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Mr Shivanand Rai has organised camps and workshops for Hindu youth, given talks on Hinduism and taken part in and organised interfaith sessions.

SHIVANAND RAI

Asking questions is important

Questions about the numerous deities of the Hindu pantheon come hurtling at Mr Shivanand Rai, 24, when he speaks at interfaith sessions.

Why are there so many gods and goddesses? Why does Goddess Kali look so fierce? What is the position of women in Hinduism?

The final-year business management student at the Singapore Management University says many of the questions are asked not only by people of other faiths but also by Hindus themselves.

There is much they want to know about a religion which does not have a founder and has several scriptures interpreted differently by various religious leaders.

To provide answers, Mr Shivanand reads up about the religion as much as he can and talks to established Hindu leaders.

There are many idols, he explains, because different individuals relate to God differently and this allows them to fully express their devotion.

In the Hindu epics, women have empowered roles, he says.

In the Hindu classic, Mahabharata, Princess Draupadi is staked in a dice game by her husband Prince Yudhisthira. When he loses to the enemy, she enters the court and asks if she was a mere piece of property to be gambled away.

"A war was fought over the fate of Draupadi. Were women really powerless or given a position of respect?" he asks.

He is also asked sometimes

about the Hindu view on homosexuality. His reply is that there are references to transgender issues in the Mahabharata.

In one Hindu interpretation of the epic, Shikhandini is born a woman. She performed penance in the jungle and was transformed into a male, Shikhandi, who was trained to fight battles.

He is often asked why he does not eat meat or drink alcohol. This is a personal choice, explains the son of a retired pilot and a housewife. He adds that although the consumption of alcohol is frowned upon in many Hindu texts, it is served to the deity in the Kala Bhairav Temple in the Indian state of Madhya Pradesh.

He has organised camps and workshops for Hindu youth, given talks on Hinduism at the Islamic Religious Council (Muis) headquarters and taken part in and organised interfaith sessions.

Last year, he visited Beijing and Hong Kong as a member of the Inter-Religious Organisation's youth group. The aim of the visit was to promote dialogue among people of different faiths.

"Asking questions in a frank but sensitive manner is important if people from different religions are to understand and accept each other's differences and similarities," he says.



Shivanand Rai fields questions on his Hindu faith