

Rungbh

A South Asian Quarterly of Culture, Comment and Criticism

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Volume 2, Number 1 & 2

The Roots Issue

From the Roots

South Asian History and the Komagata Maru

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A Conversation with Trichy Sankaran

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Rungh

Volume 2, Number 1 & 2

RUNGH is an interdisciplinary magazine committed to the exploration of traditional and contemporary South-Asian cultural production. It is a project of the Rungh Cultural Society —an incorporated, non-profit society.

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Editorial

This double issue of *Rungh—The Roots Issue*, represents our response to the growing politic of conservatism and fear which is sweeping Canada. As millions of people migrate around the globe, running from persecution and oppression, to safe havens where they hope to establish a sense of home and community, the response of 'the West' has been reactionary. There is a misplaced and predictable nostalgia for a time that was and longer is; a history as remembered by the coloniser. As the colonised, when we look back at our history, we note that former Prime Ministers and legislators conspired to keep Canada white. Various laws, such as the Continuous Journey provision which resulted in the tragedy of the Komagata Maru incident, institutionalized racism by targeting specific communities of colour.

In 1993, the notion of Canada as a humanitarian country which no longer tolerates racism is being eroded by the government of the day. Prime Minister Kim Campbell has responded to the fears of the dominant by making refugee and immigration policy a Public Security issue, as opposed to one of care and compassion. It is also an unstated fact that the forceful brunt of securing Canada's borders will be disproportionately felt by people of colour. In the Conservative agenda, Canadian culture has been recast in the mould of a new Heritage Ministry. We cannot help but wonder whose heritage will be supported and where the contemporary discourse of race and cultural production will fit in.

The challenge for cultural producers who oppose the reactionary machinations of the state is to not be lured into debates which consist of false dichotomies and predictable arguments. We have to seek and work towards a vision which is inclusive, empowering and different from those of the past. The notion of multiculturalism, where all difference is equated and homogenized, can no longer meet the needs of a country where soon over half the population will be non-white. No identity is pure in the 1990s. We are all hybrids and motivated by conflicting allegiances and memberships in communities, be they defined by race, gender, geography, class, sexual orientation—the 'isms' of the '90s. We believe that *Rungh* is playing a role in developing this new vision. We remain convinced that if the vision is to have any meaning, it must be grounded in an understanding of our various histories as told by us and not for us. It must ultimately rest upon a foundation of respect for one another's past.

Milan Kundera writes, "the struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting." By examining the roots of the South Asian community in Canada, this issue of the magazine strikes a blow in the battle of memories. It is only by remembering the pain of past injustices that contemporary South Asian artists and cultural workers can remain vigilant: vigilant against racism, and vigilant for empowerment.



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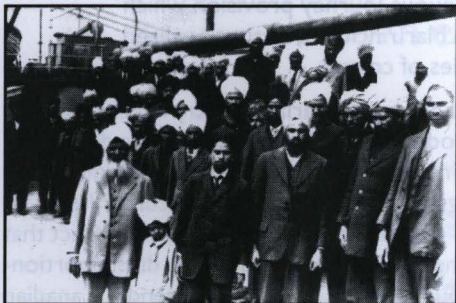
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Letters

This exchange is reprinted from *The Appropriate Voice, Newsletter For The Racial Minority Writers' Committee*, (Vol. 1, No. 2). It contributes to ongoing dialogue about cultural appropriation. (See: *Rungh*, Vol. 1 No. 4).

It includes, first, Kit Pearson's note in *Writer's Confidential* (September 1992), a section of The Writers' Union of Canada newsletter (printed with permission), in response to the motion on Cultural Appropriation at the TWUC AGM which had been brought forward by the Racial Minority Writers Committee, followed by Aruna Srivastava's reply.

As I sat through the debate about cultural misappropriation at the AGM, and as I talked to people afterwards, it became apparent to me that there were two reasons the motion was passed: as a gesture of goodwill towards the Racial Minority Writers Committee, and because the word 'appropriation' had been changed at the last moment to 'misappropriation'. Because I voted against the motion, and because a number of members have asked me why, I will now say what I wish I'd had the courage to say at the AGM.

I cannot accept The Writers' Union making any motion *at all* concerning what its members write. Some people I talked to said I was taking it too seriously, and that the motion does not put *any* sort of restriction on what we write. Certainly its wishy-washy wording makes it difficult to interpret—what does it mean? "Thou shalt not misappropriate"? "Please try not to misappropriate"? The mildest interpretation possible is "The Writers' Union affirms that misappropriation is bad," but I cannot agree even with this.

Juxtapositioning the words 'responsibility' and, especially, 'accountability' with the words 'freedom of expression', and applying these words to the definitions of 'misappropriation' in the preamble, means that we are attaching *conditions* to whether and what and how we write about cultures not our own; conditions individual writers might agree with, but which each writer will *interpret differently*.

Some people I talked to even seemed to think this motion implied all sorts of *permissions*. Thus, one non-Chinese writer told me she now feels better about using a Chinese voice in one of her novels; another writer, not native, feels free to continue a novel with a native girl as the main character; and a third who didn't attend the AGM, upon reading the preambles of the motion, sighed with relief

and said, "Oh, *that's* all right; I wouldn't do *that*."

Comments like these scare me—that these writers feel they need The Writers' Union approval for what they write. They also seem both a misunderstanding of and an insult to the hardworking and eloquent members of the Racial Minority Writers Committee. I'm sure that even if they were disappointed by how much the motion was watered down from their original one, they meant a great deal by it. Because there was a motion, however watered down and muddled it is, I will pay them the respect of taking it seriously; and if I take it seriously, I cannot accept it.

I sympathize strongly with the position of the Racial Minority Writers Committee. I would search my conscience very carefully before using material from another culture. But if I then felt that the demands of my novel required this, I would go ahead. I wouldn't call this misappropriation; *but someone from the culture might*. Who can define 'misappropriation'? Webster's says it is 'to appropriate wrongly'—who is to decide what 'wrongly' is?

At least we live in a society where people are allowed to try—publishers, reviewers, critics, and most of all, readers. But we also live in a society where, thank goodness, writers are free to appropriate, misappropriate, insult, steal, as much as they choose to; they are also, of course, free to accept the consequences.

Being against this motion puts me in an uncomfortable, lonely position. I don't enjoy being on the side of the question that to me means supporting freedom of expression, but to others might be viewed as unsympathetic, smug, and even racist. I don't enjoy being on any side at all—but now I am.

The Writers' Union should continue to do all it can to increase awareness of racial minority writers in Canada. We need to keep talking to each other about the complicated and delicate question of what is stealing from a culture and what isn't. What we don't need is an official statement about it.

I feel so strongly about this, and am so shocked at the benign view of both my fellow writers and the press about the motion, that I'm tempted to resign. I won't—if only to be able to continue to be in on the discussion. And, after all, I can simply start pretending like many others that the motion that was passed doesn't mean anything anyhow.

—Kit Pearson Vancouver, British Columbia

Dear Kit,

It doesn't surprise me that people you talked to about the motion on (mis)appropriation interpreted both its intent and scope so variably, sometimes self-servingly, condescendingly. And you are right on many points—the revised version is so diluted that it may be little more than a wave of the hand in the direction of minority writers and the work of the Racial Minority Writers' Committee. On much of what you say about responses to the motion, I can only say I am saddened, and in full agreement about the dilution of the original wording. But. There are so many buts.

It astonishes me that writers should be wary of seeing themselves both as responsible and accountable—surely the guarding of the principle of 'freedom of expression' (whatever that means, and to whom) involves recognizing the responsibility that comes with the very burden of such a principle. Surely this motion does no more than remind writers of the importance, responsibility and accountability that define 'freedom'.

It concerns me that writers should belong to one of the few professions where the concept of ethical behaviour and the (yes) often frustrating restrictions that entails is so roundly and vociferously suspected and decried.

Indeed, it strikes me that the motion in either of its wordings, is clearly not a call to censorship or regulation (by the Writers' Union or anyone else) but a statement of principle, that, yes, any responsible or ethical writer will recognize intuitively—a principle that suggests that she 'search [her] conscience very carefully before using material from another culture.' But it is clear too, in this profession as in so many other areas of our daily existence, that there are people who need reminding of such basic principles and who will indeed defend their right to harm, violate, steal behind that unassailable democratic bastion, freedom of expression, freedom of imagination.

I have argued elsewhere that those of us who work with words, who believe our realm to be those of imagination and expression, recognize that imagining can be productive, powerful, creative and healing *and* that it can be productive, powerful, creative and hurtful; oppressive, discourteous, solipsistic. Cultural appropriation, whether intentional or unintentional, smug or sympathetic, is an imaginative act, and it seems to me that should be willing to take the responsibility for and foresee the consequences of that act. Yes, we can then choose to go ahead and (mis)appropriate anyway—the motion in no way prohibits such a choice, not does it curtail what writers write and how they write it.

It occurs to me too that there are certain slippages in how we conceive of what is permissible within the freedoms we guard so zealously. We inhabit a culture of copyright, patents, ownership of ideas, private and community property—and with these we stake our claim on what is appropriate and what is not. If someone photocopies my stories without permission, I have the right to define the act as stealing, or the borrowing of my words as plagiarism, however benignly or defensively that sinister photocopier or quoter may interpret her appropriation to be. Yet we get equally defensive when others suggest to us that the whole world is not ours to imagine or borrow from *without* accountability or responsibility or a little humility.

And we expose the impoverishment of our own imaginative and expressive potential if we argue that we have no option *but* to appropriate, that words fail us otherwise. We reveal ourselves further if we argue that the inevitable misuses and mistakes that self-critique and critique from others sometimes engenders invalidate the putting into place of processes and systems and principles that remind us and our peers that responsible, ethical work—the recognition that we live among others and that our worlds and words affect others—is as much an imaginative act, an expression of a particular freedom, as the zealous and jealous reaction to what amounts to nothing more (and much more) than a request for respect from a professional union, and the individuals in it.

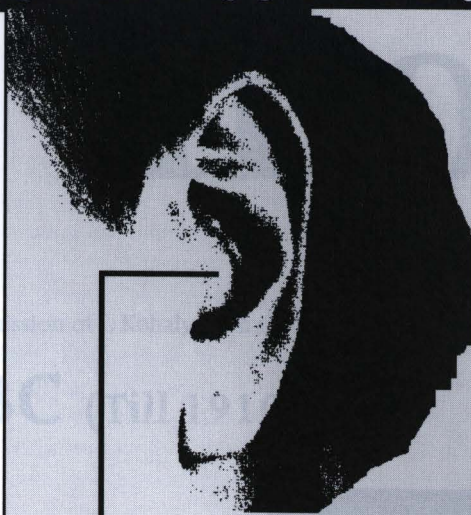
The motion as now worded and passed is indeed 'watered down and muddled' and as such is not a particularly imaginative 'gesture of goodwill'. But for those of us who tussled with each other, argued principles and freedoms and imaginations for days trying to come up with a motion-in-words that might prove acceptable to the majority of the union, perhaps the 'gesture' is a start. Look around you at your next gathering: think of how you imagine yourselves as writers, as a group of writers. Perhaps ask yourselves what story your creative and multifaceted resistance to the principle we laboured intensely over in our imaginations last May is *really* telling, and how peopled your community actually is with darker faces, accents and histories.

—Aruna Srivastava *Calgary, Alberta*



Kit Pearson's response can be obtained by writing to:

The Appropriated Voice
5812 Bavoc Road NW
Calgary, Alberta



Have you heard the news?

The reviews are in...

“With a broad mandate and a polished presentation, *Rungh*...is clearly a different creature from the usual multicultural journal.”

—Chris Dafoe, *Globe and Mail*

“This hip new addition to the magazine rack is a collaborative effort of many people across the country and began, like so many great ideas, with living room conversations...*Rungh*'s larger cultural project is a broad one which includes lesbian and gay voices, feminist insights and anti-racism.”

—Lloyd Wong, *Fuse Magazine*

“The careful thought and fine writing on issues such as representation and individuals maintaining various allegiances deserve a wider audience than the obvious niche. Recommended,”

—Bill Katz, *Library Journal*

From the



Photo Courtesy of I. Kohaly

SEATED: Bhai Bhag Singh, Prof. Teja Singh, Bibi Bishan Kaur (wife of Prof. Teja Singh) and Bhai Balwant Singh.
CHILDREN: Mukand Singh and Hari Singh—sons of Prof. Teja Singh.
STANDING: (from left) Bhai Raja Singh Banan, Bhai Arjan Singh Malak, Bhai Samagat Singh, Bhai Hari Singh (Granthi) and Bhai Kartar Singh Nawan Chand

Introduction

From the Roots recognizes the crucial role of knowing our history in defining ourselves as a community living in the West. The work of those who have gone before and those who continue to respect history as a touchstone for their creative endeavours provides a foundation for the South Asian community in the diaspora to continue to evolve. Since its inception, *Rungh* has been committed to presenting not only contemporary South Asian cultural production, but also the roots from which that production arises. In this special *Roots Issue* of the magazine, we want to provide the reader with an historical and contemporary framework within which the South Asian community on the West Coast of Canada has evolved and established itself.

The West Coast of Canada represents the ground upon which the first South Asian migrants to Canada and their white counterparts met. The outcome of this meeting represents a paradigm of the unequal power relations which continue to exist in contemporary Canada.

The process of reclaiming history and contextualizing it in the present is a complicated one. We have chosen to start our historical journey by reprinting two articles originally published in the *Indo-Canadian* (Vol 7, Nos. 3 & 4, 1971). The *Indo-Canadian* was an English language publication produced by a group of concerned Indo-Canadians (as they called themselves) who wanted to represent their communities as they saw them. This approach represents a distinct shift in the coming of age of the South Asian community in Canada. It was an empowering process in which the 'other' decided to construct its own identity, primarily for the consumption of a white audience. The language and tone of the articles must be understood in the context of a multicultural framework which was in its nascent stages.

The articles in the *Indo-Canadian* prominently featured what is now referred to as the Komagata Maru incident. It is arguable that this incident is the singular most defining moment of the history of the South Asian community in Canada. The Komagata Maru and the treatment of its passengers by white authority structures perfectly encapsulates the British colonial history of oppression, dominance and denial. More importantly, the Komagata Maru Incident represents the resistance, activism and unity of the South Asian community in the face of the brute reality of racism.

We have chosen to represent the history of the Komagata Maru's journey through excerpts from the pages of the *Vancouver Province* and an editorial from the *Hindustanee*, an English-language paper sponsored by the *United India League*, both published during the time of the incident.

Inderjit Kohaly represents, in many ways, a living treasure for the South Asian creative community in Vancouver. As an individual, he has dedicated the majority of his life to capture and document the history of his community. One of the founding members of the *Indo-Canadian* editorial group, Mr. Kohaly is presently engaged in an archival project which deserves far more support and attention than it has received. This labour of love, which reproduces images from the Komagata Maru incident through to images of South Asian families which immigrated to British Columbia up to the 1950s, is Mr. Kohaly's attempt to remind us of our roots and to make sure that we never forget.

The *Vancouver Sath* collective relies upon the daily lived experience of the South Asian community in Vancouver to inspire its cultural production. Deeply rooted in the labour struggles of South Asians working in the agricultural, resource and service based industries of the West Coast, *Vancouver Sath* has established itself as the creative voice for the struggles of those who seek meaning in the inhospitable and racist conditions in which they work. The collective has a keen awareness for the history of the South Asian community in British Columbia and uses this history to challenge racism outside the community and patriarchy, sexism, agism and classism within the community.

South Asians, colonized by the British and now living in the West, have a strong, proud history of resistance against oppression. We continue to struggle against the stifling confinement of categories, criteria and quotas to claim our right to live and work where we choose in equality and peace.—Editor.

The following articles are excerpted with the permission of I. Kohaly from the **Indo-Canadian**, Volume 7, Number 3 & 4, 1971.

East Indians in BC (Till 1910)

by Dr. I. M. Muthanna

Canada—An East Indian Word?

Many theories have been advanced as to the origin of the name 'Canada'. One of those put forward in the **Dictionary of Canadianism on Historical Principles** is that the word 'Canada' is just a variation on KANARA on the southwest coast of India, and that it was chosen because the explorers perhaps thought that they had landed in India. This is not unlikely as many of the early explorers who ventured to the Orient did land on the Kanara coast of India. And, of course, as everybody is aware, the natives of North America were called Indians, because Columbus thought that he had reached India.

Pre-1870

There is no evidence of any East Indian visit to the Pacific coast prior to the visit of Captain Vancouver in 1792. Amongst the earliest East India Company vessels to visit the west coast of Canada was a trading boat from Madras, India in the 1790s, but it is not known whether there were any East Indians aboard...

From 1870 to 1905—Indentured Labour

With the abolition of slavery, indentured labourers were utilized in British colonies to fill the gap. Thus, in 1876 alone, about 45,000 people from Calcutta and 15,000 from Madras were transported to the Fiji Islands alone, apart from others shipped to the Caribbean. Hundreds of these labourers were able to slip out and move from place to place and country to country in search of trade or better opportunities. During this process, a number of Hindus were able to infiltrate into North and Central America.

First Emigration

The actual emigration of working people from India to the United States and Canada began to take place only after 1894, mostly agriculturists with little or no education. They infiltrated at the rate of at least 30 per year, mostly to the United States...a few turbaned men were to be seen here and there in British Columbia.

Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee

A number of Sikh troops from the Indian Army contingent that took part during the 1897 Diamond Jubilee celebration in honour of Queen Victoria passed through Canada on their way home. They spread stories in India of Canada as a land of great opportunity that was welcoming immigrants. Some of those who did emigrate to BC were old Sikh soldiers who had taken part in crushing the Boxer Rebellion on demobilisation in China.

Settlers in 1900

However, the actuality of life in BC was not up to the dreams of the East Indian migrants at the turn of the century. They ended up building railway tracks or as labourers in the lumber and logging industries. It is estimated that in 1900 there were no more than a hundred East Indians, mostly Sikhs. They were constantly on the move between Victoria and Vancouver and even south of the border. According to the US census there were 2,050 Hindus in America, including a few hundred on the Pacific coast.

Anti-Asiatic Action

Anti-Asian feelings were first aroused on the west coast in the 1870s in the face of relatively large Japanese and Chinese immigration to California. The US Government was prevailed upon, exactly a century ago, to enact the first restrictive Immigration Act directed against the so-called 'Mongolians'...

In 1900, at a meeting in Vancouver, the unions of fishermen, bakers, clerks and merchants as well as other Associations demanded that Ottawa strictly enforce the restrictive Aliens Act so as to cut off the Asian flood...

At that time, there was only a scattering of East Indians. The BC census of 1904 lists 258 'Hindus', almost all of them Sikhs. Another 45 arrived to join them in 1905. As British Subjects, the Sikhs were less inclined to be less submissive, demanding special rights denied to the Japanese and Chinese.

The Sikhs worked in mines, farms, logging and lumber and some even engaged in laying CPR tracks...

Anti-Asian Riots

The Sikhs were prepared to work at wages offered by the employers. The Provincial Government had authorized them to employ up to 25% of their force at nonunion wages. This sparked anti-Asian riots. The stalwart Sikhs specially stood out with their flowing beards and coloured turbans as a distinctive type. As such, they became the main target of the rioters and suffered a great deal. Simultaneously, pressure built up for the government to enact a minimum wage law.

Growing Influx in 1906

In 1906, the number of Hindus entering BC shot up sharply from 300 to 500, and even more in the following year.

They gradually started to supplant the Chinese and Japanese in the saw mills of BC. The manager of a saw mill at Port Moody 'saw these strapping men move piles of lumber with ease.' Soon other mills started employing them.

One Devichand was reported to be behind the drive to import East Indian labour. As an entrepreneur, he apparently claimed payment from some of the immigrants, and in one instance he was charged with 'obtaining money under false pretences.' During the court proceedings at Vancouver on July 18, 1906, he admitted that it was his mission to help East Indians to come to BC...

Roots



1910s – South Asian Immigrants just having disembarked at CPR Pier, Vancouver BC

Photo Vancouver Public Library

'Beaten' by the Cold

About 150 East Indians proceeded to the Interior to work in the Hydraulic Mines of the Cariboo. But they were unprepared for the cold. Shivering, without proper clothing and penniless, many straggled all the way back to Vancouver suffering greatly from the elements. However, about 100 of them remained behind to grimly face the Cariboo winter. According to the miners, 'the Hindus did not prove any too industrious.' No wonder, since most of them had nothing but a very thin blanket to protect from the harsh elements...

Immigration Act of 1906

After prolonged discussions under continual representation by the Whites on the west coast, the Dominion Parliament enacted the Immigration Act of 1906 aimed at controlling the influx of Asians into Canada. It is good to note that even in those days, some liberal spirits in BC joined hands with Asian immigrants to protest the blatantly discriminatory statute.

The Act was not entirely successful in curbing all Asiatic immigration, especially that of the Sikhs. According to available records only 18 East Indians were debarred from landing in BC in 1906 and another 120 the following year as a direct result of this restrictive legislation. Ottawa also took the matter up with the Government of India and received assurances from the Viceroy that "steps would be taken to end the movement of Indians to British Columbia."

It is of interest to record that despite the generally hostile atmosphere, Mr. B. Robertson, the Assistant Immigration Superintendent, paid the following tribute to the East Indians: "They are employed or, if not employed, look after their own people. They have not been a burden on the Government."

1913 – South Asian man unloading salmon at BC Canneries, Vancouver



Photo Vancouver Public Library

1907 – A Turning Point Thousands Arrive

The heaviest influx of East Indian immigrants, 2,124 in all, came to BC in 1907. They were Hindus, Sikhs, Indian Muslims and Christians...

There were several versions for this sudden influx. The MacKenzie King Royal Commission was of the view that the flood of arrivals was planned rather than spontaneous. The Commission felt that "the aims and methods (for the influx) were anything but imperial and patriotic." King listed the following reasons for people from so far away turning up in BC:

(i) Promotional activities of certain steamship companies in Calcutta, Hong Kong and elsewhere;

(ii) Propaganda pamphlets in Gurmukhi, Punjabi and Bengali painting BC in rosy colours distributed in the villages;

(iii) Activities of individual entrepreneurs like Devichand to supply cheap labour to industries on the west coast.

'The Hindu Shall Not Vote'

The Anti-Asiatic BC Government introduced the 'Election Act' Bill in March 1907 to disenfranchise East Indians from provincial and municipal elections. The main clause read: "The expression 'Hindu' shall mean the native of India—not born of Anglo-Saxon parents... No Chinese, Japanese or East Indians shall have their names on the register of voters for any electoral district or be entitled to vote at any election."

