

ORAL HISTORY

Many Firsts - Establishment of Berkeley Chairs in India Studies

Satinder K. Lambah, currently Special Envoy of the Prime Minister, was India's Consul General to the United States in San Francisco during 1989–91. With his “encouragement”, the Indian community there contributed to the establishment of two Chairs of India Studies at the University of California, Berkeley – the first such at a university in the US. His achievement in galvanizing the community, coordinating the fundraising efforts, etc. was recognized by the University of California, Berkeley, which, in a rare gesture, conferred the 1991 Trustees' Citation Award on him, noting that “This is the first time that the University of California, Berkeley, is honouring a foreign diplomat in this manner.”

Indian Foreign Affairs Journal (IFAJ): The establishment of two Chairs of India Studies at the University of California, Berkeley, in October 1991, the first such at an American university, with the enthusiastic participation of the Indian community there, was a momentous event. You were instrumental in encouraging and motivating the Diaspora to contribute. Your yeoman efforts were recognized – you were described as “the primary force behind the first ever coordinated fundraising campaign by any ethnic community group for the University” and were honoured with an award. Can you take us through the history of India Studies in USA and what prompted you to work towards these Chairs?

Satinder K. Lambah (SKL): The two Chairs were formally established on 1 October 1991. India Studies began in the USA in 1841, when Yale University introduced the study of Sanskrit. There could not have been a better milestone in 1991 to mark the 150th anniversary of the initiation of India Studies in the USA.

Indian philosophy and religion have influenced the American mind, and there have been several events since India studies commenced in the USA, which have increased awareness of India. The selection by *Time* newsmagazine of Mahatma Gandhi as “Man of the Year” in its 5 January 1931 issue attracted attention. Many US universities started giving prominence to India studies, particularly after World War II. In 1948, a Department of South Asia Regional Studies was set up at the University of Pennsylvania, which acted as a model for others. The passage in 1958 of the National Defense Education Act made funding possible for language and area training centres. In 1959, three centres

were set up at the Universities of Chicago, Berkeley and Pennsylvania. In 1989 there were ten. The Festival of India in 1985-86 was also an important event.

I realized when I arrived in San Francisco in September 1989 that there was no Chair as such of India Studies at any US university. India Studies had been in decline for some time, both because of shortage of funds and competing areas of interest, particularly the new interest in China.

We felt that the best possible way to promote India Studies would be through efforts by the Indian community, who should get involved and fund some of the programmes. The Indian community, particularly in the Bay area, was then becoming prosperous, though it was nowhere compared to what it is today.

The First Chair

IFAJ: You started the project to establish “a” chair and ended up establishing two. The fundraising was accomplished in a remarkably short period of four months. Can you give us an idea of what was involved in creating the first Chair of India Studies and the funds that were needed and collected?

SKL: The main Chair, with the consent of the Indian community leaders, was named the Indo-American Community Chair at the University of California, Berkeley. Nearly six hundred people contributed a total of \$450,000, ranging in amounts from \$5 to \$56,000. The Regents of the University of California approved the Chair at their meeting on 21 June 1991.

It had been agreed that:

- a) This would be a highly visible, prestigious and professorial Chair in India Studies. It would be a new permanent position in teaching and scholarly study of humanities, social studies and professional studies on India.
- b) A particular value of the Chair was to be that through programmes of carefully selected courses and public lectures it would expose the campus community and the general community to the cutting edge of scholarly research on India, with particular emphasis on those fields of study where India Studies were not present in the University.
- c) A special aspect of the Chair was that the resources provided by this endowment were to be augmented by the University, which agreed to provide a new full-time position and pay the salary and expenses of the Professor – estimated to be in the region of \$1.3 million. We were told that the University had to make a special provision for this

in their budget. This was a unique gesture, acknowledging the fact that the basic contribution had come from an entire community.

IFAJ: When did the fundraising campaign start?

SKL: The campaign started on 17 October 1990 at a dinner for a small group of Indian community leaders. Dr. Watson M. Laetsch, Vice Chancellor for Development, and Dr. Robert Goldman, Chairman, Center for South Asia Studies, were present. A note was circulated giving the outlines of the Chair. I gave a cheque of \$1000 to start the campaign. Vice Chancellor Laetsch next day sent me a letter stating that “Your founder’s gift will have an honoured place in the campaign.” This meeting was followed by another meeting of the Indian community leaders on 8 November and a core group meeting on 29 November.

