

SAVE YOUR CULTURE

By Stephen Knapp

After touring the area of Northeastern India in late 2002, I can more easily understand the value of the culture of that region, and the need to protect and preserve it. The people of the area are some of the nicest, simplest, and most friendly people I have ever encountered. They show a high degree of respect toward others and for life itself. It would be a real shame if that should ever change.

On the other hand, I come from America, a land rich in facility, technology, wealth, business, global enterprises, and the desire in most everyone to climb the social ladder to increasingly better positions and higher pay. It also has the high crime, the pollution, as well as the selfishness, competition, lack of respect for others, and the impersonal relationships that come with such an environment. Now I ask you, is this real progress? Is this the kind of progress we should be making? Obviously, as we can see from the results of the economic difficulties the whole nation is facing in 2009, it does not always provide the kind of results we expect from it.

We have to have the foresight to see that opulence without culture and time for introspection leads to a shallow life, even a meaningless life. These days in the West, people look for culture, but since America is so young, we have to look for it from outside our borders. And people in the East may be surprised that Westerners often look toward them for culture. Westerners often look to the East for a deeper understanding of life, of who they are, and to learn what is their connection with the universe and God. There are more Westerners than ever before who practice yoga, study Eastern philosophy, and who are adopting dietary and health disciplines of the East for improving their lives. So the people of India should not think that giving up their own culture or spiritual path to adopt some new technology or Western religion is going to be the answer to their problems. That is not the way it works.

As I have traveled all over India, I have seen that one of the prime reasons for many of the social and environmental problems of the country is not the culture itself, but it is the distancing or even a disconnection from it. Remaining fixed in the true principles of your own indigenous culture, which has gone on for thousands of years, is often the means of keeping social problems to a minimum. But that also means staying educated in what your culture actually teaches and handing that knowledge down to younger generations so that it never becomes lost.

This is something that is important to understand. The Vedic and indigenous cultures of India are the oldest in the world. They have been developed by some of the wisest sages the planet has ever seen. This culture has given some of the most profound knowledge and deepest insights and understanding of life that mankind has ever known. It has existed for thousands of years. So who is to tell me that it is not good enough to last for

another several thousand years? Who is to tell me that its philosophy is backward or not up with the times? Do not accept another person coming to tell you that your own culture is not good enough, especially a foreigner who mostly wants you to convert to his Western form of religion, or who tells you that what you do is evil. Since when did it become evil? Who is he to tell you this when his own culture or religion does not have the many years of development as your own?

So don't think you have to give up your own culture in order to meet someone else's definition of being "civilized". Some of these Western religions have been a part of some of the worst wars and most brutal carnage in world history. And so many are divided into numerous sects, like the Catholics and the Baptists, all of which fight among themselves for converts. This should make you ask, how can unity come from such disunity? How can social harmony come from such disharmony? How is this a sign of advanced civilization?

So do not give up your culture or feel that you must convert to some other religion. Do not be tempted to think that your ways are backward. As my own spiritual master, Srila A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami would say, and as Vivekananda has also said, that we only need to combine the Western technology with the Eastern philosophy. This is what helps makes for a progressive society. Develop yourself on all levels, the material and the spiritual. Simply broaden your education. You don't have to give up your culture or spiritual path to do that. Merely learn and keep up with the modern developments in the world, and use the latest technology when it's applicable to further enhance your development in your economy, ecology, agriculture, transportation, communication systems, construction of roads, and in your health systems. But there is no need to become so influenced by it that you should feel that you need to give up your own culture, your own values, or your own spiritual practices in the name of progress.

So what should you do?? These are some of the solutions that can be followed not only by the people of Northeast India, but by people of the indigenous cultures from around the world.

SOLUTIONS

1. Practice your own culture and spiritual path. Be proud of what it offers.
2. Learn it deeply. Stay familiar with your traditions, rituals, and holy days, and pass it along to the youth.
3. Make sure the traditions and stories are recorded in books so they can be studied, remembered, practiced, and handed down through the generations.
4. Compile the books of prayers, songs, and stories, and with translations, and make them available to everyone.

5. Make the proper and benevolent images to worship where and when it is helpful.

6. Construct centers for prayer, worship, and practice. Such centers are the basis of preserving the culture and offering education in them.

7. Congregate together regularly, and be supportive toward one another.

8. Celebrate and enjoy your festivals, and know and discuss the meaning of them so they are not lost, and be willing to share the beauty and joy of them with all others.

9. In a friendly way, encourage others you know to participate as the basis of a united community.

10. Recognize the need to be pro-active in working to keep your culture. Join or form the organizations that help you preserve and protect your culture.

11. Establish the means or campaign that will assist people to realize the value of their own spiritual heritage.

12. Form political action committees to (A) make sure politicians are aware of your issues, (B) to make sure that they are representing you properly, and (C) to unite voters to bring in a better political representative for the indigenous culture or vote out those who are ineffective.

13. A group should be established in every town and village, if possible, to encourage people in this way.

14. Come together in groups regularly to participate in and discuss your culture, and develop the ways of defending it, especially when it is under attack or threatened by conversion groups who are under a foreign influence.

