Understanding of U.S. Culture in India

The understanding of U.S. culture is varied across India.

Many Indian students had little exposure to people from other places (including Indians from other states) before coming to Buffalo.

Indian students in the U.S. tend to live with Indians from their subgroup and form groups in classes that way.

Strong Emphasis on Education in India

- Educational Context
  - Population: 1 billion, Land Area: 1/3 the size of the U.S.
  - Fierce competition in all arenas
  - More higher education + academic excellence = Only path to decent wages
  - “Education is a must.”
Strong Emphasis on Education in India (cont.)

- Family Focus on Children’s Education
  - Encourage/Pressure children to do better in school
  - Child’s results on tests compared to classmates’ results
  - Bad exam results
    - “What’s the matter with you?”
    - “Why aren’t you crying?”

- Make sacrifices as a family
  - Move to different city and change jobs for child’s education
  - Postpone or miss family ceremonies (e.g. engagement, marriage, baby-naming) because of child’s exam schedule
  - Cancel cable subscription while child is preparing for exams
  - Save all their money for their children’s education

English as Status Symbol in India

- Many Indians do not know English (approx. 75%).
- Most Indians who speak English do so without caring about accuracy or intelligibility.
- Some Indians may show off their English ability to impress others.
  - View speaking English quickly as a sign of skill.

- Showing off one’s English ability may also be frowned upon
  - Ex. “Are you Peter”?

- Hierarchy among students is based on school(s) attended, how early one began studying English, etc.
- Tendency to equate speaking English well with intelligence

Behaviors Linked to Caste System

- Indian people are divided into ethnic and religious communities. In the Hindu community, people have traditionally been divided into castes and subcastes.
  - Priests - highest caste
  - Warriors – second caste
  - Merchants / Tradesmen – third caste
  - Cleaners – lowest caste

- Caste and subcaste lines are blurred now.
  - However, there are hardliners who are purists in matters of caste.

- Caste demarcations are nonetheless still visible when it comes to admission to university, marriage, and civil service job opportunities and promotion.
Behaviors Linked to Caste System (cont.)

- **Language**
  - When speaking to subordinate or lower ranked individuals, Indians may not use polite expressions (e.g., “May I,” “Thank You”) as they consider them unnecessary in such contexts.
  - When speaking to higher ranked individuals, Indians may overuse polite expressions.

Behaviors Linked to Caste System (cont.)

- **Employment**
  - Indian students at UB may refuse to work for campus food services or tell their parents about it.
  - Indian student employees in Campus Dining & Shops may refuse to touch meat.

Indian Government Bureaucracy

- Indian civil servants have job security regardless of their performance.
- They may also be treated poorly by their superiors so may not be inclined to treat their customers well.
- They may feel and act as though they are doing someone a favor when they do their job.

Cultural Difference: Office Hours

- Hours and schedules tend not to be followed in India due to overcrowding, traffic jams, etc.
- Indian students do not expect to find University employees in their office during regular business hours in India.
- When Indian students encounter University employees on campus, they try to get what they need because they believe it is their only chance.

Cultural Difference: Office Hours (cont.)

- If an Indian student discounts a UB employee’s comment about being busy, it is because the student feels helpless and needs immediate help.

Cultural Difference: Office Hours (cont.)

- In University offices in India, employees dodge students by:
  - Setting up an appointment for the student.
  - Telling the student they will work on his/her problem.
- Indian students may conclude they are being dodged when UB employees take such actions, which causes them to become anxious and even more persistent.
**Differences in Communication**

**Presenter**
Sudeep Hegde, Ph.D. Student  
Industrial Engineering

**Vocabulary**

- Although Indian students studied in English, there are significant differences in vocabulary that can cause miscommunication.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indian English</th>
<th>American English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tuition</td>
<td>Cram school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Course</td>
<td>Academic program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standard</td>
<td>Grade in school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paper</td>
<td>Exam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lab practicals</td>
<td>Lab experiments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Give an exam</td>
<td>Take an exam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mugging up</td>
<td>Memorizing for an exam</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Vocabulary (cont.)**

- Indians may also use strong verbs to convey milder concepts.

