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FULL CIRCLE: University of Southern California Dean of Religious Life Varun Soni and His Holiness the Dalai Lama, with whom he has 'fortuitously' crossed paths more than once
Picture: SUPPLIED

Soni on being entrepreneur, academic, attorney, writer

SIPHILISELWE MAKHANYA

FOUR years after taking the helm as the first Hindu person to become dean of religious life at a US university, academic, lawyer, writer and businessman Varun Soni was recently nominated as one of Los Angeles' most fascinating people by LA Weekly newspaper.

Soni, the husband of Durban-born physician Shakti Naidoo, completed his PhD in religious studies at the University of Cape Town.

The Indian-born but Southern California-raised Soni calls himself the "black sheep" in a family of 11 physicians.

Four years ago, he joined the University of Southern California as dean.

Besides his academic work, Soni runs a small firm providing support services to immigration law firms. He has also published a

His unique perspective on work has opened doors

graphic novel that features an Indian-American protagonist, *Tina's Mouth: An Existential Comic Diary* by writer Keshni Kashyap.

"Confucius said if you love your job, you will never work a day in your life. In order to truly love your job, you really have to enjoy the work itself and be invested in something greater than status and salary. You have to find joy in the process of work, in the 'doing' and not the 'being' and in the journey as opposed to the destination.

"In my case, I never thought to myself that I wanted to be a professor, attorney, entrepreneur or writer, but rather I aspired to teach classes, practise law, start businesses and write books. This perspective enabled me to approach my career in a creative and multidisciplinary way."



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He explains his inspiration to study religion: "My great-grandmother was a close friend of Kasturba Gandhi, Mahatma Gandhi's wife, and my grandfather grew up around the leaders of the Indian freedom movement. When I was a child, my grandfather would regale me with stories about Mahatma Gandhi while challenging me to think deeply about the ultimate questions of meaning and purpose in my life.

So, at a young age, I was fascinated with spirituality and social justice, and that early interest shaped my personal and professional life."

Being Hindu has enriched his approach to his work as dean, as the "pluralistic and encompassing religion views all religious traditions as vital and valid" which helps him to "support all religions on campus equally, while also promoting religious literacy and interfaith engagement."

Soni said he found it moving that students from India and Pakistan had come together in an interfaith memorial service and candlelight vigil after the 2008 Mumbai terrorist attacks.

He was proudest about meeting the Tibetan spiritual leader the Dalai Lama when his university hosted him for two events on secular ethics and university

responsibility. He describes the experience of introducing the Dalai Lama to students as one that "brought me full-circle back to my own university experience of meeting him for the first time".

He said he had met the Dalai Lama in "one of the most transformative experiences of my life, when I was in Bodh Gaya, India", where he lived as a Buddhist monk for a semester as part of his Buddhist studies programme.

He relates their meeting. "One morning, I unexpectedly met His Holiness at the Mahabodhi Stupa, where a bodhi tree shades the sacred site where Buddha reached enlightenment.

"Meeting the Dalai Lama and meditating with him at the centre of the Buddhist world inspired me to bring together the spiritual and the scholarly in my life, and that fortuitous encounter ultimately changed the trajectory of my life."