

Indian Student Leaders Learn About America First-Hand

By CAITLIN FENNERTY

Six confident and poised Indian university students, aged 20 and 21, walked into a conference room at the American Center in New Delhi in July. Each took a seat behind a stack of books, including a world almanac, an outline of U.S. history, another on American geography. They had reason to be confident. Each had been nominated by their university for demonstrating leadership on campus and off. And they were on their way to becoming representatives of their country.

Sixty students from across India had written essays on leadership and engaged in a panel discussion on democracy. These six were the ones chosen by the U.S. Embassy for the two-month Study of United States Institutes for Student Leaders program this fall. Indian, Bangladeshi and Pakistani undergraduates are placed in intensive academic programs to give them a deeper understanding of the United States and to develop their leadership skills.

Despite their confidence, the students were nervous and excited, too. None had ever been to the United States. And five of them were receiving a passport for the first time.

Samridhi Shukla from Delhi University, a young woman with long, dark hair and sunglasses on her head, was elated over the prospect of regular trips to KFC and meeting new American friends at the University of Alabama in Huntsville. Eisha Aleem from Jamia Millia Islamia, wearing a pink *salwar kameez* and head

scarf, spoke excitedly about the experiences that her older sister, Hiba, had with the program at Washington College in Maryland in 2004. Hiba was also on hand to share tips and insights with the other students. Raghav Bhatt, a quiet but self-assured young man from Lucknow University, said he was psyched to fly half way around the world. Shubhda Chaudhary, a smiley young woman with hazel eyes, couldn't wait to meet the host family she would be staying with.

All agreed that first and foremost they wanted to be good ambassadors. In Eisha Aleem's words, this means "showing a true picture of India." Bhatt said that, like many Americans, Indians view themselves as part of a large salad bowl; one country composed of very diverse cultures and peoples. So whether they are Muslim or Hindu, a Kashmiri or Delhiite, they wanted to convey to Americans the richness of India's diverse culture, traditions, values and religions. It is not an easy task, they admit, but an important one. "When groups of people are unaware of one another, when they see things in a shallow or one-dimensional way, things get dirty and prejudiced assessments on both sides are likely to be made," says Eisha Aleem. Rizwan Javed Sheikh believes he has a threefold duty: to represent his state, Jammu and Kashmir, his country, and his religion, Islam. Naveed Iqbal, like Sheikh, attends Kashmir University. "As a Kashmiri and a Muslim I am just as die-hard an Indian as anyone else. I love my country," she says.

The students are equally eager to learn more about American culture and expect this to be a huge eye-opener. "It will be a whole new experience," says Iqbal, who is attending the University of Alabama in the American South with Shukla and Eisha Aleem. "We can't wait to drink it all in!" The other three are at Green River Community College in Washington, in the

Northwest.

Rashee Mehra, who attended Green River College last summer, was on hand to tell them how valuable experiences both inside and outside the classroom are to getting a deeper insight into American culture and values. "It was such an opportunity to learn from the American perspective about the political, social and economic issues and changes that have shaped life in the U.S.," Mehra says. "I think it...helped me respect and understand the culture. Staying with a host parent was also wonderful. We became so close that my host mother came to visit me here in India. You make such close bonds with people."

Those studying in Washington are living with host families and those in Alabama are in dormitories with other students.

Although they weren't entirely sure what to expect, the students had a few preconceived notions about Americans. Bhatt had heard that Americans are typically friendly and informal and apart from professional or academic settings, introduce themselves by their first names. The informal bit worries him a little. "Are we supposed to call our host parents by their first names? In Hindi we have special words to denote status and respect. I don't know if I could get used to calling adults by their first names. Do you think they'll mind if I stick to Mr. and Mrs.?"

Shukla appreciates the value Americans place on individuality. She likes the fact that they "seem to feel free to speak their minds on most subjects. I think it will create a more interesting learning environment when students are outspoken and are frank in expressing their opinions."

At the U.S. universities, the visiting students are engaging in seminar discussions and they are assigned readings, group presentations and lecture attendance. The coursework and classroom activities are aimed at helping them explore the princi-

For more information:

Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs

<http://exchanges.state.gov/>

The University of Alabama in Huntsville

<http://www.uah.edu/>

Green River Community College

<http://www.greenriver.edu/>



Courtesy Raghav Bhatt



Courtesy Eisha Aleem

Top: Raghav Bhatt (back row from left), Rizwan Javeed Sheikh and Shubhda Chaudhary with other program participants in front of Hurricane Ridge in Olympic National Park in Washington state.

Above from left: Samridhi Shukla, Naveed Iqbal, Jasmeet Khurana and Eisha Aleem visiting a synagogue in Huntsville, Alabama.

ples of democracy and fundamental American values such as individual rights, freedom of expression, pluralism, tolerance and volunteerism.

Hiba Aleem, who participated in the program five years ago, is pursuing a Ph.D. in English literature and plans to go into education. She was very impressed by the informal, discussion based aspect

of the American classroom, “I liked that the teachers listened to the students. We were encouraged to express our opinions and it was okay if we disagreed with the teacher. As a result, my professors were very approachable, the discussions were deeper and more enriching and I felt I could take charge of my own education.”

While Mehra found the American classroom less rigorous than the Indian, she was impressed by the emphasis on volunteerism. “I think that is a fantastic thing. I think volunteerism is so important for personal development and creates a better, cleaner, healthier society.” She herself is working for an NGO called Swechha. Its mission is to draw attention to New Delhi’s growing environmental problems.

Mehra excited the group with stories of her own experiences: “We played Bollywood songs for our teachers on YouTube and they absolutely loved it! We also got them excited about cricket. We talked about it so much that the teachers told us they wanted to play in a cricket match with us. That was great. Since we’ve left, Green River Community College has set up a cricket team. We definitely left our mark.”

Shukla, who did another exchange program last summer, adds that as much as you leave a mark on others, a mark will be left on you, too. While living with her host family, she was forced to face ways of life and thinking that were very different from her own. She feels this was a positive thing and is excited to challenge herself again. “You know I stayed with a family that was very different from my own. At first I wondered what I had gotten myself into, but then, you know, I saw that they were good people. They are now close friends of mine. You can’t be content with what you know. You need to challenge yourself, your ideas, make an effort, so you can grow.”



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