata* by the age of seven.

After the death of his parents, Ghanshyam Pande left his home on 29 June 1792 (Ashadh Sud 10, Samvat 1849) at the age of 11. He took the name Nilkanth Varni while on his journey. Nilkanth Varni travelled across India and parts of Nepal in search of an ashram, or hermitage, which practised what he considered a correct understanding of Vedanta, Samkhya, Yoga, and Pancaratra, the four primary schools of Hindu philosophy. To find such an ashram, Nilkanth Varni asked the following five questions on the basic Vaishnava Vedanta categories:

- What is [Jiva](#)?
- What is [Ishvara](#)?
- What is [Maya](#)?
- What is [Brahman](#)?
- What is [Para Brahman](#)?



## Bhagvan Swaminarayan

While on his journey, Nilkanth Varni mastered *Astanga yoga* (eightfold yoga) in a span of 9 months under the guidance of an aged yogic master named Gopal Yogi. In Nepal, it is said that he met King Rana Bahadur Shah and cured him of his stomach illness. As a result, the king freed all the ascetics he had imprisoned. Nilkanth Varni visited the Jagannath Temple in Puri as well as temples in Badrinath, Rameshwaram, Nashik, Dwarka and Pandharpur.

In 1799, after a seven-year journey, Nilkanth's travels as a yogi eventually concluded in Loj, a village in the Junagadh district of Gujarat. In Loj, Nilkanth Varni met Muktanand Swami, a senior disciple of Ramanand Swami. Muktanand Swami, who was twenty-two years older than Nilkanth, answered the five questions to Nilkanth's satisfaction. Nilkanth decided to stay for the opportunity to meet Ramanand Swami, whom he met a few months after his arrival in Gujarat.

According to the sect, Nilkanth's understanding of the metaphysical and epistemological concepts of the *pancha-tattvas* (five eternal elements), together with his mental and physical discipline, inspired senior *sadhus* of Ramanand Swami.

Nilkanth Varni received *sannyasa* initiation from Ramanand Swami on 20 October 1800, and with it was granted the names *Sahajanand Swami* and *Narayan Muni* to signify his new status.

At the age of 21, Sahajanand Swami was appointed successor to Ramanand Swami as the leader of the *Uddhav Sampraday* by Ramanand Swami, prior to his death. The *Uddhav Sampraday* henceforth came to be known as the *Swaminarayan Sampraday*. According to sources he proclaimed the worship of one sole deity, Krishna or Narayana. Krishna was considered by him his own *ista devata*. In contrast with the Vaishnava sect known as the *Radha-vallabha Sampradaya*, he had a more puritanical approach, rather than the theological views of Krishna that are strongly capricious in character and imagery. While being a worshipper of Krishna, Swaminarayan rejected licentious elements in Krishnology in favor of worship in the mood of majesty, alike to earlier Vaisnava teachers, Ramanuja and Yamunacarya.

Swaminarayan also became known by the names Ghanshyam Maharaj, Shreeji Maharaj, Hari Krishna Maharaj and Shri Hari.

Swaminarayan strived to maintain good relationships with people of other religions, sometimes meeting prominent leaders. His followers cut across religious boundaries, including people of Muslim and Parsi backgrounds. Swaminarayan's personal attendants included Khoja



## Bhagvan Swaminarayan

Muslims. In Kathiawad, many Muslims wore kanthi necklaces given by Swaminarayan. He also had a meeting with Reginald Heber, Lord Bishop of Calcutta and a leader of Christians in India at the time. Bishop Heber mentions in his account of the meeting that about two hundred disciples of Swaminarayan accompanied him as his bodyguards mounted on horses and carrying Matchlocks and swords. Bishop Heber himself had about a hundred horse guards accompanying him (fifty horses and fifty muskets) and mentioned that it was humiliating for him to see two religious leaders meeting at the head of two small armies, his being the smaller contingent. As a result of the meeting, both leaders gained mutual respect for one another.

