



Survey of Indian Muslim Experiences At Arizona State University

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Funded by the Indian Muslim American Council

STUDY OVERVIEW

Coming to the USA is a life-changing experience for many international Indian students, offering numerous opportunities for personal and professional growth. However, this transition is often fraught with challenges, including a lack of proper guidance and support during difficult times. Indian Muslim students, in particular, are drawn to the U.S. for its freedom of speech and the ability to practice their beliefs openly—freedoms that are sometimes restricted in India. Despite these opportunities, they face significant hurdles such as difficulty finding on-campus jobs or internships without referrals, exclusion from Indian Student Association clubs and other student organizations, and challenges in securing accommodations. Addressing these challenges is crucial for helping Indian Muslim students thrive academically and personally during their time in the USA.

Funded by the Indian American Muslim Council with logistical and research support from the Center of Muslim Experience in the United States, a student researcher was hired during the spring 2024 semester to document the experiences of Muslim students enrolled at Arizona State University. The survey collected responses from Indian Muslim students, covering a range of questions about their demographics, academic pursuits, motivations, challenges, and interests. Both quantitative and qualitative data were analyzed to identify key trends and insights.

Who Participated in the Study?

The study aimed to explore the experiences of 60 Indian Muslim students at Arizona State University (ASU), focusing on their demographics, motivations for studying abroad, and challenges related to religion and culture. The survey included multiple-choice, Likert-scale, and open-ended questions to gather quantitative and qualitative data.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

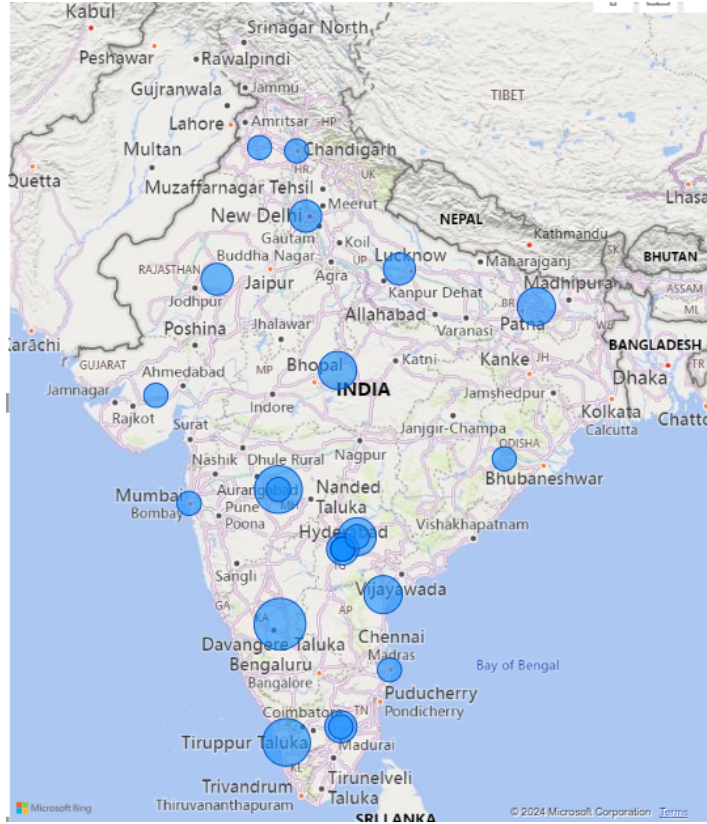
Indian Muslim international students at Arizona State University, and across the United States, face particular challenges unique to their social and cultural backgrounds. Because of religious, cultural, and (often) political differences, they are disconnected from the Indian Student Association, dominated by Hindus. In addition, while religiously connected, they also often feel less at home with the Muslim Student Association, where many members are American-born and where there are many Arabs as well. Subtle differences make it difficult for Indian Muslim students to find a sense of belonging on campus.

