

## Hindu New Year and Diwali



Hundreds of the faithful gathered at the B.S.S. (Bochasanwasi Swaminarayan Sanstha) Temple in Clarkston last November 5th to celebrate the Hindu New Year and Diwali (a combination of American Christmas and Thanksgiving). As Dekalb County's cultural and ethnic diversity has grown in recent decades, it has become the home of many Indians from the Gujarat State of India, north of Bombay. For many of these new Americans, their spiritual home is the B.S.S. Temple on Clarkston Industrial Boulevard.

The recent celebration shows the socio-religious nature of the Hindu Temple. An important goal of the Temple is to increase awareness of Indian traditions and to serve specific social goals, which included a Red Cross blood drive as one of this year's activities. The large temple was decorated with lights, flowers, and banners for the many followers who came from Georgia and several adjoining states. Speakers addressed the crowd with the words of their spiritual leader, Pramukh Swami Maharaj, and there were performances of skits and Indian music. The centerpiece of the gathering, however, was a large altar with representations of the Hindu Gods before which were placed offerings of 108 different types of food. Throughout the afternoon, people placed additional offerings before the altar and knelt in prayer.

The main room of the temple is divided in half, with one side for the men and the other for the women and children. No one is allowed to wear shoes and the floor is carpeted for most seating. Although all the speakers were male, there was constant interaction between the two sections with young children everywhere. Most of the women and female children were dressed in elaborately colored and arranged traditional saris. They also

wore extensive, pure gold jewelry in intricate Indian designs. By comparison, the men appeared much less colorful and less comfortable in western style clothing. According to one spokesperson, 99% of the area Indians over the age of thirty are from the state of Gujarat, with many of the younger members having been born in the United States, of course. The day was topped off with an Indian dinner.

When asked what was the most difficult aspect of transition from India to the United States, the same spokesman mentioned the loss of a sense of community with other Indians. One of the chief goals of the local temple is, therefore, youth programs of regular Sunday "assemblies" for young children, classes in Gujarati (the native dialect), and classes in Hindu/Indian culture and traditions. Older children attend a Youth Center which encourages participation in national and international competitions in art and sports, devotional singing, drama, seminars and numerous other activities aimed at, in part, the development of a strong family life.

The B.S.S. was founded in 1781 in Gujarat, India by Lord Swaminarayan, whose motto was "In the joy of others, lies our own; In the progress of others, rests our own; In the good of others, abides our own". Today, the B.S.S. Hindu faith is worldwide with several million followers. There are eleven temples in North America (one of which is in Toronto, Canada) and fifty-two centers. Worldwide, there are 3,000 centers whose avowed goal is "the betterment of society . . . irrespective of caste, creed, color or country". This is done with blood drives, anti-addiction drives, anti-drug campaigns, and food drives. The current spiritual leader, Pramukh Swami Maharaj, constantly travels around India and the world visiting temples and centers and directing volunteers to areas of flood and famine. He has also directed the planting of 200,000 trees and created medical and eye camps. For his many works, he has been honored by the Parliaments of England and Canada and received many municipal awards.

For more information on the B.S.S. Temple, readers can contact the director of public relations, Jayanti Patel at 363-1100.

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