Swaminarayan enjoyed a good relationship with the British Imperial Government. The first temple he built, in Ahmedabad, was built on 5,000 acres (20 km<sup>2</sup>) of land given by the government. The British officers gave it a 101 gun salute when it was opened. It was in an 1825 meeting with Reginald Heber that Swaminarayan is said to have intimated that he was a manifestation of Krishna. In 1830, Swaminarayan had a meeting with Sir John Malcolm, Governor of Bombay (1827 to 1830). According to Malcolm, Swaminarayan had helped bring some stability to a lawless region. During the meeting with Malcolm, Swaminarayan gave him a copy of the Shikshapatri. This copy of the Shikshapatri is currently housed at the Bodleian Library at University of Oxford. Swaminarayan also encouraged the British Governor James Walker to implement strong measures to stop the practice of sati.

In 1830, Swaminarayan gathered his followers and announced his departure. He later died on 1 June 1830 (Jeth sud 10, Samvat 1886), and it is believed by followers that, at the time of his death, Swaminarayan left Earth for Akshardham, his abode. He was cremated according to Hindu rites at Lakshmi Wadi in Gadhada.

Prior to his death, Swaminarayan decided to establish a line of acharyas or preceptors, as his successors. He established two *gadis* (seats of leadership). One seat was established at Ahmedabad (Nar Narayan Dev Gadi) and the other one at Vadtal (Laxmi Narayan Dev Gadi) on 21 November 1825. Swaminarayan appointed an acharya to each of these *gadis* to pass on his message to others and to preserve his fellowship, the Swaminarayan Sampraday. These acharyas came from his immediate family after sending representatives to search them out in Uttar Pradesh. He formally adopted a son from his brothers and appointed them to the office of acharya. Ayodhyaprasad, the son of Swaminarayan's elder brother Rampratap and Raghuvira, the son of his younger brother Ichcharam, were appointed *acharyas* of the Ahmedabad Gadi and the Vadtal Gadi respectively. Swaminarayan decreed that the office should be hereditary so that *acharyas* would maintain a direct line of blood descent from his family. The administrative division of his followers into two



## Bhagvan Swaminarayan

territorial dioceses is set forth in minute detail in a document written by Swaminarayan called *Desh Vibhaag Lekh*. Swaminarayan stated to all the devotees and saints to obey both the Acharyas and Gopalanand Swami who was considered as the main pillar and chief ascetic for the Sampraday.

The current *acharyas* of the Swaminarayan Sampraday are Acharya Shree Koshalendraprasad Pande, of the Ahmedabad Gadi, and Acharya Shree Ajendraprasadji Pande, of the Vadtal Gadi. <sup>[87][88]</sup>

Decades after his death, several divisions occurred with different understandings of succession. This included the establishment of Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha (BAPS), the founder of which left the Vadtal Gadi in 1905, and *Maninagar Swaminarayan Gadi Sansthan*, the founder of which left the Ahmedabad Gadi in the 1940s. The followers of BAPS hold Gunatitanand Swami as the spiritual successor to Swaminarayan, asserting that on several occasions Swaminarayan revealed to devotees that Gunatitanand Swami was Aksharbrahm manifest. Followers of BAPS believe that the acharyas were given administrative leadership of the sect while Gunatitanand Swami was given spiritual leadership by Swaminarayan. The current leader of BAPS is Shastri Narayanswarupdas, who addresses the spiritual and administrative needs within the sect. The followers of the Maninagar Swaminarayan Gadi Sansthan hold Gopalanand Swami as the successor to Swaminarayan. Current leader of this sect is Purushottampriyadasji Maharaj

### **Principles & Practices in Spiritual Life**

Using Hindu texts and rituals to form the base of his organisation, Swaminarayan founded what in later centuries would become a global organisation with strong Gujarati roots.

He was particularly strict on the separation of sexes in temples.

Swaminarayan was against the consumption of meat, alcohol or drugs, adultery, suicide, animal sacrifices, criminal activities and the appeasement of ghosts and tantric rituals.

Alcohol consumption was forbidden by him even for medicinal purposes.

Many of his followers took vows before becoming his disciple. He stated that four elements need to be conquered for ultimate salvation: dharma, bhakti (devotion), gnana (knowledge) and vairagya (detachment).

Doctrinally, Swaminarayan was close to eleventh century philosopher Ramanuja and was critical of Shankaracharya's concept of advaita, or monistic non-dualism. Swaminarayan's ontology maintained that the supreme being is not formless and that God always has a divine form.



## Bhagvan Swaminarayan

After assuming the leadership of the Sampraday, Swaminarayan worked to assist the poor by distributing food and drinking water. Swaminarayan organized food and water relief to people during times of drought. He undertook several social service projects and opened almshouses for the poor.