The inspiration behind this retrograde move was the notorious Natal Act of South Africa which similarly disenfranchised Indians, despite the fact that they were British Subjects...

Thus, taxpaying, law-abiding Asians were not allowed to vote. They were at the same time denied the elementary privileges of entering a profession, serving on juries, obtaining Government contracts and buying land in selected places in the city.

The Asiatic Exclusion League

The BC legislature passed several measures to check East Indian immigration and to prohibit employment in certain industries, although some of these enactments were invalidated by the courts. As mentioned earlier, the provincial and federal government even approached the Government of India to choke off possible emigration at the very source. Such popular sentiment led to the birth on August 12, 1907 of an organization called the Asiatic Exclusion League.

Probably it was sparked by the Anti-Asian Riot that had broken out a month earlier in Vancouver. The main targets were the Chinese and Japanese who suffered up to \$40,000 in damage...

The Khalsa Diwan Society

As their numbers neared 3,000, the East Indians became a significant ethnic group in BC. Over 75% of them were Sikhs...

They formed branches (of the Khalsa Diwan Society in Vancouver and) at Victoria, Fraser Mills, New Westminster, Abbotsford, Duncan and Ocean Falls.

Their first projected plan was to erect a temple and they obtained a good response from all Sikhs for this laudable proposal. A total of \$7,000 was collected, a huge sum for those days. Construction began in 1907 and the Temple was ready for use during the first half of 1908.

With the new Sikh Temple, the Sikhs earned a status and personality among the scores of immigrant communities on the west coast. Teja Singh said with justifiable pride: "That ought to indicate that we are here to stay. We are law-abiding citizens and we seek to win the goodwill of our white brethren."

1908 – Some Exciting Changes— Restrictive Legislation

MacKenzie King, the Deputy Federal Minister of Labour, had proceeded to England in 1907 to explore ways of discontinuing the flow of Hindus to Canada, since "the native of India is not suited to this country." He returned with a clever formula called **direct passage**.

Now most of the Hindu immigrants had not come to Canada direct from India. They had come largely from England, Hong Kong or Fiji. Therefore, a cooperative Viceroy of India was of limited help in curbing Indians desirous of going to Canada. So, the Canadian government issued an Order-in-Council to supplement the Immigration Act of 1906 as follows:

"All immigrants seeking entry must come to Canada by continuous journey and on through tickets from the country of their birth or nationality or citizenship." ... The main object of this ban on Hindu immigration, since there were no direct ships between India and Canada in those days, was:

(i) To prevent hardships to Hindus themselves due to the severity of the climate;

(ii) To avoid race friction and all its complications;

(iii) To protect Canadian workmen whose standard of life, family duties and civic obligations were of a high order.

Deportation Order

Now that he was armed with discretionary power, Mr. Munro, the Federal Immigration Officer in Vancouver, proceeded to detain batches of East Indians on grounds of 'Poor Health', 'Insufficient Funds', 'No Direct Passage From India'... In all, about 200 Hindus were held for deportation by March, 1908...

Hindus Win in Court

Judge Clements, who tried the case of East Indians awaiting deportation ruled that, "The Governor-General-in-Counsel cannot delegate his powers on immigration to any official..." In other words, Dr. Monroe, who was an Immigration Officer could not act on behalf of the G-G-in-Counsel. The Vancouver Supreme Court went on to rule that the order in council "was not only defective but never should have been promulgated in Ottawa, particularly against British Subjects." This was a single victory. All of the two hundred Hindus were immediately released with no more inquisitions of "Where did you come from? Did you come by continuous journey?"

Resettlement in British Honduras

The governments of BC and Canada decided to try and get rid of the East Indians of BC by sending them off to British Honduras in Central America. With the full cooperation of India Office, London and the colonial government of the Honduras, the ball was set in motion by first sending a mixed delegation to the Colony to report back on the conditions and opportunities there...

Delegation to the Honduras

The fact finding mission to the British Honduras consisted of JB Harkins of the Federal Ministry of Interior, Hopkinson, the Vancouver Immigration Department (who also acted as the interpreter) and Nagin Singh and Sham Singh representing the East Indians.

On their return, both Nagin and Sham told the East Indians at a gathering at the Sikh Temple that the conditions in British Honduras were very poor indeed. The country was mosquito infested and malaria was rife. People lived miserably, subsisting on a milk and vegetable diet supplemented with coconut and coconut oil. Fresh water was not easily available and the cost of living was very high. East Indians who had spent a lifetime there had nothing to show for it. Every one of them had warned the Hindu delegates not to be a party to the resettlement of the BC East Indians to that place, where they felt almost like convicts in prison.

Nagin Singh and Sham Singh finally told the Temple congregation; "The Hindus will have nothing to do with the proposition to transport them to British Honduras." This motion was unanimously adopted and copies forwarded to Ottawa, London and Calcutta. A like resolution was later adopted by the East Indians in Victoria...

Transfer Proposal Dropped

Matters had officially advanced to the stage when an ordinance was issued in British Honduras authorizing Col. Eric Swaine, the Governor, to enter into negotiations with the Dominion Government of Canada regarding the migration of Hindus en masse to the Colony.

Every labourer was to sign an Agreement before leaving BC and was to be given \$12 per month on resettlement in British Honduras.

Fortunately, the Federal and Provincial governments did take note of the unanimous negative resolution of the East Indians in BC. The Federal Department of Interior ruled that: "No official steps will be taken to transport the unemployed Hindus to British Honduras in view of the opposition offered to the proposition."

This was the second great victory for the Hindus in 1908, the first being in the courts on the deportation issued referred to earlier...

1909 to 1910 – Immigration Ceases

During the years 1909–10, there was a sharp decline in immigration. From a peak of 2,623 East Indian arrivals in BC in 1908, only 6 managed to make it in 1909 and 10 in 1910.

The 1908–09 BC census lists 17,229 Chinese, 15,848 Japanese and 5,141 Hindus. About a third of the latter shortly thereafter proceeded south of the border, almost doubling their numbers in the USA to about 3,600 Hindus.

Reasons for Decline

This sudden falling off in immigration can be attributed to a number of factors. Of course, by far the major cause was the well-nigh insuperable 'Direct Passage' barrier, in an era when there were no direct shipping routes between India and Canada. The regulations were made even more stringent under the promulgation of a new Order that specified, "No person of Asiatic origin shall be permitted to enter Canada unless in actual possession of \$200 in his or her own right." This Order came into force on May 19, 1910.

Secondly, MacKenzie King had again travelled all the way to London to make sure that the obliging government of India did clamp down hard on any possible emigres to Canada. Sir Wilfred Laurier, the Canadian Prime Minister, wrote to Lord Minto, Viceroy of India, as follows: "Strange to say, the Hindus are looked upon by our people in BC with still more disfavour than the Chinese. They seem to be less adaptable to our ways and manners than all the other Oriental races that came to us."

Minto was most happy to oblige. He replied: "We have published the conditions imposed by Canada widely with the results that emigration has ceased all together and we consider there is practically no chance of its being re-opened... We raised no objections adopted by Canada and we have no intention of raising any questions regarding them."

Anti-Hindu Feeling

Furthermore, conditions in BC were not inviting enough for new migrants. There had been a number of anti-Hindu riots in BC and just south of the border in Bellingham where "600 lumberjacks herded 200 Hindus out of town with many suffering serious injuries." The Asiatic Exclusion League was at the forefront of these outbursts,



1909 – The Guru Nanak Mining & Trust Company Shareholder's certificate. The Company, spearheaded by Prof. Teja Singh, was formed to establish a strong South Asian foothold in North America through ownership of land.

justifying them because allegedly Hindus were willing to work for low wages and were of "filthy and immodest habits"... The Hindus also suffered from a number of discriminations. For instance, the Royal Columbian Hospital (in) New Westminister (BC) isolated East Indian patients in a separate building, giving as an excuse 'uncleanly habits.'

Racial Journalism

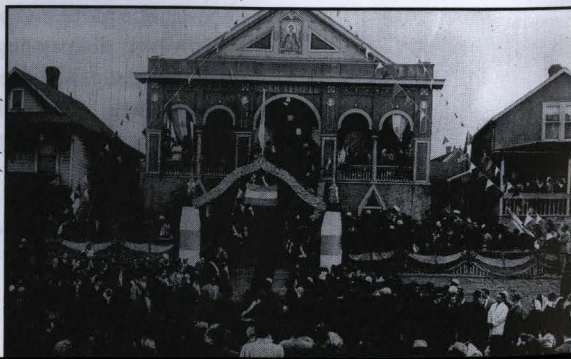
A review of the press since 1900 clearly indicates a profound bias against all Asiatics. There are replete with wanton misstatements and are blatantly unethical. The editors were obviously racialists and took their cue from organizations like the Asiatic Exclusion League, calling all Orientals 'coolies', forgetting that White men did similar labourer's jobs...

Anti-British Developments

There was much unrest in India about this time and terrorists had killed prominent Britishers not only in India but in England as well. As already indicated, Hindus in BC were linked to the supply of the bombs. On June 1, 1910, the local daily reported: "As much as \$2,000 has been raised in Vancouver in a single Sunday on a direct appeal to the Hindus employed in and about this city for funds with which to buy rifles, to aid the plots to overthrow the British rule in India."

The funds collected in Vancouver and elsewhere were forwarded to the plotters in London through their secret servicemen. Reportedly, on one occasion, a draft for as much as \$20,000 was sent from Vancouver to London...

1947 – South Asians in Vancouver welcome the arrival of Jawaharlal Nehru at the Sikh Temple at 1866 West Second Avenue, Vancouver, BC. The building was opened on January 19, 1908. It was demolished in 1969.



East Indians in BC (Since 1910)

by Homi M. Engineer

In his article on East Indian immigration Dr. Muthanna has covered in detail the history of this movement until 1910. This article aims to review in summary the period from 1911 to date. I propose to dispense with the irritating prefix 'east' when referring to East Indians in North America.

1911 to 1920

According to the 1911 census, there were only 2,342 Hindus in Canada, nearly all of them concentrated in British Columbia. As already indicated, this was because restrictive legislation had brought Indian immigration almost to a total halt.

A delegation led by Teja Singh left BC for Ottawa to seek redress from the onerous restrictions: the continuous voyage requirements; the \$200 minimum asset; the ban on wives and children; and the difficulties encountered by students and tourists hailing from India. They found Ottawa to be sympathetic but unwilling to move in the face of the prevailing hostile White sentiment in BC. The only minor concession made was permission for the wives and children of two resident Sikhs to land. At the same time, the (Canadian) federal government made it clear that this compassionate act was not to be considered as creating a precedent.

In 1911, a society called the Friends of the Hindus was formed in Victoria to protect the rights of immigrant Indians as British Subjects. It sent petitions to the Imperial Conference of 1911 but to no avail. In 1913, a deputation of BC Indians proceeded on a fruitless mission to London and Delhi to seek some amelioration in the conditions of their compatriots in Canada.

It is good to record that even in those 'rough' days several liberal Canadians tried, albeit to little effect, to help and comfort their India brethren. Thus, Isabella Broad made a fervent appeal in her pamphlet entitled, **An Appeal for Fair Play for the Sikhs in Canada** based on the British tradition of 'fair play' and the Christian teaching of 'brotherly love.'

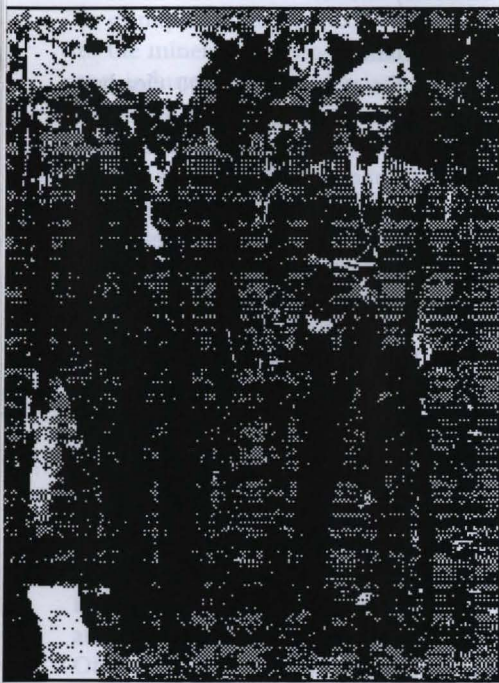


Photo Courtesy of I. Kohaly

1913 - Two Sikh men in the Kootenays, BC

Komagata Maru

The next year, 1914, witnessed the now notorious Komagata Maru episode. This chartered ship, carrying 351 Sikhs and 21 Punjabi Muslims, was not allowed to dock in Vancouver harbour. The Khalsa Diwan Society raised the huge sum of \$50,000 to help their cause, also fighting restrictive clauses of the Immigration Act in court, but failed to obtain a favourable ruling.

Six weeks of waiting on board led to growing restlessness culminating in a riot with the passengers seizing control of the ship. Orders were issued for the Komagata Maru to leave Vancouver harbour. The joint police and immigration party that tried to board the mutinous ship to enforce the order, was met by a veritable barrage of coal, wood and any moveable items aboard. The party had to beat a hasty retreat to shore.

However, the passengers had ultimately to accept defeat with the arrival of armed troops and the war ship HMCS Rainbow. Thus ended the sad saga of the Komagata Maru after a valiant struggle of two months. One Canadian official was driven to write to Prime Minister Laurier: "By a strange irony, this nucleus of the Canadian Navy was first used to prevent British Subjects from landing on British soil."

Mewa Singh

Three months later, on October 21, 1914, an unhappy Mewa Singh shot Immigration Inspector Hopkinson dead while in court, because he believed the Anglo-Indian official to be unscrupulous and corrupt, and using informers to spy on Indian immigrants. This act was to him in the great Sikh tradition of *karbani* (self-sacrifice) and Mewa Singh paid the supreme penalty of hanging...

World War I

With the outbreak of the First World War, Indian immigrant problems were pushed into the background. Nevertheless agitation for a better deal for Indians never ceased. This was true also for Eastern Canada, where, in 1916, a group of Indians together with Canadian friends launched the **Canada India League** in Toronto and did a lot of propaganda work.

There is no doubt that a dent was made in the hostile White thinking because of the gallant efforts of Indian troops, of whom 40% were from the Punjab, during the 1914-18 War. One concession that resulted was to allow Indian veterans the right to vote in elections. Also, in 1919, immigrants were allowed to bring over their wives and children under 18.

A further plus arising from India's war effort was the passing of a resolution at the Imperial War Conference of 1917 to the effect that in the interests of the solidarity of the British Commonwealth it was desirable that the rights of Indians to citizenship should be recognized. Unfortunately, these became empty words once the War was over. No Indian was granted the franchise in British Columbia where 95% of Indian immigrants to Canada had settled down.

The Twenties

The statutory handicaps continued to dog the efforts of would-be immigrants from India throughout the 1920s. It would appear that the number of Indians declined to as low as one thousand by 1921, since many migrated to the United States or returned home to India.

All that this handful could do was to go on agitating for equal status as full-fledged British Subjects...

In fact, during the entire sorry history of the Indian struggle for the vote in British Columbia, is the recurrent passing of the buck between Victoria and Ottawa. There's no reason to doubt that this served a most useful purpose in delaying a firm decision in the matter based on justice and equity.

One would have thought that with the freezing of the Oriental to becoming a very small minority, anti-oriental feelings would gradually subside. Not so. It continued unabated throughout the twenties, and culminated in 1927 with the Vancouver Chapter of the Canadian Knights of the Klu Klux Klan demanding

that the entry of all Asiatics be banned, period. It is fitting to recall at this stage the gallant efforts of that fine gentleman, J.S. Woodsworth, the Founder of the old CCF party (now NDP) for the rights of Indians in BC...

The Thirties

With Canada in the throes of the Great Depression, all immigration ceased. Nevertheless, a trickle of East Indians continued to pour in during the thirties, somehow circumventing the contrived barriers...

By 1939, there were 218 Sikhs who were lined up for deportation. Fortunately, Dr. D.P. Pandia, a newly-arrived Indian lawyer, took up their case with the Dominion Cabinet. The latter moved, (a) to suspend deportation proceedings indefinitely... (b) to refund the security bonds that had been furnished... and (c) to allow all Indians who had entered Canada illegally to remain, subject to good conduct.

The Forties – World War II

Once again, a world conflagration helped Canadians appreciate the valour and help of the Indian troops, especially in North Africa and Burma. For once the Sikhs in BC had a chance to get some of their own back when conscription was introduced in Canada. They blandly pointed out that since they had no vote, they could not be conscripted as full-fledged citizens defending their homeland from attack—also that generous treatment here would alleviate the troubles the British were facing in India during those critical days.

In 1943, for the first time, organized labour switched over to a 'fair play to the Sikh' attitude. The CCF party led the fight for the vote in the BC legislature, but Premier Hart decided against it. In fact, some of the arguments raised in the debate were so odd as to be laughable. Thus, one gentleman loudly declaimed that Sikhs were unworthy of the vote since they had violent tempers and tended to be reckless drivers!

Post-War

With the end of the war in 1945, the average BC resident became more tolerant in their attitude towards the Indians. In fact, during the twenty-first BC legislature that year, the CCF failed by only 3 votes to get the Indians voting privileges.

This was the era of the Atlantic Charter, the UN Charter, the UN Declaration of Human Rights, etc. and the time was ripe for a breakthrough. Prominent Sikh leaders and Dr. Pandia spearheaded the drive for the franchise for Indians. A new point was injected—that favourable treatment for Indians in Canada would help India decide in favour of remaining in the Commonwealth.

At last, in 1946, the BC Legislature set up the

Election Act Committee. A brief was presented to the Committee by a delegation consisting of Kapoor Singh, Kartar Singh, Mayo Singh, Ishar Singh, Gurdit Singh, Naginder Singh and Dr. Pandia. This brief was accepted and the Committee recommended necessary changes in the Act to give the franchise to the Indians. The BC Legislature enacted it into law on April 2, 1947.

At last, the Indian was given the full benefits of Canadian citizenship, including the right to own property and to practise his profession. However, he still lacked the Municipal franchise. This matter was vigorously pursued at the 1947 convention of the Union of BC Municipalities by Messrs. Kapoor Singh, Mayo Singh, Kartar Singh & Dr. Pandia. Their efforts were successful.

With India independent, the Indians in BC gained a new stature and anti-Asiatic feeling as a whole abated considerably by the end of the decade. Indeed, an Indian student, Raghbir Singh Basi was elected as the President of the Alma Mater Society of the UBC something that would have been unheard of only a few years earlier.

The Fifties

With the struggle for the vote brought to a successful conclusion, the struggle for equitable immigration laws for Indians began in right earnest. The first relaxation, albeit a minor one, occurred with the signing of the Canada-India Agreement of 1951. This pact provided for an annual quota of 150 sponsored immigrants who were close relatives of those already settled in this country.

Pressure now built up for a relaxation to allow general immigration rights enjoyed by other ethnic groups. This led to an amplification of the Agreement doubling the quota to 300 in 1957. In addition to the 150 who fell under the previous sponsored category or 'preference quota' another 150 were to be admitted by selection. The latter batch provided an opportunity for professional and skilled people from States other than the Punjab to come to Canada purely on merit...

The Sixties

This decade saw the Indian gaining full equality with his White compatriots. The discriminatory treatment in immigration had to be eliminated. The first break was in 1962 scrapping the quota-based India-Canada Agreements of the Fifties in favour of new regulations with emphasis on skills. However, the nominated categories still favoured European, Egyptian, Lebanese, South American and other immigrants. Unlike the Indian, they could sponsor married children and children over 21, as well as stand surety for brothers, sisters and their families.

Indian leaders continued to hammer away at this anomaly till full equality was attained under the new immigration rules. The Point System based on age, education, skills, kinship, knowledge of English, etc. was to apply to all, irrespective of ethnic origin.

There has been a heavy influx of Indians during recent years, and for the first time in large numbers also in Eastern Canada. The exact numbers will be revealed by the 1971 census. However, one can safely say that there are well over 25,000 Indians in BC today, the vast majority of whom are Sikhs.

Indians are now to be found in nearly every walk of life. Today the Canadian Universities are studded with Indian PhDs, and one of them, Dr. Khorana (now in USA) even won the Nobel Prize...

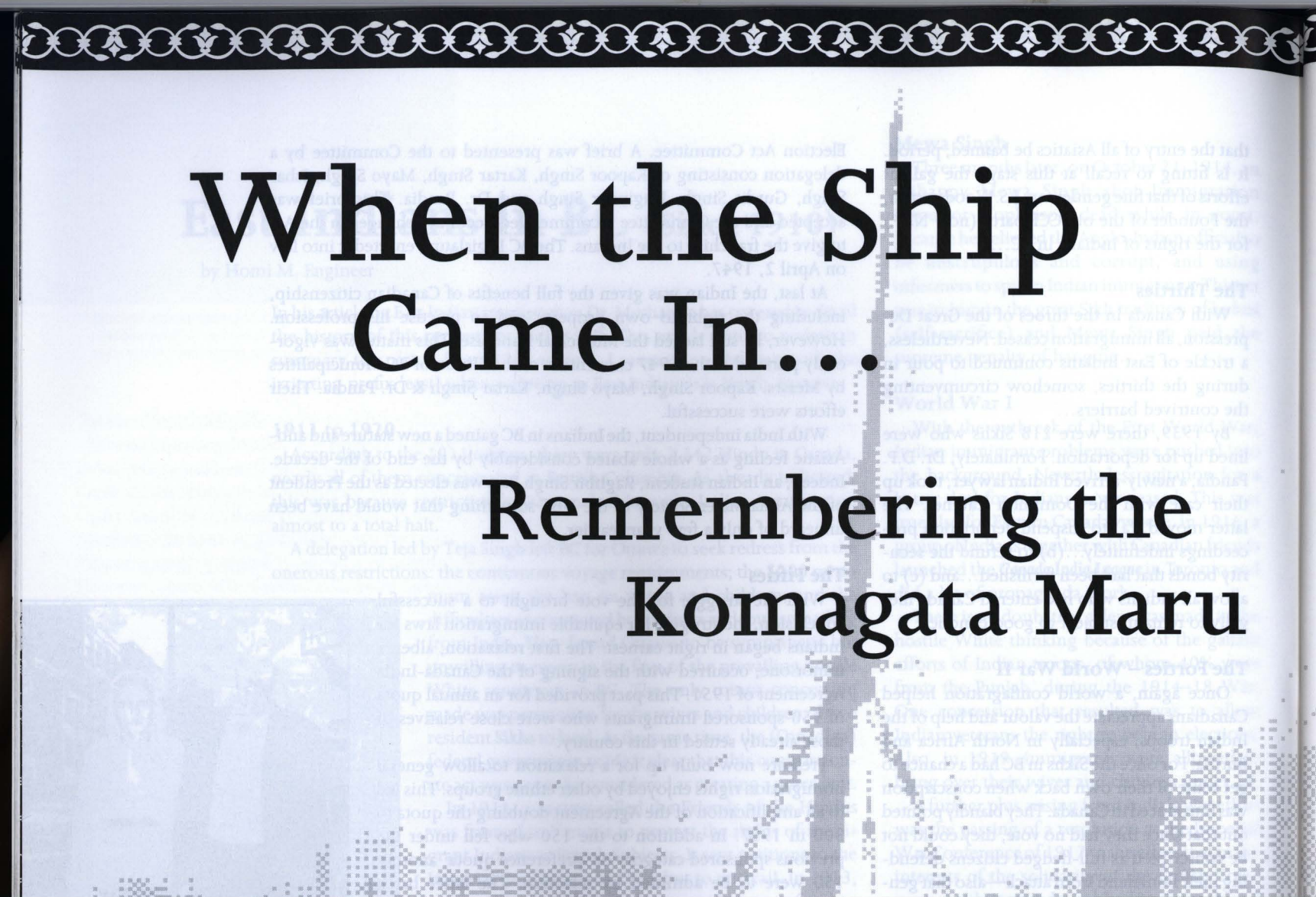

With their long saga of struggle now behind them, the East Indians of BC are ready and able to contribute in ever greater measure toward the future building of this rich, multi-ethnic nation during the second centennial of this beautiful province of ours.



