

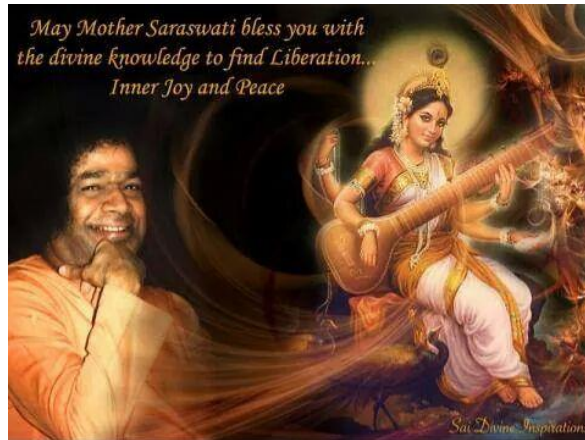


Sathya Sai International Organisation

South Africa Zone 9A - Region 92
National Devotional Wing Coordinator

Email: rauthav@gmail.com

Cell: 0833893967



“Where my devotees sing, there I install Myself”. [1960.9.27] Sathya Sai Baba

“Group devotional singing has a different purpose from silent individual prayers. It is a Mutual effort of spiritual practice to overcome the six foes of man: lust, anger, greed, attachment, conceit, and hatred”. [1975.4.1] Sathya Sai Baba

“Singing the name by a group of people can help the process of liberation not only for the members of the group. It will benefit those who listen and even those beyond the circle of listeners —the whole world can benefit from the vibrations”. [1982.1.26] Sathya Sai Baba

Loving Sai Ram Dearest Bhakthas,

Pray that this communication finds you all in a blessed space. Over the past 2 and half years(since the implementation of the standardised bhajan format), I have been receiving numerous calls from regional and centre devotional convenors in regards to the pertinence and practicality of what is being advised as a standardised format. The standardised format as per the Operations manual for the international organisation outside of India is a guideline and not a prescription in the order provided.

The first question we should ask ourselves is; what is the Thursday satsang called? It is called GROUP DEVOTIONAL SINGING (GDS) as per the 9 point code of conduct. The format for GDS that takes place in Prasanthi every day is a simplified one. Start with 3 Oms, Bhajans, Samastha Loka and Divya Arthi. Looking back in History, Swami gave talks on special occasions or allowed speakers to talk for special events. The GDS is preceded every morning and afternoon by Vedic chanting which is separate from the GDS. The main thing to be kept in mind is the very purpose of singing the Bhajans - communion with the Divine.

Prayers are very important and must be done before you start Bhajans. Make your chanting team (for chosen chanting is to be done [108 namavalli, vedam, gayathri and Saithree mantras, stotras etc.] to be

conducted before the group devotional singing) to arrive earlier and choose to place all your chanting in the space preceding Bhajans as this will help sanctify the environment as is done with Vedam in Prasanthi. Singing should be done non-stop without interruptions so that the devotees can submerge themselves into the vibrations being created by the Bhajans.

This brings me to the queries and practicality of the provided format as per below table

1. 3 *Oms*
2. Devotional songs (30 min.)
3. Prayers (optional)
4. 3 *Santhis*
5. Meditation (optional)
6. Prayers (optional)
7. Spiritual talk (optional)
8. Study circle (optional)
9. Announcements (optional)
10. Prayers (optional)

The format to re-iterate once again is for the International parts of the organisation. The challenges faced in the western and European countries or all countries outside of India is that dharma of employment has to be fulfilled in order to fulfil the dharma of a father/husband or provider. Therefore balancing time between active participation in the centre/organisation – work & family requires some time management. To this end you will find in the above format that every activity (which is normally a stand-alone activity) after the 3 shanti's is marked optional. You will also notice that **point 3** is also optional.

