

# Namaste Ji, how're you doing?

President Bush thinks learning Hindi is a 'critical need' – and sparks a growing cross-cultural connect, finds **Monika Joshi**

**N**eelam Mishra is very busy these days. The South Brunswick, New Jersey, resident joined the Edison Public School District in January this year, and will teach Hindi in the township's two high schools when the language is introduced this fall.

In a historic decision, Edison has added Hindi to its curriculum, offering students at John P Stevens High School and Edison High School the language as an elective (courses outside the curriculum that students can pick), just like French and Spanish.

Mishra is the only teacher for the 60 students (ninth and 10th graders) who have enrolled this year. Though classes won't begin till September, she has her hands full designing the curriculum.

Teaching in the United States is different from India, she says. "Here, the curriculum needs to be content-based so that students enjoy learning." For example, instead of starting with the alphabet, teachers pick a theme, say, family life, and build the vocabulary, sentences and cultural nuances around it.

roots initiative that runs non-formal schools throughout New Jersey – is confident the Edison program will progress well. Inspired by her English teacher to take up the profession, Mishra taught for seven to eight years in India before moving to the United States. When she learnt about the position in Edison, she completed her credits (30 credits in Hindi are required to be eligible to teach, she says) and applied. She sees herself as a teacher who engages the class but enforces discipline. "Children respect me but feel free to speak up in class," she says.

**P**resident George W Bush's 2006 National Security Language Initiative identifying Hindi as one of the 'critical need' languages came as a boost to Hindi. Under the government's Foreign Language Assistance Program, Edison Township Public Schools has received a \$197,500 grant, which has made the program possible. In addition, Startalk, a summer program in Hindi, Chinese, Arabic, Persian and Urdu, funded by the Director of National Intelligence and the Department of Defense, is conducting classes for students and Hindi teacher training workshops at New York University, the Hurst-Euless-Bedford Independent School District in Texas, Indiana University and Kent State University, Ohio in June and July.

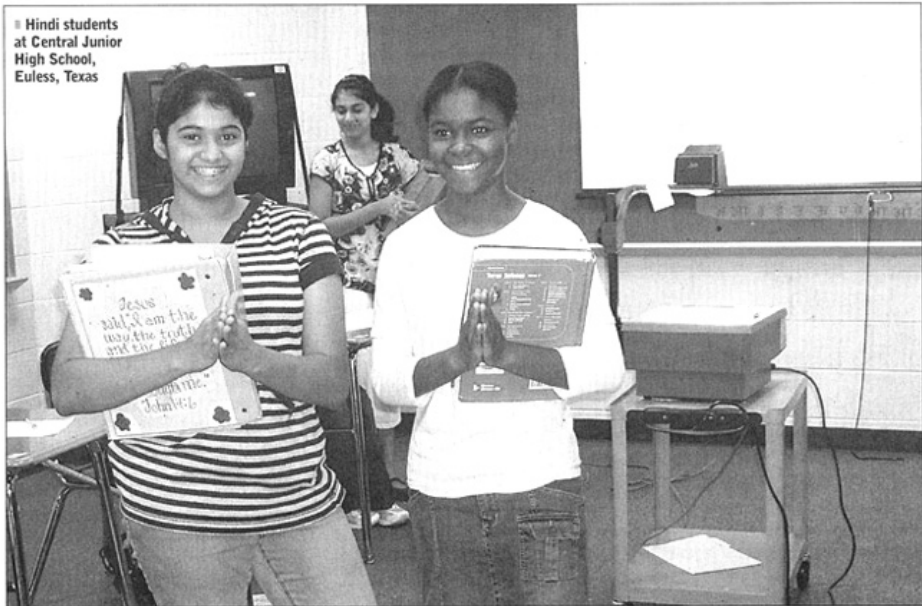
India's growing stature in the world, the ease of travel between continents and greater exposure to Bollywood are among the factors helping promote Hindi in the United States.

Prasad Thotakura, a leader in the Indian-American community in Dallas-Fort Worth, offers an analogy. Approximately 17 students are enrolled in the Telugu program that started at University of Texas Austin's College of Liberal Arts a year ago. The program (supported by the Telugu Association of North America) attracts non-heritage students. One of the students is engaged to a girl of Telugu heritage, another has a Telugu girlfriend, he says.