Photo Courtesy of I. Kohaly

1951 – Bhai Arjan Singh Chand and his wife





When the Ship Came In...

Remembering the Komagata Maru



Photo Vancouver Public Library

1914 — Passengers aboard the Komagata Maru. Gurdit Singh stands next to his son (front row left).

Introduction

The Komagata Maru represents a complex and volatile mix of hope, despair, treachery and tragedy. The facts of the incident are well known. In the Spring of 1914, Baba Gurdit Singh chartered a steamer named Komagata Maru to carry Indian emigrants to Canada. On May 23, 1914, the ship arrived in Vancouver with 376 passengers aboard, all of them Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims from the Punjab. The ship was detained in the harbour for nearly two months until July 23, 1914. During this period of time, except for twenty returning residents, the ship's doctor and his family, no one was allowed to land. That summer, the tragedy of the Komagata Maru unfolded both on the front pages of the local papers and in the corridors of government. In this issue of *Rungh* we have chosen to reprint an article from the *Vancouver Province*, a local daily newspaper, and an editorial from the *Hindustanee*, an English-language newspaper based within the South Asian community.

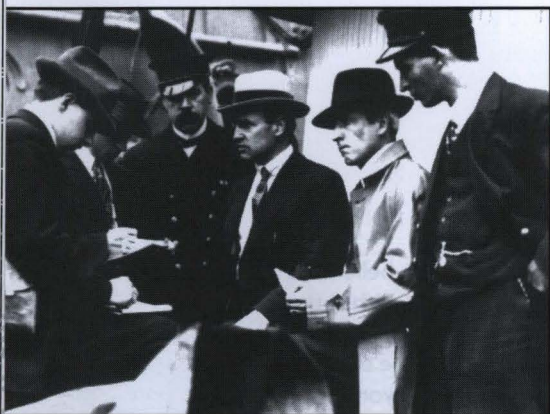
The passengers of the Komagata Maru had come to Canada in the belief that as British Subjects, they should be able to travel freely anywhere within the British Empire. The Canadian government did not share this view and in 1908 had enacted the Continuous Journey Provision in the Immigration Act. The effect of the Provision was that Immigration officials could refuse entry to anyone who did not come by continuous journey from his or her country of origin. The Canadian government, in order to crack down on immigration from India, had convinced shipping companies not to sell direct tickets from India to Canada to Indians.

None of the passengers of the Komagata Maru met the continuous journey requirement since the boat had commenced its journey from Hong Kong, and had made stops at Shanghai, Moji and Yokohama to pick up passengers and cargo before reaching Vancouver Island. From the moment the boat arrived, it was met with hostility by Immigration officials. Passengers were denied landing and held in *comunicado*. Since their rations were depleted and officials would not allow provisions to be brought aboard in a timely manner, several times during the ordeal, passengers were left to go without food and water.

The Khalsa Diwan Society had organized a shore committee led by Bhag Singh, a community leader and Hussain Rahim, publisher of the *Hindustanee*. Through the intervention of the Society, thousands of dollars were raised to feed the passengers and to keep the ship in the harbour. Further funds were raised and used to launch a legal challenge in the British Columbia Court of Appeal against the draconian immigration laws. The court case was lost not on the merits of the arguments presented but on the basis that each person aboard the ship did not have the funds requested by immigration laws (\$200) to support themselves in Canada.

Upon hearing news of their defeat in court, the passengers agreed to leave Canada but only if sufficient provisions were put aboard. After much argument and posturing, the requisite supplies were provided and the Komagata Maru left with 352 passengers aboard. The ship was escorted out of Burrard Inlet by the HMCS *Rainbow*, a Canadian military cruiser.

While the legal battle was proceeding, a human tragedy was beginning to unfold. Inspector Hopkinson was an Anglo-Indian who served as an interpreter for the Immigration office in Vancouver. But his power within the department exceeded simply interpreting. Hopkinson was known to have informants within the South Asian community. He used these informants during the course of the Komagata Maru incident to thwart all attempts by the Khalsa Diwan society and their legal advisors to assist the passengers. Bela Singh, who was thought to be one of Hopkinson's informants, shot Bhag Singh and Battan Singh in the Vancouver Gurdwara on September 5, 1914. Bela Singh's motives were unclear, though Hopkinson was scheduled to testify in his defence on October 21, 1914. On that day Mewa Singh entered the Provincial Court house in Vancouver and shot Inspector Hopkinson before he could testify. Bela Singh was subsequently acquitted of murder while Mewa Singh was found guilty and hanged on January 11, 1915.



1914 - Immigration Inspector speaks to reporters

The Komagata Maru arrived at Budge, India on September 29, 1914. The passengers hoped to raise sympathy for their plight but the Indian government viewed them as agitators. Upon their arrival, police attempted to arrest Gurdit Singh and some other passengers. During this process, a riot ensued and by the end, 19 of the passengers were killed. While some of the passengers escaped, the remainder were imprisoned or kept under house arrest in their home villages during the course of WWI.

The Komagata Maru incident serves as a lesson of the danger of expressing racist sentiments through government policy. This shameful chapter of Canadian history bears remembering at a time when xenophobic attitudes are on the rise and when, once again, government policy is being manipulated to quell racist fears.

—Editor

Preface

The following editorial is excerpted from the *Hindustanee—The Official Organ of the United India League*, Vol.1 No.5, Monday, June 1st 1914.

The *Hindustanee* was an English language newspaper, published from 1913-1914 in Vancouver. The *United India League's* objective was to 'carry on activities with constitutional means. Object: social and political regeneration of the Hindustanees' (1:5, p16). The paper took an aggressive stance, demanding change in the British attitude towards 'hindustanees' throughout the empire, and discussing the 'problems with Economics, Politics, Labour and Industry as they affect the lives of Hindustanees at home and abroad.' Its target audience was all Indians of any language group and interested white Canadians. The *Hindustanee's* articles came from local writers, reprints from other newspapers, local, national and international, and analysed within a Marxist framework. For example, the anonymous article, *A Lesson From the Famine in the United Provinces* (1:5) states that 'The workings of the capitalist government of India, while it was directly ruinous to Hindustanees also adversely affected, in no small degree, the conditions of the working class of the British Isles, owing to the fact that the same capitalist interests which exploit India also exploited England, Ireland, Scotland, etc.' (1:5, p4)

The editor of the paper, Hussain Rahim, was a 'Ghadharite supporter.' The *Ghadar Party* based in India with satellite groups through the world, was a revolutionary organization whose 'avowed target was to drive the British from India.' Rahim was also known to be a member of the *Socialist Party of Canada* and in 1912, he organized his 'own branch with more than a dozen Sikhs and Hindus as members' (Johnston, Hopkinson File, 231). He was seen as a threat to Dominion security, and his newspaper an organ through which to spread dissent. The paper was eventually banned by the Canadian government.

—S. Jamal

Editorial— Welcome to Komagata Maru

by H. Rahim

We extend a cordial welcome to Bhai Gurdit Singh and his party of 375 Hindustanees on board the SS Komagata Maru, which arrived in this harbour on the morning of the 22nd of last month.

All kinds of spectacular and alarming stories in which the arrival of this ship has been termed a Hindu invasion have been indulged by the local press day after day, in their sensation mongering dailies, while the Empress boat, bringing 650 Chinese, at the same time, was welcome.

As acts of high-handedness, illegality and utter unfaithfulness to their own laws, the immigration authorities pretend that during the ten days that have elapsed since the arrival of the Hindu ship, they have not been able to finish the medical examination of the passengers on board the SS Komagata Maru. It is well known that ships bringing 500 to 1,000 Chinese passengers have been medically examined within twenty-four hours, so it is a mystery why, in more than ten times that period, the authorities have not been able to go through with the medical examination of the smaller list of 375.

All our requests to board the ship as press representatives, and the repeated appeals of the counsel acting for Gurdit Singh and the Hindus of Komagata Maru to be allowed to see his clients on legal matters have been flatly refused on the miserable dodge of the medical examinations not being through.

Even provisions, and it takes quite an amount to feed 400 people on the Komagata Maru daily, were refused to be passed on board until most insistent and impatient demands were made by the Hindu friends of the passengers.

Perhaps the authorities of this country consider the actions of Russian rulers to be worse than theirs, or that treatment of Hindus such as is mentioned in this article, does not equal the grievances with which the people of the United States of America indict the British every Fourth of July in their anniversary of the Declaration of Independence throughout the length and breadth of that vast country, but we are inclined to think that the harassing of Hindustanees is monstrous and that British fair play a huge joke and misrepresentation.

To seek admission to Canada in no sense a crime, and yet the Hindus on board the ship are not given an opportunity of seeing their (legal) counsel, which privilege is not denied the worst of felons or criminals.

Bhai Gurdit Singh is not allowed to unload or

sell the cargo of his chartered vessel and this is a serious restraint of trade by the immigration authorities, causing serious pecuniary loss to the Hindu merchant, and of course we consider that the immigration department, in so acting, is incurring enormous liabilities.

The local press has been publishing wild stories in order to frighten the working men to the effect that Gurdit Singh is a rich millionaire, and threatens to bring shiploads of Hindustanees to compete with them, while the fact is that he is nothing of the kind. The ship was arranged to be brought with the cooperation of many men, the majority of whom are farmers seeking to secure, as British subjects, a little of the millions of fertile acres of British Columbian soil now lying wastefully idle, so that they might till them and eke out a living in the same way that hundreds of thousands of white men are making a living in different capacities in India.

This doctrine of Hindu competition with the workers of this country is, we again assert, an utterly false one, put up by fake labourites. The true economic formula is: More men=more work: more work=more wealth in the country. Sir Wm. Osler, president of the Canadian Club in England is reported to have stated: "There is no trouble as far as China and Japan are concerned; the case is different with the Indians who are our fellow citizens. We ought, if we could say to them, "Come in, you are welcome," but we have to safeguard our country. Therefore, we are bound to say, "We are sorry, we would if we could, but you cannot come in on equal terms with Europeans. We are bound to make the country a white man's country."

Such specious trash. We would if we could! This kind of argument was all right in days gone by. We also would like to say that we would stay out if we could, by we are sorry we cannot stay out—we are bound to come in. We want to point out, in a straightforward manner, that we demand equal terms with Europeans and Britishers. Nothing more, nothing less. It is in accord with the solemn pledges of the British sovereigns and statesmen, and it is high time for Britishers to hasten the fulfilment of these pledges, as honeyed words, duplicity and subterfuges merely add fuel to the fire.

Dr. Sutherland of Moose Jaw, according to a report in a recent issue of the 'valued' (Vancouver) Sun, also talks as though he knew something of the question, and suggests a solution of the problem, by banning Hindus by means of the hookworm bogey. Yes, hookworms are a great danger to Britishers. Then for heavens' sake let the British evacuate India at once, before they become infected with them and endanger Great Britain with the epidemic.

Hindus first transported hookworms into the United States and from thence these noisome pests have travelled over into Canada, a few of which, let loose, were observed crawling around the Dominion House of Commons by one of the honourable members a couple of months ago. Now this Moose Jaw medicine man has perceived them and the journey to British Columbia is not very far.

Though these worms are microscopic, they can, for convenience sake, be magnified to any degree.

We hardly think that the honourable mem-

ber who had the hookworm hallucination in the Federal House a short time ago would know the difference between an Indian hookworm and a British Columbia crab, if he saw them side by side.

The Hindus have sound legal advice that part of the Immigration Act is unconstitutional and that the Orders-in-Council can be proven untenable and ultra vires. A number of authorities have been found which substantiate the claim of the Hindu passengers of the SS Komagata Maru to enter Canada. The Orders-in-Council are not infallible and have been before proven ultra vires by the judgments of Justice Morrison and Chief Justice Hunter and the additional proof that they are so is shown by the fact that after the Hindus arrived a new Order-in-Council was passed barring Port Alberni and Newport as possible points of landing, according to the News-Ad of May 30.

Hindustanees claim to have legal rights and the Counsels of Hindustanees must seek the protection of the courts of Canada and the law can take its course in the matter of their landing.

We do not know of any representations having been made by the central committee of the Hindus to the office of the secretary of state or the government of India, but whether the appeal is made or not we must say that as far as the Hindustanee immigrants to Canada are concerned the home authorities or Lord Harding's government have this opportunity of justifying their existence by getting the passengers of Komagata Maru landed in Canada by the official treatment of this question with the Dominion authorities.

The following article is excerpted from the *Vancouver Daily Province* May 23, 1914.

Hindu Ship Can Not Show Bill of Health

—Ottawa is asked to immediately order her back to the Japanese coast

—Leader of big excursion says that all India is watching moves now

—Immigration officers warn off Hindu launches at William Head

—Special Precautions to be taken in Vancouver if the vessel comes here

LONDON, MAY 23. Apropos of the trouble threatened over the arrival of Hindu immigrants at Vancouver, tonight's Pall Mall Gazette remarks that the yellow races are not wanted in Canada and can not be introduced without endangering the livelihood of the white settlers. If Canada has taken forcible measures to defend her shores it must be remembered that she has given ample warning, adds the Gazette.

Awaits Ottawa's Order

There is a strong probability that the three hundred and seventy-six Hindu excursionists who wish to be forerunners of a horde of a few million into Canada may never pass the quarantine station at William Head, where they arrived last night.

When Dr. Nelson, the quarantine officer at the station off Victoria this morning examined

the papers of the Komagata Maru, he found that she had no bill of health from Moji, the last Japanese port from which she had cleared. This omission is clearly a technical reason to refuse to allow the vessel to proceed and it remains with the authorities at Ottawa to say whether the vessel will be allowed to come



1914 — Gurdit Singh speaks with his legal counsel, J. Edward Bird.

on to Vancouver even to discharge 1,500 tons of coal which she has in her hold.

At one o'clock this afternoon the Japanese steamer was still tied up at William Head. Later in the afternoon definite instructions are expected from the federal capital, and the officials hope that these will order the vessel back to Japan on the ground of breaking the health regulations. This would obviate even an examination by the immigration officials.

Bills of health are in Captain Yamamoto's possession from Hong Kong and Yokohama and he explained that the British consul at Moji told him that it would not be necessary for him to secure a bill at that port through the fact that he would have to call in at Yokohama. This morning he produced papers to show that his ship had been fumigated at Moji, but Dr. Nelson decided to write Ottawa for instructions and the craft is being held in the meantime.

The eyes of all India are focused on the outcome of the test cases, it is said. The Hindus believe that they will be admitted to Canada because they are British subjects, but if they are ordered deported they are willing to spend both their time and money to force matters in the courts.

On the other hand, the Canadian immigration officials have an order-in-council backing them up, and the order for their deportation seems almost a certainty.

Surprised at Charge

When informed this morning that the order-in-council relative to the exclusion of labourers and artisans had been extended, the Hindus expressed considerable surprise. They were under the impression that the regulations had expired and that their main point to fight on arriving here would be that they had not come direct from the land of their birth.

It was evident that the Hindus felt that the new laws would harass their proposition to no mean extent, but now that they are here they are preparing to make the best fight they are capable of putting up.

The latest information from William Head is that the Komagata Maru, if granted pratique, will proceed directly to Vancouver without calling at Victoria. The Majority of Hindus have served in the British army and they are a tall, broad and handsome lot. They seem superior to the class of Hindus which have heretofore come to this province. The Hindus are under the conviction that as British subjects they are entitled to roam throughout the British Empire. When this privilege is denied them, they intend to appeal to the Imperial Government in London believing that it has authority to enforce their right of entry. They say they will hold the British Government responsible if they are ordered deported. Before leaving Hong Kong,

the party had the governor of Hong Kong send telegrams to the British Government and also to the governor general of Canada but the text of the messages is not known.

Hindu Friends Warned Away

Very early this morning Chief Inspector Reid of Vancouver and Dr. Milne of Victoria went out from Victoria to board the Japanese liner. They found that of the 376 immigrants aboard all were men except two women and three children. The decks presented a remarkable sight for many groups of men were squatting about preparing their morning meal and jabbering very excitedly amongst themselves.

The officials had been on hand but a short time when a large launch with Hindus on board came out from Victoria to the quarantine station. Coming quite close, a Hindu with a speaking trumpet endeavoured to talk with the men on the ship apparently trying to instruct them regarding the arrangements for the landing. Chief Inspector Reid immediately ordered this party away out of speaking distance with the ship, and notified the Hindus aboard that he objected very vehemently to their action.

"What is done with this shipload of my people will determine whether we shall have peace in all parts of the British Empire," significantly declared Gurdit Singh to one of the officials this morning. He added:

"The main object of our coming is to let the British Government know how they can maintain their rule in India, as the Indian Government is in danger nowadays," he said: "We can absolutely state how the British Government may be made to last in India forever."

Take Precautions Here

If the ship is given health clearance she will proceed to Vancouver. Arrangements have already been made to have a detachment of police on hand to keep Hindus in the city away from the wharves, and also to secure an adequate marine patrol by launches at night. In all probability, until the immigration officials have concluded their examination, if they are called on to make one, the vessel will be anchored in the stream.

Many score of Hindus paraded out to the outer wharf at Victoria this morning waiting to welcome their compatriots from the other side. Many of the watchful waiters were said to be armed with stout canes and clubs.

Gurdit Singh, the character in charge of the party on the Komagata declared to newspaper correspondents who went out in launches to the vessel that he was going to make a desperate effort to land his passengers. He added that he was out to ascertain once and for all if Canada had any right to keep out British subjects while she allowed aliens to land. He informed the reporters that 160 of his passengers were taken

on at Hong Kong and the balance at Shanghai and at Japanese ports. Gurdit Singh is apparently a wealthy man for he announced his intention of fighting the matter in the courts if the immigration authorities prevent the landing of his passengers.

Launch Went to Meet Her

The promised arrival of the Hindu excursion kept the immigration officials on the jump last evening. Quite early yesterday Chief Inspector Reid received advice from Alberni that a small party of Hindus from Vancouver had arrived there on Wednesday afternoon, and after charting a good-sized and fast launch, had proceeded down the canal in the direction of the sea. It was suspected immediately of course, that the object was to overhaul the Komagata Maru on her way to quarantine. The possibility that she might land her 376 Hindus in some infrequented bay on the west coast of the Island caused Inspector Reid a good deal of worry. Two government launches and a fishery protection cruiser were warned to be on the look out and the revenue cutters of the American service off Cape Flattery were also asked to keep an eye out for the Hindu vessel. But no report of her was sent in until just at dusk. Last evening she appeared off the quarantine station proving that she had a rather better turn of speed than she had been given credit for. She made the run across the Pacific in sixteen days which was very good for a tramp vessel.

It was suspected that the launch sent from Alberni might have gone to convey funds to the new arrivals, so that they might have a better chance to be considered as good immigrants under the regulations which provides that each man must have a well-filled purse. It has not yet developed whether or not the Alberni expedition was successful at all, but in view of the early arrival of the Komagata Maru at William Head, it does not appear likely that she was delayed by dropping in anywhere on the west coast.

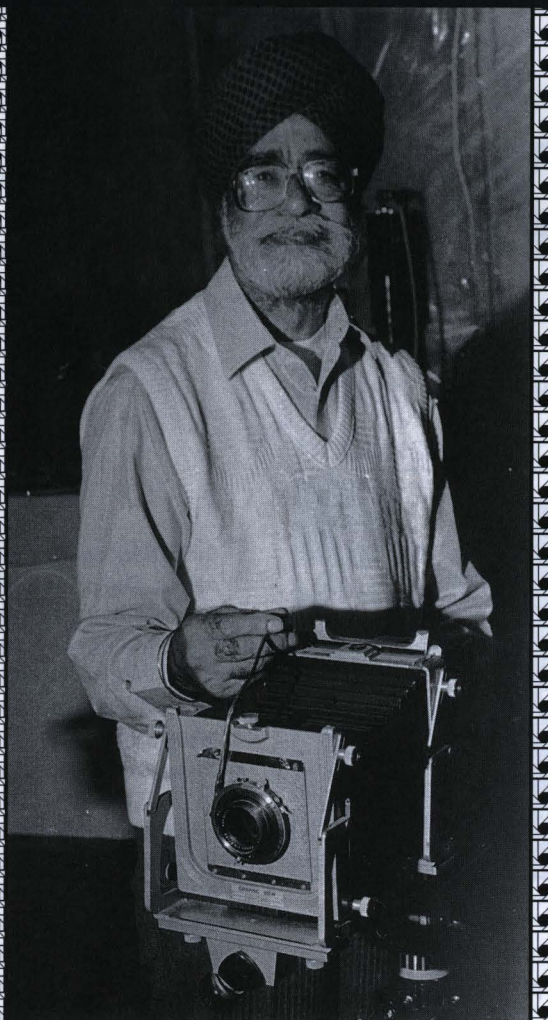
It is stated that Mr. Edward Bird has been retained as counsel by the Hindus to fight the legal end of their proposed landing.