So in reality **points 1, 2 and 4** are the core of a Thursday GDS platform at a centre or regional level. The numbering of the activities in the format bears no order to what is being prescribed. As stated above, point 3 prayers can be chanted before the start of the Bhajans which for the purposes of the busy lives we lead can be followed by silent sitting or meditation (point 5) to calm the devotees down from the hustle and bustle of having to rush home and then make their way to Bhajans. Bhajans can then start after that calming period so that everyone is focused and concentrating on the Bhajans.

In so far as **Point 8** is concerned, the same will apply to activities of study circle. It is a time intensive process and cannot be mixed with Bhajans. The spiritual base of a devotee is built around “regular study of spiritual literature with special reference to Sai teachings”. Of recent the 5 mandates from Prasanthi Council requires the organisation to provide for this activity for the devotee to be exposed to the various literature so that they could grow themselves personally (Jnana yoga). Swami further re-iterated the need for all of us to read up on leaders lives and learn thereof. You will find at the end of Mahavakya of

leadership stories on various leaders of the world. To combine this activity with bhajan singing and distribute the time between the two only defeats the purpose of what we would want to achieve. Please have the study circle session outside of the allocated hour for Bhajans. Also include meditation into the study circle as practice which will create the platform for the daily practice at home. Do study circles on meditation and demonstrations will help the devotees a lot. Let devotees enjoy a full bhajan session.

Point 7: Spiritual talks are a very important component of spiritual inspiration and refreshing but, relative to the events and functions being celebrated. Even the summary of a study circle that has taken place would suffice. Time discipline is important. One can go as far as using video clips with inspirational and motivational content for those 5 minutes.

Time planning

The activity of study circles can be combined with a host of activities. Considering the time constraints devotees may have in balancing work, family and organisation. If you have bhajan practice on a certain day...look at having a study circle before or after the bhajan practice so that you have two activities on one day. If you have a Sunday morning program of omkar, suprabatham, nagarsankirtan; then consider a study circle to be included. Use the concepts of study circles for the spiritual talks as they will give the devotees a taste of what topics are being discussed and encourage more devotees to attend study circles. So in essence look at capitalising on activities to feed the spiritual talk with content.

Point 9: Announcements are very important. But equally important is the communication at the centre from region to devotee. It is imperative that there be an information officer that can work with the region and national to filter the pertinent announcements to every single devotee. For this to take place a database of all devotees' details must be kept and a weekly communique (mailing group) created to send to the devotees before the GDS session. If these email communications go out to the entire database then announcements can become that much easier as there will be no need to dwell upon long drawn announcements. It is also important to know those devotees who do not have emails so that copies of the announcement can be printed for them and an announcement board in the centre also updated. It is also important to note that devotees in some cases are oblivious of the announcements and are not receiving them. This is a sin committed by ourselves if we are not disseminating the Global and National announcements.

Many queries were also presented in regards to children singing and chanting. This is a very important part of forward planning. Children will be the future of the organisation. In the cases where SSE or Balvikas teachers are teaching children to sing; attention must be paid to the quality of the voice, the child's ability to maintain rhythm and pitch (Shruti) and the nature of the voice. Children can be trained to sing Bhajans to the highest level. It is the way they are taught. It is good for parents to consider sending their children to

a music guru to train them and prepare them for the bhajan sessions. Centre Devotional Coordinators can arrange for a GDS session to be sung by the children only. In the event where a child is of the correct quality to sing with the adults, that can be allowed at the discretion of the Devotional Coordinator. We should manage this closely as it is not our role to create expectations and upset children who are the future of the organisation.

