

It's the End of an Era but I will always remember.

Firstly, I would like to congratulate Mandhata Samaj UK on the publication of the 40th edition of the Mandhata Pragati. A big thank you to all of the individuals who work behind the scenes to get it published.

Unfortunately I have not been able to contribute towards it for some time but this year it's absolutely vital for me to provide an overview of the work that Shree Krishna Mandir has been undertaking since the fire destroyed the Mandir in December 1991.

I am writing this article at the eleventh hour just before the Pragati goes to the printers, so I would also like to take this opportunity to thank Aroonbhai Dayaljibhai (AMSUK trustee) for accepting the article at the last minute and to Ashokbhai Ranchodbhai (AMSUK secretary) for bringing it to my attention in the first place.

"End of an era" well what's that about then? Sounds a bit dramatic! End of an age, end of a period, end of an epoch, or just an end of years?

"But I will always remember" Oh that sounds a bit expressive and open. Well what's this article all about then?

This article is about all of the aforementioned because it's a narrative about a temple in West Bromwich belonging to the Mandhata community that was destroyed in a fire but then rose again from the ashes. Shree Krishna Mandir in West Bromwich has been built, it has had a grand opening, it has been running profitably for 10 years, it has had its accounts completed, it has had the accounts internally audited, has had the accounts externally audited and has had an Annual General Meeting that has approved the financial reports and elected a new committee on the 30 June 2019 to run its affairs.

Yes I would confirm that the Annual General Meeting has taken some time to come but I can also assure you that our internal auditors and external auditor have not left any stones unturned. All of the Mandir's financial records have been scrutinised to the highest degree and not only did the auditors confirm that they are a true and accurate record but they also confirmed that the organisation is currently operating on a profitable basis. In other words the Mandir rebuilding project in West Bromwich has been a huge success.

So it is an end of an era, an end that has resulted in the arrival of a Panchayatan Mandir, the first of its kind outside of India and based on the religious texts of Sanatan Dharma, widely known as Hindu dharma.

On a personal note, it is also an end of an era for me as the long standing President of Shree Krishna Mandir (Mandhata Hithwardhak Mandal) West Bromwich. I was the president of the Mandir for a period of 27 years. I became the President of the Mandir about a year and a half after the Mandir was destroyed in the fire.

I remember the night fire struck very well, and as I am writing this article (it's about 2 o'clock in the morning) I am getting flashbacks of the fire engines, the commotion and tears created by the congregation who thought for a moment that our dear Shrimati Radha and Shree Krishna deities were no more. I can smell the burning of the church building and I can remember the frantic nature of the congregation old and young, male and female.

I can remember talking to the firemen who told me that the fire will heat up the marble murties of Shree Shree Radha Krishna and if the water comes into contact with the murties they are likely to shatter. I remember a shiver going up my back and my eyes welling up with tears that I discretely wiped as I did not want other members of the congregation to see me. I remember my manager giving me time off work to be at 81 Old Meeting Street, I remember my partner at the time Inderjit who is now my wife phoning me to console and comfort me. I remember the news travelling to our Mandhata community throughout England and across the globe to Canada, America, India, New Zealand, and Africa. I remember journalists running around the site and interviewing people, I remember the public meetings that were called initially which at best provided a platform for local politicians but really no answers for the congregation.

I remember the despondency starting to set in, I remember my annoyance towards the president at that time who had allegedly received a phone call from the police during but had not heeded their advice of putting in place adequate security measures to protect the Mandir. I remember my delight at hearing the news that the Shree Shree Radha Krishna Murties had survived the fire. I remember my despair and heartache when the murties were boarded up. I remember thinking you can't do that to bhagwan, it doesn't feel right after everything that had happened and we needed our darshan.

I remember the whirlwind of activity gradually grinding down to the point of what can we do?, we are under insured, we can't demolish this building its listed, we don't have access to the murties they have been boarded up, we can't move the murties as we did a prana pratistha ceremony so how's that going to work? I remember the despondency setting in as the clock ticked away. As year passed and the media lost interest the congregation set up a makeshift Mandir in the hall next door but Shree Shree Radha Krishna were still boarded up in a building to which we had no access. I remember some of my elders using anecdotes of how Lord Krishna's divine appearance was in a Jail and he was moved out of jail straight away yet we were keeping him locked up. The narratives had an element of sadness to them and I had at this point started to feel the pain of the congregation but felt helpless to do anything about it.

I eventually resolved myself to the fact that a long period had passed and I was getting agitated at not having a darshan of Shree Shree Radha Krishna so I really need to leave this in the hands of the elders and rather than getting upset about the

whole thing. I stopped going to the Mandir and got back into my routine life work and play. Some time passed and I heard that various sadhus and sants were invited to the Mandir but they did little to lift the spirit of the congregation. I recall the frustration of the congregation at distinguished guests who visited the damaged site but did not offer any solace to the predicament they were in. I met many members of the community in pubs, restaurants at cricket matches at Mandhata Samaj meetings, in shopping centres, in coffee shops and they all had one thing in common which was their concern for what had happened and what was happening or not happening to the Mandir that had been destroyed by fire.

