

CULTURAL INCLUSION AND EXPANSION INITIATIVE OF SSIO-USA

Background

Prior to the National Council SSIO-USA meeting in January 2018 Regional Presidents received a survey soliciting information about the challenges and needs they were experiencing for which the National Officers might provide help. Among the major areas that the Regional Presidents requested assistance with was “Cultural Sensitivity” of Sathya Sai Centers in their regions. They reported that the vast majority of the center members in their regions were Americans of Indian Origin. Very few members reflect the majority of Americans of All Origins. They added that when Americans of All Origins reflecting the diversity of the local area visit a center they rarely return. In addition, many members who had been actively attending center meetings for a significant period of time, especially members who grew up in the local communities, stopped attending center meetings and functions.

The National Council responded to the request for assistance by initially selecting a committee of long-term SSIO-USA members of varied positions and experiences in the organization. The committee included some current and past national officers and other officer bearers, diverse in ethnicity, race and professional backgrounds. All committee members, some who asked to join, shared an interest in this topic.

Initial Exploration

The foremost goal of the committee was to recognize the scope of this situation and understand the reasons why so many Americans of All Origins leave after attending a Center meeting for a while, sometimes after a significant period of time, or who do not return after a first visit to a center event. The committee chose to invest time exploring why before addressing what can be done to reverse this trend.

After the first meeting that focused on introductions and sharing reasons for the common interest in cultural sensitivity of centers in the SSIO-USA, the following meeting addressed thoughts, experiences and observations by team members of why so few Americans of All Origins attend or continue to participate in Sai center functions. The next step was to seek out and

interview people they knew who visited a center and did not return or attended for a length of time and stopped their involvement. The third meeting brought valuable information shared by the people interviewed. Much of what the members heard concurred with the team's own thoughts. But some of the findings added to the reasons learned, and many included the sharing of emotional reactions that accompanied the ending of their attendance.

The Findings

The setting and format in Sai centers are initially off putting to newcomers who know little of the Indian culture. Most were not used to taking off their shoes at a gathering and sitting on the floor. The dress of people they met, saris for women and sometimes whites for men, were quite unfamiliar. Some said it appeared cultish when they entered a center. Bowing down to a photo or to an empty chair, even after hearing a brief introduction, was disconcerting to many. There were many foreign and unfamiliar elements including songs in a language they did not understand and musical instruments they had not seen or heard before. They perceived a lack of familiar warmth with the greeting of "Sai Ram" or "Namaste" rather than a handshake and eye contact. They were not comfortable with the separation of men and women especially if they were with their spouse.

To many people the abundance of rituals seemed too staged and made little sense to them. It seemed a very different culture, interesting but foreign in dress, custom, and atmosphere. Some people reported a sense of distance or separation after the meeting ended as small groups of people formed and socialized excluding them. They did not feel accepted as welcomed guests.

Some reports described people who attended a public meeting and were moved by the topics of Human Values and Universality but were disappointed when they attended a center meeting. For example, one gentleman, who was raised Catholic, was so attracted to this message he brought his entire family to a local center meeting expecting to find out more. He said he was very disappointed with the way the center was run versus how the Sai organization portrayed itself at the public meeting. He said speakers represented the organization as a multi faith group that emphasized the 5 human values. But at the center he saw people bowing to a picture or a chair, and he was uncomfortable. He said he already had Jesus

who he worshipped and felt like he would have to worship this new God. So, to him, it did not appear that the organization was multi faith or universal.

A long time devotee who was a past center officer, and whose family were regular and active members, reported that the family stopped attending a couple years ago. She had recently returned to a center meeting and said everyone was kind and gracious, but she felt a “huge disconnect there” – not in a bad way at all, but confirmation that she was in a different place. She said there was so much attention to the form, in a way that was likely helpful for everyone there – “but it doesn’t resonate with me any more.” She said the cultural divide gets deeper and deeper every time she is there now. She described attending a recent meeting where SSE students were given certificates, and each child was instructed to prostrate before Sai Baba’s picture to get the blessing. If a child forgot, he was instructed to go back. She reported that it may look quite normal and familiar to an Indian person, but it would look and feel weird if there were a child there, like mine, who was not Indian.

A team member interviewed a YA who was born and raised in this country and attended SSE when he was younger. He shared that he does not feel the need to attend a center to be connected with Sai. He is able to practice and live Sai teachings through his work which is concentrated on service. He feels that going to a center is more social than spiritual. He has met several individuals not connected with Sai centers and feels that he connects with them more spiritually. He said he enjoys spiritual connectedness more than “Indian connectedness.” He expressed disappointment that systemic issues of the country (poverty, race and gender inequality) are tabooed and not discussed in Sai centers. He thinks the attitude is that these are not our problems, so why bother discussing them. For this YA, he finds spiritual fulfillment in service oriented community work versus guest speaker talks and bhajan singing.

Comments from Adult Young Adult Advisors

During September 29-30, 2018 the National Young Adult Leadership Retreat took place in St. Louis. Regional Young Adult Reps and Adult YA Advisors, along with the National YA Team met for this intensive weekend under the theme, “Connect – Inspire – Unite.”

During a breakout session with the Adult YA Advisors, the National YA Advisors developed an exercise that solicited the primary challenges that the Young Adult groups were experiencing. Those challenges then were categorized by significance. The top challenge was “Disengagement” of YAs, many who left the centers as well as the YA gatherings. The reasons shared appeared similar to the reasons many new comers and Americans of All Origins gave for leaving or not returning to center meetings. One pertinent comment by a Young Adult who stopped attendance in center functions that reflects many reasons given was, “The center is more a cultural gathering and not a spiritual group. I want a spiritual group to learn from now.”

