

["The Indians are Coming"](#)

Category : [July/August/September 2008](#)

Published by dharmalingam on May. 31, 2009

Culture

"The Indians are Coming"

America's 14 Vedanta Societies face an immigration-induced identity crisis

Ever since the first center was founded by Swami Vivekananda in 1894 in New York, the country's Vedanta Societies have catered to a white American public with a deep interest in spirituality but a varying sense of the Hindu foundation of the teachings they love. Beginning in the 1960s, many Hindu immigrants from India to the US have gravitated toward the centers. They brought with them rituals, culture and culinary influences in what has been described as "Indianization"--to the joy of some Western members and the dismay of others.

The American Vedantist magazine, an independent publication not connected to the Vedanta Societies or the Ramakrishna Mission, tackled the issue head-on in their 2007 summer and fall issues. They asked readers to respond to the questions being raised at centers across the US: "Are Western Vedantists Hindu? Is Vedanta a universal philosophy independent of any particular religion, or is it a sophisticated form of Hinduism? Have the Societies become Hindu temples and cultural centers for a mostly Indian immigrant population? Does it matter?" Below are excerpts from the ten responses they published. Five favor the Indian influence, four are against and one is neutral.

William Page is an English teacher living in Thailand who has been connected with the Vedanta Society of Massachusetts since 1960, shares. "I have found Indian devotees to be charming, generous and hospitable people who are a delight to know. Not long ago I went down to visit the Ramakrishna Ashram in Penang, Malaysia, where the hospitality I received from the Indian devotees was so overwhelming it almost reduced me to tears. There is a proverb from the Taittiriya Upanishad (I: II, 2), Atithi devo bhava--'The guest is to be treated as God.'

"So if Indian devotees are coming to the American Vedanta centers, that's

wonderful. Give them a warm welcome and make them feel at home. Many of us will never have a chance to go to India and visit the holy places of our movement. Now India is coming to us!

"Sustained contact with Indian devotees and their culture will enrich us. It will broaden our hearts, our minds, our knowledge, and our waistlines. By making friends with Indian devotees, we'll be able to learn more about Sri Ramakrishna, his culture, and the people he associated with. We'll learn about schools of philosophy we never knew existed, and whole bodies of scripture, too. Some of us may develop an interest in Indian art, music, dance, literature, or languages. Best of all, we'll meet some really nice people. And the food will be fantastic.

"Vedanta is, after all, an Indian philosophy. There's no question of 'Indianizing' it, because it's already Indian. Maybe what's actually happening is 're-Indianization,' because for many years some American Vedanta centers looked and operated very much like Protestant churches. Let's not forget what Swami Vivekananda thundered so many years ago: 'I shall flood your Yankee land with ritualistic swamis!'"

An Anonymous Devotee voiced a different view: "As immigrant Indians came to America, after immigration laws were liberalized in 1966, they naturally gravitated to Vedanta Centers. There were then few places to remind them of home and to meet fellow countrymen. Today, forty years later, all or most of the Vedanta Centers in America have a large attendance of Indians. The Americans will find activities that they cannot relate to, pujas to many Gods and Goddesses, some of which they've never heard of. I envision that fewer and fewer Westerners will attend, till at last, the only ones will be a few American women in saris and dots on their foreheads.

"There is nothing wrong with having centers that focus on the needs of the Indian immigrants. But what is the primary reason for the Vedanta Centers in the US? Can the needs of Hindus and Americans be met at the same time in the Vedanta setting? The two populations have different problems. The Indian swamis are sometimes not aware that Americans have a different background, so they end up speaking as if everyone in the audience has the same issues as Indians."

Beatrice Bruteau of Atlanta, Georgia, an author and an editor of the American

Vedantist, writes, "Although Vivekananda is from India and was formed by Indian culture, he did not insist on Americans' adopting Indian cultural forms in order to realize the Formless. I think that we may safely answer the often-asked question, 'Are American Vedantists Hindus?' by responding 'Not necessarily' or even 'No.' That would depend on the individual, but would not characterize the nature of the Vedanta Societies. The sannyasin was supposed to keep moving and not take part in any particular cultural behaviors.

"In understanding Vivekananda's presentation of Vedanta, we need to say that American Vedanta is not intended to be another religion among the many religious institutions that we have in this country. It is not supposed to fulfill the social roles of the proper religious institutions. Religion was not Vivekananda's idea. We are not expected to adopt Indian dress or language or customs or religion."

John Schlenck, a musician, is secretary of the Vedanta Society of New York and Coordinating Editor of the American Vedantist. He offers: "Some would say that Vedanta in America was Hindu from the start, and why pretend otherwise. Vivekananda's universal spirituality was merely a liberal presentation of Hinduism.

