

Paying It Forward

Through their gift establishing the GTU's new Center for Dharma Studies, Mira and Ajay Shingal have invested in the future of Hindu scholarship

On December 5, 2015, the Graduate Theological Union announced the establishment and endowment of the Mira and Ajay Shingal Center for Dharma Studies, a center dedicated to the academic study of Hinduism, Jainism, and Indian Buddhism. The creation of the Center for Dharma Studies was a major step toward the GTU's goal of having all of the world's great religious traditions represented in its academic community.

The new Center for Dharma Studies was made possible by a \$4.4 million gift from a Bay Area couple, Mira and Ajay Shingal, who have been integral to the local Hindu community for twenty-five years. The Shingals chose the GTU for their gift because they believe deeply in the GTU's approach to religious scholarship: "We are so encouraged by the GTU's faith-based approach to education, where students learn from faculty who are practitioners within the traditions they teach," Mira Shingal explains. "The study of many different religions here offers students the opportunity to be in conversation with different ways of thinking, and deepen their knowledge. But Hinduism has been visibly missing at the GTU," she continued. "We feel privileged that we were able to make a gift to help establish this Center. And our hope is that the Center for Dharma Studies will be a very significant help in expanding the understanding of Hinduism for many generations to come."

Ajay Shingal echoed his wife's thoughts about the unique environment the GTU offers: "We need places where religion is respected and taught openly, and for us there is no place that does this better than the GTU. As I hear about the relationships that the Director of the Center for Dharma Studies, Dr. Rita

Sherma, has already built with faculty from the GTU's other Centers such as the Center for Jewish Studies and Center for Islamic Studies, I reflect on the importance of those kinds of relationships that really bind the community together. I think the GTU, through both the member schools that founded it, and the academic centers that have been established over the years, really provides a unique environment, where people from different traditions are able to sit down at the table and talk, with the understanding that we do have differences, but we still respect one another and can seek to work together."

Shingal expressed his appreciation for the ways in which the diverse GTU community and its member schools have shown support for the establishment of the Center for Dharma Studies. "We met one day with the Dean and Director of Intercultural Initiatives at the Jesuit School of Theology, and we spent three hours talking about the commonalities between our two traditions." JST is offering an Interreligious Immersion Course in fall 2016, followed by an immersion trip to India next January in which students will visit both Hindu and Christian sites. The course will be jointly offered by the Center for Dharma Studies and the JST, led by professors Thomas Cattoi and Purushottama



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Bilimoria. “These are the kinds of exciting opportunities that are available at the GTU,” noted Shingal.

While the Shingals celebrate the GTU’s multi-religious environment, their greatest passion is for the expansion of the academic study of their own Hindu tradition. “Hinduism is a very unique, peaceful, and global way of looking at the world,” Mira Shingal explains. “It is a religion of universality that believes we all emanate from the same power, that we are all connected, and that we must take care of this small planet we live on.” Hinduism has “tremendous wisdom” and “a legacy to offer the world” says Mira, but there are few places in the United States where Hinduism is studied with the kind of comprehensive, broad-ranging, academic approach used to study other faiths.

The Shingals believe in-depth scholarship that illuminates the textual, philosophical, and theological ethos of the Hindu world as well as its lived practice can help correct distorted understandings of Hinduism throughout U.S. culture. They have long been involved with an initiative that seeks to address errors in the way Hinduism is depicted in the textbooks in California elementary schools. But this campaign, Ajay says, has been hampered by the lack of Hindu scholars in the United States whose academic credentials are recognized by the state Board of Education. “Back in India, we have institutions where Hinduism is studied, but that same advantage is not available to second or third generations of Hindu American youth growing up here,” offers Mira. “So this is a gift we felt like we could offer to our own Hindu young people, and others in-

terested in Hindu Studies, to help create a space at the GTU where scholars are exposed to the systematic, in-depth study of Hinduism, and also have contact with, and knowledge of other faiths.”

The Shingals hope the Center established in their names will continue to grow and diversify in the years to come. “Hinduism is such a multi-faceted religion, with different teachers and different paths,” says Mira. “I hope the Center will grow so that one day we’ll see a greater range of different Hindu philosophies taught by different professors, and students will be given more than one view of this great philosophy. That’s part of the beauty of Hinduism. It’s not just one simple way of thinking, but it includes many diverse views.” They also look forward to the Center’s expansion of its course offerings in other Dharma traditions like Jainism and Indian Buddhism. The Jain Center of Northern California has recently opened a Jain Studies Initiative at the Center for Dharma Studies, offering graduate courses in Jainism.

“Mira and I feel extremely lucky to have found an institution like the GTU,” says Ajay Shingal. “We know the Center for Dharma Studies will get the best support possible here, so we anticipate many good things in the years to come.” Mira agrees, “I look forward to the day when future generations who grow up here in the United States will be able to learn from scholars who studied at the GTU.”

Doug Davidson is Director of Communications at the GTU.