Differences among Indian Muslims themselves, who originate from a diversity of regions across India, speaking different languages compound differences with existing organizations. To meet these particular challenges of the unique status of Indian Muslim students at ASU, the following recommendations are suggested:

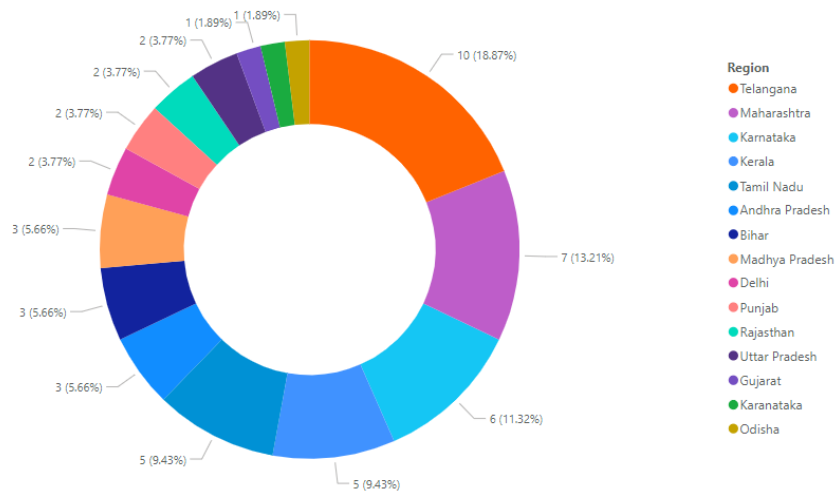
- Establishment of *halal* food options on campus, particularly with South Asian cuisine;
- Support for networking and guidance of new Indian Muslim students and other international students for obtaining on-campus jobs and professional summer internships;
- An office to identify and work with the university community to address issues of Islamophobia and the particular discrimination that Indian Muslims may face in light of the political situation in India;
- Support of the activities of the newly established Indian Muslim Student Network.

Demographic Background of Survey Respondents

Respondents originate from different parts of India.



(Fig 1)



(Fig 2)

These demographics highlight the diversity within the Indian Muslim student community at ASU, indicating a need for inclusive policies and support services that cater to various backgrounds.

The vast majority of Indian Muslim students are forging new paths.

The survey data revealed that approximately 81.13% of Indian Muslim students at ASU are first-generation students in the USA. As the first in their families to pursue higher education in the USA, these students face unique challenges.

Motivation for Studying Abroad and Choosing ASU

The survey responses highlight several key motivations for Indian Muslim students choosing to study abroad and specifically at Arizona State University (ASU). Out of 60 respondents, a significant majority cited the desire for better educational opportunities, international exposure, and enhanced career prospects as primary reasons for not continuing their studies in India. Specifically, 45 students (75%) mentioned seeking higher quality education and more opportunities abroad. For example, one student noted, "An M.S. in India isn't that attractive and wouldn't provide the same opportunities," while another stated, "Better depth of knowledge gain, more exposure to culture."

A notable 20 students (33%) expressed that the communal environment and lack of quality in higher education in India influenced their decision. One student explained, "Because of the communal environment," and another shared, "The amount of Islamophobia and hate crimes being committed made my parents decide on sending me over here."

When it came to choosing ASU specifically, the motivations were diverse. The top reasons included:

- **Reputation and Quality of Education:** 15 students (25%) mentioned ASU's strong programs and academic reputation. For instance, one student said, "Strong EEE programs, and warm weather climate," and another highlighted, "Its reputation and the course it provides."
- **Financial and Practical Considerations:** 10 students (17%) chose ASU for its lower tuition fees and favorable living conditions. One student noted, "Less tuition fee, safer place, and better weather among the unis I applied to."
- **Community and Environment:** 8 students (13%) valued the presence of a supportive community and the inclusive environment at ASU. One student pointed out, "A Mosque on campus! I also had a sibling studying here and a big interest in entrepreneurship,"

while another mentioned, "Indian community, lower tuition as compared to other schools, weather similar to my hometown, decent education."

- **Ranking and Research Opportunities:** 12 students (20%) were drawn to ASU for its high ranking and research facilities.