Many people requested that I get involved but I resisted. As a younger person at the time I felt strongly that I should do something about building a new home for Shree Shree Radha Krishna but at the same time I also had every respect for the elders who were in charge of the project so felt that they had the solutions and they needed to continue their work.

Over a year and a half had passed and then I heard that the Mandir had scheduled an Annual General Meeting (AGM) so decided to attend it in order just to get an update. My recollection of that day is that by the time I had arrived at the meeting, I was about an hour and a half late. However, when I arrived at the hall, the meeting had not commenced so I went and stood at the back of the hall and blended into the crowd that had gathered. At this point in time I had no intention of stopping for the full duration of the meeting so decided not to get seated. I then heard my name being announced over the microphone "Chandubhai your name has been nominated to chair the meeting" I was astonished and thought to myself "is this for real?". However before I could think, I was sitting at the front table chairing the meeting and the rest is history because the meeting ended with me becoming the President of the Mandir.

In the 27 years that followed the congregation of the Mandir in West Bromwich I worked alongside members of our Mandhata community nationally and internationally to rebuild the Mandir. It would not be possible for an article in a magazine to cover the depth of the work that has been undertaken to rebuild the Mandir, however the following summary attempt to provide some of the identifiable milestones of the project following my election as the President.

- Insurance claim settled.
- Building delisted
- Deities opened for daily worship inside the burnt temple
- Chalan Pooja for the deities and they were moved to the hall.
- Demolition of old Mandir.
- Graves surrounding the Mandir site were removed and re-buried at a local cemetery following home office approval.
- Ongoing fund raising activities locally and nationally.
- Business as usual in respect of ongoing celebration of festivals at Mandir.

- A series of activities with architects and design teams that produced over a period of time, five different design plans for a new Mandir with associated costs. All of the designs costs were well beyond the financial capital the Mandir possessed at the time. The Mandir was underinsured at the time of the fire and therefore did not receive adequate funds to undertake a rebuilding project.
- Review of financial shortfall for building works and discussion of design of a new Mandir.
- Protracted discussions and evaluations took place on the financial and practical feasibility of designing and building a Mandir in India using marble and sandstone and then transporting it over to West Bromwich.
- In 1996 Pravin J Patel (Architect) and I visited India to meet with various contractors in Rajasthan and Gujarat to consider the feasibility and management of India/West Bromwich collaboration to build a Mandir according to ancient silpa sastra tradition.
- Findings of India visit reported to the congregation via an Extraordinary General Meeting which approved the plans and approach to project.
- Full planning application submitted to the council
- Full planning application rejected by the council
- Mandir receives fine from the Inland Revenue for not paying corporation tax as the Mandir constitution had deemed the organisation a trading company
- With further clarification from Rt Hon Tom Watson MP the Inland Revenue makes adjustments to the previous determinations to zero.
- Mandir receives full planning permission
- A limited company named Krishna Industries established with myself as the director to manage the India and UK collaborations.
- Contract signed between Krishna Industries and India
- Small portion of a mountain in Rajasthan purchased to extract pink Bhansipardhapur stone.
- Stone quarried and sent to a factory in Ahmadabad for processing.
- Stone processed and carved at Ahmedabad.
- Carved stone packed and sent in containers to port the port at Kandla and Mumbai by lorry and train.
- Containers were custom cleared in India and transported by sea to Felixstowe in England.
- Containers were then cleared through customs by Krishna Industries at ports in the UK and then transported to West Bromwich for unloading at the Mandir site.
- A property a terraced house with a commercial garage purchased
- Fork lifts and cranes with Mandir personnel and volunteers unloaded the stone at the Mandir.
- UK building contractors and structural engineers appointed

- Mandir bhoomi poojan and sila nyasa ceremony performed
- Mandir foundation built
- Stonemasons and artisans recruited (via Krishna Industries) from India to build the Mandir.
- Workers housed in the property that had been purchased and renovated
- Mandir building programme commences
- Trustees and President take out a loan from the Bank of Baroda in order to finance the building works
- Stonemasons and artisans work permits finish and they return to India
- Carved stone continues to arrive from India
- Indian stonemasons and artisans recruited from UK base
- Rebuilding work continues Mandir faces financial difficulties
- One consignment of stone arrives from India via Dubai
- Building work continues with a small building team of artisans
- Mandir building project is completed
- Priest is called from India for the opening ceremony
- Opening ceremony is organised for a period of 10 days
- Mandir opens and functions on a profitable basis for 9 years
- Annual General Meeting on 30 June 2019 approves financial records of Mandir and Krishna Industries elects a new management committee and trustees.

.....and that is the end of an era. I thank the congregation of Shree Krishna Mandir West Bromwich and all members of the Mandhata community nationally and internationally for their support in the building project. The Mandhata community has made its mark in building a Mandir made to last thousands of years.

I wish the new management committee of Shree Krishna Mandir every success for the future.

Shree Chandubhai Dhirubhai Patel

Ex-President of Shree Krishna Mandir (Mandhata Hithwardhak Mandal)
West Bromwich