Coming Abroad to Find Home

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I can only speak autobiographically because I have no training as a sociologist. I shall, however, address my experience as an immigrant and activist in Canada in a way that I hope will throw some light on issues of concern regarding the South Asian diaspora. However unreflectively I may have lived, this conference makes me see my own trajectory from some distance, placing it within the specificity of the class, culture, and place of my origin and the professional enclave of my settlement here. These are the basic categories within which my idiosyncratic biological and psychological particularity has found its expression. Perhaps these reflections would fall into a genre called *"apologia pro vita sua."*

I came to this country on a wave of privilege of which I was only vaguely aware, feeling it largely as a debt I owed to my homeland, which had given me so much. This oriented me to think of my stay in North America, first as a graduate student in the US and then as a professional in Canada, as a period of training, on the completion of which I would return to India. I had come on a leave of absence from my college in Delhi and fully expected to go back. I remember a conversation in a bar in Chicago during a convention I attended as a student, wherein a man asked me what I planned to do; on my saying that I would go back to my country, he expressed irritated surprise. His skepticism regarding the notion of "my country," a concept that I had never questioned, opened up important questions for me: was he annoyed that I wasn't sufficiently awed by the US? Or was he genuinely skeptical about the notion of belonging to a country? Was this a philosophical question about the notion of belonging, patriotism, and cosmopolitanism? These questions about homeland, patriotism, belonging, and cosmopolitanism stayed with me.

Some friends who had been here for a while told me that those who went back immediately after the completion of their degree made it, but those who stayed longer to work couldn't return. I found this intriguing but thought myself resistant to the lure. I accepted a job in Canada, turning down one in the US because the opportunity to get away was attractive. I had been at Kent State University when students protesting Nixon's bombing of Cambodia were shot

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down by the National Guard, and had participated in anti-war demonstrations. I came to the US as a product of elite education in India without ever having questioned my status or the state of affairs in the world. Political matters, whether Indian or international, had seemed remote to me. My middle-class privilege insulated me, keeping me securely within the cocoon of my class; I accepted things as they existed as normal, as they always had been and had to be. Coming to the US made holes in the cocoon, letting in questions, and witnessing the students in protest against their nation's policies and the passion of the anti-war movement enabled me to step out of my blinkered world. I recognized that I respected these people who were protesting, that they saw things that I had been blind to. I wished to be like them.

I came to Simon Fraser University in 1970, and learned that the university had been through turmoil related to student agitation, that some professors had been suspended for standing with the students, and that the university was under a boycott from the Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT). There were frequent rallies in the mall and numerous meetings. Leftist literature was being sold and distributed. I was invited to join a study group and learned to stand on the street to distribute papers. An Indian colleague invited me to join him in going to the Indian Consulate to submit an international petition he had organized for the release of political prisoners in India; I joined him for the first of my many visits to the site for various protests, and learned in the process the horrifying extent of the problem of political prisoners, about which most Indians are kept in the dark. Some colleagues from Sociology and Anthropology approached me regarding the need to raise awareness about the genocidal war being waged by Pakistan against Bengalis in East Pakistan with the support of the United States, and we agreed to organize a meeting on campus on the issue. Again, the need for action based on what I only slightly understood at the time led to an educational process motivated by the search for deeper understanding. Within a very short time, I learned to connect the US war in Vietnam with the Government of India's many wars at home, as well as Pakistan's war on its own people. As an Indian, I found it necessary not to remain silent regarding the injustice and violence of the state in India while protesting the policies of the US government. I found myself developing a double awareness, feeling that I had a responsibility to remove my previous blinkers regarding my homeland as I challenged the injustices that I saw so clearly here and in other places.

