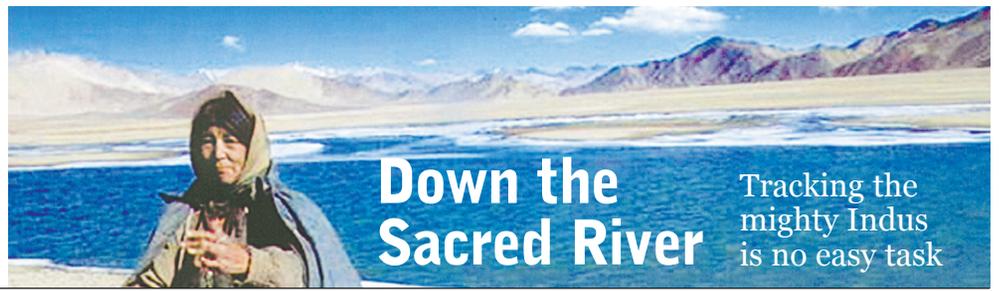




MAGAZINE

# My name is Orhan Pamuk

Inside the mind of the Nobel Laureate



# Down the Sacred River

Tracking the mighty Indus is no easy task

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## Smithsonian plans to showcase desi history

Nation's largest museum says it's 'time to tell the story of the people of India who have made their home in America for more than two centuries'

AZIZ HANIFFA  
in Washington, DC

The Smithsonian Institution — the world's largest museum and research complex — has begun the exploratory phase of a major project to showcase Indian-American history in the United States.

At a press conference at the Capital Gallery October 11, and in interviews with India Abroad, Smithsonian officials, along with two second-generation Indian-American political activists Toby Chaudhuri and Parag Mehta who are driving the project, exhorted the Indian-American community and others to raise the \$2 million necessary to make the project a reality.

The project, HomeSpun: Made In The USA, seeks to establish a permanent presence at the Smithsonian dedicated to the history, achievements and contributions of the Indian-American population, which, according to recent Census Bureau figures, numbers about 2.5 million.

HomeSpun will chronicle the immigration of Indians to America and point to the impact and contributions they have made in diverse fields like medicine, engineering, technology, education, culture, the arts, media and politics. It was the Indian community in the US that produced the first-ever Asian-American US Congressman in the early 1950s, Dalip

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## Climate change guru celebrates Nobel glory

Dr Rajendra Kumar Pachauri, chairman, Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, celebrates in New Delhi October 12. The IPCC and former Vice President Al Gore shared the 2007 Nobel Peace Prize. Dr Pachauri said it did not matter that the Nobel citation does not name him as an individual. "In any case, this is an honor that goes to all the scientists and authors who have contributed to the IPCC's work."



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## Smithsonian plans to showcase desi history

Singh Saund.

The project envisages a national traveling exhibition, related public programming at the Smithsonian, a dedicated Web site and a middle school curriculum guide for the Smithsonian's young visitors, depending on the availability of material and funds. The entire project will then be made available to the more than 24 million visitors who come to the Smithsonian every year and the nearly 100 million visitors to its site on the Internet.

Franklin Odo, director of the Smithsonian's Asian Pacific American Program, pointed out the Smithsonian had dedicated a special section for Sikh Americans and their contributions to American society in an exhibition three years ago, but said HomeSpun strives to be a much larger project about a broader Indian-American experience.

"There are millions of Indian Americans, but the story of their struggle and emergence in this country is largely unknown to the general public," he said, while noting that very few people are aware that Saund was the first Asian-American US Congressman elected. "It's time to tell the story of the people of India who have made their home in America for more than two centuries," he said.

"HomeSpun is an obvious homage to Gandhi [Mahatma Gandhi told Indians to spin their own cloth and wear clothes made in India, instead of using textiles imported from Britain as a form of protest], but the subtitle, Made in the USA, we thought was a particularly useful way of trying to make sure that people across the country and around the world, understood that this is a particularly American take on this issue."

Odo said the APA program, which is only about a decade old, "and if truth be told is a latecomer to the whole menu of racial, ethnic minorities," had during its brief tenure showcased the histories of Japanese-, Chinese-, Korean-, Filipino- and Vietnamese-American communities in the US.

"We felt it was high time to be working with the Indian-American community because it's such a large and important community within the United States," Odo added.

He lauded Chaudhuri and Mehta "for helping us think through how we would begin this project and how we would try to make an effort that would be as welcoming and as large as possible to incorporate all of the different groups and individuals in the Indian-American community, who would like to participate in this."

Mehta, who worked with Odo more than seven years ago in the Clinton administration's White House Initiative on Asian American and Pacific Islanders, explained the project in context, saying, "We need to know our history and that is really what attracted me and Toby to this project: The Smithsonian Institution — the people's museum here in the United States — really making an effort to tell the history and tell the story of Indian Americans."

He said "the really important part of this effort is that it's not just the Smithsonian telling our story, [but] they've invited us to tell our own story — to be the voices to tell about the Indian-American experience in this country."