Cultural Relevance Described in SSIO Operations Manual

These findings seem to contradict the section on Cultural Relevance in the Operations Manual of the SSIO which includes “Ideal Sathya Sai Center meetings provide spiritual upliftment to members and are welcoming to people in the community in which the Sathya Sai Center exists. To be welcoming, Sathya Sai Center meetings should have a spiritual basis and not oriented towards set rituals or to any one religion or language. It is important to remember that Sathya Sai Baba came for all people, so the Sathya Sai Center or Sathya Sai Group should not be identifying with one particular religion.”

In response to a discussion of the appropriateness of a particular culture relevant to Sai centers, the team reviewed Sathya Sai Baba’s words on culture. He said, “What is culture? It is the cultivation of discrimination between good and evil, sin and merit, and truth and untruth that we experience in our daily life. It is also thoughts, feelings and good qualities. Not only this, culture makes one broadminded by getting rid of one’s narrow-mindedness. This morning, a song, ‘I and you are one!’ was sung. Even this is a kind of narrow-mindedness. It will be better to say, ‘All are one!’”
SSS Vol 34, Ch 20

The team agreed to research Sathya Sai Baba’s discourses and learn more of what He said about the Sai organization and how He wanted Sai centers to operate. All team members received the materials that were part of the pre-work in preparation for the weekend Officer Training program for all regional officers held in Houston in February 2017. They included 7 Discourses of Sathya Sai Baba speaking about Sai centers and the Sai organization. Also

included was the printed message delivered by Sathya Sai Baba to overseas office bearers in Prasanthi Nilayam on November 20, 1992. The team also searched for and shared other Discourses that would be relevant.

The team's research on teachings of Sathya Sai Baba that address many of the causes of Americans of All Origins leaving or not returning to Sai center functions are included in Addendum A.

Cultural Inclusion and Expansion Initiative

The team changed the name of the initiative from Cultural Sensitivity to Cultural Inclusion and Expansion. The original term could be misinterpreted and actually did not go far enough to address the concerns. It also did not go far enough to reflect what Sai Baba taught in the following quote:

“You wear colored glasses and see everything through those glasses. Correct your vision; the world will get corrected. Reform yourselves; the world will get reformed. You create the world of your choice. You see many, because you seek the many, not the One. Try to subsume the many in the One; the physical bodies of yourself and others, the village, the community, the state, the nation, the world, thus progressively march on towards more and more inclusive loyalties and reach the stage of Unity, in thought, word and deed. This is the sadhana of love, for, love is expansion, inclusion, mutualization. The individual has to be Universalized, expanded into Vishwaswarupa (Cosmic Form). When you enter upon this sadhana, you have to suppress all tendencies of hatred, greed, envy and malice, and concentrate on expanding love towards all, at all times. You might have opposition from all sides; but, consider these as tests of endurance, of sincerity and steadfastness.”

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During a divine discourse given to the American devotees on July 27, 2002, the following question was asked:

Question: “Many devotees are asking how the centers in the various countries can be a better reflection of spirituality within their own society? The selection of bhajans, the appearance of the Sai Baba Centers, and all of the

programs should be a function of each culture because Swami has planted the seed of Divinity in the land of every country all over the world.”

Sai Baba graciously provided the following response:

“Each country should follow its own procedure and culture but not compare themselves with others. You should not imitate others. Swami is not stretching His hand to ask anything from anybody. Swami says I am not a beggar, but I am bigger in good thoughts. Bhagawan declares His life is His message and you should follow the example of Swami’s life. Do what pleases Swami and definitely you will attain divinity. There is no other spiritual practice higher than that. Spiritual practice really means respecting and following Swami’s teachings. Importantly, you should respect all. Don’t expect others to respect you. Even if others do not respect you, you should respect others because the same divinity resides in all. When you respect everyone, you respect God. Even if anyone criticizes you or abuses you, still you should respect him. Even if he criticizes you, you should not criticize in return. Then only there will be transformation in the other person. You should remain silent and fill your heart with love. There is nothing higher than love. Swami’s entire property is only love. All of you have share in my property. So all of you are shareholders in the property of Bhagawan. Wherever you do service, Bhagawan is with you, in you, and around you.”

Goals of Cultural Inclusion and Expansion

The initial goal of the Cultural Inclusion and Expansion initiative is to support devotees in all centers to more fully understand why many visitors, especially Americans of All Origin population looking for ways to connect to a universal spiritual group that respects and embraces members of all faiths, do not return to Sai center meetings. This will also increase awareness of why many Young Adults begin to disengage from activities in the centers and YA groups. The goal goes beyond understanding by also stimulating reflection and discussion on ways to help centers take advantage of the teachings of Sathya Sai Baba to address the needs of visitors and Young Adults in ways that will more fully satisfy their spiritual needs.

The team has developed study circle materials that will give devotees in centers many teachings of Sai Baba relevant to this area to reflect upon, and questions to elicit deeper thought and discussion. After contemplating and discussing these teachings in center study circles, those centers or groups, or sub-groups from within centers, may decide to make changes to become more inclusive to all community residents, and expansive in thoughts and words

and activities that may advance their sense of “expanding love towards all, at all times.”

There will be a value in sharing ideas and efforts to enhance cultural expansion and inclusion, and their successful consequences, and lessons that are learned. Centers may send their thoughts and descriptions of endeavors to a special portal on the national SSIO-USA website for all to share. Some centers or groups may exchange communications in other ways through the website.

In addition to maintaining communication through the website, interested center and group members or representatives may join regular conference calls with members of the Cultural Inclusion and Expansion Team. Every effort will be made to support ideas and actions to help centers become more open and welcoming to Americans of All Origins.