Halal Food Preferences Among Indian Muslim Students at ASU

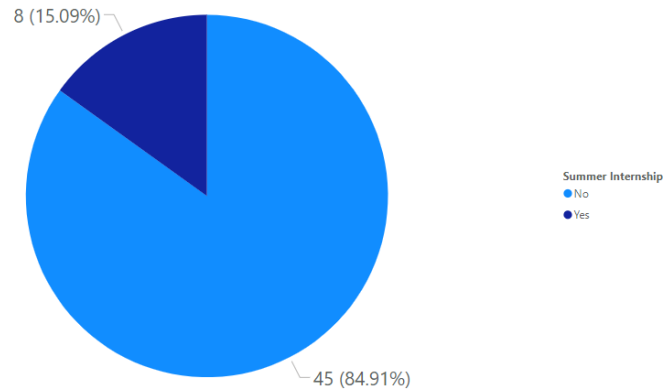
The availability and management of halal food preferences significantly impact the experiences of Indian Muslim students at ASU. Many students proactively researched halal food sources before arriving, with one noting, "I googled about the Muslim population of Arizona and places where I could get halal meat." Others relied on local markets and recommendations from peers, as illustrated by a student who said, "I posted on the MSA Discord group and they suggested Baiz Market. So, I buy halal meat from there." Home cooking emerged as a common solution, with several students preparing their meals to ensure they adhered to halal dietary restrictions. Also, one of them said, "Finding halal food is the main challenge."

Despite these efforts, difficulties persisted for some students, highlighting the variability in access and convenience of halal options. One student expressed frustration with the lack of dining hall options, stating, "No, the dining hall barely has options for halal food." This variability underscores the need for universities to enhance the availability and visibility of halal food options on campus. Ensuring easy access to halal food in dining halls and local eateries, along with providing resources to guide students, can greatly improve their comfort and integration into university life.

On-Campus Job Opportunities

Securing an on-campus part-time job has proven to be a significant challenge for Indian Muslim students at ASU. Based on the survey responses, a substantial number of students reported difficulties in obtaining such positions. Out of the respondents, only a minority managed to secure on-campus jobs. Specifically, the data indicates that 32 students reported finding an on-campus job, while 38 indicated they had not. This highlights a substantial gap in employment opportunities within the campus community. The survey further reveals that having a referral significantly increases the likelihood of securing a job. Among those who did secure a position, several reported obtaining the job through a referral indicating that networking could potentially play a more significant role in their job search success.

Summer Internship Opportunities for Indian Muslim Students at ASU



(Fig no.3)

Securing a summer internship has proven to be a significant challenge for Indian Muslim students at ASU, reflecting broader difficulties that all international students face in the current job market. Based on the survey responses, most students reported encountering difficulties in obtaining internships. Out of the respondents, only a small fraction managed to secure summer internships. Specifically, the data indicates that only 7 students reported finding an internship, while 53 indicated they had not. This highlights a substantial gap in internship opportunities within the campus community.

The competitive nature of the job market, exacerbated by economic fluctuations, makes it increasingly difficult for international students to secure internships. Many students have noted the importance of having referrals in the internship application process.

The lack of a robust referral network among international students, particularly Indian Muslims, further exacerbates these challenges. This situation underscores the critical need for universities to provide better support and resources for international students seeking internships.

The survey responses indicate that while a majority of Indian Muslim students at ASU have not faced discrimination, a significant minority have encountered such instances. Out of the respondents, 9 students reported experiencing discrimination, particularly while searching for a job or internship or in the classroom. Efforts to mitigate these challenges should include enhancing support systems, promoting diversity and inclusion initiatives, and ensuring that discrimination policies are effectively enforced.

Discrimination Faced on Campus

Even though many students did not face any discrimination, there are a few who encountered significant challenges related to Islamophobia on campus. One student shared a particularly distressing experience, stating, "I had anticipated the worst part is it came from the people who I never thought would say these things. I had a friend who was Indian, and during Ramadan, I told him I was fasting. We were walking on campus, and he said, 'Do you really think staying thirsty all day and doing all this work and then downing water like a sewer after sunset is religious?' It hurts when you feel connected to a person through identity, and they say this. It is awful, and once someone came over for iftar, they instantly said no with disgust on their face." Another student reflected on broader social dynamics, noting, "As a Muslim Indian, I've sometimes felt the weight of discrimination, especially in environments where Hindus and other groups outnumber those of my faith."

