

The Hindu New Year: Food and Meaning in Ankot and Diwali

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On November 9, 2002 we were invited into the Shri Akshar Purushotam Swaminaryan (BAPS) mandir with open arms. We came to this Hindu mandir with the intention of learning about Diwali, the Hindu New Year Celebration, and how food is central to this day. This event is separated into two parts: the morning service, called Ankot, and the evening Diwali worship service.

When we arrived at the mandir, we were invited into their prayer and meditation room. The room looked amazing. There were hundreds of silver platters that overflowed with food, and more were being brought in to be placed at the front of the room, in front of the guru. The Ankot ceremony is a time for the worshippers to offer food to their guru, Lord Swaminarayan. Lord Swaminaryan blesses the food at the request of the people, and it is then removed to the kitchen to be consumed during the large supper following the evening Diwali service.

Every female in the church is given a dish to make; if one female is particularly good at making a certain dish, then she is given permission to make it for the event. The morning of Diwali, they set the food up all around the room along with small candles. During the Ankot ceremony, we sang songs and prayed to the guru, asking him to bless the food before us. Since the food has been blessed by the guru, none of it may be thrown away; it all must be consumed by the worshippers.

After the Ankot ceremony, the men lined up and began to walk around the front of the room, viewing the elaborate displays. After the men had viewed the food, the

women then lined up to do the same. "Ninety percent of the foods are sweet," one worshipper informed us. All of the dishes had been arranged in their metal containers in a creative and thoughtful fashion. We viewed one item that began as a red apple and was transformed, with some great talent and a sharp paring knife, into a beautiful bird, complete with wings, a beak, and tail plumage. Not all of the foods were homemade. For example, many of the dishes consisted of store-bought candies (i.e. Kit-Kat bars, Hershey's Kisses, M & M's, and Reese's Peanut Butter Cups) that had been mounted to pictures of the living disciple. Someone had brought in a sheet cake that had been decorated with icing to create the message "Happy Diwali." While a large majority of the foods were sweet, some had a savory flavor. For example, someone had created a vegetarian pizza and had decorated it with julienned strips of red and green bell peppers. In and around each of the food offerings were votive tea candles that were set ablaze during the Ankot ceremony. The sight of the candles glowing and all of the light reflecting the carefully-arranged foods was breathtaking.

After the Ankot ceremony, we followed the women into the gender-segregated kitchen for a light lunch, which consisted of a spicy vegetable puree, toasted and buttered white bread, a sweet dish called "bundi" that consisted of flour, sugar, and chopped pistachios, and water to drink. We were constantly surrounded by the Kishoris, or young women, of the mandir, and they implored us to join them. They were insistent that we allow them to serve us lunch; we were amazed at their generosity. In fact, they checked on us many times during the meal to make sure that we had enough water to drink and that the food was not too spicy for us.

An hour later, we were back in the dining hall, watching as women, both young and old, and one older gentleman worked assembly line-style to compose little packages of Indian food. We were told that these packages would be delivered to the local Indian homes the following day, a project that involved every member of the church, and would be distributed to any first-time visitors of the mandir. The packages consisted of two sweet items, one of which was pureed almonds, and a spicy rice mix, all housed in individual baggies within a blue and white Rubbermaid container. By the time the supplies ran out, at least five hundred packages had been made.

The Diwali worship service lasted for nearly three hours, and involved music, a dance number, a lecture given by a guest speaker, and a humorous theatrical number that detailed the importance of listening to the guru for guidance on improving one's life. After the service, everyone moved into the dining hall. Some estimated that there were as many as eight hundred attending the service. Due to the large number of people and the importance of keeping the genders from intermingling, the men ate outside the dining hall while the women dined inside. Again, the female worshippers were boundless in their generosity and kindness towards us. We spoke with an older woman for a few minutes, and when we got up to leave, she insisted on making us a plate of food to take with us. She guided us through the line, asking the female servers to place a bit of everything on the plate, making sure that we would be able to at least sample everything. The meal consisted of a spicy yellow broth, a bread dish, two vegetable dishes (one of which contained potatoes), and two sweet items. The plate of food overflowed to the point that we had to place it in an aluminum baking dish so that it we could carry it without causing spillage.

Our minds full with the spiritual fruits of this community, and our bellies full with the physical fruits, we left the BAPS mandir in Matthews, North Carolina genuinely impressed by the incredible generosity and kindness shown to us by the community members.