

Hindu Culture in USA

What is culture?

Today, we are discussing about why we need to have and maintain the Indian culture in the U.S. In order to discuss this topic, first we need to understand what culture is, and what are its characteristics. Culture includes belief, behavior, language, and the entire way of life of a particular time or group of people. Culture also includes customs, ceremonies, arts, inventions, technology, and traditions. The term also may have a more specific aesthetic definition and can describe the intellectual and artistic achievements of a society. Generally, a set of actions followed by this group helps the group to achieve harmony in their daily life. These sets of actions, or unwritten rules (norms), cultivate the people's thoughts and thus their behavior, thereby bringing about order in the society.

Generally, civilization and culture are used interchangeably. In fact, our civilization is what we use and our culture is what we live. In Sanskrit language culture is Sanskriti - derived from the two words - Samyak(best) and Kruti (product). So one may ask, "What product are we talking about?" The product is human beings and we have to learn to maintain high standards for ourselves. In ancient times our rishis have developed a set of thoughts over time that became part of our culture. Our Rishis developed symbols (pratiks) like Svastika, Aum, Kalasha, etc. to remind us of our rich heritage and our belongingness to our shared culture. These cultural ideas and thoughts are also maintained within our lives through celebrations of various festivals such as Divaali, Holi, etc.

Why is there a need for culture?

One may ask, "What is the need for culture?" You may look around and say I do not need a culture to survive. Look at the world today and everyone is doing his or her own thing and there is not much sign of culture in the world today. There is also the misconception about cultures being associated with wrongs being done in this world. We may associate one particular culture with a wrong and say I do not want to be a part of that.

However, one has to admit that a cultured person has a sort of aura around him/her. Like a fragrance this quality makes him/her attractive to others and people want to be around him/her. For instance, visit a park to understand this concept. In a park you will observe there are favorite places, like a small garden with beautiful and colorful flowers and there are places where there may be only some grass and maybe a bush or two. When you observe all the people who are in the park, you will notice that those who take pictures will be attracted to the spot where there are flowers. There they may take pictures of the flowers or may take pictures of their family and friends with the flowers in the background. Even though the unattractive part is part of the park, hardly anyone takes pictures there. Since the area is not cultivated it does not attract the crowd as the other colorful area did. Similarly, if a person is not cultivated, then his life will not be attractive and he would be isolated. So, you have to decide how you want to be perceived by others in the society.

All of us would like to be perceived and respected as a good Indian American, and not a confused desi.

Why Indian culture?

Most of us can agree that we do need some sort of culture. So the next question that arises is, “Why Indian culture?” You may say that I was born and raised in the U.S.A and I am going to live here the rest of my life. I am comfortable with my lifestyle and the Western culture. I do not need any other culture.

Whether one observes the Indian culture in U.S.A. or not, at least one has to be part of any one culture. Look at the U.S.A. to know that it does not have its own culture but it is a multi-cultural country. Cultures that all the immigrants brought to the U.S.A. are thriving. One sees Amish, Arabic, Hispanic, Indian, Jewish, Japanese, Chinese, etc. cultures in this country. So we must ask ourselves a few questions:

- Why am I going to abandon Indian culture and my Indian identity?
- What alternative culture would I want to become a part of?
- How do I know that the alternative culture is better for me than Indian culture?
- How long will it take me to learn about the new culture? How will I evaluate it?
- How long will it take for me to incorporate it into my life and how long will it take me to become a part of it?
- From whom will I learn about this new culture? Can I trust that this person or society teaching me has my best interests at heart?
- How can I verify what I learn?

What is the purpose of a culture?

A culture must be able to solve fundamental problems and challenges that a person faces in life. A culture must promote ideas like positive thinking, value based life, family values, unity, love, well-being of everybody, reverence for freedom, spiritual development, patriotism etc. Culture should also discourage vices like discrimination, addiction, drugs, alcoholism, violence, greed, etc. One can see many good qualities in American society like ingenuity, a positive can-do attitude, etc. However, today there is also an increase of intolerance, violence, hate crimes, greed, drug use, etc. One cannot make laws to keep everyone in line.

One can say the same thing about Indian culture and all of its failings in India. But one has to learn to separate the culture from its practitioners. In the past thousand years so much degradation has happened within India with foreign conquests that our true culture has been buried and as a consequence cultural values have eroded from our society.

Let us assume you have a very nice car, like a Lamborghini, that has been sitting unused for a while and it is covered with dirt and grime. What would you do? Would you throw it away and buy another car? Or would you clean it up, recondition it, and continue to use it. Think of another analogy, where the window has been left open in a bedroom and a lot of dust has blown through the window into the room and settled on the furniture. Do you throw away all the dusty furniture and get new furniture or do you clean the dirt away and keep the existing furniture? Similarly, our Indian culture should be examined and judged for its contents and not its current state in society. Again we should not judge the culture for the way it is practiced or not practiced. If the Indian culture satisfies all the requirements that one may want from a culture, then why abandon it?

What one sees in India

One may look at India today and see millions of people living below the poverty line who are starving for the basic necessities of life. If Indian culture is so great, how did this come about? India had not made any progress in the socially and economically for many years. Only with the opening of India to the world economy can we now see progress in India. So, with the help of Western influence, India is improving.

This seems to be a valid observation of the state of present day India. However, we should ask the question, “Did this degradation happen because we were following Vedic culture or because we strayed from it?”

To understand the state of affairs in India today, we should examine another culture. In what other culture do we see people that are powerful, progressive, wealthy and united in the whole world today? The answer is Jewish people, who have remained faithful to their culture. Jewish people are taught from childhood the importance of their culture. For example, during the cold war in Russia, when other foreign cultures were not allowed to be observed, Jewish mothers used to secretly teach the Hebrew language to their children at night using candlelight. We of the Indian culture have not even done that for our children.

