

Is Harvard Ready to Take on South Asia?

By ROBERT E. NELSON

The expanding presence and growing influence of South Asian students and professionals in American society is presenting American higher education institutions with both challenges and opportunities. Over the past five years, Harvard University, in Cambridge, Massachusetts, has taken a leading role in calling for greater engagement between American universities and the South Asian region. Meanwhile, Indian American students and visiting students from South Asia have flourished at Harvard, establishing perhaps the most visible and influential presence on campus of any cultural or international group. For example, the South Asian Association's "Ghungroo," an annual, springtime, cultural show nearing its 20th anniversary, is one of the most highly anticipated artistic events at the university. Yet, Harvard's administration is struggling to keep up with soaring demand among students for greater resources devoted to South Asia related activities.

In a speech at the Harvard South Asia Conference in September 2003, the university's then-president, Lawrence Summers, pronounced a bold call to action, not only for Harvard but for universities nationwide. "There is an enormous opportunity to fill a gap," he observed. "There is an enormous need for us as a nation to enhance our understanding of contemporary South Asia."

A region on the rise, he said, "commands the attention of a great university." For Summers, Harvard's role would be to lead the way toward filling that gap: "The development and enhancement of our capacity to study South Asia," he proclaimed, will be "our major international affairs and regional priority in the years ahead." While calling for improvements, Summers also paid special tribute to two South Asian scholars already established on Harvard's campus: Sugata Bose, Gardiner Professor of Oceanic History, and Amartya Sen, the Nobel Laureate in Economics.

An ambitious proposal

Summers followed up on his speech a few years later with a visit to India in 2006. Inspired by the experience, upon returning he made the ambitious proposal that "every American should visit the country that may be our most important ally two decades from now." Since Summers' resignation from the presidency last year, leadership of the university has been handed over to Drew G. Faust, a professor of American history. She will encounter increasing demand from a vociferous contingent among the undergraduate student body to revamp and reorganize the school's resources in order to fulfill Summers' South Asian mission.

Harvard, America's oldest university, has a long history of South Asian scholarship, though it has been devoted chiefly to philology, the study of language. Sanskrit was first taught at Harvard in 1872 by James Bradstreet Greenough, a Latin grammarian. A *Sanskrit Reader*, published in 1888, by Charles Lanman, head of the department of Indo-Iranian languages, continues to serve as Harvard's standard introductory text for the language. By 1902, interest among students had grown to the extent that a Department of Indic Philology was formed. Its modern incarnation, the Department of Sanskrit and Indian Studies, has held strongly to its linguistic center. Today, a Harvard student can choose from courses offered in

Sanskrit, Vedic, Pali, Urdu-Hindi, Tibetan, Bengali, Nepali, Sindhi and Gujarati.

Historic roots and modern shortcomings

Today's undergraduates, though, are no longer satisfied with Harvard's historic tradition of scholarship in South Asian

South Asian Programs at U.S. Universities

- The Committee on South Asian Studies, Harvard University, Massachusetts
<http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~sanskrit/sastudies.html>
- Department of Sanskrit and Indian Studies, Harvard University, Massachusetts
<http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~sanskrit/index.html>
- South Asia Program, Cornell University, New York
<http://www.einaudi.cornell.edu/SouthAsia/>
- Southern Asian Institute, Columbia University, New York
<http://www.sipa.columbia.edu/REGIONAL/SAI/>
- India Studies Program, Indiana University, Bloomington
<http://www.indiana.edu/~isp/>
- Asian Studies Center, Michigan State University, East Lansing
<http://asianstudies.msu.edu/>
- South Asia Center, Syracuse University, New York
<http://www.maxwell.syr.edu/moynihan/programs/sac/>
- Center for South Asia Studies, University of California, Berkeley
<http://www.ias.berkeley.edu/southasia/>
- South Asia at Chicago, University of Chicago
<http://southasia.uchicago.edu/>
- Center for Southeast Asian Studies, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor
<http://www.umich-cseas.org/>
- Department of South Asia Studies, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia
<http://www.southasia.upenn.edu/>
- Center for the Advanced Study of India, University of Pennsylvania
<http://casi.ssc.upenn.edu/>
- Asian Studies, University of Texas at Austin
<http://asnic.utexas.edu/asnic/index.html>
- Center for South Asia, University of Wisconsin-Madison
<http://www.southasia.wisc.edu/>
- Council on Southeast Asia Studies, Yale University, Connecticut
<http://www.yale.edu/seas/>



CASIM FAZA

Robert E. Nelson with a map of South Asia.

USEFI CALENDAR



Northern Region

September 11, 18, 25, October 9, 16, 23, 30, November 6, 13, 20, 27

“United States: Explore the Possibilities of Higher Education,” basic orientation program, 2:30 p.m., USEFI, New Delhi.

September 13, 20, 27, October 11, 18, 25, November 1, 8, 15, 29

“United States: Explore the Possibilities of Higher Education,” basic orientation program, 4:00 p.m., American Center, New Delhi.

September 17

Linden U.S. University Fair: Admission officials from U.S. institutions interact with prospective students and provide information on U.S. higher education, 5:00–6:00 p.m. for undergraduate students, 6:00–9:00 p.m. for all students, Taj Palace Hotel, New Delhi.

September 20

Information session on “Higher Education in the U.S.” with Susan Whipple, admissions official from Marquette University, Wisconsin, 2:30 p.m., USEFI, New Delhi.

September 25

Information session on “Higher Education in the U.S.” with Guilherme Alberi, admissions official from Hawai‘i Pacific University, 2:30 p.m., USEFI, New Delhi.

