

CIVICS, CULTURE & COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Shaanti Bhavan Mandir:

First Hindu Temple in the Nation to Declare Itself a Sanctuary

On Sunday March 19th, the Shaanti Bhavan Mandir announced its decision to become the first Hindu temple in the country to declare itself a Sanctuary and join the growing nationwide Sanctuary movement for immigrant rights.

Since the presidential election and the subsequent onslaught of anti-immigrant policies and actions, the word 'sanctuary' is something that many local governments, community-based organizations, and faith institutions across the country have used. What exactly does it mean? For city governments, being a 'sanctuary' typically means following certain procedures to protect undocumented immigrants, including prohibiting police departments from asking about a person's immigration status. Oftentimes, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) relies on local authorities to help enforce federal immigration laws. Many jurisdictions around the country have passed policies to stop the federal government from co-opting local resources (like the NYPD, for example) to enforce immigration law. These localities have become known as "sanctuary cities." New York City is one such sanctuary city.

What does being a sanctuary mean for a house of worship? It can mean many different things. For some, it is about making physical sanctuary, and offering emergency shelter to people in crisis. For some it means symbolic sanctuary: taking a strong position on immigrant rights, and being a resource to congregants in fear and danger of deportation. Shaanti Bhavan Mandir's spiritual leader, Pandit Manoj Jadubans, considers "sanctuary" to be nothing other than "manav seva" or service of mankind. Aptly summarizing the work of the Mandir, the

motto of its Naujawaan Mandalee Youth Group is a famous Satya Sai Baba quote: "The hands that serve are holier than the lips that pray."

During Sunday satsang, Pandit Manoj announced to the 100 devotees congregated at the temple that Shaanti Bhavan Mandir declares itself a Sanctuary. Pandit Manoj said, "My dear sisters and brothers, it gives me the greatest pleasure, this Sunday morning, the 19th of March, 2017, to announce publicly that the

hope this gets out to other Hindu temples – when these places can be established, remember a mandir (temple) is not just a place that we come and we pray. It goes beyond that. It's an institution for higher learning

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set upon us by the federal government, we will keep this city an open and welcoming city to immigrants, to everyone regardless of their

can."

Father Ruiz welcomed Shaanti Bhavan Mandir into the Sanctuary movement, "We (New Sanctuary Coa-



Immigration Know Your Rights Forum on March 18 at Richi Rich Palace. (Photo Credit: Hemma Kilawan)

Shaanti Bhavan Mandir has joined forces with Sadhana organization to declare ourselves the first Hindu temple that has become a sanctuary in the community."

He explained that he wanted all congregants, members of the public, and especially other temples to know that Shaanti Bhavan Mandir would be a sanctuary in the community in every sense of the word: both physical and symbolic. "There are people in the world today that are confused, they are scared, they feel threatened, and they don't know what to do, who to turn to, or where to go. And when a Hindu temple – and I

and we are learning how to allow this place to reach out to the public now. Without the people, the mandir cannot survive. What does the mandir do now to repay the public? You give them a shelter, a place where they can come and feel safe and secure and protected. And I am so happy to make this announcement here today."

Also present were AJ Yusuf, representing the Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs (MOIA), and Father Juan Carlos Ruiz, co-founder of the New Sanctuary Coalition. Mr. Yusuf stated, "Regardless of what sort of incursions are

religious denomination, sexual orientation, gender. These are New York values. We will uphold them regardless of what's going on in the federal government. And there's no other tangible representation of that than what happened here today at this mandir. This is the first act of its kind and we hope that this will be replicated elsewhere in other mandirs, mosques and churches. I cannot express to you how much this means to me as a DACA recipient. So thank you very much. Our office is behind you in whatever shape or form you need us to be and we will support you in whatever way we

On March 19, Pt. Manoj Jadubans announced that Shaanti Bhavan Mandir is a sanctuary temple.

lition) have about 150 communities of faith throughout New York that are standing up and saying no to the hate-filled rhetoric and policies that exclude and belittle our brothers and sisters, wherever they come from, whoever they are. I humbly welcome you as part of this network of solidarity, declaring this place, which already is a holy place, as a home for you. And I echo the same words all of you have been praying – that these (sanctuaries) will continue to grow and they will continue to elevate and emphasize who we really are."

Shaanti Bhavan Mandir has committed to making sure that everyone in the temple community knows that Pandit Manoj, his wife Ravina, and other temple leaders are available to help in a loving non-judgmental way if any of them are facing problems due to the current targeting of immigrants, undocumented people, etc., or any other crisis in their lives. The temple will listen to them, and with the support of Sadhana:



Coalition of Progressive Hindus (Sadhana), New Sanctuary Coalition, and other organizations and city agencies, the temple will do their best to get the person access to the resources they need. In times of actual immigration raids, the temple might be a place to bring people inside for a short period. This being said, to date ICE officials have not entered any house of worship. Sadhana will help to provide up to date materials, and resources on the changing immigration laws. These are currently housed in a space designated by Shaanti Bhavan as a "Sanctuary Resource Center." There will be ongoing information sharing about how the community can stay safe and protect themselves and each other. Regarding legal resources, at first, a list of organizations and phone numbers will be provided to those in need. If the temple finds that the need is great, it will organize, in partnership with Sadhana, regular hours with pro-bono immigration lawyers who can meet community members one-on-one.

The day before Shaanti Bhavan Mandir's landmark announcement, Sadhana organized an Immigration Know Your Rights forum with Mayor De Blasio's Community Affairs Unit. During a robust question and answer session, one attendee asked how we could get all the people at the Phagwah Parade to attend such events. His solution? Reach out to the mandirs and other local houses of worship. It is heartening to see one such house of worship stepping up to the plate and going above and beyond to serve in all the ways it can. Perhaps other local houses of worship will be inspired towards a similar activism.

The views expressed in this column are solely those of the writer and do not necessarily represent the views of the THE WEST INDIAN.