

The Seattle Times

Friday, October 16, 2009 - Page updated at 03:46 AM

Permission to reprint or copy this article or photo, other than personal use, must be obtained from The Seattle Times. Call 206-464-3113 or e-mail resale@seattletimes.com with your request.

Gandhi's statue a rare gift in recognition of Bellevue-India ties

By Katherine Long
Seattle Times Eastside reporter

This weekend, the region will be given a gift that is often requested but rarely granted: a life-size bronze statue of Mahatma Gandhi, the Indian political and spiritual leader, from the government of India.

It's a recognition of a steadily growing link between India and Washington — and specifically, a link to the Eastside, where many Indians have made their homes after moving here for jobs in the software industry, and where the Indian consulate would like to open a fifth U.S. office.

For Indians, the bronze statue of Gandhi — striding forward, with a staff in his right hand — is a powerful symbol of India's quest for liberty and freedom by peaceful means, as well as a tangible sign of the community's embrace of its new home in Washington.

The statue will be dedicated Saturday on the south lawn of the Bellevue Public Library in a daylong festival and reception attended by Ambassador Meera Shankar, the Indian ambassador to the U.S., as well as Indian consulate members and Congressman Jim McDermott. The library lawn was a natural choice for the statue because it is already home to a growing collection of outdoor artwork.

"The Indian government is very cognizant of the diaspora here, and this is to honor that," said Anjali Sachdev, the director of the National Federation of Indian-American Associations, the largest U.S.-based Indian-American umbrella organization.

Sachdev, who lives in Maple Valley, was the driving force behind the Gandhi statue. Last year, when the federation held its biennial conference in Seattle, Sachdev suggested to Ambassador Ronen Sen (now retired) that Bellevue would be a good location for a statue of the slain Indian leader. In May, while she was in Delhi, she followed up with the request to the Indian Council for Cultural Relations.

The council receives requests for Gandhi statues from all over the world, so it was a "great surprise" when the request was quickly granted, she said. Less than a year after she first proposed the idea, the statue by



STEVE RINGMAN / THE SEATTLE TIMES

A 1,000-pound sculpture of Gandhi waits "patiently" as workers get a forklift positioned to install it at the Bellevue Public Library.

Dedication of Gandhi statue

The statue of Mahatma Gandhi will be dedicated Saturday in a daylong festival and celebration at the Bellevue Library, 1111 110th Ave. N.E.

11 a.m.-1:30 p.m.: Interactive programs about the life and beliefs of Gandhi

2-3:30 p.m.: Ambassador Meera Shankar and other guests will speak and dedicate the statue.

3:30-5 p.m.: Refreshments are served.

Parking: Parking at the library is limited. A free shuttle, provided by the Federation of Indian-American Associations, will be available 10 a.m.-5 p.m. from Hidden Valley Park, 1905 112th Avenue N.E., Bellevue.

Bellevue and India

Indian population: Bellevue's Indian-born population grew from 600 to an estimated 6,000 residents — many of them high-tech workers — between 2000 and 2008. About 15 percent of the Indian population in Washington state lives in Bellevue.

Indian businesses: Ten Indian businesses have located their U.S. headquarters on the Eastside in the past decade.

Indian trade: Among U.S. states, Washington was the top trading partner with India in 2008.

Source: U.S. Census data, Bellevue Office of Economic Development

renowned Indian artist Anil R. Sutar was on its way.

The statue "evokes a feeling of peace and spirituality, which I hope will resonate with all the community," said Sachdev, who got a sneak peak at the bronze work when it arrived from India. "It's a beautiful gift."

There are a few other statues of Gandhi in the U.S., including one at the federally owned Martin Luther King, Jr., National Historic Site in Atlanta, said Subash Razdan, the chairman of the Gandhi Foundation USA in Atlanta. But this may be the only Gandhi statue gifted by the government of India and placed on land owned by a local government. (The library property is owned by the King County Library System.) It took about seven years for the Atlanta statue to be approved, in part because Gandhi was a foreign national and the park is a federal park.

"The government of India does not give out a statue to an area unless the area has a critical mass and respect for the statue," Razdan said. "This is a sign of respect for the growth of the area, and the potential for ties to the area." Razdan is flying here from Atlanta to be at the dedication.

"It is a recognition that our city has become much more visible nationally, and even internationally," said Bellevue Mayor Grant Degginger.

More than 6,000 people of Indian descent, or 15 percent of Washington's Asian Indian population, make their homes in Bellevue, which has the largest foreign-born population of the state's 10 largest cities. Bellevue's Indian population grew by 1,000 percent between 2000 and 2008, said Tom Boydell, economic-development manager for the city.

The city has spent more than a year nurturing regional trade relations with India, Boydell said. And from both a cultural and economic standpoint, he said, it's been a hit.

Ten Indian firms have located their U.S.-based operations on the Eastside in the past decade. Bellevue has co-sponsored the International South Asian Film Festival and is exploring the possibility of a South Asian film night. The city has talked about holding a South Asian fashion show, and thinking about where it might be able to build fields for the sport of cricket — the fastest-growing sport in the U.S., Boydell says. And, of course, there is the Gandhi statue.

Earlier this year, the Indian government requested to the U.S. State Department that its next consulate office be located in Bellevue. Boydell doesn't know when that decision might be reached. "We're just waiting and hoping," he said. There are Indian consulate offices in San Francisco, Houston, Chicago and New York, along with the embassy in Washington, D.C. The San Francisco office currently serves Washington state.

Boydell said the city decided last year to foster a closer relationship with India and vie to be the headquarters of the Washington consulate. He said expansion of trade with India is attractive because the flow of trade between the two nations is equal; the U.S. exports as much as it imports. Among the U.S. states, Washington was India's largest trading partner in 2008.

In Atlanta, the Gandhi statue is more than just a stirring piece of art; it's served as a rallying point for the community in times of strife, Razdan said, and the monument could gain that type of significance for the Puget Sound region, as well. "In Atlanta, we do night vigils for peace and civil rights at the Gandhi statue," he said.

Sachdev hopes people from across the region, no matter what their cultural heritage is, will come to the celebration Saturday. "Mahatma Gandhi belongs to the world," she said.

Katherine Long: 206-464-2219 or klong@seattletimes.com

Copyright © The Seattle Times Company