

## Sixteen Months After 26/11, Taj Ballroom Welcomes Patrons

Mumbai: (IANS) Curious guests and old regulars started trooping into the famous Ballroom of the Taj Mahal Palace & Tower Hotel - severely damaged and scarred during the Nov 26, 2008, Mumbai terror attacks - which re-opened here recently.

The Ballroom, located in the heritage wing of the iconic hotel, is synonymous with exclusive parties, corporate events, mega-launches, high society weddings and receptions and media gatherings.

"It is a fitting beginning to a new chapter in the history of the Palace wing of the hotel. We are delighted to throw the doors open and invite our guests, old and new, back to create special memorable occasions at this venue," said the hotel's general manager, Karambir Kang.

Overlooking the Arabian Sea and the imposing Gateway of India, the regal and elegant Ballroom has always been the first and final choice for landmark events.

Bathed in rich hues of gold and bejeweled with antique crystal chandeliers, the venue now returns as a dazzling setting for evenings of pleasurable wining and dining, for which it has always been known.

LTW Designworks, Kuala Lumpur, carried out a detailed study of the original architecture of the Ballroom and incorporated it in the new settings. The outcome is Corinthian capitals on gold polished columns, vaulted ceilings and state-of-the-art audio-visual requirements coming together as the perfect amalgamation of the classic and the contemporary.

Fitted with the latest in technology for high-profile corporate events, its graceful arches and scalloped pillars give it an air of Victorian elegance, ideal for exclusive social events, too.

Grand executive chef Hemant Oberoi and his team would oversee and orchestrate the cuisine for the Ballroom events, besides a team of banquet planners and hospitality personnel.

## Baba Ramdev's Organization To Contest Polls

New Delhi: (IANS) Yoga guru Baba Ramdev recently said that his Bharat Swabhiman Andolan would contest the next Lok Sabha elections in an effort to build a corruption-free India. He, however, ruled out joining the fray himself.

Ramdev, whose real name is Ramkishan Yadav, told reporters here that he would field candidates in all the 543 Lok Sabha constituencies.

"We will have seven-10 lakh members in every district in a year or two, and they will become a big deciding political force," he said, speaking in Hindi.

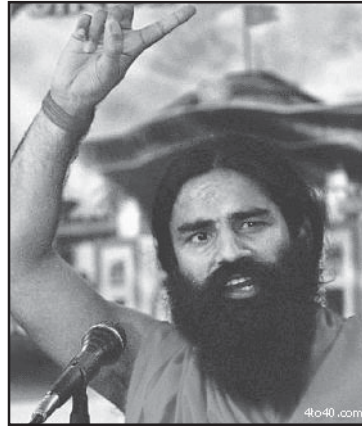
Stating that he himself would not contest elections, Ramdev said: "I will never contest elections

and never take up any political position."

He said the next general election would be a watershed event, "when all the corrupt politicians will be wiped out" once the Bharat Swabhiman Andolan becomes a force to reckon with.

"One of the main objectives of the movement is to end corruption and to bring back more than Rs.300 lakh crore of Indian black money from abroad for the country's development," he said.

Ramdev, whose yoga lessons are followed by an estimated 85 million people on televisions and video, said the recent arrests of self-claimed holy men on criminal charges was "a very big conspiracy" even if some of them



were indeed guilty.

"Some politicians and communal forces are conspiring to malign the name of Indian saints by trapping them in cases related to fake currency, rape, murder, sex scandal and drugs," he said.

Ramdev shot to fame by teaching traditional Indian yoga and breathing exercises at camps and on television through the channel "Astha", managed by his Patanjali Yogpeeth, a sprawling yoga retreat and Ayurveda centre on the Haridwar-Rishikesh highway in Uttarakhand.

"He had been campaigning for clean governance, better health, 100 per cent franchise, restoring the country's lost glory, a cleaner Ganga and recovery of black money for the last three years," a senior Patanjali Yogpeeth spokesman told IANS.

In an interview to IANS, Ramdev had earlier said he would not join active politics but "act as a facilitator to ensure a clean, green and proud India".

## Sania's Decision To Marry Shoab Baffles People

Hyderabad: (IANS) The decision of Indian tennis star Sania Mirza to tie the knot with Shoab Malik has baffled people in her home town and triggered a debate on her move in view of the controversy involving the Pakistani cricketer.

The people, especially youngsters, were heard discussing the possible impact of the wedding on India-Pakistan relations, on her tennis career and whether Sania would remain an Indian citizen or become a Pakistani.

There is also speculation that the 23-year-old would stop playing tennis after the 2012 Olympics.

Coming a couple of months after she called

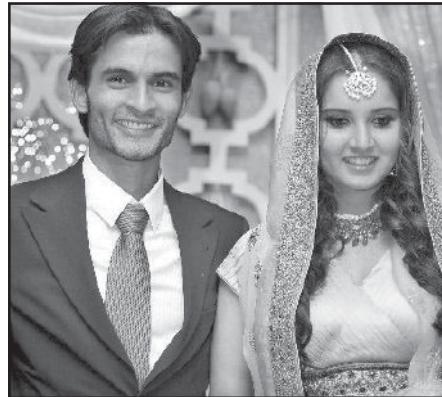
off her engagement to childhood friend Sohrab Mirza citing "incompatibility", the news of her proposed marriage with former Pakistani captain has surprised her fans and critics alike.

