

# Veteran UC Berkeley Hindi Instructor Calls it a Day

By **ASHFAQUE SWAPAN**  
Special to India-West

BERKELEY, Calif. — For Hindi instructor Usha Jain, there was always more to teaching Hindi than just teaching the alphabet and grammar.

“When I started teaching Hindi, the language was taught for tourists going to India — how to get a washerman to wash clothes, buy things, how to hire a rickshaw,” the veteran instructor told **India-West** during a recent interview. “This is okay initially for a foreigner learning a language, but I thought it was too limited and it was not giving them the cultural aspect of the country, which is

extremely important.”

Jain, who has just finished a 40-year-stint teaching Hindi at the University of California at Berkeley, said she wanted students to get more from her Hindi class, “make them culturally educated,” give them a sense of “how Indians see themselves. You know, language is a mirror of culture.”

As she formally quits her position — she will still be involved, writing books, teaching the odd class — the university has recognized her contribution as well.

In 2001 she received UC Berkeley’s Distinguished Teaching Award, which is rarely given to lecturers.

In a letter prepared as part

of her nomination for the Distinguished Teaching Award, Prof. Vasudha Dalmia wrote that Jain’s “years of service have added to the liveliness and freshness of her classes, rather than diminished them, as her students have repeatedly pointed out. She has shown



*Veteran Hindi instructor Usha Jain, a winner of the University of California’s coveted Distinguished Teaching Award, is retiring after teaching Hindi to generations of students for 40 years.*

no signs of fatigue, rather she has felt the need to improve, to change, to constantly adopt new pedagogical approaches and tools.”

Jain’s colleagues call her the backbone of Cal’s Hindi program. For 40 years she has served as a role model for colleagues, developing the best and most widely used curricular materials for teaching Hindi.

Over the years, the demographics of Jain’s students have changed dramatically. Predominantly Caucasian students of anthropology, religious studies or South Asian studies have given way to a flood of second-generation Indian American youths keen to rediscover their roots, and, if truth be told, get an easy grade.

They were in for a surprise, said Jain.

“Sometimes they take it for easy grades. Pretty soon they find out that I’m tough and it’s not an easy grade, you have to perform,” she said. “People who learn it at home don’t learn it properly. But pretty soon they love it because of the cultural context. Many of the premed students continue up to third year.”

One of the reasons the class has appealed to generations of students is the keen cultural exploration she has brought to her language instruction class, where in between teaching the rudiments of grammar and the Deva-

nagari alphabet, she has talked — and obliged students to talk and write in their fledgling Hindi — about issues like the generation gap, the conflict between Indian parents and next generation and how they cope.”

Her passion has been infectious. For five years now, her advanced-level students have been deeply engaged in Hindi literature. “They read poetry, they write poetry,” she said. “They come out with beautiful poems.”

Her students have written such beautiful poetry that she is compiling them and planning to publish some of it.

In addition to decades of teaching, her Hindi instructional books have virtually become standard textbooks wherever Hindi is taught in U.S. universities. She has done such a good job that her introductory Hindi grammar book is being translated into Urdu by Aftab Ahmed, an Urdu instructor at Cal.

It’s been years of long, hard work for Jain, but she insists that the students made it a great experience.

“These young people, whether American or Indian, they are such beautiful people,” she said, adding that she was struck by “their idealism, their inspiration.”

It was the opportunity to teach them that makes all the hard work worth it, she said.

And it’s not over.

“It has been a wonderful life, and I will continue to teach,” she said, adding that she has just finished a book on advanced Hindi grammar.