

Indian International Students in American Higher Education: An Analysis of India's Cultural and Socioeconomic Norms in Light of the International Student Experience

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This article examines Indian international students in American higher education. It discusses major factors influencing this student population's academic study in the United States. The article provides information about cultural and socioeconomic issues that student affairs professionals should consider when working with this minority student population. This article concludes with brief recommendations for effectively working with this diverse and dynamic student population.

Indian international students make up approximately 15.4% of the total non-immigrant international student population at American colleges and universities (Institute of International Education [IIE], 2009). Since 2001-2002, India has remained the leading place of origin for international students, and the numbers continue to grow with 103,260 undergraduate, graduate, Optional Practical Training, and those in other programs (e.g., English language programs) represented during the 2008-2009 school year (Gardner & Witherell, 2009). To adequately serve this growing international student population, it is important that student affairs professionals understand the impact of India's norms, values, and beliefs within the broader context of the American higher education international student experience. As this international population becomes more prominent within American campus culture, professionals should be sensitive to how India's diverse cultural and socioeconomic issues influence the needs and concerns faced by these international students as they work toward developing their academic, professional, familial, and personal objectives.

This article serves as a literature review, examining research about Indian international students and providing information about cultural and

socioeconomic issues that student affairs professionals should consider when working with this minority group. It discusses factors that shape American study, including the role of the family, traditional Indian gender norms, and globalization. It is important to note that the themes and trends discussed in this article do not represent all Indian international students. Similar to other international student populations, Indian students have varied religious, sociolinguistic, and cultural backgrounds that influence their experiences abroad. However, through presenting practical information grounded in relevant research, this article serves as a resource to further support this dynamic student population.

FACTORS INFLUENCING INDIAN INTERNATIONAL STUDENT STUDY IN THE UNITED STATES

To understand Indian international students' diverse experiences in American higher education, it is important to analyze literature that introduces relevant trends relating to this population. This section addresses primary reasons that Indian international students study in the United States and presents pertinent information about other demographics, such as primary fields of study and how this population finances their education abroad.

Primary Reasons for Study in the United States

The attraction for Indian international students to study in the United States is growing, and it has changed significantly throughout the decades. According to Lavakare (2007), during the early 1960s, American universities mainly attracted graduate and doctoral students from India in areas of natural sciences, physics, chemistry, biology, and mathematics. These students earned upper level degrees difficult to acquire in India during this time. The American higher education system depended on this graduate student population for research projects sponsored by funding agencies. Throughout the 1970s-1990s, India underwent periods of major increases and decreases in the number of students studying in the United States; beginning in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, however, the number of students from India increased dramatically and continues to grow steadily (IIE, 2003). Although there is still a large recruitment effort for graduate and doctoral candidates, sustained growth also occurs within undergraduate recruitment and enrollment.

Dewan (2008) supports Lavakare's (2007) research when he writes about the main reasons for this continued growth of Indian students enrolling in American higher education. One primary reason is the Indian government's economic liberation policies, providing increased social mobility and access to educational opportunities both in India and abroad. Another reason involves India's extraordinary economic growth throughout the beginning of the twenty-first century. This growth has increased India's ability to provide education loans from dollars per student in the 1970s to thousands of dollars per student for contemporary study abroad options (Dewan, 2008). A

further reason for this increase concerns the number of quality higher education institutions in India and their inability to sustain India's population growth and demand for postsecondary education. Since India declared its independence from Great Britain in 1947, the country has developed one of the largest higher education systems in the world (Gupta, 2008). However, with over ten million students currently enrolled in Indian institutions, competition for admission often forces these students to find other higher education options (Dewan, 2008).

Dewan (2008) continues his analysis, stating that a fourth reason why many Indian students study in the United States relates to the American dollar's weakness compared to other worldwide currencies. This weakness makes American higher education more economically appealing, ultimately increasing the diversity of Indian students pursuing degrees abroad. Although the aforementioned reasons are primary motives for pursuing an American education, research shows that Indian students also feel that the prestige of an American degree is important (Altbach, 2004; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). American higher education's reputation attracts this student population, as they see increased academic and socioeconomic opportunities for advancement within the United States' "globally disseminated culture" (Altbach, 2004, p. 4).

Primary Fields of Study and Majors in the United States

Business and management are the most popular fields of study for international students in the United States, followed by engineering, and physical and life sciences (IIE, 2009). Khadria (2004) writes that this popularity holds true amongst many Asian and Indian international students, who primarily study engineering, technology, and

management. Over the past decade, there have been increases in Indian students studying arts, law, and medicine, as well as expanded diversity in the types of American postsecondary institutions that these students attend. In the past, Indian international students often enrolled in Ivy League institutions due to the prestige of degree and research opportunities (Lavakare, 2007). However, as opportunities for mobility increase and more Indian students with varying interests enter the United States, further options at public, private, and community colleges are more affordable and available.