September 29

The MBA Tour: Admission officials from U.S. universities interact with prospective MBA students and provide information on pursuing an MBA program in the United States, 12:30 p.m.– 5:00 p.m., Taj Palace Hotel, New Delhi.

October 4

USEFI-Institute of International Education Fair: Admission officials from U.S. institutions will interact with prospective students and provide information on U.S. higher education, 2:00–6:00 p.m. at USEFI, New Delhi. Open to all students.

Western Region

September 5, 13, 27, October 25

“United States: Explore the Possibilities of Higher Education,” basic orientation program, 11:00 a.m., American Center, Mumbai.

September 6, 17

Question and answer session on U.S. admissions procedures for USEFI annual members, 11:00 a.m., USEFI, Mumbai.

September 19

Linden U.S. University Fair: Representatives from U.S. universities and colleges interact with prospective students on admissions and financial aid, Hilton Towers Hotel, Mumbai. Also on **September 20** at Aurora Towers Hotel, Pune.

October 2

USEFI-Institute of International Education Fair: Representatives from U.S. universities and colleges interact with prospective students on admissions and financial aid, Hilton Towers Hotel, Mumbai.

October 4

“Higher Education in the U.S.” information session by Ohio Wesleyan University, 11:00 a.m., American Center, Mumbai.

October 4, 11, 25

Question and answer session on U.S. admissions procedures for USEFI annual members, 2:30 p.m., USEFI, Mumbai.

October 5

Outreach at Thadomal Shahani Engineering College, Mumbai.

October 6

The MBA Tour: Educational fair with representatives of U.S. business schools. Hilton Towers Hotel, Mumbai.

October 11

Information session on opportunities offered by Montana State University, 11:00 a.m., American Center, Mumbai.

Southern Region

September 5, 12, 19, 26, October 3, 10, 17, 24, 31, November 7, 14, 21, 28

“United States: Explore the Possibilities of Higher Education,” basic orientation program, USEFI, Chennai.

September 7

“Resources at U.S. Campuses,” informal discussion with U.S. consular officers, USEFI, Chennai.

September 22–23

USEFI, Chennai to make two presentations at the “Astro Exhibition” and serve at the USEFI stall at Vellore Institute of Technology, Vellore.

September 24–26

Presentations at four colleges in Coimbatore.

September 27

Linden U.S. University Fair, Taj Coromandel, Chennai.

October 1

MBA Fair, Le Royal Meridien Hotel, Chennai.

October 5

Presentations on “Choosing and Short-listing U.S. Universities,” USEFI, Chennai.

October 12

Informal discussion with consular officers on higher education in the United States, USEFI, Chennai.

October 19

Session on “Statement of Purpose and Letters of Recommendation” for the university admission process, USEFI, Chennai.

Eastern Region

September 14

Linden U.S. University Fair: For the first time in eastern India. Representatives from U.S. universities and colleges interact with prospective students on admission and financial aid, Oberoi Grand Hotel, Kolkata.

October 11

“Higher Education in the USA,” a presentation by the University of North Carolina, Charlotte, USEFI, Kolkata.

philology. In recent years the demand for broader regional studies has come especially from Indian American students and scholars from South Asia, who have formed a South Asia Studies Initiative. In March of this year, two leaders of the movement raised the profile of the issue with an opinion piece in the *Harvard Crimson* daily newspaper. Vinita Andrapalliyal and Shreya Vora insisted that South Asian studies must break out of the constraints of tradition and be elevated above the status of a mere “special interest issue.” Writing at a time of simmering inter-faculty battles over the undergraduate curriculum, they argued that the study of South Asia has become “absolutely essential to any curriculum that seeks to make global citizens of its students.”

Academic interest rising

Andrapalliyal and Vora contended that Harvard has not adequately met growing demand for South Asia related study opportunities. Supporting their case was the Initiative’s 2005 survey that found academic interest in the region among undergraduates on the rise, and found present resources inadequate in comparison to peer universities. Lack of resources and opportunities may be a deterrent to devoting one’s studies to the region, they argued, noting that fewer than 12 percent of students who were initially interested in concentrating on South Asia studies actually followed through. Moreover, of 59 students who said they were interested in going to the region to study, only three eventually signed up.

Students said they are seeking greater breadth and depth in course offerings, especially in contemporary South Asian politics, culture and society.

The recently formed South Asia Initiative is a serious attempt by faculty across disciplines to compensate for the narrow focus of the Sanskrit department. The Initiative, housed at Harvard’s Weatherhead Center for International Affairs, supports faculty and student exchanges and research in South Asia, and conducts a broad range of seminars, lectures and conferences across academic disciplines. In 2005 and 2006, a group from the Initiative, led by Assistant Director Rena Fonseca, traveled to Tamil Nadu to assist with tsunami reconstruction projects. Despite these steps toward Summers’ vision, though, the Initiative has yet to become a heavyweight among Harvard’s legions of institutions and faculties. It has not been granted the power to appoint faculty or grant degrees, and has limited resources.

Looking ahead, Harvard has much work to do to satisfy the demands of the students and turn the opportunities envisioned by her predecessor into realities on campus. In order for South Asian studies to enjoy enhanced comparative prestige among other regional studies programs and institutes at Harvard, the South Asia Initiative will need to attract greater funding and build its capabilities. Faust could persuade the Sanskrit department to modernize its curriculum to match undergraduate interests, and could lead a university-wide effort to recruit leading professors to Harvard departments lacking in South Asian specialists. Given Harvard’s stature and influence in the United States, if the university can succeed in meeting those challenges, South Asian students and enthusiasts can expect to find the coming years among the most exciting in the history of American higher education.



Robert Nelson, a 2007 graduate of Harvard University, wrote this article while working as a Public Affairs intern at the American Center, New Delhi.

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