These experiences of discrimination, especially coming from individuals within the same cultural community, highlight the deeply ingrained biases and lack of understanding that some students face.

Discrimination Faced by Women

Female students, particularly those who wear the hijab, reported more acute forms of discrimination and social challenges. One student remarked, "I wear a hijab, so, I receive a lot of rolling eyes and it is difficult to make friends." Another shared a more detailed account, describing uncomfortable interactions and comments about their religious attire, stating, "I ordered an Uber ride to the mosque for *Jummah* [Friday congregational prayer] with my sister who is a hijabi; the driver's face went red as soon as he saw her from a distance. The whole ride he was just angry and disgusted by us, this was one of the few instances I have faced." Additionally, one student succinctly captured the pervasive nature of bias by stating, "As a visibly brown Muslim woman, there are so many prejudices we face." These experiences highlight the everyday biases and social challenges that these women encounter. These accounts underscore the need for increased awareness, support, and inclusive practices to ensure a welcoming environment for all students, particularly women who visibly practice their faith.

Staying Connected with Indian Muslim Identity

Donna Anderson, in her research on Muslim International Students in the United States, found that after arriving in the country, 60% of Muslim international students encountered difficulties in maintaining the important practice of performing Islamic prayers five times a day, as well as attending Friday prayers each week. These students struggled with adhering to the prescribed prayer times due to the constraints of attending classes and finding a suitable space to perform

their prayers, particularly for female students.¹

Indian Muslim students at ASU employ various methods to stay connected with their Indian Muslim identity while living abroad. Based on the survey responses, 15 students actively participate in local mosques and religious communities to maintain their cultural and religious practices. One student shared, "Being an active member of the local masjid, as well as regularly meeting Indians, and planning events with them," helps him stay connected. Similarly, others mentioned attending prayers and visiting mosques regularly, with one stating, "I visit the mosque regularly" and another noting, "Attending prayers every day."

About 10 students engage with organizations such as the Indian Muslim Student Association and the Islamic Community Center (ICC) in Tempe. One student emphasized, "*Jumma namaz* on Friday and other prayers are with ICC," while another mentioned, "Through attending programs by MSA and ICC." These organizations provide a sense of community and support, facilitating cultural and religious practices.

Networking and forming friendships with people from similar backgrounds also play a crucial role for approximately 12 students. A student remarked, "I have made a couple of friends with the same religious background who provide me with a suitable environment," and another highlighted, "By connecting with friends and being myself."

However, not all students feel well-connected. Around 8 students expressed challenges in maintaining their identity, with one stating, "I am not connected at all, I don't have a point of contact," and another mentioning, "Visiting the mosque helps a little, but other than that there isn't a certain place or organization that would hold these kinds of get-togethers."

While many students actively maintain their Indian Muslim identity through religious practices, community involvement, and friendships, others face challenges due to a lack of organized support and inclusive events. This highlights the need for more targeted initiatives and inclusive practices to support Indian Muslim students in staying connected with their cultural and religious identity while abroad

Impact of Living in the US on Religious Identity

The survey responses reveal that living in the US has had varied impacts on the religious identity of Indian Muslim students at ASU. Out of the 60 respondents, 12 (20%) indicated that living in the US has strengthened their religious identity, while 45 (75%) reported no significant change, and 3 (5%) expressed confusion or a decrease in their religious observance.

¹ D.L. Anderson. 2020. Muslim International Students in the United States: A Phenomenological Inquiry into the Experience of Identities. In *Journal of International Students* (Vol. 10, p. 327). OJED. <https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v10i2.965>

A significant portion of students, 12 out of 60, noted that their religious identity became stronger after moving to the US. This strengthening is often attributed to the increased freedom to practice their religion openly without societal pressures. One student remarked, "Yes, [coming to the US] made me stronger. In the absence of close relatives nudging me to pray, fast, and observe Muslim activities, I am now recognizing how important those Muslim activities were for me." Another student shared, "Living among those who often forsake their religious beliefs in a new environment has strengthened my connection with Allah." One student mentioned, "It has made me acknowledge more about my religious identity. It has made me comfortable to follow my religious duties more openly compared to in India." This suggests that the US environment, with its freedom of religion, allows students to continue their practices without external pressures, contributing to a stable religious identity.