15. Also recognize the need for true harmony and unity, and know that a true religion or spiritual path does not create disharmony by dividing people into the "sinners" and the "saved" simply because of following different religions or spiritual traditions.

16. There must also be the maturity to balance the old traditions with any new modifications.

17. Unite with other organizations, groups, or village tribes who have similar interests and concerns for cultural preservation, and share information and support with other groups.

18. Start your own schools. Write or compile teacher's guide books on ways to teach children and others the culture. In this way, the culture will more likely be preserved and passed down through the generations.

19. Work on ways for economic self-sufficiency to be free from the need of support from organizations or religions that actually disdain your own original culture.

20. Followers of Vedic Dharma, Hindus, must be ready and willing to stand up and distribute knowledge to overcome misconceptions, false media reports, the false history of India, and any social or religious injustices that take place toward its people.

21. All foreigners who enter India, especially under a tourist visa, and are seen to be engaged in converting people from their own culture, traditions, and religions, which is illegal in India, must be reported to the government or other groups who will do something about this.

22. Know how to work within the legal system and do not be afraid to take organizations and people to court in order to resolve issues, or delay

their activities of denigrating and distorting the truth of your own culture. Bring in lawyers who are willing to help you and who share your concern.

23. Approach the wealthy who will help contribute to do something about these wrongs, and assist in various projects to facilitate the spiritual development of all Sanatana-dharmists and people everywhere.

24. Acharyas or local spiritual elders must also reach out to the villagers and tribals to show them welcome into the Vedic family, and that they are respected as members of the Global Vedic Community.

25. Encourage all Hindus and people of the indigenous traditions to participate in politics as a vote bank to oust the politicians who improperly represent the Hindu/Vedic community, and to vote in and support those political leaders who will. This must never be taken for granted. Also, learn how to run for office and get involved in politics to better defend your culture and bring particular issues to the fore.

26. Report or write to newspapers immediately when errors or unfairness or discrimination appear in their reports. Also, learn to write to the editor on these issues, some of which may get published to offer a different view.

27. When the government or politicians provide laws that favor minorities, or add holidays to the calendar year at the expense of the majority population in India, or refuse to recognize the holidays or traditions of the growing Indian community in countries outside India, then act in ways that will show support for your view and cause in order to make the government realize the importance to change what it is doing, and to provide more support for your own community. Be ready and willing to take such cases to court if necessary.

28. Learn to use and control the media to defend against any misconceptions of the culture. Be ready and learn how to establish radio stations, or radio and television shows and programs to broadcast what is of interest to the community, along with spiritual knowledge that is of interest to everyone. You may be surprised at how many people become regular listeners, or how you become the connection between people and the Vedic and indigenous tradition. This is a strong way to present correct conceptions and understanding of the culture, or keep people informed regarding what is actually happening in the district.

29. All Hindus and people of indigenous cultures must become more united in this way, and show their unity. They must also take a stand on important issues together, such as the Rama Sethu issue and others. I have often said, if the Hindus or Sanatana-dharmists could ever really unite, they would be a force that could change the world, and keep India as the homeland of a dynamic and thriving Vedic tradition. Remember, that the Global Vedic Community represents one billion people. That is no small number.

30. Hindus, Sanatana-dharmists, Vedic devotees, and people of the indigenous traditions must be proud to be what they are. They should not feel afraid or embarrassed to be Hindu, or from India, and must be able to defend their culture and correct misconceptions that other people may have. They must become a collective voice of one billion strong and join in the Global Vedic Community.

31. They can also participate in community activities, and open their temples to the increasing number of Westerners who are curious and interested in the Vedic culture and its traditions. The Vedic community is looking for support and new participants, and the West is the biggest marketplace for their culture than anywhere else right now. So, why not work together to provide enhanced spiritual knowledge for everyone? If we want *punya* or spiritual credit, there is no way of getting it faster than assisting others in their spiritual development. So, what are you waiting for?

32. Non-Resident Indians (NRIs) must also do their part to preserve, protect, and promote the true understanding of Vedic Dharma, especially in India, and contribute toward the well-being of India's future. They must also help support those who are working in a similar way, such as writers, lecturers, or Swamis who can help create awareness of current issues and find resolutions for them, and help wake up Hindus of India to become proactive for the protection of Vedic Dharma. It is not enough simply to work for enlightenment, but NRIs must also help to preserve the freedom so that we can continue to follow the path of enlightenment without obstacles.

If Hindus can work together in this way, this can certainly and quickly change the view and the support the world will have toward Hindus at large.

India's civilization is the oldest in the world. It has withstood the test of time when others have crumbled. It has weathered the onslaught of many foreign invaders and has still retained its religious and spiritual values, along with its original customs and traditions, which are unique in nature. It is the Eastern culture which has shown itself to be the most respectful and tolerant, allowing all forms of deities and spiritual paths to remain, and permitting the expression of every form of spirituality. It has given liberty of individual thought as the ultimate freedom, which other tyrannical civilizations have denounced, which has also brought about their own demise. Therefore, you have every reason to value what you already have and continue practicing it.

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