The Komagata Maru is commanded by Captain Yamamoto and carries a crew of Nippon sailors and firemen. She is consigned to C. Gardner Johnson & Co., Vancouver, by Y. Sato & Co., of Kobe, and she has 1,500 tons of Japanese coal which her owners wish to sell here. A Vancouver pilot left for Victoria at 10 am today to pilot the steamer here.



So We May Always Know...

Mr. Inderjit Kohaly Photo Angela Wanczura



Introduction

Inderjit Kohaly represents a rare individual who recognizes the value of the past to the future. While he was trained as an engineer in India, Mr.

Kohaly has made his mark not in the mines of British Columbia

but in its cultural history. Through his activities as a publisher and now an archivist, Mr. Kohaly has managed to provide the readers of this issue with a window into the evolution of the South Asian community from the 1900s to the 1950s. This fifty year period of history represents the formation of the South Asian community on the West Coast of Canada, a period marked by virulent racism, violence and struggle. While Mr. Kohaly's interview has been edited for grammar and syntax, his opinions about the relevance of history and helping to create understanding are clear, both within South Asian communities and between South Asian communities and dominant culture. *Rungh* supports Mr. Kohaly in his project to retrieve and create an archive of photographs of South Asian families who settled on the West Coast of Canada up to 1950. Mr. Kohaly is persevering in this task through the use of his own funds and the occasional aid of volunteers. The culmination of his dream is to have one copy of these archival photos be deposited with the National Archive in Ottawa. We are pleased to play our part in documenting Mr. Kohaly's project.

Zool Maybe you can tell us a little bit about your own history. When did you first come to Canada?

Mr. Kohaly I came to Canada in 1954 as an independent immigrant in the quota system. At that time there was a quota system—50 from India, and 100 from here and so many from there.

Zool What made you want to come to Canada?

Mr. Kohaly Oh, just curiosity. I wanted to come out of India and this country accepted me so I came to Canada. I found that there was a little problem to start with but later on it was nice and I had a nice time here. And I've made my life quite successful.

Zool Do you regret coming here? Do you wish now you had stayed in India?

Mr. Kohaly No. No, I love this country. I love this country as good as my own country. As a matter of fact I have lived here longer than I have lived in India. So this is my second country.

Zool Tell me about the magazine you used to publish [*The Indo-Canadian*]. What gave you the idea to start the magazine?

Mr. Kohaly Well at that time there was no magazine or newspaper for our community, and we felt that there was a need. As well, there was a need to communicate with the white people. There was no media or whichever media was present like the *Vancouver Province* and the *Vancouver Sun*, they were not writing favourably about us. We didn't want any favour from them, but they should at least write something correctly. We thought that if we had our own paper, we

The Vision of

could project our own image, our own feelings about what our 'good points' are to the Canadian people. That's how we started the magazine. That was the idea, to make a bridge across the Indians and the white people.

Zool I noticed the title you chose for the magazine was 'Indo-Canadian.' Was that the first time that the term 'Indo-Canadian' was used?

Mr. Kohaly No, we had many other titles thought up, but we finally agreed upon this title because it represented both India and Canada. Our emblem [for the magazine] also represented India in Canada. Our logo was a maple leaf and within that we put the *Ishwar Kapilar*. That created a sort of a sign for us that we are Indo-Canadians living in Canada. The magazine was published for about eleven or twelve years. Then I gave up and some other papers like the present Indo-Canadian [a weekly newspaper published in Vancouver] took over the name and became a newspaper in Punjabi.

Zool How was the magazine received?

Mr. Kohaly It was well received. Some of the white people appreciated it and we used to send it to the libraries. They subscribed for it. The subscription was only \$1 per year. Some people didn't even send a subscription, but we still mailed it to them anyway. We had 1,000 copies printed every time and most of them went to MLAs, MPs and the national library and libraries in other provinces. So we had a wide unpaid circulation. We were happy that we could publish the magazine for as many years as we did. We had nice articles which were of general interest and they introduced our culture to Canadians who appreciated it very much.

Zool From your experience, do you find that the younger people these days are



Early 1900s - South Asian men employed at a sawmill

trying to do more cultural things, or do you find that there is a problem there and that they don't produce enough creative work?

Mr. Kohaly Well, there has been a gap between the interests of our generation and those of the younger generation. Though we had our [Sikh] temples here, later on the Hindu temple came and the mosques came. But still there was no real interest shown by the elder people in their children because they [the parents] were struggling for their livelihoods. The young people were left on their own to survive by whichever way they could. Actually we didn't guide them the way we should have and as we would have in India and in Pakistan. There the family is a unit and there the elders have contact with younger people all the time and they rub off on each other. Here we had nothing to rub off on each other because we thought that our children were our responsibility to educate about our community, our culture. We thought that they get enough education from Canadian schools and Canadian society, so we lost them. One generation was completely lost because they didn't get anything from the temples. They would go there and there was nothing there in their language [English] that they could easily understand. So when one generation is neglected, the following generation, naturally, is neglected too. Now the elders are taking more interest in the young boys and girls. They have classes for them and I think it will take another generation or so to bring

them back so that they feel proud of themselves. The pride has to come back. It is not enough that they know about our culture, the pride has to be there.

Zool What can our communities do to bring back that pride? What can the leaders of our community do today?

Mr. Kohaly Well, they should have more programs and functions where young people are involved or they are given a greater chance to show themselves. There are a lot of programs going on now but they need to be publicized or spread out more often in the general community and not exclusively for say, Punjabis or Bengalis. You see, we are fractionalised community. In one of the editorials I wrote for the *Indo-Canadian* a long time ago, I spoke about government grants being given to each individual group [within the Indian community]. I felt at the time that this was destroying us [as a community]. It was as if "I am not associating with the Gujerati [person] because he has his own grant and he doesn't care about us." If there were common grants to all of the [Indo-Canadian] groups combined, they could say, "Here's the money. Do something with it."

We need common programs or collective programs where we know what it is that the Iraqi [community] is thinking so we know what their dances represent and they know ours. At that time, we felt that these grants were not good for our community. But if each one can get his own money to play with, why shouldn't they take it? We should not depend on grants. We should have a common fund for our community and we should use that fund to have the programs that everyone can join in and display their culture. India is a big continent and it does not have one culture, even though we call the country Hindustan. Each [Indian] province has its own way of life and its own culture. I believe that all the cultures should be all displayed so that we can say, "We know Gujerati culture; we know South

Inderjit Kohaly

When you know the differences, you love them because they belong to you, you belong to them.

Indian culture. But they are so different." We lived all over India for two years, in Banglore and Madras. I worked in the gold mine. I was a manager there and I learnt the differences between the communities. When you know the differences, you love them because they belong to you, you belong to them. When you come over here, to Canada, Madrasis say, "I'm Tamili, I'm Telegu." These sorts of statements create friction. If we can somehow or other devise a method that we are all from India and look at ourselves as Indians, rather than as Madrasis or Punjabis, then we can find a solution.

Zool In the roughly forty years that you have been in Canada, do you find that there are more issues of racism now than when you first arrived? Do you think that the larger Canadian public is more accepting of Indo-Canadians than they used to be?

Mr. Kohaly The friction is the same, but the level of tolerance is different now. We were not tolerated as nicely forty years ago. We were openly rejected.

I was a double graduate [Mr. Kohaly came to Canada with a Masters' degree in Engineering] but I had to work in the sawmills because they didn't recognize my degrees. In 1956, they started to ease up on this issue a little bit. "If I am a graduate," I argued, "I should be given a better job. I should be utilized properly." So at that time, in 1956, five or six people got engineering jobs and teaching jobs. So, I also got into engineering. At that time, there were hardly any [Indian] shops here. There was an Italian shop where we used to buy our groceries. Gradually our shops opened up and similarly we expanded into every other field.

Now we have discrimination of a different kind. It is very sharp and very cruel. But we now have the strength to stand up to it and face it. Before, they would come and break our windows and nobody could do anything. The police wouldn't do anything. Now we take things into our own hands and they don't come near us. Naturally, the

government acts nice and they are more liberal-minded [than 40 years ago]. We are better prepared for all these things. We are stronger and we are a little united on this count. So they dare not say something or do something which will create trouble. They are smart and we are smart.

Zool Tell me about the archival project you are working on, when did the idea first come to you to do this?

Mr. Kohaly About three years ago, I got this idea. We were sitting together, some friends and I when they said, "Well, you not doing anything. Why don't you start something. It will be worthwhile." So, the idea started there and I thought it would be a small project consisting of about two or three hundred families and it would not be too much. However, to handle two or three hundred families was not as simple as I first thought and it has taken me three years so far. I have done quite a bit of it but I do not see the light at the end of the tunnel as of yet. It will take another year, I think, to finish it.

The main idea was that histories are usually written about people who took a strong part or did something as the head of the community. Nothing is mentioned about the average person who raised his family and who brought up good children who are now very well settled and who are in good positions in the government and the public sector. Why should history neglect them? This idea inspired me. There are people who should be remembered and that's why I started collecting everybody's pictures not just those of known people. Some people went back to India and never came back, so we don't know much about them. But the people who stayed here [from the early 1900s to 1950], I thought that they are worth keeping track of so that they will be remembered for a long, long time.

The earliest [photograph] I have collected is from 1905 and there are many that I haven't come across yet. The families of those who

arrived to Canada from 1900 up to 1950 have been or have to be contacted for their photographs. People are cooperating nicely, but some people feel shy about parting with their originals. I would request of these people that if they don't want to part with their originals, they should go to the nearest photographer and get a negative made. Send us the negative and the cost of the negative and we will pay the cost.



If you are interested in assisting Mr. Kohaly, or if you have access to any of the photographs he is seeking, please contact him at:

11566 Parkwood Place,
North Delta, BC
V4C 7L1

1914 - Funeral of Bibi Hamam Kaur, highly respected wife of Bhai Bhag Singh, president of the Khalsa Diwan Society. She died suddenly in childbirth, leaving two children in the care of Bibi Kaurtar Kaur—one of only a handful of women in Vancouver at the time. Her husband, Balwant Singh, was away in India. Now she was responsible for her own children as well as the children of Bibi Hamam Kaur.



Photo courtesy of I. Kohaly

ਵੈਨਕੂਵਰ ਸੱਥ

Vancouver Sath

“In our view, art is subordinate to life. Life does not exist so that artists can create their art, rather art exists because of life.”

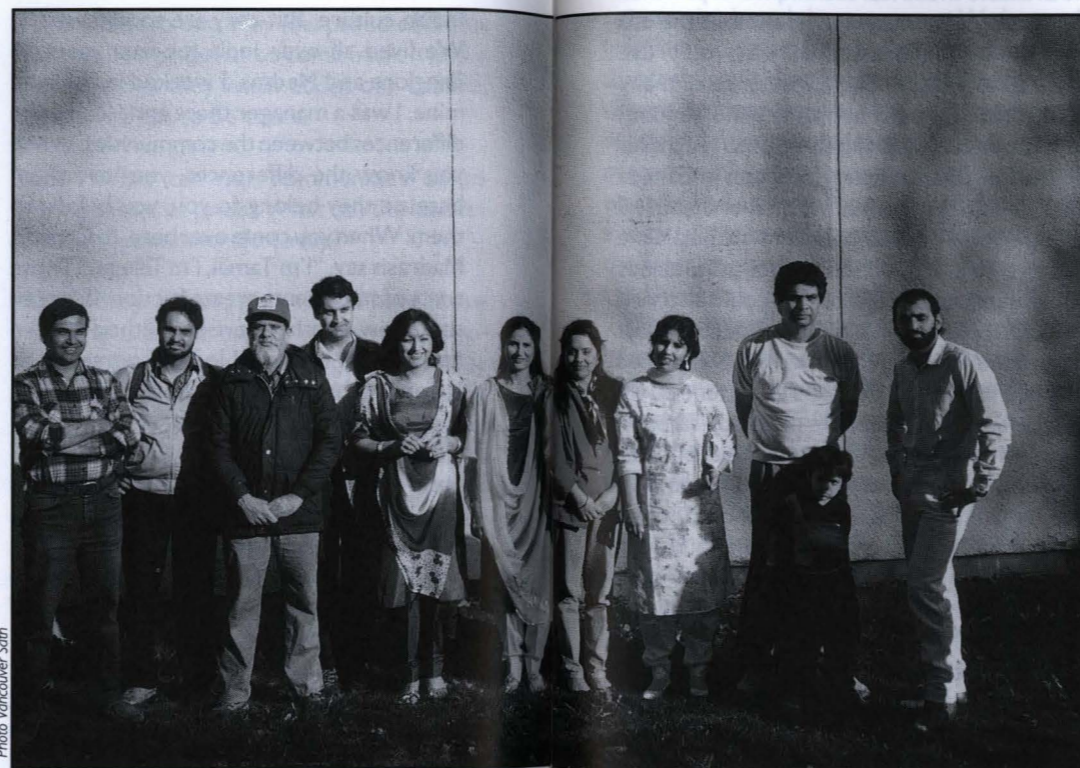


Photo: Vancouver Sath

Vancouver Sath — Sadhu Binning, Sukhwant Hundl, Makhan Tut, Armanpal Sara, Jas Binning, Jagdish Binning, Harjinder Sangra, Anju Hudal, Sukhwinder Takhar.

Introduction

Vancouver Sath was started as an informal discussion forum by a group of politically conscious Punjabi writers and community activists. Prior to **Sath** there was the **Punjabi Literary Association** in Vancouver, which provided the opportunity for concerned writers and intellectuals to discuss and explore not only literary and cultural matters, but many social and political issues as well. However, during the 1981-1982 year, the atmosphere in that organization deteriorated to a point where no genuine discussion was possible. Also some of us had been struggling to keep **Watno Dur**, a monthly Punjabi literary and cultural magazine alive for the last few years. We wanted something else, something different, to happen in the Punjabi literary and cultural circles. Moreover, we felt during that period that numerous issues that demanded serious attention were arising as a result of

the demographic growth of the community. Those of us who eventually came together to form **Sath** were already actively involved in ongoing struggles such fighting against racism, and for farm workers' rights. We shared a common ideology and were socially very close to each other.

Towards the end of 1982, we started informal but regular weekly meetings to discuss social, political and literary issues. The main focus of our community at the time was Punjab because the situation there was beginning to slip towards the present day problem. It was only natural that Punjabis living here would feel concern about the situation back home. However, the degree of this concern was, and still is, such that people didn't pay attention to the problems facing us as an immigrant community in a different geographical, economical and social environ-

ment. There was an urgent need to understand the problems faced by the younger generation growing up here: the effects of racism on the individual and the community; the economic exploitation of new immigrants; the abuse of women and children in our families and so on. We felt that if we didn't pay sufficient attention to these issues, we would eventually, and in actuality, become the very low ebb of this society which was perhaps the hidden desire of its ruling class.

In order to work towards this goal, we decided to give a formal structure to our informal gatherings. We wanted to avoid all the structural problems that organizations usually encounter. We decided against having a conventional structure of presidents, secretaries and other hierarchical positions. We also decided against any formal membership for this organization. The idea was that whoever agrees with the goals and is willing to work towards them could join. Every member was entitled to equal credit for the work done. Our idea was that instead of working for the organization or some individuals, we would work together for our shared, common goals. The only reason to come and work in this group would be that one wanted to do that work without expecting anything in return. There were no strings attached. Whenever somebody, for whatever reason, wanted to stop working he or she could simply get up and go. With these kinds of ideas in our minds, we quite naturally thought about the *saths* in Punjabi villages. They have no formal structure and everybody is free to say one's peace and is free to come and go as one pleases. We decided to call our organization **Sath** and for our local identification we added **Vancouver** in front of it. Thus, with **Vancouver Sath** we felt connected to our past and yet part of our contemporary place and time.

After formalizing in the beginning of 1983, the first task we collectively undertook was to produce a number of articles on the following issues: Punjabi immigrants and the type of employment they get; BC's Solidarity Movement against the anti-labour legislation of the Socred [Social Credit] government; the

growing dangers of the Punjab situation and its effects on the community here; and video and entertainment in the Punjabi community. These articles were locally published in **Watno Dur**, **Canada Darpan** and some were also reproduced in magazines and newspapers in Punjab as well. We, as a collective, also wrote reports and published interviews on the community's struggle against exploitation and racism. While we worked on these articles and tried to get a clear grasp of the issues faced by the Indo-Canadian Community, we continued to debate the usefulness of the printed medium for communication. We realized that most of the Punjabis were not in the habit of reading serious articles in the best of times, let alone at a time when they were simply too involved in their daily struggles to establish themselves in a new land. This realization led us to experiment with theatre.

Towards a Clear Direction for Theatre

The theatrical activities in the Indo-Canadian Community began in 1972 with a short one act play produced by the Punjabi Cultural Association of Vancouver. Theatre was kept alive in Vancouver by various organizations in the face of numerous difficulties. The pace, however, was very slow. Plays were produced periodically. People would gather strength to do theatre but often exhausted themselves with one or two productions. Often, mainly due to the lack of resources and direction, there were rifts in the organizations and it took a long time to reorganise. Some of us involved in **Vancouver Sath** were directly or indirectly part of these efforts over the years, and were aware of the difficulties involved. While working on **Watno Dur** for the last few years, we debated about these difficulties. Numerous questions arose from these discussions. It was felt that serious attention had to be paid to a number of issues in order to do Punjabi theatre in Canada on a continual basis. To build a solid base for theatre in Canada, it was necessary for an organization to have defined and declared goals, and a very clear idea of its own strengths and weaknesses. Since we were aware of a host of past historical, economic and social obstacles, we concluded that there were very limited possibilities of building Punjabi theatre based on the simple desire to entertain people. We had repeatedly witnessed the efforts of many talented and genuine people in the community end in frustration. We debated some of the following questions. Why do theatre? Who is the audience? What were the limitations of available resources? And which traditions should be followed?

The process of finding answers to these questions led **Vancouver Sath** people

towards a relatively clear direction for Punjabi theatre in Canada. It was obvious that there was no Canadian Punjabi theatrical tradition that we could follow. It also became obvious that we could not build theatre solely based on either the Punjabi and/or Indian tradition, or on the tradition of English theatre in Canada alone. We needed to get direction, help and inspiration from both traditions in order to create a distinct Punjabi theatre in Canada.

The very first question that we faced was why go through so much pain to do theatre? Why not simply wait for the time when the flow of economic fluency would make it possible for professional Punjabi companies to exist? It was not at all difficult for us to decide this matter. We could easily imagine the type of theatre that professional companies, based wholly on the principal of profit, would do. But **Vancouver Sath** was, and continues to be, a part of a literary tradition which believed that literature and art should be created for the betterment of humanity. As a group of conscious people, we felt that as our other activities were directed towards creating a better balanced, just society, our theatrical and cultural activities should do the same.

We were aware of the criticism that we degraded art and literature when we said that art should exist in the service of life. But, we were never fully convinced by this criticism. In our view, art and literature are subordinate to life. Life does not exist so that artists can create their art, rather art exists because of life. Art and literature depict the beauty and coarseness of life in a way that makes humans fond of beauty and ardent opponents of ugliness in life.

Whenever art and literature are discussed in this manner, the critics claim that it is an effort to lessen the importance of aesthetics in art and literature. How artistic a piece of literature or art is and how it affects its audience depends on many different things, such as the state of art in a given society in which the piece has been created, the artist's ability and knowledge, available resources for the creation and presentation of that piece, and so on. Thus, Modern Punjabi theatre was not possible three hundred years ago, regardless of the fact that there may have been thousands of people who had a genuine commitment to theatre. In our view, the significance of art and literature is increased when seen in connection to life.

By declaring this, we as artists did not separate ourselves

from life around us but become one with life. We could look at hundreds of thousands of examples of art and literature in the West which were alienated from life, and were created by people who were themselves alienated from life. If we, as Punjabi artists, were not an intimate part of the life around us, or if we were to become alienated while living here, then our views of art and literature would automatically change. But, until that unfortunate moment happens why should we, for the sake of fashion, create art that was alienated from our society? We understood that art and literature should be developed within its social context, and the highly acclaimed art and literature of the world is a proof of this view. To our good fortune, we found many people, not only from the Indo-Canadian community, but from the larger Canadian community who agreed with our views, and who provided us with much needed moral support.

It was also clear to us that the absence of Punjabi theatre in Canada also meant the absence of a Punjabi theatre audience. One must remember that the majority of the immigrants in our community have come from Punjabi villages and until the mid-seventies, there were not many opportunities in the villages to be exposed to modern theatre. With this in mind, we needed for building Punjabi theatre in Canada was to identify the audience for whom this theatre was to be developed. It was not difficult to see that for the Punjabis the most important thing was the content and especially the language of a film or play. They did not pay much attention to modern techniques used in developing the film or play. The most entertaining piece for them was one that they could relate to, directly or indirectly. The more closely related the subject, the more they would enjoy the piece. This is why one could easily understand why a Punjabi audience was as much, if not more, delighted with technically primitive Punjabi films, as they were with technically

superior Hindi or English films. The time had not yet arrived (perhaps still not arrived) when a Punjabi audience would accept or reject a Punjabi film or play based solely on its technical presentation. To say this is not to insult the tastes of a Punjabi audience, but to present a stage in its development. We needed to develop our theatre on sound foundations and we needed to create a serious audience for that theatre as well. The only way to achieve this was to begin at the very first stage.

We arrived at the conclusion that it is not necessary to go beyond one's means to use all the available theatrical techniques to produce Punjabi plays. If the resources allowed the use of certain techniques, then we would use them, by all means. The experience of many small theatre groups in and around Vancouver's larger community helped us to reach this conclusion. Like other large centres in Canada and America, Vancouver was full of theatrical activities of all types, sizes and shapes. One could go to a production that cost hundreds of thousands of dollars, or one could also visit numerous places where the production cost may not have been more than a few hundred dollars. From other people's experiences, we concluded that to become naked by stretching one's feet farther than the sheet of cloth allotted was not a very wise thing to do. We also felt that theatrical activities should not be delayed until we were in a position to use available techniques and more suitable venues. The whole point was not to fit the Punjabi theatre into the available techniques, but rather to fit the techniques to the needs of Punjabi theatre. Consequently, we decided that the development of theatre should be undertaken based on our own strengths.

