Will the World Lose 90% of its Cultures?
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Indigenous People Ask For the Right to Exist

The Western world had long expected that 1992, the 500th anniversary of Columbus' landing in America, would be a time of unprecedented celebration. But the year went by and the party never started. Not even a postage stamp. What happened?

The world's conscience had begun to stir. Native Americans, or "Indians," as Columbus named them, together with other indigenous peoples of the world, had begun to speak out, to ask a cruel world to ease up and allow them a few rights, including the right to exist. For them, Columbus' arrival was nothing to celebrate. It set off a holocaust still going on today, "500 years of horror," as they put it.

Indigenous means native. More specifically, it refers to original inhabitants of a locality who, by virtue of language, race, culture, territory traditionally inhabited etc., constitute a distinct people - distinct from others who came later and encompassed, shared, or took their territory. There are today 300 million indigenous people living in more than 70 countries 011 all five continents. They are as diverse as the American "Indian," the Eskimo, the Australian Aborigine, the Ainu of Japan or the Saami (Laplander) of Europe. All are facing imminent extinction as peoples and living cultures.

Some sensitivity to their plight was shown when the 1992 Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to an indigenous activist, a Maya Indian of Guatemala, and when the United Nations made this the Year of the Indigenous People. "But," said Chief Oren Lyons [see sidebar], "these signs, positive as they are, are just 'lip service,' considering the awesome forces we're facing. We need more than symbolic gestures."

It is interesting - perhaps ominous - that these forces crushing out the world's oldest cultures, are the same ones menacing all of life on earth. "The accessible lands having been devastated," explained Alex Ewen, a Purepecha of Western Mexico and editor of Native Nations, "the remaining "wilderness' now comes under assault." Glades, plains, forests, snows and tundras that have been homes and motherlands for untold centuries are being systematically destroyed, holy sites desecrated. People pushed or lured off of their land generally disperse and become objects of misery, while protective measures, if they exist at all, are easily circumvented by crafty entrepreneurs.

To regain some control, many indigenous are now seeking self-determination - a modest measure of autonomy or full sovereignty, accompanied, in unfortunate cases, with armed insurrection, as in India. Most of Canada's 633 different indigenous groupings - one million souls in all - are demanding autonomy or full independence over territories covering the greater part of the country. Unlike the USA, Canada made very few treaties with the native population during its time of conquest, leaving huge holes in its "territorial integrity." And because Quebec's non-indigenous are also agitating, the situation is complex and unstable. Many predict important changes in Canada's future, even its breakup into several fully independent nations.

With 22 new countries appearing in two years, nations are nervous. This explains why, according to Anglican Archbishop Paul Reeves, a Maori (indigenous of New Zealand). "The UN is not deeply committed to helping the indigenous." To head off the threat, some governments are attempting to quickly transform their indigenous into regular citizens. "In 1972," explains John Mohawk. Native American activist, "the American government determined that no one born in Alaska after 1992 will be considered a 'native.' Thus, with the stroke of a pen, an entire population [Eskimo and Indians] was wiped out and all their property - which covered 80% of Alaska - was taken."

Malaysia legislated that its three nations of aborigines shall forthwith melt into the mainstream and convert to Islam, the state's official religion. Various enticements, such as free housing, plus vast deforestation, are removing the people from their habitats and forcing the merge. The intention is brotherly enough. But the consequence is the sudden end of these cultures, including the Senoi, whose profound knowledge about dreams was enriching the world.

India contains nearly one third of the world's indigenous people - 60 to 100 million of them (tabulations vary). No nation has more [see My Turn, p. 3 of this issue and HINDUISM TODAY, p. 1, March 1993]. Activists and sympathizers the world over regret India's inability to protect its own indigenous from exploitation and its "consistently negative position toward us." At a meeting of nations preparatory to the Rio Earth Summit of 1992, India took a leading role in "destroying our proposed statement on self-determination and territorial rights. The issue is most painful for India, we know, but if it is not resolved now, it will only come up stronger in the future," they said. India's obvious concern is for its territorial integrity, which is already strained by a variety of insurrections in several areas.