SUMMARY AND WAY FORWARD

Simplicity and purity is the most important components for a successful GDS session. In order to avoid debates and negative emotions, let us keep the format of Bhajans to the basic. That basic format is as follows:

- 3 Om's
- Bhajans (50 minutes. If there is a talk 45 minutes)
- Om tat sat
- Announcements
- Divya Arthi
- Samastha Loka
- Vibuthi (Sanskrit or English)
- Leave silently with the playback of recorded Saithree

The Thursday program/satsang per design of the centre can be as follows:

- Chanting session prior to GDS (optional) (Vedam, mantras, stotras etc)
- Some Centres do Hawan prior to GDS (optional – allowing for starting time to not impact the starting of GDS).
- Minimum of 3 minutes of silent sitting/meditation prior to GDS (optional to settle down and be ready for GDS)
- GDS time can only be reduced in the event of a special speaker (***national council or international as will be arranged by National Council or with permission from National Council. It is imperative to note that speakers outside of the organisation or from other regions or provinces or who have held positions in the organisation need to be agreed upon by the National Devotional Wing Coordinator if a centre or region requires them to talk and this protocol cannot be deviated from. If they are required to speak at a centre, we need all requests to be sent in writing to the National Devotional Wing Coordinator 2 weeks prior. The speaker's previous roles or positions do not warrant an automatic agreement to be able to talk in the organisation. We also need to be cognisant of the devotees purpose in attending GDS for their personal journey and speakers with negative messages should not be allowed to address the devotees.***)

- GDS time can be altered for the special purpose of the centre in conducting a survey at the centre for the collection of devotee information; but this must be only conducted after the GDS session so that the vibrations are not impacted.

A summary of all devotional wing activities that the coordinator is accountable for are listed below:

- a) Bhajan and Bhajan Practice
- b) Bhajan Practice (in conjunction with National Music Team)
- c) Study circle workshops (in conjunction with National Study Circle team)
- d) Study Circles and the rosters
- e) Cleaning and setting up of centre for satsang (afford the devotees the opportunity and create a roster)
- f) Library and books (coordinate jointly with other coordinators)
- g) Celebration of all spiritual and religious events as per calendar
- h) Morning Programs (omkar, suprabatham, nagar sankirtan)
- i) Sadhana Camps
- j) Spiritual Talks
- k) Communications that must be sent to all devotees in regards to devotional activities
- l) Hawan
- m) Vedam Chanting (in conjunction with National Vedic Chanting Team)
- n) Group Devotional Singing
- o) Pilgrimage

The above activities cannot be managed alone and must therefore be carried out with a team (youth and ladies in particular) that can be used for coordination of the activities.

Arrangements must be made for registration prior to the Thursday program as the devotees arrive so that we maintain records of attendance. It will also allow the centre the opportunity to meet new devotees and provide them with the necessary material on how the organisation functions. Newcomers' corners are very important and attention should be paid to this aspect. Some devotees are not receiving this attention and are calling upon national council to be assisted. This is the role of the centre and is part of the operation manual for centres.

Having visited many centres, we find that there are no sevadals at the doors to receive, welcome and guide devotees when they arrive. This is also an important component of making sure that the devotees (especially the newcomers) feel welcomed.

National Team Details

NMT:

Malcolm Moonsamy (NATIONAL)	malcolm.shivakumar1@gmail.com
Shane Coopsamy - KZN	shane.sai999@gmail.com
Keshree Pillay - Gauteng	keshree.pillay@gmail.com
Pavan Kondiah - Gauteng	pierrekondiah@gmail.com
Prashanti Chetty – Gauteng	prashanti.chetty@gmail.com
Akshay Kamath – WC	aksai87@gmail.com

NVCT:

Raithan Govender	ray_govender@yahoo.com
Jeron Moodley	jeron.moodley@vodacom.co.za
Kavir Daya	kavirdaya@gmail.com

National Study Circle Team:

Niren Yenketswamy	nirenyenketswamy@gmail.com
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We look forward to your esteemed participation in ensuring that the GDS is made to be a platform of heaven on earth and is able to transport the devotee to spiritual bliss.

With Sai Love and Light

Ravi Thaver

SSIOSA: National Devotional Wing Coordinator

Malcolm Moonsamy

Deputy National Coordinator

