

# 1. SOUTH ASIAN MINDSET

## Gifted Minds from an Amazing Nation

We live at an incredible moment in world history and for the Great Commission. People from everywhere are everywhere. Your doctor, neighbor or co-worker may have been born on the other side of the world. A graduate student in cutting-edge electrical engineering research could come from an isolated Indian village that just received electricity for the first time. People who were once geographically distant from hearing the good news of Christ are now in our neighborhoods and universities. However, many remain culturally distant from the gospel. They come from groups with minimal or no gospel witness. This is especially true for the South Asian world where the gospel often remains a mystery, clouded by stereotypes and misunderstandings. It doesn't have to stay this way!

## Unity and Diversity

Though India as a political nation is just over 60 years old, its cultural and religious heritage dates to the origin of civilization. Indians are rightly proud of their culture, ancient and modern, diverse and yet Indians and other South Asians\* represent the second largest group among international students on American campuses today. They are talented, optimistic and globally-minded. They speak English well. They are increasingly open to cross-cultural relationships. Plus, they are a fun and richly rewarding group of students with whom to engage—a group we would most likely be unable to reach in their homeland. Surely it is no coincidence that God is bringing so many Indian students to our campuses.

*\*Note: South Asia refers to the culturally similar countries of the Indian subcontinent - India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Bhutan. This document focuses primarily on Indian students and those from neighboring lands who practice a religion from the Hindu world (Hinduism, Sikhism, Jainism, etc.).*

- **Nationally:** India is the second most populous nation in the world and likely to become the most populous country in a few decades. It is the world's largest democracy with more than a dozen national political parties.
- **Ethnically:** Indians use well over 100 main languages and well over 1,000 dialects. Caste divisions further stratify ethnic groups, even among those with a common language. Said

Indian writer Shashi Tharoor, “We are all minorities in India.”

- **Spiritually:** The majority of Indians are Hindu, numbering around 800 million. But India is also the second or third-largest Muslim country in the world. Buddhism began in India as an offshoot of Hinduism. Christianity, representing just 2-4 percent of the population, has groups which trace their history to the Apostle Thomas.
- **Socio-economically:** India has perhaps one-third of the world’s poor. Yet there is a vast emerging middle class, and the nation is home to some of the world’s wealthiest individuals.
- **Belonging - Family and Relationships:** In this ocean of diversity, a person’s security is tied to the identity and welfare of his or her family. Indians see themselves within their network of family and relationships, so they are threatened by isolation. Older people are respected and treated with deference. Globalization is affecting the student generation, and youth are more affluent, more mobile, more Westernized and more curious about other cultures. Yet there remains a strong desire in young Indians to belong to a group. Social decisions (like attending parties or going on trips) are usually made as a group, often at the last minute.
- **Spirituality and Religion** In South Asia, spirituality is everywhere. Temples and mosques of various sizes and histories dot the landscape. The dominant religion, Hinduism, is better defined by what it is not rather than what it is. It is not creedal. It has no founder. It has no single common scripture. It does not claim an absolute truth - except perhaps that there is no absolute truth. It has no single god or specific pantheon of gods. In fact, many consider Hinduism to be a way of life more than a set of beliefs about God, life and life after death. The pleasures or pressures of life dominate the thoughts of most Hindus. Although some are truly devout, most worship deities for practical assistance in this life or for the sake of family traditions. Thus, it is more helpful to recognize what a Hindu “is” or “does” rather than what he or she believes. Growing numbers of Indian students today are outwardly secular and skeptical, yet retain Hindu in identity and practice.
- **Misunderstandings:** Misunderstandings between Hindus and Christ followers go both ways. Christian's perception of Hindus and Hindu practice is not always right; Hindu perception of “Christianity” may be distorted. Christianity is often perceived by Hindus according to cultural values. Conversion is assumed to be a cultural change for worldly benefit rather than a spiritual transformation. Indians tend to perceive others who “convert” to Christianity as uneducated, poor, tribal or low-caste individuals - because these are the ones who might have something to gain. This view is reinforced by the fact that the Indian church is mostly growing among such people. Thus, “becoming a

Christian” is associated with a pragmatic decision to change culture and perhaps to reject one’s own family. Most Hindus have very little knowledge of the Bible. Catholicism is the primary lens through which Christianity is viewed, so many will draw parallels between Catholic rituals and ornate church buildings and their own rituals and temples. Biblical concepts (God, sin, resurrection) are usually interpreted through a Hindu lens (many gods, ritual pollution, reincarnation). Most know that Jesus died on a cross. Few really understand why.