



Youth in Mandirs 2021

Conference Proceedings




YOUTH IN MANDIRS

A conference for Hindu Mandir Youth Executives
Sunday 25th April 2021 | 3pm - 5pm



HINDU MANDIR NETWORK is a networking group to inform, educate, assist and strengthen the mandir as an institution to preserve, promote and protect Hindu Dharma, Hindu ideals and traditions in a multicultural society.



Hindu Mandirs play an essential role in the spiritual, cultural and dharmic welfare of UK's Hindu society.

Designed for Mandir Executives with responsibilities for Youth activities, the Hindu Mandir Network's **Youth in Mandirs** conference enables us to share ideas and collaborate to:

- Learn how to connect young people to mandirs
- Create attractive programmes and activities for youth
- Learn from successful mandirs how to organise activities that engage children, teenagers and young adults
- Create a vibrant mandir for the whole community

MANDIRS OF ALL REGIONS AND SAMPRADAYAS ARE WELCOME TO ATTEND
Hindu Mandir Network is a project of VHP UK





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Introduction

Namaste!

This booklet is a summary of the proceedings of the Hindu Mandir Network's Youth in Mandirs conference held in April 2021.

The Hindu Mandir Network UK (HMN) was formed following the successful Hindu Mandir Executives Conference (HMEC) www.vhp.org.uk/hmec in October 2020. With a wide range of topics that affect the Hindu Mandirs in the UK, it was felt that the involvement of young people in Mandirs was of pressing importance.

Therefore taking the feedback from the Mandirs and Youth workshop at the HMEC 2020 conference this conference was planned with the following objectives:

1. To explain/remind the Mandir executives the importance of involving young people in Mandirs.
2. To enable Mandir executives to connect more with modern young people, their needs and how these are represented at Mandir management committee levels.
3. To provide examples of different types of programmes, events, regular activities that involve young people and possibly provide templates for some types of activities.
4. To evaluate the current status of Youth activities in UK Mandirs and Youth representation on Mandir committees.

Whilst the pandemic lockdown was still in place the conference was organised to be online.

A team with experience of organising youth activity in UK Mandirs was assembled to plan and deliver the conference. The team involved senior executive members from several Mandirs as well as youth leaders from Mandirs across the UK where youth activities are regularly organised with guidance provided by the HMN advisory team.

It was felt that well organised youth activities at Mandirs for the different ages can be self-perpetuating as younger children come in and follow through the different ages constantly being involved with the Mandirs over the changing generations. As a result workshops were organised to target activities for 3 separate age ranges:

- A. 5 -10 years
- B. 11 - 18 years
- C. 18 - 25 years

Each workshop had several case studies examples from successful Mandirs

Youth Leaders who organise activities or are responsible for youth activities in Mandirs were invited together with the Executive committee members. For those Mandirs wishing to start youth activities at their Mandirs the invitation was opened to potential youth leaders as well.

We were pleasantly surprised at the demand as over 120 delegates registered to attend the 2 hour online conference with 85 attending on the actual day.

We hope you find this booklet as a useful reminder if you attended and inspirational if you missed the conference. We also hope that it may guide and inspire Hindu Mandirs executives to attend such events in the future.

If you wish to connect with any of the presenters of case studies for more information on any aspect presented here or need further help to start youth activities at your Mandir please contact them directly (see page 35) or contact HMN by email info.hmnik@gmail.com.

We would like to thank all the following people for their contribution in making the first Youth in Mandirs conference a wonderful success. Specifically...

- All the Executives of Mandirs who have supported us on the day
- All the facilitators and case study presenters for conducting the workshops so diligently
- The technical team working in the background to enable us to communicate at this conference from our homes
- Regional coordinators for their valiant efforts to ensure so many Mandirs took part in the conference as well as many other people who supported us for the conference.

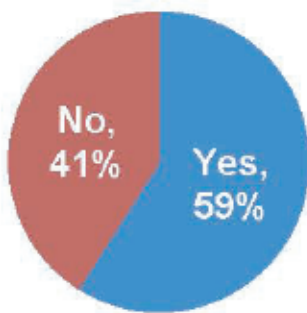
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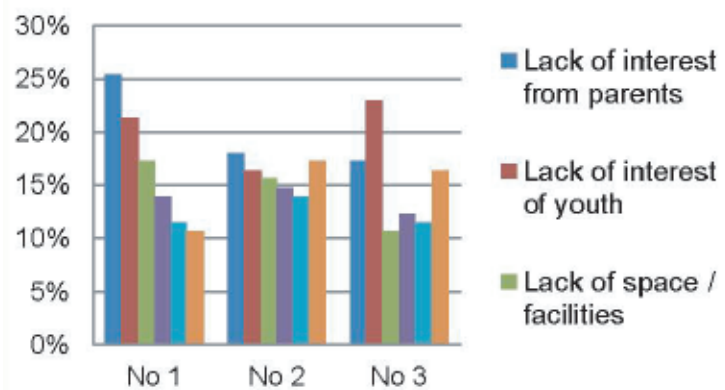
Pre Event Survey

As part of the registration process we requested delegates to provide details of youth activities at their Mandir. Whilst much information was provided in text format it has not been easy to present it here in a meaningful format. For the data we are able to present we have provided some analysis which gives some idea of youth activities at UK Mandirs.

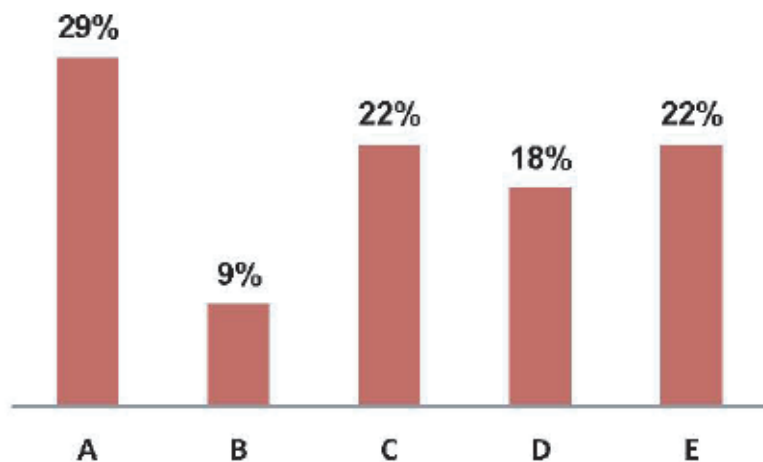
Youth (Under40) on Mandir Committee?



Biggest Challenges



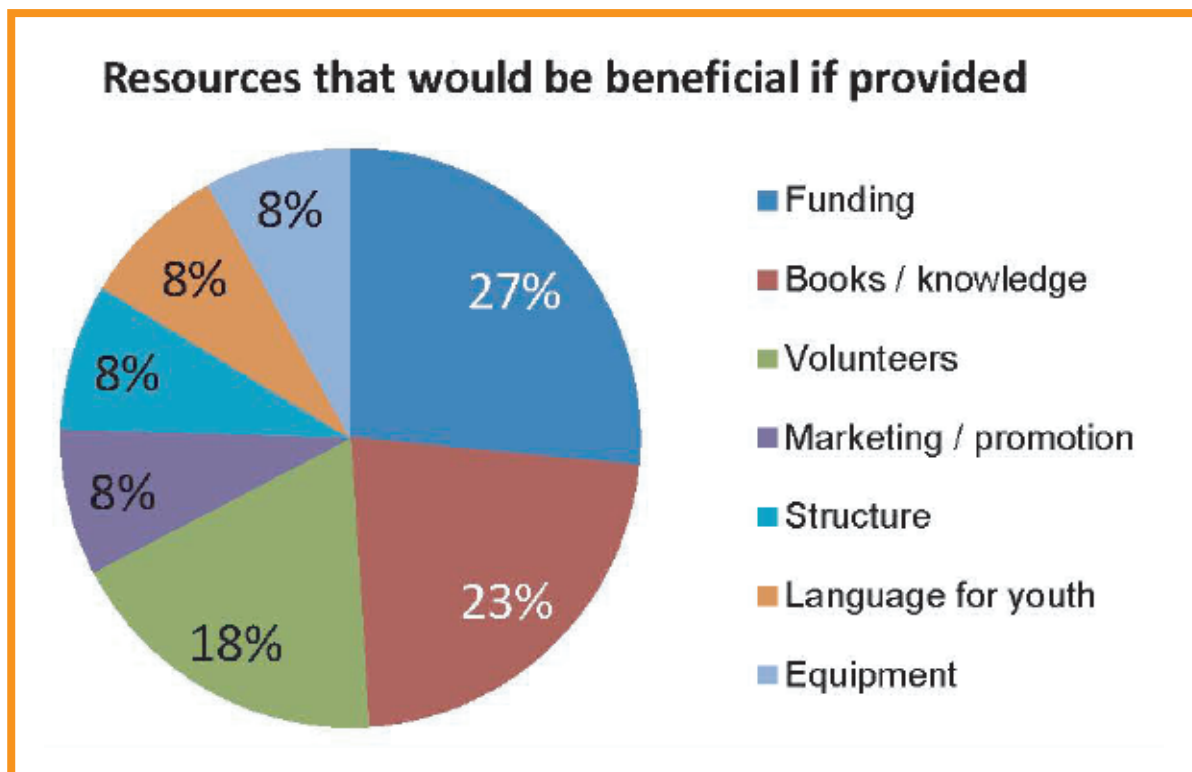
Pre COVID activities available for youth in your Mandir



- A. Religious classes
- B. Educational support e.g. for 11+ or GCSE's
- C. Sports
- D. Art / Drama / Dance / Music classes
- E. Language classes

Q. - How have you adapted to youth activities during COVID?

Of those that provided an answer 17% had None or no activity whilst 30% had Zoom / online. Many had weekly, fortnightly or monthly online activities, language classes, Dharmik classes. Some started new activities online and involved young people for the technology aspects. Sewa activities attracted young people willing to serve the community.



