

## SHRI SWAMINARAYAN MANDIR

THE LARGEST NEW HINDU TEMPLE TO BE BUILT OUTSIDE INDIA IS IN A LONDON SUBURB

**N** easden is famous for its ordinariness, a north London suburb of small industrial estates, tower blocks and residential streets lined with red-brick terrace houses. It makes an incongruous setting for one

of Britain's most extraordinary 20th-century buildings, the Shri Swaminarayan Mandir, a Hindu temple – 'an abode of peace, love and harmony' – built to the meticulous standards of ancient religious tradition.

Its story goes back to the 1950s, when Asian followers of the Swaminarayan faith held their first organised meetings in Britain. The founder of the faith was the charismatic Shri Sahajanand Swami (1781-1830) or Swaminarayan, a Hindu saint, reformer and seer, and an advocate of nonviolence and the education of women. During his lifetime he

was revered as a god and acquired a following of millions in India, notably in the state of Gujarat. The faith was also taken by emigrants to East Africa.

The population of Swaminarayan devotees in Britain swelled when Ugandan Asians were forced to flee their homeland in 1972. Many prospered in Britain, and it was against

**DOMED SPLENDOUR** The mandir is the main focus of the complex. Accessed by a broad flight of stairs, it is a ceremonial centre and a sanctuary for sacred images of the gods.





**PROFUSION OF ORNAMENT** The interior of the mandir rises through layers of ornately carved marble detailing. By contrast, the orderly and neatly delineated spaces at floor level create an atmosphere of deep, meditative calm.

best stand up to the conditions of Britain. They settled on Bulgarian limestone and Sardinian granite for the exterior, and a mixture of Italian Carrara marble and Indian Ambaji marble for the interior. Nearly 5000 tons of Bulgarian and Italian stone was shipped to India, where it was carved by a team of over 1500 stoneworkers in 14 different sites in Gujarat and Rajasthan. A total of 26 300 carved and numbered pieces of stone were then shipped in wooden boxes to Britain, where they were assembled like the pieces of a giant jigsaw puzzle.

Building work began in August 1992. On November 24, the temple recorded the biggest-ever concrete-pour in the UK, when 4500 tons was put down in 24 hours to create a foundation mat 6 ft (1.8 m) thick. The first stone was laid in June 1993; two years later, the building was complete.

The adjoining haveli is almost as impressive. Designed by the British architect Nigel Lane, it is essentially a functional steel-and-concrete building, and includes an assembly hall measuring 164 ft (50 m) by 148 ft (45 m) – big enough for 4000 people. But again, the application of traditional models and the detailing set the building apart. Whereas stone is the medium of the mandir, here wood – English oak and Burmese teak – has been fashioned into panels, arches and screens, all carved by craftsmen in India with a cornucopia of geometric patterns, stylised animal heads and garlands of flowers.

The Shri Swaminarayan Mandir complex represents an act of faith. Over 1000 volunteers worked on the building, and many more contributed and solicited donations, or organised sponsored walks and other activities; children raised money by collecting aluminium cans and foil for recycling.

The temple complex was completed in just three years, at a cost of about £5 million, over half of which went on materials. The cost would have been incalculably higher without the efforts of the volunteers. As a result, when the temple was opened in August 1995, the ceremonies were greeted with great excitement and a deep sense of achievement by those who had contributed.

this background that the idea of a new temple took hold. Money was raised through donations and fundraising, and in 1991 a large plot of land was acquired in Neasden.

The aim was to construct a temple following Swaminarayan traditions as closely as British building regulations would allow. As in the Swaminarayan temples in India, there would be two parts to the complex: the sacred mandir, a place of devotion and prayer housing the brightly dressed holy statues, or *murti*; and, attached to the mandir, a *haveli* – a cultural centre with meeting halls, a marriage hall, conference centre, a vegetarian kitchen and other facilities.

#### Volunteer work

The Neasden mandir was built entirely of stone. The architect, Chandrakant B. Sompura, and his team absorbed various ideas from historic temples in India, and adapted them to suit the British climate. It is a *shikharbaddh* mandir, a pinnacled temple: seven tiered pinnacles topped by golden spires crowd the roofline, complemented by five ribbed domes. Inside, serpentine ribbons of stone link the columns to form decorative arches, creating a sense of levitation.

All the more remarkable is the fact that this stonework was entirely carved in India. The architects searched for stone that would

