



## FLOURISHING IN THE FAMILY OF FAITH

*No other country in the world has such a diverse and complex society with thousands of different communities all separated by caste, language and religion. Each of these communities will likely need a separate movement of disciple making and church planting—thereby making India the greatest challenge to world evangelization.*

*(Missions Frontiers, May/June, 2019)*

Yes, India presents a huge challenge to the followers of Jesus, but what if a partial solution to that challenge is present right now on campuses across the U.S.? Indian students are the second largest international student group in the U.S. What if students from many of its diverse communities became multiplying disciples who could reach out to their family and friends in culturally appropriate ways?

Will you take up the challenge to help disciple these students?

### Understanding Their World

India and its neighboring nations in South Asia form one of the most diverse regions in the world. But it is no melting pot. Its thousands of people groups have grown side-by-side for centuries with little mixing. Traditionally, people readily work and interact with people from a large cross-section of society but live life and marry within their own community.

This includes religion which is defined by birth, not by choice. So each person is born into a family and sub-culture with defined expectations and boundaries. As long as everyone follows the rules and stays within their own community, unity in society is maintained.

Christian communities also have their own identity. Historic South Indian churches have existed since the early centuries AD; Protestant and Catholic groups have been around since the British colonial period. Each has its own traditions, expectations and boundaries. Some are nominal with only a Christian label. Others have a vital spiritual life but tend to limit their outreach to those within their own language group.

What happens when someone chooses to follow Christ in a way that crosses these boundaries? Society says they aren't following the rules. Perhaps they will be seen as rejecting their birth culture or joining a Western religion. Those who are the first to follow Christ in their families may wonder, "Who am I and where do I belong?"

*"I had to learn that being Christian does not mean being American—I built up a lot of walls at first between my friends and family."*

## Family and Relationships

South Asian identity and security are bound up together with the family. Even with a growing trend toward individualism, family is critically important. Parents have high expectations and will sacrifice to see their children succeed academically. Children are expected to provide for their parents when they are older. Much more than in the West, marriage is an alliance between families with social, spiritual and financial considerations. So, major life decisions are rarely made independently.

When a son or daughter from a non-believing family chooses to follow Christ, this step often brings conflict, pain and shame. The entire family is affected and could be viewed poorly by the community. Those contemplating a commitment to Christ may hesitate, fearing their parents' response or the pain their family might face. After trusting Christ a new believer may still find it difficult to share with his or her loved ones. Some may want to keep their faith secret, not wanting to bring hurt or shame to the family. Conflicts may continue for years as the disciple encounters such milestones as baptism, marriage and events that are connected to the family's religious traditions.

## Spirituality and Religion

South Asia is a place of many ancient faiths where people are born into their religion and not expected to change. Pluralism is valued to maintain peace in this environment. For some Christian communities, a primary concern is survival—the freedom to practice their religion as a minority faith. Some may hesitate to share their faith beyond their own community.

For most non-Christian South Asian religions, the belief that “many paths lead to truth/god” is fundamental. Accepting the exclusivity of Christ is a big step. So is letting go of multiple gods and traditions. New believers must learn to relate to Christ

personally instead of by works and rituals. These believers may face external social pressures as well as spiritual opposition from the unseen world.

*“Having believed and worshiped many different gods all my life, it was hard to know how to fully follow Jesus alone.”*

## Helping Them Grow with Jesus

South Asian culture may be unfamiliar to you but don't let that keep you from investing time in discipling new believers. Everyone needs to learn the fundamentals of the faith and there are many good discipleship resources to cover the basics. However, South Asian believers will face issues unique to their family's religious community. Beware of offering quick, simplistic answers when these issues arise. Encourage their personal walk with Christ rather than conformity to religious expectations. Trust the Holy Spirit to guide them even when answers are hard to discern.