Summary

Whilst these results provide an overall picture of youth activities in UK Mandirs, each Mandir's situation is unique. The information from this survey may help towards Mandirs efforts towards providing youth activities. Mandir Executive and committees will no doubt need to take their local situation into consideration when planning and organising youth activities.



Keynote Address

Shri Tushar Shah

Tushar Shah lives in Reading where he has been active in growing and developing the youth activities in the local Hindu Mandir for the last 20 years. He is an active member of various organisations and a volunteer for Dementia Friends, Sewa Day and Princes Trust.

Namaste and thank you for inviting me to this conference. The responsibility of a keynote speech is quite a challenge especially when it's sunny outside and I am just a humble volunteer. However, what inspires me is your commitment and your dedication to be here and to help develop the Hindu youth work in the UK through our Mandirs. So firstly, thank you for giving me this opportunity.

I am no expert but hopefully by sharing some of the stories of what we have done in Reading with the Hindu Mandir that can give you some food for thought and inspiration.

While we were all signing on it was very interesting to see the pre-event survey results (See Page 5) While I am talking I would like you to think about today is where you are within your Mandir and the engagement with the youth under the age of 40. The work that you are doing, does it fall into the following three categories?

1. Is it little or nothing?
2. You are doing work, but it's hard work and it's centred (relies) around one or two people?
3. There are lots of activities and it's flourishing with a dedicated committed and vibrant team of volunteers?

Think about where you are within that and use today as an opportunity to connect with somebody that can help you move to the next level up.

We'll use today to share some ideas, connections and frameworks. And what is really important is, while there will be lots of ideas and action points, it's better to implement one or two of them very well, then to have 10 and 20 action plans and become overwhelmed. When I share the story of what happened in Reading over 20 years, you'll see that staying small and focused is really important.

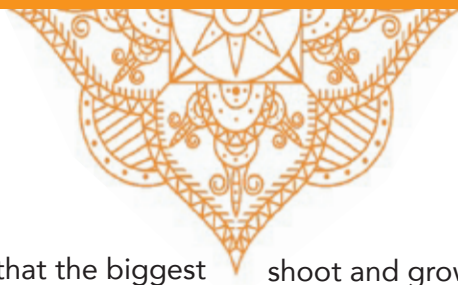
New Opportunities

Now these last 18 months have been a challenge for everybody. The pandemic has had a massive impact on everyone, mentally, financially and emotionally. But what is really inspiring is that, when we look back in history, whenever society goes through these crises, it creates a new dawn, a new opportunity, and that opportunity usually stays with the next generation.

As Hindus in the UK we have always been top of the class in education. Financially we have always be one of the better off communities. Professionally, many of our individuals have reached to the highest levels within their professions - whether it's in health care, politics, business, or any other industry. We are seen as role models, but what the last 18 months has shown, not just for the Hindu community but for the human race, is that we were lacking and missing the spiritual and human contribution. This is where our Mandirs can play a clear role in filling that vacuum and it must start with the younger generation.

Challenges for Hindu community

There is some fantastic work happening across our Mandirs, but we also have some challenges, which we need to work on collectively to really understand and to overcome them. Challenges such as grooming, conversion, even what is my identity as a Hindu; am I British; am I Indian; am I a Hindu; am I Jain; who is my God; do I have one God or many Gods - so many questions that our youth are looking answers for.



At the same time, we are seeing that the biggest victims of the pandemic have been the elderly, whether it's been through ill health, or even isolation. Our parents and grandparents are facing those same challenges. So we need to look at our Mandirs as a means for overcoming those. We need to understand our Hindu Dharma and not just do the rituals, the prayers, and the bhajans, but make sure our children understand the scientific reasons and the importance behind these so that they have the right understanding to confidently, articulate this into the wider community.

The pre event survey indicated that 61% of Mandirs have some form of youth activity which is good. What I really want to understand is the work we are doing within our temples, is it with a sense of purpose? I'll give you an example. Week in week out, we could have our youngsters playing football, but will that mean that they will contribute to the Hindu Community - not just to the Hindu community but also to the wider community?. Will they have a sense of responsibility, leadership skills and teamwork skills? Many times will see this but many times once they have got to the age of 18 or got married, they disappear and lose all connection with the Mandir. We need to understand and learn from organizations, some of whom will be presenting their case studies today, how we can develop a culture where our youngsters not only enjoy and stay occupied but also develop the skills to give them the confidence to contribute to the Mandir activities.

Bamboo Example

Now, the bamboo is a very symbolic plant in Hindu culture, but it also has a significant meaning. When the seed of a bamboo is planted in the soil and is watered and nourished, for the first year nothing will appear. Same in the second year, it will be watered and nourished, and this will continue for around seven to eight years and still nothing will be seen. However, in the eighth year, within 3 months that bamboo shoot will

shoot and grow to around 30 feet and this is the work that we will have with our youth that a lot of the effort that we do we will not see the fruits of the labour for a long time but it is important that we lay the roots and the foundation. Because once the bamboo has grown to 30 feet tall, it is impossible to remove from the soil and this is how we must approach our work.

Support from Hindu Mandir

We are very grateful in Reading that the Hindu Mandir has been a key venue, support and catalyst for the work that we have done. I'm going to share what's happened over the last 20 years in Reading.

When we started in 2001, we only started with three volunteers. For the next four years our average attendance was around 12 to 15 young people. We had many ups and downs, but we still carried on, and then in 2005, we expanded the team to five volunteers. For the next six years, we had an average of 15 to 25 young people with some parents also being involved.

In 2010, it grew to eight volunteers, with an average weekly attendance of 30 to 40. However from 2012 to now we have seen, like the bamboo, the benefits of all that hard work. We now have a very strong and active team of 30 volunteers. On a weekly basis, we get between 90 - 100 attendance and that has also been very similar during the pandemic. The activity is not just for the youth, but also includes the parents and sometimes even the grandparents, but the focus has always been on the youth.

Whilst we may have begun as a youth activity, we are now seen as a key organization within the community and with the Mandir, where we do great work and I will give some examples of how we have done that.

Through our youth activities for the youngsters from the age of five to ten, our focus has been on games, craft activities and learning mantras and



about our religion. Between the ages of 10 to 18 our real focus has been on developing their leadership and their teamwork skills. We organize camps, we get them to do various challenges to run activities and then from 18 to 40, they then become the mentors for the next generation and are guided in that work. This has been the structure and that has benefitted us. I am going to give you three areas where we have really seen the benefit of this - Education, Sewa and Politics.

Education

It started in 2012. We used to celebrate Guru Purnima, and the idea came that maybe we should invite the youngsters' teachers to the event. So from 2012, every year school teachers have been invited. They've come to the Mandir; the children present what they have done over the year, they're given dakshina, they're shown around the temple and they are given a lovely vegetarian meal.

In 2017, we saw the benefit of that relationship. Many of our children came to the age where they were having to take GCSE Religious Education and we realized that actually whilst the Government education board states that the top eight religions can be studied, in most schools in the Reading and Wokingham area, only allowing two, Islam and Christianity were being offered. (*Ed – This is the case in many parts of the country – <https://insightuk.org/hinduism-in-re>*). However because of the relationship we had with the schools and the teachers we were able to start having conversations around this.

In 2018, many of us were invited to schools to talk about Hinduism and to start changing the narrative to mention that actually there are more than just two religions that people can learn about.

In 2019, one of our members was invited to the local Board of SACRE and in 2020 with the Hindu Mandir, we were able to create video stories about Hinduism and the benefits it has in the local Reading community. All this came from an

activity that started in 2012, where the idea of inviting our teachers to our Temple for Guru Purnima started.

Sometimes when we do these activities, we do not see the benefits of it till many years later. But now, whenever there is an educational policy decision our volunteers will be there to help guide, debate and discuss that policy and also contribute towards it.

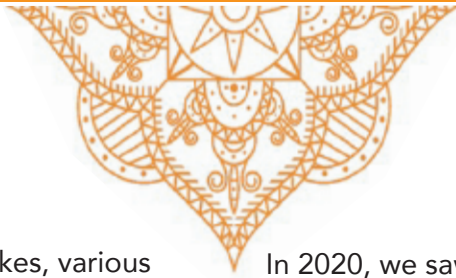
Sewa activities attract youth

Sewa has also been a key focus of our youth activities. Every year we would do some kind of sewa activity, whether it be a blood donation, canal cleaning, park cleaning, fun run, walks or even visiting Care Homes,

By doing sewa activities on an annual basis, we have created a process where the parents and the youth work together to identify a project, connect with them and build a team. We started creating connections in the community and a sense of giving back.

