

## News & Events

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### When sacred narratives from home go abroad

#### **“Reception of the *Ramayana* in Diaspora” symposium on Oct. 10 hosted by India Studies Program**

A political conspiracy forces a prince, his wife, and his brother into exile from their royal palace and sparks a harrowing chain of events for the trio as they attempt to defeat their enemies, save the prince’s wife from abduction, and reclaim their rightful positions in their kingdom.



This is the premise of the *Ramayana*, one of the great epic poems of ancient India that was composed in Sanskrit in the early centuries of the common era.

The *Ramayana* also is the subject of an Oct. 10 symposium hosted by the India Studies Program in the Comparative Cultural Studies Department and sponsored by the Shri Sita Ram Foundation, USA, a philanthropic nonprofit that promotes Vedic culture.

“Our symposium arose from a conversation with donors to the India Studies program, Vinni and Arun Verma, and their interest in keeping Indian traditions alive here in Houston,” said Dr. Jon Keune, the Sushila and Durga Agrawal Postdoctoral Fellow in India Studies. Dr. Verma is president of the Shri Sita Ram Foundation, USA.

“This symposium will explore the cultural, linguistic, and religious negotiations involved in how the *Ramayana* is understood among Indian (especially Hindu) communities outside India,” he said.

Over the centuries, the *Ramayana* has been tremendously popular and influential across the Indian subcontinent and Southeast Asia, and it is a major source of cultural and religious heritage. The epic has a complex history over the centuries, leading to slightly different versions of the story becoming popular in different regions of India.

The same principle of audience reception shaping a story to fit the cultural milieu of those reading or hearing the tale is at work in the retelling of myths, legends, epics, fairy tales, and other oral and written origin stories that give definition and commonality to groups of people.

Because Houston is home to a large community of people with Indian roots, Dr. Keune and his collaborators titled the symposium, "Reception of the *Ramayana* in Diaspora."

"We're especially looking at how people *outside* India have interpreted the *Ramayana* and what perspectives they have taken on why the *Ramayana* is important to them," Dr. Keune said.

"Reception of the *Ramayana* in Diaspora" will host two main speakers. Dr. Sherry-Ann Singh, a lecturer from the University of the West Indies, will talk about roles that the *Ramayana* has played in Trinidad. Dr. Caleb Simmons, assistant professor of religious studies at the University of Arizona, will discuss how the *Ramayana* is portrayed in a popular comic book series, *Ramayan 3392 AD*.

"In the afternoon, we'll have a common viewing of an animated film, *Sita Sings the Blues*, which is based on the *Ramayana* but tries to tell the story in a novel way," Dr. Keune said.

The symposium will be held October 10 in Insperity Building (CBB) room 238 beginning at 9 a.m. Everyone is welcome to attend for part or all of the symposium.

This public conversation is one of several events the India Studies Program organizes to promote knowledge about the richness of Indian history and cultures.

- by Monica Byars