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EDUCATION

Enrolling in Hinduism

A sudden silence in once full classrooms does not drive Durban's "dean of dharma" to dismay

Ajith Bridgraj, Durban

The University of Durban-Westville was established in 1960 as an exclusively "Indian" university under the country's apartheid race laws. But it would be another twenty-one years before the Department of Hindu Studies was launched by Guru H.G. Dewa in 1981. The department commenced with less than twelve students, with Dewa being the only staff member for the first five years. During its peak, the department saw two additional staff members appointed to teach 135 students. Enrollment has since shrunk drastically, and presently there are only 15 students. This phenomenon is not unique to Hindu Studies, but is mirrored in other language and religious departments.

While Hindu studies have attracted predominantly Hindu students, over the years there have been a few Christian, Moslem and black students. "Judging from their remarks," professes Dewa, "these students have found the courses extremely interesting and innovative." Yet the number of

non-Hindu enrollees remains small. Dewa, 60, who possesses a Masters in Indian Philosophy as well as a doctorate in Hinduism, believes the decline is simply because Hindu Studies does not lead to lucrative career opportunities. The changing racial composition of the campus, where an increasing number of African students are now being admitted, may also account for the sharp drop in student interest.

The core curriculum of Hindu Studies ranges from elementary to detailed aspects of Hindu theology and philosophy, including undergraduate courses as part of a Bachelor of Arts degree, and post-graduate courses towards a Doctorate in Hindu Studies. The Department is research-oriented as well. "We investigate many aspects of Indian culture and the direction it is taking today. We have also conducted extensive research on human rights issues that affect the development of Hinduism," reports Dewa. Publications regularly manifest from such efforts. To date, the department has submitted two articles to government recognized journals, Human Rights and Hinduism and Democratic Ideals and Hinduism in South Africa. Various pamphlets and bulletins are also produced regularly, as well as the monthly newsletter, Nidan.

South African by birth, Dewa has been steeped in religion since childhood. He tells, "I learned about many aspects of Hinduism on the knees of my mother." He is closely affiliated with the Vedanta Mission.