Financing American Higher Education

Indian international students are willing to pay higher fees for American higher education due to its prestige in both India and worldwide (Gupta, 2008). Marginson and McBurnie (2004) support this argument when they write that these students believe a foreign degree will enhance their professional opportunities while also increasing their educational and financial mobility. Similar to other international students attending American higher education institutions, the majority of Indian international students' primary funding comes from sources outside of the United States (Gardner & Witherell, 2008). Parents or other family members provide approximately 66% of funding and bank loans provide an additional 27% (Bhushan, 2006, as cited by Gupta, 2008).

Although research illustrates increases in mobility and diversity within the demographics of Indian students attending American universities, the high cost of international education can deter many lower and working-class Indians from applying and enrolling (Lavakare, 2007). Nevertheless, many families invest significant funds for educational pursuits, hoping that

their children will obtain profitable jobs after graduation and cover the expenses by giving back to the family (Lavakare, 2007). This hope enforces an interdependent relationship discussed in the next section of this article.

FAMILY STRUCTURE AND ITS INFLUENCE ON THE INDIAN INTERNATIONAL STUDENT'S EXPERIENCE

To better understand Indian international students' experiences at American higher education institutions, it is important to analyze the diverse cultural and socioeconomic factors to consider when working with this subgroup. In particular, research indicates that the traditional Indian family structure greatly influences Indian international students' personal, professional, familial, and academic objectives as they study in the United States (Das & Kemp, 1997; Segal, 1991; Suryakantham Durvasula & Mylvaganam, 1994). For many Indian international students, the family structure is inherently different from Western European and American family structures. This structure creates an "interdependent group of people whose concerns are not for themselves as individuals, but for the family as a whole... the responsibility is to family before self" (Das & Kemp, 1997, p. 25). Parents often raise children to be respectful and obedient; they teach their children to demonstrate good behavior to bring honor to their family (Segal, 1991). Because Indian families invest considerable finances in sending their children to American universities, choices in study and career objectives are often "heavily influenced, if not dictated, by the family" (Segal, 1991, p. 235). Indian students may feel conflicted studying in the United States where society teaches values such as "individualism, independence, and self-sufficiency" and where American students

have more freedom to study what they please instead of feeling pressures toward family goals (Suryakantham Durvasula & Mylvaganam, 1994, p. 99). Thus, for Indian students studying in American campus culture, financial responsibility can generate juxtaposition between individualism and familial accountability, often creating complicated collectivist and hierarchal relationships.

Moreover, the traditional interdependent Indian family structure is also important because it often brings intense demands to succeed personally, professionally, and academically. Similar to other Asian international student populations, academic achievement and success are highly esteemed (Nilsson, Butler, Shouse, & Joshi, 2008). There is an expected norm that all Indian students succeed at the university level; if the individual student does not achieve, a belief exists that lack of success can negatively affect the family's reputation (Segal, 1991). Many Indian families aspire that their children achieve "social and economic mobility in India's very competitive society" (Altbach, 1993, p. 11). Therefore, they believe that their children will have more success if they earn a college degree, especially from an American institution that holds an impressive reputation (Altbach, 1993). Not all Indian international students can live up to these idealistic expectations. Furthermore, because these students often depend on their family group for financial and psychological support, these expectations can elevate their stress, making them feel like a failure since communal resources invest heavily in their success (Nilsson, et al., 2008; Segal, 1991). Within the interdependent system where collective resources finance the individual's education, Indian students can feel an intense obligation to give back once they achieve their family's goals of financial and academic accomplishment.

GENDER ROLES AND THEIR INFLUENCE ON THE INDIAN INTERNATIONAL STUDENT'S EXPERIENCE

Gender roles in Indian society are also important in examining the diverse needs of Indian international students in the United States. Traditionally, Indian culture is "very patriarchal, patrilocal and patrilineal, resulting in entitlements for being male" (Root, 1998, p. 220). There are distinct lines defining male and female gender roles. According to Ibrahim, Ohnishi, and Sandhu (1997), the conventional domain "outside of the home is managed by men and the one inside the home is managed by the women" (p. 40). Males are often highly favored because they "act as the head of the household, primary wage earners, decision makers, and disciplinarians" (Segal, 1991, p. 235). In contrast, women often serve a subordinate role, acting as *caretakers* and *preservers* of Indian cultural traditions (Farver, Bhadha, & Narang, 2002; Segal, 1991; Sue, 1981). Women are traditionally defined as successful if they can obtain a well-financed dowry for marriage and continue the family's lineage by raising children and showing compliance toward their husbands (Farver, et al., 2002; Ghuman, 1997; Root, 1998). Thus, a hierarchal structure significantly influences Indian gender roles. Men typically have more access to personal autonomy and educational opportunities, while often restricting women from these types of resources.

