

South Asian Students in America: Gifted Minds from an Amazing Nation

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.).*

1 Understanding Their World

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 yet modern, diverse and yet

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unified. If you travel to India, you will frequently see this slogan on the backs of buses and motorized rickshaws: Mera Bharat Mahan (“My India is Great”). Indeed, this is an amazing nation:

- 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 as well. 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 identity and practice.

Misunderstandings

Misunderstandings between Hindus and Christ followers go both ways. Our 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 seem to have something to gain. This view is reinforced by the fact that the Indian church is mostly growing among such people. Thus, “becom-



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ing 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.

2 Connecting Them To Jesus

Due to such misperceptions of Christianity, it is unusual for Hindu students to honestly consider the gospel apart from contact with a Christian friend or community. It is within that relational environment that they can understand the gospel and wrestle with their questions.

Our goal is to build bridges:

- **Cultural bridges** of relational trust that demonstrate the love of Jesus and open doors for further connection and conversation
- **Spiritual bridges** to clarify misunderstandings about the message of Jesus and focus on a restored relationship with God (a transformed heart rather than a conformed cultural identity)

Build Cultural Bridges:

- **Take time to get to know South Asian students** on an individual basis and as part of the larger community. Ask about their family background (language, siblings, culture, religious traditions, holidays, etc). Learn about their hobbies and interests.
- **Ask about their religious background.** Is their family devout? How do they worship, and what holidays do they celebrate? Share your family’s religious background (Protestant, Catholic, etc.). Don’t hide your identity as a follower of Jesus.
- **Be quick to affirm positive aspects of Indian culture** like loyal families, strong community values and the quest

for spiritual truth. Refrain from criticizing traditions like the caste system or arranged marriages.

- **Fellowship over chai (tea) or a meal is a great way to get to know Indian friends.** Indian food is an integral part of the culture, and hospitality is highly valued. (Note: Indians have a variety of dietary practices and restrictions. If you are entertaining South Asians, it is very important to have vegetarian food available. Avoid serving beef to Hindus and pork to Muslims. Muslims will eat chicken, and so will many—but not all—Hindus.)
- **Remember to consider an Indian’s orientation toward family and social groups.** Pray for a person’s family when you pray for the individual. Enter his or her circle of friends and allow your friend to enter yours. Decisions are often made as a group, so include the group in planning activities whenever possible. Join South Asian events and celebrations - by yourself or with your group of friends.



Growing numbers of Indian students are outwardly secular and skeptical.



- **Think twice about making appointments for surveys or spiritual discussion.** Such appointments may seem too formal for a friendly conversation. Try spontaneously texting: “Hey, I’m on campus till 7. Let me know if you want to meet up.” If you know a friend well, dropping by his or her apartment unannounced is fine.
- **Build your friendships by watching Bollywood movies with Indian students,** and such experiences will also boost your knowledge of the culture. Two good choices are: “PK,” a 2014 hit that explores the search for spiritual truth as conducted by the major religions of India, and “3 Idiots,” a view of life at the top engineering colleges of India. Note: “3 Idiots” contains profanity, and both these films contain some sexual

references, but these are mild compared to what is found in most American films.

- **Don't pretend to be someone's friend in order to share the gospel with that person.** Love and serve everyone without distinction. But also look for those with whom you have natural affinity or shared interests.

Build Spiritual Bridges:

- **Pray for your South Asian friends and pray with them.** Expect God to answer. When He does, you have an open door to share more about the love and power of Christ. Invite your friends to ask their Creator to reveal Himself to them.
- **Use open-ended questions.** Asking good questions and carefully listening to the answers will build bridges of trust. Resist the urge to immediately correct every misunderstanding and explain every concept about the gospel. Rather, allow some loose ends and questions for your friend to think about. Here are some good beginning questions: Do you believe in God? (If so, why?) Can you tell me about your spiritual journey? What do you think is the purpose of a person's life?
- **Address misconceptions** such as "Christianity is a Western religion" and "All Americans are Christians." After you shed light on these topics, it may become easier to discuss deeper questions.
- **Offer truth in bite-sized pieces.** Present spiritual content in proportion to your friend's level of interest and in response to his or her questions. Do not rush to bring someone to a "point of decision." Wait until the person is ready (John 6:44).

Starting Points and Suggestions:

- **Invite your friend on a spiritual journey** to discover who Jesus Christ is in the Bible and through prayer.
- **Start with a belief in one God and point to Christ** as God's self-revelation as a man (Acts 17:23). Most Hindus believe there is one supreme God—whether personal or non-personal—who manifests Himself and is worshipped in different forms.

- **Begin by looking into the Bible and address apologetic questions as they arise.** Most consider the Bible a holy book and give it some degree of authority.
- **Use stories and analogies to explain spiritual truth.** The Gospel of John is good for the philosophically-minded and Luke for the scientific-minded. Parables are helpful, for they connect the gospel with practical issues of real life (family, work, money, etc.).

