UCB to Document Stories of Indian American Entrepreneurs

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A two-semester course at the Center for South Asian Studies at the University of California at Berkeley has been launched to document the accomplishments and struggles of Indian American entrepreneurs in Silicon Valley.

The program is being funded by the Bhandari Foundation, a charitable trust launched in 1994 by Los Gatos, Calif., entrepreneur Narpat Bhandari and his wife, Chandra.

The course, "The Indian Diaspora in the Silicon Valley," has already begun meeting to catalogue oral histories of Indian American entrepreneurs and make a documentary film about them. "This is something I wanted to do for my grandchildren and great grandchildren long after I'm gone," Bhandari told India-West.

"To commemorate (the histories) of Indian American entrepreneurs, there couldn't be a better place than UCB," the instructor selected to teach the class, Darren Zook, a veteran teacher of South Asia-related courses at Berkeley, recently won the university's "Outstanding Teacher Award," the only honor awarded by the students at Berkeley.

Zook told India-West Sept. 20 that he was beset by applications from undergraduate students to enroll in the course, which was originally limited to 10 students. He expanded the class to 11, when one student turned down an application saying that getting admitted would be a life-changing experience.

Zook said there will be three central elements to the course: "gaining a deep understanding of the Indian Diaspora as it relates to Silicon Valley," discovering a methodology on how to do good research and producing the documentary film.

Students will select three Indian American entrepreneurs "as the centerpiece" of the film. Non-Indians and Indian Americans outside Silicon Valley will be interviewed for their perspectives.

There are two Indian American students in the class who had already planned visits to India during school breaks, so there may be a chance to conduct interviews in India, Zook said, adding that the oral histories will be archived for scholars and a public showing of the documentary may be held sometime in May.

Bhandari, a private venture capitalist and founding member of The Indus Entrepreneurs, said he feels it is important for mainstream society in the U.S. to understand that Indian Americans "came to this country not only as takers, but as active contributors who reshaped our industry and made America a new tolerant and diverse country which can enjoy, benefit and profit from its new global relations."

Raka Ray, Sarah Kailath Chair of India Studies at the Center for South Asian Studies at UCB, in an e-mail to India-West, pointed out that the accomplishments of Indian entrepreneurs "in business terms have been staggering and well documented."

She added that the Bhandari-funded program "will attempt to examine the largely neglected sociological side of this revolutionary history and thereby cast the economic success of Silicon Valley's Indian entrepreneurs in a much more nuanced and compelling light than do the simplistic stereotypes about Indian tech."

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