Mehta, who is now director, training, at the Democratic National Committee recalled that when he worked with Odo on the White House Initiative on APAs, "one of the mandates of that Presidential Initiative was that we need to tell the history of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders because for too long they have been missed in history. And, the Smithsonian plays a very key role in that as the nation's attic, as we affectionately call it. It's their job to archive this history of all the people in this country."

He acknowledged that it could be decades and generations "before we ever see an entire museum dedicated to Indian Americans, but at least, we can have one small space to tell our story about not just the generations that have come in the last 40 years, but really two centuries worth of migration and history in his country."

Mehta said when the concept was broached by Odo and Francey Lim Youngburg, the APA Program's Development Consultant, who is the hands-on specialist in developing strategic plans for such projects, he had quickly jumped at it and quickly co-opted his close friend of many years, Chaudhuri — currently communications director of the Washington, DC-based Campaign for America's Future — "because we really care passionately about making sure that Indians are visible in every aspect of our society. So, we really got excited about the aspect of creating a permanent presence at the Smithsonian. Basically, that means not only having an exhibit that will be housed in the Smithsonian, but travel around the country, and also have a research and archive collection, a curriculum, so that when students come to visit the Smithsonian Institution, they get to learn a class on Indian-American history."

"Also to have a Web site, so that people who aren't even



DAVID LA SPINA/GETTY IMAGES

**‘The Smithsonian wants to tell the story of Indian Americans... They’ve invited us to tell our own story, to be the voices to speak about the Indian-American experience in this country’**

in DC, can access this information from around the world," he added.

Mehta and Chaudhuri, in echoing the sentiments of Odo and Youngberg, emphasized that it is imperative that the Indian-American community get actively engaged to get this project off the ground and running. "Toby and I are just two people who've just volunteered on this project early on, but we want to engage more people — we want to make sure that this exhibit and this effort truly reflects what our story is from all the different perspectives — where you are North Indian or South Indian, whether you live in the rural South or the industrial Northeast, whatever part of the country, whatever social or economic strata you come from."

"This isn't just the story about doctors and engineers and high technology workers. This is a story about the entire community — the farmers, the small-business owners, the hotel and motel owners, the cab drivers. All the people who have come to this country from India and made it their home and it's a really exciting thing for us as the second-generation Indian Americans because in doing this we are honoring the generations before us that came and they gave us the opportunity to become not just Americans, but proud to be Indian Americans," he said.

"This is a story that you can't find on Wikipedia" Chaudhuri said, "it's a story that you can't find on Facebook. Only the Smithsonian can bring the scholars to the table to really tell their story."

"There is not a larger megaphone that you can find other than the Smithsonian," Youngberg declared.

"It's not a partisan issue," she said. "It's about heritage. It's about telling the story about who makes up America, what contributions have been made, what roles people have played in history. The Smithsonian, for the last 180 years, their philosophy is, 'If you build it, they will come.' And, why not? I mean, we are the largest museum complex in the world."

Youngberg said "the Smithsonian's doors are open and the sky is the limit in terms of what you would like to see. But it really depends on the resources that we can generate

in the community." She said the public program and the dedicated Web site is "our first priority because that would really show that this project is about."

The initial plans, Youngberg added, are to raise a certain amount of seed money, and said the target was \$200,000 by the end of December "that would allow us to develop a dedicated Web site, to be able to hire an Indian-American scholar in order to conceptualize the exhibit, and then as we get more resources, we can plan the expansion."

"Our hope is that we are able to do the four main things, which is, an exhibit that will be shown at the Smithsonian, will travel the country for three years and go to about 12 to 15 venues. Then we would have a series of public programs, some in DC and some in key cities around the country, and third have a dedicated Web site and fourth, it is geared to the next generation, and that would be a middle school curriculum guide," Youngberg said.

"Our goal is to have the exhibit hopefully opened in 2009," Youngberg said, "and the ultimate goal is to have \$2 million so that we can do all the things we mentioned. In addition to that, what we'd like to see is a \$1 million endowment at the Smithsonian, in order to have a permanent presence — to use the interest generated for use for public programs, oral history."

She said if the \$200,000 can be raised by the end of the year, "we can really kick this off next year and be able to hire a scholar and start conceptualizing the project."

Odo reiterated that even though the Smithsonian has had some experience in working with the South Asian American community, "This is a major step forward and if we can make this work, we would be really delighted."

Chaudhuri said "the strength and depth of the project depends again on that initial investment from the community. This is an opportunity not only to show that we can put our money where our mouth is, [but] maybe we can leverage some of that [clout and influence shown recently by the Indian-American community in getting the enabling legislation to facilitate the US-India nuclear deal approved in Congress and also mobilizing to defeat Republican Senator George Allen last November for derogatory remarks he made against a young Indian-American to tell the story."

Mehta asserted "this is a community-led effort," and that in order to garner the \$200,000 by the end of this year, "Toby and I are going to be working very closely with Francey and Franklin to start doing roll-out events and we've already started talking about doing one in DC next month, but really taking it around the country and briefing the community leadership."

Since there are "so many great community organizations, both at the national level and the local level," he said, "we want to make sure that they feel fully engaged in this and they feel ownership in this project."