

Indo-Canadian studies centre opens

Project at the University College of the Fraser Valley began as way of increasing classes

BY MICHAEL SCOTT
VANCOUVER SUN

ABBOTSFORD — Construction dust is sifting on to tabletops and shelves, and painters are cursing a blue streak in a corner office, but Satwinder Bains sits unperturbed, her navy-blue suit still immaculate.

This suite of half-painted offices and meeting rooms on the campus of University College of the Fraser Valley, in Abbotsford, had to be ready by this morning to receive its first guests as the new Centre for Indo-Canadian Studies. While decorators and cleaners rushed to meet the deadline, Bains, who is the director, and D. J. Sandhu, who runs an overseas component of the centre in Chandigarh, India are all smiles. They can afford to relax a little: the hard work of establishing the centre is behind them.

What began more than two years ago as a local initiative to increase the number of Indo-Canadian classes on the UCFV curriculum, has turned into a project of regional and international significance.

"At first, all we were trying to do was start some classes with Indian content," Bains says, in the unmistakably patrician accent of her hill-station upbringing, in Simla.

Bains, who teaches social work, lists the subject areas she was interested in seeing developed at the university: geography, history, philosophy, language, literature, social work and business.

There are 10,000 students at UCFV, about one-quarter of them of Indian descent, which is slightly higher than the community population in Abbotsford, according to Bains. The UCFV's research department has found that the Fraser Valley has the highest proportion of Indo-Canadians of any metropolitan area in Canada.

Two years later, the school offers 16 courses with Indo-Canadian content, and Bains says she hopes to see the number rise to 24, the level at which students could declare a minor concentration in Indo-Canadian studies.

The process of developing new classes also led directly to the school's bid to create a centre for Indo-Canadian studies with a permanent research chair. Bains and her team applied for endowment funding through the provincial government's Leading Edge Endowment Fund, a principal goal of which is to attract international-calibre academics to B.C.

The favoured field is trade development, according to Bains, who explains that the program views academics as economic engines.



RICK COLLINS/SPECIAL TO THE SUN

D.J. Sandhu (left in top photo) and Satwinder Bains at the new Centre for Indo-Canadian Studies and Research at the University College of the Fraser Valley. The project is aimed at UCFV students such as Kuldar Kanda (bottom photo), pictured here in a study area near the new centre.

The provincial government agreed to provide \$1.25 million in permanent endowment if the school provided an equal amount. There was just one catch: it couldn't be money the university had already raised.

So Bains and her board got to work. In just over a year, they had collected more than enough — \$1.4 million. The single largest donation was \$50,000 from Richmond developer Lucky Janda, who came to Canada from Punjab as a teenager.

A key player in the centre's operations will be the high-profile academic who occupies the new research chair. A national search was conducted and a candidate selected. Bains said she had hoped to announce the winner this weekend, but the

appointment has not yet been confirmed by the provincial government.

The Abbotsford centre, in addition to providing an academic home for the incoming professor, and a focus for the university's Indo-Canadian courses, will also develop a variety of seminars, round tables and community meetings dealing with immigration and integration issues, as well as Indo-Canadian trade.

"The question for us is how to use the social capital of immigrants," Sandhu says. "How should they be settled here to Canada's advantage?"

Bains stresses the key goal of stimulating trade between Canada and India.

"It is an important part of our

mission here to build bridges in terms of India-Canada trade," she says. "Canada is far behind in its trade with India. It seems as if Canadian businesses haven't had a real impetus so far to go and look at opportunities there."

"This is definitely something we will be addressing."

"If we fall any more behind [in our trade dealings with India] we will be left behind. Permanently."

Sandhu, who is a business professor at UCFV, and formerly the chair of its Business Administration program, has spent the last two years working to create a UCFV degree program in India, now under the aegis of the Centre for Indo-Canadian Studies.

That initiative took wing last month when the first 17 Indian undergraduate students were admitted to UCFV's four-year degree program at a private university in Chandigarh.

Because the business administration degree is identical to the one offered in Abbotsford, the Chandigarh students are free to spend any portion of their four years in Canada.

Sandhu said his research indicates the Indian economy is crippled by its lack of well-trained middle managers, and the UCFV degree is aimed directly at that shortage.

The Chandigarh program is conducted entirely in English, and all of its first 17 students have some family connection to Canada.

Sandhu has also been developing a relationship with one of India's best-known public universities, Panjab University, where he was instrumental in 2004 in forging a memorandum of agreement between Panjab and UCFV.

A Panjab professor has agreed to build a mirror version of the Centre for Indo-Canadian Studies there, exploring similar issues from an Indian perspective.

"Panjab is considered one of the top 10 universities in India," Sandhu explained, "so this is a huge coup for UCFV."

An agricultural university in Ludhiana, in the Punjab, has also approached the Centre for assistance in arranging for a transfer of Canadian dairy technology.

Sandhu, who settled in Canada in 1977 after an international childhood, said the fact that 100 million Indians — one-third of the country's population — are between six and 16 years of age, will have a significant impact on the shape of the world's economy in decades to come.

"Everything we do now to build bridges to that future economy is going to bring enormous benefits," he said.

"That is our future market, sitting there. This is our chance to introduce ourselves."

mscott@png.canwest.com

The Centre for Indo-Canadian Studies celebrates its official opening today with an open house from 1 to 5 p.m. The Centre is housed in Building F, just off McKenzie Rd., on the eastern edge of the campus in Abbotsford.