“Nearly 3,500 gathered at the JAINA Convention held this past July 4th holiday weekend in California, USA and created history celebrating Jain Religion in 21st Century at the Ontario Convention Center, CA, by featuring programs for delegates aged 3 years to 93! Programming events were comprised of Jain spiritual discourses by renowned scholars and dignitaries, multi-faith Keynotes, colorful procession, on-site Jain Temple, Yoga and Meditation sessions, Jain Academic Bowl, Jains Got Talent, Youth Activities, Young Jain Professionals, Jain Connect, Shatavadhan, JAINA Awards and Election Results, Cultural Entertainment Program, and a Bollywood Show, with over 48,000 vegetarian/vegan meals served over a 4-day event.”
Ontario, CA – Every two years, the federation of Jain Associations In North America (JAINA) - in partnership with a local Jain center community - organizes a biennial convention in North America, drawing thousands of diaspora attendees and distinguished speakers not only from the US and Canada but also from Asia, Europe, Australia, and Middle-East. This year, JAINA partnered with the Jain Center of Southern California (JCSC) and Jain Center of Los Angeles (JCLA) hosted JAINA’s 20th Biennial Convention at Ontario Convention Center (OCC) in Ontario, California, just east of Los Angeles.

It took two years in planning and more than nine months of preparations and dry runs perfecting it. In the end, JAINA in partnership with the two host Jain centers of Southern California, JCSC and JCLA, delivered an incredibly successful convention last weekend, at a sold-out venue in Ontario Convention Center, Southern California from July 4 to July 7. This year’s convention theme was appropriately coined as “Jain Religion in the 21st Century”. The convention remained true to its theme leaving behind an everlasting impression of JAINA and a unique immersion into self-realization with education and inspiration.

Thousands of Jains from North America and around the world participated to celebrate their religion, absorb thoughts and ideas from experts and professionals for further adopting and living a Jain Way of Life, and discuss how to promote Jainism and transition its values in a sustainable manner to the next generation.

In the opening session, Convener Mr. Mahesh Wadher and Co-conveners, Dr. Nitin Shah and Dr. Jasvant Modi, warmly welcomed and explained this convention’s logo and theme; highlighting the five distinct tracks of enrichment about Jain principles and practices. These tracks represent the five key elements – Seva, Satsang, Samarpan, Sadhana, and Self-Realization and other tracks on focus groups, including for Young Jain Professionals, Young Adults, Youths, and Jain Connect. The five tracks depicted in the convention logo represented the steps in a path of progression of a spiritual journey towards achieving moksha, the final liberation. This convention was extraordinary also from its attendee demographics in that it attracted over 600 youths and young adults among the 3,450 attendees.
In addition to thought-provoking speeches by invited Keynotes and leading Jain thought leaders, the convention was also graced by speeches from revered Jain acharyas who reside in India – namely, Shri Namramuniji Maharaj and Acharya Shri Yashovijayji Maharaj (pre-recorded) and Acharya Shri Vijay Ratna Sundar Suriji Maharaj (live stream) from India. Further, the convention was sanctified by 22 invited Jain sadhus, sadhavis, scholars and spiritual guides who have significant diaspora following, such as; Acharya Shri Chandanaji (Founder of Veerayatan International, Rajgir, India), Acharya Dr. Lokesh Muni (Founder of Ahimsa Vishwabharti, New Delhi, India), Bhattarakji Charukeerthiji (of Jain Digamber Math Moodbidri, India), and Gurudev Shri Rakeshbhai Jhaveri (Founder of Srimad Rajchandra Ashram, Dharampur, India).

Resonating the themes and major tracks of this convention to illustrate commonalities the world’s great religions have with Jainism’s core teachings of Ahimsa (Non-Violence), Aparigraha (Non-Attachment) and Anekantavad (Non-Absolutism) were invited keynotes from leaders of multiple faiths and global service organizations who addressed the gathering’s four General sessions and an Interfaith Roundtable – represented by Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism and Christianity. Foremost amongst them were Sadhguru Jaggi Vasudev (Founder of Isha Foundation), Gaur Gopal Das (who was born in a Jain family in Pune and is a motivational speaker with ISKCON), and Sadhvi Bhagawati (co-leader of Parmarth Niketan, Rishikesh, India), Brahmri Shri Guruwanandji (Founder of Sri Brahmrishi Ashram, Tirupati, India), Rahul Kapoor Jain (a motivational speaker from Bangalore, India), and Audrey Kitagawa, JD (Board Chair of Parliament of the World’s Religions).

Sadhguru pointed out human weaknesses and our futile tendency to look outside to guns, drugs and other forms of violence to tackle human conflict, when the reality is that we are just a speck in the universe. Hence, his recommended path towards salvation is to look inward like Bhagwan Mahavir and Jain Tirthankars did to find inner strength against evil, and to tackle existential challenges such as climate change and intolerance.

