

Article

Communicating Sustainability within Britain's Hindu Community

Sita Rama Das ^{1,†}, Martin Haigh ^{2,*†} and Sheila Chauhan ^{1,†}

¹ Lotus Trust, The Lotus Trust, The Manor, Hilfield Lane, Aldenham, Watford, Herts WD25 8EZ, UK; E-Mail: info@thelotustrust.org

² Department of Social Sciences, Oxford Brookes University, Gypsy Lane Campus, Oxford OX3 0BP, UK

[†] These authors contributed equally to this work.

* Author to whom correspondence should be addressed; E-Mail: mhaigh@brookes.ac.uk; Tel.: +44-1865-483-785; Fax: +44-1865-483-937.

Received: 11 November 2013; in revised form: 2 January 2014 / Accepted: 17 January 2014 / Published: 10 February 2014

Abstract: Focusing on the UK's Hindu community, this explores some modes for the communication of pro-sustainability messages and their affective strength. These campaigns employ the community-center role of many UK Hindu temples to connect Hindu congregations to the cause of environmental sustainability through the medium of Hindu scripture and tradition. The international Hindu Bhumi Project (and its larger “Many Heavens, One Earth” interfaith initiative) provide an umbrella for such pedagogic initiatives. Two are described. First is the festival-ground-based Karma to Climate Change (K2CC) campaign, which encourages pilgrims to pledge pro-sustainability lifestyle changes as part of their religious practice. The second, the Ahimsa Project, is devoted to the popularization and production of ethically pure, cruelty/slaughter free milk, which encourages people to develop greater empathy for the wellbeing of their fellow creatures and, ultimately, to abhor the casual slaughter of animals for meat. These projects are driven by the enthusiasm and concern of a younger generation of British-born Hindu people and their impacts are felt both through the campaigns themselves and the family structures of the volunteers who participate.

Keywords: community education; British Hindu minority; Hindu diaspora; faith-based environmentalism; Bhumi Project; K2CC—Karma to Climate Change Project; Ahimsa Project; slaughter-free dairy production

1. Introduction

As this Millennium began, the current United Nations Secretary General, Kofi Annan, declared, “Our biggest challenge in this new century is to take an idea that seems abstract—sustainable development—and turn it into a daily reality for all the world’s people” [1]. Today, many global problems are driven by the way that individuals live their lives and set their priorities. They emerge from the collective impact of the small, individual, lifestyle decisions that billions of individuals make every day in everyday life. As in the theory of karma, some of these daily decisions have good effects and some have bad effects but, collectively, their outcome creates a burden upon the Earth that manifests as negative environmental change [2]. For the modern world and its citizens, sustainability is a concern that involves personal ethics, personal responsibility to others and practical action. Sri Krishna, who appeared to relieve the burdens of the Earth, confirms in the Anu Gita 3.2 to 3.3: “As during the bearing season, a fruit-bearing tree yields much fruit, so meritorious acts supply ample benefit; but faulty acts, done with a corrupted mind, produce corresponding results” [3].

Unfortunately, “For more than 30 years, the world’s major institutions, scientists, and governments... have compiled and analyzed details of how we are abusing the planet... Yet the crises are still with us... The simple fact is that knowledge on its own is not enough... Ultimately, the environmental crisis is a crisis of the mind...” [4]. Most people understand that the world faces problems due to environmental change but fewer believe that they have a personal role in its prevention. The challenge is to find ways of communicating the message that everyone has a personal responsibility for (and role to play in) reducing the burden placed upon the Earth’s environmental systems.

James Lovelock notes: “recognition that we are the agents of planetary change brings a sense of guilt and gives environmentalism a religious significance” [5]. Rick Clugston [6] adds: “Most people identify themselves as religious and/or spiritual, and for many, their faiths call them to live in ways that respect and care for all life, present and future, and to focus on being more, not having more, after basic needs are met”. The argument here is that religious movements may have a key role in guiding individuals towards living lives that enhance the prospects for a sustainable future. In 2009, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon advised leaders of the World Religions that they “are the leaders who can have the largest, widest and deepest reach to protect people and planet...” adding that “the world’s faith communities occupy a unique position in discussions on the fate of our planet ... because of the scale of their reach” [7]. In fact, the world faiths are almost alone in being able to call upon human societies to rise beyond the language of “me”, through the language of caring for “us humans”, into the realms of caring for the whole environment and the future.

Most of the world religions ask their adherents to live better and more compassionate lives, so all that needs to be done is to connect pro-sustainability behaviour to each religion’s scriptural authorities and, through this, foster the will to enact pro-sustainability lifestyle changes. Making an affective connection of this kind depends on communicating an appropriately transformative message.

This paper explores attempts to make this connection in the Hindu tradition. Hindu practice insists on a spiritual and ethical approach to life, which is the touchstone for sustainability education [8]. The UN Secretary General [9] notes that “The Vedic philosophy of India has always emphasized the human connection with nature. Vedism is a way of life based on scriptures [that] contain some of

the earliest messages on ecological balance and the need for people's ethical treatment of nature. They emphasize harmony with nature and recognize that all natural elements hold divinity".

However, as an agency for the communication of pro-sustainability messages, Hinduism presents special problems because of its lack of a central authority, its huge diversity and its infinite divisions. In India, it is near unimaginable that the major Hindu religious leaders might come together with the aim of changing the world by collectively guiding their followers toward more sustainable living. However, outside India, amongst the 15 million strong Hindu diaspora, the social construction of Hinduism is different and does hold this potential [10]. Here, Hinduism's adaptations to local ways of life include the adoption of local lifestyle rhythms and sensitivities, e.g., special events on Sundays, some homogenisation of tradition and ritual, but most importantly the development of congregations [11]. In places where Hindu communities find themselves isolated in an ocean of alien traditions, there is a constant struggle for recognition and identity. Many key Hindu temples have evolved into community centres that, routinely, provide leadership in community matters, beginning with the preservation of cultural identity but extending into welfare and education, especially for those who were born and raised far beyond the Hindu heartlands. It is no accident that most of the processes described in this paper are driven by young people from the diaspora.