As mentioned earlier, the structure and dynamics of the group were also discussed thoroughly. By keeping in mind the structural problems faced by other organizations, we came to the conclusion that all members should be at an equal level. There should be no 'star' or 'director' or any other kind of hierarchy. Each active member would share in the decision making. As far as it was practically possible, each activity would be handled collectively. It would not be a conventional structure where some people carried chairs and others sat on them. The person sitting on the chair would also carry it. No participant should ever feel that (s)he was working for someone else. Rather the feeling should always be that (s)he was working for the common goal of the

A scene from the play *Picket Line*.

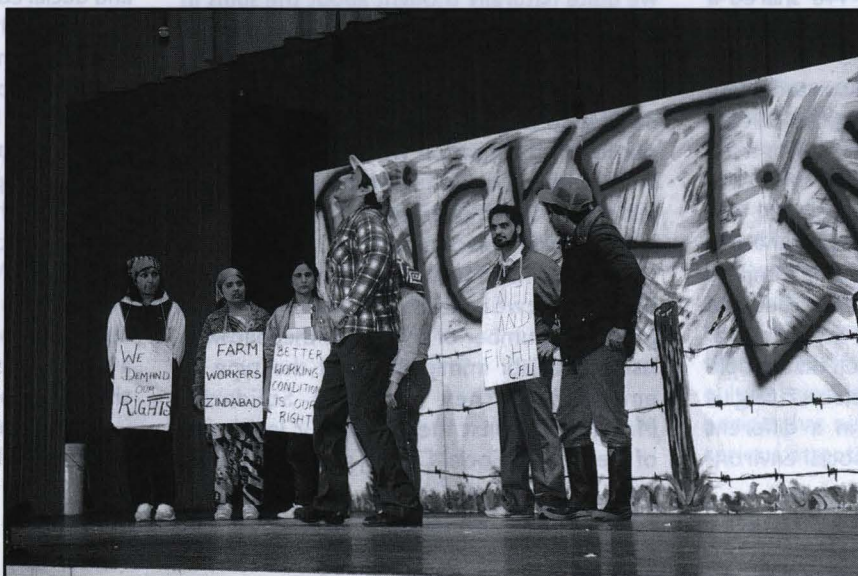


Photo Vancouver Sath

organization, and to achieve his or her personal artistic goal. Whenever a member felt otherwise, he or she should raise this question in the organization. Each member was to be fully responsible for the well being of the organization in all its aspects.

While we were still at the stage of debating these issues we had an opportunity to meet the soul of Punjabi theatre, Mr. Gursharan Singh. He was invited by IPANA to visit Canada with his theatre group, **Amritsar Natak Kala Kendar (Drama Art Centre)**. We had a chance to see some of his plays and to discuss with him the various aspects of starting a community-based theatre group. We learned from him, in detail, how he had established his theatre, first in Amritsar and then in remote villages all over Punjab. We were extremely happy and surprised to learn that our concept of community theatre was quite similar to what he had already done. He had developed a theatre that could be easily performed with the least number of props, since none were readily available in Punjab's villages.

Obviously, this chance to meet with him gave us enormous confidence in our conception of how to develop theatre in the Punjabi community here. We were lucky to have some members of the **Punjabi Cultural Association** join us. These people had been involved in cultural activities, especially folk dance Bhangra, since 1971-72, and these were the people who had started the tradition of Punjabi theatre in Canada back in 1972. With this addition, **Vancouver Sath** was ready to take on the responsibility of developing Punjabi theatre. In the beginning of 1984, **Sath** decided to produce its first plays.

The Beginning and the Development of Sath Theatre

The first difficulty we encountered was in deciding which scripts to choose. Clearly, our first priority was to do a play that dealt with life here, but we had no appropriate script available to us. On the other hand, the Punjab situation by this time had taken a more serious turn, and it was simply not possible to think about any other issue.

Finally, we decided on two plays: one, written by a **Sath** member, Makhan Tut, was entitled, **Punjab Di Awaz (The Voice of Punjab)**; and the second, written by Gursharan Singh was entitled, **Kursi Morcha te Hava Vich Latkde Lok (Chair, Battlefield and People Dangling in the Air)**. Both were presented at an elementary school auditorium in Vancouver in March, 1984. The players who took part in both of these plays were: Makhan Tut, Sukhwant Hundal, Balwinder Rode, Gurcharan Tallewalia, Inderjit Rode, Paul Binning, Bhavkhandan and Sadhu Binning. The response from the community was very

encouraging. Later, both of these plays were staged by **Sath** in Williams Lake and Quesnel, BC.

Picket Line

Sath members, as mentioned before, were also actively involved in the struggle of BC's farm workers. In the summer of 1984, there was a strike by the farm workers in a lower mainland mushroom farm in Langley. Workers on strike were mainly Punjabi women who showed remarkable determination to win workers' rights from their employer. Along with many other progressive people from the community, we joined these workers on the picket line on a regular basis. We had a first hand chance to learn about their problems. These women were going through tremendous personal revolutions at the time. Coming from a feudal background, it was a giant step for them to stand on a picket line with placards around their necks. It meant throwing away values established centuries ago to take on a new set of values in an industrial society. They were faced by many doubts and fears. The employers, who were also Punjabis, wanted to continue to deal with them as they dealt with women in the feudal society. The employers attempted to use religious affiliations, regional loyalties and relationships to coerce them, but the women stood their ground and supported each other.

By observing them on the picket line and being a part of their struggle, we (Sadhu Binning and Sukhwant Hundal) wrote our first play, **Picket-Line**. This play was staged in November, 1984 along with Gursharan Singh's **Havai Gole (Air-Balls)**.

Picket Line provided us with the opportunity to test our theoretical views on a practical level. It was written and developed collectively. All decisions were made collectively. The people playing the eleven characters in this play helped each other in developing the characters and deciding on costumes and other matters. Each artist first worked on understanding his or her own character in relation to the other characters. Each person developed the character on his/her own and the others pointed out any weaknesses and gave suggestions that would improve the character. In this production, there were five women, three of whom had never been on the stage before. One was Canadian born and had difficulty with the Punjabi language. In total twelve people—Makhan Tut, Jagdish Binning, Rachpal, Anju Hundal, Jas Binning, Inderjit Rode, Gurcharan Tallewalia, Sukhwant Hundal, Amanpal Sara, Harjinder Sangra, Paul Binning and Sadhu Binning—were involved in the production of this play—eleven performers and one coordinator. In the process of creating equality among participants, **Sath** experi-

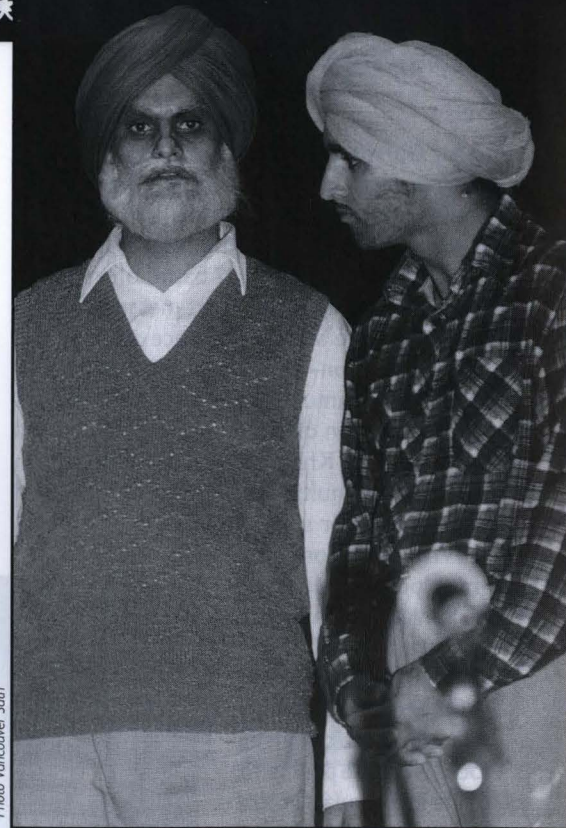


Photo Vancouver Sath

A scene from the play *Maluka's First University*.

mented (it was definitely a new thing for us) with the direction of the play. In the place of one director, a successful play was produced with an collective effort. Some contemporaries described it, contrary to our view, as a 'directionless' play.

Picket Line was a collective effort from the writing stage to its presentation. The understanding among participants and their genuine commitment to their work made an extremely difficult task relatively easy. **Picket Line** was later staged in English at the 1986 **Vancouver Folk Music Festival**. The English production opened up many new doors for **Vancouver Sath**. The most important achievement was that we were able to involve a number of second generation people—Pindy Gill, Nick Sihota, Sital Dhillon and Bhavna Bhangu—in our activities. We also received one thousand dollars for doing this play, a totally new experience for us—getting paid for what we wanted to do anyway. Similarly, because it was in English, the media also paid some attention to our activities. On the national scene, a long interview with **Sath** members was published in the magazine **Fuse**. Locally, CBC and CJOR radio programs interviewed the writers of the play. Dave Barret, the ex-premier of BC, and a talk show host on CJOR at the time, made an emotional statement that **Sath** had made a qualitative addition to the Canadian culture.

Other Plays

In 1985, Gursharan Singh of **Amritsar Natak Kala Kendar** was once again invited to come to Canada. **Vancouver Sath** members had a chance to share with him the experience of the past two years. **Sath** produced **Tootan Wala Khoo (A Well With Mulberry Trees)**

under Gursharan Singh's direction at this time. This play was Gursahran Singh's adaptation of a novel of the same name by Sohan Singh Sital. **Tootan Wala Khoo** told a tragic tale of the partition of Punjab in 1947 based on religious politics. The play had a direct message for the Punjabi people who were once again in the similar situation—they were being forced to divide the community again based on religion. The production of this play enraged the local proponents of Khalistan, and its presentation on the local multicultural television channel was blocked for six months.

While the ongoing grave political situation of Punjab was a major concern to all of us and **Tootan Wala Khoo** was another effort to address that situation, our main focus were the problems of life in Canada. One of the most serious issues faced by the community was, and is, the manifold exploitation of women, often through violence. In the fall of 1985, Sath produced a play called **Lattan De Bhoot (Ghost That Can Only Be Handled With Force)** by Sadhu Binning and Sukhwant Hundal. The play was



Photo Vancouver Sath

Harjinder Sangra and Sukhwant Hundal accepting a heritage award on behalf of Vancouver Sath from Mayor Gordon Campbell.

based on a very tragic but true story of a woman who was forced to sponsor relatives for immigration purposes against her will. She was made to work like a slave in the house and in a restaurant without getting anything in return. She was physically beaten on a regular basis. A co-worker in the restaurant eventually learned of her plight and helped her escape from the clutches of her relatives. The play helped to intensify the ongoing discussion of this issue in the community.

The next two areas which **Sath** decided to explore were the problems faced by the elderly in their Canadian surroundings, and the ever-present issue of arranged marriages. To make people aware of the day to day difficulties faced by the Punjabi elderly, especially outside the home environment, a play called **Havelian Te Parkan (Mansions and Parks)** by Sadhu Binning and Sukhwant Hundal was written and produced in early 1987. At the same time, a second play called **Kihda Viah? (Whose Marriage?)** by Sadhu Binning and Sukhwant Hundal was produced. The play questioned parents' attitudes concerning marriage, and pointed out that the views of the young people whose marriage was being planned, were being totally ignored. We in-

entionally poked fun at parents and took the side of the young. The stage production of the play was recorded on a video and aired on the local multicultural channel. As expected, it started a lively discussion in the community.

In the fall of 1987, the women members of the **Vancouver Sath** were invited to do a play in a conference on women's issues. Anju Hundal, Jagdish Binning, Harjinder Sangra and Pindy Gill collectively wrote and produced a play entitled **Different Age Same Cage**. The male characters were also played by them. It showed three different stages in the life of Punjabi woman. While young, she is treated as a lower class of human being in comparison to her brother. In a marriage situation she is slave to her husband. In her old age she has to look after her grandchildren and when not needed, she is pushed out of the house due to economic pressures. The play was a hit with the audience and has been presented more than two dozen times at various locations since then. Originally written in English, it was later translated into Punjabi and was done as a street

play in the Punjabi market on Main street in Vancouver in the summer of 1989.

In early 1988, Sath produced another play about the situation of Punjabi farm workers. The focus this time was the use of pesticides in the agricultural industry. Most of the immigrant farm workers had not dealt with these kinds of dangerous chemicals in their prior life experience, though most had come from an agricultural background. Prior to the play, numerous cases of pesticide poisoning and deaths were recorded in the Lower Fraser Valley. A much discussed case in the media was of Jarnail Singh Deol, a young man who had died as a direct result of pesticides. A major obstruction to dealing with the danger of pesticides was the 'old world' loyalties held by the workers. The workers tended to be loyal to and trust the labour contractors and farmers, often for no other reason than that they shared the same cultural background. The play entitled **A Crop of Poison** questioned old feudal values and loyalties and encouraged farm workers to deal with matters in a more rational manner. Both plays **A Crop of Poison** and **Picket Line** were performed in Mission, Abbotsford, Langley, Surrey and Vancouver as part of a tour organized

by the **Deol Agricultural Education and Research Society** and **The Canadian Farmworkers Union**. At the end of the tour, **A Crop of Poison** was also performed in English at the Vancouver East Cultural Centre as part of the **MayWorks Festival**.

In the following year **A Lesson of a Different Kind** by Sadhu Binning was produced by **Sath**. It highlighted the exploitation of immigrant janitorial workers. This production has since been repeated a number of times since.

A second play dealing with the issue of violence against women **Not A Small Matter** was written by Anju Hundal, Jagdish Binning, Harjinder Sangra, Sukhwant Hundal and Sadhu Binning. This play has been staged both in Punjabi and English at a number of locations and has also been produced as a video play sponsored by **People's Law School of Vancouver**.

Epilogue

In 1988, **Sath** members translated **Maluka**, a novel based on the early experience of Indians living and working in BC. The author Sadhu Singh Dhami, who lives in Switzerland, was invited to launch the book. A play based on this novel **Maluke Da Paihla Vishav Vidialia (First University of Maluka)** by Sadhu Binning and Sukhwant Hundal was produced and staged in Vancouver.

In 1989, The Indo-Canadian community commemorated the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Komagata Maru incident. Vancouver Sath prepared a photo exhibition and an entire issue of the Punjabi magazine **Watan** was devoted to the event. A play **Samunday Sher Nal Larrai (A Battle with the Sea Lion)** by Sadhu Binning and Sukhwant Hundal was also written for this event.

Since 1984, **Sath** has produced more than a dozen original plays which deal with the Indo-Canadian experience. Along with theatre, **Sath** has continuously carried out other activities such as workshops, seminars, book launches, translation work and publications. All this has been achieved without any kind of funding from any government or private agency (except a grant to start the magazine **Ankur**) without having a permanent place to meet or rehearse and by people who have been holding full time jobs or are full time students.

Vancouver Sath continues to create art in the service of life!



Sadhu Binning is a writer, a poet and a member of Vancouver Sath. For more information about Vancouver Sath, please write: PO Box 67681, Station O Vancouver, BC V5W 3V2



to drum is

Trichy Sankaran in conversation with Salvador Ferreras

in Vancouver during Simon Fraser University's
World Percussion Intensive June 8, 1993

Photos by Tom Stratton

Salvador It's a pleasure to have a moment to speak with you. Many of us who have known of your activities in Canada for some years may not be as familiar with your training prior to your arrival in this country, can you tell us something about your ranking and any other academic training you've received?

Trichy I left India at age 29 with the ranking of Vidwan or master. We follow a ranking system in India, according to the number of public performances the artist has presented as well as how the musician is ranked by senior musicians and peers. I got my top rank evaluated by a panel of well known artists assembled by All India Radio in the year 1964, a ranking which also determines fee structure and the like. I had my debut at the age of 13 performing with the Alathoor brothers, as well as performing very early in my career with my master Guru Sri Palani Subramania Pilai, consequently I come from a very traditional background and that tradition is very important to me. I also completed a BA and Master's degree at Madras University, in Economics. My master didn't really like me getting involved in an education, but this was like any other situation around the world, especially in the West where a musician is looked upon as what are they going to do for a living. This uncertainty prevailed even within my own family, particularly my father felt that I should get an education. In those days there was no real degree available in music, this turned out to be a blessing in disguise when I came here, to be

not just to pound...



able to do research, to write and lecture in English which was the language we were educated in. We never spoke English in conversation because there was no need to but the subjects were all taught in English.

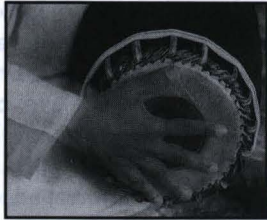
Salvador How did your eventual arrival at York University in Toronto come about?

Trichy I came at the invitation of York University...the invitation came from Professor John Higgins, a Carnatic music specialist and the newly appointed director of a new World Music program. They wanted Indian music to be a part of it. When John, an accomplished Carnatic singer, who happened to be in India doing some research, came to see me at one of my concerts he suggested I consider the invitation. I had no idea where Toronto was, I didn't know what this country was like and I hesitantly said I might try it for six months or a year. That is how I came, I was the founding member of the India music program at York University. In the beginning I was teaching one on one, in the traditional way, performance teaching, I did no lecturing. Due to the growing popularity of the department and my own teaching I agreed to stay for one more year and at that time began to lecture. My first assignment from my director was to talk to the students about Mridangam solos. Can you imagine that? I said to him, "John what are you talking about? People seldom talk about it this, I can play any number of solos for you but to talk about it? Well, I'll try to

do it." It was there and then that someone said that 'the Vidwan was lured into being a Professor.' I was eventually to become a one man Indian music department.

Salvador What kind of interest was there in Toronto in the early '70s for the type of Indian music you wished to present?

Trichy I was the founder of the **Tyagaraja Festival** in Toronto in 1972, longing for this tradition and really homesick. As a 14 year old boy I had performed in front of my Guru at that festival held in Tiruvairu, Tanjore district in South India. It is a great festival held in honour of this composer. Musicians really throng to this tiny village to pay homage to this great composer. I had played at that festival almost every year until I came here. I had been teaching some Indian friends. We would gather for long sessions on Sundays at one of their homes. I casually mentioned that we could do this same thing (hold a festival) on a small scale, and that I would take the leadership and give some advice on how to run this festival. It didn't, I stressed, have to be very big, it could be really small—that was 1972. We then pulled out some recordings and selected some possible performers. We eventually invited John Higgins and some local amateur musicians to play some Tyagaraja compositions in the afternoon (of the festival) and in the evening I performed a concert with John Higgins was probably attended by something over 50 people. We prepared some



food and it was a fantastic event on a dreary winter day.

The very next year I proposed it to the music department at York University. The new chairman, who had no idea what I was talking about, said 'OK!' The first year the entire audience was Indian and when we decided to make it larger even more Indian residents came. I encouraged many of the semiprofessional amateur musicians who had studied back home in India and who had other professions in Canada, to participate as well—that was in 1973. The community response was very warm and encouraging most of the time. After 1973, the local Indian Association was interested in taking over this thing. I was getting quite busy at the University during this period, and to me it didn't really matter who took over from me all I wanted was to keep the spirit of the festival alive. I gave it to them and to this day we hold this festival at York. I'm in charge of giving them space and inviting people. I was also interested in seeing that my Indian music students got an opportunity to see the spirit of this festival and to see the people, the Indian community coming to the University.

Salvador When Indian audiences see Vidwan Sankaran come back to perform, are you able to perceive their expectations of you?

Trichy I always carry that in my consciousness. I know what the tradition is and I respect my tradition. I believe that tradition should be something very strong yet at the same time an artist should be creative and should establish his own individual style. I am highly convinced of that. I know it is a very competitive field but I live up to my mark and more than up to their expecta-

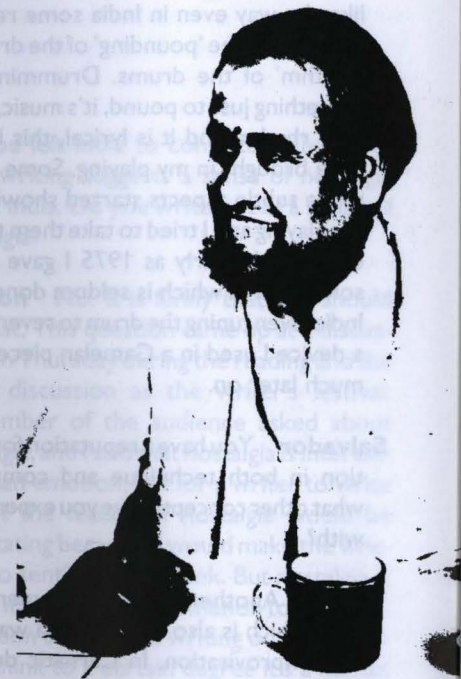
tions. The best compliment I have recently received was by an Indian newspaper reviewing a performance a couple of years. The critic said, "we miss him in his absence but even though he only comes once a year he really reminds us of his illustrious Guru Palani Subramania Pilai." To me tradition remains very important but I do introduce new things in a very subtle way.

Salvador Are a Classical Indian musician's interpretations of classical repertoire affected by prolonged exposure to Western musical concepts?

Trichy I would say that in a positive way if at all. My exposure to other musical cultures in the West has greatly broadened my own perception of Indian music. Honestly I didn't even know much about Tabla drumming principles when I was in India, even though I had played with Tabla players.

Salvador There is a perception among some Westerners that our 'classical' music has become irrelevant to many of our aspiring artists, that it shares little with our common lives and aspirations, and that it is not a contemporary expression of 'our' culture. Is this the case with Indian Classical music too?

Trichy In India when we talk about the classical tradition, it is a highly respected and revered tradition by musicologists, educators, students and performing artists, yet it is not the most popular music, let's face that. The percentage of people that go to classical concerts is in fact very small relative to that of Rock, Pop and of course Film music. In fact I see that people here do not view Indian Classical music as non-relevant, at least in my teaching I've come across a



wide variety of students with diverse backgrounds who have come to study with me for a better understanding of music or rhythm in order to better their own musical skills. But I can also see how classical music suffers with the emergence of the contemporary schools. Things have a way of going wrong when musicians try to attempt sophisticated or experimental music forms without a solid base or foundation.

Salvador Were you composing new works before your arrival here or was that a development following your university appointment?

Trichy Well, I introduce a number of drum compositions in my drum playing but there it goes largely unnoticed, it's part of the performance. I was very interested in compositional ideas as early as 1974, after coming here I became aware of a big difference in how composition is viewed in India. Because I've always taken my drumming to new heights and different dimensions I didn't like the way even in India some reviewers referred to the 'pounding' of the drums, the 'rhythm' of the drums. Drumming is not something just to pound, it's music, not just only rhythm and it is lyrical, this is what I have brought in my playing. Some of these more subtle aspects started showing up in my playing and I tried to take them to higher degrees. As early as 1975 I gave a totally solo concert which is seldom done even in India, even tuning the drum to several scales, a device I used in a Gamelan piece I wrote much later on.

