

God Eats Veggie Burgers

by Natasha Thakkar

Today God will eat veggie burgers minus the onion and garlic. He will eat eggless cake, small deep-fried tortillas or *puris*, caramel apples, and a traditional rice pudding called *kheer*. He will eat pizza, grilled cheese sandwiches and *gulab jamun*, or condensed-milk dumplings fried to a golden brown and soaked in saffron syrup. In front of the Lord Swaminarayan, on the marble steps inside the new Chino Hills Cultural Center and Temple lies a spread of more than 100 special dishes made by the hands of over 500 Chino Hills Hindu Temple volunteers. Lord Swaminarayan surveys this offering. He is as tall as a three-year-old child and carved from glossy white marble. His arms are swirled with crystal tattoos of lotus flowers and other traditional designs. He is adorned in a light blue silk robe embroidered with golden thread. From His neck hangs a gold necklace so large it looks like armor. He is a king in His palace.

Lord Swaminarayan sits on His throne above and away from those who worship him. The food He has been offered is all around, garnished with flowers and fruit cut to look like fragrant bouquets. He looks out into the crowd; His innocent brown doe eyes are intensified by painted-on green eye shadow. His left hand is extended, upturned with His red painted nails hidden and henna-painted palm facing out as if to say, Welcome to my home, my Chino Hills palace. But this is not actually His Chino Hills palace. It is a temporary residence. His palace will be made of the finest Italian marble shipped from Italy, and pink sandstone from Udaipur, India. It will stand 71 feet tall. It will be carefully carved and assembled by the hands of professional carvers flown in from Rajasthan, India. And it will rise from the sand lot next door, which is currently fenced off by green plastic canvas and covered in caked dirt.

Approximately 200 Hindus have come to worship the Lord Swaminarayan on Hindu New Year's Day at His makeshift home on the newly extended Fairfield Ranch Road in Chino Hills. When I first entered the reception hall turned temporary temple, my quiet steps must have made too much noise. Instantly, I felt all 200 pairs of intense ebony eyes on my comparatively white skin. Groups of women packed the reception hall draped in sequined traditional cloth or *saris*. Their bangles clinked in harmony and their chunky jewelry, studded with emeralds, rubies, and diamonds, caught the light as they shuffled around urgently trying to find a spot on the marble floor. Young girls, barely seven years old, ran around in chiming anklets, shimmering beaded leggings, matching short dresses, and sheer pieces of cloth or *dupattas* tied across their shoulders like beauty queen sashes. I made no such sounds, in my black leggings and dark blue shirt, and my minimalist silver heart-shaped pendant and stud earrings did not catch the light; yet my presence was felt.

I stood awkwardly in the reception hall and looked around. The entire hall appeared to have been blanketed in a dark-chocolate Burmese teak lace filled with flowers, peacocks and religious symbols. I find one that is familiar to me, the "Om;" it looks like a "3" with a tail attached to its midsection. With hundreds of my own kind around me, I should have felt more at home than ever. But I didn't. Between the colorful food in front of me and the chocolate-colored arches behind me, I felt as if I had been transported to Willy Wonka's Chocolate Factory. If only Wonka had been a religious Hindu, he might have liked this place.

The reception hall is now packed with people sitting knee-to-knee. I struggle to sit comfortably on the icy marble floors and wonder how the girl in front of me is sitting with silver anklets digging into her soft, brown flesh. My eyes move from her ankles to the grandmothers and mothers around me. I smile at the sight of Western influences that unknowingly taint the ceremony about to take place: grandmothers struggle to silence their fancy cell phones, a device still foreign to most of them despite its popularity; and mothers try to quiet their children with Halloween candy from two nights ago pulled from their purses as they crane their necks to watch the monk prepare for today's auspicious prayers. Unlike priests in America who confine their wardrobe to the mundane black or white, the monk, or Swami as he is called by his followers, is dressed in bright-saffron robes; a boxy saffron hat covers his balding head, and a rosary is draped around his neck. He is careful not to face the crowd of women because it is against the rules. Looking at a woman poses a danger: one might feel desire, and a Swami must remain celibate.