According to Maslak and Singhal (2008), although a history of patriarchal structure has instilled these traditional gender roles in much of the contemporary Indian population, the twentieth and twenty-first centuries produced important social changes, challenging female identity as it had been conventionally recognized. For many middle and upper class families,

contemporary Indian society prioritizes education for both male and female children. The woman's role has expanded outside of the home to provide a less hierarchal and more flexible means to gain social mobility along with academic and professional success. However, although women's roles may have changed, many Indian parents still watch over their daughters more strictly, especially when these daughters study abroad and do not have the physical dependence on the family structure (Farver, et al., 2002).

Maslak and Singhal (2008) continue to analyze female Indian international students when they examine the relationship between pressures to succeed and the sense of personal duty to give back to the family. Although most female Indian students are in the United States to obtain a postsecondary degree, their parents often emphasize the need to find an Indian husband and raise a family after graduation, thereby perpetuating traditional Indian gender stereotypes and hierarchy. Therefore, as tradition and modernity intersect within the lives of these students, a struggle often exists to balance familial responsibilities within the new cultural environment designed by their own academic and professional aspirations. This intersection of tradition and modernity can generate anxiety and stress, further intensifying cultural adjustment issues (Constantine, Kindaichi, Okazaki, Gainor, & Baden, 2005). Female Indian students may feel conflicted pursuing their own objectives without the restraints of present and future familial responsibilities.

GLOBALIZATION AND ITS INFLUENCE ON THE INDIAN INTERNATIONAL STUDENT EXPERIENCE

The Traditional Indian Caste System

In recent decades, India has transformed from a traditional society to one of the fastest growing economies in the world (Jahanbegloo, 2008). Altbach (1993) stresses that this expansion takes place at all societal levels, especially in "all levels of the academic system—from increases in postgraduate and professional education to massive expansion of undergraduate arts and sciences colleges throughout the country, including to smaller towns and even to rural areas" (p. 11). He supports this statement by writing that the availability of more places to obtain postsecondary degrees has become a "top priority of the aspiring middle class and to growing segments of the upwardly mobile rural and urban poor" (p. 11). As India's population continues to increase and education becomes more accessible, globalization becomes a prominent socioeconomic phenomenon that greatly affects many Indian international students' experiences in the United States.

Vidyasagar Reddy (2006) defines globalization as "a process of change that affects all regions of the world in a variety of areas including the economy, politics, education, culture and the environment" (p. 344). The results of globalization include "the integration of research, the use of English as the lingua franca for scientific communication, the growing international labor and [educational] market for scholars and scientists...and the use of information technology" to aid in worldwide communication, education, and commerce (Altbach & Knight, 2006, p. 1). For some Indian students, globalization means increased opportunities to study in the United States and achieve social mobility away from conventional societal roles. In particular, the decreased role of the traditional Indian caste system as a controlling socioeconomic construct greatly

influences the role of globalization, especially for Indian international students from middle, rural, and urban poor socioeconomic statuses.

Migration into Indian cities along with increased educational opportunities and globalization have significantly altered the traditional Indian caste system and its effect on educational, socioeconomic and cultural mobility. According to Deshpande (2000), the Indian caste system is almost 3,000 years old. The ancient Hindu society divided the population into five “mutually exclusive, exhaustive, hereditary, endogamous, and occupation-specific *Varnas* (translated into English as castes)” (p. 322). Deshpande continues by listing the caste levels, including the *Brahmins* (priests/teachers), the *Kshatriyas* (warriors, royalty), the *Vaisyas* (moneylenders, traders), the *Sudras* (menial jobs), and the *Ati Sudras* (*the untouchables*, the lowest of the menial jobs). For centuries, a person’s caste affiliation determined all aspects of his/her existence. However, during the last six decades, increased efforts to equalize opportunities among different socioeconomic classes began, including a decline in higher education inequalities (Chauhan, 2008). The Indian population’s increased movement to cities ultimately “disrupts the prescriptions of caste that are still found in towns and villages from which the many new large-city residents have migrated” (Mehta & Belk, 1991, p. 401). In the context of Indian international students’ experiences, the caste system plays a significant role; the types of students attending American institutions have diversified due to the decreased emphasis on this traditional social stratification system (Chauhan, 2008). Modernization and globalization work to reduce socioeconomic inequalities, influencing how families seek social mobility opportunities through financing education abroad.