## Discipling Christian Background Students

A second-hand or unexamined faith is common for South Asian Christian students. Most adopt their family's religious identity but may not have embraced the faith as their own. Some have unvoiced doubts about Christianity. Some have been hurt by a legalistic church experience. Still others reject their faith completely and want to be free from religion. As a result, South Asian Christians you meet on campus may not have much understanding of the Bible or personal relationship with Jesus.

### Initial Follow-up

Ask about their faith journey and their experience with Christ and the church. Share your story along with the gospel. Distinguish between religion and relationship, and let them see your intimacy with Christ. Invite them to meet with you or a small group to read and discuss the Bible or basic follow-up content. Be patient as they may initially resist. Know that assurance, forgiveness and the ministry of the Holy Spirit will be life-changing for them. It is quite possible that committed believers were exposed to a church experience that lacked the grace and freedom of the gospel.

### Faith Sharing with South Asian Friends

Don't assume South Asian Christians are eager or prepared to share their faith with Hindu friends. They will be crossing cultures to do so. Pray for the Holy Spirit to expand their





heart for the lost. Make sure they are grounded in their faith. Pray together for their non-believing friends and roommates. Prepare them to first share Jesus through their own personal story and through practical demonstrations of the love of Christ.

## **Discipling Non-Christian Background Students (Hindu, Sikh, Jain, Muslim, etc.)**

New South Asian believers from non-Christian families have completely different starting points. Their Bible knowledge is minimal. Their religious worldview is different. The church is unfamiliar or foreign. They may be the first Christ-followers in their family. They are probably excited about their faith but fearful about how the implications for the future—especially the reaction of their family members. As you journey with them, remember that Christ is sufficient and he is leading them. Be willing to move patiently as the Holy Spirit leads them. When opposition comes they need to own their faith with personal conviction and not only as an emotional experience or community association.

*“I was most confident in my faith in Jesus because God poured into my life through many different people. No one pushed me and everything was my decision. That’s why I feel so confident in my faith. I know God is leading me and I’m not in the wrong hands.”*

The topics below are possible “speed bumps.” A full understanding of each goes far beyond the scope of this document, so when you encounter such a topic: slow down, ask important questions, look at Scripture and seek counsel from South Asian believers. Connecting new believers with solid disciples from similar backgrounds will be invaluable in helping them navigate these issues.

### **Sharing with Family**

In South Asia, family may seem to have a higher priority than god(s). So when a person begins to follow Christ, his or her family may serve as a rival for that person’s ultimate identity and affections. He or she may feel shame from family and friends who view the person as a traitor. New believers should be encouraged not to reject their families, but of course, Christ must have the highest place in their hearts.

Each family will respond differently—from casual indifference to heated opposition. And each person will express faith differently to his or her family. A danger for new believers is to compartmentalize their faith to a campus or American cultural setting and hide it from their families in South Asia.

Ideally, new disciples will have shared some of their spiritual journey with family before actually coming to faith.

The following are some beneficial activities you will want to do with a new South Asian believer:

- Pray together for the person’s family and extended family.
- Ask how the person’s parents might respond when they first learn that their child has received Christ; also ask if there are family members with whom they could naturally share.
- Read stories from the Book of Acts.

### **Prepared for Opposition**

Family pressure, shame and emotional manipulation are common forms of opposition toward a new Christian. In extreme cases, the person may encounter physical abuse or various threats. (A family might threaten to remove financial support from a son or marry off their daughter to an unbeliever.) But emotional and relational distress is the most common.

It is important to realize that opposition can create two different results. It may hurt and create fractured relationships so that the new believer is tempted to turn back from following Christ. But it can also strengthen the new believer’s faith as he or she sees God intervening in positive ways. Rejection of one’s family should not be encouraged, but if opposition comes new disciples should not be surprised by it (1 Peter 4:12). Look together at Scriptures about persecution (Matthew 5:44, John 15, Acts 14:22, Romans 8, 1 Peter).

