

[Vedic University Nurtures Hundreds of Students](#)

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Vedic University Nurtures Hundreds of Students One Teacher Manages the Low-Budget School by Computer, Fax and Mail

"The Vedic University of America," proclaims the introductory material, "was founded at Los Angeles in the year 1987, with God as its Chairperson and godly persons as Chancellor and Patrons." The University is a correspondence school whose purpose is to spread Vedic Dharma. Of its 1,600 students, 600 are studying Hindi, 300 Sanskrit and the balance Hindu philosophy. One person-Pandit Satya Pal Sharma-handles the entire teaching load from his home. Aided by his computer and fax machine, he maintains a remarkable degree of personal contact with the students.

Sharma was born in Mysore to Tamil parents-K.T. Doraiswamy Iyengar and Padmadevi. He was raised in a traditional Hindu gurukulam and later entered government service as a teacher and translator for Hindi. He is a qualified priest in the Arya Samaj tradition and entered the United States on a minister's visa in 1983 when such visas for Hindus were rare indeed. Sharma retired from government service in India (teaching and translating Hindi) in 1980, then spent three years in Nairobi as a minister of religion. Just before coming to the USA, he spent time in South Africa where he fulfilled the request of then Zulu chief minister, Butalezi, to be baptized as a "Gandhian." A short ceremony was done and a Gandhi cap presented. Butalezi is now Home Minister of the new government under Nelson Mandela.

His early training prepared Sharma for the work he is doing today. In 1936 at the age of eight he was sent to the gurukulam at Kurukshetra set up by Swami Shraddhananda of the Arya Samaj. Later he went to the gurukulam at Vrindaban and there earned their highest degree, Veda Shiromani, in 1949. Both gurukulams taught only religion-Vedas, stories of the rishis and the works of Arya Samaj founder Swami Dayananda Saraswati. These gurukulams are not the present-day Arya Samaj DAV schools which teach many modern subjects and very little religion.

Shraddhananda's schools were along the old style. The students lived with their teachers, rose at 5:00am to bathe in cold water and got primarily a religious education. "My parents sacrificed a lot for me," Sharma said. "The object of my life is to please and give eternal peace to these souls."

Students Around the World

The Vedic University's most popular course is Hindi, taken by a wide range of people. This course is approved for use in California state public schools. Most students are in the US, but others are in Italy, Saudi Arabia and Dubai. Sixty percent of the students are not Indians.

We interviewed four students of Vedic University. The routine is simple. They study one lesson at a time from the carefully graduated books, then answer the test at the end. They mail, or preferably fax, this to Sharma, who corrects and sends it back to them immediately. One student, Gary Conlon, said "This is the best course I've ever seen, very simple, very complete. He really starts from square one and works his way up slowly. " Conlon is setting up Kalyani, a Kerala-based health and information project for rural people, with Sharma as his cultural/linguistic adviser.

Dr. G.S. Rao of Huntsville, Alabama, USA, decided along with his wife to learn Hindi because it is India's national language. "I cannot compliment enough VUA for this course. It is a great service to the Indian community. I fax my tests and get a reply the same day."

Jim Crutchfield of Garden Grove, California, has studied Hindu philosophy through the school. "When I had questions, Panditji would answer in such detail, explaining every concept, every angle. I've seen him answer questions from children, teens and adults. He can satisfy everyone."

Dr. Vithol Wagle of Shrewsbury Massachusetts got the Hindi course for his 13-year-old son. He's returning to India permanently next year. He and his wife speak only Gujarati and Marathi. They wanted their son to know Hindi for living in

India.

Grappoli Elisa of Carcare, Italy, said her Sanskrit course was "easy and very clear." She is a member of Gitananda Ashram and needs to learn Sanskrit for use in their new magazine, Sri Vidya.

Aside from those directly enrolled with the university, temples and ashrams use the books for their own classes. Dr. N.S. Datta (the university's chancellor and a major donor) and his wife Savita teach the Hindi course at the local Chinmaya Mission school and a Gujarati temple.

There is a certain irony in all this-Sharma, a Tamil, spreading Hindi in America. Tamil/Hindi disputes have been a major source of tension in India. "My work will encourage others," to overcome linguistic discord, Sharma said.

Resource Material

For its Sanskrit course, Vedic University uses the 13-book Sanskrit Self-Teacher by Dr. Pandit S.D. Satwalekar. Sharma has developed his own books, Hindi America Primary and Secondary, each 150 pages long, plus a tape series. Other books published by the University include commentaries on Upanishads, Ramayana and Gita, books of prayers and bhajan, a handbook on the Arya Samaj form of yajna, and a very good question/answer format explanation of Hinduism for children called Know Your Religion. "In the long run, we want to make children real Hindus," Sharma summarized.

The most popular book, however, is Happy Home, an all-in-one compendium of wedding rituals and advice for a happy marriage. The advice is exemplary and traditional: "Don't try to have your wife under control. She is not a dummy, but a human being. Don't treat her as your maid or doll. Don't think that she must always dance to your tune. ... Don't crave to marry a working girl. To expect that the wife also should be an earning member so that she is an undrying source of income for you all the days to come is just like putting a milking cow under the yoke to till the field. It will extract every drop of blood from her. ... Never think of becoming

separated from each other. One cannot prosper without the help of the other." Sharma has detailed in the book both the traditional ceremony and a simplified (75 minutes flat, start to finish) marriage ceremony for use in the West.

The Lap of God

The yearly budget of the University is US\$24,000, raised from donations and book sales. Despite the small budget, Sharma said, "My work has never been blocked due to lack of funds. This work of the university has put me in the lap of God." Address: 10509 Caminito Basswood, San Diego, California 92131, USA.

Editor's note: The Vedic University is prepared to assist anyone who wants to set up a similar correspondence school by providing the course material in bulk at discounted prices, as well as practical advice.