And how can the Hindu help? Activists and sympathizers frankly confided in HINDUISM TODAY that they had expected more help from this traditionally tolerant sector. Instead, they had often bumped into "airs of superiority," "cultural arrogance," and "indifference." B.M. Sinha of New Delhi said, "We must stop treating these people like animals."

There are Hindus who hope for serious rapprochement with the indigenous, pointing out the natural affinity between the two, being both ancient faiths and cultures, and sharing similar, if not identical, views of life. They feel that the Hindus could - and should - be a friend and rare ally to the indigenous. Forest dwellers figure in the pages of the Mahabharata and the Ramayana not as aliens, but as fellow countrymen, often friends and allies of the Pandyas or the exiled King Rama.

Indigenous peoples worldwide constitute some 5,000 distinct cultures, accounting for 90% of the world's variety of cultures. As they disappear, so do the experience, knowledge and wisdom they have accumulated over millennia. "We don't know the effect of this loss," said Alex Ewen. "We don't know the effects of losing species either, but we know it can't he good."

But, on this great wall of indifference there are a few small cracks - signs of a growing appreciation for the indigenous, as keepers of precious virtues which are in short supply elsewhere - strong spirituality, strength to survive, functional societies, ethics sensitive to all of nature, music, dance and ceremony, a realistic approach to life, tolerance, knowledge of herbs and natural medicine, freedom from stress, mystical knowledge and practical wisdom. Albert Gore, vice-president of the United States, in his book, Earth in the Balance, urges humanity to look into the

ancient cultures for answers to modern predicaments, implying that protecting these peoples is not only compassionate, it is also smart.

Noble Red Man, Lakota tribe Chief, USA, said to two whites seeking his wisdom: "While man came to this country and forgot his original instructions. We have never forgotten ours. It's time Indians tell the world what we know about nature and about God. You guys better listen. You got a lot to learn." Chief Oren Lyons of the Onondaga nation [see box], explains how "white man" has benefited from indigenous wisdom all along. Around 1000CE, a great spiritual being, "the Peacemaker," established a council of the wise to replace warring chiefs. This government - and that peace - endures to this day. He had planted a "tree" of spiritual power within the collective mind, Lyons explains, that the founding fathers of modern America tapped into. This gave them the force to make a great nation.

And now? "We're still here," says Chief Lyons. "The tree is still here - and growing. We see signs of it in our white brother's children sitting on our doorstep, looking for directions, wanting to be a part of us...We'll see, but we are ready to help however we can." It ought to be humbling to think that while a thousand minds are busy imagining what else to steal from them, these simple people stand ready, still, to freely share their most precious possession.

As to the essential difference between the indigenous and the others, Chief Lyons muses. "Well, we didn't develop the F-16. We didn't go in that direction. We're a people who sat under a tree for a long time. To talk about society, about the importance of community. Talk about law, about rules - how to live, here, how to live." This ability to sit in peaceful council, in powwow may be the indigenous peoples' most special art indeed, and the one the world needs most to learn.

Alex Ewen concluded, "It's time to sit down and see how, in a humane manner, we can proceed from this point. Where, realistically, do we want to go?" Is it such an impossible dream? Chief Lyons' people have been doing it for a thousand years, and it has worked very well. The key to successful powwows, according to Lyons, is to cultivate "the good mind," by giving up the urge to dominate and seeking agreement instead.

WHAT THESE EYES HAVE SEEN:

Truganini, when she was a girl, lived an extraordinarily simple and peaceful life among the 5,000 gentle people of the island of Tasmania, south of Australia. For 10,000 years, they had lived in total isolation. One day, Truganini saw the first Europeans walk ashore. Then, convicts came to colonize. A rowdy lot, they took slaves, rounded up women into harems and practiced abominable cruelties until, by the time this photo of Truganini was taken in 1876, she was the last one her people.

In the Global Forum of Religious Leaders and Parliamentarians on Human Survival, a good circle of wisdom may be forming. It meets every two to three years to seek sane directions for humanity. "This Forum is important because it is the first time that indigenous people's viewpoints are sought after and valued," said John Santos, a Mexican activist. It comes to order again in Kyoto. Japan, from April 18th to 23rd of this year.