The Role of the Brain Drain and Brain Gain

Globalization is also important in understanding Indian international students’ experiences due to its role in the creation of the concepts *brain drain* and *brain gain*. According to Meredith (2008), in the past when Indian students graduated from college abroad, they often continued to live outside of India to earn higher salaries and pursue their professional interests. Altbach (2005) supports Meredith’s assertion by stating that “the talent migration was once called a brain drain because departing [students] retained few, if any...links with their home countries” (p. 68). Due to the increasing role of globalization in Indian society, contemporary Indian international students stay better connected with their home country, and often do not feel the same type of stress to remain in the United States or move to other Westernized countries to succeed (Altbach, 2005). As India’s economy continues to grow and brain drain reverses to an economic and cultural brain gain, social mobility and educational opportunities become increasingly accessible (Marginson & McBurnie, 2004; Meredith, 2008). As more Indian students obtain a prestigious American degree, they often stay further connected to and invested in their Indian heritages, creating brain gain as they bring the skills and expertise learned abroad to their home country.

WORKING WITH INDIAN INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

Family structure, gender roles, and globalization are three important issues that student affairs professionals should take into account when working with Indian international students in American higher education. In analyzing these issues, it is

important that professionals “adopt many helping roles in serving [these] international students, including being counselors, advocates, resource persons, mentors, and facilitators” (Carr, Koyama, & Thiagarajan, 2003, p. 133). In particular, professionals must be aware of the model minority stereotype and its influence on Indian international students’ experiences. Leong and Schneller (1997) state that, “traditionally, Asian Americans have been pointed to as the ‘successful minority’ [in American society] and have been perceived as above-average in intelligence and education” (p. 75). Because of this Asian American minority model, American students often group other Asian international subpopulations into this stereotype, including Indian international students. Although the traditional Indian family structure and gender roles enhance this model minority stereotype by encouraging Indian students to be achievement-oriented, practitioners should be sensitive that this need to achieve may cause social and academic isolation for this student subgroup (Leong & Schneller, 1997; Nilsson, et al., 2008). Professionals can help ease Indian international students’ adjustment to pressures based on family expectations and model minority stereotypes by creating supportive environments where these students can better understand their experiences and feel more comfortable adjusting to American culture according to their own developmental needs (Carr, et al., 2003; Lin & Yi, 1997). Unfortunately, little research exists on how to effectively produce these supportive environments for this particular student population (Suryakantham Durvasula & Mylvaganam, 1994). However, in utilizing relevant counseling and mental health research related to other Asian international student populations (Atri & Sharma, 2006; Byon, Chan, & Thomas, 1999; Carr, et al., 2003; Heggins & Jackson, 2003;

Lin & Yi, 1997; Yoon & Jepsen, 2008; Zhang & Dixon, 2003), professionals can better recognize the transitional needs and potential barriers that this student population faces within the United States.

Another recommendation for higher education is not to generalize the Indian international student experience within American higher education. According to Atri and Sharma (2006), a “stereotype of homogeneity [leads]...many researchers to mistakenly focus on this extremely diverse, multicultural, multilingual, and multiethnic assortment as a homogenous populace” (p. 136). Professionals must understand that these students come from various cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds, have different academic and familial objectives, and cope with assimilation and acculturation stresses in different manners. Practitioners must be cautious in generalizing the identity development of Indian international students and “allow [these] students to ‘name themselves and their identities’” like any other minority group on campus (Poynter & Washington, 2005, p. 46). When working with Indian international students, it is very important that student affairs professionals remember that there is not one way of displaying Indian tradition and identity; rather, Indian international students need to be able to express and make meaning of their multiple identity dimensions simultaneously.

CONCLUSION

For many Indian international students, studying in the United States “has opened up new opportunities for education and research in frontline areas, with an increasing access to the growing global employment market” (Lavakare, 2007, ¶ 3). As more Indian students choose to study in American higher education institutions, it is important that student affairs professionals

create welcoming and safe environments for these students. These environments will better enable this minority subgroup to adjust positively to developmental and environmental stresses as they aim to fulfill their academic, professional, familial, and personal objectives. Much of the research analyzed in this article deals with cultural and socioeconomic issues this student population can face throughout their experience studying and living abroad. This article recommends that future research continue to recognize the extreme religious, sociolinguistic, and cultural diversity of Indian international students to avoid generalizations in this important area of international student research.

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