IFAJ: How did the public campaign start?

SKL: An Endowment Kick-off Reception was hosted by the University on 8 December 1990. As a result of the efforts of the Consulate General of India, an amount of \$100,000 was pledged. Chan Desaigouder, Chairman of the Board of California Micro Devices Corporation, and Sailesh J. Mehta, President of First Deposit Corporation Bank of California, pledged \$25,000 each. Among those who pledged \$10,000 each were Dr. Rameshwar Singh, a Professor of Civil Engineering and an important community leader; and Nitin Mehta, an investment banker, and President of the FIA of Northern California. The first cheque of \$10,000 was given by a scion of the Gujarati community in San Francisco, Dayabhai Patel.

IFAJ: Was the Indian community fully involved in organizing the events during the campaign?

SKL: We made it a point to involve the Indian community as hosts right from the beginning. On 12 December 1990 at a function at my (Consul General’s) residence Sailesh Mehta gave a cheque of \$10,000 as the first instalment of his contribution of \$25,000 to Vice Chancellor Laetsch in the presence of Ambassador Abid Hussain (India’s Ambassador to the United States, who was visiting California). In January 1991, I visited Los Angeles and \$20,000 was pledged during a luncheon on 20 January organized by community activists like Inder Singh and Rajen Anand. Ramesh Jhapra, President of the Federation of Indo-Americans of Northern California, hosted a fundraising dinner at his residence on 9 February 1991. On 22 February 1991, V.P. Dhalla hosted a fundraising dinner at his residence in Riverside (Los Angeles). It gave me an opportunity to speak about the Chair to the assembled guests. On the morning of 9 March, the festival of “Holi”, Anil Kapuria, President of a Silicon Valley

Indian company in the Bay Area, hosted a function and announced a contribution of \$10,000 for the campaign. From there I flew to Los Angeles, where in the evening Raj Dutt, at a function at his house collected \$14,000. A week later, on 16 March, I visited Dallas, Texas to brief the Indian community about the Chair, where a pledge of \$15,000 was made. This was my first visit outside California in connection with the Berkeley Chair. This was followed the next day with a visit to Phoenix, Arizona, where over \$10,000 was pledged. On 30 March I visited Sacramento, the capital of California, to meet the Indian community. Later in May 1991 I visited Palo Alto to meet A. Salam Qureshi, who contributed \$5000.

IFAJ: The community seems to have enthusiastically participated in the exercise. What prompted them to respond so positively?

SKL: I had the good fortune to inherit the goodwill of my predecessors. Immediately on arrival, I started during the weekend on-the-spot issue of visas in different cities, including Texas, which at that time was under the Consular jurisdiction of the Consulate General in San Francisco. This was very positively received by the Indian community and enabled us to meet a large number of community leaders. Many of them were extremely helpful in the campaign for the Chair.

IFAJ: Was there any other contributor of special significance?

SKL: Those were the days when a section of the Sikh community was unhappy. I tried to meet and integrate them with the rest of the community. A Sikh leader, who was amongst those angry at that time, approached me and told me that he wanted to contribute to the Chair but wished his contribution to be anonymous. I forwarded his cheque to the University, requesting them to keep the contribution anonymous.

Another contribution was from a member of the US House of Representatives. Congressman Robert T. Matsui announced a donation of \$1000 at the last fundraising dinner hosted by the Kripalani brothers of Gaylord Restaurant in San Francisco.

IFAJ: Were there any other fundraising activities that you remember?

SKL: There were a number of fundraising functions at different places by various Indian organizations and individuals. Individual meetings with community leaders were also held by Rajiv Mishra and Pradeep Khanna, the two Consuls in the Consulate General of India, San Francisco. Some firms also donated air/luxury cruise tickets, whose proceeds were given to the University for the Chair.

During January–April 1991 regular advertisements in the local media started giving the names of donors. This encouraged others. Many more donations received included \$10,000 each from Bipin Ramaiya and Magan Patel. Meanwhile, Dayabhai Patel in addition to his own contribution helped in collecting funds from others.

