

Georges Van Den Abbeele,  
Dean, University of California Irvine School of Humanities,  
And an open Letter to the Community

Re: DCF's Response to the UCI Decision to Reject Gift

Dear Georges,

It is extremely distressing to all the Dharma Civilization Foundation (DCF) Trustees, advisory members and donor members that the UCI School of Humanities' Ad-hoc Committee and Executive Committee have acted hastily to reject the gifts from Dharma Civilization Foundation. In part they have cited UCI administrative procedural issues and in part they have openly questioned the motives of the Foundation. Whatever be their intentions, they have not advanced the cause of civil discourse.

On behalf of the many hundreds of donors from the Indian community who contributed and participated in the opportunity to endow these Chairs at the University of California Irvine's School of Humanities, the Board of Trustees of Dharma Civilization Foundation wish to express their deep disappointment both at the decision to reject these chairs and the manner in which this decision was made. We are extremely anguished by the fact that a major university which claims to respect diversity and enjoys the goodwill of a substantial number of Indian and Indian American faculty, students and alums would treat a gift initiative from the community with so much discourtesy.

Our particular concern is that DCF was not offered a single opportunity to appear before decision making committee members to state their case even though it was offered by me and you had assured me that you will bring it up to the committees. A second major concern of DCF is that you gave us final approval for the Thakkar family chair, which gave us an impetus to get other chairs done. We, who are busy with our professions, dropped all our work and spent countless hours to get other chairs funded. We lost our incomes

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and quality time with loved ones, traveled all over the country and even went to India to accomplish this mammoth task. We succeeded, but only to be dropped so unceremoniously by UCI.

Let me comment on some of the objections raised by your ad-hoc committee.

- The most important of all issues is that your team had not followed your internal policies for approval and DCF ended up getting a bad name in the community because of the failure of your team to do so. You were fully aware of our efforts at other universities, which we did not pursue, as you unequivocally promised to provide a hospitable home for India studies at UCI and even for the creation of an India center. However, from the events that subsequently unfolded, we now learn that you had no such authority to do so.
- I remember you telling us that UCI intends to create a Department of Religion after three or four chairs are established. With that kind of prospect, I, as chair of DCF, took upon myself to rally the community and created four chairs in one year. And now I am learning that you had no such authorization to create the department.
- After the first chair was announced, you had informed us that potential candidates for the chair position could contact us, and that we could refer them to your office. We did just as you instructed and we see in your report that it was held against us as if we were meddling with the hiring process by referring candidates to UCI.
- I vividly remember our conversations when Prof. Paranjape from JNU, New Delhi, was visiting the Southland as he was interested in the position and wanted to scout out the area. You had informed me that he could visit the university campus to get the feel of the area and even meet with you. That is why he visited UCI and called your office. As you were out of town he ended up talking to some faculty members to do his own due diligence. Why is this considered inappropriate?
- You were aware that one of the purposes of DCF was to protect the donor intent. Since donors may not be around several years after the creation of the chairs and

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DCF will continue to remain a living entity, DCF would oversee the orderly functioning of the chairs and make sure that donor intent is effectuated. For this very purpose DCF was creating a three-member body to interact with the university. After agreeing to these terms you are now objecting to this minimum interaction.

- About the need for Sanskrit proficiency in the scholar for Vedic study chair, it would be obvious for anyone with some knowledge of Indian history that proficiency in Sanskrit is of significant value as many of the original writings are in Sanskrit. Thus the objection regarding the need for Sanskrit proficiency is inexplicable. How can a university be even considered a place for higher education when it does not recognize need for Sanskrit proficiency in Vedic Study?!
- And now about the ad-hoc committee's imputation of hidden political motivations on a respectable California-based foundation. Georges, you know that I have donated a million dollars to Simi Valley Adventist Hospital, you have met my Catholic wife, and you know that Dr. Bajpai is married to a Christian woman. You are aware that DCF has brought you the Jain and Sikh chairs, and you and Manohar Shinde were working on getting Buddhist and Parsi chairs to UCI. In light of all these facts and developments, including our significant efforts to bring other chairs besides the two Hindu chairs to UCI, the charges of Hindu fundamentalism and anti-pluralism are indeed baseless.
- Indians in the United States have observed that out of all the religions of the world, Indian traditions, particularly Hinduism, get the maximum negativity from academia. In order to systematically analyze this suspicion, an independent study was done even before I had heard of DCF. That study confirmed the validity of this observation and was the origin of the so called "anti-Hindu and Pro-Hindu faculty list." DCF considers this type of analysis a rational way to analyze the problem, and this observation was the reason for some of the language of the gift agreement. We wanted to protect our gift so that it is not used to foster negativity regarding Hindus and Hinduism. We were concerned that if the chair was held by known and

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- committed anti-Hindu persons, it would result in biased academic work and not produce the rigorous academic study of Vedic traditions as intended by the donor.
- UCI's allegation that DCF is an arm of some right wing Hindu fundamentalist organization because some of its past officers and some present members were part of RSS or HSS is totally false. DCF is defined by our mission statement and our actions, and not by individual members or their affiliations with other organizations.
  - Finally, on the issue of scholar practitioners. DCF has observed that other areas of study, such as women's studies, African-American studies, and Christian, Buddhist, Jewish and Islamic Studies have all benefited from respectively having women scholars, African-American scholars or scholar-practitioners in these traditions, respectively, as active participants in these fields. Such scholars are not questioned about their objectivity, but are, in fact, respected for their unique experiences and perspectives, as well as the depth, nuance and academic rigor they are able to bring to academia. DCF holds that such scholar-practitioners of Hinduism bring the same heightened awareness to Hindu studies. It is discriminatory for UCI to disapprove our request to consider scholar-practitioners of our traditions for faculty positions.

DCF has always been keen to foster the trend towards multidisciplinary approaches as it pertains to the study of Hinduism and other Indic religions, which it views as being complementary to the predominant critical and constructive methods. DCF has no intention to curb academic freedom in any field of study, as has been clearly expressed in our gift agreements.

I have been inundated by calls from all over the country, as well as from Indian news organizations accusing me of being a Hindu fundamentalist. I have received anonymous threatening calls. My wife is looked at with suspicion at her Catholic church. The Thakkar family is feeling let down and is shunned when going out in the community. Your actions have caused me and my family enormous grief and distress.

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The overwhelming message that your faculty members have delivered through their public petitioning and open letters is that DCF and its officers like me are bad people and Hindus are not welcome to participate at the academic table. We have to wonder, what indeed is the academic freedom that these faculty members are defending? Is it the freedom to accuse, abuse and slander law-abiding US citizens like me, so freely and without any check? Why so much irrational hostility towards the Hindu community? It would be an understatement to say that the organized effort to defame DCF has unfortunately, irreparably harmed the Dharma Civilization Foundation and its public standing. The many hundreds of donors and many community leaders who came forward with support and contributions to make these chairs possible, did not deserve to be smeared in this way.

I, the Thakkar family, and DCF are extremely distressed by what has transpired. Some of what I have said above might be too harsh and I apologize in advance. Our emotions are very raw.

Yours truly

Ushakant Thakkar, M.D.  
Chairman  
Dharma Civilization Foundation

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