Last year, when the Covid-19 happened, the sewa challenge was necessary across the country for many Hindu communities. In Reading we had a team of volunteers and together with the Mandir we have done some fantastic work over the last 18 months. There were regular food deliveries for food banks, there was supporting the NHS, whether it's delivering food or PPE, etc. The youngsters created Care Home appreciation parcels which were then delivered to care homes as a thank you. And this then spread to other towns across the UK. We had a sewa kitchen, where food was created for frontline key workers, vulnerable and homeless people, and we supported Slough Mandir with this, so there was great partnership working.

Also the youngsters created puzzle books. There were many people in hospitals who were very isolated. The NHS asked us to help and make connections and bring some joy. So the youngsters aged between 11 and 16 created



puzzle books, with crosswords, jokes, various different activities that people could do while in hospital. They then cycled and delivered these around the hospitals and to the care homes. During the pandemic our sewa team has grown to over a hundred and twenty-five active volunteers with people whom we had never met before coming forward.

So by doing these activities, by having our weekly regular activities with the youth, we have seen the benefits of creating a sewa contribution within our local community.

Political Benefits

The final area where we've seen the benefit of having regular activities where we are training and developing our youngsters has been in politics. In 2013, we invited two councillors - we invited many but only two councillors came to look at our work with young people.

In 2015, we invited Alok Sharma, who is the MP for East Reading. He won his seat by a narrow margin and through our support he was able to win his seat. In 2018, we were very fortunate that through the connections with Alok Sharma and other councillors, we were able to support one of our members to become a local councillor.



In 2020, we saw the benefit of working in politics. During the pandemic, we had the former prime minister Theresa May attending our activities as well as many councillors and mayor's coming forward. And in the recent Parliament week we had four MPs from around our area attending and speaking to our youngsters and engaging them in politics and seeing how they could support our activities. This all began in 2013 when we invited two councillors but it was the consistency and the regular focus on that which proved beneficial.

So, all of these activities, whether it's been in politics, sewa or education will hopefully give you some food for thought.

Parents join to help

Within Reading Mandir, our parents have run yoga classes and language classes regularly. When I look at the survey, many people say parents are not interested and the reality is initially they are not. But when they start seeing the benefits and the development in their children, they themselves will come forward and say, how can I get involved. Our work should be so inspiring that it does that.

In today's sessions you'll have several workshops and here are some things that you should think about. Hopefully I have given you some ideas and I hope that you can actually build on the success and the work that Reading has done and even share ideas that have worked in your specific areas. Hopefully we can also learn from that. But look to use the tools and resources, don't reinvent the wheel. There are many organizations doing great work, speak to them, learn from them and work with them.

I know initially resources and volunteers is always a challenge. Find other Mandirs locally and work with them. Having a team of two or three across local Mandirs is better than one person trying to drive that initiative within your Mandir.

Cost is also always a challenge. But we were very fortunate that Reading Mandir has always given us the space and supported us financially and through that support we have created a vibrant community. Now the donations naturally flow to the Mandir. With everything, you will always have challenges but it's being consistent with your activities that will help you.

Now, I'm just going to summarize all of this, but the real benefit is, how does this impact our Hindu community?

In 2015, I was in Reading Town Centre, and I came across somebody I knew from Birmingham. He was only 30 years old, but he was living homeless. When I recognized who he was, it was a big challenge. But within 24 hours, we were able to assemble 12 volunteers and locate him in Reading.

And then over time, we were able to connect him back with his family and I'm pleased to say that he's actually doing really well. And when I was scrolling through social media, just last June, I saw a post from the international pop singer Robin Williams. He had visited this individuals Cafe in the southwest of England, which during the pandemic had to close but became a food bank centre.

Now if we hadn't put those efforts back then, when we found this youngster on the streets of Reading, I do not feel confident that we would have the team to go and find him and make that difference. But we did and it shows that by us helping him he has made a significant contribution to his community as well.

So in that I conclude with the principle of karma. What we sow is what we reap.

With our dedicated efforts with the youth, we will reap a brighter future for the Hindu community in the UK.

Namaste.



WORKSHOPS | 5 – 10 YEARS

Bala Vihar Activities - Chimaya Mission UK

Krishnan Rajaram

Krishnan ji is a sevak with Chinmaya Mission – an organisation that encompasses a wide range of spiritual, educational, and charitable activities. The institution aims to provide to individuals, from any background, the wisdom of Vedanta and the practical means for spiritual growth and happiness, enabling them to become positive contributors to society.

I'm here to talk a little bit about what we have been doing with Chinmaya mission, especially within the five to eleven year age group. I'll share with you our experiences and hopefully if you have any questions happy to answer them.

"Children are not vessels to be filled, but lamps to be lit."

– Swami Chinmayananda Saraswati.

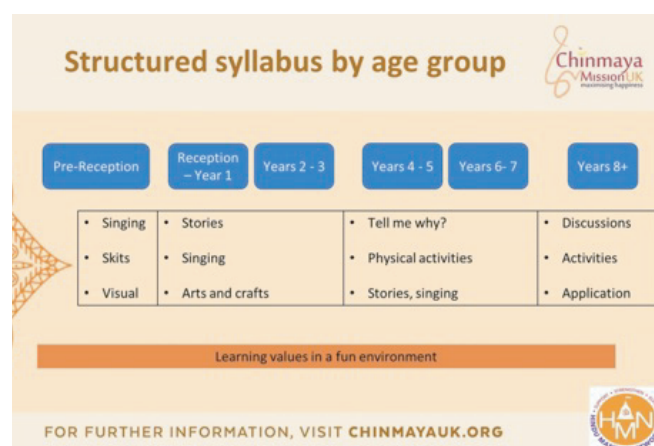
I want to start with the vision that Swami Chinmayananda ji had, which has really influenced many of us and inspired us on this journey which as you can see from the quote. Children are not there to be just dumped with more and more information. Today sites like Google and Alexa can do that much better than we can. They are really lamps to be lit and I think that is still the role that we, whether as parents, teachers or mentors can play in terms of inspiring them because once those lamps are lit, they can go and light a million more lamps and I think that as a parent it has been a very inspiring factor for me.

When Swamiji started this he decided that across all age groups, whether you are a Brahmacharya or through to Sanyas, through all of these stages of our lives, we need to find ways to embed spirituality, almost as a foundation through that whole journey.

There are classes right from two years old and obviously till they are teenagers. But also there are classes for adults in terms of learning and applying and for senior citizens. I'll focus on the children's one.

We have over time had the advantage of having a structured syllabus for each group. With close to 200 schools in India we have some advantage in terms of that Foundation and resources. But here in UK, from a Bala Vihar perspective, starting from pre-reception (2 to 5 year olds) and then going on from five onwards most of our classes are structured by age group, by school year, so it makes it a lot easier for our children.

The early years focus more on singing and visual activity which are usually only 30 minute sessions for the pre-reception till about year two. Year three children are more interested in stories, singing, arts and crafts. As they grow little older they want to know more and start questioning. It's important that we address some of those points also because they don't just want to be told stuff they want to discuss and they want to do more activities. Then as they grow older, past year 8, they've gone to the secondary school, they are a lot more focused on the discussions and the underlying ethos is in all of this.



How we learn while having fun

Children don't come to Bal Vihar for the learning, they come to have fun. They come to be with their friends. Along the way, if we can light few lamps, then we've done our job.



So, here are some examples of the types of things they learn. In the early years, one of the topics is Alphabet Safari. So A to Z every alphabet we pick one value and they learn a story and an activity and that's beautiful because we've been learning alphabets and they start to remember A is for Aspiration C for Cleanliness, G is for God and so on. Another example we have is the 24 teachers from Srimad Bhagvatam and that's been distilled in the saying, what can I learn from Mother Earth, what can I learn from air, what can I learn from the Sun and using nature to see that there is so much inspiration we can provide.

Another example is with the initial years focused on Krishna and Rama and various deities, we again focus on the values. So yes Hanuman is great, all that is good but what can I learn? So how can I have a strong backbone here? For example, by the eight qualities put there - Balam, Dhairiyam and so on. So in each of these activities children actually make like their own japa mala, and they learn and imbibe those values.

As they grow older the same thing then goes into the highest truth to saying how do Dharma, Artha, Kama and Moksha come together. How do the three types of yoga's - Bhakti, Karma, Gnana yoga mean for us and what is the ultimate goal of life. Depending on the age groups, these are offered in small capsules so that children build the right foundations and more importantly they develop love for it. This is not supposed to be an intellectual exercise because the two have to go hand-in-hand.



Here are some of the examples of the syllabus. We have for this age group, There are things on Krishna, and Ramayana, but again in a manner very suited for young children. Later on the same things are covered with a bit more depth. They learn Hanuman not just in terms of the stories but also as a superpower and what values.

One very popular activity is, for slightly older age groups is where we talk about, Why do We... Why do we apply tilak - Why do you light the lamp - Why do you have an altar? Etc. This booklet has all these questions and every class we pick one topic and go into discuss with children so that they learn and form their own views. It's not us telling them or they have to do it, but we leave it to them to say, here is the science behind it. Now, you decide how you want to adapt it in your own lives and we find that's quite effective.

Tailor the Message

I want to conclude with some learnings and best practices that I hope might be helpful for you. So the first thing we have seen is classic with any communications. It does not matter what you want to say. It's really what your audience wants to listen. So we have found that depending on the audience, we have to tailor the message. So there have been times when we have used, for example, characters like Kung Fu Panda to be able to communicate a certain message.

Not all messages have to have Rama and Sita and Krishna and Radha and Shiva. If a message

can be communicated via Harry Potter or why a Kung-Fu Panda perfectly fine. So long as they get the learning, that's fine. I think Hinduism allows that level of flexibility that we can adapt to the times.