IFAJ: Was there any specific donation that you would like to mention?

SKL: There are many, but what I distinctly remember was a visit to the Consulate in the first week of December by Dr. Suhas Patil, founder and Chairman of the Board of Cirrus Logic of Milpitas, California. He said that whatever he had achieved in the United States was on account of the education he had received in that country. To express his gratitude he wanted to give back something to the community to help the spread of education. Encouraged by what he had heard about the campaign for the Chair, he had decided to make a significant contribution. I told him that I would not like only one person to become a dominant contributor for the Community Chair, but would welcome any contribution that he wished to make. He pledged around \$50,000. I told him it would help me if he made this contribution to the University before my meeting with the Chancellor of Berkeley University scheduled for 20 February 1991. On 19 February, I got a message from his bankers that he was not well but he and his wife Jayashree had transferred stocks worth \$56,000 to the University. He was the single-largest contributor for the Chair.

IFAJ: You mentioned about your meeting with the Chancellor. What did you discuss about the Chair?

SKL: Asking the Indian community to contribute directly to the University was one aspect. The other was to get the best possible terms from the University. I met Chancellor Tien on 20 February. Pradeep Khanna accompanied me. It was agreed by the University that after \$400,000 was donated by the Indo-American community, a new permanent professorial position would be created, whose purpose would be to provide studies in areas of India Studies not currently emphasized on the campus. This was a significant development in the campaign, as the contribution which the Chancellor promised would be equivalent to an endowment of \$1.3 million. As a special case, the Chancellor agreed to provide FTE (full-time-equivalent enrolment) status, overruling some objections.

The Chancellor agreed to my suggestion that Professor John Kenneth Galbraith and Dr. Chandrasekhar would be requested to deliver the first lectures under the auspices of the Chair. It was agreed that as a special case an advisory

council would be appointed, comprising principal donors and academics from the Indian community. I told him that as Consul General I would not be a member of the council. I also informed him that as of that day, a sum of \$285,000 had already been pledged by the Indo-American community. Suhas Patil's contribution strengthened my hands in negotiating with the University. Later I learnt that Chancellor Tien had some difficulty in getting the University's bureaucracy to agree to the provision of FTE.

IFAJ: Were there any further steps that needed to be taken and was it smooth sailing thereafter?

SKL: Not really. A few days later I met Dr. Albert Fishlow, Dean of International and Area Studies. We worked out the final letter which the University was to send to us about the Chair. He was not happy with the Chancellor's commitment, but the Chancellor fortunately was determined to go ahead with the decision. The Chair then became a reality.

There were intense discussions with the University to get the terms of the Chair, which had been agreed between the Chancellor and me, in writing. There was reluctance on the part of the University to do so. Fishlow had promised to give me a draft, which after repeated reminders, I got on 1 April 1991. This was not satisfactory. I told them that it would not be possible for me to hand over the remaining cheques, which I was holding in trust on behalf of the community, till I got the terms of the Chair, including the promise of a Professor's position in writing. Thereafter we exchanged four drafts on 1 April, 3 April and two on 16 April. Each time I pointed out to him the lacunas and also told him that I had an onerous responsibility as I was representing the interests of the Indo-American community. Finally on 16 April, I distinctly remember, in the evening at 5 o'clock we were able to reach an agreement on a satisfactory draft. This letter was formally handed over to me by the Chancellor at a function held at my house the same evening, attended by three Nobel laureates and the principal donors.

The letter noted: "In view of the demonstrated and unprecedented support of the community, the University has committed itself to the establishment of a counterpart permanent F.T.E. (full time equivalent position), whose value in terms of salaries and benefits – by conservative estimates – comes to over \$1.3 million. This contribution by Berkeley contrasts to private universities where the endowment itself must totally support the position and its full expense. This matching effort assures that Berkeley will thereby significantly increase its course offerings and research upon India." The letter goes on to say: "This decision has been taken in the midst of significant fiscal

retrenchment and cutbacks in many areas. Such a highly visible position will ensure exposure to the broader community and the general public to the cutting edge of scholarly research on India in those academic areas where India is not so well represented at Berkeley as it might.”

The Second Chair

IFAJ: Your project was for “a” Chair. How did the second Chair crop up?

