

Diversity in Hinduism:

- If as Christian, I ask another Christian friend “which God do you believe in”, they would think I am crazy. However, that is a perfectly normal question in Hinduism. I have heard it so many times from one Hindu friend to another. One day I asked my Hindu friend what is the most fascinating thing that she found at our Bible study. She said that the most surprising thing is that in our bible study, we have people from the US, Brazil, Ghana, India, China, Korea and Germany. But when we say “let us open the Gospel of Mark chapter 7”, everyone knows what we are talking about. She doesn’t have that in Hinduism. In fact, her best friend in India, who is also Hindu, has nothing common as far as beliefs or rituals are concerned.
- These two examples just goes on to show the diversity of Hinduism as a religion. To be honest, it is easier to define what Hinduism isn’t than what it is. It has no founder, no common scripture, and no absolute truth. What is believed in one sect of Hinduism can be prohibited in another. Each sect believes a completely different God and completely different scripture, set of rituals and rules.
- Because of this, many Hindus are just culturally Hindus (not believing in their hearts but just doing rituals to respect their families). The other end of spectrum are Hindus who believe every religion and doesn’t mind praying in temple, mosque, durgah, churches or cathedrals. I will explain this with one example. A catholic church near my house (back in India) had more Hindu women attending it than Christians. I talked with the father (priest) and asked him. He said there is a strong belief among Hindu women in the area that praying in that church helps with childbirth without complexities. Most Hindu women in the region visits that church at least once (if not multiple times) during their pregnancy.
- Broadly speaking, the relationship between Hindu God and Hindu devotee is that of “give and take”, quite unlike our relationship with our savior which is “receive and have authentic relationship”. While there are many devotee Hindus, many others just go to temple to “get a blessing” or “solve a problem in life”. And that is perfectly acceptable in their religious context

Cultural insights: What are some things I should know about Indians as I reach to them?

- In the beginning, avoid words like “conversion”. Avoid topic of “cast system” and do not be critical about their traditions or culture.
- Please understand that it is an “indirect” culture and they can’t say “no” to your face (especially if they grew up in a small town as opposed to big city). So, avoid putting them in that position. Instead of asking “Do you want to come to church this Sunday”, you may say “hey, if you want to come to church this Sunday, you

- can text me by Saturday and if I don't hear back, I'd assume you can't. I know you are busy with papers you need to finish"
- Know that when it comes to time orientation, they are opposite of Japanese. And this is not putting India down. Indian culture is very hardworking and still laid back. In Japan, 8:30 means 8:29. In India, 8:30 means sometime close to 9. Indian Standard Time (IST) is jokingly referred to as "Indian Stretchable Time"! This is true when they are new in the US. Over time, they get used to the time orientation here.
 - Along the same line, India is "drop-in" culture. So don't "schedule" appointments, especially in the first year. Instead text them "hey I am on campus during lunch hour. Wanna grab lunch at the university café? My treat!" After the first year of living in the US, they get used to "scheduling".
 - It is polite to decline the offer of food two or three times. So offer food or drink many times. Also, it is Indian hospitality to offer food when you visit their home (without asking if you want it). Do the same when they come to your home. Bring water without asking if they are thirsty. It is just polite to do so.
 - Please know that you don't say "thank you" a lot in Indian culture. It seems fake. Instead gratitude is expressed thru reciprocal actions. So, don't feel offended when you do something for your Indian friend, and they didn't say "thanks". They really mean it in their heart, and you will find out when next time you are in need.
 - Same goes with "please" and "sorry". Indian culture tends not to overuse these words. Do not be offended. The word "please" carries a lot of heavy weight, so one uses it in situations like requesting a doctor to help with a painful back or borrowing money in difficult financial crises.; not for requesting to pass salad bowl from one side of the table to the other.
 - Indian culture is traditionally conservative so avoid physical contact (shaking hands or hugs) with opposite gender until you become close friends.

Ways to engage in Spiritual conversations:

- Initial contacts: Asking good questions, learning more about their families, parents, aspirations, dreams and bringing listening ears. Asking them about their favorite movies/music always helps and breaks the ice.
- Sustaining contacts: Indians are fun people and very hospitable and open to friendships. But also remember that they also grew up in a society that suspects. This suspicion is not merely a response of Indian students to Christians in the US. Suspicion of other people is rooted in Indian society and instilled in children from a young age even in their nursery stories. No one can be taken at face value. Benevolence can never be presumed. And if this is the case, then lasting friendships can only be built if this suspicion is broken and authenticity replaces

it. So, care about them as individuals and create honest / authentic relationships that will stand the test of time.

- Don't hide you are Christian. They have no problem that you are! Most of Indian people believe in higher force so don't try to prove there is God, they already know. Don't try to prove that Bible is holy. They already know. Along the same line...Never put bible on ground or sit on it. Treat it with utmost respect.
- Storytelling: Telling stories of Jesus from the bible is one of the easiest way to share spirituality with them. You can connect everyday life things to these stories. As for example, if they are talking about being exhausted with exams and research, you can tell them about the bible verse where Jesus calls to give us "rest". If they say their grandma is sick back home or something along the line of sickness in their family, I always offer the story of Jesus where he heals.
- Share your own story (testimony). What God has done in your life and how He has changed you is one of the most authentic way to share Gospel and show the power of Jesus.
- Pray Pray Pray: Indians are very spiritual. They love to pray and they would love to receive your prayers. They actually like when you pray for them or with them.
- Always offer to pray for them, especially when in need. Remember that if an Indian person has ever experienced "answered prayer", they are so much open to knowing more about this "God".
- Asking questions that spark further curiosity is always helpful.
- As you get close to them, encourage them to hold true to their cultural identity while still considering following Jesus. Share the Gospel with love and kindness. It might be helpful to say that Christianity is not a religion, but an intimate relationship with Lord Jesus Christ. In Jesus they would find an amazing friend, guide, leader, savior and God. Following Jesus is not about rituals but rather a change of heart.
- Show clear distinction between cultural Christianity and authentic Christianity. This is essentially important for and Indian to understand because India was a colonized nation once. There might be misunderstanding or antipathy in their heart towards Christianity.
- Humbly clarify any misconception they have. (Do I have to change my culture in order to receive Christ? Do I need to change my name or the way I worship? Do I need to eat non-veg food? etc). Some of these might seem like silly questions, but these are real fears in their hearts. Communicate clearly that following Jesus does not mean rejection of their family or cultural values.