

## **Report on the Fourth Hindu Mandir Exec. Conference Padma Kuppa, Troy, MI**

This fourth conference, organized by members of VHP-America, was attended by over 250 delegates from about 115 temples who all came to Linthicum MD on Sept. 11-13.

The website is here <http://mandirsangam.vhp-america.org/> and will soon have information from the presentations and possibly videos of them as well. <http://mandirsangam.vhp-america.org/> This year's conference was focused on engaging youth in mandirs, and began with deep prajwalan by MI representatives (myself and Sri Vishnubhai Patel who came as a delegate from the Flint Paschima Kasi Temple), and a couple of critical presentations. One was by Shivi Chandra, who is a junior at John's Hopkins Univ. and affiliated with Gayatri Parivar. She spoke about youth and their involvement in mandirs being more social and less spiritual, as illustrated by a couple of her slides. She compared a Hindu student group's campus flier that invited people to aarthi where there would be free dunkin donuts and coffee, with a Christian flier that asked "do you make time in your life for god?" And she quoted a Hindu student's response to what are some significant aspects of the Hindu faith, that "we have garbha and bhangra!" Sri Swami Mukundananda senior disciple of Jagadguru Kripalu maharaj of JKYog, spoke to the application of management principles to mandir management. He is an IIT and IIM grad, who said management is maya, that we should consider both paravidya (spiritual) and aparavidya (material) matters in temple management. He spoke of Kirthan, Shraavan, Smaran and is the first one who convinced me that we should have (Sunday) prasad without strings attached. He also recommended that we distribute copies of arthi when we sing it, that we invest in expansions, and establish a Hindu Credit Union. Again, his powerpoint, like Shivi's and many others' who were part of the conference, is worth being presented to the entire Temple community.

The opening speaker on Saturday was Sri Dayananda Saraswathi who spoke of many things and was phenomenally inspiring, and reminded me of my father. Some key points from his presentation were: that mandirs are forms of passing tradition, our ancestors paid taxes to stay Hindu, that forms of passing the tradition are very important, that body is a moving temple, and that we have to understand, not just practice the form. On engaging the youth to be active in mandirs, he said that teaching our tradition to them is a responsibility and that we should not worry about the youth becoming involved, but that we as Temple execs and leaders need to change ourselves. In yet another session, someone pointed out that many churches were sold to temples, and as we are proliferating the structures and not able to engage the next generation, asked if will temples be sold in 30 years in a similar way. A key speaker on Saturday morning was Anju Bhargava, on the President's Council of Faith Based and Neighborhood Partnerships, who along with several people across country, including myself (I was recommended to her by folks at Harvard University who know of my outreach work on behalf of the Hindu community), has formed the Hindu American Seva Charities as a nonprofit. The mission of HASC is here, <http://www.hinduamericanseva.org/home>, and Anju spoke to the ongoing Seva projects and partnerships we have around the country, and

collecting the Hindu American service projects into a database to leverage a Hindu voice at the table.

Saturday afternoon's concurrent workshop sessions included a youth breakout session with no "adults," a session on are we inward looking in which I was a panelist, management and administration of mandirs, and interracial marriages. I had been a panelist and moderator at last year's conference in MI on interfaith issues and the Outreach Committee I chair is organizing an Interfaith Family Forum on Nov. 8, so I was disappointed that I could not attend the interracial marriage session. I believe that discussions got a bit heated and there were some things I heard from several youth - who I was able to connect with quite well due to my upbringing in the US - which were quite illuminating.

From the summary of workshop sessions, we came up with several action items, which were sent as part of a powerpoint to the attendees (I believe that these will be available for download from the website soon, otherwise I will send it out to you to share with Board of Trustees and Exec./Working Committees of our Temple). Some of these are: to provide premarital counseling to interfaith couples, to contact Dr. Bapineedu Kuchipudi with issues related to priests, that we should draft a letter regarding dietary restraints for Hindus that can be used by temples to provide to local public schools, to create a list of all really successful projects that are going on at specific temples around the country (eg., the Siva Vishnu Temple in MD provides food to 600 homeless people weekly and have a significant volunteer pool to support this activity). Specifically from the youth session, it was determined that in order to retain/engage youth, we need to have them become leaders in temple activities, not participants, that we need to have seva (to the community we live in) as a critical component of mandir activities, and that we should create a youth network.

One of Sunday morning's sessions was related to the representation of Hinduism in the media and how it is important for us to become involved to correct these. Both USINPAC ([usinpac.com](http://usinpac.com)) and HAF ([hafsite.org](http://hafsite.org)) were there to do presentations, USINPAC being a political action committee for Indian Americans, and Hindu American Foundation is an non profit org advocating for American Hindus, including human rights issues for Hindus around the world impacted by America's policies, and working with media, government and think tanks to better represent the Hindu community. The American Jewish Committee's local representatives, a Board member, the Director of the Baltimore chapter, and the staff member on Indo-Jewish Relations were a panel on Sunday morning as well. While all three spoke to our common ground and how we should build partnerships between Hindu and Jewish communities around the country, Nissim Reuben was quite memorable as he is a Indian-born and raised Jewish person. He said that India has been hospitable to all faith communities because of our principle to treat guest as god, athithi devo bhava.

Reporting on action items from past mandir conferences, there were a few significant items: the production of an antyeshti samskara book, the initiative taken by several mandir executives to create a temple management software application, called HOMA, and a health care pool for temple employees (priests and staff). I have provided the relevant info to the appropriate people - e.g, Anand and his tech team will investigate the HOMA software, Dr. Saini has the Healthcare pool

brochure, etc. Dr. Vishnubhai Patel also gave me a free reign to buy books for the Bharatiya Temple which I did (asking me to buy books can be a dangerous thing) and have handed over to Shan Shah, Chair of the Library Committee. One book I highly recommend that everyone (at least those on BOT/EC/WC) take a look at is *Invading the Sacred, an Analysis of Hinduism studies in North America*. This is one of the challenges we have as a faith community - overcoming what is presented to our youth who take courses in college about Hinduism from non practitioners who often have misconceptions, an "outsider" perspective on our faith, some of whom look down on our practices - particularly because they may be looking at some remote or outdated beliefs.

I was honored and happy to be the Bharatiya Temple's representative, and very glad that the organizers asked me to present a topic this year also. Next year's conference will be hosted by the Meenakshi Temple and folks in Texas (one of the key people there is my husband's cousin, Sharma Tadepalli). I REALLY URGE our temple to send at least two delegates and to find ways to get the other temples in MI to be part of this annual gathering. I made several new friends, such as a friend from Grand Rapids MI who has the title Outreach Minister from the Temple Board, named Fred Stella, who was first exposed to Hinduism in Detroit at the ISKCON Temple as a youth. He is a practicing Hindu and is president of the Grand Rapids Interfaith Association, and we have already begun corresponding on our respective interfaith initiatives and how we can create synergy. It would be really beneficial to send others to have this experience as well.

Sorry that this is so long, but trying to encapsulate all that I learned and experienced at the conference in a couple of paragraphs is impossible. I know this may be quite different from someone else's report, because each of us may see and hear the same things differently and give importance to various aspects based on our unique perspectives.

Please feel free to use any part of this as my report to the various committees/boards, and please let me know if you have any questions. If you want to see my essay on last year's conference, please see this link:

<http://padmakuppa.blogspot.com/2009/02/reflecting-on-reflection.html>

Thank you,  
Padma