2. The Bhumi Project

"Many Heavens, One Earth" is an interfaith initiative, a rare civil-society program supported by the UNDP (United Nations Development Program) that is fronted by the UK-based Alliance of Religion and Conservation [12]. This initiative invites the world's religious groups to put forward generational plans for change toward more pro-sustainability behavior on the part of their adherents. The proposal for a Hindu contribution brought together representatives of four of the UK's major Hindu congregations at OCHS (Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies, an independent center of Oxford University) in April 2009. These groups represented the Shree Sanatan Mandir (Leicester), Sri Venkateswara (Balaji) Temple (West Midlands), BAPS' (Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam) Swaminarayan Sanstha, London, and ISKCON's Bhaktivedanta Manor Temple, Watford. The meeting was also supported by representatives from the National Hindu Students' Forum, from the UK's first Hindu faith school the Avanti Primary School in London, and, through letters of support, by a score of other Hindu organizations in the UK. After some negotiation, a Hindu 9-year plan, now called the "Bhumi Project", became one of 31 plans set before the UN Secretary General at the "Many Heavens, One Earth" Conference, Windsor Castle, UK, November 2009 [12]. Subsequently, the Bhumi Project went global with American Hindu groups launching the Bhumi Project in the White House, Washington, DC, [13] and Hindu groups in Nairobi, Kenya, developing their own Bhumi Africa plan [14].

The Bhumi Project has two main initiatives. First is the Green Temple initiative, which aims to have the temples set a good example and, more recently, addresses greening pilgrimage [15]. Second is the Compassionate Living initiative, which aims to green the lifestyles of devotees in the community [16]. The Green Temple program advocates greening worship by using locally grown and organic fruit and flowers, gardening to produce home grown food, greening festivals by demonstrating good practice through recycling, greening pilgrimage journeys by using public transport, and employing ecological disposal and recycling of sacred waste. The Compassionate Living initiative is aimed at the

congregation and advocates four lifestyle changes. These are dietary change, such as cutting out meat to reduce carbon footprints, adopting a vegetarian diet on ethical grounds thereby promoting better treatment of animals, ethical purchasing and, more generally, adopting a life-ethic based on compassion for the living world.

However, the Bhumi Project also acts as an umbrella for many quasi-independent initiatives. The balance of this paper explores two projects that broadly support the Bhumi Project and its objectives. These projects are both core activities of the Lotus Trust NGO and owe much to the inspiration of its spiritual leader, Sita Rama das, a disciple in the line of Srila A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada. The first, “Karma to Climate Change” (K2CC) sought to make the Hindu faithful aware, first of Sri Krishna’s commitment to the welfare of the Earth, second of the shortcomings of their lifestyle in sustainability terms, and third of the things they could change to improve their relationship to the Earth and to Sri Krishna [17,18]. The second, the “Ahimsa Project” has the ambition of sponsoring better cruelty-free, slaughter-free, treatment of farm animals and of solving some problems of the Hindu diet by creating dairy products that are not only “organically” pure but also “ethically and spiritually” pure, because cows and their offspring are treated well and allowed to live out the whole of their natural lifespan. The project is about empathy and compassionate living. Its core idea is to connect participants to the wellbeing of animals, to sensitise them to harm done to them in farming, to encourage them to think about the ethics of animal slaughter in general and, ultimately, to create a deep connection between them the welfare of the whole living Earth.

Of course, even in the UK, there are many comparable ventures. One, run by the London Sustainability Exchange and Thames Water from 2006–2008, worked with the East London Hindu community and concerned water conservation [19]. This involved 3000 participants and received 520 pledges to use water more efficiently and 264 other pledges for pro-environmental action. A sample survey of 208 participants at the close of the project found that that 40% wanted more sustainable lifestyles and that 25% felt they had benefited from their interaction with this programme [20]. The report identifies festival goers as an appropriate target for community education. Of course, many Hindu groups run their own initiatives. These have included the BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha’s “Go Veg(etarian) Go Green” and “Be the Change” campaigns [21] and the Shree Swaminarayan Gadi Sansthan’s “Sustainable Energy” program [22]. Of course, the whole sustainability enterprise is about living for the future and green thinking has been embedded within the aims and curriculum of the new Krishna-Avanti Primary School, Britain’s first state-supported Hindu faith school [23]. At University level, the National Hindu Students Forum’s Sewa campaign promotes ethical consumerism, volunteering and political awareness [24]. The NHSF also contributed to the UK’s Green Kumbh Yatra festival, an international environmental pilgrimage. Green Kumbh founder, Kusum Vyas, hails the Yatra as the first global “green Hindu” event [25]. The Green Kumbh (or pitcher) symbolises the web of life and emphasises the preservation of biodiversity. The Yatra was launched at COP11 (Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity, Hyderabad, India) and is travelling to a meeting with COP12 in South Korea, 2014. It made several stops in the UK that included the Shree Sanatan Mandirs in Leicester and Wembley and the Shri Venkateswara (Balaji) Temple in Tividale, West Midlands, which happens to be constructed on land reclaimed from the despoiled industrial lands of a former foundry and coal waste-tip.

3. K2CC: The Karma to Climate Change Project

“Karma to Climate Change” (K2CC) is a community-based sustainability-education interactive exhibition, which has been cited as an example of good practice by UNESCO [26]. It addresses the problem that the connection between personal actions and environmental change is not generally recognized. This problem is a key target for all those faith communities developing long-term projects to protect the planet [12,27]. However, K2CC explores a Hindu path to deeper engagement with sustainability and to helping individual families minimize their burden on the Earth. Its aim is to communicate an affective message that makes this connection and delivers action. It reflects the observation that traditional British communications on this topic are usually couched in ethnic British values that may not resonate strongly with its minority communities [28,29].

The K2CC exhibition was developed as a tented display for the two day Janmashtami festival at the Bhaktivedanta Manor Temple in Watford, UK. This is Europe’s largest Hindu festival, attracting >40,000 devotees each year for the celebration of the advent of Sri Krishna. Subsequently, more compact versions of the exhibition were used at three other festivals and at two Annual Conferences of the National Hindu Students Forum. The original K2CC design and pedagogy, as well as its smallest, “desk-top”, version have already been described by Chauhan and colleagues [17,30]. This paper describes Sheila Chauhan’s design for the second full-scale iteration at the Janmashtami Festival of 2008.