Parental engagement is key

Obviously we've spoken a lot about parent engagement and it takes time because different parents are at different stages in their own lives. We have found that where Bala Vihar is treated as a family affair and the children are doing their classes, parents are also doing study classes, it is a lot more effective because when another activity choice has to be made, then they realize that we are not going to break this and they will work everything else around and somehow magically everything finds a way to fit. However where it just becomes a creche then obviously it's a different experience.

Online world experience

In the last 18 months, as we've moved to the online world. We have realized that we have had to be more creative in the way we engage children. A typical class will be one and a half hours. We've trimmed it down because children can't sit that long with zoom and already having so much of screen. Even the types of activities we have had to tweak so that they still retain the personal touch. It's not just a place where they come and somebody teaches them but they develop that personal connection with the teacher almost like a Guru Kulam.

Finally remember teaching children is a form of Sadhana for us. I'll conclude with Swamiji's message that ...

"Children are not vessels to be filled, but lamps to be lit."

– Swami Chinmayananda Saraswati.



Shishu Kunj Activities at Shree Sanatan Mandir, Leicester

Vibhooti Acharya – President Shree Sanatan Mandir, Leicester

Vibhooti ji is the first female President of a Hindu Mandir in UK. She has been part of Shree Sanatan Mandir since her childhood and been a participant and a karyakarta/ sanchalak of Shishu Kunj activities. Having been through the Shishu Kunj process she has moved onto the Management committee of the Mandir.

The youth activities for the children at Shree Sanatan Mandir Leicester really began almost 50 years ago. But the roots stem way back before then. The way that Shishu Kunj came to Leicester from East Africa is a story in itself.

Shishu Kunj literally translates as Garden of Children; and in a garden, the flowers are not all the same, they're all very different and they have different fragrances and this is what Shishu Kunj was all about. It was about tapping into the children's different interests; so, the activities that actually took place in Shishu Kunj were things like sports, Indian sports or storytelling, traditional Indian games and drama. Children love to act out and impersonate so this was a lovely way to engage children. There were also sessions where children, would learn how to self-control and also become disciplined perhaps through yoga instruction or exercises as well as sessions about Dharma and Ethics, prayers, etc. And one thing that was typical of the Shishu Kunj activities in Leicester, when they were brought from East Africa to the UK was that they incorporated the Geeta classes, which were introduced also as part of Shishu Kunj so that the children would learn the Geeta in a formal way as well.

The way that we identified which Shishu Kunj or the youth activities would be really suitable to run at the Mandir was that we felt that when people move from East Africa to the UK, there was a strong need to keep up the culture in the new country and teach the children about the main leaders of Hindu culture and instil these values into the young budding people in the UK.

It was not all about just culture. We also wanted to instil life skills and help children to become good citizens and confident adults. So the activities that we had started organizing when we came to the UK, slightly changed in terms of having more games that would engage the children and puppet shows or as mentioned the Geeta classes. One of the games that we use is called Ram Raja and it's like Simon says and it gets the children going, at the same time as learning the culture.



We use the principles defined in the words SHISHU KUNJ to guide us and teach the children about the values we want to impart... Shishu Kunj Meaning:

- SHISHU** - Meaning Children in Sanskrit.
- HUMANITY** - Serve Humanity and honour all forms of life.
- INTEGRITY** - Be honest and truthful. Know your identity.
- SANATAN DHARMA** - The name of our religion. It is eternal and based on universal principles.
- HUMILITY** - Be humble and open minded.
- UNITY** - Be united as a family, community and whole of humanity.
- KINDNESS** - Be thoughtful and kind.
- UNDERSTANDING** - Understand yourself before you try to understand others.
- NON-DISCRIMINATORY** - Do not discriminate or judge others.
- JUSTICE** - Stand up for what you believe in and be fair.

Activities related to Age groups

At the same time as keeping fit over the years Shishu Kunj has developed so much in that we have classes that are broken up into different age groups, for example, we have the 5 and under class, the 6 to 7 group and then the 8 to 10 group. The fourth category is the children aged over 10.

It is difficult to keep teenagers and youngsters in a Mandir. So although traditionally Shishu Kunj was about 5 to 24 year-olds altogether, what we realized was that it was very important to have age specific activities. So, the younger ones would learn things like, songs or rhymes, little short prayers and then we would take that further to develop stories or puppet shows that I mentioned earlier. For the older groups we hold discussions sessions and also getting the children to take the lead.

Providing opportunities for young people

Basically Shishu Kunj has given the youngsters lots of opportunities such as volunteering themselves, carrying out their Duke of Edinburgh award activities, developing into learning Hinduism at a formal level, GCSE and A-level classes.

We also set up another group, called Sanatan Youth Forum where children were able to discuss issues that were concerning them and thereafter start getting involved in the Mandirs activities at a management level. That is where I have started as a young leader of Shishu Kunj activities.

I had the opportunity to be elected on to the management committee; initially as an assistant secretary for many years and thereafter as president for the last seven years. My aim has always been to try and promote as many youngsters as I can on to the management committee. I hope that future committees will be able to reserve at least a couple of places on the management committee for youth to lead the activities by the youths for the youths.

Thank you.



Balagokulam Activities in UK

Falguni Bhatt

Falguni ji Bhatt is currently the National Coordinator for Balagokulam UK. She has been involved with Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh (UK) for over 15 years.

Namaste everyone. Today, I'll be speaking on behalf of Balagokulam UK, an organization which was started over 12 years ago.

As we know Gokulam is the place where our divine Lord Krishna was brought up, and this is what we recognize as well for our children. We want them to have this beautiful environment for growing up so they can see the Divinity in themselves as well.

The whole idea of Balagokulam, when it was formed back in 2008, was to actually have the young children and their parents connect with their culture. There does seem to be the gap where a lot of the young parents don't actually know enough about their Dharma to actually teach their children. Where Balagokulam is enabled the parents actually come along with their children to appreciate the Hindu cultural roots, learn values in an enjoyable manner, and make wonderful friends. Our activities are focussed on three themes of Sewa, Sanskar and Sanghathan.

Our aim is to facilitate children to appreciate, participate, learn, and practice the Hindu way of life, to instil pride and confidence about their identity, develop social awareness and universal values amongst children and ultimately have fun.

Regular weekly activity

Our regular sessions are usually once a week and we have all sorts of different activities during the weekly sessions. We do a lot of Indian khel and all the khel that we do actually have some sort of value in there. Values such as honesty, about team building or sometimes survival of the fittest, how to survive in difficult environment and a lot of soft skills being taught. Then we have the

physical aspects like yoga, and other physical activities that we do as well with the children. We also do a lot of the cultural activities to teach them to be proud of our history and culture, to know and understand about our festivals. If there is a Dharmic story, then we have a fun way of doing it, whether it's a role play, whether it's just through storytellers or other engaging ways. We want them to learn about Shlokas and mantras so the emphasis is on learning different geet and bhajans. We also use quizzes and mental games to get educational ideas across. Finally, one of the key focuses we love to do is the Arts and Crafts. So what better way to learn about our beautiful and creative culture that we have, then through do these types of activities.

Developing Life Skills

Life Skills are the soft skills that we are talking about. It's not just about come and play or come and learn about our culture, but it's actually bigger than that. Tusharji spoke about this in the keynote speech; it is building that confidence in children and their communication skills because then you're not just communicating with fellow children, but also adults who will be present as well engaging with them in teamwork and public speaking. We have activities, every year where children are encouraged to pick a topic and/or are given a topic upon which they have to speak. Topics such as knowledge of our culture, heritage, and famous personalities such as Swami Vivekananda and it's really admirable to see what they pick up and how they deliver it - it's absolutely beautiful.

There's definitely a focus on health and fitness as every year we do Surya Namaskar Yagya in February as well as other general physical challenges.

Different Balagokulams might do different activities, according to their local requirements or get involved with national campaigns like Cycle for Sewa. The key thing is the universal values

that we all hold that we are so proud of and teaching that to the children as well.

How we operate

How we operate is weekly sessions and this is a parivar activity. We focus on the family. We encourage at least one parent to attend with every child and it's not that the child would not. It's not like the parent will do another activity. We actually ask the parent to get involved in the activity. I've spoken to many parents who've turned round and said, I never knew that Raksha Bandhan signifies this, that they maybe knew the cultural aspect of it, or really know the stories of some of the festivals and actually through learning themselves and delivering it to children, they have actually learnt a lot more. So the focus is developing not just the child but the parent as well giving them that confidence to actually take the sessions.

There's no administration fee, we don't ask for weekly donations. Only once a year at Guru Purnima we encourage children and parents to offer dakshina to our Guru the Bhagwa Dhwaj. Everyone can contribute their skills and knowledge and this is really key because, as a parent there will be one parent who's actually brilliant at arts and crafts. It could be another one who's good at Shloka. So at the end of the day, the key coordinators needs to identify what each parent could possibly bring to the Balagokulam.

So if you did want to start a Balagokulam at your Mandir, we would initially require a few dedicated coordinators and with the help from the Balagokulam local or national team, we can definitely support you in running some Balagokulam activity.

The age range is from 5 to 11 years old. Resources and ideas are available from the national Balagokulam team.

Currently, we have 26 regular Balagokulam centers across the country. Some of those are actually held at the Mandir. For example, Birmingham Rama Mandir, Lakshmi Narayan Mandir, Reading and Newcastle are examples that come to my mind.