Coming to the US as a student had removed me from the security of my class privilege, made it possible for me to think critically about class society, and brought home the imperative of social justice. Seeing people like me doing every kind of work, and men doing some things only women did in Indian homes, challenged my notions of hierarchy and patriarchy, though patriarchal notions would take much longer to emerge into critical consciousness, being more deeply embedded and prevalent here as well as there. Race, too, is something I learned about only by leaving India, though of course I knew about it from my reading of English and American literature. Yet it had been something historically and spatially distant, not something in which I was personally involved. My first experience of racism was on the way to the US, when my flight had taken me to London. On my first walk in the streets of London, a group of young people had shouted, "Go home, you bloody wog"; I was completely in the dark as to the meaning of this term until an Indian friend who had come down from Oxford enlightened me. Nor did I know what was meant when, on entering a pub, we were directed upstairs, where we would find a quieter space. These intimations would make sense only later when I saw the racism directed at black people and learned about the racism faced by Indians and other people of color in Britain. On my first exposure to racism, I had shrugged off any personal offense, thinking that it was no different from the untouchability and purification rituals that I had seen commonly practiced in my own Brahmin family, which I had been socialized to see as normal. But coming face to face with the equation of what was palpably unacceptable and what had been my sense of the normal determined my opposition to the inequities of my homeland. My flight out of India had brought me to the frontier of critical consciousness.

The leftist study group I had joined introduced me to Marxist literature, which enabled me to understand the world in a critical light. If coming to a totally different culture within which I remained a stranger had filled me with a sense of dislocation, this Marxist literature gave me a sense of belonging in the world, as a part of the global community in struggle against an unjust order. But I was not at home in Canada, and decided to return to India on a leave of absence from my tenured position. My hope was to connect with like-minded people in India, but this hope was rudely frustrated by Indira Gandhi's declaration of emergency in June 1975, shortly after my arrival. The emergency led to mass incarceration of people critical of the government, and an atmosphere of suspicion that silenced all who were outside prison. Any attempt at a political conversation was seen as a sign of being a provocateur. A comment I heard in a crowded bus in Calcutta,

which had always been the hotbed of leftist politics, summed up the situation, when a man hanging by the straps, as if in a scene from a street theater, announced, "We are already dead. What you see is only the husk." This was the verbal equivalent of the newspapers with blank front pages protesting censorship that I had seen in book stalls and along footpaths. Finding myself wholly unequipped to function in the repressive reality of India, I decided to come back to Canada. Yet I returned with a profound sense of failure, and a gloom that lifted only when I discovered that shortly before Indira Gandhi's declaration of emergency, Indians teaching and studying in several US and Canadian universities had met in Montreal to found the Indian People's Association in North America (IPANA), which had taken up opposition to Indira Gandhi's dictatorship as its immediate task. I promptly joined this organization and immersed myself in its work.

IPANA had chapters in Vancouver, Montreal, Toronto, New York, and Boston, and was connected with people mainly in universities in several other cities of Canada and the US. We produced a quarterly journal from Montreal (the *New India Bulletin*), a monthly from New York (*India Now*), and a monthly Punjabi paper from Vancouver (*Wangar*), all of which we distributed in the streets. Our group in Vancouver included university teachers and students as well as workers from various sectors, including sawmill workers, truck drivers, factory workers, and janitors. This was the first time in my life that I had come into intimate contact with Indians outside the middle class, and this in itself was a profoundly educational experience. It also brought me into contact with the large Punjabi community that constituted the main body of immigrants from India. This enabled me to enter a cultural world that was new to me though I had lived in Delhi for many years and was married to a Punjabi woman. My world in India had been either Bengali or an elite space where regional cultures were submerged in an English-based national amalgam. Through IPANA, I developed a wider and deeper knowledge of India than I had before, and had the privilege of entering another Indian community than the one I was born in.

There were several Bengalis in IPANA and a few in the Vancouver chapter, mainly Indians but also a Bangladeshi. A woman who was musical formed us into a singing group and trained us to sing the Internationale in Bengali as well as some songs from the Tebhaga movement. We would sing these songs at our public meetings. We also sang them in solidarity with similar groups from other countries at their meetings, possibly the only time Bengali songs were sung at political meetings in Vancouver. However there were very few Bengali families

in Vancouver in the 1970s, and no organization that would enable us to maintain contact with our culture. This need led us to communicate with other Bengali families regarding the formation of a society, and resulted in the creation of the Lower Mainland Bengali Cultural Society (LMBCS), which included West Bengalis and Bangladeshis.

IPANA linked up in solidarity with organizations concerned with similar issues in other countries and formed an organization called the "Third World People's Coalition," comprising First Nations people, Indians, Palestinians, Chileans, South Africans, Ethiopians, and Eritreans. We held meetings, marches, and demonstrations to bring our concerns to the notice of the public. Our most memorable demonstration was in solidarity with Palestinians following the 1982 Israeli-sponsored massacre of Palestinians by the Phalangists in the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps in Lebanon. Many of the issues we took up remain pertinent today.