Soon the clock strikes noon and the Swami starts ringing his small bell, signaling that the prayers for God's New Year's Feast are about to start. The last few women scramble in and sit down as the large wooden doors are shut. Hymns begin to play over the loudspeakers hidden in the wooden carvings, and slowly everybody closes their eyes. Everybody, that is, except me. They sway side-to-side with the melodies, like a calm river, clapping softly to the rhythms. I sit there, static, like a rock in this peaceful river, my hands clutching my notebook as if it were a lifesaver.

Never have I felt less Indian.

I am one hundred percent Indian. In fact, I am one hundred percent Gujarati, just like all the people who come to this center. The only difference is the place where we are from. Most, if

not all, Swaminaryan worshippers come from the rural state of Gujarat. My family and I, on the other hand, are not Swaminaryan followers. We are from Mumbai, India's Los Angeles. Gujarat can be compared to the Midwest: rural, traditional, and slightly backward. Mumbai is more like Southern California—very forward, very modern, and very fast-paced. Now, imagine moving from California to Oklahoma. Both places are homes to Americans, yet there's a huge cultural difference. Similarly, I am Gujarati like the people here, but I feel culture shock when I am among them. I feel and look so foreign.

Despite the fact that I can understand every word that comes out of their mouths, I cannot understand their unyielding devotion to a man dressed in saffron robes. This was the first time in my life I was with so many Gujaratis in one place without having to take a 23-hour plane trip. I should have felt more at home than ever; but I didn't. I have always looked different from everyone else. I am the only one in my family for generations on both sides to have hazel eyes. Mix that up with my fair skin tone and Western clothes and no wonder they thought I was lost. I might as well have been Dorothy, plucked from Kansas and placed in Oz.

I looked for someone to talk to, someone to disappear into the crowd with.

“Hi, my name is Natasha,” I said to a girl who seemed to be around my age.

“Arpita” she said, offering me her first name. She didn't give her last.

“Let me guess, is it Patel?” It wasn't hard to guess: nearly every person here was named Patel, except me. It's a huge Gujarati clan.

“Yeah, of course! What else?” She smiled. My last name, though, is Thakkar.

Out of curiosity, I conducted a quick Internet search on the White Pages website with the last name Patel and received a message which said “Over 100 matches found. Please narrow your search.”

Like “Smith” in America, Patel is the most common last name in Gujarat, a province in India and the native land of Lord Swaminarayan. It is believed that His “human form” was born in 1781 and preached the type of Hinduism that is named for Him. BAPS, or the Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushotlam Swaminarayan group, was started in 1907 by one of his successors, a Sanskrit language scholar and monk named Sahstriji Maharaj. In English, BAPS roughly translates to “(The) Bochasan-ite Eternal Supreme Being, Lord from the First of Men, Establishment.” Since Maharaj’s death in 1951, two more successors have served: Yogiji Maharaj and Pramukh Swami Maharaj. Today, Yogiji Maharaj handles the BAPS temples in India, while BAPS International is headed by Pramukh Swami Maharaj.

The followers of Pramukh Swami Maharaj believe that he is a saint and spiritual teacher through which the knowledge contained in the Gita, the Hindu equivalent to the Bible, are realized. Pramukh Swami Maharaj is now 87 years old and still travels the world preaching the teachings of BAPS. Since its start in 1907, BAPS has grown to have over 770 monks, 55,000 volunteers, and more than a million followers with over 600 temples in 45 countries.

Walk into the Vons grocery store near the Chino Hills Cultural Center and Temple and the city’s increasingly diverse population and need for a Hindu temple is apparent. Among the blue eyes with tied-back blonde hair scanning for bananas with green tips, are dark brown, almond-shaped eyes framed by thick and wavy dark hair looking for the greenest vegetables, and half-moon ebony eyes framed by silky dark hair looking for soy sauce and dry noodles. This is

the city of Chino Hills now, 78,725 strong. Asians, Caucasians, and Indians occupy houses where the median income is \$93,332 a year. According to Henry Noh, Chino Hills City Hall Principal Planner, about 1,320 Indian residents live in Chino Hills; yet their closest place of worship is in Whittier, nearly thirty minutes away without traffic. Noticing the increasing Indian population, BAPS representatives decided to build their fifth United States headquarters (the first on the West Coast) in Chino Hills.