Benefits of Balagokulam

Now some may argue that youngsters are not interested in Mandir activities, but in fact, I would argue otherwise, I think every parent out there wants their children to learn something, some Sanskar, and I think what better way than going to a Mandir to learn these Sanskars.

It is so important to have one of these activities at your Mandirs. Have any of the activities, whether its Chimaya Mission Bala Vihar, Shishu Kunj or Balagokulam - that's what that regular attendance connects the families to the Mandirs. Balagokulam works in collaboration with the Mandirs and I've just given some examples where its flourished and successfully engaged young families. Dhanyavad

"Let positive, strong, helpful thoughts enter into their minds from childhood"

- Swami Vivekananda.

WORKSHOPS | 11 – 18 YEARS

Teen focus at Preston Mandir

Krishna Mistry

Krishna Mistry is a pharmaceutical professional, currently supporting COVID activities. She has been involved with Preston Mandir from a young age and is a Youth Leader who works to bridge disconnections between the youth and the committee and support the mandir in its existing and new activities.

Jai Shri Krishna.

At the Gujarat Hindu Society Recreational and Community Centre (GHS) in Preston, youth activities are still taking place and have been sustained across a number of years. The GHS is a longstanding Mandir with over 50 years of experience in promoting Hindu dharma and Indian culture. The Mandir aims to empower the Hindu community living in Preston by catering to all generations. The Raas-Garba Competition is an activity that resonates well with the 11 - 18 year age group since the 1980s and is still an ongoing activity.

In affiliation with the Hindu Council of North UK, the Raas-Garba competition's aim was to learn a Gujarati cultural dance form and promote Gujarati heritage. In addition, skills such as teamwork and coaching were developed, coupled with meeting other like-minded Hindus and connecting with other competing Mandirs. Over the years, a healthy competition was born between northern Mandirs and brought a sense of strong representation to the GHS - 'Preston pride'. This so-called 'pride' has been instilled in all participating generations which drives the youth to have the 'want' to take lead and represent the Mandir. Nowadays, the youth are attracted by the competitive nature, team spirit, the music, building relationships with other competitors and the fast-paced dance form itself.

These key developments are only met due to the support from the GHS committee e.g.:

- Free use of the Mandir premises to practice
- Keeping the Mandir open until late solely for the participating team
- Helping the teams with making creative props
- Providing resources such as costumes
- Previous generations coming in to advise
- Taking a supportive interest by attending competitions
- Presenting the trophies at large events to show appreciation

A solid and trustworthy foundation has been built at the GHS and other activities have supported the teenagers wanting to feel involved. The Balkunj and Yuva Group caters for ages 4 - 11, the Raas-Garba Competition provides the 10/11 year olds of this group something to look forward to when they slowly transition from the early years. The children can play supporting participant roles in the raas-garba dances, therefore, integrating them into the next chapter of their involvement at the Mandir and hence, not feeling isolated because the Mandir has something for them as the next activity. GHS actively encourages involvement for children at a very early age, therefore allowing children to feel part of an organisation during their teenage years.

Challenges for Youth activities

However, this activity does not come without its challenges which may be felt by other organisations. At one end of the spectrum, all youth face pressures from an educational point of view where extracurricular activities can take up much of a young person's life. The youth may struggle to dedicate time to attend the Mandir and engage in religious activities because it may not feel as a priority. Parents lead demanding lives where aspects of life aren't as easy as they once were. As Hindu families progress, they may move away from the Mandir which was once the central point for families to socialise and

congregate. Logistically, this makes it hard for parents to commit their own time to bring their children to the Mandir. In relation to education, the young adults of the community face the prospect of university which may be in another part of the country. Youth may feel a disconnection to their Mandir once moving away and it is challenging engaging them should they return or reside in the city of their choice.

Youth Inclusion is key

With these challenges come actions for the future. The youth of today are much different to a youth brought up on the other side of the millennium. The youth are people who may have lost their Hindu identity by being brought up in a British/Indian culture and a Mandir could be the place that can help fill that void. Soft skills can be developed such as leadership, teamwork, time management, organisation via responsibilities passed onto young members by the executive committee. The youth are skilled and can feel a sense of belonging if Mandirs were inclusive and allow the youth to take opportunities e.g. Mandir maintenance, social media, communications and technological activities.

Making the Mandir current

Making the Mandir current and opening up discussions in a community that may have felt they couldn't talk is a way of engaging youth e.g. answering the 'whys' of why we perform a particular ritual, or why we must attend the Mandir for a certain event. Other topics such as the environment, mental health, race and identity, equality, health can be a great way of engaging youth because these are the issues the youth are interested in the current climate. Extracurricular activities that may or may not be provided by schools could be provided by Mandirs e.g. learning a musical instrument (tabla, harmonium classes), dharmic classes and education/CV/career advice.

The key to engaging youth is the relationships within a Mandir. Mandir Committees have a responsibility of influence on its members. It is not enough to gain a place on the committee and not exert any influence to gain positive impact for future the generations. A Mandir must feel welcome to all individuals, a simple greeting to a new young member can influence them to return to the Mandir and fill a void that they could be feeling. It is these small interactions that have great effects on a community and therefore, efforts must be made between committees and the youth.

Mandirs have many opportunities to capitalise on youth activities and bring back the next generation to sustain Hindu dharma, Indian culture and the Mandir. If they take up the opportunities there is great hope for the future of all Mandirs.



Balaji Youth Camp

Shri Venkateswara Balaji Temple

Akash Thota

Akash Thota is a 4th year dental student at Bristol and current president of the Hindu Society at Bristol. He has attended Balaji youth camp since the age of 7 leading the camp in 2018 and now a volunteer for the camp.

Namaste. I am going to talk about the Youth Camp that we run at the Balaji temple in Birmingham every year.

The camp is organized by youths for young people aged 8-22, with the biggest group being 11-18 age. It lasts a whole week and it runs at the Balaji Mandir.

It was started in 1988 with 16 children in the first year. Now there are nearly 200 children who take part. The main intention of the camp was to teach children about Hindu culture and Sanatan Dharma and this has remained the mainstay of the camp over the years. What the camp also promotes is the development of lifelong friendship.

Organisation of the camp

Many of the resources needed to run the camp are provided by the mandir. This establishes a strong connection between the temple and the campers. The young people themselves take the lead in organizing the content and activities of the week-long camp, nurturing organization, communication and teamwork skills. Activities include yoga in the morning, prayers and lectures then sports, bhajans and an evening of cultural activities. The success of the camp has meant that over the years the Mandir trustees have developed the Mandir with the camp in mind.

Progress and achievements

The camp has grown substantially from a small gathering of youths at a house over the weekend

at the beginning to a nationally recognized camp with youths coming from all over the country.

Every year we grow and get better! Giving young people the responsibilities and the opportunities at young age has enabled the camp to grow with new ideas every year. Behind the scenes the support and guidance of adult volunteers is vital for success in ensuring the knowledge and passion for our religion and culture is carried by the next generation of potential leaders.

Opportunities for the future

The next stage as I see it is making sure that youth engagement with the temple lasts more than just a week. Young people should be engaging with the Mandir wherever they live on a more regular basis than just the one week camp. Further activities could be organized by young people for other youths throughout the year for special religious days and festivals and to establish a community of young people within the Mandir from which future leaders can emerge.



Transformation of Bolton Mandir with youth involvement

Hirendra Patel - Veda Mandir Bolton

Hirendra Patel is a trustee for both the Bolton Interfaith Council as a Hindu representative, and a trustee for the Bolton Hindu Forum. He is also the coordinator for the Spiritual team at the VHP Mandir in Bolton where he oversees the sewa as well as the utsavs and other events that are held at the Mandir.

Namaste. I will talk about how we involved young people at the Veda Mandir in Bolton to transform the Mandir. I'll use the word RAM for Responsibility, Assistance, Materials to explain what we did.

Responsibility

Someone once said, "The need to be needed is one of our fundamental desires. It is an individual's sense of significance rooted in the sense of being part of a community or cause beyond themselves."

Before refurbishing

At our Mandir we used the lockdown as an opportunity to refurbish the Mandir. We established a team of young volunteers, and gave them the opportunity to get involved in redesigning the Mandir. We improved and renovated the Mandir with input from experienced and skilled young people. By involving the young people it gave them a sense of belonging and pride in their efforts and made the people feel that they were needed.

After Refurbishing

Assistance:

The next level of involvement for young people was with the Bhajan Mandal. We encouraged the young people to pursue an interest or passion in music and express this in the performances. The bhajan mandal facilitated the involvement and taught the youngsters to play musical instruments and sing. It brought the elderly and the youth together at the same time as passing on the faith, culture and traditional aspects of our Dharma. This gave them a sense of belonging and importance and enabled them to network with other musicians across the country.



Materials:

"Even the simplest tools can empower people to do great things"

The lockdown presented a fantastic opportunity to bring the Mandir into the modern age of communication. An example of this is the online streaming software facility that was introduced. Working with the Mandir audio visual team, this was managed by the youngsters as something that was naturally much easier for them.

The regular programme of broadcasts created a more professional outlook for the Mandir, kept the community connected with the Mandir and at the same time increased the reach to a wider audience of Hindus. The young people felt empowered by the use of these new online tools and skills they needed to develop and the involvement of young people also appealed to a younger audience than would normally have been the case.