The aim of the K2CC exhibition is twofold. First, it offers a message about spiritual purification through devotional service and the renunciation of material excess. Second, it fosters small incremental lifestyle changes through persuading participants to pledge small practical actions toward spiritual advancement and toward creating a smaller personal ecological footprint in the material world. The urge to step lightly on the Holy Earth is deeply embedded in Hindu consciousness. Pilgrims to Lord Krishna’s childhood places in Vrindavan walk barefoot; many, following Lord Caitanya, refuse to tread at all upon Govardhan Hill, which is considered a manifestation of Lord Krishna. So, it is a small step to link the Hindu concept of respect for the Earth to that of the modern ecological foot-print. Here, the message is reinforced by quotation from the Isopanisad 1.1: “take only what you need that is set aside for you. Do not take anything else for you know to whom it belongs” [31].

The challenge is to help devotees embed this message in their personal lives. This educational message is communicated in four steps. Step one involves instruction through a series of tableaux and audio visual displays. Step two fosters self-evaluation; participants complete a lifestyle self-assessment questionnaire, a “Karmic footprint” calculator developed from the standard “ecological foot print” questionnaire [32]. Step three uses discussion to foster introspection and encourage action. Step four is about making a commitment to act. Participants are encouraged to make a personal vow to take some pro-environmental behavioural change in their lives.

This pedagogic strategy carries participants from knowledge, through awakening personal awareness and establishing action-consciousness, toward targeted enactment. Necessarily, the K2CC Trail combines a spiritual and ecological message. A key objective of sustainability education is to encourage people to accept personal responsibility for their world [33]. Here, the pathway is lit by Hindu concepts that include the personal duty of devotional service (seva), the purity of austerity and renunciation (tapas), the necessity for right action (dharma), and the power of the vow (vrata); each

reinforced by scriptural references mainly from the Śrīmad Bhagavadgita and Bhāgavatam, two of the most widely respected Hindu scriptures.

In 2008, the tent was modelled on a Banyan Tree. Volunteers, marshalled by Sheila Chauhan, spent many hours preparing and then hanging thousands of paper leaves and painting backdrops. The Banyan is sacred to Sri Krishna as well as to Buddhists. The Vaisnava Khanda of the Skanda Purana (2ii.3.11) identifies the banyan tree with the body of the Lord and its many trunks with His hair (Skanda Purana 2ii.18.11 to 2ii.18.17). Its shade is associated with the expiation of sins (Skanda Purana 2ii.7.24 to 2ii.7.25) and the bestowal of prosperity and happiness (Skanda Purana 2ii.10.9 to 2ii.10.18) [34]. The Banyan is also identified as a symbol of the material world. In the Bhagavadgita 15.1, Sri Krishna says: “It is said that there is an imperishable banyan tree that has its roots upward in the heavens and its branches down on the Earth and whose leaves are the Vedic hymns. One who knows this tree is the knower of the Vedas”, which are the books of knowledge (see also: Katha Upanisad 2.3.1) [35,36]. Srila Prabhupad suggests that the many stemmed banyan tree represents the entanglements of the material world and that understanding this tree of illusion lies on the path to liberation [35].

For participants, the first stop in the exhibition is the queue at its entry, which is graced by a small shrine to Sri Krishna Caitanya and Prabhu Nityananda, founders of the Caitanya Vaisnava Bhakti (devotional) movement in early Sixteenth Century Bengal, who are considered by followers to be incarnations of Sri Krishna and Sri Balaram respectively. The tent then opens onto a tableau of Sri Krishna and his elder brother Sri Balaram as young cowherds playing in the forest, as described in Canto 10 of the Śrīmad Bhāgavatam sacred text (Figure 1). Cremo and Mukunda Goswami, in the book that inspired this trail—*Divine Nature*, urge Hindu’s to make this world a better reflection of Lord Krishna’s heavenly abode, “a place of pure waters, forests full of tree bearing fruits and flowers” [37]. These opening scenes are designed to evoke similar feelings in participants, especially the notion that purifying the world is their religious duty.

The second tableau is a large “dolls’ house” that demonstrates all the many ways that domestic life wastes resources such as energy and water (Figure 2). This is supported by a short video presentation that portrays the consequences of such waste on a global scale through dystopian environmental visions that are counterpointed by a vision of an alternative spiritual future [38,39]. Posters reference the Hindu “Laws of Karma”, which argue that every action has a consequence with good following good and bad following bad [2].

On entry to the exhibition, each participant is offered a questionnaire. The typical festival participant in the K2CC exhibition is a multigenerational family group, parents and grandparents, often pulled into the exhibition tent by excited children. Typically, a questionnaire is accepted by only one member of this group, usually the father but sometimes the mother, especially if the father is not present. The questionnaire, a modified version of a standard “Ecological footprint” questionnaire, here upgraded to include a range of more spiritual questions, helps participants consider the actions and motivations that drive them to create a burden on the Earth, such as less than perfect energy management. Interspersed with the major tableaux, posters, linked to the questions of the karmic footprint questionnaire, address lifestyle issues ranging from daily/holiday travel habits, housing, energy use/sourcing, diet, and commitment to recycling, and the desire for consumer products (Table 1).

Figure 1. K2CC “Karma to Climate Change” Display 2008: Banyan Tree with Shri Shri Krishna Balaram (Photo: Sheila Chauhan).



Figure 2. K2CC “Karma to Climate Change” Display 2008: Dolls’ House (Photo: Sheila Chauhan).



Table 1. The K2CC (Karma to Climate Change) Questionnaire—Janmashtami Festival Responses; (Score: 3 represents poor practice, 2 is “average” for the UK, 1 is best practice) [30].