But Chino Hills had other plans.

In 1999, BAPS representatives picked out a 15-acre site in Chino Hills. The city quickly shut them down. Officials planned to build a Civic Center on that same 15-acre plot of land and they weren't going to let a Hindu temple take its place. The two sides then negotiated: BAPS agreed to let the city buy the land and the city officials agreed to help BAPS find another site in Chino Hills. In 2003, after looking at 20 other locations, BAPS found a 20.31-acre stretch of farmland near Fairfield Ranch Road. It was visible from the 71 freeway and lay between a sewage treatment facility and mobile home park. As word spread about the construction of a Hindu temple, comments – about 1,600 – in the form of e-mails and letters poured into City Hall from concerned Chino Hills residents.

Nestled amongst calm rolling hills, Chino Hills takes pride in being known as one the safest and most affluent areas in Southern California. *It will become a hiding place for terror* wrote one person, suggesting that Muslim extremists may blend amongst Hindu temple-goers. Another one read, *Unless you want the current demographics to look like New Delhi don't do this*. The writer was worried that the temple would draw more Hindus to live in the city. Still others were in support of the temple: *What a fantastic cultural and spiritual addition to have in*

our very own community!, a supporter wrote in. Another wrote, *Not every city has the good fortune to become the home of a landmark project such as this one promises to be. I say let's move this project forward.* Inundated with so many comments, both for and against the temple, the City Council asked BAPS representatives to prepare for a hearing.

On Tuesday, September 14, 2004 over 1,200 people attended the meeting between the city of Chino Hills and BAPS representatives. In order to accommodate the number of people, the meeting was moved to the Chino Hills High School gymnasium. The basketball hoops had been folded up for the night but there was still a game to be won. Two teams stood on the hardwood floors; divided only by the painted half-court line at the center of a varnished wooden court. Team one, led by BAPS, were in support of the temple's being built and included various city notables both Indian and non-Indian, as well as one city council member, Mayor Gary Larson. Team two was against the temple being built and cited too much traffic and an unfavorable change in the community as their main objections. They were led by the "Just Say No" Committee, an opposition group, as well as many city residents and the remaining four members of the city council who were on their side.

The meeting started promptly at 6:00 p.m., as BAPS volunteers and temple supporters handed out bright-orange, circular "YES" stickers and highlighter-yellow "VOTE YES" signs. The opposition had no such materials upon arrival. But team members left and returned an hour later with bright green "VOTE NO" signs, according to Divyesh Patel, the temple's public relations manager, who was present at that night's meeting. After nearly an hour of PowerPoint presentations explaining the selection of the site made by community development directors and architects, Rakesh Patel, representing BAPS, presented one last PowerPoint explaining the

temple and its type of *Shikharbadh Mandir*, the traditional stone temples with domes and pinnacles normally built of sandstone and marble. He explained that the architecture of the actual temple is 8,000 years old and in order for the temple to be authentic, it must be built to exact specifications and religious proportions as established in scripture; compromising on any part of the temple would distort it and thus distort its meaning and significance. A debate began and words jumbled in the air as each side made their statement. Most in opposition feared that the culture complex and temple would create too much traffic in their neighborhood and draw unnecessary attention to their quiet and rural community. While supporters felt that a place of worship could never be an eyesore and it would be an honor to be home to such a landmark project.

At 1:26 am, after nearly seven hours of debate, the hearing came to a close. The city council voted 4-to-1 to approve the project's permits but rejected the extra height that BAPS requested, which would have allowed the temple to stand at 73 feet, exceeding the 42-foot city limit. The final vote meant that the council was accepting the temple, but effectively prohibiting it from being built.