Summary

Overall involving young people in the Veda Mandir has been very successful. It has created something that is sustainable, and will keep youth involved in the future. It has created a greater sense of the community in Bolton with an inclusive and welcoming environment with the greatest benefit for the Mandir itself. Young people are now involved in many other areas of the running of a successful Mandir.



WORKSHOPS | 18 – 25 YEARS

Facilitating the Mandir - Student Connection

Sharada Kamle - Gita Bhavan Mandir, Manchester

Sharada graduated in Religion and Social Anthropology from University of Manchester, with special interest in Hinduism and Indian culture. She is also GCSE Hinduism teacher at VOICE since last four years.

Namaste. I'm going to talk about the challenges faced by students when they go to university and how that affects their relationship with Mandirs.

I think the first few weeks when you go to a new city or university are very busy, very hectic. You have left home, packed all your stuff and are looking to settle into a new home, which is usually just a new room and sharing facilities with other students.

Adjusting to a new life

After you unpack everything you start adjusting a new life. The first thing that you probably deal with is you are cooking meals for yourself, because there is no mum and your dad's taxi is not there to take you places. So if you want to get to anywhere at all in the city you have to manage that on your own. Adjusting with roommates is usually a one of the toughest challenges and often not discussed. It can be quite stressful at the beginning because you are adjusting to new people, strangers you are going to be sharing the kitchen and/or bathroom with.

On top of that, of course you are getting to know the city and the university. In a large university it can be a challenge just trying to find the first lecture room. So these are some of the first few hurdles that you face.

Pressures of academic work load

The first couple of weeks are usually called the Fresher's week which means that you won't have lectures or any kind of studying at that point in time. It's just for the students to get used to the university however when the lectures start, work and long days and hectic schedules do hit you

quite hard. Often people think that University is flexible but it's not, especially in the first year or so. You have long hectic days with lectures, maybe you have couple of lectures back to back and that's four hours straight away. There is a pile of work; you're given essays almost every week. There's no getting away from them - 500 Words 1000 words, 2000 words, and there's not just one essay every week, but a few essays every week. So some students work all night at the library studying and finishing assignments then go to the lecture in the morning. So it can be quite stressful and it takes a toll on your body clock as well.

Financial Pressure

I think managing money is an eye-opener and a bit of a shock as well. I remember when I started University, one of the first things I realized is that on the campus even if I bought just one coffee every day, by the end of the month, I had spent a fortune just on coffee not even including any lunch. So for this reason many students do take on part-time jobs to earn extra cash even though a lot of parents provide financial support to their children. They then have to balance the part-time job and the studies as well.

Homesickness & Isolation

I think one of the things that is not talked about is that of homesickness and isolation. Your first couple of months are all busy, every day something is going on. There's so many things that you don't really stop to think. But as you start to settle into a routine, I think one of the first things that actually hit you really hard is the homesickness and isolation that comes with it because all the family support systems and the friends that you had suddenly are not there and it's just an empty void. That void can mean that you often feel alone or isolated and this creates vulnerability, which means that students will often seek companionship from new or unknown people, and that can be quite dangerous.

Students can easily become targets for grooming and conversion to other religions or fall into bad company.

Social & Peer Pressures

Further, social and peer group pressures can lead to experimenting, and exploring things in trying to understand adult life. And this can create dilemmas or other friction between what they've been brought up with and what they do right now. This can sometimes lead to them being a little uncomfortable about going to Mandirs.

So I think that students in general have many things going on in their lives at university and often end up getting detached, not just from the families and temple but also from their culture and Hindu religion as a whole.

I think that the new found freedom that students tend to have while at university leads them to making decisions which sometimes conflict with their cultural upbringing. Your priorities really change quickly. I think the top priorities of students is studying, socializing, make new friends and to their career. So going to the Mandir falls down the list of priorities. If Mandirs can help students in any way whilst they are at university it may be mutually beneficial for both the students as well as the Mandir.



NHSF connection with Mandirs

Deepika Nandha - NHSF

Deepika Nandha is currently one of National General Secretaries of the National Hindu Students Forum UK (NHSF), which is a largest Hindu student movement outside of Bharat reaching approximately 10,000 students annually to his activities. A graduate of biochemistry from the University of Sheffield. Deepika works with a large Optician chain as a contact lens advisor and is currently based in Nottingham.

Namaste, everyone. I think Sharada ji our previous presenter laid out quite nicely in the number of different challenges that students face when they go to university. They are in an unfamiliar location and we want to make sure that something that they connect to is their Dharma, their culture, and that's something they retain, even though they are far away from home. Now some of the logistical reasons with all that's going on, whether it's study, or hobbies or sports, at university, it's a whole new experience. So some of the reasons for not going to the Mandir are:

- may be its not a top priority for them, or
- they may be struggling with their studies and balancing everything. So it wouldn't be the first place that they would go to
- it is perhaps it's too far from the local Mandir and public transport is not as convenient
- perhaps they have not made many friends yet, and they don't feel comfortable going to the Mandir alone

I think something to note here is that students will also come from a wide range of backgrounds and experiences as well. Some may have attended the local Mandir weekly from a young age and participated in kirtan. Others may have only attended a Mandir with their family when there's a big utsav taking place, or maybe someone doesn't have a Mandir in the locality at all. So how do we engage these youth in particular and make them feel welcomed and show them that they have a place to go to their home away from home at university.





Now with all these personal challenges we also need to recognize that it's important to keep our youth connected as well. So this is where NHSF plays a part for students on campus in particular. NHSF is a platform that keeps University students connected to Hindu Dharma when they may be far from the local Mandir in particular.

This is just a snapshot of all the university societies currently across different zones in England. So we can see that there's an average of twelve University Hindu societies per zone at a number of different cities across the UK. This means that there are young people present at these locations to be engaged and this is a great opportunity for university Hindu Society to connect with Mandirs in particular.

Hindu societies at a campus level will carry out a number of cultural events and activities for the students. These events explore and promote the Hindu identity whether it's through sewa, whether it's through a focus on ahimsa, whether it's learning more about our Dharma and Itihaas and this may take place through Aartis or sewa days or other cultural programmes.

How University Hindu societies can contribute to our local Mandirs?

One example of how they are welcomed when students join a Hindu Society is a meet and greet. This is something where they are introduced to when activities take place on campuses and they are introduced to the local Mandir here – e.g. where can they find the local Mandir, how can they get there etc. This is something that NHSF Hindu societies mention. As students speak to each other, they'll feel that connection, that they have similarities, and if that connection is there, then they are more likely to engage in activities and then contribute or have the confidence to contribute to the wider samaj.

A great example of how this takes place and how our students are welcomed in particular, is at Manchester Hindu society and Gita Bhavan Mandir in Manchester who host a welcome dinner for students every year. Over dinner they will have conversations about their backgrounds, their personal lives and they'll get an understanding of what the Mandir does, what Mandir activities take place. This just makes a way for there to be regular touchpoints throughout the year, whether it's attending the Mandir for Maha Shivaratri, whether it's bringing their skills, where the students can bring their musical instruments to play and contribute in that way.

Another example is an event called Jagruti, which is a bhakti event where a hundred and one Chalisas are sung at Mandirs across the UK. In that process, what happens is that our youth are empowered to lead sessions develop skills like public speaking and leadership, and not only engaging the local youth by inspiring them, but also getting to know the local community in particular.

These are just a couple of ways that NHSF Hindu societies can bring the youth to the Mandir in particular. NHSF is growing and they're always going to be more Hindu societies that hopefully arise in different parts of the UK in particular. We want our students to continue to engage with the Mandirs because we recognize that is very, very important. Mandirs are an essential part of our society, the heart of our community, our sanskriti, our heritage, and culture. So we especially want to inform you that if any NHSF Hindu societies approach you that we would love if you welcome them with open arms to make sure that they can then contribute to their local community as well, and develop the youngsters there. One idea that comes to mind is perhaps we could come to Mandirs and speak to the individuals or youngsters that are thinking about University and talk about, how can we sustain our values and traditions at University and beyond. Can we have those communications connections, taking place right at the start?

But of course we would love to hear more from you as well. If there are any thoughts or ideas that come to mind please reach out to us. We would love for students to continue to engage with Mandirs in particular. Thank you.

Mandir Connection after University

Meena Ashworth – Shri Venkateshwar Balaji Temple , Birmingham

Meena ji is associated with Venkateshwar Balaji Mandir since its inception. She is currently a volunteer in the Youth section particularly helping and organizing the Youth Camp that is held twice a year. She studied medicine at King's College Hospital and is currently a Paediatric Consultant at Luton and Dunstable hospital.

Namaste everyone.

I've been involved with the Balaji Temple in Birmingham all my life mainly because both my parents were active key volunteers in building the Temple. Even before the temple was built, I remember my childhood spending pretty much every weekend and also holidays at the Geeta Bhavan Mandir in Birmingham doing other religious or spiritual activities. and also as a young teenager myself, my brother and a few of us got together and decided that it would be a good idea to meet up during the summer holidays and learn a little bit about Hinduism and our culture. That is when the Balaji Youth Camp actually started over 30 years ago in our house with only 10 children and it's grown over the last 33 years into massive event with over 150 children at each camp.

Disengagement and reengagement over time

But as the first speaker in this workshop mentioned that actually when I went to university things changed a lot. From going to the temple every week I hardly went back to the temple in Birmingham. I only went for key festivals or key events at the temple and became very disengaged and this persisted even when I became a junior doctor there was this disconnection for a number of years. It was only actually in my early 30s when I actually thought I would really like to get re-engaged. I wanted to give something back to the temple, particularly as I had benefited hugely as a young person.