Rank	Topic	Argument	Options	Mean Score	Standard Deviation
17	Electricity Source	The electricity I buy is on a:	Normal tariff—because it is produced from fossil fuels/Don’t know (3); Green tariff—it comes partly from renewable sources (2); Green tariff—it comes entirely from renewable sources (1)	2.65	0.671
16	Holiday Travel	Usually, when I travel on holiday, I go:	By airplane (3); By car in the UK (or abroad) (2); By bus or train in the UK (1)	2.57	0.707
15	Residence	I live in a:	Detached or semi-detached (duplex) house (3); Terraced or row house (2); Apartment or flat (1)	2.43	0.779
14	Purchasing Decisions	My purchasing decisions are most strongly affected by:	Price and quality only (3); The product being produced organically, sustainably, fairly traded, with low “food miles” (2); The product also being grown locally or at home (1)	2.38	0.695
13	Travel	Mostly, I travel by:	Car (3) but I car-pool or share with others (2); Bus or train (2); Bicycle or I walk (1)	2.30	0.673
12	Diet	I eat:	Vegetables and some meat (Non-vegetarian) (3); Vegetables and dairy products (Vegetarian) (2) Only vegetables (Vegan) (1)	2.17	0.563
11	Priorities	In general, in my life:	I do what is best for me and my family (3); I do what is best for my community or society (2); I do what is best for my world and its future (1)	2.13	0.805
10	Money and possessions	My money and possessions:	Make me proud, as I accumulate more, they bring me more respect, power & pleasure(3); Make me happy—they are sufficient to allow me a comfortable life (2); Mean nothing to me, I keep what I need & give away the rest (1)	1.90	0.447
9	Wants	In general, what I want is:	More, bigger, better, faster, newer...(3); To have enough of what I want to be content and comfortable (2); Nothing...nothing more than I need to live (1)	1.87	0.513
8	Advocate	To persuade others to reduce their environmental impacts:	I do nothing (3); I do a bit...when I remember (2); I try to set a good personal example and encourage others to follow (1)	1.71	0.658

Table 1. Cont.

Rank	Topic	Argument	Options	Mean Score	Standard Deviation
7	Food	The food I eat is:	Mostly pre-packed/convenience foods (3); A mix of fresh and convenience foods (2); Mainly organic and fresh or home produced food (1)	1.67	0.537
6	Recycling	My household rubbish is:	Not recycled or reused / Don't know (3); Partly recycled and reused (2); Mostly recycled, reused or composted in my garden (1)	1.62	0.624
5	Switch Off Electrics	When not using lights or appliances	I leave them on or on standby (3); I switch them off (2); & also I use energy saving light bulbs, etc (1)	1.59	0.708
4	Water Use	To keep clean, I mostly use	A bath or power shower (3); A shower (1)	1.54	0.885
3	Co-habitation	I share my house with	No-one else (3); One other person (2); More than one other person (1)	1.36	0.624
2	Home Insulation	My home is insulated:	Fully insulated and doubled glazed (1); Partially (2); Not at all/Don't know (3)	1.34	0.596
1	Fashion	When one of my possessions (cars, clothes, gadgets) falls out of fashion:	I throw it away and buy a replacement (3); I make do with it—as long as it functions (1)	1.21	0.611

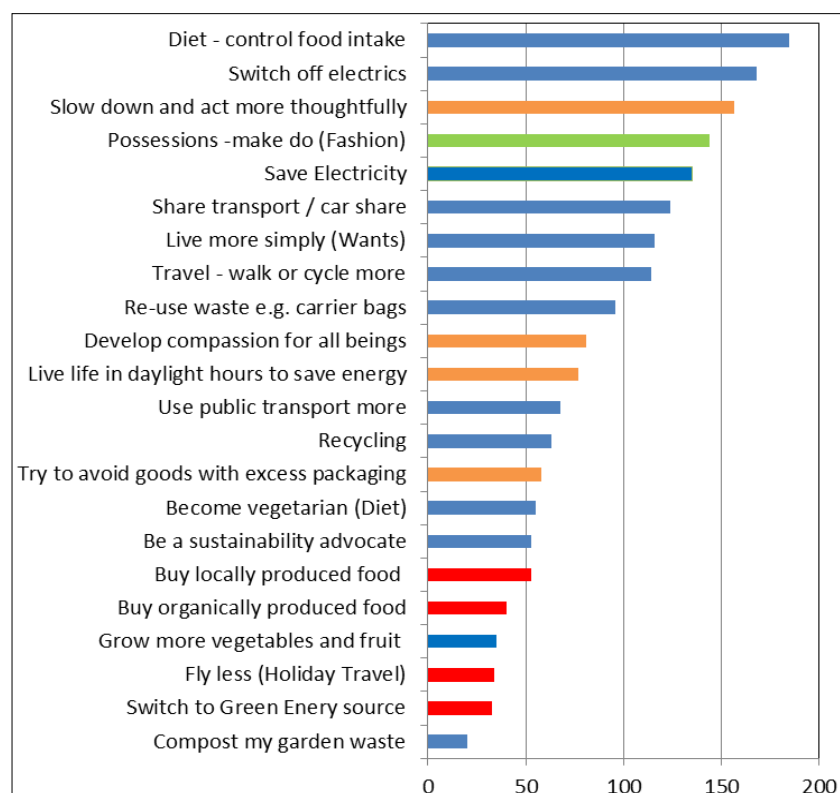
Toward the end of the exhibition, questionnaires are collected, scored and participants allocated to one of three desks according to strength of their score. Each desk contains a series of advisory leaflets, many sourced from “Friends of the Earth” [40], and a volunteer who offers each visitor a list of suggestions for improvement. In practice, the role of the volunteer is to listen sympathetically to the participant before encouraging them to consider how they might, personally, make one small lifestyle change to make their burden on the Earth smaller. Participants are then guided past a further, trailer-based, display of alternative energy technologies provided by “Friends of the Earth” before, finally, reaching a pledge wall. Here, they are reminded that Sri Krishna appeared to relieve the burdens of the Earth and that “An enlightened person is one who acts unselfishly to maintain the world” Bhagavad-Gita 3.25 [35].

Thus, the exhibition’s four step pedagogy works by linking the problems of the Earth to the individual decisions that create karma. Bad karma is caused by self-indulgence, which, leads to distress—much as inhaling tobacco smoke leads to respiratory disease (or carbon dioxide emission leads to global climatic change). Good karma is created by far-sighted and dutiful actions such as attention to child-rearing, education and healthy living, which, while they may be difficult at the time, lead to a better future. However, only one way of living produces no karma. Karma free actions, are those done in service to, and whose results are surrendered to, Lord Krishna (Bhagavad-Gita, 18) [35].

It is suggested that dharma, duty, requires each person to try and make this world more like the places favoured by Sri Krishna.