Salvador You have a reputation for innovation in both technique and composition, what other concepts have you experimented with?

Trichy Another concept I experimented with which is also rare in India was that of free improvisation. In Carnatic drumming you don't play out of time so this was another one of my bold gestures. The audience reaction to these 'new' elements was very favourable and these are elements of my playing that I have experienced from living in this culture.

Salvador I'm looking at a programme of new Gamelan compositions you recently performed in Toronto. Is this a new stream we can expect to see more from?

Trichy I've been encouraged to write compositions for Gamelan, even my first piece was quite successful, that one and my more recent two others will in fact be broadcast

by the CBC in September 7 on **Arts National**. I have great interest in several other idioms such as **Buka** [a Toronto based multinational drum ensemble]. As a performer it was a tremendous experience for me to share my traditions with say African drummers or musicians from many countries in the various World Drum Festivals. Another new development will be that of performing with the **Winnipeg Chamber Orchestra** who has commissioned a work for me by James Tenney to be premiered next year.

Salvador How did Gamelan music come to fascinate you?

Trichy Well, actually it came about out of a completely different research. I had for some time been very interested in studying Buddhism in Bali. My visit there revealed a very different practice than that I had grown up with but one that nevertheless fascinated me. In musical terms I became very interested in the Balinese approach to rhythmic interpretation and organization but did not pursue it until much later in Toronto. I was asked by John Siddall, one of the founders of the Evergreen Gamelan club, to write a work for the group that the group hoped to realize through a composition grant from the Canada Council. That was the beginning of my explorations in Gamelan.

Salvador Your bio describes collaborations with some very well known, highly respected and somewhat bold jazz performers, how did these come to be?

Trichy The collaborations came about through some contemporary music performances I was involved with at Mills College in San Francisco. I had been involved in some electroacoustic projects that led to work with David Rosenboom and later Anthony Braxton, Charlie Haden and Vinny Golia. Most of those performers have very unique approaches to improvisation which I enjoyed interacting with both from a players point of view and also as an extension of the many musical experiences I seek to share with musicians of all cultures.

Salvador What about your teaching, are you forging frontiers as you are in performance?

Trichy My interest in rhythm pedagogy has led me to develop a course combining jazz traditions and my own Indian techniques and their relationship to improvisation. I'm happy that I am able to help my students at both the graduate and undergraduate level,

glad that performers such as John Wyre [director of **World Drums**] have brought together such a vast array of talent to share in a wonderful learning environment. All these experiences feed into my teaching. During the drum festivals I shared the stage with Pakistani drummers, Hindustani musicians, improvised with Sri Lankan drummers, performers leaving aside all political differences. Only Fine Arts can bring people together, I think we have practically proven that though I don't know how many people have actually perceived it. There are common goals for universal education.

Salvador You're just putting the final touches to your new book **The Rhythmic Principles and Practice of South Indian Drumming** in which you put forth yet another innovation of yours, a notational system of South Indian drumming.

Trichy Yes, even back in India I was interested in ways of relating the 'solkattu' [rhythmic syllable singing] to drum performance. It was here that I really developed it and later used it in the teaching of my students. Yes, this is unique, yet I had questions in my mind as to how this would be received in India where our music is an oral culture. Within the many Mridangam drumming styles in South India there are a number of different approaches to playing, I want my students to understand the difference between these various styles and I think my book is going to take care of that.



Trichy Sankaran is a virtuoso Mridangam player whose mastery of this essential South Indian instrument is recognized worldwide. His first musical training was under his cousin Sri P.A. Venkataraman, later becoming a disciple of the late Sri Palani Subramania Pillai. He made his public debut at age 13. Mr. Sankaran has performed widely throughout Asia, Europe and North America. He has performed outside his traditional styles to collaborate with jazz, world music and contemporary music ensembles. He has two outstanding recordings available on the **Music of the World** label; **Laya Vinyas** (Rhythmic Elaborations) and **Sunada** (Pleasing Sound) with Vina master Karaikudi Subramaniam. Mr. Sankaran is a Professor of Indian Music Studies at York University, he lives in Toronto with his wife Lalitha and daughters Bavani and Subashini.

Salvador Ferreras is a percussionist, teacher and producer living and working in Vancouver.

Trichy Sankaran recordings can be obtained from **Music of the World**
PO Box 3620, Chapel Hill,
North Carolina, USA 27515-3620

the long journey of Rohinton Mistry

Interviewed by Ali Lakhani
at the Vancouver International Writers' Festival



Ali You left India to come to Canada yet your writing suggests a sense of nostalgia about India. Do you write out of a sense of nostalgia?

Rohinton No. It is funny that you should ask that. This question came up at a discussion on Thursday during the reading and the panel discussion as the writer's festival. A member of the audience asked about nostalgia, and I said that nostalgia is interesting as an emotion, but for a writer to write out of the feeling of nostalgia would be debilitating because it would make the writing too sentimental, I think. But nostalgia is a very interesting phenomenon to examine. No, I don't think I am writing out of nostalgia. I think to a certain degree it's a human

ailing—too much nostalgia is like too much guilt. Perhaps the two go hand-in-hand in some ways, but to order one's life or the process of writing around that would not work. I think in Bombay and India, my imagination is engaged by that place still after all these years and I think it is a healthy kind of engagement. It helps me to understand my life there. I suppose the time will come when I will stop writing about Bombay.

Ali You are writing about a world that in a way has all but disappeared. You are from a community that has undergone a lot of transformations, in recent years particularly, and I suppose in a sense every act of creation is an attempt to hold at bay the forces of disintegration, the erosion that occurs through time. In fact this is one of the themes that you explore in your novel. To what extent would you say that your writing is a sort of antidote to amnesia, an attempt to reconstruct the past through memory?

Rohinton Well, I am not consciously setting out to do that. I think there again it is like nostalgia. If I consciously set out to preserve, to be an antidote against forgetfulness, I think the writing would turn into something almost anthropological and a sort of a tourist guide. A sophisticated tourist guide. [laughter]

Still, I suppose it does work in that way. In a sense this novel perhaps will, when the Parsis have disappeared from the face of the earth, will preserve a record of how they lived, to some extent. But that is not my starting point or my goal.

Ali What is your goal, to the extent you do have one?

Rohinton To tell a good story.

Ali Could you speak about your childhood in Bombay? You have evoked in your collection of short stories the close knit Parsi community in Firozsha Baag [in *Tales of Firozsha Baag*]. You have done something similar with the community in Khodadad Building [in *Such A Long Journey*]. Did you live in such a community in India?

Rohinton No. I did not live in a 'baag'. A 'baag' is the conglomeration of apartment buildings usually under the management of the Parsi 'panchayat,' and I did not live in such a 'baag'. But I had friends who inhabited these places and I had the opportunity to observe a little bit of it.

Western eyes often see this closeknit community and the neighbourliness as something very positive, something laudable. And at the same time it can be claustrophobic and intrusive—one has no sense of privacy. Everybody knows everyone else's business.

Ali Did you personally feel this claustrophobia?

Rohinton Yes. Especially during the early teen years.

Ali Is that one of the reasons you eventually left India?

Rohinton Yes. In an indirect sort of way. Leaving India was in a way decided for me by the constant opinions that were being expressed by people around me. When I say 'me,' I mean my whole generation. For example, after finishing college in Bombay or elsewhere in India, one had to go abroad for higher studies. That was the mark of success. If possible, one had to find a job after finishing a Masters or a PhD in the US or in England, get a job and settle down there. That was how success was defined. So, being brought up in that way, with a sort of lower middle class/middle class mentality; still clinging to the West—I suppose it goes on to this day. So that is why I say that coming to Canada was in some ways decided for me.

Ali Do you feel that other people's aspirations for you limited you in some ways? This again appears in your novel in the dilemma between Gustad's aspirations for Sohrab and his rebellion against that?

Rohinton I am going to say 'yes' to your question. My aspirations limited me. But that should not lead to the automatic conclusion the novel is autobiographical, because the same dilemma, the same limitations which I experienced, were experienced by hundreds around me. So Sohrab and Gustad and their confrontation over his refusal to go the Indian Institute of Technology and become an engineer, was played out repeatedly in home after home, in the lives of my friends and their friends. It was unthinkable that a boy should go to college and study English literature, for example. It was unthinkable. It was all right for a girl to do that, get a BA, do some fine arts, learn a little piano, get married, and then it wouldn't matter if she studied 'useless' things like English literature. But for a boy, he had to study something more substantial, more 'useful,' capable of bringing home a pay cheque. Other things were expected of him—at the very least a Bachelor of Science degree.

Ali I believe that you mentioned that one shouldn't assume that these sort of conflicts that we have just been talking about are autobiographical. But are there portions of your writing that are autobiographical?

Rohinton In a superficial sense, yes. For example, the novel is set in Bombay. I was brought up in Bombay. Sohrab and his father have this ongoing conflict. I had no such deep conflict with my father. I just accepted it that I was going to go to univer-

sity and study science. I did a degree in mathematics. But I never defied anyone. I was not, perhaps, as hot headed as Sohrab. I accepted it that this was the way life was meant to be for me. So I don't even know if that is autobiographical then, because we didn't fight, my father and I.

Ali What about the feelings of someone like Kersi in the short story that deals with his coming to Toronto?

Rohinton There again, the resemblance, the autobiographical connection is superficial. I came to Toronto. I lived in an apartment in Don Mills. But there it ends. And I suppose things I saw and observed and heard may have found a way into the story. But I don't think that is really autobiographical, because there is some kind of transformation that takes place, even with autobiographical details when they become fiction. It would not be accurate, really, to say that they were autobiographical.

Ali You describe in detail customs, rituals, and traditions associated with the Parsi religion. For example, the Towers of Silence, which you describe in your novel. Were these an important part of your background?

Rohinton No, I wouldn't say they were important. They were sort of in the background, to be tolerated. We were all supposedly modern young men and women and, at that time perhaps, there was even something slightly embarrassing about these things. Being a minority and having different customs could make one defensive. And again, the whole thing about the West and aspiring to Western ways, which we did outwardly—we listened to western music: Bob Dylan and Joan Baez, and Crosby Stills and Nash; we read literature that came from England and the US—yet here in the background, there were these supposedly quaint or barbaric practices going on, so one tended to leave them in the background and try to gloss over them.

Ali One of the themes that emerges in your writing is the tension between tradition and modernity. You write with a lot of empathy, I feel, for traditions, for familial bonds. For example, in your novel there is the passage that describes Gustad observing his younger son, Darius using the hammer, and Gustad looks at him with pride and speaks of 'the passing of the hammer from generation to generation.' And similarly in your short stories as well, there is the sense of parental

and filial bonding: in the story of *White Hairs and Cricket*, Kersi's affection for his father, or in the story called *The Collectors*, Dr. Mody's aspirations for his son, Pesi, and how he turns to Jehangir to fulfil some of the aspirations that Pesi has failed to deliver on. Could you comment about this theme in your writing?

Rohinton Yes. Granted this is present, the father/son bonding, everything that you have mentioned, but I think, for me, what was more interesting in the writing of all these things was the attempt by the father—let's say by Gustad by passing on the hammer—these are ways that the individual has to, I think, deal with mortality. I think it is more than father and son. Ultimately, it is of course all futile. Hammer or no hammer, Gustad is going to die and that will be the end of it. I suppose it's the way that Shakespeare wrote in his sonnet: 'So Long lives this...' These are all various attempts to pretend that we can be immortal. And I find that it is very touching to see human beings go about dealing with mortality in these various ways. That is what I think interested me in all those passages.

Ali This reminds me of the passage in your novel where the artist, the pavement artist, senses some discomfort with the wall that he is painting. You state, somewhere in the novel I believe, that the root of all sorrow is in this yearning for permanence, and then the artist comments, He is in a sense acknowledging the fluidity of life there. Do you see detachment as one of the morals of your book?

Rohinton I suppose it comes out of it, although again I would disclaim any attempts to put morals in the book. As I say, tell a good story and that's it, whatever comes out of it is up to the reader.

Ali Even though you resist any attempt to be seen as imposing a moral through the book, I did find that detachment was one of the themes that came through quite strongly. And yet I found it was a compassionate detachment and I was reminded of a passage in Bertrand Russell's *Autobiography* where he writes that a part of ourselves strives for knowledge and truth—and that takes us away from the world—and there is another part of ourselves, our humanity, that keeps us here, and there is this tensions between the two. Can you comment on that?

Rohinton I find that idea appealing. It is sort of like the couplet from Alexander

Pope about how we are between the angels and the beasts, somewhere in between. I can't quote it, I can't remember it, but I think it is from his *Essay on Man*. I like the idea of detachment with a human grounding.

Ali This is a difficult balance to achieve.

Rohinton Perhaps life is the struggle to obtain the balance between these two.

Ali In every instance where values are involved, there appears to be a tension between freedom, on the one hand, and responsibility, on the other. And again a balancing is involved between those two. In some senses I think of 'traditional societies' as emphasizing responsibility more, and what we call 'modern societies' as emphasizing freedom more. Where do you fit into this continuum? How do you resolve the tension between these two? Do you lean more towards freedom or more towards responsibility?

Rohinton I suppose, having been brought up in the old way, where the emphasis was on responsibility as you say, my reaction would be to move towards freedom. This also connects with what I said earlier about those close knit, neighbourly communities which are envied by Western eyes. They are claustrophobic to one who has been brought up there. I suppose the idea of responsibility comes out of those communities. One has to be responsible if one is living at such close range, in such close quarters with so much of humanity.

Ali In the story, *Lend me your Light*, Jamshed and Kersi both leave Firozsha Baag to go to the West, one to New York, the other to Toronto. But their attitudes towards 'home' are quite different. Have you felt the same sort of tensions yourself?

Rohinton I have seen those tensions. I have witnessed them. I suppose between Kersi and Jamshed, the difference involves their way of dealing with a new life, probably relates to their difference in their old lives. Jamshed is from a wealthy family in Bombay—that is evident in the story—and he has probably been brought up in a way where he never saw any of the poverty around him, or if he did see it, it was as part of the urban landscape. Perhaps Kersi was a little bit closer to it than Jamshed. I am simplifying things here a bit.

Ali There is a sense in which your 'roots' are in one place and your 'home' is in another. I am thinking here of your roots being in India, your home being in Canada. I would like to know how successful you feel you have been in making the transition from Bombay to Brampton. Do you feel any tensions between your 'roots' and your 'home'?

Rohinton A friend of mine once said that he had 'portable roots.' He could put them down temporarily, wherever he found himself to be.

Ali Yet, you can never really escape your past, can you?

Rohinton No, I don't think so. And attempts to escape the past in artificial ways, usually lead to more trouble than it is worth. How do I deal with it?

Ali Where is home?

Rohinton Can I take this a step further and wonder if really the position of an immigrant who leaves one country and comes to another is really that unique, if it is really that distinct from the more general human condition, where we—all of us—leave behind a home which we can never return to. And that home could be, let's say, a small town in Ontario, somebody who leaves his or her town in Ontario, a remote suburban place, and moves to Toronto—that person has lost his or her home. The person who leaves behind—and this we all do, we leave behind our childhoods; that also is home.

Ali But we rarely leave behind our cultural environment. There is a difference.

Rohinton Well, the culture of Toronto is a great deal different from the culture of Newfoundland, for example. I suppose the difference is one of degree.

Ali But that belief alone is not enough. It also takes an attitude among the community that you live in, to feel that a place is your home. In Canada, we have a multiculturalism policy. Do you feel that this policy assists or hinders in enabling immigrants to feel that this country is their home?

Rohinton Well, there have been so many good and valid arguments on both sides. I think it is up to the individual to take from multiculturalism what he or she wants to take out of it. It can provide comfort

to some extent, it can ghetto-ise the community, if taken to extremes.

You said that the ability to feel at home depends on the environment, where you find yourself, and of course we are thinking now about prejudice and racism, where one can be made miserable by society. Then I think of the racism that went on in Bombay all around me, and I would find that racism now, thinking back, so much more offensive and hurtful, coming as it did from my own community—and when I say ‘community,’ I don’t mean to say my own community, but the community in Bombay, people who were my classmates, neighbours, my fellow country men, let’s go that far, let’s say my fellow Indians. I am thinking about, first of all, the whole caste system, the most insidious form of racism. I am thinking about all the harassment that went on in schools from the majority community towards the Parsis or the Catholics who were minorities. In certain parts, the Catholics in a Catholic school, for example, were in the majority. They could make life difficult for the small number of Hindus amongst them. So it wasn’t all roses back there either. I don’t think we can escape this basic human disease. And I really feel that that was more hurtful, that was more unjust, and more illogical coming from what I, at that time, assumed was one homogenous community of Indians. But there is no such thing, just as there is no such thing as Canadian.

Ali For you, how does the process of writing a novel differ from that of writing a short story?

Rohinton I started by writing short stories, and I guess I made that choice because I was working in a bank and time was restricted, and I always felt that a short story required less effort, was a smaller chunk of work, and would take a few weeks to finish, whereas a novel was a commitment of many years and I wasn’t sure if I could sustain the effort for that long. Of course, once I quit the bank and I had written some short stories, the natural sequence was to see if I could handle the bigger form, see if I had the stamina for it. So at that time I thought in very mundane terms between novel and short story, in terms of time and energy and having the stamina to keep on creating incidents and making a character live for over 300 or 400 pages. Would I have enough creativity and enough imagination to flesh them out and give them life for that long? After the novel was done, I found that I really enjoyed the process and it was much more rewarding to have those characters with me for two

years rather than, let’s say, two weeks or two months in a short story. But then the period of recovery is also longer after doing a novel. You need a lot of R&R.

Ali In one of your interviews you stated that your characters are quite well formed in your mind before the writing commences, and yet in another interview that I read recently, you have stated that you do a lot of revising. Could you talk about the process of writing for you?

Rohinton I would like to do a third variation on those two. When I said that they are fully formed before the writing begins, I suppose they are as fully formed as they will be till I actually begin to write. What do I mean by that? It is like I have to take on some sort of substantial reality in my head before I can write about that. And yet, they are not fully formed in that sense till I think it is done, because they keep changing and keep evolving, and then they start doing things I did not expect them to do when I had just begun to write. So they will evolve.

Ali Let me give you an example. The fondness that Tehmul has for flying objects becomes quite significant at the end of the novel. Was that a revision?

Rohinton That was a revision, yes. I think I remember the point where it happened. It happened when there was a leaf floating down from the tree and he tries to... no, there was a butterfly that he goes chasing after and he stumbles and falls. I had not planned that. That sort of happened out of what I was writing then. That gave me the clue, that, yes, this will link up at the end with the way he dies.

Ali So you have to keep all the characters very much alive in your mind and their characteristics alive.

Rohinton Yes, and don’t close off your mind to possibilities. Let things happen and see where that can lead.

Ali One of your reviewers, Constance Rooke, has suggested that your novel, and in particular the character, Dinshawji, may offend some feminist sensibilities. Have you had any comments or feedback on that?

Rohinton Well, if she says that Dinshawji may offend some feminists, she is quite right. Dinshawji can offend me too. But that is Dinshawji. If I was to create characters mainly to satisfy, or to keep from offending,

feminists and gays and all the other constituencies whom I respect, that is not the way of writing a book. I mean, characters take on lives of their own and, like the human race, they are varied and they have their prejudices and their obnoxious characteristics and good things about them. That is what being human is. If I did not keep myself open to the possibilities of all these characters, I would be creating cardboard cutouts.

Ali This leads to the question about freedom of expression and it calls to mind the *Satanic Verses* episode with Salman Rushdie. In the West that became really an issue of free speech, and yet for Muslims it was seen differently—in the same way, in a sense, that many Catholics have viewed the incident of Sinead O’Connor tearing up a photograph of the Pope on *Saturday Night Live*. What is your opinion as to the appropriate or legitimate bounds to the freedom of expression?

Rohinton Freedom of expression. The minute you use the word ‘bounds’ with the word ‘freedom’ there is something impossible happening there. If there are bounds, how can it be free?

Ali It is like freedom and responsibility, the balancing that every individual has to deal with in life.

Rohinton It is up to each individual to decide that, and the minute a limitation is put from the outside on a freedom, then of course you can argue that one’s rights cease and you start harming something else.

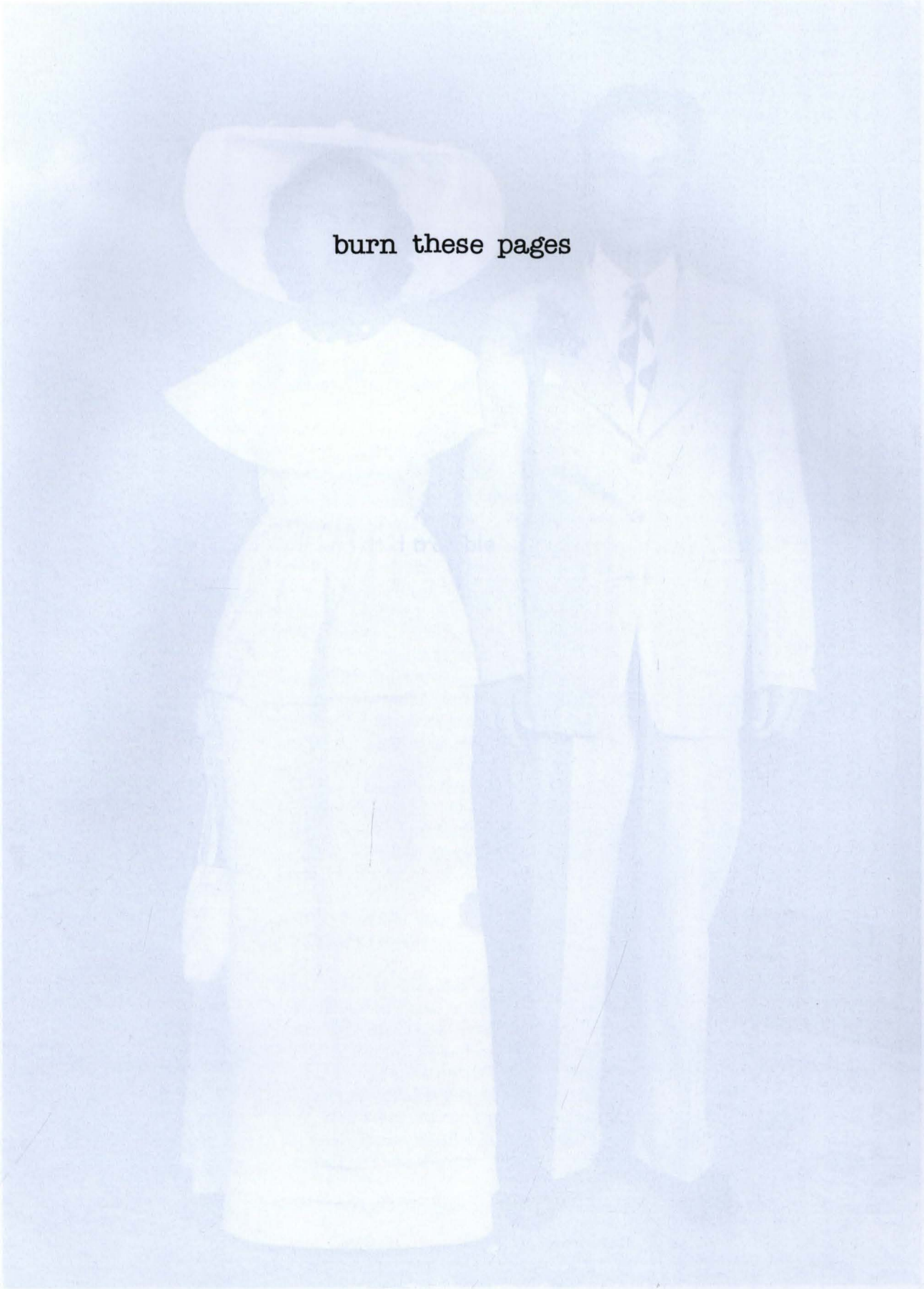
Ali The title of your novel is taken from the T.S.Eliot poem, *The Journey of the Magi*, but while that poem suggests to me a journey to a specific destination, your novel suggests that life itself is an endless journey, a journey, as it were, without a destination. Could you comment on that?