*“I remember telling my brother about my faith and being ridiculed for it. I cried all night but I remember thinking there is a cost in following the cross. That was something Jesus used powerfully in the next few years.”*

### **Removing Idols**

New believers will know the exclusive claims of Jesus. But putting idols away completely may take a little time. Isaiah said a day would come when the people would “throw them out like filthy rags, saying to them, ‘Good riddance!’” (Isaiah 30:22). It is important for disciples to do this as God leads them.

### **New Identity in Christ**

Following Christ may disrupt a South Asian student’s sense of cultural identity. There can be a danger of rejecting their own culture while Christians (unconsciously) disciple them into a form of cultural Christianity. Help them distinguish between biblical and cultural expressions of faith, and help them find their identity in the person of Jesus.

- Study Scriptures together which emphasize our new identity in Christ as the people of God (1 Peter 2:4-10), citizens of heaven (Philippians 3:20-21) and the new temple

(1 Corinthians 3:16, 6:19).

- Expose them to different types of churches so they will see that there is not just one form of genuine worship.

*“It was important for me to understand that God says we are all citizens of heaven... rather than feeling that I don’t belong in America or in India.”*

### **Religious Festivals Participation**

Most major events in South Asian culture (such as holidays, birthdays, weddings and funerals) have religious connections. Secularization and global migration have reduced the impact of some traditions, but navigating others will be a lifelong challenge. How does a person honor his or her family without compromising devotion to Christ? Can the believer be present without inappropriately participating? Where is the line? These are not easy questions.

- Encourage them to value God-glorifying expressions of South Asian culture (like strong communities, respect for elders, etc.) and to discern which traditions need to be avoided or redeemed.
- Study passages like 1 Corinthians 8-10 together. Ask how this applies in their family and culture.

### **Baptism**

Parents might only be mildly opposed to their child’s faith decision at first, considering it as just a “phase.” But baptism can imply a decisive point of no return. It can also be confusing in South Asia due to unhelpful historical, social and political baggage. There is no need to rush your friend into baptism. In some cases, it may be wise to wait before taking this step—to allow time to clarify its meaning for the family. Baptism should emphasize the organic identification with Christ and the family of God rather than social, political or institutional identities.

### **Marriage**

For students, marriage may not be immediate but it is probably not far from their minds or their upcoming experience. Marriage is a setting in which many issues (family opposition, idols, festival participation, identity) will converge. The choice of a marriage partner and the way a new couple relates to their respective families may shipwreck a person’s faith. Meanwhile, a marriage can also create a new family that is united in Christ that brings blessings to successive generations. Begin praying together for God to provide a godly spouse and encourage your friend to grow into a mature man or woman of Christ.

## **Final Notes**

- **Security and Social Media:** Remember to guard the security and reputation of new South Asian believers. Other South Asians should hear about their faith from them directly and personally—not from social media. Always protect the individual’s privacy (no photos with names, locations or other specific details).
- **Connecting with a Church:** It is important to help South Asian believers connect with a church family. South Asian churches in the US tend to resemble counterparts in their homeland (language, traditions, hierarchy, etc.). Not all will be conducive to a student’s spiritual growth. Be personally familiar with the churches you recommend.
- **Spiritual Warfare:** Don’t be blindsided by spiritual opposition. There may be demonic strongholds or influences that will need to be renounced and resisted biblically. (James 4:1-8)
- **Time & Appointments:** Academic pressures are high and time is limited. Students often hesitate to commit to regular, systematic discipleship, and appointments may be frequently changed or cancelled. Be patient and extend grace. Your friend will value time with you, but at first, such appointments may be intermittent.

## **Resources**

- *And Then There Was Jesus* by Pooja Chilukuri
- *Honoring Your Parents Discipleship Curriculum* by Jacob Townsend (DESIGN movement)
- *Bondage Breaker* or *Steps to Freedom in Christ* by Neil Anderson
- *South Asia Bible Commentary*, edited by Brian Wintle