SKL: It started with Thomas Kailath getting in touch with me on 29 January, saying that he would like to make a “significant contribution”. On 5 February 1991 I attended his wife Sarah’s fiftieth birthday. Thomas Kailath was the Hitachi America Professor of Engineering at Stanford University. He is a high-tech entrepreneur and co-founder of Integrated Systems, Inc. Discussions started about the state of fundraising for the Chair. By then we had collected half the funds. Kailath wanted to fund the other half and have the Chair named after his wife. Many community leaders approved of the idea. I realized however that collecting the first half of funds had been difficult, but as more funds had now started flowing in, we should not allow one donor to monopolize the Chair. Earlier I had refused a larger contribution from Suhas Patil. I therefore suggested to Thomas Kailath that we would work for a second Chair and we would help him to get assistance from the University.

Thomas Kailath and two of his former students and business partners, Nirin and Vinita Gupta, agreed to contribute \$300,000 to the University, with the University making the remaining contribution of \$100,000 for the establishment of a second Chair. This was to be called the Sarah Kailath Endowment. It had been agreed that the two Chairs would work together.

IFAJ: Were the two Chairs similar or were there different criteria?

SKL: The Sarah Kailath Endowment is concentrating on matters dealing with women and social affairs. Unlike the other Chair, there was no provision of a professorial position by the University in this case. Its programmes are being financed from income accruing from the endowment.

Here, I recall a development that took place after I left San Francisco. In early 1995, when I was High Commissioner in Pakistan, I got a frantic message from Thomas Kailath. He said he had pledged shares in 1991 to the University which he thought should fetch \$300,000. But immediately thereafter the value of the stock went down. He asked the University in 1991 not to encash them till the value increased. Their value went up in 1995 and the University was able to realize on 5 February 1995 a sum of \$300,000 from the sale of the stock. The original arrangement was that Thomas Kailath would contribute

\$300,000 and the University would give the remaining amount of \$100,000. He wrote to me that the University was not willing to make the contribution of \$100,000, which Chancellor Tien had promised. I sent a message to Chancellor Tien, and to be fair to him, he sent an immediate response on 13 February 1995 authorizing transfer of the University's contribution of \$100,000.

Sarah unfortunately passed away a few years ago after a long illness which she endured bravely. Thomas Kailath continues to be involved in many charitable activities and was conferred the Padma Bhushan for his professional work.

Annual Lecture

IFAJ: In addition to the two Chairs, there was also an Annual Lecture to be delivered by a prominent Indian. Can you share some details with us?

SKL: We had, in the course of our negotiations with the University, agreed that in addition to the various programmes in respect of the two Chairs, a Distinguished Lecturer from India would be invited to Berkeley every year for two weeks. While the fare would be paid by the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR), the University would meet all other expenses and pay an honorarium and publish the lecture in its publications. This was in addition to other commitments, because the amount collected by the community for the Community Chair had exceeded the original target of \$400,000. To begin with, the lecture would be every two years, as the amount collected was \$450,000. When it reached \$500,000, the lecture was to be annual. This took place in the late 1990s. Those who have lectured under the auspices of the Chair include John Kenneth Galbraith; S. Chandrasekhar; Upendra Baxi and Andre Betéille of Delhi University; Madhav Gadgil, Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore; Ramachandra Guha, Indian Institute of Science and independent writer, Bangalore; Meenakshi Mukherjee, Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi; Narendra Panjwani, sociologist and journalist; Anuradha Kapur, National School of Drama, Delhi; Mrinal Datta Chaudhuri, Delhi School of Economics; and Subrato Mitra, University of Hull, UK. There must have been a few others in recent years.

Scholarship in the School of Journalism

IFAJ: There was also a scholarship for Journalism. ...

SKL: During the campaign we realized that decades earlier, some Indians had collected money for a scholarship of journalism named after the veteran Indian journalist Govind Behari Lal. At that time the money was short by about \$20,000. In the course of our protracted negotiations with the University, I

we convinced them to give the interest on the amount lying with them. Further, we collected an additional amount of \$10,000. This enabled the scholarships to commence on a regular basis thereafter.

IFAJ: That was quite a few projects out of what started as “a” Chair. What was the total endowment for the Chairs, the lecture and the scholarship?