Rohinton Yes. Life itself, as you say, is a journey without a destination. Sort of like a wall that goes on and on with pictures.



Ali Lakhani is a lawyer writing in Vancouver.

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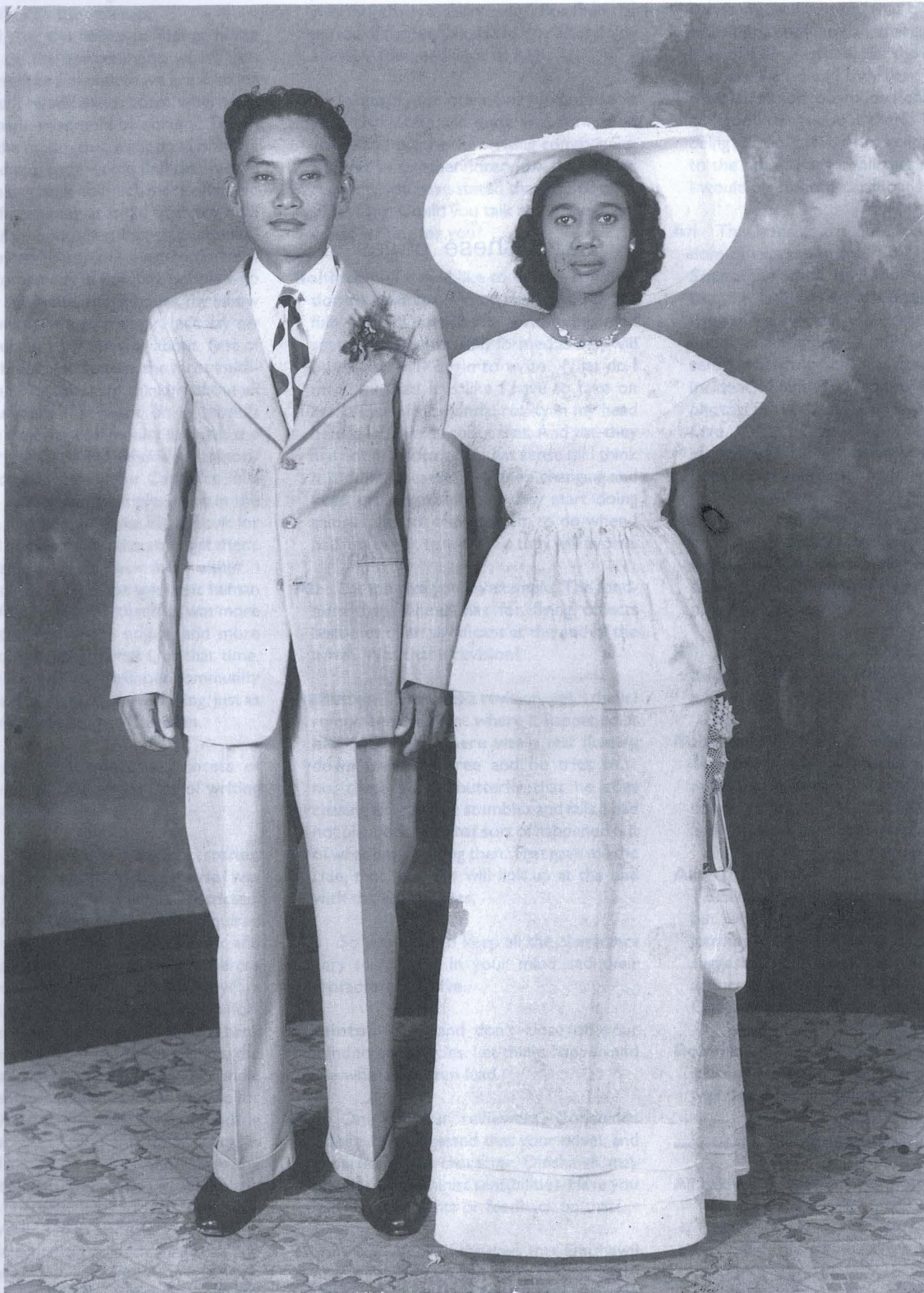
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Searching for Another Cypher

Interview
with
Alia Syed
by
Atif Ghani

With *Fatima's Letter's* recent screening at this year's Desh Pardesh (1993) cultural festival, and its previous selection as part of the 1992 New Direction in British Cinema, *Fatima's Letter* stands as an example of an emerging British work which successfully weaves between existing experimental and black cultural conventions and extremely difficult fiscal conditions. On a budget of £250 (\$500 Canadian), Alia has successfully crafted a dreamlike exploration into memory, identity, imagination and sexuality. The text which is spoken in Urdu, centres around the thoughts of an Asian woman as she awaits an oncoming train.

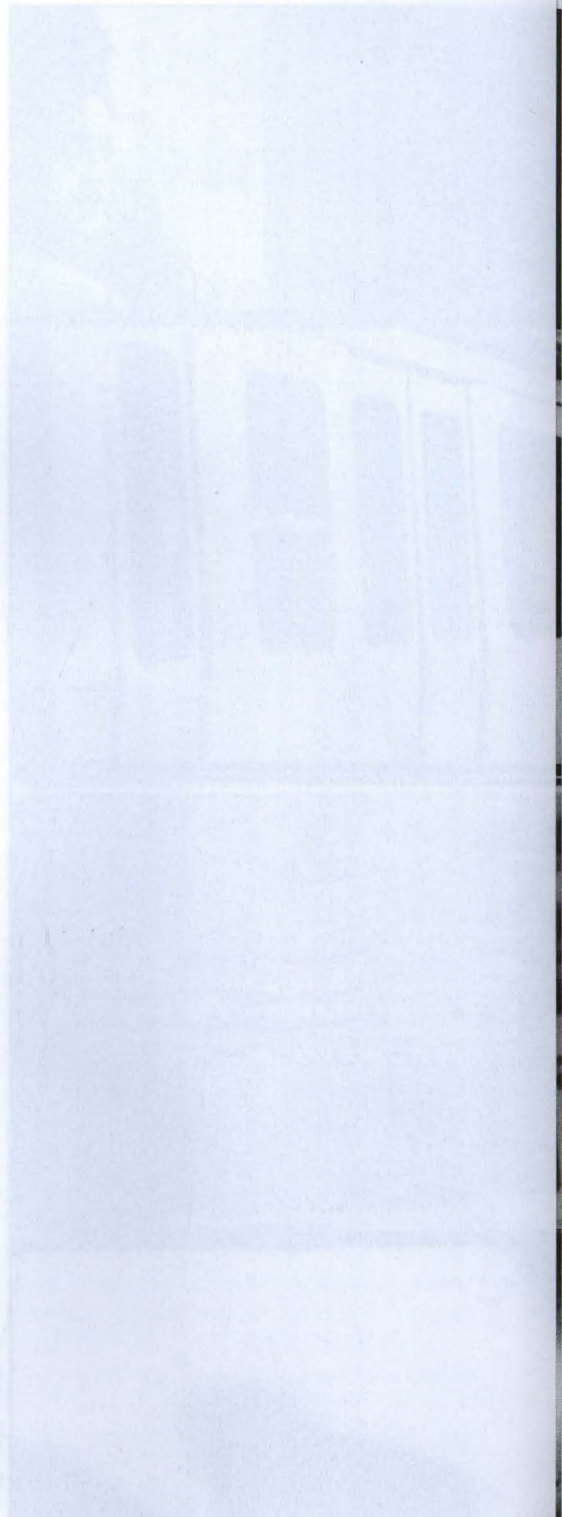
I recently had a chance to talk with Alia. Aside from discussing issues of money, dreaming, the construction of images, and the 1980s Black aesthetic, we talked specifically about *Fatima's Letter*.

Atif: What was your initial inspiration for *Fatima's Letter*?

Alia: The original idea was quite simple. I wanted to make a film about looking at people, about how you can make assumptions about people without really knowing anything about them. Finding certain people attractive, wondering where they are coming from and where they are going to. Race is a very strong signifier as is gender. I wanted to incorporate all of these ideas into the film.

Atif: How did you conceptualize representing the issue of race?

Alia: Initially I was going to explore issues of race without mentioning race itself. What usually happens when you are reading a piece of text is this. "She had long hair, she wore a flowery dress, and she was smiling" but you haven't mentioned race, however you automatically assume she is white because race hasn't been mentioned. This process allows white people to become neutral, it plays into ideas of



Still from *Fatima's Letter*



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Atif What was your initial inspiration for *Fatima's Letter*?

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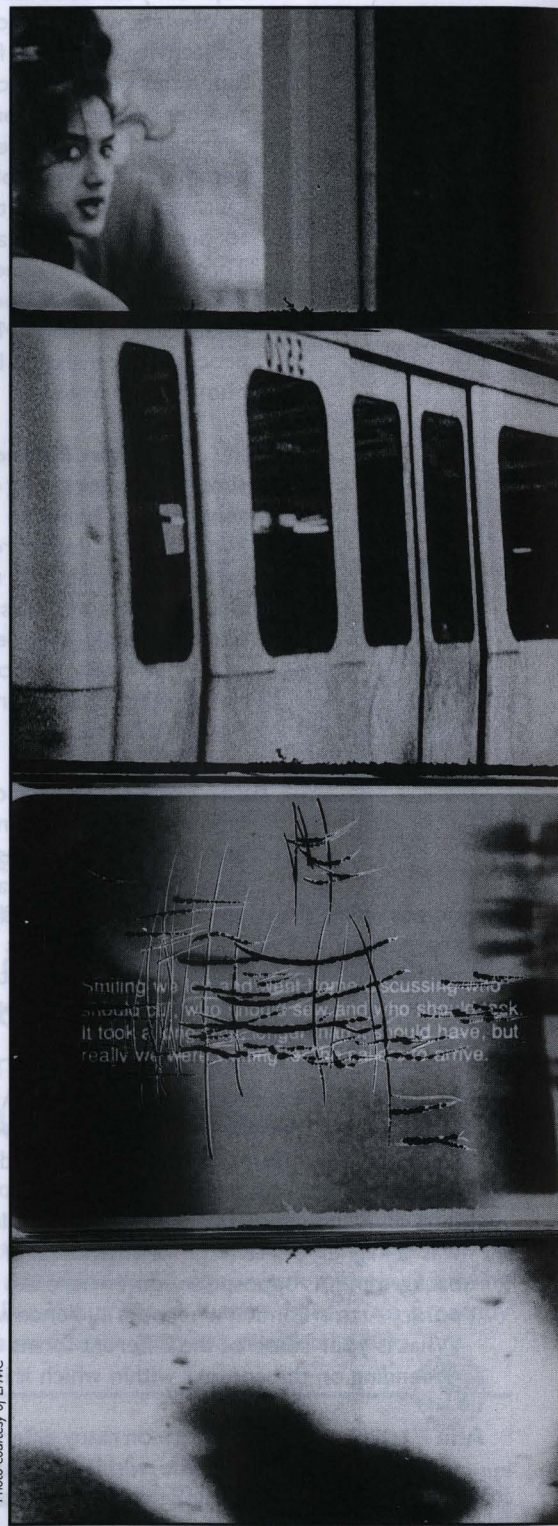


Photo courtesy of LFMC

Stills from *Fatima's Letter*

objectivity and rationality. You have the neutrality of white western thought, as opposed to the subjectivity of 'other' forms of thought. But I found this process to be clinical so I searched for another cypher that would represent otherness. Eventually I develop a female character: the film became a document of what she sees as her journey. The narrative takes the form of a letter to her friend Fatima and is spoken in Urdu. Through this it is implied that the woman is from Pakistan or India it doesn't matter which, her background is clearly Muslim. Language and the process of translation become the main metaphor for otherness.

Atif I think that *Fatima's Letter* is particularly successful in not taking on the 'burden of representation' in being an 'Asian film' or being a 'woman's film'. Rather really going beyond those categorical limits and thereby critiquing their closed or essentialist assumptions. Upon reflection, was that juggling between both attempts by others at categorization and past representations of blackness a tricky process in making *Fatima's Letter*?

Alia Rather than providing answers I was more interested in questioning how we see ourselves in relation to categories of race and gender. The element of disguise, playing around with stereotypes, using 'dress' to say important things such as, 'Not all women are women and not all sailors are sailors. Some of them are just pretending.' The film continually attempts to question our assumptions and how we define ourselves and others. This process was tricky. It was a challenge.

Atif Your film was clearly within a certain Avant-Garde, Experimental Tradition of British cinema. And in some ways because of its genre, it will be seen by particular types of audiences. As an example, *Fatima's Letter* was shown at this year's *Desh Pardesh* cultural festival. Although I was not in attendance, I am assuming that there was a higher percentage of members of the audience of Asian background, as opposed to somewhere like the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London where the audience was predominantly white. What is your sense of the different forms of reading of your work depending on the context within which it is screened?

Alia I think my film can work on many different levels but it is geared towards building a dialogue with other Asian people, particularly other Asian women. I think that the issues are particularly pertinent to Asians.

Atif What about the fact that it will be consumed by a white audience?

Alia Yes I am aware that it will be consumed by a white audience. But I don't think the film is only about issues of race, it is also about film as film. A lot of people appreciate the aesthetics of the film regardless of their background; it's structure, the composition of the shots, etc. I am interested in the formal aspects of filmmaking as I am in the issues of representation. I think there is a very close relationship between the two.

I think that the film is problematic in many ways. For instance, the idea of a woman not looking at anyone is quite a stereotypical image. The idea actually came from my own experience. I find myself staring at people. On the whole, people do not like to be stared at, so you develop ways of looking without looking directly, like looking at people's reflections. I didn't want to portray a 'strong woman'. I have problems with the concept of strength. We all have our weaknesses and strengths. The idea of the strong women, the feminists, the radical women within essentialised western discourse in a way discards everything that is Asian, or at least the relationship between the two is very complex. I wanted to show how women can negotiate a space in which they can be themselves within an Asian culture. There are many different kinds of strengths, not all exist within a western discourse.

Some people just get off on the exoticism of the film. They have already constructed a reading before watching. However I do play with the idea of exoticism within the actual story. I draw a parallel of how the sailors attempt to consume the sweets/women and how the text is read. The 'women' suffocate the sailors to death as they entice the sailors. I do the same with how I reveal the text.

Atif The dominant illusion or metaphor which I responded to in *Fatima's Letter* was that of translation. In that the process of translation allows us a partial understanding, but we can never gain full meaning. In that moving between cultures is at once difficult and simultaneously creates a very exciting space because it is undefined and unstructured. I really enjoyed how you played with English subtitles.

Alia An integral part of the whole process was that the reading would be disjointed. You would be prevented from reading a certain segment and because of the camera movements, how the text was placed in relation to the image underneath. People who have no knowledge of Urdu would be prevented from reading a certain section until I, the film maker choose to reveal that section. It's culturally specific, in a way. I think that the idea of understanding simply because something has been 'translated' is problematic.

Atif That is interesting because you are then using that power as a filmmaker in controlling the film gaze, which in the past has been used as a sign of displacement. But in this situation you have taken the traditional marginal perspective, and subverted the powerlessness of the margin into a power. The power is in the form of knowledge, and control in the accessing of this knowledge.

Alia Yeah, I think that there is a power in marginality. I find that it is an interesting space to occupy. It is a lot more challenging because you are aware of and have a number of insights into both cultures.

Atif You repeat the same images and sounds within the text over and over. The layering of the images, the voiceover, the English translation, and the background sounds which are not in sync provide the viewer with a real material awareness of the camera in constructing a particular series of images and emotional responses. Aesthetically, I found watching *Fatima's Letter* a very rich sensual experience. Was this use of layering through repetition something which you felt comfortable in utilizing?

Alia I often use repetition, I think that it's quite a standard experimental technique. In *Fatima's Letter*, because information is being given out slowly through time it allowed me to play with the idea of creating characters and identifying somebody as belonging to somewhere. So for me the use of repetition is political. Because you are given a certain amount of information, or you have been given no information, you are constantly put in a situation where you have to reassess how you are reading, what you are seeing.

Atif I see your work as part of a second generation of Asian and Black cultural production. What do you make of your work being viewed in this manner?

Alia Do you mean being defined as part of a movement?

Atif Yes, the newness of this movement stemming from the structural changes to the material condition of making films in Britain today, as well as the move away from what I term the 'cult of the victim' in which being displaced/marginal/de-centred immediately assumes a sense of victimization. What I sense from this (second generation) movement is a more self-reflexive type of awareness of the issue of identity, and an overt challenge to the attempts at categorizing these works.

Alia To see things which are similar in Black and Asian work, say the representation of the subject, I don't know to what extent it is useful to have (these categories) hoisted upon you. I think that it can be disempowering.

Fatima's Letter is available for family viewing through the London Film-Makers Co-op
42 Gloucester Avenue
Camden, London, England NW1 8JD
Phone 071-586-4806.

Atif Ghani is an Edmontonian, living and playing in London. He is currently researching cultural manifestations of contemporary diaspora politics in Britain.

Having to make your work fit into a certain category,

be it to have some sort of credence with the 'community' or the funding bodies so that it can fit into the current definition of 'marginal', is not always very useful; it can be limiting.

Yet, I don't want **not** to be thought of as part of a movement. It is very important to have those parameters drawn up if only to break them. The broadly based Black film movement of the 1980s drew up certain parameters, and I think that it is important to begin redrawing these parameters. But the problem is that there is no presently emerging discussion surrounding any experimental work.



Notes

1. "There is no money in Britain. To say there is no money, well okay you can do things without money. But it's not just a question of money. It is a question of importance and validation or valuing of cultural production be it video, film, painting, sculpture, whatever." (Alia Syed)
2. "I dream a lot, and certain things will trigger certain responses. With no concrete reasons, like something very subtle, like how somebody would walk, how they might look back, and it will just take me back somewhere. How the shadows and sounds will take you back. Smell for me is a real trigger. Sometimes I will smell something and I will just be taken somewhere, although I won't know where I have been taken back to, it has taken me somewhere. You can't grasp it. It is always beyond your grasp. Just watching things, remembering things and placing things and how things become familiar." (Alia Syed)
3. "I have always been interested in interweaving images, particularly very disparate images together to construct something new." (Alia Syed)
4. "[People] may be very critical of the work of filmmakers such as Isaac Julien and John Akomfrah. But at the same time, those films such as *Testimony* and *Territories* created an idea of a black aesthetic, which is really important. Whether you are going to use that aesthetic or work against it, at least there is a point from which to work from." (Alia Syed)

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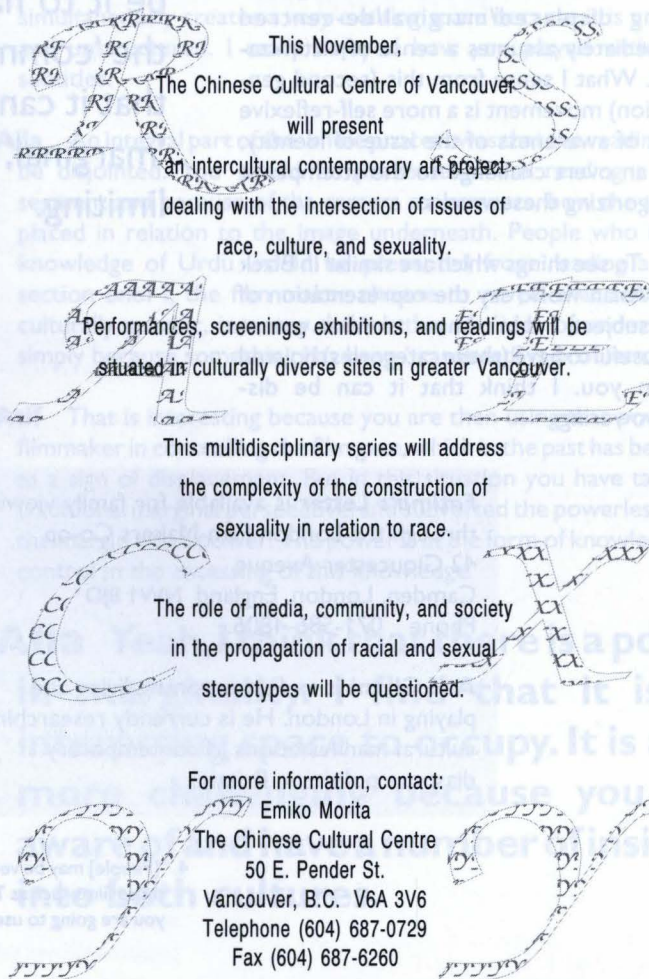
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The Migration of Memory

I first met Ayisha Abraham in New York City in 1992 after learning about the powerful series of images she had produced dealing with the history of colonial missionary activity and conversion to Christianity in her grandmother's family in Kerala, India. Soon after we met, Ayisha invited me to her home in Harlem where she had been living and working for the past two years. It was a very busy, active space, cluttered with images in various stages of production—painting, mixed media, video, and writing—all dealing with the pain of history and memory, and the fragmented relationship between past and present.

