During the past decade, Columbia’s momentum and expertise in South Asia has grown exponentially, reflecting the increasing significance and importance of the region in today’s globalized economy. One of the key areas where Columbia has taken the lead is in the study of South Asia, which is now a subject of wider interest across many departments and disciplines.

As Nicholas Dirks, vice president for the College, Schools of the Arts and Sciences and dean of the faculty, who has worked closely with University President Lee C. Bollinger and others to effect this transformation, explains, “Students have to know how globalization works—from Cochin as well as from New York City.”

Dirks, an historian specializing in India, has played a major hand in revitalizing the University’s South Asia studies by adding new courses, faculty and partnerships and by encouraging new scholarship. These efforts have been paying off. In the past few years, South Asia expertise has broadened from Indian art, literature and religion—all these are no longer taught as single subjects—to embrace other disciplines as well, such as history, economics, engineering and medicine. There are now over 50 faculty devoted to South Asian studies. About 135 non-language courses with South Asian content are offered in the College’s departments and the graduate schools of journalism, law, business and international affairs. Columbia’s South Asian language program is the fifth largest in modern languages: Hindi, Urdu, Punjabi, Bengali and Telugu. Students can also study Tibetan and Sanskrit.

Enrollments in courses with South Asia content are also at an all-time high. In 2005, there are 1,736 undergraduate students, 80 graduate students and 65 Ph.D. candidates pursuing research work on or relating to India or other parts of South Asia. Columbia’s library resources in the South Asian area also are growing tremendously, at the rate of nearly 18,000 books per year.

Three important South Asia courses have already been established and filled recently. The Barbara Stoller Miller chair in Indian Studies, held by Vidya Dehejia, a leading art historian of India and former acting director at the Smithsonian’s museum of Asian art (Freer & Sackler Galleries); the William B. Ransford Professor of Sanskrit and South Asian Studies chair held by renowned Sanskrit scholar Sheldon Pollock; and the Jagdish Bhattacharyya professorship in Indian Political Economy, held by Arvind Panagariya, an expert in trade and globalization.

Dehejia, who was at Columbia before, was enticed back recently to direct the Southern Asia Institute (SAI), which serves as the coordinating body for the study of South Asia in the University as a whole. The institute promotes collaborative research on South Asia among school departments and programs and throughout the University. A National Resource Center, it also serves as a resource on South Asian studies to educational institutions and to practitioners, including K-12 teachers.

Dehejia says she has high ambitions for the institute and its mission. “I want to put the ‘S’ in MEALAC—making it the department of Middle East and South Asian Language and Culture. And, indeed, this is already beginning to happen with the recent appointment of Sanskrit scholar Sheldon Pollock.”

... Columbia now has the strongest South Asia program in the U.S., on the quality of its faculty, the innovative nature of its curricular and research programs, and the qualities/impact/placement of its graduates....

--Independent reviewer of SAI's 2005 application

Besides new hires, Dehejia hopes to introduce new languages. Under her direction, SAI has a new award from the Mellon Foundation to further its commitment to “reach the least-taught languages, such as Telugu,” she says.

Dirks is very positive about SAI’s development. “The strength of the institute is to bring together faculty and others who wouldn’t necessarily meet up in the past,” he remarks. “There’s no other institutional place we’d get together.”

Vidya Dehejia, assistant professor of Professional Practice at the Graduate School of Journalism, has no formal affiliation with SAI, for instance, yet reports that students who are interested in international affairs participate frequently in the institute’s brown-bag lunches and lectures.

Sreenivasan is actually teaching a course this semester, which he describes as “the religious front, the Earth Institute is now working with the Indian Institute of Foreign Trade to help develop manufacturing export therapies the business school has partnered with Indian schools to develop case studies on Indian businesses and partnerships. And its Chazen Institute leads yearly study tours to introduce M.B.A. students to major industry leaders in Bangalore, India’s Silicon Valley. In the fields of medicine and environmental sciences, the Mailman School’s infectious disease laboratory has joined forces with leading Indian scientists to develop state-of-the-art methods for the diagnosis of infectious diseases, while the Medical School is collaborating on the ground with Indian physicians to help them develop better emergency medical care in rural areas. Meanwhile, Columbia’s Center for Environmental Research and Conservation (CERC), working in collaboration with the India Institute of Science, has conducted the first genetic study of free-ranging Asian elephant populations.

On the cultural front, Pollock is leading an ambitious project to preserve and explain India’s rich past, while Dehejia and several of her graduate students are attempting to solve the riddle of a mysterious rock outcrop in Southern India. (See article below.)

Next month, at least seven key South Asia faculty will be in India for a variety of separate reasons: family ties, holiday celebrations and research expeditions. Their numbers include not only Pollock and Dehejia but also Dirks and his wife, Janaki Balakre, a Columbia historian who has just published a book about India’s classical music tradition, as well as engineering professor Upmanu Lall. Lall is now involved in the Earth Institute’s Millennium Villages project, working on water and sanitation. Several from this group plan to take advantage of the opportunities their travels present by participating in a series of panel discussions in Mumbai and Delhi, updating some of the more than 800 alumni living in India on Columbia’s India-related activities. When these academic ambassadors do their job, the buzz about Columbia’s newly revitalized South Asia program will soon be spreading all over the Subcontinent.

To learn more about SAI go to www.columbia.edu/cu/芝麻/or/SAI/