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Category : [July/August/September 2011](#)

Published by dharmalingam on May. 29, 2011

Education

The Legacy of Professor Uberoi

Aerospace engineer leaves fortune to establish foundation to support academic study of Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism

By Katharine Nanda

Professor Mahinder Singh Uberoi (1924-2006) was an aerospace engineer at the University of Colorado at Boulder and an intellectual whose vision of the religions of mankind paralleled his expansive view of the heavens. In his house on the hill in Boulder, Dr. Uberoi had a clerestory of colorful windows bearing the character names for God in a number of different symbolic languages--Chinese, Arabic, Sanskrit and others. He once said the name of God was the most common word between all the languages of the world.

Thus, while Dr. Uberoi was an intensely private man in his later years and did not generally discuss religion with friends or colleagues, it was not altogether surprising that after his death in 2006, at age 82, a handwritten will dated 1986 was discovered amid the old piles of his papers, in which he left his entire estate to a foundation to be used for the "scholarly study of Buddhism, Hinduism, Jainism, Sikhism and other related religions...." On the other hand, because he had remained single and had chosen to live his life without pretense or ostentation, many who knew him may have been startled to learn that the estate amounted to nearly eight million dollars--developed from a good academic salary combined with a family inheritance, austere living and astute investments.

The trustees he designated were his three Delhi-based nieces, Anu, Jyothi and Sneha, whose own father had died when they were children. Their mother, understanding the difficulties facing fatherless young women in India, had sent them to the best possible schools and instilled in them a love for learning. But they

were caught unawares upon hearing of this plan crafted by an uncle they scarcely knew. Now grown and with their own families, they were about to embark on an unanticipated adventure that would truly change their lives.

Through friends and relations in Delhi, the sisters discovered a law professor in Denver who, it turned out, had met Mahinder Uberoi many years earlier. This was my husband, Professor Ved Nanda. Unlike Dr. Uberoi, Ved has always been actively involved in Hindu community activities in Colorado, the US and India. He was soon named chair of the Foundation. Anu's brother-in-law, Mr. Parveen Setia of Orlando, Florida, joined in the effort as vice-chair. Jim Polsfut of Denver was recruited to be our Executive Director, and I was named Secretary.

Dr. Uberoi's will made it clear that his intent was not to proselytize. "Scholars need not have any particular faith or beliefs," he wrote. To carry out his mission, he intentionally left much to the judgment of the men and women who would be named as trustees of the foundation. Nevertheless, by way of example, he wrote, "Obvious candidates for support are persons who are regularly engaged in scholarly work, such as universities, institutes and religious centers."

Coincidentally--or maybe providentially--the Uberoi Foundation (uberoreligiousstudies.org) was created to promote the scholarly study of the religions founded in India at roughly the time the famous California textbook litigation was coming to a close. In the California case, the plaintiffs, parents of middle-school children, challenged the State Board of Education for using teaching materials that gave a distorted--sometimes grossly misleading--view of Hinduism. In fact, the case was simply symptomatic of the larger issue of education in the Eastern religions in America as a whole. For generations, American school children have been taught that Hindus worship monkeys and elephants, have long hair and beards and live in caves; Sikhs are warlike; and Buddhists have big bellies and meditate all day. Jains barely find mention at all.

Even in some of the best universities in the country, teachers of Eastern religions are frequently not practitioners of those faiths. Destructive distortions result, even though they may be unintended and the teachers well-meaning. Such ignorance has resulted in the dissemination of seriously misleading information. There is a real need to establish institutions of dharmic study that operate from an authentic point of view.

The new Uberoi Foundation thus charged itself to raise awareness of the four major religions named by Dr. Uberoi--Buddhism, Hinduism, Jainism and Sikhism--in an effort to promote understanding, communication, tolerance and peace among the diverse peoples of the world. These four may be called the "dharmic traditions," as a similar concept of dharma is central to each. The Foundation seeks to encourage an honest portrayal of the dharmic traditions in academia through fair inquiry.

It is remarkable that, while most Western or Abrahamic religious traditions are taught in the US by adherents, this is not generally the case with the South Asian religions, which attract scholars who may not even be sympathetic toward them. This makes a fully sensitive and properly profound understanding difficult to achieve. Also, these South Asian traditions often involve foreign or remote concepts that do not translate easily into Western religious prototypes. The Foundation aims to make the dharmic traditions more accessible to the American audience while retaining their integrity.

Especially in the current geopolitical climate, where interest in the dharmic traditions is eclipsed by a preoccupation with Islam, and often motivated by fear of differences, it is important to counter media preconceptions and misunderstandings that have been fostered by inadequate instruction and materials, particularly in the disciplines of world history and world religions.