There were 90 distinguished speakers including professors, medical doctors, astronomers, climate scientists, animal rights activists, vegan advocates, scholars, and other subject-matter experts. Besides 12 keynote lectures, the Convention featured
86 breakout sessions among its 8 parallel tracks – several sessions were repeated due to attracting capacity crowds. These scholars and speakers were the stars of this JAINA Convention that recharged everyone’s spiritual batteries.

Australian entrepreneur / philanthropist / vegan activist and Founder of Winsome Constance Kindness Trust Philip Wollen stressed in his eloquent Keynote talk the need for the world to reduce both, our carbon and karmic footprints, by adopting a vegan diet that eliminates slaughter and uses non-dairy alternatives, while PETA President Ingrid Newkirk, complimented the Jain community on its reverence for all life, and their recent activism campaigns against animal cruelty in the US and India. Both, Wollen and Newkirk urged the world to use cosmetic, medicinal and lifestyle products that don’t involve animal sources or suffering.

Nipun Mehta (Founder of ServiceSpace, a San Francisco non-profit group) spoke about the significance of adopting a lifestyle that embodies Jain principles through acts of kindness and service to uplift others. He shared his message on service, compassion and humility, and encouraged the audience to initiate the smallest, simplest acts of kindness to experience how they can radically transform one’s life. His concluding line was “In a gentle way, we can shake the world.”

Gurudev Shri Rakeshbhai Jhaveri spoke on why currently self-realization is elusive and how seva, satsang, samarpan and sadhana are the founding pillars towards achieving self-realization.

Gaur Gopal Das, an ISKCON monk and a lifestyle coach, in his inimitable style of tongue-in-cheek humor and witticisms, imparted life-long lessons on bringing balance and purpose in our lives explaining that spiritual wisdom is about propagating
universal values and transforming to the better inner state with religion-neutral choices by pursuing our mastery over anger, greed and deceit.

Rahul Kapoor Jain, a motivational speaker from India hosted two interactive sessions to packed audiences on harnessing our inner powers to reinvent ourselves.

Each dignitary keynote speaker left a lasting impression on the audience on the significance of our human life and the many opportunities it provides for self-improvement. Each speaker conveyed impactful messages about living in harmony and peace while striking a balance towards multiple aspects of duties towards mankind and other living beings.

Noteworthy among many other firsts in this convention, were two service projects, performed by youths, young adults, and seniors; executed at the onset and closing of this convention. The Sarva Mangal Family Trust, in collaboration with JAINA and JCSC, sponsored both projects. A health fair was held at Dr. Atul Karja’s office that provided free dental and vision care to 52 patients and donating 55 pairs of prescription eyeglasses. Further, these volunteers assorted, packed, and distributed in one hour 1,008 backpacks containing basic essentials to the homeless in Anaheim, Santa Ana, and San Diego, through a non-profit U-Turn Lives.

At the Welcoming Ceremony, the attendees observed a moment of silence in recognizing the immense contributions by Jain pioneers to the West, Late Gurudev Shri Chitrabhanuji, Late Acharya Sushil Kumarji Maharaj, and Late Amrendra Muniji; all deserve the community’s credit for their grassroots efforts in establishing the Jain community organization such as JAINA, Siddhachalam and other institutions in North America.
The convention begun on Thursday July 4, 2019 afternoon with a grand procession featuring colorful floats and banners represented by Jain Centers from across North America, an unveiling ceremony of a uniquely constructed Jain Temple, and a Swagatam ceremony welcoming the attendees in the OCC’s grand ballroom.

First of its kind at such a convention, it took eight months for this Jain Temple’s plan, design, and construction, prior to its installation on 6,000 square feet of convention center space. The Jain temple with shikhar and gabhara with chovisi (arrangement of 24 Tirthankars) also displayed in its rangmandap an exhibit, created by artist Chandrashekhar Parab from India, of a three-dimensional depiction of epic Jain stories of the lives and virtues of Jain tirthankars including Bhagwan Mahavir.
Twenty-two beautiful decorations and displays constructed with recycled and reused art materials decked the halls throughout the OCC, providing ample photo opportunities to attendees. Over 30 vibrant exhibit booths informed or entertained the crowd during breaks.

The opening evening entertainment was highlighted by Garba-Raas, a Jains Got Talent competition. On the second night, a Jain Cultural Program titled “One World, One Rhythm” featured uniquely choreographed performances representing the countries and cultures around the world, involving 20 non-stop dances with universal themes of harmony performed by over 200 youth and adult dancers to thunderous audience applauses, which nearly drowned out the commotion caused by a 6.9 magnitude earthquake that hit Southern California on July 5! The final evening held a Bollywood Concert on the third evening. Each program carried and delivered a night of excitement with performances, music, and dancing.

The safety and security team did an outstanding job in ensuring a sustained and calm endurance of 3,000 people audience in the main hall during evening program when at the onset of the show, a 40-second 6.9 magnitude earthquake hit the LA metro area and felt by all in the audience. The very successful Convention was not fazed by the quake that shook the building where it was being held. Following the safety announcement, Co-convener, Dr. Nitin Shah told the audience, “the show will go on”.