The majority of students, 45 out of 60, reported no significant change in their religious identity. These students maintained their previous level of religious observance despite the change in environment.

A smaller group of students, 3 out of 60, indicated that their religious observance has decreased or they have become more confused about their religious identity. One student noted, "Yes, during the first year, I slipped away from the religious practices, which I am regaining back strength," while another stated, "Maybe, I am less religious now." These students often cited the lack of a strong community and social barriers as contributing factors to their decreased religious observance.

Overall, the impact of living in the US on the religious identity of Indian Muslim students at ASU is predominantly positive, with 20% of students becoming more religious due to the increased freedom to practice their faith openly. The majority of students, 75%, reported no significant change in maintaining their religious practices in the new environment. However, a small percentage of students, 5%, faced challenges that led to a decrease in religious observance. These findings highlight the importance of providing supportive religious communities and resources to help students maintain and strengthen their religious identities while studying abroad.

Indian Student Association: Inclusivity and Support for Diverse Backgrounds

The survey responses indicate mixed experiences with the Indian Student Association (ISA) at ASU. Thirty-five percent reported receiving help from the ISA, while 65% indicated they did not receive any assistance from the organization. This disparity highlights significant gaps in how well the ISA serves the diverse needs of Indian students on campus.

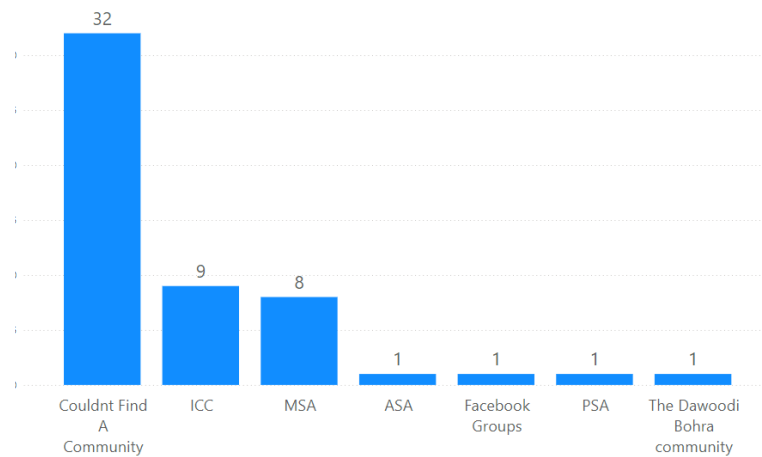
Many students expressed feelings of neglect and unrecognized needs within the ISA. One student shared, "When I talked with the Indian Student Association president about why they don't conduct any Muslim events, they said they conduct only Indian events, which was ridiculous.

Then when I asked why they don't conduct Pongal, a Tamil cultural festival, they replied that they won't conduct any regional events. and any Muslim events you can collaborate with the Pakistan Student Association. This makes me feel that this is not an Indian Student Association." Such responses underscore a perceived lack of inclusivity and representation within the ISA.

The feedback from students suggests that their needs and cultural preferences are often overlooked. Many students felt that their religious and cultural identities were not recognized, and they were treated as a minority within the organization. This sentiment was reflected in the survey results, where 65% of respondents indicated that they did not receive help from the ISA. The lack of events and initiatives catering to the diverse cultural and religious backgrounds of Indian students has contributed to a sense of exclusion among many.

The Indian Student Association should take care of the entire Indian student community, acknowledging and celebrating the diverse backgrounds of people from different parts of India. It should not only focus on cultural events but also provide support to help students improve themselves academically and personally. By adopting a more inclusive approach and organizing events that cater to the various cultural, religious, and academic needs of Indian students, the ISA can better fulfill its purpose of fostering a supportive and unified community.

