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Posted on Tue, Jul. 29, 2003

Putting a spotlight on Indian history

PARENTS GROUP WORKING TO CRAFT
THOROUGH LESSONS

By Kamika Dunlap
Mercury News

Learning about tandoori chicken, the Taj Mahal and Hinduism is not enough to tell the full story of ancient Indian culture and civilization, say some Saratoga and Cupertino parents, who are trying to coordinate a new approach for local school districts to educate their children.

This summer a grass-roots organization -- mostly made up of parents of Indian backgrounds -- has sprung up with a mission to recruit and train people to be "experts" on Indian culture. Calling itself the Indian Network Community, the group wants to knock down stereotypes and create a collective understanding about Indian culture.

"Indian history and culture is not being portrayed accurately," said Mona Vijaykar, 46, a Saratoga resident and founder of the network. "There's a Eurocentric approach in education and a need to better understand other cultures."

It becomes even more relevant in a region like Santa Clara County, which has seen a major increase in its Indian population over the years. The numbers have grown from 20,000 in 1990 to about 67,000 today, or about 4 percent of the area's 1.7 million residents.

In Cupertino, 9 percent of the population is Indian, while in Saratoga, Indians make up 4 percent, according to the 2000 census.

Last week the network held a meeting with about 15 people to prepare a guideline for parents to use when giving classroom presentations. The group plans to continue to enlist members and hold more planning sessions throughout the summer. Experts on Indian culture and Hinduism are scheduled to be guest speakers at the meetings to provide members with further insight, Vijaykar said.

Parents will also be given worksheets and posters for teaching aids. "We want to get a consistent picture of India," said Surbhi Sheth, 40, a network member and a Cupertino parent at Miller Middle School. "Students need factual information, not incomplete details

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about ancient India."

Pam Dovola, 41, a teacher at Redwood Middle School in Saratoga, is supportive of the concept. "Any kind of network that brings parents into the classroom in a structured way is a good idea," said Dovola, who teaches world cultures, among other things. "Hopefully, students will get a clearer understanding of Indian culture."

The network hopes their efforts will increase not only awareness, but an appreciation for the contributions of ancient Indian civilization to society. "We are known for contributions to the high-tech arena, but there's still a need to educate students and make them understand the historical perspective," said Vandana Sathe, a network member and a Cupertino parent whose children attend Blue Hills Elementary and Miller Middle schools.

BlueHills, she said, holds an International Day that gives students a taste of the foods, dances and dress of many cultures. The network would like to do much more, such as spread knowledge about Indians such as Sushruta, a doctor who performed cosmetic surgery more than 2,600 years ago. And Aryabhata, an astronomer who was recognized as one of the first to discover the closest value to pi, a mathematical constant that relates to the properties of a circle. "It's important to teach children that just because these people are ancient history, that doesn't mean we should forget them."

Vijaykar, an author who writes children's books about Indo-Americans, first became interested in the idea of starting an Indian parents group years ago when her two sons were in middle school and studying ancient civilizations in India, Greece and Egypt. "Some teachers are not familiar with India to the full extent," she said. "There's ignorance about the culture, and not only do Indian children sometimes feel awkward and confused about their culture, their peers also have a limited awareness."

For many students, the parents say, the understanding of ancient Indian culture begins with brief lessons they learn from their teachers on topics such as Hinduism and the caste system. Sometimes, parents of all backgrounds have been known to participate in class and share their cultural and personal experiences. While parent participation is always appreciated, Vijaykar said, having untrained instructors can sometimes cause more harm than good because the message isn't always consistent. "It's confusing to children when they get different messages," she said. "As our community gets more complex we need to share accurate information with each other."

IF YOU'RE INTERESTED

For more information about the Indian Network Community, e-mail indianclassrooms2003@yahoo.com.

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