Shoab, 28, had reportedly married Ayesha Siddiqui, daughter of a businessman from this city, in 2002 but the Pakistani star later denied the marriage.

Even close family friends of Sania had no information about the alliance till her family Monday night confirmed a report by Pakistani television channel Geo News.

Some of her fans believe that she has taken

a risk by choosing a Pakistani as her life partner given the strained relations between the two



neighbours.

Sania Mirza is perhaps the first Indian sporting celebrity to marry a Pakistani who is also a sports star in his country. The news of the marriage has attracted intense attention here.

"Sania and Shoab will make a handsome couple. I wish her all the best," said S. Rashmi, a student.

The opinion was divided on whether the alliance would help strengthen people-to-people ties. "Marriage of the two celebrities would make no difference to Indo-Pak relations as they would have no influence on the powers that decide the foreign policies," said M.A. Amir, a software professional.

Though Sania's family in their statement said she would settle down in Dubai after the marriage and would continue to represent India in coming events, her relatives were tight-lipped on whether she would remain an Indian or accept Pakistani citizenship after a few years. "I don't think she will ever accept Pakistani citizenship given the strained relations between the two countries," feels Fauzan Hashmi, a student.

Sania's critics feel she has committed a "double fault" by breaking off the engagement with her childhood friend and then choosing a Pakistani, who allegedly cheated a girl from her own city after marrying her.

"Sania has made Hyderabad and India proud through her achievements but she should not have landed herself in a controversy by choosing a man who is accused of cheating a girl," said Sana Khan, a housewife.

Controversies surrounded Sania and they in fact overshadowed her tennis career. Muslim clergy had taken strong exception to her dress on court and her reported remarks on pre-marital sex. She, however, denied making the remarks.

Sania, who has one single WTA title, eight doubles and one mixed doubles title, had a meteoric rise on Indian sports. She became the highest ranking Indian woman tennis player by breaking into the top 30 in world ranking.

Shoab had called off his engagement with Ayesha Siddiqui in January 2008 saying the two families could not reach an understanding on some issues. Ayesha's father M.A. Siddiqui had even threatened to sue Malik for cheating and demanded him to give a formal divorce.

## Swamis In Scandals: What Keeps The Faith?

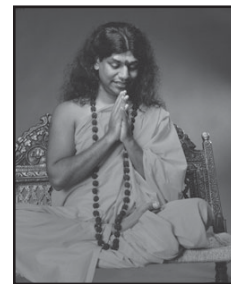
New Delhi: (IANS) Twenty-seven-year-old Priya, a devotee of Paramahansa Nityananda Swami, can't believe a video footage where the Karnataka-based spiritual guru is allegedly shown in a compromising position with a Tamil actress.

"I still doubt whether it is swamiji or it is a graphic gimmick," a shocked Priya told IANS.

Nityananda Swami's is not the first reported case of a person in religious garb being caught in a scandal. Ichchadhari Sant Swami Bhimanand Ji Maharaj was arrested for running a multi-crore rupee sex racket in Delhi involving former air hostesses. Kumar Sahai alias Swami Ji was arrested from Ghaziabad, on the outskirts of Delhi, for kidnapping a girl.

Guru Asaram Babu is still under the police scanner for the deaths of two minor boys in his ashram-run gurukul in Ahmedabad, while several years ago Kanchipuram mutt head Jayendra Saraswathi was charged with the murder of a former employee. Although many blame followers for not being discerning enough, more interestingly what has emerged is the unshakable faith that devotees, particularly women who seek solutions to personal problems, have in them.

Swami Shantatmananda, secretary of the Ramkrishna Mission, told IANS: "One should seek god through prayer and scriptures and not through fake godmen."



"They thrive due to thoughtless followers who have not understood the true meaning of spirituality. Ignorant, miracle-and-fortune-seeking followers are the ones who help such fake swamis prosper in our society," he said.

According to Swami H.H. Sukhabodhananda, founder of the Prasanna Trusta, "Like fake doctors and engineers, there are also fake godmen in society."

Police say they can't act against fake swamis until they get a complaint. "It's a social issue, with proper evidence, police will do its duty and arrest fake godman. As for the public, it's high time they recognised such fraudsters," Rajan

Bhagat, Delhi Police spokesman, told IANS.

But there are those who are angry with the names of gurus being dragged into scandals. One of them is yoga guru Ramdev, who said the recent arrests, were "a very big conspiracy".

"Some politicians and communal forces are conspiring to malign the name of Indian saints by trapping them in cases related to fake currency, rape, murder, sex scandals and drugs," he said.

Agreed Anitha Swaminathan, a member of the Theosophical Society in Chennai. "Our country has veteran sadhus and swamijis. Such fake godmen are just a bubble in the water," she said.

The arrests have not altogether made much of a dent in the mindset of people or deterred them from following a guru who would show them the light in their day to day problems. But it has helped them understand the need for the right one.

Naunidhi Kaur, a follower of Radhaswami Satsung, said: "There are numerous ashrams and satsangs that stand out for their spiritual teachings and true selfless service to mankind. A follower just needs to be more knowledgeable about the faith and not just be a blind one."