Background: How the idea of the SAIM project was born
Submitted by: Dr. Barin Desai, July 10, 2007

A disappointingly low turn out at an event in 2004 marking the 100th birthday of a major freedom fighter in the South Asian Independence Movement (SAIM) proved to be the catalyst for creating the SAIM project launched at Yale in 2007. How could the same people who spend so lavishly and participate in throngs for the annual August 15 Indian independence parades and parties not expend similar energy to commemorate the actual people, the heroes of the movement that made independence possible across the sub-continent? Dr. Barin Desai asked the question and he committed himself to provide a proper response. In his search for a response, he began brainstorming with Dr. Pravin Bhatt, a research scholar at Yale University to seek ways to preserve the history of these times and people. As his tale below reveals, the rest is history, i.e., history of the independence struggle of Colonial India to be preserved at Yale.

Dr. Barin Desai had helped to organize the event in October 2004 to mark the of accomplishments and great personal sacrifices of Mr. U.N. Dhebar at the time of the centenary of his birth. He had been a major freedom fighter in the struggle for independence in Colonial India and also served as a past President of All India Congress (1955-1959). The attendance was exceedingly low. Dr. Desai was particularly upset because he had known Mr. Dhebar personally and knew of his great personal sacrifices in the cause of Indian Independence.

The paradox was inescapable to Dr. Desai. Indian Americans are known to spend very lavishly to celebrate Indian Independence Day on August 15 with parades, floats, banquets and such other celebrations. He was struck by the irony that Indian Americans are willing to spend so lavishly on parades etc and yet they shy away from honoring the people who made August 15 possible.

Dr. Desai started thinking of the ways to sensitize Indian Americans to the history of Indian freedom struggle and the great sacrifices made by our people under the inspired leadership of Mahatma Gandhi. He considered a project for a museum of Indian freedom struggle. A friend informed him that Rutgers University would be very much interested in such a project and that it would be an ideal location for the tri-state residents. However, Dr. Desai had a personal connection with a colleague at Yale University and he hoped that he might find a more prestigious home for such a distinguished project. He knew Dr. Pravin Bhatt, a long-serving research scholar at Yale University. Dr. Bhatt shared Dr. Desai’s sense of the importance of the history of the independence struggles. Indeed, Dr. Bhatt provided an example of how to preserve the record of the time. He had arranged the donation to the Yale library of about 50 handwritten letters of Mahatma Gandhi to Mrs Vijayaben Pancholi and Shri Nanabhai Bhatt, Pravin’s father. Rather than a private museum, they agreed that a library-based project would be appropriate.
Dr. Desai discussed the project with Dr. Bhatt who agreed to explore possible collaboration with Yale. Yale had relatively recently created a South Asian Studies Council (SASC), Chaired by Prof. T.N. Srinivasan and Dr. Bhatt served as Secretary to the Council. The Council organized a luncheon meeting with Dr. Desai and other concerned friends to discuss possible ways forward. As Prof. Srinivasan’s term was ending, the luncheon meeting was hosted by the incoming chair Prof. Thomas Hansen and Dr. Bhatt, with support from Nancy Ruther, Associate Director of the Yale Center for International and Area Studies which houses all the world area Councils of Yale. The librarian associated with the SASC, Mr. Richard Richie, also supported the Council’s initiative for such a historical preservation project based at the Yale Library. At that first luncheon meeting, the SASC and the Library agreed to host such a project within a set of general guidelines including:

- The Project will cover all of Colonial India during the British rule and not just the present day India.
- Yale will provide the space for this project in its library and in the SASC website as an organizing point.
- Funds will be collected from all the well wishers for purchase books and other memorabilia’s from the countries of south Asia and to support the set-up of the website and collection procedures. Dr. Desai provided the first gift to help set up the project.
- SASC will set up a faculty plus library committee for the academic oversight of the project.

After that initial luncheon, the SASC began working with the library to organize the actual mechanisms for collecting material and the criteria for what items to seek. There was great excitement that this could provide a large, oral history project but the idea proved too large for the limited scholarly resources at Yale. With the leadership of the SASC Chair, Prof. Phyllis Granoff and the steadying hand of Prof. Mridu Rai, the SAIM faculty director, we settled on the current simple yet powerful design in agreement with Dr. Bhatt and Dr. Desai. From there, the implementation moved quickly and the SAIM project was launched in July 2007.

With the official launch of the SAIM website, the community has the opportunity to share their stories and memorabilia of these important times. While the SAIM site is ready and Yale will manage it, the full aspirations of Dr. Desai and his collaborators at Yale will only be fulfilled through the contributions of many, many people. Dr. Desai, as well as Dr. Bhatt, are quite happy to talk to people about how they can participate and help realize the vision and keep the story of the independence struggle alive.