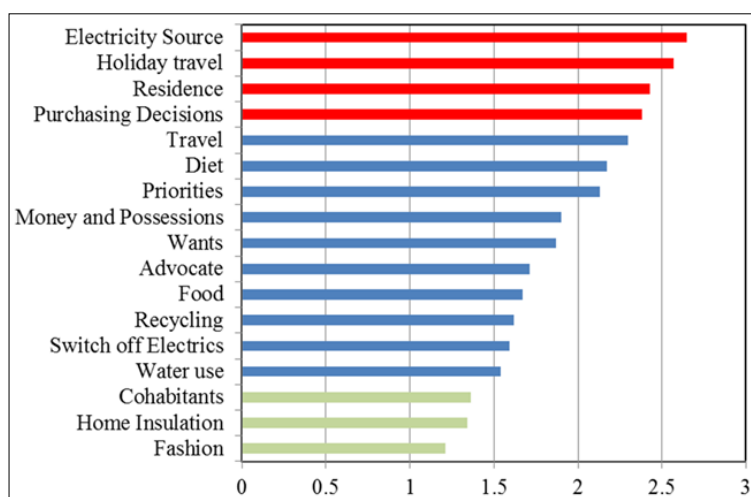
The self-assessment “karmic footprint” questionnaire poses questions to participants that have three answer options, one is normal practice, which scores “2”, another is good practice, which scores “1” and the last is bad practice, which scores “3”. It is argued that, if everyone on Earth lived the way that people in the UK live, then it would require the resources of >two planets to sustain them. So, the suggestion is made that an average score close to one means that the responses are more conducive to sustainability, an average score close to two means that the respondent supports the current unsustainable status quo, and a score nearer three means that they are weighing more greatly on our already overburdened Earth. When, later, the questionnaire scores are reviewed, the argument is that an average score of 3 equates to a resource demand that would require three planets to fulfil, if everyone did the same, while an average score of two would require the resources of two planets, and 1 respectively. Participants are guided into discussion with one of the volunteers who staff the desks that provide leaflets and advice about how households might reduce their ecological footprint. The discussant’s role is to encourage participants to identify one area where they might change a 3 score to a 2 score or a 2 score to a 1 score by adjusting their normal routine. Of course, desk discussions tend to focus, initially, on a critique of the questions, the questionnaire and its scoring system, and then move into extended self-justification and explanation for the patterns scored by the participant and why they had to be that way. The desk volunteer listens and encourages the participant to pledge “just one change in their lifestyle” and make this change their personal vow to Sri Krishna. Figure 3 offers a breakdown of their content.

Figure 3. Pledges on Janmashtami (n: 1909). (The color scheme is from Figure 1, except that amber shading indicates issues that were not addressed by the questionnaires).



Thus far, 1075 self-assessment questionnaires have been left with the K2CC project. Most, 754 (70%), come from the two Janmashtami Festivals and most of these are produced by the predominantly Gujarati-origin, family groups that dominate these festivals. The results from the questionnaire survey, ranked from bad practice to good, are shown alongside the questionnaire questions in Table 1 and summarised as Figure 4.

Figure 4. Ecological (Karmic) Footprint Questionnaire (Janmashtami Sample $n = \text{or} < 750$). (Score: 3 is poor practice, 2 is average for the UK, 1 is better practice. The mean score is 1.91 (SD: 0.43); Red is >1 standard deviation above and green <1 standard deviation below the mean).



In brief, these results show that there is room for improvement on purchasing green energy. Long haul travel is also an issue, although much of this is forced due to family and pilgrimage responsibilities in India. However, in the daily travel category, the plain fact that the Bhaktivedanta Manor farm becomes covered with cars during the Janmashtami Festival, while the Temple bus from the railway station is not much used, suggests that there is room for more use of public transport. On the other hand, these families score very strongly on issues relating to domestic efficiency, if less so on matters of ethical or green purchasing. Nevertheless, they espouse a wish to set a good example and their scores for following fashion and attachment to material possessions are low. More detailed analyses of these findings and those from the non-Janmashtami fielding of the K2CC exhibition are reserved for a later publication.

After reflecting upon their questionnaire scores, participants were encouraged to discover one or two aspects of their lifestyle, either material and/or spiritual that they might change for the benefit of the world and then to dedicate a pledge for change to Lord Krishna. Unlike other occasions, in the Janmashtami 2008 exhibition, participants were not required to write down their own pledge, although some did, but allowed to collect two buttons to stick on the pledge wall. Again, uniquely, the pledge wall was compartmentalized into 22 sections, 5–6 each dealing with energy, transport, waste and food. This approach generated many more “pledges”, 1909 in total, but, possibly, many fewer that signaled any deep commitment.

Figure 3 provides a breakdown of the pledges and compares them with the issues recognized in the questionnaires. The list is dominated by spiritual lifestyle issues. Janmashtami is a day of fasting and

this may explain the concern to control the food intake. Encouraging “mindfulness”, which is common to both Hindu and Buddhist traditions, features prominently in these pledges. Another Hindu virtue is simplicity of lifestyle and a raft of pledges relate to this goal beginning with the “make do” pledge near the top of the list, limiting wants further down, energy saving by using daylight hours, re-using waste as well as some of the dietary resolutions. Domestic efficiency is something emphasized in the questionnaires and repeated in the pledges where many stress saving electricity and avoiding waste. There is also some nudge towards the ethical purchasing of organic, locally and home produced food, although these are located near the foot of the list. However, it is notable that those things done least well in the questionnaires remain at the bottom of the list of pledges. Collectively, the pledges divide evenly between the four broad categories of Transport, Waste, Energy and Food.

4. Compassionate Living: The Ahimsa Project and Ethically Pure Milk

The goal of the Ahimsa Project is to change the British Hindu community’s attitudes to agriculture and their purchasing patterns from those dominated by concerns for cost and value (cf. Figure 1) toward those based on ethical and religious purity [41]. Its target is current practice in the UK dairy industry, which currently treats cows like milk machines. Here, dairy cattle calve when they are two years old, are milked 2–3 times daily for 10 months and then rested for 2 months ahead of the next calving. In the UK, the process is repeated up to four times before the cow is killed—having lived less than 8 years of a 17–20 year lifespan [42,43]. Male calves are usually slaughtered within 24 h of birth. Those cows that survive suffer. Britain’s Farm Animal Welfare Council (FAWC) [43] has criticized the levels of lameness (21%) and mastitis (20%–40%) among dairy cows and argues that more concern should be given to animal health and welfare rather than merely milk production. The situation is similar in the USA [44].