Among the extraordinary efforts by 45 committees, the convention’s multimedia and audio-visual committee installed a huge LED wall screen covering the entire span of the stage, where art, graphics, pictures, images, and videos sourced from around the world were projected commensurate with each session, presentation, and performance with unique special effects.

One of the significant youth education and development initiatives is a team-based competition, Jain Academic Bowl (JAB), first launched about a decade ago by the JAINA Education Committee to encourage youth learning the basics of Jain religion in a fun and entertaining manner. JAB is a Jeopardy show style trivia game in which young teams compete with each other for a prestigious win. One hundred youths from 15 JAB teams, ranging in ages 10 to 18 years, representing pathshalas from 9 Jain centers, participated in the JAB competition. This 13th Jain Academic Bowl competition involved 33 hours of game play requiring JAB students to master 400-pages of Jain facts, concepts, and stories from ancient literature. This year’s winners of both senior and junior teams are from Chicago, Senior Team “Hrim” and Junior Team “Arham”, of the Jain Society of Metropolitan Chicago.

Congratulations Chicago!!

The other significant accomplishments at this convention were the sold-out events of Young Jain Professionals and Youth Activities. Almost 600 youths and young adults enjoyed this convention by attending focused tracks at their opening and closing keynotes, and dedicated parallel sessions including; Ted Talks, Mind Connection, Lifestyles, Jainism 101, Jainism in College, Jains in Action; and more; all of these were organized by and for youth and young adults.

Presented for the first time at a west coast JAINA convention, was Shatavdhan (a demonstration which tests a person’s memory power by performing multiple tasks simultaneously) at which Mr. Jaynesh Jain, a young disciple of Acharya Chandanaji, demonstrated his unique skills and talent by memorizing in about 45 minutes 50 questions, objects, and statements asked by a live audience of over 400 youths and adults, and then immediately recalling them and answering the questions in any order prescribed.

The BAPS Swaminarayan Mandir of Los Angeles, under the oversight of the Convention Food Committee and many volunteers, prepared fresh vegetarian and vegan meals serving 3,450 attendees 4-5 times/day. It must be recognized that the members of the Food Committee and over 110 dedicated volunteers of BAPS prepared and served 14 delicious meals over the 4-day convention event. In 4-days, they served approximately nearly 50,000 meals!!
At each convention, JAINA announces its most prestigious biennial award recipient for the JAINA Ratna Award, which is bestowed upon one most deserving nominated individual. Dr. Nitin Shah, Chair of JAINA’s Award Committee, announced the selection of Mr. Ram Gada of Minnesota as the winner of the 2019 JAINA Ratna award. Mr. Gada gave a heartfelt acceptance speech crediting his spiritual journey to the teachings of Mahatma Gandhi and recognizing Mahatma Gandhi’s 150th birth anniversary this year.

On behalf of the JAINA Executive Committee, Mr. Gunvant Shah, now the immediate Past President of JAINA, presented special Presidential Awards to Acharya Shri Chandanaji, late Gurudev Chitrabhanuji, Acharya Dr. Lokesh Muni, and Gurudev Shri Rakeshbhai, for their immense contributions to the establishment of Jainism and for promoting the united lifestyles of Jains in North America.

JAINA conducted its biennial elections of the Board of Directors and Executive Committee in June. The Election Committee Chair, Mr. Anop Vora, announced the results of this election. The new officer bearers of JAINA’s Executive Committee for the next 2-year term are: Mr. Mahesh Wadher – President, Mr. Haresh Shah – First Vice President, Mr. Hemant Shah – Secretary, and Mr. Ashok Savla – Treasurer; they will be supported by 7 Regional Vice-Presidents. Accepting the Presidency, Mr. Mahesh Wadher said that he is humbled by the trust invested in him by the community, and promised to make JAINA stronger, vibrant, and more relevant in the lives of the Jains in North America as well as for communities across the world.

In a statement released by Mr. Dipak Doshi, Chairman of Public Relations and Press-Media Committee of this convention, he conveyed that the JAINA conventions embody Jain values with a call for action at gatherings that have been organized by volunteers every two years since 1981 in North America. This 2019 JAINA Convention highlighted diverse topics related to the Jain Way of Life, along with devotion, compassion, and transformation while creating many opportunities for exchange of ideas, dialogues and concerted actions on global issues. As the largest and most organized gathering of diaspora Jains outside India, the convention brought together thousands in promoting Jain values, and modelled this convention as a benchmark to its future events and programs. He credited the thousands of hours of relentless planning, preparation, activity and efficient execution by a group of 600 volunteers from Southern California and across North America for making this convention a huge success. What was done was no small task. An incredible achievement has happened! This is what a Jain Way of Life is all about!!

For Further Information, visit www.jainaconvention.org, or contact Chair of Public Relations and Press-Media Committee, Mr. Dipak Doshi at dipakginni@gmail.com or our Committee Co-Chairs, Mr. Hemant Shah at hemantil@yahoo.com or Dr. Manoj Jain at mjainmd1@gmail.com.