  - Examples:
    - "India would erupt over the recent sex edition of the UB Spectrum."
      - Meaning: There would be an uproar.
    - "Indian students scorn those who show off by speaking English."
      - Meaning: They frown upon them.

**Pronunciation**

- Stress, intonation and pronunciation patterns in Indian English are influenced by British English and local Indian languages.

  - Examples: aunt, can’t  
    - laboratory, philosophical
- Indians tend to enunciate more clearly than Americans.

**Body Language**

- South Indians nod horizontally to indicate agreement while North Indians nod vertically.

  - Ex. UB professor asked South Indian student, “Are you disagreeing with me?”

**Communication Style**

- Indians perceive Americans as using colorful language while Indians use basic description.

  - Indians tend not to use colloquial expressions.
  - Indians see Americans as “requiring entertainment” in their communication.
Communication Style (cont.)

- Indians tend to be blunt and come across as judgmental.
  - Examples:
    - Indian #1: “Don’t take that course. You’re going to flunk it.”
    - American #1: “If I were you, I wouldn’t take that course.”
    - Indian #2: “If you mess up the lab, you’re out of here.”
    - American #2: “It’s generally a good idea to clean up the lab before you leave.”

Communication Style (cont.)

- Indians tend to be blunt and come across as judgmental. (cont.)
  - Examples:
    - “Stop chasing that girl. You’re never going to get her.”
    - “You’re not studying well these days.”

Communication Style (cont.)

- Indians tend to show respect by being very subservient, flattering and obsequious to appeal to the ego of a superior.
  - Example: Putting their hands behind their back
- Indians tend to use pleading to obtain a favor and create an informal contact.
  - Example: “Respected sir, I would plead you to grant me . . .”

Educational System in India

Presenters
Sumit Tripathi, M.S. Student, Mechanical Engineering
Sourish Chakravarty, Ph.D. Student, Mechanical Engineering

Homework

- Homework is not emphasized in India. Final grades are based on exams.
- The only important factor about homework is that it is submitted on time.
- Academic integrity is not enforced in homework.
  - Ex. One student does the homework and the others copy it. No one will tell on the students who copied. They won’t mind either because they view it as helping.

Homework (cont.)

- Academic integrity is not enforced in homework. (cont.)
  - Ex. There are photocopying machines outside universities. The owner keeps copies of students’ homework assignments so he can make copies for other students.
Homework (cont.)
- Graduation projects involve group work.
- Everyone is given a fragment of the work.
- No one is expected to pull it together.
- No one is assigned to be the leader because it would seem preferential and hierarchical.
- Because the grades are usually average, only one or two groups stand out. As a result, students sometimes lose their drive to work hard so the results tend to be substandard.
- There is no accountability or enforcement of plagiarism.

Testing
- Sanskrit instruction is based on memorizing every word. Indian students learn to memorize every word and regurgitate it on tests.
- Test questions are open-ended for some courses and standardized for others.
- Examination integrity is really important. Exams are coded so there is no chance of bias. Students will tell on students who cheat on an exam.

Testing (cont.)
- In private cram schools, the teacher/professor will teach to the test.
- Students will enroll in a cram course taught by the teacher/professor who wrote the test.
- Professors who wrote the tests may provide clues in cram school classes.
  - Ex. “This is a very important question”.

Grades
- Grades in India are not curved.
- Indian professors also tend not to give high grades.
  - 80-82%: typically the highest
- Grades are read out publicly or posted in India.
- Students with poor grades are scolded publicly and feel guilty because it is drilled into them that they have to do well.

Relationships Among Students
- Collaboration among students on homework
  - Typical Indian students won’t mind if a classmate asks for class notes or homework.
    - Exception: Situations where there might be a penalty if caught
  - Some students will “go the extra mile” for fellow students who are in dire need due to family emergency, sickness, etc.

Relationships Among Students (cont.)
- Collaboration on tests in a “low risk” environment
  - Some students might be willing to give another student a quick peek at his answers.
- Exceptions to this bonhomie occur in situations where the students are vying for a limited number of rewards.
- Note: Indian students tend to form study groups based on GPA, as well as mother tongue.
In Indian culture, the Mother, the Father, the Guru (teacher) and the God(s) play key roles in an individual's development. It is customary to pay respect to one’s elders by touching their feet, thus requesting their blessings and also lowering one’s own ego. When one touches an elder’s feet, s/he reciprocates by touching your head with her/his hands as if blessing you.