What caused the degradation of the Indian culture?

We need to look at India’s heritage. India was the richest country on the earth until the time of British, in the early 17th century. Christopher Columbus was attracted by her wealth and that is why he set sail to reach India by sea. India has never invaded any country for the last several thousands of years of history. We were ruled for more than fifteen hundred years, until we achieved our freedom in 1947, by many foreign powers and emperors including the Moguls, Turks, Portuguese, French, and British. When the British initially came to India, they became curious about the Mogul invasion and so studied the history of India. What they noticed was that the Moguls invaded India sometimes in the 700C.E. but that the Moguls failed to overrun India. What the British learnt was that the Vedic culture was so strong that the people were able to contain the Moguls in the Northwest part of India. So the British broke down our progressive idealism and denigrated our great scriptures by intentionally misinterpreting verses and meanings. They then dismantled our tapovanas and gurukulas by confiscating the land they were on. In the face of this tyranny, our patriots fought for freedom for centuries risking their lives and treasures. Shivaji, Rana Pratap, Lakshmibai Rani of Jhaansin, Bhagatsingh, Gandhiji, Subhashchandra Bose are just a few of those heroes. Imagine the conviction in our culture these heroes had to risk everything they had including their very lives! That is what we want from a culture.

Present day Behaviors in our culture

One may argue that these are not old times and that the past is gone and we must deal with the present. So we must ask, “Do the values in Indian culture address today’s problems that every teenager, not only Indian but also American, faces?” One can see youngsters, like us, behaving very rudely with their parents and do not even listen to them. Inside the home we behave one way and outside of the home a completely different way. Most youngsters are not prepared to accept a ‘no’ and have little patience. Is this an example of Indian culture? Here again we have to understand that practitioners do not define the culture. It should be noted that in our culture any natural feeling is considered God’s gift, including temper. Only thing you should know is how, where and when to use it or channel it. We all have some temperament issues, but instead

of creating a problem for yourself and others, we should use it as a tool to change the world. In this way our culture teaches us how to use different tools like temperament (anger), excitement, jealousy etc. properly and effectively. Instead of becoming a problem for others by not listening, why can't we build such a character that people will listen to us, follow us, and respect us.

To give an example that will clarify this point is that of Nelson Mandela. After spending 26 years in jail for his noble thoughts, when Nelson Mandela was released in 1991, he refocused his anger and energy towards uniting his countrymen. As we know he is strong believer of Gandhiji's principles of ahimsaa, restraint and non-violence. Gandhi and Mandela are great, but there are other practical approaches to control anger for common people like us. Yoga and meditation, which are gifts from Indian culture to the world, can be used to work on our temperaments. They are pure ways of stress management without using any substances like alcohol, drugs, etc.

Use of Alcohol

One of the biggest pet peeves of the younger American born youth is the use of alcohol. They always ask, what is wrong with it. Everybody drinks it. It is made from nature, and has medicinal values. Even present day studies of the French, despite eating fatty foods, has lower cholesterol and lower incidences of heart disease. So what is wrong with drinking alcohol?

We should truly understand the effect of alcohol before making a sound judgment. Most people drink for joy but then become miserable. Think how many friends start drinking and end up fighting. People drink to relax but then become tense. People drink to clear their minds and instead become confused. Some drink to rest and fall asleep only to wake up exhausted. Alcohol is a very addictive substance. In the report about the French, they can eat less of the fatty food and eliminate use of alcohol. There is new research that warns women about the correlation between use of alcohol and development of breast cancer. Does one know how many fatalities in the U.S. drunk driving causes? It is roughly one death every half-hour, not to mention all the other issues, such as child abuse, spouse abuse, cancer, cirrhosis of the liver, etc. Obviously, alcohol is unhealthy for our well-being. The understanding that God is within me and is my active partner can make one realize that there is no place for garbage in my body. Instead of wasting yourself, why not channel your energies to fulfill your ambitions.

Indian parents in America

The first thing everyone notices about Indian families is that they have very high expectations of their children. People say that it puts undue pressure and stress on Indian kids. This can lead to students getting frustrated, distancing themselves from their parents, taking drugs, and even taking their own lives, because they felt that they had let their parents down. It seems that parents always believe that the Indian way of life is best, and that the American lifestyle is substandard and should not be followed. They view the American way of life in a negative light, and fail to see the positive aspects.

The second thing seems that most Indian parents are here only to make lots of money quickly. They seem to completely ignore their kid's interests and feelings. All the parents care about is their children getting good grades so that they can brag about how well their kids do to the other parents.

This does not shed a good light on Indian family values. It also seems that even if the kids are detached from their parents, it's OK as long as they are successful. Somehow that doesn't define success to others.

We need to understand that having high expectation of our children is not bad, it is only bad if it is done at the expense of everything else except money and “education”. Parents should teach children family, morals, values, principles and spiritual aspirations are just as important to life, it not more so. Parents need to teach about balance in the child’s life.

Our culture has recorded great examples including the lives of Raama and his brothers, the Paandavas and how they lived for one another, the life of Meerabai and selfless Savitri, etc. Parents should teach children about companies in U.S.A. Every company, big or small, has an objective, mission statement and plan to fulfill those goals. Then why should not one have a goal, vision and plan to accomplish the same in his life. Just think about these fundamental questions of life:

Who am I?

Why am I here? [What is my purpose in life?]

What is my relationship with God and the World?

Decision

An important thought we need to keep in mind, whether we adopt or shun our culture, is that we will be regarded as Indians in this society no matter how much we may try to disown our Indian identity. In my opinion it is very important to carry forward our heritage in a country that does not have its own native heritage. We have a lot to offer the world and as such learn about our culture.