Previously, the most advanced thinking about dairy production favored organic production, which avoids the massive doses of medical antibiotics and the stimulants used in conventional farming and that allows cows more room and better access to pasture. However, organic production does not avoid the fundamental problem that production is subsidized by premature slaughter. Heroes of the Western world such as, Albert Einstein, may have avowed that “If a man aspires towards a righteous life, his first act of abstinence is from injury to animals”; or, like Leonardo da Vinci, have linked the murder of animals to the murder of humans. Mahatma Gandhi also pointed out: “Cow-slaughter and man-slaughter are...two sides of the same coin” [45] but such thoughts remain outside the mainstreams of social thought. However, there remains room for a still more compassionate style of milk production, one based upon ethical purity as well as chemical purity.

It is said that Sri Aurobindo argued that “Life is life—whether in a cat, or dog or man... The idea of difference is a human conception for man’s own advantage” [45]. So, the need is for a form of dairy production that respects life and that produces slaughter-free milk, where no cows, calves or bulls are harmed, where all are allowed to roam on open pasture and all are protected for their whole natural life. The Sanskrit term for non-harming is Ahimsa, so the need is for Ahimsa milk production. The mission of the Ahimsa project is to make Ahimsa “slaughter-free” milk a reality and establish sustainable dairy farms in Britain that give people a real ethical choice.

Sadly, animal welfare remains a neglected dimension in sustainability thinking [46]. Rawles suggests that the “downright resistance to including animal welfare” in the sustainability agenda could arise because it is seen as weakening the “apparently value free, hard-nosed objective credibility” of the sustainability message [46]? For example, an anonymous peer reviewer of this paper wrote: “there is nothing particularly sustainable about having old/male cows put out to pasture, to continue producing methane and not be used for any purpose. That is not a good use of land, nor is it a practice that will help reduce environmental impacts on the planet”. The statement demonstrates the chief obstacle to the achievement of a sustainable world, which concerns less the well-being of cows and more that of the human mind, specifically, its narrow materialism and lack of compassion for fellow creatures [47,48]. Of course, this project is not about cows, it is about humans; it is an Ahimsa Project—it is about compassion and non-harming. As Eknath Easwaran notes: “it is necessary to take sustainability a step further into the place where our environmental problems begin: the mind... The environment crisis is not a separate, isolated concern. It is connected with all our attitudes, conscious and unconscious... until these change, we will go on damaging the environment, no matter what surface changes we make” [48]. Easwaran suggests: “Let’s simply post a question mark on the door of the mind... Who goes there? Are you a friend to all life? Do you contribute to my health and the health of all creatures? If so, you may pass...” [48]. Similar ideas are found in the Buddhist tradition, Stephanie Kaza asks: “How can we find a way to offer kindness that will reduce the suffering of trees or birds or people on the land? How can the practice of kindness make life more sustainable...?” Reducing harm is internal work for one who wants to be a good “econeighbour” [49]. Thich Nhat Hanh adds; “Because we are not taking care of the Earth, we have both become sick... we can heal ourselves and heal the Earth as well” [50]. Kate Rawles concludes: “Compassion for others, and resistance to using others—human or non-human—merely as resources, is a fundamental value that underpins sustainable development in its fullest, most constructive sense. In my view, this is the only sense of sustainable development worth fighting for” [46].

The truth is that few sustainability measures are without environmental cost. Consider the wind turbine, each contains >160 tons of material, including 5–10 tons of copper, just 18%–31% of which is recyclable [51], as well as unsustainably large amounts of some Rare Earths, already in critically short supply, such as Neodymium. Even in energy terms, the payback for each turbine can be equivalent to 3.4 to 8.5 months of production. [52]. The point is that even a flagship green energy technology like wind farming has environmental costs and, in terms of the need to change human attitudes, is no more than a “holding action” [53]. The Ahimsa project, however, while it also has costs, tackles the far deeper human problem of lack of compassion and the need to shift human consciousness toward more “life-sustaining” patterns [53].

Of course, the Hindu interest in protecting the “Sacred Cow” is simply a cliché in many minds; so, perhaps, its deeper significance merits exploration. Ultimately, this emerges from the ancient traditions of Vedic pastoralist communities for whom herds were the livelihood. Today, Sri Krishna is worshiped as a cowherd boy, Gopala, and as Govinda, the Lord of the Cows, the vehicle of Lord Shiva is the bull, while in the iconography of triune teacher-deity, Sri Dattātreya, a cow represents the Earth [54,55]. One of the most ancient hymns of the Rig Veda addresses the Goddess of the Earth as “Pṛthvī” rather than Bhumi. The Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam (Bhāgavata Purāṇa) 4.17.1 to 4.17.36 and 4.18.1 to 4.15.28 explains why [56]. The story concerns the Vishnu Avatar, Pṛthu, appointed Mahārāja during a famine

caused by the Earth's with-holding of grains in protest at the poor behavior of its people. Pṛthu Mahārāja chastises the Earth, manifested as a cow, and she relents. Pṛthu, then, organizes the milking of the Earth; each species of life presents its best as the calf and milks whatever it needs for its well-being. In gratitude, Pṛthu adopts the Earth as his daughter, hence, the name Pṛthvī. The point is that, in the Hindu mind, the cow represents the Earth, the two are inseparable.

From 2010 until 2012, the Ahimsa Project message and early progress reports were communicated at Janmashtami (and other British Hindu Festivals) through the “Story of Milk” tent. This was organized around the teachings of Mahatma Gandhi, who argued that “The greatness of a nation and its moral progress can be judged by the way it treats its animals” and ISKCON's founder acharya, Srila Prabhupada, who advised: “By His personal example Lord Krishna wanted to teach us the value of protecting cows... Therefore, God's gifted professions for mankind are agriculture and cow protection” [57].

Originally, the “Story of Milk” was another awareness-raising exhibition (Figure 5). Its aim was to influence festival goers' milk purchasing habits towards something with greater compassion for the welfare of cows. Its specific objectives were to introduce the concept of slaughter-free milk, to encourage participants to commit to buy organic milk only, and to becoming vegetarian. Later, it also became a vehicle for the marketing of Ahimsa milk.

Figure 5. Ahimsa “Story of Milk” tent (Photo Sheila Chauhan).



