

New Web site offers information for natives of India

By CAROL MARSHALL
STAFF WRITER
cmarshall@home.com.net

Although he's lived in the United States for 16 years, Anand Kumar remembers well what it was like when he left India and settled in his new, strange home in the Midwest. He needed a place to live, a car and places to shop and eat — and he needed to find them fast.

Those needs sparked Kumar's Michigan Indian Web site, www.miindia.com, launched two years ago.

"The area was growing quite fast and there was a need among people from India who were getting off the plane and already had good jobs, but did not know how to find a place to live, how to get a car, where to buy Indian clothes and food," Kumar said.

Kumar, who already had a busy schedule as AAA of Michigan finance director, began working on the site in his spare time with business partner, Senthil Kumaran. The site opened in 1999, and it's been growing ever since.

"We now have five people working on it regularly," Kumar said. "Our primary objective is to develop miindia as a Web portal for Michigan Indians."

Comprehensive source

Kumar said most Indian groups and associations are based on their members' region of origin, but until miindia, there was no one source that brought all the groups together.

Today, the site includes information on issues every newcomer to the United States needs to know, including how to dress, where to shop, how to get a driver's license and Social Security card, and information about immigration.

The site also gets personal,

and includes a message board, filled with messages from people seeking baby sitters, roommates, used cars, and information about issues and events.

"There's a certain comfort level when people visit our Web site," Kumar said. "They like they're visiting a room full of people who have been through exactly the same things at one point or another. We have all been through those things."

Kumar said the site was first intended to help Indian immigrants adjust to relocation and fit into American culture, as well as preserve their own identity.

"We are very concerned with

'People understand so much more about other cultures and other people than they used to, and that has a lot to do with the Internet.'

Anand Kumar
—Web site developer

fitting in. We want to be a part of our communities," Kumar said. "But at the same time, our culture is several thousand years old and we want to hold onto that while we go about our jobs and everyday lives."

The site began to evolve from there, said Kumar.

"My friends and neighbors were curious about me and my culture — especially Indian food — so I try to include information for them to learn about us," Kumar said. He added he hopes to develop more information about Indian culture specifically for non-Indians.

Site for everyone

"This site is definitely not intended to be only for Indians," Kumar said. "This is great for people who work with, or live with, or are friends with Indians, who want to know more about us. Our intent is help everyone understand about each other."

Kumar explained said just this week, he came across a message on the message boards from a young man whose former room mate is Indian, and is getting married. The writer asked for suggestions about what to buy him for a traditional wedding gift.

The site also tries to help its visitors in their careers.

Much of the material on miindia is technology-intensive, explained Kumar, because so many immigrants come from India to take technology jobs. Recognizing that, he includes as much useful information and tutorials as possible for them.

Kumar said he has no intention of expanding the site outside Michigan, and he estimates about 80 percent of the site's visitors are from Michigan.

"If you're going to do something like this, and do it well, you have to live there," he said of his intent to keep the site Michigan-specific.

He is, however, cultivating relationships with other Web site developers in order to link up with other India-themed sites throughout the country.

"My friends would be very helpful to people who are relocating or traveling from state-to-state," Kumar said.

The site is currently supported by more than 30 advertisers, but Kumar said he is convinced that number will grow quickly.

The area about 40,000 Asian Indians living in Michigan, and more than 80 percent of them

have computers," he said. "Business, especially large businesses, are recognizing that ethnic marketing is the way to go to reach these people."

Further, he said, Indian consumers are a very attractive audience because so many have well-paying tech jobs.

Kumar said he's very pleased with the site's growth, and looks forward to watching it grow in the future.

"The changes I've seen during the last 16 years are phenomenal," he said. "People understand so much more about other cultures and other people than they used to, and that has a lot to do with the Internet."



STAFF PHOTO BY PAUL HUNTERMAN

MIINDIA.COM: Anand Kumar describes the offering of his Web site, www.miindia.com, designed for Michiganders of Indian descent.

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