

COMMUNITY NEWS

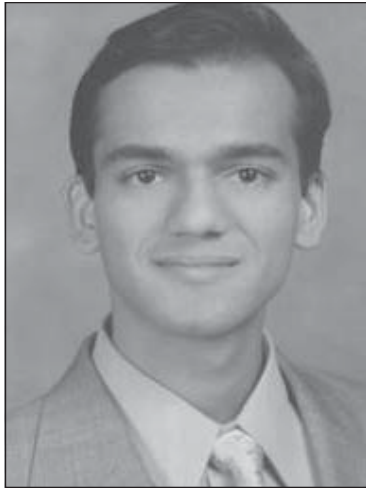
California school textbook issue: HSC student debates with Harvard professor

The following are excerpts from an eye-witness account of the meeting held in Harvard University on the California textbooks issue on Friday, February 3, 2006.

The debate was organized by the Harvard Dharma, a student club, in a room with a capacity of about 100 people which was full. Most attendees were students with several community members also present.

Prof. Michael Witzel opened the discussion with a ten-minute presentation on his background and a history of how he got involved in the California textbook revision process for the edits recommended by Hindu Education Foundation and Vedic Foundation. He stated that he understood second generation American issues as he has a son who was born and brought up in the US and that the edits being presented were by groups that had associations with fundamentalist organizations. He agreed that textbooks required revisions, but felt that the current revisions were not correct because they did not stand up to a scholarly interpretation of history.

Krishna Maheshwari, a Harvard Business School student, spoke as a person who has been following the California issue with interest but has not been involved with any of the organizations involved. He was introduced as a co-founder of Hindu Student Council at Cornell University. He began the debate by explaining how the portrayal of Islam, Christianity and Judaism was made with an insider's point of view and events which are debated in academic circles and have no authoritative claim on reality were presented as fact. Maheshwari re-



Krishna Maheshwari (left) and Prof. Michael Witzel

peatedly asserted that the presentation of materials on Hinduism needs to be on par with that of other world religions and must follow the regulations of California (which they currently do not). In addition, he kept pointing out that the books are written for sixth graders and the current text has psychologically harmed many Hindu kids and encouraged other kids to not only have a negative feelings about India and Hinduism, but has also resulted in their mocking their Hindu peers. This is something that damages the multi-cultural fabric of the United States.

Maheshwari and three more second-generation Americans in the audience narrated how their 5th-7th grade textbooks denigrated Hindu beliefs and practices (like the heading "Where is the Beef" to a chapter on vegetarianism, etc).

After that, another audience member got up and referred to the letter written on Harvard letterhead by Witzel which claimed support of a legion of experts in Hinduism. He said that the background of most of the signers was in unrelated fields — including a professor of Roman Entertain-

ment — questioning how people with such credentials can lend any expertise in the issue.

A point brought out by several audience members was that the edits were not inclusive of all the philosophy of Hinduism. Maheshwari said the proposed edits were not and did not claim to be fully inclusive and in fact the foundations did not have the space to be all-inclusive in their edits. However, the edits were also made in a general manner and, thus, were not exclusive of any Hindu group. Another topic that came up was the fact that the textbook in California states that the Ramayana came after the Mahabharat. On this topic, Witzel claimed that according to evidence in the texts, this was correct. Maheshwari immediately asked why the Mahabharata refers to the Ramayana many times and not vice versa. The professor didn't respond.

An audience member got up and asked Witzel: "I am Indian born, educated in India, have a daughter going to school here, so I am a concerned parent. I understand the frustrations expressed by some of the second generation folks. I appreciate your work on Sanskrit and your eleventh hour jump in the California issue out of concern. You mentioned that the textbooks were not perfect. You also accepted that books in the past did not appropriately represent Hinduism or ancient India. So I would like to ask, in your 30 plus years of dedicated work, did you ever try before to change anywhere any textbooks to make a good impression of Hinduism?"

Witzel smiled and said very good question. But he couldn't answer directly, but claimed ignorance. He mentioned that had he known earlier he would have written a book himself. He also mentioned that he had planned on writing a high school textbook but it got "snatched" by someone else.

Later on, Witzel, mentioned that the edits state that God in Hinduism is presented as "Bhagwan" when that is a term used by Vaishnavs (a group of Hindus) while the term "Ishwar" is used by Shaivites, another group. Maheshwari said that these terms are not exclusively used by the two groups and are often interchangeable. On this, an audience member said, "Krishna Maheshwari, who refers to himself as a Vaishnav (in his talk) and in his last name there is Ishwar, so what do you say to that?"