In those days, the temple used to have weekends where a group of the trustees, key volunteers

and youths would get together and brainstorm about the vision of the temple for the next five to ten years. And I remember going to one of these and joining youth section of that workshop and actually finally feeling that I had found my niche. I knew what I could do and I knew something that I could actually positively give back to the temple and it was after that, that I took over organizing the youth camp for a number of years. Now I help as a volunteer in organizing and running the camps.

I just wanted to share a few thoughts about how I think temples can really attract young people of ages of 20s to early 30s back to the Mandir. I think we need to find areas of interest that a young person can really relate to that they perhaps, feel passionate about and also that they feel that they are actually going to be useful to the Mandir. I think that although rituals play a massive part in Mandirs activity, that shouldn't be the only activity that Mandirs do. I feel that temples really need to be a beacon, a shining example to the congregation such that any activities that the temples practice potentially the congregation may follow.

Three areas of Youth involvement

I feel the three key areas of how youth involvement can be facilitated, is one to think about environmental issues, because young people are always very passionate about this. I can give an example that even in our youth camps, the youth had a workshop where they actually invited the trustees to come and attend. They presented a very powerful argument of trying to make the **Mandir more green and particularly making it plastic free.** The Balaji Temple has thousands of devotees that come every weekend where they're given Prasadam in a plastic non-recyclable plate. The youths were actually able to persuade the trustees that they needed to make this big change and although it took a couple of years that change happened. It made me feel that actually youths have a very powerful voice and that they can actually make big changes in how temples are run.

So the second key area, I think, is with regard to **sewa**. Now on a very personal level, I've been really inspired by how many Mandirs and charity organizations have really risen up during the Covid situation and been able to make and provide food for the needy and the homeless. If you look within that organization at who is actually driving it, who is actually doing it, it's mainly the youths that are doing the sewa.

The third area I think of involving youth is with regard to **education** and I know that in the keynote speech there was mention of the issue of education. If you think about it, in our current time Yoga, mindfulness, meditation etc. is really, very relevant today. And using the skill of youths, Mandirs can provide a really good education program, not just for youths, but for all the devotees that attend.

So I want to finish by thanking all the young volunteers that have come up with this concept of the conference because I really think it not only begins the dialogue between the trustees, the elders and the young people, but I think it also builds relationship between different organizations that we can learn from each other. I have already got ideas just from hearing the two speakers but not only that from the keynote speaker. It will help build those bridges and for us to work together.

So thank you very much and namaste.



Concluding Address

Bharat Mistry – National Coordinator Hindu Mandir Network

I hope you enjoyed the workshops and hope they provided you with good ideas that can be implemented in our mandirs. I certainly learnt about the range of different activities that can be implemented... From the...

5 – 10 Group

Structured classes & activities of Chinmaya Mission with a portal of resources, childrens activities at Sanatan Mandir Leicester and Balagokulam activities at many mandirs across UK,

11-18 Group

Raas-Garba competition at Preston Mandir, week long camp at Balaji temple, and empowering young people at Bolton Mandir

18-25 Group

Keeping the connection with hosting dinners for university students at Gita Bhavan Manchester, the role of Mandirs in shaping students landscape before and during university, and how pressures on the youth affect their involvement back in the community.

Common Theme

There are some great activities at many Mandirs and we trust they will develop further and continue for the benefit those Mandirs.

In all the case study examples at the workshops there are some common themes.

Almost all of the activities discussed today were started 10-15 or more years ago and are continuing because of the efforts of dedicated volunteers and support of the Mandir committees. They are not something that can be developed in short term.

Challenges & Opportunities

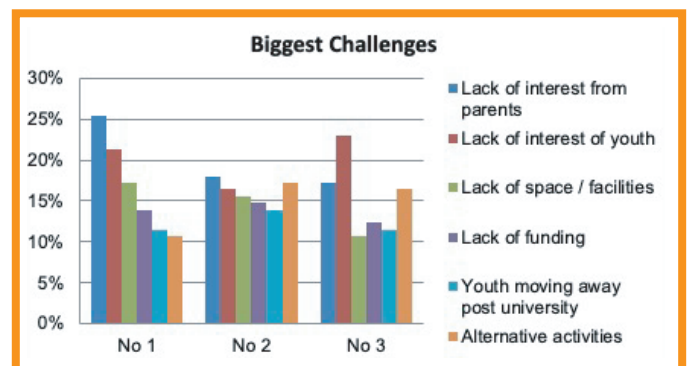
The Hindu community and therefore the Mandirs in UK faces many challenges. However these challenges also provide opportunities (more on that later).

The survey we did as part of the registration highlighted some of the challenges.

Youth representation on Mandir committees. Its good to see that more than half of the Mandirs have Youth representation on the committee. The challenge is for the remaining 41% as well as for the mandirs who are not here today to have youth representation on their committees.

Biggest Challenges with Youth engagement

This result was a bit surprising for me – Just focusing at the top 2 challenges – The lack of interest from parents and youth were the number 1 challenge for nearly half of the mandirs. Lack of space and facilities is also a big concern.





Let us look at possible reasons for these challenges being so high.

We begin to lose the connection with young people from around age 11-12 when they go to secondary school. Peer pressure, pressure to achieve good grades as well as physical development changes mean there are lots of changes in a young person's life.

This loss of connection continues and increases as they go to university or start their adult life.

A bigger challenge for Hindu and wider Indian community is the loss of connection with 2nd and 3rd generation parents and families. Living in UK is much different compared to our lives in India or Africa. (As explained in one of the survey feedback) The family unit is smaller, parents have to work hard and long hours to meet the financial commitments and demands of modern lifestyle means that children often do not benefit from the guidance and support from the family elders or the community environment available in Mandirs. Also as Hindus typically work hard and do well they move further to better suburbs away from where the Mandirs have established some years ago. The Dharmic and cultural development of children seems to take a lower priority for parents.

On top of this the freedoms and flexibilities in how we follow our Dharma also means that if its not convenient we do not take the trouble to come to Mandir.

Further many of our pujaris are not able to explain our dharma to children and families brought up here in the UK in a language and format that is appropriate for our environment. The modern generation of young people have different needs and pressures living in the west and we need to understand those and find solutions to keep them connected.

The result is that Hindu children lose their Hindu identity and become easy targets for grooming and conversion to other faiths.

Opportunities

So how do we overcome these challenges. Every challenge is an opportunity to do things differently or better.

Yes we can continue with the regular satsang, bhajan, bhojan type karyakrams for the elders. Indeed they need to continue for the well-being of our elders. But what happens when the next generation of parents retire and they have not been used to coming to the Mandirs? We as Mandir Executives and leaders have to think ahead 5-10 years and invest in our youth.

Investment in Youth

Swami Vivekananda said *"My faith is in the younger generation, the modern generation – Out of them will come my workers. They will work out the whole problem, like lions."*

Investment in our youth is not easy. Some of the most important facets of youth involvement are

- a) respect
- b) motivation
- c) mentoring
- d) interaction/communication
- e) ownership.

Can we think about ..

- A. Get a youth activity representative on Mandir committee
- B. Provide funding, premises and resources to them.
- C. Let them make plans and execute.
- D. Let them represent Mandir at certain levels.

We have to involve the youth (22-40 age range) in running activities at our Mandirs and enable them to make decisions and have a voice on the committee.

Well organised youth activities for the different age groups can be self-perpetuating over time as younger children come in and follow through the different ages constantly involved with the Mandirs over the changing generations.

The easiest starting point is with the very young primary age children, involving parents in the activities, and get the basic grounding of Hindu dharma right. Activities need to be attractive, structured and fun to ensure children want to keep coming back as illustrated by Bal Vihar and Balagokulum activities. If our Mandir has facilities, can we provide them free of charge for the youth activities? Can we get support from organisations such as Chimaya Mission, Balagokulum or other mandirs where successful youth activities are run?

At the next age range activities that involve sports, music, dance, alongside the Dharmic and religious learning etc. but involving the youngsters in the organisation and planning will keep them involved as well as teaching them valuable life skills such as leadership and how to organise. As they develop they can even help in running activities for the younger age range. In organising these activities, the focus and priority has to be on the needs of the youngsters.

Use of Technology

The Covid pandemic has opened up lots of opportunities to keep the connection with Mandirs. The technology could be used to overcome some of the challenges of distance and having to travel to the physical Mandir. It is uncertain how things will be once the lockdown eases completely however we need to think about how to take advantage of the technology and create well organised progressive activities that will benefit the Mandir and the wider Hindu community.

I hope this conference has given you good ideas and perhaps some action points to involve young people (and their parents) in Mandirs.

I conclude my address with this wonderful quote from Swami Chinmayananda.

