Hindu Students in American Colleges
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Getting the Best of the West Without Loosing the Best Of the East Isn't Always Easy, But There Are Ways

"You have a great and ancient tradition," Professor Kevin Ryerson of Princeton University advises his Hindu students, "stay rooted in that tradition." With a profound grasp of the Sanatana Dharma reinforced through years spent in India, Dr. Ryerson is an adept surrogate elder for the many Hindu students at Princeton ill-equipped to confront that least-rooted of world traditions: the American college.

The problems are manifold and run from merely annoying (Christian conversion attempts) to emotionally confusing (dating) to downright devastating (alcohol or drug abuse). They affect Hindus of all origins. To gain insight and garner advice for an estimated 24,000 Hindu undergraduate and graduate students in the U.S., Hinduism Today interviewed students, parents and professors.

Unwelcome proselytism is often the first problem the student encounters. Ajai Shah (University of Mississippi) explained one system: "Churches give rides to grocery stores [which can be far from campus]. You go for three or four months, then they say, 'Why don't you go to church with us?'" Another program, Ajai explained, takes foreign students all over America during Christmas and Easter holidays to stay at Christian homes when the students would otherwise be left alone at campus. Dr. Ryerson minced no words in his assessment: "It upsets me that these awful fundamentalist Christian groups work on these students' insecurity and cultural problems."

Among their peers, Hindu students are not only well-accepted but admired. Thus welcomed, they run head-on into that universal and touchy subject: dating. In our interviews, many played it down, but a more candid Dr. Ryerson put it this way: "I think sexual relationships are the biggest problem. The American campus is quite a shock. Sometimes these students think they are westernized, but don't realize it is an Indian westernization. When they arrive here and actually live among young

Americans, they find it very different."

Vishnu Sharma (Florida Atlantic University) said that others, particularly those born in the U.S., are more comfortable with dating. But, he explained, when an Indian student starts dating a non-Indian, he or she usually leaves the Indian group. Between Indians, he said, dating is equivalent to engagement. Boy/girl relationships get an added dimension with the common practice, beyond belief to Indians, of coed dorms - boys and girls living in the same building, often on the same floor, with free and even unsupervised access to each other's rooms.

Drug abuse is uncommon but not unknown among Indian students. Drugs mean little to most Indian students, explained Neeraja Sankaran (University of Alberta), because they are so common in India and already rejected. Alcohol is another matter. Vishnu Sharma said, "You can't find a party without alcohol. It is very difficult in a college setting to come up and say 'I don't drink,' when you are already different because you are Hindu."

The Vishwa Hindu Parishad, along with other Hindu organizations, realizes a strong religious and cultural training is necessary to combat these problems. Their "National Student Meet" held in December at Georgia State University in Atlanta, Georgia, brought together thirty students from 12 universities. The Florida Hindu Parishad held a youth meeting in October. F.H.P secretary Mr. Muldeo advised the group, "You can no longer afford to be complacent towards religion, or your culture or you stand in great danger of losing your identity."

Students, parents and teachers were unanimous in declaring that a strong religious life is the best antidote to the potential problems in western universities. But most Hindus are woefully ignorant of their own religion. The surprising solution? Study Hinduism here, advises Dr. Ryerson. Many colleges have fine departments of eastern religions. Rather than have the "college experience" weaken his faith (as happens to so many Christians), the Hindu student can return home with renewed dedication and increased knowledge.

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