Witzel remained quiet. The same person then asked whether the professor had read the textbooks himself and/or the edits prior to writing his original protest letter. Witzel responded by saying that, "It is a court issue and I cannot say anything".

It is not known if there is a court case involving the professor that would prevent the professor from answering this question.

During the discussion, a point was brought up that the textbooks mention "gods" and "god" with a lower case G. The professor said that this is because Hindus have multiple gods and why they can't just accept it like the Chinese and Japanese who have thousands of gods — why do Hindus want to be like Abrahamic religions. Maheshwari responded by saying that Hindu belief is that there is one God who has infinite manifestations.

Many times during the debate, Witzel fumbled through one of the textbooks he brought (which is out of an approximate 6-foot pile of textbooks on which edits were presented) and showed examples to counter Maheshwari's arguments. In fact, he seemed to believe a lot in refuting an argument rather than making his case. Maheshwari mentioned after these counter examples that the representation of Hinduism was generally negative across the textbooks and the one book Witzel repeatedly pointed to was not representative of the set.

Several times Witzel tried to discuss the link of the Hindu foundations to allegedly fanatic organizations in India. Maheshwari effectively argued against defamation based on association by showing what happens if we take the same argument with the professor in the center. He asked, "Professor Witzel is German and the Nazis were German, so by the same argument, we have to ask whether the professor is a Nazi? I certainly don't think so, but you can understand why this line of argument is incorrect."

After Maheshwari's defense of the Hindu organizations, the professor took a sly swipe at Maheshwari by saying that Maheshwari was toeing the party line. Maheshwari asked the professor "which party are you referring to? I am not affiliated with any of the parties involved."

Krishna Maheshwari is a first year MBA student at Harvard Business School. Krishna was a founding member of HSC Cornell University which has a dual standing with the university. HSC is now both a student club and the Hindu Chaplaincy of Cornell University. In the past two years, he was located in Seattle where he helped start Yogabharati, restart Chinmaya Mission and lead a Bhagavad Geeta class as part of ISKCON.

IACF taking scholarship applications

The Indo American Charity Foundation of Houston invites graduating seniors from high schools to apply for six scholarship grants open for the 2006 year. Applications are being mailed to all area high schools in Harris, Fort Bend, Spring, Clear Lake, Alief and Katy school districts.

Only students of South Asian Indian origin are eligible to apply. This is a need and merit based scholarship in the amount of \$2000. The mailing deadline for the completed application is April 15, 2006. Send applications to the Scholarship Chair, Mrs. Sushma Bhan, 714 Cranfield Ct., Katy, TX 77450. Forms can also be obtained by calling Sushma Bhan at 281-492-7575 or Radha Thiagarajan at 281-496-6700. The applications can also be downloaded from the IACF website: www.iacfhouston.org.

3,000 Indian doctors jobless in UK

Indian doctors, who come to Britain in search of cushy jobs and a better life have lately found that life is not that rosy after all. Out of nearly 4,000 Asian doctors who came here recently, 3,000 from India and 800 from Pakistan, a majority is said to be struggling.

A newspaper had published a photograph of unemployed overseas doctors queuing up outside the Sri Mahalakshmi temple in East London for free meals. Many are working in restaurants while the lucky few are working as assistants in pathology laboratories.

Dr Shiv Pandey, a senior doctor from Liverpool and an executive member of the British Medical Council, had campaigned for these unemployed doctors and even went to India to acquaint New Delhi of their plight. He said there was no hope for the new doctors to get jobs despite the fact that Britain has a shortage of medical practitioners. A few seniors also complain of racism.

At the last count, there were over 6,000 overseas doctors who had come to Britain in the past five years in response to calls by the National Health Service (NHS) for foreign medical staff. They hoped to find jobs after passing the Professional and Linguistic Assessment Board Test (PLAB) - a mandatory requirement for all immigrant doctors. But most of them are still unemployed.

The government earns a lot of money from the PLAB test, also held in India, and so holds them regularly. Most doctors come to Britain hoping for the kind of success their predecessors achieved in the 60s and 70s. Until recently, around 30 per cent of GPs in the NHS were Asian, most of them from India. Dr Sisir Ray, who came here in 1966 and is a consultant at a Harley Street clinic, said preference is now given to doctors from the European Union and a large number of them continue to come here. They do not have to appear for PLAB either.

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