A year later, on September 4, 2005, construction of the Swaminarayan Chino Hills Cultural Center and Temple began. Since then, work has progressed at a steady pace. Volunteers gather every weekend to help plant trees, place tiles, install speakers, and run the small snacks and sweets shop neatly placed in the corner of the reception hall. Along with donations, the traditional snacks and sweets, which are all made on site and adhere to the special Swami vegetarian diet of no onion or garlic, are the temple's main source of income. Meanwhile the cultural center, two gymnasiums, classrooms, living quarters for the Swamis, and gardens are all

complete. The only part of the 164,372-foot facility that the volunteers, architects, and artisans from Rajasthan, India are unable to work on is the temple. Instead they continue to attend council hearings along with community supporters to push the city to accept a 71-foot tall temple.

Unlike past BAPS temples, the Chino Hills location will be the first to use a solar-powered electrical system. The temple will install a 60-kilowatt grid-tied solar power system manufactured by GoGreenSolar and is currently asking for donations to help fund its green cause. It is estimated that this 60-kilowatt system will satisfy the new cultural center's energy needs and generate extra power that will be sent to the local grid to bring in revenue. Like all the other temples built by BAPS, the new temple will be erected according to the ancient Hindu *Shilpa Shastras*—an Indian architectural science that does not use steel reinforcement. “No metal is being used, no steel, no nails, nothing that can create corrosion. The entire temple will be stone on stone and load bearers will be used for the walls. The building itself will last, but the mechanics will need replacing in about twenty years,” said Divyesh Patel. Once finished there will be about 340 carved, solid-rock (and rock solid) columns both supporting and ornamenting the temple. Every element, big and small will be carved from stone. So far all that can be seen through the tearing and tattered holes in the green canvas that surrounds the temple like a fence is a three-foot foundation. Still needed to complete the building are forty-two base isolators (to ensure earthquake safety), concrete, and most importantly—stone.

The temple will be made of Italian marble, Indian sandstone, and Turkish limestone. Each stone will be hand-selected by BAPS officials who will travel from the United States to Italy, Turkey, and India to find the perfect whole pieces with the right shade of color. Once they find the stone, it will be shipped to villages in Udaipur, India to be carved and numbered.

Finally, over 24,000 parts will make their way to Chino Hills to be assembled like a jigsaw puzzle by the willing hands of volunteers, who work for free, and Rajasthani craftsmen, who are paid no more than two dollars per an hour for their painstaking and irreplaceable work. About one hundred more men, in addition to the five who are already working on the facilities, will be flown from India to complete the carvings and bring the temple to life. Each man will use only a chisel and a hammer to free flowers, religious idols, animals, and other figures and symbols from the stone. Everything from dancing women to elephants and peacocks—these images will be both sensuous and serene. Once completed, the temple will not only stand at its preordained 71 contested feet, but will be 10,000 square feet in area. To make it a proper *Shikharbadh Mandir*, the traditional stone temples with domes and pinnacles normally built of sandstone and marble, five spires will be added, and each will be locked in place with a stone key.

This is what the temple will be. This is what all BAPS temples are. This is what they must be. Until the height standard is approved, the lot will stay hidden behind a green canvas fence, because it is not a temple unless it is a size that is approved, not by the Chino Hills city council, but by God, the Lord Swaminarayan. Until the people of Chino Hills and God agree, volunteers and temple-goers must worship Lord Swaminarayan in the reception hall.

This is where I am now. I can see the temple's site from the where I sit. As everyone moves back and forth, lost in prayer, I look out past the snacks and sweets shop and past the open door next to it. I imagine what the temple will be.

A cell phone rings loudly, interrupting the Swami's prayers in the reception hall. A loud melody of beating drums, blaring trumpets and chiming bells drowns out the peaceful hymn. I watch as a flustered grandmother quickly rummages through her purse to silence her too-loud Moto RZR. And just like that, with a touch of a matriarchal finger, the influence of the western

world is silenced. If only the qualms of Chino Hills could be dismissed as neatly as the ring on a cell phone.