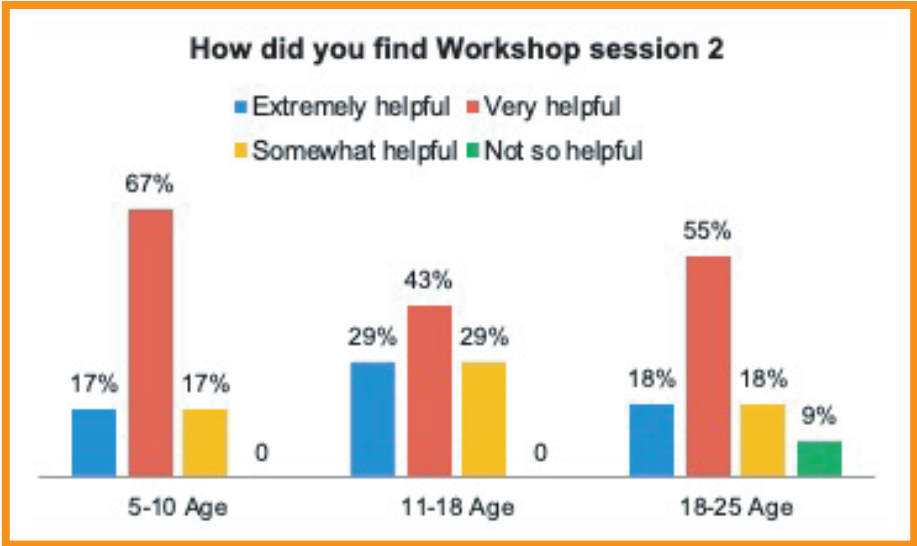
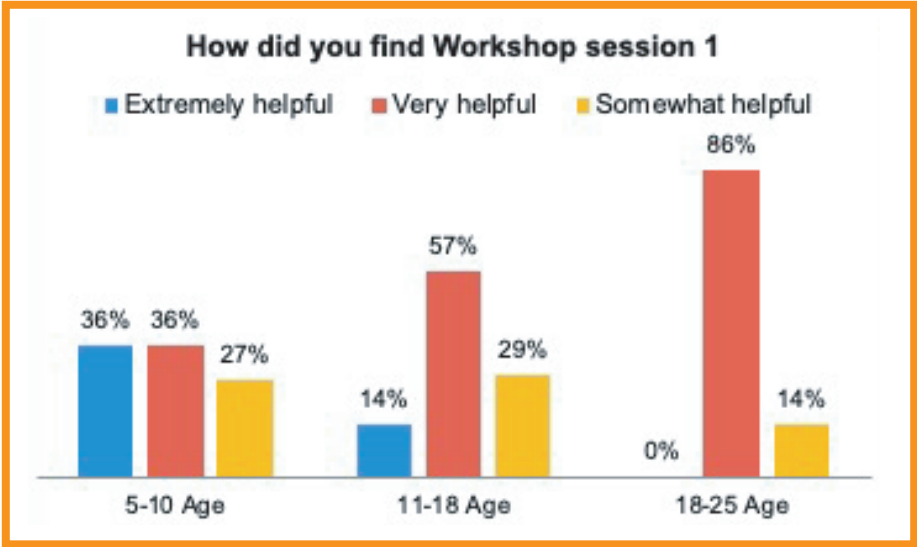
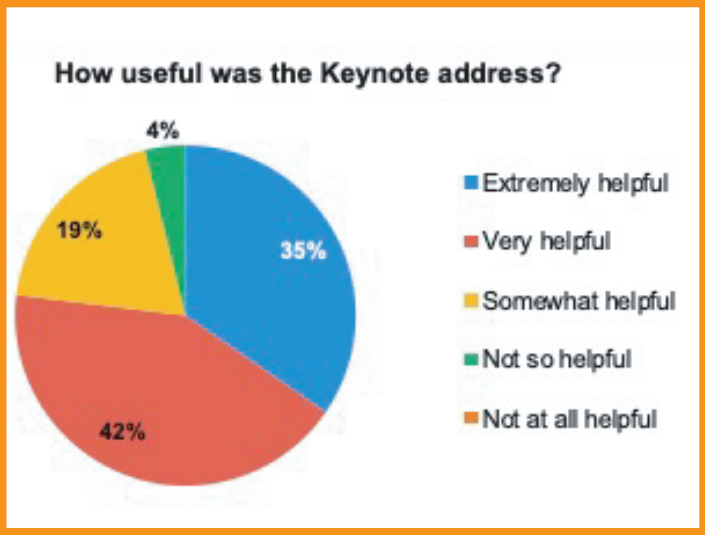
"Children are lamps to be lit, not vessels to be filled".

Let us go away and think about how we can light those lamps to make our Mandirs bright.

Dhanyawad.



Post Event Feedback



Event Feedback Comments

What do you like the most about the event?

"Learning what other temples have done to engage their youth / children, their experiences."

Dr Jayashree Venkatraman, Director, Aberdeen Hindu Temple

"I liked the workshops, really learnt lots from the speakers and how to engage the youth. I got so many tips so thank you. Very inspiring."

Chameli Meir, Youth helper, London Sevashram Sangha

"Well organised, analysis of feedback from attendees. Ideas on youth engagement."

Ajay Kotecha, Trustee, Anoopam Mission Swaminarayan Mandir

"The event provided some good ideas for the activities we are trying to implement for our mandir children"

Raj Dattani, Youth Activities Lead, Gunatit Jyot

What is(/are) the most useful information you learned that can be used in your mandir?

"Children and youths should be linked to mandir at an early age"

Kantibhai C Mistry, Gen. Secretary, Shree Bharatiya Mandal Indian Association - (Tameside)

"Active engagement and involvement of the youth is vital."

Dr G L Bhan, Senior Adviser, Geeta Bhawan Hindu Temple Manchester

"Ideas on projects that may help engage youths. Also engagement of local"

Ajay Kotecha, Trustee, Anoopam Mission Swaminarayan Mandir

"Tips on how to engage the youth, and activities we could use. Our Mandir really needs to engage the youth."

Chameli Meir, Youth helper, London Sevashram Sangha

"Mandir committee and youth activity goals need to be aligned to make events successful"

Hena Hirani , Shri Vallabh Nidhi Mandir, Wembley

Information Sources

Presenter Organisation Contacts

Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh (UK)

Balagokulam



Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh (UK)

Email: BG@hssuk.org

Web: www.hssuk.org/bg



Bal Vihar - Chinmaya Mission UK

Email: info@chinmayauk.org

Web: www.chinmayauk.org



Gujrat Hindu Society - Preston

Email: admin@ghspreston.co.uk

Web: www.ghspreston.co.uk



Shri Venkateshwara Balaji Temple UK

Email: temple@venkateswara.org.uk

Web: www.venkateswara.org.uk



Shree Sanatan Mandir Leicester Shishukunj

Email: info@shishukunjleicester.ac.uk

Web: www.shishukunjleicester.com



Veda Mandir - VHP (UK) Bolton

www.facebook.com/VHPBolton



NATIONAL HINDU
STUDENTS' FORUM (UK)

National Hindu Students Forum UK

Web: www.nhsf.org.uk

Email: info@nhsf.org.uk

Facebook: www.facebook.com/NHSF.UK

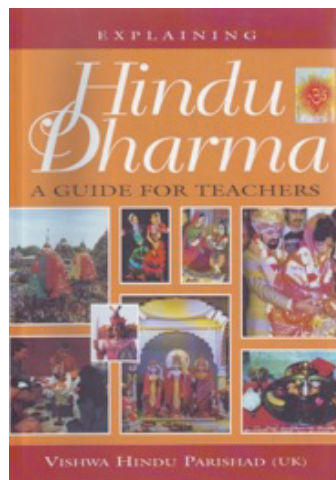
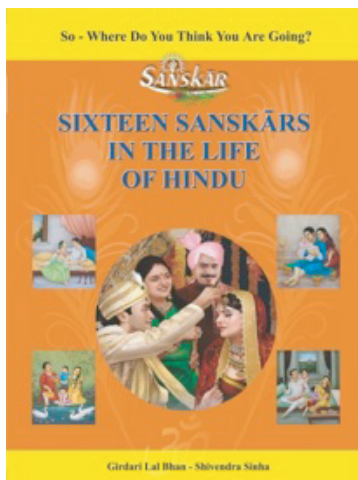
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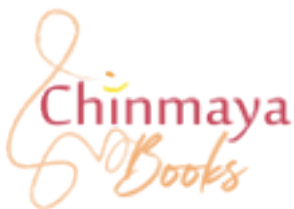
Resources Highlighted

Hindu Bookshops

You can purchase books on Hindu dharma and India from a number of sources...



Hindu Sahitya Kendra
46-48 Loughborough Road,
Leicester,
LE4 5LD
www.hindubookshop.com



Chinmaya Books
2 Egerton Gardens,
London, NW4 4BA
www.chinmayabooks.com

BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir
Neasden,
London,
NW10 8HW
www.londonmandir.baps.org/the-haveli/souvenir-shop/

Hindu Dharma Exhibition

Are you struggling to inform visitors to your Mandir about Hindu Dharma?



The Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh (UK)'s exhibition on Hindu dharma covers a variety of topics:

- The science behind Hindu rituals
- Great personalities
- Scientific discoveries and inventions
- Vedic mathematics
- Indian games and sports

For details and availability of the exhibition please contact through Hindu Mandir Network
Email: info.hmuk@gmail.com

Chaplaincy Guide & VOICE

The following two resources are available on line.
Please follow the relevant link:-

Hindu Chaplaincy Guide published by VHP (UK).
This guide offers Hindu faith specific material to help the existing and future volunteers who are willing to do this noble task of helping patients and their families.

<http://vhp.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/chaplaincy-guide.pdf>

VOICE

Information about online GCSE course on Hinduism offered by VOICE (an educational project of VHP (UK). Full details can be found on <http://voiceculture.org/home>

