

[Sadhu Vaswani Mission](#)

Category : [April 1993](#)

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Diverse Programs Empower New Jersey Center

Melwani, Lavina The great saint of India, Sadhu T.L. Vaswani, used to say, "Little things are so potent. A grain of mustard is the least of all seeds, but it grows and becomes a big-branched tree. Be thou a little one!" As parents, we all want our little ones, our children, to grow up to fulfill their promise and live up to their full potential. When Indian Hindu families migrate to foreign lands, they may gain materially and financially, and opportunities for their children are endless. Yet if the gains and losses were to be weighed, what price could one put on the loss of culture, religion and traditional values?

Now a group of parents, all firm believers in the teachings of Sadhu Vaswani and of his spiritual heir, Dada J.P. Vaswani, have gotten together to ensure that their children gain Western benefits but do not lose their moral values and Indian culture to the onslaught of television, rock music and differing values.

"An infinite power lies hidden in the heart of every child," said T.L. Vaswani, and the challenge has been to nourish and sustain that power. It was just a year back that the Sadhu Vaswani Center was built in Closter, New Jersey, and in keeping with Dada's philosophy, children are included in every event of the center. Rather than moralistic or stern, religion has to be fun and joyful for children to get involved. So the center established an 80-member Youth Group who - with guidance from their elders - are involved in charity, fund-raising and cultural activities.

Every year when Dada J.P. Vaswani visits the U.S. from Pune, India, over 200 people participate in a Sadhana Camp for three days. Here, cut off from the pull of the outside world, parents and children meditate and listen to Dada's discourse. Fun is not forgotten, and adults and children get involved in an afternoon of sports and a cultural meet where a skit produced by young and old is performed. To attract the children, there is even an American-style campfire - with bhajans being sung by all under the stars.

The success of the Sadhu Vaswani Center in involving the children lies in their blending of ancient traditions and American trends. Which child can resist a fun-fair? So the center organizes a yearly Dada Darshan Mela, with games, skits, music and stalls of vegetarian snacks and fastfoods. This draws crowds from all over the area.

Looking at the gleaming white structure of the new Sadhu Vaswani Center, Dada said it would be a shame if it was not used every day. So the members of the board laid out a blueprint to utilize the center in creative ways to benefit the Indian community. In so doing, they have redefined the role religious centers can play in the day-to-day lives of their devotees. Besides arati every evening, the center also has Gita classes conducted in English by Dr. Jayaraman of Bharati Vidya Bhavan. There are bhajan sessions for the adults, and there is also a youth satsang where members of the youth group teach the younger children. Kiran Jotwani, 20, is a junior at Steven's Institute of Technology and a committee member of the youth group. He says, "Actually I didn't know these bhajans myself. I had to learn them and learn them well so I could teach the younger kids the meaning also." Neena Vaswani, the dedicated chief executive officer of the center, points out: "The youth group also does a lot of research on saints and different festivals. They come up with their own ideas for a Holi skit."

Language is all important, yet many families neglect to teach the children their regional or mother tongue. Recognizing this, the Sadhu Vaswani Center fosters pride in language, and Sindhi classes are conducted at the center on weekends for children and adults. Raakhee Mirchandani, a member of the youth group, says, "I think it's important to know our language because it's part of our heritage. It is also necessary to learn to speak Sindhi to communicate with people who don't know English, like my grandmother."

The youth group teaches compassion and love, and many of the youngsters volunteer at homes for the aged and the handicapped, and distribute food to the homeless. Describing their food drive for the homeless at the Port Authority terminal, Kiran Jotwani says, "We make the food ourselves from scratch. Simple food like ziti or sandwiches, something which gives them carbohydrates quick for the energy they need, something hot." An inspired Kiran himself recently became a vegetarian.

Vegetarianism is an important precept of the Sadhu Vaswani Center. For those

who are not yet vegetarian, Dada suggests observing at least November 25th, the birthday of Sadhu T.L. Vaswani, as "Meatless Day," and members of the youth group pledge to avoid meat on that day. Realizing that many vegetarian children miss eating the fun fast foods, Neena has organized 7-week cooking classes where the youngsters (and adults too) can learn not only the basics of traditional Indian cooking, but also recipes for American, Chinese, Indonesian and Lebanese dishes.

In a country where there is often alienation and misunderstanding between the generations, the many activities of the Sadhu Vaswani Center help to bring the adults and children together in a shared vision of religion and culture, and foster pride in their roots.

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The true meaning of life is revealed to the man who learns what it is to live for others, to plant shady trees under which he will never sit," says Dada J.P. Vaswani, spiritual leader of the Sadhu Vaswani Mission which operates out of Pune, India. The founder of this mission was his uncle and master Sadhu T.L. Vaswani, one of the great philosophers and religious teachers of India, whose motto was "Service to the poor is worship of God." It is this message the mission continues to promote through its schools and welfare organizations. The mission has a large following and centers in several countries.

In 1990 the devotees in the tri-state area established the Sadhu Vaswani Center in Closters, New Jersey. Besides bhajans and arati, the center conducts several culture-related classes. Several activities are planned for September when Dada J.P. Vaswani visits the USA.

In the planning stage is a library, and a day-care center for working parents which would incorporate religion and culture in teaching the young. The center is available for pujas, langars (feedings), weddings, thread ceremonies and other events at a reasonable fee.

Address: Sadhu Vaswani Center, 494 Durie Avenue, Closter, New Jersey, 07624,

USA. Phone: (201) 768-7857; for Neena Vaswani, office hours 3:00 PM to 7:00 PM.

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