India Studies at IU

Endowed chair Gerald J. Larson heads IU’s newest interdisciplinary area studies program

India’s 5,000 years of continuous civilizations have left a remarkable legacy, an extraordinarily rich variety of religions and languages, art and architecture, customs and inventions. Among them are the ancient Vedas, Mahatma Gandhi’s satyagraha, the decimal system, and the manufacture of cotton fabrics. India is also the world’s largest democracy, a vibrant modern nation comprising the world’s sixth biggest economy, with technological capabilities in such far-ranging fields as oceanography, space communications, and nuclear energy. It is a country poised to play a pivotal role in the coming century.

In response to India’s new global influence, Indiana University has taken the first major steps to launch a new interdisciplinary area studies program. The India Studies Program will be unique in the Midwest and joins the University of California at Berkeley and Columbia University in being one of three U.S. universities to have an endowed program for the study of the Indian subcontinent.

Gerald James Larson, former chair of Religious Studies and of the Program in Asian Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara, has been appointed as Rabindranath Tagore Professor of Indian Cultures and Civilizations at IU Bloomington, and will serve as the founding director of the India Studies Program. Larson is an internationally renowned scholar of the religions and philosophies of South Asia. His latest book, India’s Agony Over Religion, was published this year by the State University of New York Press. “He is a pre-eminent scholar who is extremely energetic and has the vision of a unique interdisciplinary India Studies Program,” said Morton Lowengrub, dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, in announcing Larson’s appointment.

A number of courses in various departments in the College have focused on aspects of Indian civilization, but there has been no formal structure to provide an overall coherence. In starting to build the academic program at IU, Larson feels it is important to avoid the “Orientalist” model of India studies, one that emphasizes the classical heritage. While acknowledging that the study of India’s languages, texts, and historical traditions are essential, Larson envisions a program at IU that must also focus on contemporary India. A comprehensive grasp of modern Indian social reality requires a “sophisticated and critical understanding of modern arts, drama, English, folklore, literature, music, political science, philosophy, physics, religion, and sociocultural studies.” Larson says “Moreover, there are fascinating new developments in the professional areas of business, film studies, journalism, law, and medicine. India is opening up these days as never before, and the India Studies Program should reflect the new openness.” Illustrating this new direction is IUB law professor Kevin Brown, who will do research on Indian law at the Indian Law Institute in New Delhi under a 1995-96 Fulbright grant. Larson also stresses the need for undergraduate study abroad and institutional linkages for graduate and professional students and faculty. “Cross-cultural exchange is a fundamental component for a truly successful India Studies Program,” he says.

On September 16, a reception was held to welcome Gerald Larson (third from left) to IU. To his left are David Haberman (Religious Studies) and Susan Green (COAS), and to the right are Swadesh Kalsi of Columbus, Rakesh Solomon (Theatre and Dance), Abhijit Basu (Geological Sciences), and Samuel Preus (Religious Studies).
It has taken almost ten years to realize the dream of building a program of India studies at IU, and it has come about due to the efforts of a small number of dedicated faculty, some no longer at IU, working with prominent members of the Indian community in Bloomington and elsewhere in Indiana, as well as in other states. In 1986, former chair of the Department of Religious Studies Patrick Olivelle approached Dean Lowengrub with a fund-raising proposal for an endowed chair to build a program in South Asia studies. In 1987, the Lilly Foundation provided the first of several grants to finance fund-raising efforts. By December 1990, $100,000 had been raised, including a substantial donation from Greg Shopen, a Buddhist scholar then at IU who had been awarded a prestigious MacArthur Fellowship. Three years later, the endowment had reached $250,000 and in April 1994, the College approved the formation of a search committee to identify a scholar of international stature to hold the named chair.

A new major fund-raising campaign is now under way with the goal of reaching $1 million before the turn of the century. Swadesh Kalsi of Columbus and Ramakrishnan Nagarajan of Indianapolis are co-chairs of this second-stage campaign, which was set into motion in June 1995, with an "India Chair Night" featuring Ambassador Siddhartha S. Ray as keynote speaker, and attended by 175 guests. Among future events planned by the campaign is a joint conference in spring 1996 between the India Studies Program and the IU School of Business to explore historical and cultural issues related to doing business in India.

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India Studies Program

Arts & Lecture Series Fall '95

Concert, Creative Arts Auditorium, 7 p.m.
October 7
Imrat Khan on Sitar and Surbahar

Thursday Evening Lectures, Rawles Hall 100, 7:30 p.m.
October 26
Philip Lutgendorf, "Monkey in the Middle: The Meanings of Hanuman in Indian Culture"

Pratapaditya Pal, "Ascetic Ideal and Indian Art"

November 2
Wendy Doniger, "Ancient Myths of Sexuality in Modern India"

Tuesday Evening Films, Whittenberger Auditorium, 7 p.m.
Satyajit Ray's adaptations of Tagore stories:

November 28
"Charulata"

December 4:
"Two Daughters"