The popular perception of India's religions is largely framed by Christian terminology and ideas, based on the work of colonial scholars who sought to explain the beliefs of the Indian subcontinent--with a strong subtext of domination involved. Far from having disappeared, today this subtext has evolved in two primary forms: systematic hostility shown by parts of the academic community, and are ongoing efforts to fracture dharmic societies through conversion.

While so many forces are arrayed against an honest understanding of the dharmic religions in the globalized setting, it is significant that today we see a prevailing longing for the knowledge of universal truths to which they hold the key. Today the West is particularly receptive to grasp the dharmic traditions' contributions to the 21st century world.

Considering the dharmic traditions on a mutual footing brings a useful synergy. At their best, these traditions have a resonance with each other that is lacking when they are compared and contrasted within customary Western paradigms of thought. Consideration through one another's lens and from their shared basis enriches both the separate and the mutual inquiries: far from consensus, their individual independence and honesty resound in this process. Considered together, their common resistance to being assessed within the Abrahamic framework of Western thought yields to a flowering of subtlety and power in their discourse. The Uberoi Foundation strives toward these goals through a program of grants and of periodic "Experts' Meetings" on specific topics, engaging religious studies scholars with those of other academic fields who are also lifelong students and activists in the dharmic traditions. The first Experts' Meeting was held in 2009 to consider the topics of "The Absolute Reality" and "Karma," with papers given by Dr. Shiva Bajpai, Dr. Arvind-Pal Mandair and Dr. Bal Ram Singh. The 2010 Experts' Meeting was held in Denver and hosted by Dr. David Trickett, a Friend of the Uberoi Foundation and President of the Iliff School of Theology, which adjoins the University of Denver campus. This meeting was on "Decolonizing Indic Studies," with Dr. Arvind Sharma as the convenor. The meeting grappled with the impact of 19th century colonial thinking and missionary intent that remains in Indic studies. In 2011, the Uberoi Foundation Annual Experts' Meeting will be held in Los Angeles to consider "The Teaching and Transmission of Dharma Traditions."

That eight-million-dollar estate left by Dr. Uberoi hit a rough patch in September 2008, less than one year following our 501(c)(3) approval, when the stockmarket lost nearly half its value in a few days. We were not alone in suffering a nearly 25 percent loss in value. Fortunately, we had removed the funds from a large brokerage house and put them into the care of a private bank and trust company in Denver, whose risk management practices brought the Uberoi account steadily back to health. Now, in only about 2-1/2 years, we have recovered nearly all that was lost. At this point, we have not sought donations from our friends or the public and do not anticipate doing so in the future, although Dr. Manohar Shinde has made some significant gifts.

The Foundation grant-making process is by invitation of the board of directors; unsolicited applications are not accepted. In the first three years of grants, the amounts ranged from \$10,000 to \$100,000. An important project, begun in 2010 which will continue through 2011, is a teacher training program hosted by the University of Massachusetts at Dartmouth. Led by Mr. Rajiv Malhotra and Dr. Bal Ram Singh, this program instructs middle and high school teachers in the basics of the dharmic traditions and their cultures, making the teachers more sensitive and

aware of how they teach and more discerning about the materials they use. The instructional materials for this project are prepared by a number of scholars in the traditions and may be used by the teacher-participants in formulating their own curricula in the future.

Other grants for 2011 funded the start-up of a dharmic traditions think tank and database, a program on Eastern and indigenous traditional perspectives in conflict management, support of research in communication studies and dharmic traditions, a dharmic traditions teaching project, work on a Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the World's Religions, and a workshop on Sikhism and public life. Earlier, the Foundation also supported the publication of a book on tantra.

In the near future, the Foundation anticipates publishing materials from the Experts' Meetings and other projects. We hope also to promote establishment of academic chairs and programs in major academic institutions.

On a personal note, I must mention the serendipity that has brought us together in Denver with such highly esteemed religious scholars and practitioners from around the US and overseas. We feel tremendously blessed to be part of this organization that almost literally landed in my husband's lap, and grateful for the opportunity it created for us to know and to learn from such wonderful, intelligent and wise persons. No less an adventure has been becoming part of the Uberoi family with the Delhi nieces and Mr. Setia of Orlando, who also could never have anticipated how their lives would change as they have become involved in this lofty dialogue and the fascinating world of religious discourse. We thank them for their confidence and friendship and the joy they share with us.

Katharine Nanda, now semi-retired, has practiced law for many years and is involved with several community organizations, including being a founding member of the Hindu Temple & Cultural Center of the Rockies.