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A giant leap into South Asian studies

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by Carole Bass '83, '97MSL

Just a year and a half after recruiting anthropologist Kalyanakrishnan Sivaramakrishnan '91MES, '96PhD, away from the University of Washington, Yale has tapped him to build what it says will be the broadest South Asian studies program in the country.

"I have to confess," says Sivaramakrishnan, "I wasn't expecting to have to lead such a major effort so soon after I got here. We have a lot of work to do."

He's not just being modest. President Richard Levin, visiting New Delhi in November, announced an ambitious new India initiative that will form the core of the larger South Asia program. Over the next three to five years, Sivaramakrishnan

Yale has long been noted for its scholarship and teaching on China and Japan.

hopes to at least double Yale's course offerings in South Asian studies (currently about 30 courses) while tripling its faculty strength (from 10 to about 30). What's more, he says, the interdisciplinary program will "permeate not just the college but the professional schools and all parts of the campus."

Yale has long been noted for its scholarship and teaching on China and Japan -- a strength that "was built over decades," notes George Joseph '00MPhil, an assistant secretary for international affairs at the university. "Given the pace at which South Asia is growing, we don't have the luxury of taking decades to build a program. This is being done in a very accelerated fashion."

The "trajectory" of Yale's South Asia push started in the 1990s, Joseph says. That's when India liberalized its economy and began the tremendous growth that has put it among the world's major geopolitical forces. That's also when the children of the first big wave of Indian immigrants to the United States -- children like Joseph himself -- went to college. They found "a glaring gap" in Yale's curriculum, he says.

"They wanted courses on Indian history, on their own languages -- courses on all aspects of India and South Asia,"

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Joseph says. "President Levin's announcement is the culmination of more than a decade of students and faculty really pressing the institution to do more."

Currently, Yale has about 150 to 160 students from South Asia; Joseph estimates the number from the South Asian "diaspora" -- in the United States, Britain, and elsewhere -- at an additional 150 to 200. They're an active bunch: the campus houses at least a dozen South Asian student organizations.

Yale has already moved to meet the growing academic interest, launching a South Asian studies major in May 2007. To expand course offerings,

Academics are only part of the story.

Sivaramakrishnan brought in five visiting scholars this year and aims for at least six next year, while also recruiting permanent faculty. But academics are only part of the story. The university also touts its connections to South Asian political and business leaders, including an annual program that brings members of the Indian parliament to the Yale campus for leadership training.

The outreach is timely. Levin announced Yale's India initiative only a week before gunmen stormed tourist spots in Mumbai and terrorized the city for days. While India's rising tide of political, ethnic, and religious violence requires extra caution, it is "not going to derail our long-term plan," Joseph says. "The kinds of events that transpired [in Mumbai] underscore why students at Yale and others who are going to be in leadership need to have a deeper understanding of South Asia."

Yale's existing program is smaller than the older, well-established programs at Penn, Chicago, Columbia, and elsewhere, but Joseph says the expansion will make Yale's program comparable to those. He also declares Yale's program "quite distinctive" in its collaboration with professional schools. However, Sugata Bose, director of Harvard's five-year-old South Asia Initiative, says Harvard's program has begun working with its professional schools.

Bose calls the Yale announcement "very exciting," and adds, "What is truly unique about what Yale has announced is the commitment of unrestricted endowment funds": \$30 million off the bat, with an eventual outlay of \$75 million. And will Yale's move motivate Harvard to follow suit? A circumspect Bose says simply, "It's great news for both Harvard and Yale." 

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