

Address by the President of the Oshwal Association of the UK

Mr Raaxeet H Shah

His Eminence – Cardinal Tauran, Respected Archbishops, Community Elders, Ladies & Gentlemen,
Jai Jinendra & Welcome to Oshwal Centre

It is a huge privilege and honour for me and the Oshwal Community to have present our esteemed guests from The Vatican and the Catholic Church here today at Oshwal Centre. This place, Oshwal Centre is our main community centre and home to the first Shikharbhandh Jain Derasar in Europe.

Yesterday, I had the privilege to attend a Prayer for Peace at Westminster Cathedral Hall. The Prayer for Peace was hosted by Archbishop Kevin Macdonald and His Eminence was the Chief Guest with Speakers from many faiths, all sharing the same message. It was a truly inspirational event. So for us, today it is particularly auspicious. Our faith is open to all and to have his Eminence and the Catholic dignitaries here at our Derasar is a truly momentous occasion. Our coming together promotes more understanding, tolerance and peace in the world.

I would like to share with you a little background on our community. As Oshwals, we are largely followers of Jainism. The teachings of Lord Mahavir and the previous Tirthankars. (Tirthankars are best described as persons who are an ordinary soul that is born as a human and attains the states of a Tirthankar (Enlightenment – leading to the liberation of the cycle of birth & death).

Jains worldwide are estimated to number 5 million. The Oshwal community is very small numbering under 100,000 worldwide. Outside of India, the UK is where we have the largest community, with 25,000 residing, largely in Greater London and the South East. Our history, journey and heritage can be traced back to a small place called Ossia in Rajasthan where the population adopted the Jain religion from the Jain monks who were immediate followers of Lord Mahavir 2600 years ago.

Over the centuries after several migrations, around 500 years ago a smaller group settled as farmers in villages around Jamnagar in North West of present day Gujarat. Today, most Oshwals can trace their history to these 52 Villages in India. We have represented these 52 villages in the grounds of the temple, planting trees to mark each village by name.

In its simplest terms, the Jain community has over 2600 years of detailed history charting our journey across India, to Africa and to the West.

Our colleagues and Co – Hosts; The Institute of Jainology have taken on the mammoth task of documenting the earliest known transcripts, illustrations and art through the JAINpedia project. This will form an invaluable record of Jain history and heritage for future generations, to study, research and understand.

Towards end of 19th century due to constant droughts and hardship, our menfolk started to venture out to seek livelihood in newly opening Africa. Firstly to Madagascar and then to East Africa This was during the time of the British Empire. The brave souls that made this journey, did so in the hope of a better life for them and their families. The earliest known Oswals to land in Mombasa, East Africa, was in 1898. By 1900, there were around 200 young Oswals working for the British either as labourers or as suppliers of food / lodgings to the early immigrants.

Quickly adapting to the new country by the 1920's, many Oswals had married and brought over their extended families to East Africa. Hard work and frugal living allowed these humble beginning to gradually establish roots in these new frontiers. Over the past 100 years this community became nearly 30,000 strong at its peak. Successful in trading and as shopkeepers, many went on to become small scale industrialist and with it, made East Africa their home. Strong cultural and religious beliefs kept the communities together and this saw the construction of a temple in Nairobi & Mombasa as well as smaller community centers across East Africa.

From the 1950's, Oswals ventured to the UK initially to study and returning home to India or East Africa. It wasn't until the late 1950's that the first families permanently settled in the UK. As our numbers grew, the community initially formed an informal social group, meeting for Diwali and important religious celebrations. By 1968 we had a strong community presence in London and we formalised the Association which was to become OAUk.

Those early steps established our Association making it an important and integral part of life for many Oswals. It helped maintain our culture, heritage and ancestral history from India and East Africa, becoming a forum for Oswals to come together in times of happiness through celebrations of births and marriages; as well as times of sadness at the loss of our loved ones.

Our membership has grown significantly from those early days; to the present day count of some 14,000 members, and serving a community in the UK of some 25,000 people. As our organisation has grown we have found two aspects of community life which has helped maintain a united spirit in times of monumental changes; in this our adopted country which we call home. The first has been acquiring this site in 1980 the construction of these halls and later on, the truly momentous achievement in 2005.

The construction of first traditional Shikarbandh Jain Derasar in Europe, which has become a focal point for followers of Jain Religion. The Derasar or temple is unique; in that it was constructed on untainted land, built

using traditional techniques dating back centuries and carved entirely in India, before being shipped to the UK. The term Shikhabandh refers to the ornate domes which are built tall to mean 'reaching the sky'.

The second aspect, our three community centres: the main centre here in Potters Bar and centres in South London and more recently in Kingsbury North West London. These centres have allowed local connection with Oshwals to be maintained and fostered an environment where community spirit can thrive. Underpinning all this is our Constitution, which outlines our core objectives and these form the basis of our organisation and its *raison d'etre*.

To promote the understanding of Jainism. This is to impart the values, culture, knowledge, philosophy and rituals that are central to our beliefs. Its core principles being:

- **Ahimsa** Non violence in any form, thought or action
- **Parasparopagraho Jivanam** All life is bound together by mutual support and interdependence
- **Anekantavada** Seeing and understanding the world as multifaceted, ever changing and with different points of view
- **Madhyastata** Equanimity towards all living beings.
- **Jiv-daya** Caring for all living beings

Our other objectives are: Relief of Poverty This is to remember and respect our humble background and to help those less fortunate. Over the years OAUK has successfully launched and raised significant sums for specific projects as well as natural disasters and general donations to good causes.

Advancement of Education Initially just to promote Gujarati as our mother tongue and our traditional culture.

Today we have a much wider agenda and we work towards delivering access to more information, help, and guidance for future generations to succeed in their career paths.

Protection of Health We strive to help older generations understand the challenges of old age and how to adapt to life with these changes.

In the younger generations we help to understand the threats and hereditary / genetic propensity to certain illnesses and ailments.

Like most communities that have moved across continents, with changing values and many new influences, our community is also seeing change too.

Jains are largely all vegetarian in keeping with the belief of non-violence. Even today, the vast majority remain vegetarian by choice.

Most important religious festivals such as Paryushan, Ayembil, Diwali & Lord Mahavir's Birthday are acknowledged and marked in some way, even by those who are less involved in the day to day practice of religious rituals.

Jainism was for the first time, noted as a religion in the British Census of 2011 and there is today a greater understanding of its significance.

Every generation worries about the future of its community, religious beliefs and cultural identity. Having thought about this from my position, I too do at times agonise over what will happen, to future generations. However, I am comforted in knowing that if many faiths have survived for over 2000 years, the Jain faith can evolve and remain relevant in today's world.

Thank you,

Jai Oshwal.

I would now like to invite His Eminence to address the audience. His Eminence Cardinal Jean-Louis Pierre Tauran was appointed as president of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue on 2007. Describing his role as President of the Council, His Eminence Cardinal Tauran, has said "that interreligious dialogue is not dialogue between religions. It's dialogue between believers." Ladies and Gentlemen, may I ask you to warmly welcome His Eminence Cardinal Tauran.