Relationships between Indian faculty and students tend to be more formal. Indian students mostly address their professors as “sir”, “madam” and “ma’am”. Dr. and Prof. are rarely used in India. It is strictly taboo for Indian students to address their professors by their first names.

Some Indian professors tend to be judgmental and may not hesitate to put students down or intrude into their privacy. There are also well-meaning professors who care genuinely about their students’ well-being. They will check on students who are sick or having a family emergency. They will counsel students who are going through a low period academically and emotionally.
Indian Students’ Experiences in the U.S.

Presenter
Parvathy Hariharan, M.S. Student, Biological Sciences

- Misinterpretation of the course load
  - The workload associated with a course in the U.S. is quite different from that in India.
- Unfamiliarity with the concept of resigning courses
  - Resigning courses is not an option in India.

Indian Students’ Experiences in the U.S. (cont.)

- Hesitation about approaching and interacting with faculty
  - Fear of asking “weak” questions
- Necessity of redefining what is important in each course
  - Concept of what is important is different in India
- Concept of privacy in grades
  - Doesn’t exist in India

U.S. Educational System as Viewed by Indian Students

Presenter
Anand Shankar, M.S. Student, Biotechnology

- U.S. students are encouraged to be autonomous and make their own decisions.
  - In India, students are constantly waiting for instructions from their teacher.
- The learning process is continuous in the U.S.
  - In India, students cram at the end of the semester.
- U.S. faculty will admit to mistakes.
  - In India, this would not happen.
- U.S. faculty encourage students to form opinions, come up with their own ideas and refute existing ideas.
  - In India, such an approach would be rare.
- There is a lot of emphasis on projects in the U.S.
Indian Students’ Perceptions of U.S. Educational System (cont.)

- U.S. faculty can set their own syllabus, digress from the topic and go into detail.
  - In India, this would be viewed as going "out of syllabus", which is not allowed.
- Note-taking is more challenging in the U.S.
  - In India, students copy the teacher’s / professor’s notes from the blackboard.
- The “closed” (confidential) grading system in the U.S. is good.
  - In India, grades are publicly known.

Tips for U.S. Faculty

Presenter
Preethi Gopalan, M.S. Student
Electrical Engineering

Discuss the expectations outlined in the class syllabus in detail. Remind the students about those expectations from time to time.
- Be on time for class, office hours and appointments.
- Make clear your policy of academic integrity and how it will be enforced.

Tips for U.S. Faculty (cont.)

- Discuss the expectations for laboratory work in detail.
  - Indian students are accustomed to step-by-step instructions from their professors.
  - Since they have little experience taking initiative, it’s important to be explicit about how independently or dependently you expect them to work.

Tips for U.S. Faculty (cont.)

- Understand that Indian students may have difficulty understanding lectures and taking notes due to pronunciation differences.
  - If possible, try to speak more slowly at the beginning of the semester.
  - Use transitions to make it clear when you change topics.
    - Ex. “Now I’m going to discuss . . .”
- Understand that silence in class does not mean that an Indian student is not paying attention.
Tips for U.S. Faculty

- Encourage Indian students to ask questions in class.
- Encourage them to use office hours.
- When Indian students are late for office hours or an appointment, make your expectations clear.
  - “My time is important. If you want my assistance, you need to be on time. I cannot meet with you now.”

Tips for U.S. Faculty (cont.)

- When Indian students come up to you on campus to conduct class or office business, politely advise them that such an approach is not appropriate.
  - “This is not the way to approach a University employee/professor.”

Tips for U.S. Faculty (cont.)

- When illustrating concepts in class, try to use examples that are not U.S. specific. Provide examples that would be understood worldwide instead.
- In group work, try not to let Indian students self-segregate by nationality or ethnic group. Mix them up instead.
- Clarify that the students must synthesize all information in group work.

Tips for U.S. Faculty (cont.)

- Understand that some Indian students may be aggressive because they were advised that it’s necessary to be aggressive in the U.S.

Thank you for coming to our workshop!