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### US students get their first Hindi text book

PTI

HOUSTON: With Hindi steadily emerging as a "strategically" important language, schools in Texas are taking the lead in its education by introducing the first Hindi text book for High School students in the United States.

The 480-page 'Namaste Jii' is a "labour of love" that took Indian-origin teacher Arun Prakash almost eight years to develop.

Prakash moved to Houston, Texas in the US for education and business in the 1980's. When he first began teaching Hindi at the school in 1989, only eight students signed up for the class, seven of whom were of Indian heritage.

"Initially, I was offered just USD 15 dollar a day, which barely covered the gas money". Prakash had no proper teacher training or worksheets to work with which inspired him to write the book.

The novice teacher invented his own lessons, writing them by hand until he got a computer equipped with a Hindi font. Over the years, Prakash has stuffed countless photocopies into binders for his students.

But in the upcoming year, for the first time, the Hindi students will get a hardcover textbook written by Prakash.

For decades, high school students in America have been able to take classes in Latin, Spanish, French and even German. But as India becomes a bigger economic power, interest in its native tongue is growing and Texas state, with the fourth-largest Hindi-speaking population in the United States, is poised to become a leader in Hindi instruction.

"The interest for learning Hindi is growing as the government has recognised a vital need for more speakers of strategically important languages," said Herman Van Olphen, director of the Hindi Urdu flagship programme at the University of Texas at Austin, who served as an advisor on the book.

The University received a USD700,000 grant last year to start the first nationally sponsored institute designed for graduate students fluent in the main languages of India and Pakistan.

"The desire to bring Hindi and Urdu down into the high school level is expanding, but it's not quite there yet," said Darlene Bosking, programme coordinator of UT's Hindi Urdu Flagship.

"Some of it has to do with getting a constituency together to say, 'We really need this,' and it's probably a matter of priority and funding."

The text book covers the first two years of high school Hindi and is the equivalent of one year of college-level Hindi. It includes colourful photos and illustrations and comes with workbooks on CD.

Prakash was named a Master Teacher by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages and trained 20 prospective educators of Hindi this summer.

The "Discover Asia" professional development workshop ran from June 9-20 and was funded by a STARTALK grant, part of President George W Bush's National Security Language Initiative designed to build national proficiency in critical languages.

"The Hurst-Eules-Bedford school district sent representatives to Bellaire because they were interested in starting a Hindi program in their schools," said Prakash.

"They would like to start a programme for seventh graders. Next year, I hope to bring the teacher training programme to the

Houston area."

Prakash's Hindi students at Bellaire are highly sought out by the Hindi Urdu Flagship Program at UT, which offers students the opportunity to combine holistic language study with a wide variety of majors.

It includes a year of study in India. Bellaire is one of only two public schools in Texas with Hindi classes, according to state education records.

The track indeed was not easy as Prakash promised and convinced one and all that "Hindi is not as difficult to learn as Mandarin. Despite having a different alphabets that include 52 consonants and 13 vowels, there is no spelling in Hindi. It is written the way you pronounce the word."

But, his persistence paid off and Prakash expects more than 100 students to enroll in his Hindi classes in the upcoming year.

Last year, he instructed around 80 students, and claims that less than half of them were of Indian origin. Reasons for taking the class range from interest in Bollywood to interest in the emerging global economy, of which India is expected to play a major role.

Prakash has helped start a Hindi programme at Rice University too.

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