Following the defeat of Indira Gandhi in the elections of 1977, it became clear to us that our work could not remain focused on India and had to take up the concerns of our community in Canada. This led us in two directions. One was the concern that a large number of people in our community were engaged in farm work in atrocious conditions, and the other that we as a community of visible minorities faced both systemic and overt racism that was becoming increasingly violent. We had started our opposition to racism by holding a demonstration and calling for a boycott against the New Westminster newspaper the *Daily Columbian,* in which journalist Doug Collins had been publishing racist attacks against Indo-Canadians. In 1978, we formed a coalition, the "Committee against Bill C-24," joining with similar groups in Montreal and Toronto to oppose the proposed immigration rules that we saw as enshrining racist discrimination against immigrants of color. We also joined with other groups in holding a protest march in Vancouver against the visit by David Duke, the Grand Wizard of the KKK, in 1980.

These activities culminated in the formation of the BC Organization to Fight Racism (BCOFR) in 1980 to meet the challenge of increased racist activity and violence, such as the open marches by hooded Klansmen through Robson Street, the distribution of racist leaflets in schools, the painting of swastikas on temple walls and homes, the burning of crosses on people's lawns, shootings and fire-bombings, and racism in the media including print, radio, and television. The BCOFR brought together many communities, including First Nations and Chinese, and had the support of churches and unions. The Bengali community of

Vancouver also took part in BCOFR demonstrations and marches. However, some Bengalis expressed the fear that opposition to racism would provoke racists, and the LMBCS withdrew from the struggle. This distanced me from the Bengali community, but the work against racism brought me into contact with a much larger section of the Vancouver community than before. As we know, this collective struggle has led to considerable progress, though a great deal remains to be done.

IPANA took the lead in forming a farmworkers' organizing committee to investigate the conditions of farm work and to organize the workers, but stayed in the background while providing all possible help because this struggle had to be led by working people. We helped to create a support group for farmworkers at Simon Fraser University, and participated in all the struggles of the farmworkers both before and after the formation of the Canadian Farmworkers' Union in 1980.

The work of the BCOFR – which involved day-to-day attention to incidents of racist violence and various forms of discrimination; public meetings in Vancouver, the Fraser Valley and the interior; publications and media interviews; and public presentations and demonstrations – kept us extremely busy for several years. At the same time, the work of the Canadian Farmworkers' Union, support for which required joining demonstrations in several towns and cities in BC including Vancouver and Victoria to demand government action, writing, attending pickets, visiting farms in solidarity with the workers, and attending court to express support for their suits for the payment of back wages from farm labor contractors, made heavy demands on our energy.

The events of 1984 in India returned our attention to what was happening in that country. Operation Blue Star – the attack on the Golden Temple in Amritsar that killed hundreds, damaged the temple sacred to Sikhs everywhere, and deeply offended Sikhs across the world –engaged us in condemnation of the Government of India, though the Indian community at this time was deeply divided over the rise of the separatist Khalistan movement, which had strong support in Toronto and Vancouver. This movement was vehemently anti-leftist, generated opposition from the left, and interfered with anti-racist work. Our effort to unite people against racism had come up against the wall of sub-nationalism in India. Yet the attack on the Golden Temple and the state-supported massacre of at least two thousand Sikhs in Delhi and many more elsewhere in India following the assassination of Indira Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguards not only made it imperative for us to stand with the Sikhs but also led

us to understand that henceforth the issue of minority rights in India would become salient. However, IPANA as a North American organization fell apart over differences of understanding and the absence of any specific goal in India to hold people in the diaspora together. The deaths of 329 people in the Khalistani bombing of an Air India plane in 1985 only made the division within the Indian community deeper and the possibility of organizing even more challenging than it already was.

No diasporic community is homogenous, and the Indian community is possibly more fractured than most, but the Khalistan movement deepened these fractures and consolidated identity ghettoes. At the same time, the community began to realize its potential as a vote bank in electoral politics and began to assert itself at the provincial and federal level. IPANA, which had been concerned with uniting people for support of democratic and human rights in India, and against racism and for the rights of oppressed Indian farmworkers here, lost its purpose and lapsed into inactivity. Its last achievement was the struggle to bring about recognition of the injustice done to the community over the incident of Komagata Maru in 1914. This struggle brought various sections of the divided community together, and resulted in a plaque commemorating the 75th anniversary of the incident being placed in Portal Park in downtown Vancouver in 1989.

