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Cal Exhibit Profiles Entrepreneurs

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BERKELEY, Calif. — A powerpoint slide show with selected quotes, flow charts representing education journeys and the various visa routes taken by the 20 interviewed storytellers, and another powerpoint slide show depicting the history of highly skilled South Asian immigrants to the U.S. were some of the tools used to present a hitherto unseen sociological perspective of the much storied success of South Asian entrepreneurs in the Silicon Valley.

“Our goal with the exhibit was to . . . depict certain key aspects of the entrepreneurial route taken by some South Asian immigrants to the United States,” Clare Talwalker, the UC Berkeley instructor who supervised student researchers who put together the exhibit, told India-West.



In addition to the items mentioned above, the exhibit also screened a rough cut of a film made by students on the topic, and included “Start Ups and Downs,” an adventure book game based on the life of an Indian entrepreneur in the Silicon Valley.

Another presentation, “Transnational Work Life,” displayed four clocks with different time zones to suggest how a transnational enterprise must navigate different time zones, and a poster depicting a calendar showing a week in the life of an entrepreneur who is on the verge of quitting his job and launching a start-up.

The exhibit is the result of a two-year-long project about the life and experience of pioneering Indian entrepreneurs in the Silicon Valley. Silicon Valley entrepreneur Narpat Bhandari was particularly supportive in helping student researchers work with logistics and planning, Talwalker told India-West.

“Indian entrepreneurs have contributed significantly to the rise of the Silicon Valley, helping to establish the region as a critical node in the global economy,” UC Berkeley’s Center for South Asia Studies, one of the sponsors of the exhibit, said in an announcement. “Their accomplishments in purely business terms have been staggering and well documented. Now, for the first time, and through this exhibit, the largely neglected sociological side of this revolutionary history is examined.”

A total of 20 students participated in the project. The coursework focused on learning about the larger context for the emergence of South Asian entrepreneurship in Silicon Valley. An exhibit was designed to represent the journeys of individual entrepreneurs.

Participating students, who were themselves a diverse group, suggested that the South Asian success story offers considerable food for thought.

"I found it particularly interesting that entrepreneurs came from such vastly different fields of study, but had some amazing similarities in their anecdotes and advice," said Omead Barari, a junior majoring in chemical biology. He said that working on the exhibit gave him a "greater appreciation for a highly interesting diaspora, a better understanding of a people's culture, and greater overall insight into the life of an entrepreneur."

For some student researchers, it was more personal. "This topic is very close to my heart, as my father is an entrepreneur and was interviewed for our project," Meghana Dhar told India-West. "It was certainly eye-opening to learn about his own story from a viewpoint that I had never heard before. It made me respect him that much more, as well as all the entrepreneurs in our exhibit."

Dhar said that working for the exhibit helped her jettison the preconceived notion that "all entrepreneurs are engineers who come from IITs."

"Through our exhibit, we all learned about the diversity of the Indian entrepreneur and the various backgrounds they all came from," she added.

Thien-Kim Ngo, a sophomore, said the exhibit opened his eyes to the possibility of entrepreneurship. "It notes and celebrates an incredible history, and highlights a promising future for entrepreneurship, that many, including myself, would not be exposed to if it were not for the exhibit," he said.

Corey Jackson, a junior, said the exhibit is very valuable for non-Indians. "The personal narratives around which our project is built add a level of dynamism to this community that non-Indians may not always be privy to," she said. "We all know how important Indian entrepreneurship has been in shaping the Silicon Valley, but the exhibit offers something more. It reveals the ups-and-downs inherent in the entrepreneurial process, the strain those uncertainties can have on family life, and our entrepreneurs' philosophies on education, mentorship, etc. All of which are relevant to Indians and non-Indians alike."

As for the future, Talwalker said they were "very keen on the idea of developing a Web site which we would populate first with the content of our exhibit, but which might further develop with input from the community."

Talwalker told India-West that while documenting the journeys of the South Asian entrepreneur, she would also like to see support for student research on particular related questions, such as how South Asian entrepreneurs constitute a community; what makes high-tech entrepreneurs a distinct social group from the grocery store entrepreneur, or the taxi company entrepreneur; what various opinions South Asian entrepreneurs have of their contribution to global capitalism/transnational enterprises, etc.

However, the current grim economic situation poses a challenge. "Unfortunately, the future of Industry Stories is a bit unclear at the moment," she said. "We are dependent on outside funding."

Readers interested in supporting and funding research and/or exhibits can contact the Center for South Asia Studies, Talwalker added. CSAS contact information is available on the Web at www.southasia.berkeley.edu.