Thotakura is also the Texas coordinator of the Indian American Friendship Council that worked for the introduction of Hindi at the Hurst-Euless-Bedford Independent School District. Hindi classes started last year at the district's Central Junior High School under the International Business Initiative.

In addition, this June, IBI will offer an intensive three-week summer academy in Hindi and Mandarin Chinese for students who enter the 7th grade this fall.

It's a case of the east increasingly meeting the west, says Bhavani Parpia, coordinator for the IBI. During one of her regular visits to the district's elementary



schools to offer students highlights of the Hindi and Mandarin programs, she played a clip from the Bollywood film *Kal Ho Na Ho*. "Students watched a version of the song, *Pretty Woman*, and they were fascinated by it," Parpia says. India looked very distinct in terms of people's attires and language. "It felt like a paradigm shift."

The year the program was launched, 12 students signed up to study Hindi. Approximately 17 have enrolled for this fall. The class is a fairly healthy mix of heritage (students of Indian origin but not necessarily Hindi speakers) and non-

Seema Bhushan, the Hindi teacher at Central Junior High who also teaches at the SMU Cox School of Business in Dallas, says while most business is conducted in English across the world, knowledge of Hindi will be a plus for these young learners. "You never know what the future holds," she says, recalling her recent visit to China where it was not easy communicating with the local population.

**A** typical Hindi class begins with greetings and simple instructions such as 'please sit down' or 'take the book out.' Through the language, instructors aim to also impart an idea of the culture of South Asia.

Arun Prakash, the Hindi teacher at Bellaire High School in Texas who has been developing curricula for high school and college-level students for 20 years, says in the first year, mastery of approximately 200 words is sufficient. The students learn the writing system as well.

Prakash currently has 82 students enrolled at five levels of instruction. Of the 25 students in his 9th grade class, 21 are non-heritage, coming from backgrounds such as Chinese and Latino. "They are all fluent in Hindi," he says.



Bellaire, reportedly the first high school in the country to introduce Hindi, is also unique in that it offers the international baccalaureate in Hindi. Just as the Advanced Placement program offers students the opportunity to earn credit at American universities, the baccalaureate diploma awards credit at foreign universities.

Prakash is one of the master trainers who will participate in Startalk's two-week 'Discover Asia Teacher Program', that will allow participants to focus on instruction, curriculum and assessment for Hindi programs. It will take

Hindi may be new to schools, but has been around for more than 40 years at the graduate and undergraduate level. University of Pennsylvania was the first to take it up in 1947, right after India's independence. UT Austin started teaching Hindi in 1960, with a graduate student on loan from India. In 1964, Dr Amar Bahadur Singh (who later headed the Central Hindi Training Institute in Delhi) was hired as the first professor.

At University of Texas, a Hindi program started in 1960, and Herman Van Olphen, then a student of linguistics who was required to take up a non-European language, joined it in 1963. Professor Van Olphen, a respected academic, teaches at the Department of Asian Studies and the South Asia Institute at UT Austin.

**W**hile Hindi is catching up, it is not yet the hot new thing on the horizon. People in India and abroad take pride in flaunting their knowledge of English and other European languages. Prakash says he has heard people say they converse in Hindi only with their domestic workforce or elderly grandparents. "And now even the grandmother speaks English!" he says. At his school, he has seen parents encouraging children to take up Spanish instead. "I have noticed that even after four years of Spanish, if you don't have a speaker at home, you learn nothing," he says. His daughter, he says, is a case in point.

Bhushan laments the lack of support by the Indian government. Last summer, officials from the Hurst-Euless-Bedford Independent School District, including Bhavani Parpia, visited China as guests of the Chinese government. "But for Hindi, it is difficult even to find teaching material," she says. She tries and develops material herself and, at times, uses her own resources to buy books. Parpia says she tried to reach the local Indian officials, but received no response.

Bhushan, who hails from Lucknow, grew up in Mumbai. While studying at a convent school, she did not realize the importance of Hindi and Urdu. Now, teaching Hindi has become her connection to India. "It is going back to my roots," she says. For Prakash, who has published a book, *Namaste Ji*, for elementary, intermediate and advanced Hindi students, teaching is a labor of love. He has a degree in marketing and works as a corporate consultant. That is his bread and butter. ■

■ A kid learns about Hindi, and India, through its festivals