

Center examines value of culture, traditions

By Bal Ram Singh

In today's world of tension and turmoil, India's collective experience and practice of harmonious diversity over several millennia through its culture, traditions, philosophy, music, art and science could serve as a time-tested model for the whole global village.

Unfortunately, much of the modern world at best has only a distorted understanding of the true worth of India's traditions and cultures. India is still viewed from the colonial point of view, because India was under colonial rule for most of the period since European renaissance and much of the scholarly and educational work available to the world has a colored vision of India seen from an outsider's point of view.

The University of Massachusetts Dartmouth's Center for Indic Studies, founded on Nov. 10, 2000, establishes is a small step towards a great goal of revealing the treasures of Indic traditions of integral life approach to worldly responsibilities without any prejudice and undue passion.

It must be done in the best traditions of academic and educational discourse, with the benefit of experiences and knowledge of those from within the tradition.

The Center for Indic Studies has the goal of understanding the true nature of Indic traditions.

Since the Center was founded there has been outpouring of support from academic as well as multicultural community members, which has been very encouraging for the Center's goal of examining and presenting the composite approach of Indic traditions and values.

The Center is first of its kind nationally, in terms of its mission, goal, and action plans. Through its academic research, education and outreach programs, the Center is perhaps in a unique position to contribute to the promotion of Indic thoughts, values and traditions in an academic way from a neutral vantage point. It has substantial potential to make difference in the perception of Indic traditions and Indians in the United States, especially for the next generation of Indians born and brought up in this country.

In due course, we presume Center's strong academic leadership internationally to address world's human issues, using Indic philosophy and traditions as instruments of analysis and guidance.

The Center will also act as a major resource of academic research on the culture, history, philosophy, and business between India and the United States.

The mission of the Center for Indic Studies at UMass Dartmouth is to (1) disseminate understanding of issues relating to Indian arts, philosophy, culture, societal values, customs, etc., (2) promote international harmony through the mix of ancient and modern values, and (3) promote awareness among Americans on contemporary India and its demographic diversity in the 21st century.

The Center's vision is to establish a niche in the U.S. academic world for providing authentic educational experience for students on India's millennia-old continuously living traditions. India is too important a country to be misunderstood or misrepresented. There have been way too

many instances where Indic traditions, values, philosophy, and history has been misconstrued due to the lack of proper understanding and presentation.

Over 25 million people of Indian origin currently live outside of India's borders, and have maintained much of their ancestral culture and traditions over several centuries. This provides a clear evidence of the robustness of Indic values, and their relevance beyond geographical location and climate.

The United States of America is host to about 3 million people of Indian origin, who are well-recognized for their education, prosperity, and family stability, not a small feat for a single generation against all odds of cultural isolation, missing relatives and friends and lack of financial resources.

The Center's strategy is to exploit these modern successes in the light of India's historical record of adaptation and assimilation to draw lessons for the modern society. Location of the Center in New England area augers well for its entrenched academic mission and goal, for fostering scholarly collaboration, and for its contribution to the celebrated cultural enrichment of the United States and the world.

The Center's immediate plans are to offer summer courses on Indian traditions and heritage to students and second generation Indian-American youth; coordinate Yoga classes, sponsor lecture series on Indian philosophy, art, music and history; and initiate academic research projects to understand the success of Indian-owned businesses and professionals, scientific basis of yogic effects and Indian astronomy.

The Center has several accomplishments already in its fold, including a very successful seminar series, several seminars of Indian philosophy, yoga, economic globalization, India's global influence and Vedic perspective of sound.

In addition, the Center has attracted a major international biennial conference of World Association of Vedic Studies on "India's Contributions and Influences in the World" to be held at UMass Dartmouth campus on July 12-14, 2002.

The Center is also organizing a residential summer academic youth camp for high school and college students of Indian origin on August 5-10, 2002 at UMass Dartmouth. The camp will feature academic scholars on language, philosophy, history, art, music, and yoga, with provision for discussion, debate and hands-on experience.

These efforts are underway for the Center to develop an international reputation within a foreseeable future.

There is a strong need for the Indian-American community's support for the Center to succeed in its goals.

Bal Ram Singh is the director of the Center for Indic Studies at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth. For more information on the Center visit www.umassd.edu/indic.