"Others would suggest that there were practical considerations, such as a need for specific spiritual practices for the growth of spiritual life. Those Vedanta devotees who were either dissatisfied with the religions they were brought up in or who had no religious upbringing needed some specific forms of contemplative practice. Rather than arbitrarily inventing new forms, was it not more sensible to draw on the rich and varied store of Hindu practices, proven effective over the centuries?"

Steven F. Walker, a literature professor and an editor of the American Vedantist who has been associated with the Vedanta Societies of Boston and New York for forty years, points out, "As soon as Vivekananda arrived on these shores and faced an American audience that knew little about Vedanta, he tried to express its deepest insights in a language that could bridge the cultural gap immediately. This effort to adapt Vedantic thought to the American mind resulted in a thoroughly new and modern Vedanta, a reformed Vedanta of tremendous vitality. Without his American experience, Vivekananda's writings would have been very different, there is no doubt about it.

"Thus, in many ways, we Americans have a right to claim him as 'our' Swamiji. But this 'Americanization' of Vedanta, so crucial in establishing the originality as well as the persuasiveness of Vivekananda's teaching, also involved an introduction in depth to the best of traditional Indian culture: Sanskrit chanting, commentary on canonic Vedantic texts, spellbinding stories from Indian mythology and an irreverent view of Western cultural arrogance from an Indian proud of the roots of his own culture.

"From that point onwards, the presence of Indian swamis continuing Vivekananda's work in America involved a kind of acculturation on both sides, for the swamis and for their students: the swamis becoming more American; the students becoming more Indian."

Sister Gayatriprana, a monastic of the Vedanta Society of South California, states her opinion in unambiguous terms: "Vedanta is my belief system and what I am trying to live in practice. Does it make me a Hindu? In my own mind, the answer is no. I think of myself as a Vedantist, in the sense in which Swami Vivekananda used the word. The word does not imply any specific forms of religious observance. Swami Vivekananda himself felt that Vedanta is of universal significance, because it is a map, as it were, of the whole range of spiritual possibilities, covering the dualist through non-dualist positions, including all levels of consciousness which humanity has as yet manifested, and open to all possible forms of depth inquiry, including contemporary science.

"Then, what is the place of Hinduism? Swami Vivekananda himself defined Hindus as 'Indian Vedantists.' The people of the Indian subcontinent developed forms totally appropriate for their spiritual progress, ranging from shamanism to the most refined and abstruse philosophy."

William A. Conrad, a bio-physicist, is the president of Vedanta West Communications, the company that publishes the American Vedantist. He writes, "Shall our centers go full throttle on the path to 'Indianization'? Given my experience with Vedanta, I think that would be ill-advised.

"For about 45 years I have had a place at the back of our chapel in the Vedanta Society of New York. I have talked with many newcomers, asking people how they

had heard of us. Being an experimental physicist, I would record the answers. More than 50% percent of Western newcomers had heard of us from other Westerners who had been to one of our centers. However, in recent years most of the people who have come to us have found us by searching the Web. As the number of Westerners decreases, the number who can be informed by word-of-mouth in this way also decreases in a self-reinforcing loop.

"For me, the greatest thing Swami Vivekananda said was: 'Think for yourself. No blind belief can save you, work out your own salvation.' I have observed that Indians customarily do not challenge the swamis. As our centers become predominantly Indian, questioning types like myself will become rare indeed. This has already happened."

Anil Gupta, a reader, takes the issue humorously. In an opinion piece entitled "The Indians Are Coming! The Indians Are Coming!," he explains his perspective as an Indian immigrant. "I agree that the influx of Indian immigrants starting in the late 1960s (my family and I are among these culprits!) might have changed the character of the American Vedanta Centers to some extent. But I do not think it's the end of the world. Setting aside the problem of dwindling American presence at the Vedanta Centers, we need to discard our tunnel vision and look at the bigger picture. If we take into account the contributions these immigrants have made to the USA, I am sure all will agree that the overall outcome of this influx has been positive, and that, too, in the Vedantic context. Was not that Vivekananda's vision?"

In a letter to the editors, P. Shneidre also offers a lighter view. "One good friend goes to not one but two Vedanta groups, serving the devotees those well-known Indian treats--donuts! This is a far cry from Vedanta Societies becoming curry klatches; it is in fact part of the exchange of values that Vivekananda sought. Who can forget that Swami Vivekananda met Sri Ramakrishna only after his English teacher, a Scotsman, suggested it? Many Americans and Indians are becoming ready for Vedanta at the same time. And how could anything be more universal?"