The attack by Hindu nationalists on the 17th century Babri Masjid in Ayodhya on December 6, 1992 struck many of us who had been involved in IPANA across North America as a call to unite on an even larger front than before to meet the challenge of majoritarian attacks on minorities in India. What had started as a result of Indira Gandhi's political opportunism had now come to fruition on another level in a systematic politics of communalism that would change the social and political life of India. The rise of Hinduva or Hindu nationalism would have to become the focus of our work, and an organization called Non-Resident Indians for Secularism and Democracy (NRISAD) was created for this purpose. NRISAD brought together diverse sections of the South Asian community, including Indians of different faiths, Dalits, Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, Nepalis, Sri Lankans, Ismailis from East Africa, and Hindus from Fiji.

Some were devout practitioners of their faiths and some were atheists, but all were interested in the cause of pluralism and religious tolerance. NRISAD was also allied to an American group called the Coalition Against Genocide, which carried on work in the US lobbying the government, spreading information about conditions regarding religious tolerance in India, keeping tabs on the

activities of Hindu nationalists, and monitoring text books to screen Hindu nationalist interventions. NRISAD did some extremely successful work, bringing to Vancouver progressive film and theatre personalities from India to promote the cause of secularism, screening good films, and organizing community fairs. Though it, too, petered out as a national and North American organization, the Vancouver chapter continued with its work and changed its name in 1999 to the South Asian Network for Secularism and Democracy (SANSAD) to accurately reflect its composition and field of concern.

SANSAD's first major activities were in conjunction with anti-war activities following the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York on Sept 11, 2001 and the impending war in Afghanistan. We joined the anti-war movement in Vancouver and tried, without success, to persuade members of the local Afghan community to oppose the US-led invasion of Afghanistan. Unfortunately, we found the leaders of the Afghan diaspora in Vancouver to be entirely supportive of Western military intervention in their homeland, and our argument that foreign bombs and guns did not bring about peace and democracy fell on deaf ears. We all know the fallout from that.

The end of February 2002 brought us face to face with genocide when, following the burning to death in a carriage of the Sabarmati Express near Godhra railway station 59 Hindutva activists ("kar sevaks") who were returning from their trip to Ayodhya to build a Ram temple in the place of the Babri Masjid, state-supported mass violence was unleashed against the Muslim population of Gujarat. SANSAD organized a series of public meetings with invited speakers from India, including victims, journalists, and activists to publicize the atrocities in Gujarat and build support for the quest for justice. SANSAD also screened documentaries and sponsored the launching of a book by an Indian journalist who covered the events in Gujarat. These activities continued for several years as the victimization of the Muslims continued, justice was denied, those pursuing justice were persecuted, and Narendra Modi, who as Chief Minister had presided over this genocide, remained unscathed and was reelected in Gujarat. At the same time, just as the Khalistan movement had split the Punjabi/Sikh community, the rise of Hindu nationalism and the genocide in Gujarat split the Hindu community, one section of which was deeply involved in the promotion of the Hindu nationalist ideology and generating political and financial support for it while another remained secular, though largely passive. The Bengali community shared this profile. Needless to say, I remained very much in the margin of the Bengali

community as my identity as a Bengali became far less important than my identity as a South Asian professional engaged in human rights and social justice activism.

The quest for justice for the atrocities against Sikhs remains an ongoing concern in the Punjabi community, and I have supported this quest through the screening of films on the issue and by organizing conferences to enable discussion on the matter. The genocide in Gujarat was an experiment in communal violence that has resulted in the current situation of daily and widespread violence against Muslims in India today. This continues to engage me through SANSAD in the work of supporting human rights activists in India and trying to develop support within the South Asian diaspora for human rights and social justice both here and in our homelands. Though my personal concern has been focused on India and Canada, the South Asian perspective of my organization has made me alert to the issues of justice and rights in Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal. We have organized regular public forums to deal with these issues with particular focus on specific countries.