Male followers of Swaminarayan made arrangements to educate their female family members. The literacy rate among females began to increase, and they were able to give discourses on spiritual subjects. Within the sect, Swaminarayan is considered a pioneer of education of females in India

Swaminarayan was against animal sacrifices as carried out by Brahmin priests during Vedic rituals, such as yajnas (fire sacrifices), influenced by the Kaula and Vama Marg cults. The priests consumed "sanctified" prasad in the form of meat of these animals. To solve this problem, Swaminarayan conducted several large scale yajnas involving priests from Varanasi. These did not have animal sacrifices and were conducted in strict accordance with Vedic scriptures. Swaminarayan was successful in reinstating ahimsa through several such large scale yajnas.

Some suggest that Swaminarayan worked towards ending the caste system, allowing everyone into the Swaminarayan Sampraday.

Swaminarayan would eat along with the lower Rajput and Khati castes but not any lower. He established separate places of worship for the lower caste population where they were in large numbers. However, Dalits - the lowest in the caste system - were formally excluded from Swaminarayan temples. In the Shikshapatri, he wrote do not take food or water from a person of a lower caste. Members of a lower caste are prohibited from wearing a full sect mark (tilak chandlo) on their forehead. Even now, however, for the vast majority of Gujarat's lower-caste, Untouchable and tribal population, the sect is out of bounds.

### **Teachings of Swami Narayan**

Sahajanand Swami was later known as *Swaminarayan* after the mantra he taught at a gathering, in Faneni, a fortnight after the death of Ramanand Swami. He gave his followers a new mantra, known as the Swaminarayan mantra, to repeat in their rituals: *Swaminarayan*. When chanting this mantra, some devotees went into samadhi (a form of meditation). This act is also called maha-samadhi ("great samadhi") and



## Bhagvan Swaminarayan

claimed that they could see their personal gods, even though they had no knowledge of Astanga Yoga.

Swaminarayan encouraged his followers to combine devotion and [dharma](#) to lead a pious life.

To counter the practice of *sati* (self-immolation by a widow on her husband's funeral pyre), Swaminarayan argued that, as human life was given by God it could be taken only by God, and that *sati* had no Vedic sanction. He went to the extent to call *sati* nothing but suicide.

Swaminarayan offered parents help with dowry expenses to discourage female infanticide, calling infanticide a sin.

Tradition maintains that Swaminarayan initiated 500 ascetics as *paramhansas* in a single night. Paramhansa is a title of honor sometimes applied to Hindu spiritual teachers who are regarded as having attained enlightenment. Paramhansas were the highest order of *sannyasi* in the sect. Prominent paramhansas included Muktanand Swami, Gopalanand Swami, Brahmanand Swami, Gunatitanand Swami, Premanand Swami, Nishkulanand Swami, and Nityanand Swami.

He held the [Bhagavata Purana](#) in high authority

### **Celebrated Writings**

As early as 1804, Swaminarayan, who was reported to have performed miracles, was described as a manifestation of God in the first work written by a disciple and paramhansa, Nishkulanand Swami. This work, the *Yama Danda*, was the first piece of literature written within the Swaminarayan sect

Notable scriptures throughout the sect include the *Shikshapatri* and the *Vachanamrut*. Other important works and scriptures include the *Satsangi Jeevan*, Swaminarayan's authorized biography, the *Muktanand Kavya*, the *Nishkulanand Kavya* and the *Bhakta Chintamani*

Swaminarayan wrote the *Shikshapatri* on 11 February 1826. The oldest copy of this text is preserved at the Bodleian Library of Oxford University and it is one of the very few presented by Sahajanand Swami himself

Swaminarayan's philosophical, social and practical teachings are contained in the *Vachanamrut*, a collection



## Bhagvan Swaminarayan

of dialogues recorded by five followers from his spoken words. The *Vachanamrut* is the scripture most commonly used in the Swaminarayan sect. It contains views on *dharma* (moral conduct), *jnana* (understanding of the nature of the self), *vairagya* (detachment from material pleasure), and *bhakti* (pure, selfless devotion to God), the four essentials Hindu scriptures describe as necessary for a *jiva* (soul) to attain *moksha* (salvation)

### **Sources**

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