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- **Be aware that “sin” is understood in many ways by Hindus**—ignorance, moral failure or even ritual pollution (such as eating the wrong foods). Note that sin is rarely considered an offense against God but rather against others or one's self, and it is automatically tied to consequences (karma). Most Hindus have a vague sense of falling short in their lives, so you can begin by explaining that, no matter how hard we try, we cannot be good enough to reach God's level of purity.

- **Share how Jesus is our perfect priest and once-for-all sacrifice for sin** (Hebrews 10:11-14). Hindus may readily grasp this truth since ritual sacrifices (fruit, sweets, flowers) are a part of temple worship and originated with animals—a fact that has often been lost or obscured.

Care for New Believers

- **When someone chooses to trust Christ, this decision needs to be handled with care.** One of the great fears of Indian families is that their child will “be converted to Christianity” in the United States. Such a perception of faith in Jesus is seen as turning one's back on one's family and crossing over into a non-Indian way of life. It is seen as bringing shame on the family, and thus typically results in a negative response from family and friends.
- **Don't assume your friend understands a “prayer of decision.”** If your friend expresses interest in a commitment to Jesus, make sure this person truly believes the gospel and is not just trying to please you. Take time to patiently explain and answer questions. Our role is to walk alongside our friend as he or she begins to follow Jesus.
- **Don't broadcast your friend's decision.** If friends or family members hear this news from anyone other than the new believer, this could do great relational damage. Let your friend speak of



his or her faith at the appropriate time and in the appropriate way.

- **Introduce a new believer to others from a Hindu background.** Those who have previously made the journey from Hinduism to faith in Jesus can help your friend navigate the emotional ups and downs and the resulting issues with family and friends.

Profile of a New Indian Believer

Raj began his journey to faith as a teenager in India when he observed the life of his Christian friend, Paul. Raj was impressed by how Paul made God an integral part of his life and by how he prayed about everything. Eventually, Raj came to the U.S. as a graduate student. He went to a Bible study out of curiosity, and then he began hanging out with an American named Sam who enjoyed soccer just as he did. After a while, Raj felt he could trust Sam enough to ask him spiritual questions. He was impressed by what he learned in the Bible about the unconditional love of God. After meeting Christ followers from Hindu families, Raj eventually placed his faith in Jesus. He was amazed to discover that he didn't have to go to a temple to meet God but that he could enjoy a personal relationship with God everywhere, all the time.



mility, prayer, sin, eternity and forgiveness. Focus on practical applications to life.

DON'T...imply that following Jesus means rejecting one's birth family and culture.

DON'T...criticize Hindu traditions (worship of the cow, arranged marriages, caste system, etc.).

DON'T...let sharing the gospel become the only motive for your relationships or service.

DON'T...argue or make religious comparisons. Your goal is not to win a debate.

DON'T...push your friend to make a faith decision. Be patient and allow God to work.

DON'T...assume all South Asian "Christians" have a personal relationship with Christ. Take time to get to know them and ask questions that will help clarify this issue.

DON'T...assume that all South Asian church events or individual believers will automatically help you communicate the gospel to your Hindu friends. Depending on their approach, some may produce a negative reaction.

tongue may be helpful for some, it is normally not necessary.

- **Jesus Storybook Bible: Every Story Whispers His Name**, by Sally Lloyd-Jones, is an excellent introduction to the Bible.

Outreach Books

- **Jesus through Asian Eyes** is a booklet by Clive Thome and Robin Thomson that sheds light on questions and misconceptions about Jesus and Christianity.
- **Jesus with Dirty Feet** is a book by Don Everts that introduces Jesus and deals with misconceptions.

Contextual and Religious Resources

- www.karma2grace.org – This website offers articles written by South Asian believers for Hindu seekers and disciples.
- www.aradhnmusic.com – "Aradhna" means worship, and this group captures the beauty and dignity of India's traditional worship music with songs of praise to Jesus.
- **Hinduism** is a booklet by H.L. Richard that provides an outstanding but concise summary of Hindu beliefs and practices.

3 Do's and Don'ts

DO...serve your friends unconditionally out of love—no strings attached.

DO...be respectful and courteous as you learn about your friends' culture and beliefs. Ask intelligent probing questions. Remember the answers.

DO...demonstrate authentic spirituality, a clear distinction from cultural "Christianity." Let your friends see the differences Jesus makes in your life.

DO...share your faith story with humility and also talk about God's work in your daily life.

DO...focus on internal spiritual transformation rather than outward rituals or religious conformity.

DO...treat the Bible respectfully since Hindus regard it as a holy book.

DO...discuss biblical concepts like love, hu-

4 Recommended Resources

Bibles

- Hindu students may initially prefer paraphrased Bibles due to their narrative approach. While a Bible in the mother