Again, these concerns have been addressed not only through lectures and panel discussions but also through films, often screened in collaboration with a film society that I was instrumental in setting up, the South Asian Film Education Society (SAFES). The purpose of this society is to educate the community about South Asian cinema, cinema as such, and South Asian society as revealed through the medium of film. The society has mounted a festival of films dealing with violence against women in South Asia, screening films from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan, and another on the use of Shakespeare in Bombay cinema to cast light on Indian society. It has also organized a festival on Tagore in film to highlight the continued relevance of Tagore's art. The film society and SANSAD have also collaborated on screening films on female foeticide in India and on the discrimination and violence against Dalits. The film society has benefited greatly from the enthusiastic participation of several members of the Bengali community, from both India and Bangladesh, and has screened several Bengali films from both sides of the border.

The passing of my colleague, friend, and comrade, Dr. Hari Sharma, in 2010 was an enormous loss because it left us bereft of his great energy and organizing ability. Yet it opened a new avenue of work thanks to the donation he made of the larger part of his estate to a foundation dedicated to the advancement of the South Asian community. Through the Dr. Hari Sharma Foundation, we have been able to support scholars engaged in graduate work on South Asia or the South Asian diaspora at several Canadian universities as well as other forms of

research and publication in these areas. We have been working in a collaborative relationship with the Labor Studies Program at SFU, supporting students through bursaries and setting up a series of lectures on global labor issues. We have also supported musicians, poets, and filmmakers. While we have supported institutions engaged with South Asia, including the Indian Summer Festival, the Vancouver Art Gallery, the Vancouver International Bhangra Festival, and the Vancouver South Asian Film Festival, our most direct engagement with the community has been through the organization of public lectures and conferences.

We have offered two annual public lectures with prominent guest speakers in memory of Hari Sharma and Gursharan Singh, the great Punjabi playwright, actor, theatrical producer and educator, and human rights activist, since 2012. The first of these lectures was given by the Swedish writer and activist Jan Myrdal in 2012. Subsequent lectures have dealt with human rights in Kashmir, Adivasi struggles, the impact of neoliberal policies on India, the struggles of Dalits and poor farmers in Punjab, the legacy of Bhagat Singh, the relation of the Dalits and the left in India, and global food security. We have instituted a third annual lecture in collaboration with Chetna Association of Canada, the Institute for the Humanities at Simon Fraser University, and several departments at the University of British Columbia in memory of Dr. Ambedkar. The first of these lectures will be given in November 2017.

We have organized a series of conferences to highlight issues of importance to South Asians and our host community in order to generate conversation and produce engagement. The first of these, in 2011, was on migrant labor with a South Asian focus which brought together speakers from Nepal, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, India, and the US, as well as panelists from various sections of local work on migrant and immigrant labor. In 2014, we brought musicians from Bangladesh and India to offer a concert of Sufi music to pay homage to the Sufi legacy of South Asia in conjunction with a conference on the issue. In 2015, we organized a conference on climate change ahead of the United Nations conference in Paris in November of that year to engage the South Asian community with the ongoing struggles against climate change in Vancouver and British Columbia.

In 2016, we organized an international conference on genocide to memorialize the many genocides that are forgotten or denied, including the dispossession and cultural genocide of the First Nations, as well as the genocide of the Armenians, Palestinians, Bengalis in East Pakistan, Sikhs in Delhi, Muslims in Gujarat, and Tamils in Sri Lanka, the genocide in Rwanda, and the ongoing genocidal violence against the people of Kashmir and the Adivasis in the forest

regions of India. The goal of the conference was to overcome forgetting and denial, to create solidarity, and to alert people regarding the ever-present threats of genocide. We have just concluded a conference on the urgent need to come together against the threat of nuclear war, entitled "Gathering in the Shadows of a Nuclear Winter," which brought together scientists, scholars, and activists from India, Pakistan, Canada, and the US, including Indigenous activists.

The call to review my presence in Canada brought about by this conference on the occasion of Canada's 150th anniversary (though of course it is only the last 150 years of many thousands of years of Indigenous presence on these lands and waters) has enabled me to see that leaving my homeland has put me on a quest for home. Finding return impossible, but filled with longing in an alien land, I discovered the homeland I had left before I knew it. Coming to know it through action enabled me to find a place with others similarly engaged. It gave me a new identity. It placed me within a world. The work rooted me in Canada, making it not alien anymore but rather a space that had to be fought for, a country to make my own by changing it, making it better by accepting people like me within it. My work became the work of homemaking, making me a Canadian making Canada.