The tent has three main areas. The first is devoted to consciousness-raising and holds three huge displays. The first links the wishes of Sri Krishna to the welfare of cows. Two more graphically contrast factory farming and organic farming methods. Pivotal is a five-minute video, hosted by a UK television star, that describes the qualities of the three types of milk [58] and a small drama, enacted by costumed volunteers, depicting the plight of cows from the perspective of the cow. The second area contains small workshop rooms, where participants listen to details of the Ahimsa projects and where, those who so wish, can discuss their response. Offered responses include opportunities to sponsor the project

and to pledge to purchase Ahimsa milk, where available, and organic milk where not. Those who sign up are kept in touch by a blog and newsletter. The final area houses three tables, relating to Health, Environment and Welfare, which offer further information and published leaflets from various sources. Finally, outside the tent, participants—principally their children, are encouraged to demonstrate their commitment by moving a magnetic cow on a display in front of the tent from a “factory farm area” to an open field, so symbolically freeing a cow from its suffering. There is also a table selling mementos: cow gifts and trinkets to generate income and help offset project costs.

Funds are required because this project involves more than consciousness-raising. The intention has been to produce Ahimsa milk, to make the production of slaughter-free milk a reality by establishing a viable model demonstration farm, and to introduce an Ahimsa labeling and certification system, much like that used for other organic products. The aim is to create a beacon of good practice in animal welfare and help British people establish a more ethical lifestyle.

Of course, Ahimsa Milk has been produced for many years at the UK’s Bhaktivedanta Manor Temple farm in Watford [59]. However, production is small and sufficient only to supply the temple and its residents. The Lotus Trust’s ambition is to make Ahimsa Milk available to the wider community.

The first Janmashtami “Story of Milk” exhibitions proved the existence both of deep interest and a potential market within the UK’s Hindu community. The challenge was then to find a farm partner capable of producing a reliable supply of Ahimsa Milk. After much deliberation and a false start that set the project back 5 months, support came from the Director of the UK’s Soil Association, which operates a kite-marking scheme for organic products, and an approach was made to the UK’s OMSCo (Organic Milk Suppliers Cooperative) [60]. OMSCo nominated the Commonwork farm in Kent, which has an organic herd of 250 cows, as a possible partner for a production pilot and, after another 5 months of negotiation, Commonwork agreed. Commonwork is an environmental charity that operates a study centre that explores local and global sustainability and that also runs an organic dairy herd [61]. The Ahimsa herd began with 8–10 cows within this larger organic herd. It was agreed that these select animals and their offspring would be protected for life; male calves would provide ox-power for farm work and milking cows retired from production at around 12 or 13 years.

A new “not-for-profit organization”, the Ahimsa Dairy Foundation (ADF) was launched in 2010 to manage this work [62]. The ADF observes the following principles. There will be no slaughter of cows/calves or bulls; the whole herd will be allowed open grazing and be protected for life. There will be a “pension scheme” and hospice for non-productive cows and bulls, which is newly opened near Leicester. Of course, finding useful roles for bulls is key to the project, which is seeking modern ways of using ox-power [63].

Beyond the establishment of a working, economically viable, model farm, the project hopes to continue to create additional sustainable Ahimsa dairies. Meanwhile, additional set-up costs, such as the costs of a separate Ahimsa Milk collection tank (Cost £24,000) were raised from private gifts and through local grants. An Ahimsa team player, Kap Monet, has worked out a draft economic model, which factors in a “pension fund” for post-production after-care of animals into the price of the milk. Finally, the project was launched, formally, in partnership with Commonwork and OMSCo on 6 May 2011, and commercial production began in August 2011.

Many new challenges have emerged. First was quality; the milk had more cream than supermarket milk and this put off some consumers, especially children. Despite pasteurization, the milk had a very

short shelf-life and this was a problem for customers. Eventually, this was overcome by using a cooling plate on the milking-line to cool the milk before it reached the Ahimsa storage tank and by encouraging customers to keep their refrigerators at 3 °C. By 2012, the life of the milk had increased to 5–6 days after bottle opening.

A key function of the later educational displays came to be to persuade people that the price of Ahimsa milk was not prohibitive and that relatively low supermarket prices were possible only because cruel, industrialized, milking methods were employed and subsidized by cow slaughter. Ahimsa milk might cost twice as much as that from the supermarket but its price reflected the true price of milk, where the welfare of cows and calves was protected [62].

Delivery also proved problematic and several outsourced partnerships failed to solve the problems. From April 2012, attempts were made to take over delivery and to get the milk to customers within 24 h, albeit at a cost. More recently, delivery by mail has been employed [62]. Today, the range of products has been increased to include ghee, paneer, cheese and yoghurt (curd), while work continues to solve the problems of milk processing and keep the price of the milk consistent at £2.25 a liter, plus £1.50 delivery, still, >twice the supermarket price.

However, Ahimsa milk is now available and the dream of slaughter-free milk production realized. There is now an alternative to milk produced for profit by an industry ruled more by economic efficiency than humanity or ethics. The hope is that, in time, the pilot project will evolve into a self-sustainable Ahimsa dairy and that this model will be replicated around the UK and Ahimsa milk will become widely available in shops. Mahatma Gandhi advised people to “Be the change you want to see in the world”—and this Ahimsa Milk project, with its attached educational initiative, is working towards that goal.

5. Discussion

Rabindranath Tagore wrote “We stand before this great world. The truth of our life depends upon our attitude of mind towards it—an attitude which is formed by our habit of dealing with it according to the special circumstance of our surroundings and our temperaments” [64]. Since Vivekananda, Hindus have seen themselves as part of a World Religion that should play its part in the councils, parliaments and campaigns of global inter-faith organisations. In a Globalised world, the increasing cosmopolitanism of India’s diaspora communities has led to the production of foreign-born young people with a new global consciousness [65]. Equally, it has produced, outside India, a new internationalised Hindu religion, which acts both as a hub for community identity and as the wheel for expressing larger ambitions for a better and more caring future world; one that better expresses Hindu Dharma [66].

This case study began with ARC/UNDP Interfaith project “Many Heavens One Earth; Faith Commitments to a Living Planet” [12]. This engages the world religions in preparing plans for a sustainable future. The argument is that faith commitments, which support an individual’s aspirations to be a better person, are keys to a sustainable future, where that future depends on the responsible collective behavior of individuals. While many traditions have aspects that involve retreat from the material world, many more have aspects that involve doing good works within the world. Of course, some religious concern supports action in the world that is sectarian, self-promoting, destructive, and makes Newspaper headlines. However, much more common, if less newsworthy, are those many

positive actions for social and sometimes environmental causes that promote the relief of suffering of humans and others. Gary Gardner looks forward to a new “deeply relational” ethic that “reclaims community and embraces the natural world” [67]. In Hinduism, the paths of karma yoga and bhakti yoga extend religious concern to positive intervention in the world.