Importance of Establishing an Indian Muslim Student Group



(Fig no.4)

Bateer Chen, Humaira Tabassum, and Muhammad Aamir Saeed (2019) emphasize the importance of a supportive community for Muslim students in their study on international Muslim students. They highlight that without such a community, Muslim students often experience feelings of isolation. Similar to other minority groups, social support, connectedness, and positive peer relationships are essential for the success of Muslim students in a new

environment. These factors not only assist in the preservation of their Muslim identity but also reinforce Islamic values and behavioral codes.²

The survey responses highlight the significant potential benefits of establishing an Indian Muslim student group at ASU. Out of the 60 respondents, a majority expressed that such a group could effectively address their unique challenges and provide much-needed support. Specifically, 46 students (77%) believed that an Indian Muslim student group would be beneficial, while 14 students (23%) either felt it was unnecessary or were unsure. One student stated “It would provide a sense of belonging to students and a platform they can turn to when they are in need of professional or personal help.”

An established Indian Muslim student group would focus on the specific problems faced by Indian Muslim students, offering a platform where forthcoming students could easily find support. One student noted, "Yes, they would focus on problems of Indian Muslims and try to get us to a platform where it is easier for forthcoming students." Another emphasized the importance of community and networking, saying, "I strongly believe that it would help connect and resolve issues with greater effectiveness." Furthermore, a student remarked, "Yes, during Ramadan, I can meet a lot of my Muslim friends, which is a treat for the mind. If such meetings are prolonged, it can be a better support system for every Indian Muslim ASU student out there."

Many students highlighted the importance of having a community where they could share their experiences and receive guidance. One student stated, "Having a group of Indian Muslims at the university would be fantastic. It would give us a chance to connect with people who understand our lives and what we do every day. This club would be like a second home for everyone, making us feel comfortable even when we're away from home." Another student added, "As Indian Muslims, we could relate to each other's problems and help each other out." The sentiment was echoed by a respondent who noted, "A helping hand would make things a lot easier. It'd also be good to have some Muslim friends because one could participate in activities at ICC together."

Several respondents pointed out that such a group could provide practical support for new students, helping them navigate accommodation, halal food options, and professional needs. One student mentioned, "They can set up a prayer hall on campus," while another said, "Yes, having an Indian Muslim student group would help practice our religion and culture and for accommodation and professional needs." Additionally, the group could offer better representation and address issues that arise due to religious and cultural beliefs, providing a

² Chen, Tabassum, & Saeed. 2019. International Muslim Students: Challenges and Practical Suggestions to Accommodate Their Needs on Campus. In *Journal of International Students* (Vol. 9, pp. 933–953). OJED.

unified voice for Indian Muslim students. As one student put it, "Definitely yes! That will help foster a sense of inclusivity and will surely understand our situation better than anyone else."

Despite the presence of the Indian Student Association (ISA) and the Muslim Student Association (MSA) at ASU, many students feel that these organizations do not adequately address their specific cultural and religious needs. One student commented, "ISA has not done a single event that would allow me to feel Muslims are also accepted here. It is concerning that they have not held a single event that promotes Indian Muslim identity ever since its establishment." These responses highlight the need for a dedicated group that can bridge the cultural and religious gaps that existing organizations fail to address.

Recommendations

To effectively address the unique challenges faced by Indian Muslim students at ASU, it is recommended to establish a dedicated Indian Muslim student group. This group should focus on providing comprehensive support tailored to the cultural, religious, and social needs of Indian Muslim students. The key functions and benefits of such a group would include:

1. Cultural and Religious Support:

Organize events to celebrate and respect Indian Muslim cultural and religious practices, such as Ramadan *iftars* [breaking of the daily fast], Eid celebrations, and other significant occasions. Provide resources and information on halal food options, prayer spaces, and religious observances on campus, specific to the tastes and cultural milieu of Indian Muslims.

2. Community Building:

Foster a sense of community and belonging among Indian Muslim students through regular meetings, social events, and networking opportunities. Facilitate connections with local mosques and Muslim community centers to support religious practices and social integration.

3. Practical Assistance:

Offer guidance on accommodation, internships, and job opportunities, specifically addressing the challenges faced by Indian Muslim students. Create a mentorship program where experienced students can help newcomers navigate the academic and social environments at ASU.

4. Representation and Advocacy:

Ensure that the voices and concerns of Indian Muslim students are heard and addressed within the broader university community. Advocate for policies and practices that promote inclusivity and respect for cultural and religious diversity on campus.

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