SKL: Inclusive of the University’s contribution, the figure was \$2.164 million. At that time, twenty years ago in 1990–91, this was considered a significant amount.

IFAJ: What would be the approximate endowment if all these were to be repeated today?

SKL: Prof. Robert Goldman is in Delhi for the Sanskrit Conference. He told me that a Chair in Berkeley without FTE was over \$2 million and if we were to repeat all we did twenty years ago, the approximate required endowment now would be between \$10 million and \$14 million.

IFAJ: You referred to a function attended by three Nobel laureates and principal donors. Can you tell us something about it?

SKL: The conclusion of the campaign held at my residence on 16 April 1991 was attended by three Nobel laureates – Dr. Donald A. Glaser (Physics, 1960), Dr. Charles H. Townes (Physics, 1962), and Dr. Gerard Debreu (Economics, 1983). I had sent handwritten invitations to the ten Nobel laureates who were on the faculty of Berkeley, and it was a matter of satisfaction that three of them who were in the city on that day attended. Chancellor Tien in his speech mentioned that although he hosted ten Nobel laureates in the faculty of the University, he had never seen more than two together at a function. All donors who had contributed over \$5000 were invited. The sit-down dinner for over sixty guests at our residence marked the end of the 129-day campaign. K. Shankar Bajpai, a former Consul General in San Francisco in the late 1960s and later Ambassador to USA, who was at that time teaching in Berkeley, also spoke. He was gracious to say that the idea of the Chair had originated in his time, and came up from time to time, but practical steps had only been taken now.

When some people on the last day contributed \$5000, additional seating arrangements were made, using every corner of the house. Next day, Chancellor Tien wrote to me saying, “The enthusiasm exhibited was indicative of the widespread support for the Chair. This could not have been accomplished without you and your staff.” I would like to acknowledge here the outstanding contributions made by the then Consuls, Rajiv Mishra (currently our Ambassador to the Slovak Republic) and Pradeep Khanna, who has since

resigned from the service and lives in USA.

IFAJ: The University conferred an Award on you, and the Citation mentions that this was the first to be given to a foreign diplomat!

SKL: Bradley Babar, Vice President of the University, wrote to me in June that the University had selected me to receive the 1991 Trustee Citation. I informed him that our rules did not permit receiving awards from foreign organizations. I informed the Joint Secretary in the Ministry of External Affairs, P.K. Singh, of this. After consulting Foreign Secretary Muchkund Dubey, he asked me to accept the award. This I did on behalf of all my colleagues in the consulate.

IFAJ: Did you share your experience with others?

SKL: We were in continuous touch with the Embassy in Washington and other Consul Generals in USA. In April 1991 I was invited to attend the meeting of the Indo-US Sub-commission on Education and Culture held at Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island, to brief the participants on the successful campaign of the two Chairs and with a view to encourage the concept of similar Chairs of India Studies in other US universities.

IFAJ: What were the concrete plans to bring the various endowments to fruition?

SKL: Right at the outset a five-year programme for the Indo-American Community Chair had been outlined. During the first year (1991–92), three important lectures were planned. Prof. John Kenneth Galbraith was to deliver the first lecture inaugurating the Chair. Nobel laureate Dr. Chandrasekhar and another scholar from India would deliver the remaining lectures. For the subsequent three years, the University would appoint a full-time Visiting Professor from Fall 1992 to Spring 1995 to teach for one academic year each. The Visiting status was to rotate within different departments. After having fully assessed the needs of different departments for India Studies and after having identified a suitable person, the University would create a permanent faculty position with the rank of Professor from Fall 1995. Further, as a special case, the University agreed to the establishment of an Advisory Committee consisting of major donors and academics of the Indo-American community to advise the University about the functioning of the Chair. The first meeting was held on 31 July 1991. Unfortunately, the Advisory Committee, it appears, has not been able to actively participate in the functioning of the Chairs.

IFAJ: That was twenty years ago. Have you kept abreast of the latest

developments?

SKL: I was invited in April 2006 to Berkeley to be the Chief Guest for the fifteenth anniversary of the establishment of the Chair. It was a pleasure meeting the faculty, the donors, and the students. However, I found that the bi-annual/annual lecture series was not regular. The matter was pursued with the University, the Consulate General in San Francisco and the ICCR. I understand it is now being held regularly.