One physical manifestation of this is the Bhumi Project, the outcome of a first and unique cooperation between leading components within the British Hindu community. As with the larger Interfaith movement, this cooperation demonstrates that shared concern for the global environment can bring people together across the boundaries of doctrine and sectarian belief. The Bhumi Project has two important two dimensions. The first requires religious leaders to set a good example to their devotees by greening temples and festivals, something easier in the Hindu diaspora where temples often act as cultural and community centres. The second advocates compassionate living to the communities themselves and contains the notion that Hindus can set a lead to modern society by living up to their aspiration to treat the Earth gently, as advocated within many morning prayers.

Meanwhile, the Bhumi project is still struggling to gain traction. It has been given dramatic launch events in the USA and Kenya and remains active in India’s Green Pilgrimage Network. However, it remains strongly reliant on a small number of funders and the energy of a very small number of core staff. Currently, while its existence is well known throughout the Hindu environmentalist community, while several temples use its umbrella for their own sustainability initiatives, and while it represents a groundswell of concern, especially among the younger generations in the diaspora, long term survival in its current form is far from certain.

“Karma to Climate Change” (K2CC) and the Ahimsa Project are two local campaigns that serve the Bhumi project’s wider goals. K2CC emerges from the wishes of young people of the British Hindu diaspora for their community to demonstrate a more sustainable lifestyle. The campaign uses a tented, interactive exhibition, originally developed for the Janmashtami celebrations in Watford, UK, to link pro-sustainability behaviour with scriptural texts and the concept of karma. Making a pro-sustainability lifestyle change is advocated as a devotional act, which may be reinforced by making a formal pledge to God [17,30]. Survey results show the approach’s limits and indicate that participants are open to new ideas but tend to pledge to do better those small things already done well rather than make major lifestyle changes. The project relies for its effectiveness on the Hindu tradition of renunciation and the making of vows on holy days as well as the commitment that most Hindu devotees demonstrate to self-purification [68].

The Ahimsa milk project feeds from the Hindu community’s fundamental reverence for cows, which in Hindu tradition symbolise the Earth, and the innate anxiety that arises from turning a blind eye to the treatment of cows by Western Societies [69]. The activity also has sustainability implications since the global costs of beef production to the environment would require an offset tax of 4%–9% of unit cost [70]. While few Hindus would contemplate eating beef and most abhor cow-slaughter, most use milk produced by the standard commercial methods of the West, which emphasise economics ahead of cow welfare, uses cow slaughter to control costs [71]. The Ahimsa campaign, using similar principles to K2CC, links the welfare of cows to scripture. It also exposes the ethical problems inherent in current dairy farming practices, which are subsidised by cow slaughter, as well as by massive hormonal and antibiotic treatments, and it encourages participants to pledge to obtain their milk products from places that treat their animals better—such as organic farms. However, this project

goes one step further. It sets out on the rocky track of creating a real alternative and has begun the production of Ahimsa, slaughter-free, milk, which is currently available on subscription. This work, in itself, is proving “a learning experience” on the realities of economics and ethics for all involved. However, already, two other organisations have begun to offer high welfare milk products.

Meanwhile, the project is struggling to cope with the problems of connecting would-be customers with its produce and with demand peaks at festival times. It has a core cadre of committed supporters but has not yet the capacity to meet existing demand. However, there is already evidence, albeit anecdotal, that Ahimsa project presentations have encouraged people to rethink their milk purchasing habits and, if they remain discouraged by the high costs of ahimsa milk, have at least shifted towards buying organic. Ultimately, the main impact of the Ahimsa project may not be reflected as much by actual sales as by its success in raising consciousness of the issues at hand, not least the issue of compassion towards other living creatures. The Ahimsa project is another small step on the road to developing a deeper and more compassionate way of life, which is the key to living gently and sustainably with the Earth [48,53].

6. Conclusions

Learning how to live within the means of our planet is the greatest challenge that faces humanity in the centuries ahead and its demands are certain to transform the way that societies are constructed in the future. In this future, there will be a need for all people to reconstruct their lives in the terms of Global Citizenship, to measure daily decisions in terms of their global impacts, and to restrain their desire for things that will add to the burdens of the Earth. Here, the World Religions have a major role to play. Since care for the Earth is a fundamental aspect of most belief systems and since most adherents have the ambition to become better people through the guidance of their religion, all that needs to be done is for religious leaders to highlight the pro-sustainability aspects of their teachings and provide community leadership. The case studies included here focus on the Bhumi Project, which is one of many interfaith initiatives under the “Many Heavens, One Earth” initiative of ARC/UNDP [12,15,16]. This originated within the Hindu community of the UK and has since become an international initiative that promotes greening temples and worship, as well as promoting compassionate living within the temple congregations, so building upon the special role of many Hindu Temples outside India as foci for community welfare and cultural identity. Examining two sample UK-based community education events highlights both the problems and potentials for promoting pro-sustainability causes within the Hindu community. The consciousness-raising “Karma to Climate Change” (K2CC) campaign encourages participants to make pro-sustainability lifestyle changes as a religious vow [17,30]. It also illustrated both the need to promote “green energy” provision within the community and highlights the patterns of behaviour that it is unwilling to change, such as long-haul travel for family and pilgrimage purposes (Figure 1). The second “Ahimsa project” also demonstrates how consciousness raising can also lead to applied research and development, as those involved strive to find new economic models for the self-sustainable production of slaughter free milk and, in the process, promote a more compassionate way of living with the planet.

Acknowledgments

An early version of this paper was presented to the “*National Conference on Reorienting Geography Education and Training for Sustainable Development in India*”, Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi, UP, India, 29–31 October 2012.

Author Contributions

The authors provided equal contributions to the production of this paper. Sita Rama das provided overall leadership, spiritual direction and much of the Ahimsa project text. Sheila Chauhan undertook the applied and conceptual research and development work for the K2CC and Ahimsa Festival displays. Martin Haigh undertook data analysis and preparation of the final text of this paper.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest. However, the authors are all supporters of the Lotus Trust; Martin Haigh is Technical Advisor to the Bhumi Project.

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