

# Coming To America

*A new project by the Smithsonian's Asian Pacific American Program will showcase the Indian American experience. Museum Curator Pawan Dhingra shared with ALB exhibit highlights and why such a project is so important*



## *What is the HomeSpun project?*

It's a historic initiative run by the Asian Pacific American Program at the Smithsonian to represent the Indian American experience. It will consist of an exhibition, as well as public programs, a middle school program, an interactive website, and a permanent collection of items.

## *What are some highlights of the exhibit?*

There's going to be four major sections. One is the historical dimensions of the community. We will represent how they came to the United States back in the late 1800s.

## **By Jonathan Springston, AAHOA Lodging Business**

The second part of the exhibition is on the major industries in which Indians have a prominent role. That includes medicine, engineering and IT, small business, literature, taxi driving, politics, and entertainment. I've been working with Vinod Dham, the Father of the Pentium Chip, who will share things with the Smithsonian.

A third element will be the cultural side of things, in terms of the ways in which Indian culture has become more a part of mainstream culture. You see this through Yoga, clothing and film. Another part of this is the cultural space in which

Indians gather. These could be religious spaces or secular spaces. Indian grocery stores or clothing stores, for example. These are the kinds of places that community members really value.

The final part of the exhibit is on youth and the ways in which the younger generations are articulating themselves as part of the American society. This is seen through spelling bees. Indians dominant the national spelling bee. Indian youth are part of spoken word, hip hop and poetry. They are using these other artistic genres to express themselves to talk about their place in the country and their thoughts about the community.

Sports will be part of the

exhibition as well. We're working with Brandon Chillar, who last year won the Super Bowl with the Green Bay Packers and is of Indian decent, to have some stuff in the exhibition.

*What are the goals of the exhibition?*

The goal of the exhibition is two things. One is to tell our story in our own words and secondly, be-

## Our history in the United States is something we should take seriously

come a deeper part of the American story. We're in charge of telling our story through an organization that is very supportive of what we're doing as opposed to a third-party entity who has their own agenda, however valid that might be.

We need to recognize our history in the United States is something we should take seriously. It shapes our lives and our future that for the most part is in the United States. If we don't appreciate what we've done here, then we'll have a harder time planning the trajectory for our future. That can be in terms of both adults and the next generation. You can't simply tell the next generation to refer to India to know who they are. They have to understand their place in the United States in order to have a good foundation through which to grow.

The Smithsonian is the most revered cultural museum institution in the country. The Smithsonian brand is more important than it's ever been. People can learn about history by going on the Internet. But it doesn't carry the same symbolic weight that the Smithsonian brand can give. Unless you're part of the Smithsonian, you're not fully part of the American story.



A picture of a soldier from World War I that likely will be included in the HomeSpun exhibit

*Where will items in the exhibit come from?*

States, he brought a big trunk. Hopefully she will share that trunk

## To really tell this story well, we have to have the community share its history with us

I've been able to talk to the daughter of a migrant who came around 1910. When he came to the United

with us to show how migrants came.

We'll be talking about Dalip

Singh Saund, who was the first person of Indian origin ever elected to Congress in the 1950s in California.

To really tell this story well, we have to have the community share its history with us. If people have materials, artifacts, papers, signs, photographs, home movies – anything they think represents their story in the United States – that will help us tell the story to other Indians who might not appreciate what the community has done, and to the broader population as well.

If people have something of interest they want to share, they should contact me. I'm happy to talk about what it is and how we can incorporate it.

If someone is motivated to record or video tape a conversation with their parents or grandparents who migrated here, we can preserve that here. If they have a physical item, we can make it a part of the collection. We're open to many kinds of things, even home movies. Home movies can have a lot of emotional weight.

*Will the exhibit feature anything on motel/hotel ownership in the Indian community and the achievements the community has made in that endeavor?*

We'll be talking about the origins of the Indians of the motel and hotel industry, who started back in the 1940s in San Francisco. We'll be hoping to acquire some items that represent that really long history. I'm hoping to acquire a hotel sign from one of the first hotels owned by some of the pioneers of the 1950s. That can really show what it was like to start off in this new industry.

There's oral and video histories that we'll do. Hopefully we'll be talking to the sons and grandsons of one of the pioneers. I'll be interviewing them about their lives and



More promotional materials from Saund's congressional campaign

starting in the motel business.

*Will AAHOA have a place in the exhibit?*

AAHOA is part of that conversation as well. AAHOA is relevant because it is a national organization for the owners. It helps tell the hotel owner experience,

*to reach said goal of \$2 million?*

We are currently a quarter of the way there. We have more of a deadline for the first \$1 million, which is six to eight months from now. The second million will come from an endowment, which has less of a firm deadline.

*The exhibit is set to run from April 2013 to Sept. 2013. Where can mem-*

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Pawan Dhingra

which is a key part of both the history and the major industries in which we have a prominent role. AAHOA leads us into the conversation about the hotel owners.

The goal is to show the ways in which Indians are trying to promote the advancement of their people and of others. It's not simply showing how much Indians have done. It's showing how they are trying to help others, either inside or outside their community. AAHOA represents that. It advances the cause of Indian small business owners and the hospitality industry in general.

*How close is the project to its fundraising goal and when does it hope*

*bers see this exhibit?*

There are 12 or 15 different cities we will travel to. Likely places include New York City, Chicago, Boston, Philadelphia, Seattle, the Bay Area, Los Angeles, somewhere in the Southwest, Dallas, Houston, Atlanta, and somewhere in the Carolinas, maybe St. Louis, Detroit and one or two other places.

*Is this an exhibit, once it's ready for travel, that could make an appearance in India?*

We need to develop more relationships with museums there. That would take place after it tours the United States, which will be many years from now. ■