

A VIEW FROM THE CHAIR

by Raka Ray

Dear friends,
I will be stepping down as Chair of the Center for South Asia Studies this summer after nine wonderfully fulfilling years – the privilege to work with this staff, the faculty, the students, and the community has been great indeed.

As I look back at these years I am amazed that they turned out to be such good ones: the country went into recession; the University of California in particular saw its funding cut; our Title VI funds were slashed and then further halved; and one of the programs of which we were most proud, the Berkeley Urdu Language Program in Pakistan was terminated due to the state department travel warning on Pakistan. That we were able to keep the Center alive at all was a miracle. Yet we survived, and indeed thrived, and primarily because of the devotion of the staff, and the support of key faculty and supporters in the community, we were also able to raise 1.4 million dollars to support our students and develop programs.

At the end of my first year, I wrote: “This year has been a remarkably full one, and has generated for the center, new friends and visitors.” I don’t believe we ever looked back. That year, we started a Bengali Initiative which became the first of our three new language Initiatives – to be followed by Telugu and Urdu. The objective of these initiatives was to raise funds to guarantee that these languages could be taught in perpetuity at Berkeley in recognition of their importance to second generation South Asian Americans, as well as for academic research. These language initiatives have accomplished two things: They have given students access to these languages at Berkeley. And they have brought communities which had not previously been in contact with us to Berkeley, thus broadening the reach of the Center and the University. We are particularly delighted with the warm response to our Pakistan and Urdu initiatives launched last year – and we thank the core faculty and community members who have contributed towards these initiatives both financially and with their time and support.

As part of our mandate to advance learning on South Asia, we have focused on core themes every year. In the past we have had major conferences on security, health, literature, democracy and cities. This year we have focused on Pakistan and next year we will highlight water. With each theme we were able both to increase the training of our students, and to bring key scholars to Berkeley.

We have been fortunate in being able to create a range of opportunities for students. We managed to continue to secure FLAS funds, as well as private funds to enable students to present their work at conferences, and to travel to South Asia for research trips. We have also set up internship programs through the Tata ISES program to enable undergraduate students to spend the summer in India, engaged in projects of social and economic development.

In the past few years, scholars such as Thomas Metcalf and Eugene Irschick (History), Gerry Berreman (Anthropology), Joanna Williams (Art History), George Hart (Tamil), Pranab Bardhan (Economics) and Vasudha Dalmia (who retires this year; Modern South Asia) – giants in their fields – have retired. While they can never be replaced and we will for ever be in their debt for all they have given to generations of students, to this institution and to advancing knowledge, our heavy hearts have been lightened with the hiring of a new generation of fabulous scholars – Munis Faruqui (Islam, Mughal history) and Jake Dalton (Buddhist Studies). We look forward to new assistant professors in Art History and Tamil joining us in the fall.

When I became head of the Center I felt that I had to do three things: To ensure that the Center served as a place to nurture knowledge about South Asia that only training at the best institutions could provide; to bring to the University and the community at large, a program on both the contemporary issues at stake in the region (economic, social, cultural and political), as well as continued attention to the complexity and richness of the past; and to increase our visibility in the Bay Area and the country at large. I believe that we have made some headway in all of these goals, although there is so much more work to be done. I have no doubt the next Chair will further develop the visibility of the Center and take it in exciting new directions.

As South Asia becomes ever more central on the world stage, there will arise many questions that will require serious scholarly engagement. The intellectual community of South Asianists at Berkeley remains at the forefront of cutting edge research across the humanities, the social sciences and increasingly in the fields of energy, natural resources, business, and engineering, in a way that is unparalleled in its depth and breadth. It is my hope that the community of CSAS supporters, in addition to continuing their support of the Center, will continue to fight to save public education in California, so that the excellence of this work is not compromised. I also hope that all of us will support the new Chair in the challenging and rewarding work that lies ahead.