IFAJ: Getting back to the inauguration, what can you recall of the formal inauguration of the Chair?

SKL: The formal function was held on 1 October 1991 at Wheeler Auditorium of the University, hosted by Chancellor Tien, for inaugurating the Indo-American Community Chair and the Sarah Kailath Endowment, followed by an inaugural lecture by John Kenneth Galbraith, at which Chancellor Tien, Ambassador Abid Hussain and I spoke. The emphasis in the speeches was on the many firsts of the Chairs.

- a) These were the first Chairs of India Studies in a US university funded by the Indian community.
- b) This was the first time that the Indian community had contributed for the establishment of Chairs in a foreign university.
- c) This was the first time that the initiative for the establishment of a Chair was taken by an Indian diplomatic mission which was successfully completed.
- d) This was the first time that two Chairs had been simultaneously established for studies in the same country at one university.
- e) This was the first time in the history of the University of California, Berkeley, that fundraising was completed in such a short time.
- f) This was the first time that a Stanford Professor had been endowed a Chair in Berkeley (with reference to Prof. Thomas Kailath's endowment).
- g) This was the first time in the University's history that so many people (six hundred) contributed for one endowment.
- h) And finally, the Chancellor said, "I would also like to announce a future first. I would like to make Berkeley the very first in terms of India Studies."

IFAJ: The Chairs have now completed twenty years. Are you satisfied with their functioning?

SKL: I have not been in regular touch with the functioning of the Chair for the last few years. It is however a matter of satisfaction that they are working

well and are popular. My expectation at that time was that these Chairs would promote India Studies in addition to what was being already done at Berkeley. We had also hoped that there would be lively interaction between the University and the Advisory Council. I am confident that as the Chairs now enter the third decade they will be even more effective.

IFAJ: The first Chair was on India Studies. The second was on Women and Gender Studies. One has seen that many of the Departments on India Studies in foreign universities tend to concentrate more on India of the past than India of the present/future. How was the latter objective met by these two Chairs?

SKL: As far as the Sarah Kailath Endowment was concerned, since the contribution was by one source, their views had to be taken into account and we were very happy that it was going to concentrate on matters relating to women's welfare and projecting the role of Indian women. As regards the Indo-American Community Chair, it had been agreed with the University right at the beginning that the Chair would not concentrate on subjects like language and topics, which the University was already pursuing. The idea was that the Chair would project modern India and concentrate on India Studies with that approach in mind.

IFAJ: This exercise largely involved the Diaspora. While there have been instances of an active Diaspora in the distant past, these have been few and far between. The present Indian Diaspora in the US are relatively young and are more involved with their own affairs; you seem to have energized them into thinking big. In 2005, they became a force to reckon with, when they influenced the outcome of the path-breaking Indo-US nuclear accord. How did you find the Diaspora when you arrived, during your stay and thereafter?

SKL: The Indian Diaspora on the West Coast had always been active. I do not claim credit for having energized them. We have the history of the Gadar Party based in San Francisco at the beginning of the last century. The Gadar Memorial Hall in San Francisco is a reminder of their manifold activities. As I have mentioned earlier, by the time I arrived, the Indian community, particularly in the Silicon Valley, was becoming prosperous; and what is more important, they had also started taking part in political activities. On many occasions, they were of great help to us in projecting Indian viewpoints. The idea of a Chair at Berkeley had been considered for many years, but there had been no concrete development. With the help of the University and some Indian academics, we prepared a Concept Paper which was circulated to the community leaders. Once we got their concurrence, we decided to go ahead with the campaign.

To begin with, we expected it to be a protracted affair, but fortunately it ended in 129 days. After the target was achieved, to the dismay of the University, I declared the campaign closed. I told them that we were not professional fundraisers. Our purpose had been served; the target had been reached; and the two Chairs had been established. There was no need for the Consulate to be involved in further funding. If the University wished, they could do their normal fundraising.

IFAJ: Thank you very much for sharing with us your experiences and opinions on such an important Indian foreign policy undertaking, which would be of much interest to policymakers, researchers and academia.

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