Since then, I have become very grateful for our long discussions around such themes. Her work, though emerging from a very different set of experiences from my own, has provided a kind of personal lens for me. Searching the array of themes in her art has been like standing in a hall of refracted mirrors, in which the image of my own Canadian history and 'identity' becomes gently (indirectly) reflected back at me.

Ayisha was born in England, raised in India, trained in painting at the Baroda College of Art in Gujarat, and has worked for the last four years in New York City. In May of this year she had her first solo exhibition at the New York Marxist School in Manhattan. The show was entitled **The Migration of Memory**. In some of her most compelling pieces, she draws from missionary photographs of her grandmother's family, playing them against excerpts from letters and texts, sometimes fracturing the photo itself and at other times expanding it into a painting

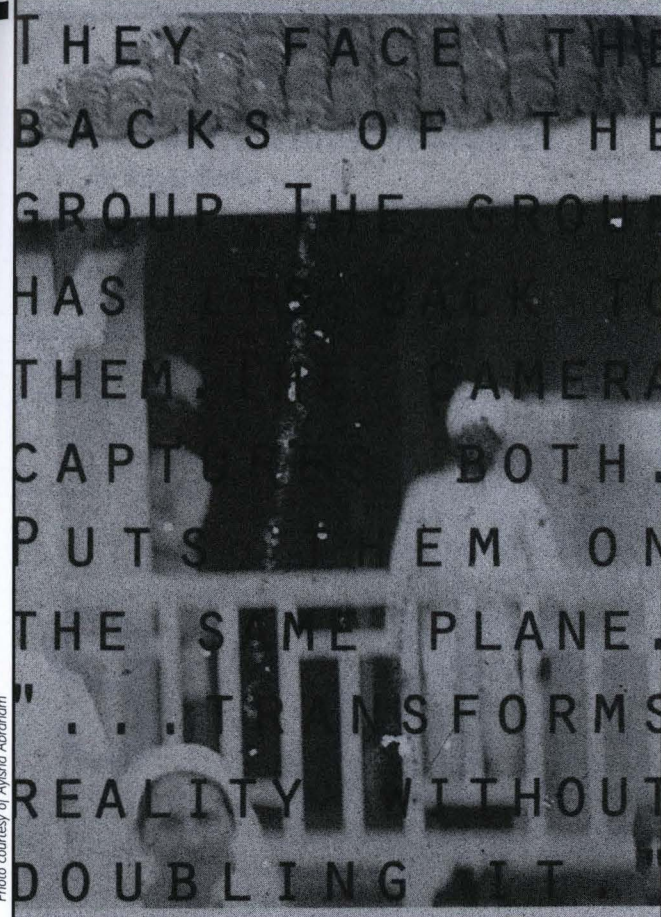


Photo courtesy of Ayisha Abraham

Ayisha Abraham's Artist Book, April 1993

or mixed media. These family memories gently carve a space where the larger themes of Indian history are figured through intensely personal narrative struggles. Collectively, her work creates neither a nostalgia for the past, nor does it construct a linear historical narrative. Instead the images interplay as fragments, some softer and some more vivid, as subtle as the process of inquiry that is 'remembering' itself.

'Migration,' in Ayisha's art, also operates in many senses. As a metaphor for movement, migration marks the distance between shifting physical and emotional sites. As Ayisha has said, such 'journeys' or felt distances have led not to a 'safe' or comfortable location in the US., but rather to an uncertain terrain of exploration. The work exhibited in her solo show represented a variety of moments in such cycles of change. In this spirit, it was a pleasure to learn that her expanding landscape will include a visit to Canada this summer as part of an artists-in-residence program at the Banff Centre for the Arts in Alberta. There she will be working in an interdisciplinary environment with many other artists from Canada and abroad.



Saloni Mathur is a New York based writer.

the colour of dance

Memories

by Roger Sinha

I came to Canada from Great Britain in 1968. I was eight years old. I was not welcomed with open arms but rather with closed fists usually aimed at my direction. It was Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, population 100,000. I was one of the only kids of colour in this school and a target for this one particular gang in my 3rd grade class. In London things were different. Almost half the population in my school were of South Asian origin. Sure there was some racism but whoever took me on also took on my white friends. There were some incidents, mostly directed at recent immigrants, and since I was not an immigrant I did not feel threatened. In the world outside this London schoolyard things were considerably more dangerous. You could read in the paper about shops being burned down and immigrants being beaten up and murdered. But I was a kid and all I read were comic books. When I arrived in Canada I really could not understand what was going on, why all of a sudden I became a human punching bag; I honestly did not understand why I was so different.

There was this girl in front of me in class who always turned around and sang, "You come from brown town, you come from brown town." Between getting swung at during recess and sung at during class, school for me became a very discouraging experience. One day this girl turned around for the same old song. The head of this gang who always beat up on me sat in the row next to me. "Hit her, c'mon hit her, go ahead you can do it," he whispered. You see, they hated girls as much as they hated Pakis. So I hit her. The blood flowed and so did the tears, mine and hers. With all my violent encounters with these guys at recess or after school the only thing I was capable of doing was raising my fists. Hitting, I never was capable of doing. Blocking, I wasn't bad at and falling down, I was actually pretty good at. But this girl's nose was the first time that my bony knuckles actually made contact with soft flesh. After school the guys confronted me. I thought I was going to get taunted and teased even roughed up a bit. Why not? Everything else bad seemed to be happening to me that day. But I was cheered like a hero and instead of me running home, with them on my heels or fearfully walking home a half a mile behind them, hoping they would not see me, we all walked home together. For the three years I stayed in Saskatoon these guys became my best friends. I've never had better since then. I never heard another Paki joke and we fought only about stupid things like who could climb the highest tree or whether the puck crossed the goal line or not. But I consider the day that I struck that girl as the day I lost my innocence. Sure I made friends; I loved those guys even though I never saw them again after I moved to Ottawa. But because of the way I gained their friendship, I learned about the power of violence and aggression. I eventually started up karate as a teenager; I got my black belt, began boxing and kickboxing. Anyone who called me Paki paid dearly for it and even though I hated the stupid jokes that my "so called" friends told, I always had the impression that I was allowing them to tell these jokes. I tried to convince myself of a lot of things in those teenage years. One of them was that people respected and feared me. "See that guy, he's got a black belt in karate." Yet it wasn't until my early '20s that I admitted to being a South Asian. It was also at this age I stopped doing the martial arts and began to study the performing arts. Ballet tights replaced Karate pants, grande jetés replaced flying kicks and the first dance piece that I created was a solo entitled, **Returning to Innocence**".

The Colour of Dance

by Roger Sinha

I was in Toronto watching a performance of the London Contemporary dancers. The curtain raised and a number of figures swarmed elegantly onto the stage: women, men, some black, some white and...what's this...brown!?! It was the first time I had seen someone of Indian origin dancing in a western dance troupe. It was Darshan Bhuller and he was magnificent. I was mesmerized by him; all I could do was watch him. He seemed to turn better and jump higher than any of the other dancers; I do not know whether this was true or not but it seemed so to me. When I saw this dancer something stirred inside of me—recognition and a sense of pride; here is a man, brown like myself, dancing for one of the world's finest dance companies.

At this time I was studying dance at the Toronto Dance Theatre and what interested me was being a contemporary artist. I did not want to create from the past but build from the present in order to create something new, something that no one has ever seen before. India and my relationship with this country seemed anchored to the past.

When I saw the films, *My Beautiful Launderette* and *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* I felt again this sense of pride of being Indian because here was someone who is brown, like myself, who is creative, and who is doing good work and getting recognized for it. Dharshan Bhuller inspired the dancer in me, Hanif Kureishi inspired the creator in me.

But it was Kureishi's essay, *The Rainbow Sign*, that had the strongest impact upon me. The essay made me feel, that I was not alone; I had an impression that I was reading about my own youth. I recognized a great deal of what Mr. Kureishi wrote when he talked about the shame of being a non-white.

When I decided to create a dance solo about my Indian experiences, I was greatly influenced by the line in *The Rainbow Sign* about the black boy who threw himself into a bath of boiling water.

This single paragraph, in fact, was the origin for much of the creative elements in my piece. Instead of using a bath tub of boiling water, I used electric kettles in order to get my images across; the steam and whistling sound creates an interesting visual and sonoric effect.

As far as the music was concerned, I found a fine collaborator in Himmat Shinhat from Montreal. It was important for me to search out someone who knew where I was coming from. I first saw Himmat in a performance given by the (Montréal) Serai theatre group. He appeared on stage playing a mean electric guitar. The section involving the text from *The Rainbow Sign* where Kureishi describes his childhood friend who needed exactly that type of 'sound.' Thus began our collaboration. What worked well in Himmat's composition for the piece is that just as I integrated Bharatanatyam with modern western dance, he too integrated western music with South Asian music.

Burning Skin came from my need to create and my need to affirm myself as a South Asian. It was a very liberating experience. I had a great deal of healing to do, and I could not do it without trying to understand who I was and where I came from. Without this exploration, I would never be a complete artist nor a complete human. To begin discovering my Indian self through Bharatanatyam seemed more real to me. Dancers are people of passion and I wanted to approach my Indian culture by getting in contact with people who share my love for dance.

I am not the one to push Indian dance into the mainstream. This is because I am not a practitioner of any single Indian dance form. I have studied it over the last two years but specifically for this piece. There are those who have been practising Indian dance all of their lives and it is for them to renew this art form. I am a modern dancer. Bharatanatyam is merely one of the elements that I use in my work, just as I use ballet, theatre, the martial arts and of course modern dance.

What is more important to me is my own personal vocabulary of movement. This is movement that no one has taught me; it is movement that comes from inside. To me this is more Indian than any dance form that I could learn because the part of me that generates these particular types of movements goes so deep

inside me that it touches the source, the very essence of who I am. Despite the fact that I was born in England and have never

as yet been to India, part of who I am is Indian. This is reflected in the way I move. I guess it's in the genes.



Burning Skin choreographed by Roger Sinha. Photo Steven Hues.



Roger Sinha will be performing at the Vivarta Festival of South Asian Performance in London, England as a part of the and at New Dance Forms in New Delhi, India in the Fall of 1993.



The Spectacle of Things that are Suspect 1993

In My Mother's Image

A Note From a South Asian Woman Artist to South Asian Women Artists

Recently I attended a discussion where a respected peer of mine said that she felt that part of her job as an artist is to make images for those who's sacrifices and perseverance in the past enable her to be where she is now—not impoverished of body or spirit, nor bowed by the weight of hatred. Such dedication to the production of gender and culturally specific work is praiseworthy and inspiring indeed, especially when we consider the implications of such a focus. To choose to be woman-centred and, what's more, South Asian woman-centred in the art arena means choosing not to be phallogentric, not to be eurocentric, not to be any kind of white feminist nor any kind of 'Canadian' other than the particular kind and experience that one is. In the face of a society that expects your silent servitude on one side and your undying gratitude for their imperial lust on the other, to be concerned about and dedicated to the production of work that speaks of and to our mothers, aunts, sisters and grandmothers is an act of great courage. This considerable fortitude ensures not only a repertoire in the context of the arts community, but also and more importantly, provides a dialogue and point of connection between generations in the Canadian diaspora.

I ask myself if I'm prepared to do this. I wonder if I can make that jump from institutional alignments to personal responsibility. As I begin to map out the terms of commitment to working for positive change, I must also be prepared to imagine and image that which is a part of me, that which, indeed, has had so much to do with my survival. I too must give back, and repay as best I can, in my own way and with my own speciality the inconceivable debt I owe. When I stop thinking about ways to trip-up a system and expose contra-

dition and consider what our grandmothers and mothers did and do still for us all, when I stop to consider the sacrifices that are made daily, monthly, yearly, my preoccupation with destroying the existing hegemony becomes pointless. After all is said and done, for whom have I worked? Who have I helped? If my answer is staring at me from a mirror that's not good enough. It is not enough to engage in battle for this singular 'I' with its needs and desires and vanities.

There is an ongoing conversation that passes between us and that has no end. It is the discussion about what we can do for our mothers. Our dialogues are multiple and go on till all hours of the early morning. The concern that comes out and the frustration that is voiced speak of the high regard and love we have for these women who always give so much to those around them and receive so little. I have thought too many times that I must, this year, do that drawing for my mother. I must do it right. Yet, every year, I produce some unacceptable mess that my five-year-old self outdid so many years ago. I look at the drawings I did for my mother back then and remember how I felt when I thought a drawing did not quite measure up to my expectations. It didn't say what I wanted it to say. And, I remember the ones that did. But my mother liked them all or at least pretended to, like any of our loving mothers did. She still does that, but I'm still unimpressed with my own drawings.

There is a language that we are trying to construct from our discussions that everything in this society attempts to stifle, negate and destroy the desire for. Our attempts to acknowledge and enter into discourse with our mothers, with our brown skinned mothers, is not advantageous for them because it

brings together two 'pools' of the labour force who do the menial jobs for the lowest pay. Our mobilization is their nightmare.

But before we can get to that point we have to forge a language in which we can find the possibilities for our images. We must produce imagery of ourselves and for ourselves that not only delineates the parameters of our private spaces but also unambiguously states what will not be tolerated in the public arena. This is a part of our job as artists. We must offer from our charcoal stained, paint splattered, scrape-knuckled, hammer blistered, young brown hands, representations of the callused, scarred, infinitely strong and tireless wrinkled hands. We must speak of what we come from and agree that it is not enough to offer to wash the dishes or move the furniture or paint the house or carry the grocery bags.

I think of all the things I do to show my mother that I love and appreciate and am proud of her and upon reflection I know I can do better. There is one thing that I can do better than anything else. There is one language in which I have surpassed fluency and entered the level of reconstruction. I have this facility and I've seen your work, so I know you've got it too. I suggest we come together and discuss till all hours of the night and use our considerable collective abilities to make images that our mothers won't have to pretend to like, and that we will be satisfied with (if only until the next series). It is indeed a daunting task, but one that grows from righteous pride.



Sur Mehat is a visual artist living in Vancouver. Her piece, *The Spectacle of Things that are Suspect*, was in *Telling Relations: Sexuality and the Family*, curated by Larissa Lai for the grunt Gallery [see review on Page 61]. More of Sur's work can be seen in ARTROPOLIS 93 from October 22, 1993 to November 19, 1993 in Vancouver.

In the face of a society that expects your silent servitude on one side and your undying gratitude for their imperial lust on the other, to be concerned about and dedicated to the production of work that speaks of and to our mothers, aunts, sisters and grandmothers is an act of great courage.

A Garden of Her Own

Excerpted from *Out on Main Street*

A Collection of Short Fiction

by **Shani Mootoo**

Press Gang Publishers, Fall 1993

A north facing balcony meant that no sunlight would enter there. A deep-in-the-heart-of-the-forest green pine tree, over-fertilised opulence extending its midriff, filled the view from the balcony.

There was no window, only a balcony glass sliding door which might have let fresh air in, and released second or third hand air and the kinds of odours that build phantoms in stuffy apartments. But it remained shut. Not locked, but stuck shut in decades of other renters' black oily grit and grime which had collected in the grooves of the sliding door frame.

Vijai knew that it would not budge—up, down or sideways. For the amount of rent the husband paid for this bachelor apartment, the landlord could not be bothered. She opened the hallway door to let the cooking lamb fat and garlic smells drift out into the hallway. She did not want them to burrow into the bed sheets, into towels and clothes crammed into the dented cream-coloured metal space-saver cupboard that she had to share with the husband. It was what all the other renters did too; everyone's years of oil—sticky, burnt, overused, rancid oil—and of garlic, onions and spices, formed themselves into an impenetrable nose-singeing, skin-stinging presence that lurked menacingly in the hall. Instead of releasing the lamb from the husband's apartment, this larger phantom barged its way in. Vijai, engulfed, slammed the door shut. She tilted her head to face the ceiling and breathed in hard, searching for air that had no smell, no weight. The husband was already an hour late for dinner. She paced the twelve strides, back and forth, from the balcony door to the hall door, glancing occasionally at the two table settings, stopping to straighten his knife, his fork, the napkin, the flowers, his knife, his fork, the napkin, the flowers. Her arms and legs tingled weakly, and her intestines filled up with beads of acidic shit formed out of unease and fear. Seeing a smear of her fingerprint on the husband's knife, she picked it up and polished it on her t-shirt until it gleamed brilliantly, and she saw in it her mother's eyes looking back at her.

Sunlight. I miss the sunlight—yellow light and a sky ceiling miles high. Here the sky sits on my head, heavy grey with snow and freezing rain. I miss being able to have doors and windows opened wide, never shut except sometimes in the rainy season. Rain, rain, pinging on, winging off the galvanised tin roof. But always warm rain. No matter how much it rained, it was always warm.

And what about the birds? Flying in through the windows how often? Two, three times a week? Sometimes even twice in a single day. In the shimmering heat you could see them flying slowly, their mouths wide open as if crying out soundlessly—actually, they would be flicking their tongues at the still air, gulping at it and panting, looking for a window to enter and a curtain rod to land on and cool off. But once they had cooled down and were ready to fly off again, they could never seem to focus on the window to fly through and they would bang themselves against the wall, and on the light shade until they fell, panicked and stunned. I was the one who would get the broom and push it gently up toward one of these birds after it looked like it had cooled off and prod prod prod until it hopped on the broom, and then I would lower it and reach from behind and cup the trembling in my hand. I can, right now, feel the life, the heat in the palm of my hand from the little body, and the fright in its tremble. I would want to hold on to it, even momentarily, thinking of placing it in a cage and looking after it. But something always stopped me. I would put my mouth close to its ears and whisper calming shh shh shhhhs, and then take it,

pressed to my chest, out the back door and open my hand and wait for it to take its time fluffing out right there in my open hand before flying away.

But here? There are hardly any birds here, only that raucous, aggressive old crow that behaves as if it owns the scraggly pine tree it sits in across the street. This street is so noisy! Every day, all day and all night long, even on Sundays, cars whiz by, the ambulance and fire trucks pass screaming, and I think to myself "Thank goodness it couldn't be going for anyone I know"—I don't know anyone nearby.

Too much quiet here, too shut off. Not even the sound of children playing in the street, or the sound of neighbours talking to each other over fences, conversations floating in through open windows, open bricks. Here even when doors are open people walk down hallways with their noses straight ahead, making a point of not glancing to even nod "hello."

Oh! This brings all kinds of images to my mind: the coconut tree outside my bedroom brushing, scraping, swishing, against the wall.

Green, blue, iridescent lizards clinging, upside down, to the ceiling above my bed.

And dinner time. Mama's voice would find me wherever I was, "Vijai, go and tell Cheryl to put food on the table, yuh father comin home just now." Standing in one place, at the top of her meagre voice she would call us one by one. "Bindra, is dinner time. Bindra, why you so harden, boy? Dinner gettin cold. Turn off that TV right now! Shanti come, girl, leave what you doin and come and eat. Vashti go and tell Papa dinner ready, and then you come and sit down." Sitting down, eating together. Talking together. Conversations with no boundaries, no false politeness, no need to impress Mama or Papa.

But that's not how it was always. Sometimes Papa didn't come home till long after supper time. Mama would make us eat but she would wait for him. Sometimes he wouldn't come for days, and she would wait for him then too.

But there were always flowers from the garden on the table. Pink and yellow gerberas, ferns, ginger lilies. That was your happiness, eh Mama? The garden, eh? And when there were blossoms you and I would go outside together. You showed me how to angle the garden scissors so that the plant wouldn't hurt for too long. We would bring in the bundle of flowers and greenery with their fresh-cut garden smell and little flying bugs and spiders, and you would show me how to arrange them for a centre piece, for a corner table, for a floor piece. The place would look so pretty! Thanks for showing that to me, Mama.

Mama, he's never brought me any flowers. Not even a dandelion.

I don't want him to ask how much these cost. Don't ask me who sent them. No one sent them; I bought them myself. With my own money. My own money.

He's never given me anything. Only money for groceries.

Late. Again.

I jabbed this lamb with a trillion little gashes and stuffed a clove of garlic in each one with your tongue, your taste buds in mind. I spent half the day cooking this meal and you will come late and eat it after the juices have hardened to a candle-wax finish, as if it were nothing but a microwave dinner.

I want a microwave oven.

Mama why did you wait to eat? If I eat now would you, Papa, he, think I am a bad wife? Why did you show me this, Mama?

I must not nag.

Vijai remained sleeping until the fan in the bathroom woke her. It sputtered raucously like an airplane engine starting up, escalating in time to fine whizzing, lifting off into the distance.

Five thirty, Saturday morning.

She had fretted through most of the night, twisting, arching her body, drawing her legs up to her chest, to the husband's chest, rolling, and nudging him, hoping that he would awaken to pull her body into his and hold her there. She wanted to feel the heat of his body along the length of hers, his arms pressing her to him. Or his palm placed flat on her lower belly, massaging, touching her. He responded to her fidgeting once and she moved closer to him to encourage him, but he turned his naked back to her, and continued his guttural exhaling, inhaling, sounding exactly like her father.

Eventually, Vijai's eyes, burning from salty tears that had spilled and dampened the pillow under her cheek, fluttered shut and she slept, deep and dreamless, until the fan awakened her.

When the sound of the water in the shower snapping at the enamel tub was muffled against his body, she pulled herself over to lie in and smell his indentation in the tired foam mattress. She inhaled, instead, the history of a mattress: unwashed hair, dying skin, old and rancid sweat—not the smell she wanted to nestle in. Neither would the indentation cradle her; she could feel the protruding shape of every spring beneath the foam.

She debated whether to get up and thanklessly make his toast and tea, or pretend not to have awakened, the potential for blame nagging at her.


She slid back to her side of his bed, the other side of the line that he had drawn down the middle with the cutting edge of his outstretched hand. Vijai pulled her knees to her chest and hugged them. When the shower stopped she hastily straightened herself out and put her face inside the crack between the bed and the rough wall. Cold from the wall transferred itself onto her cheek, and layers upon layers of human smells trapped behind cream coloured paint pierced her nostrils.

Vijai was aware of the husband's every move as she lay in his bed: water from the kitchen tap pounded the sink basin, then attacked the metal floor of the kettle, gradually becoming muffled and high pitched as the kettle filled up. He always filled it much more than was necessary for one cup of tea, which he seldom drank.

The blow dryer. First on the highest setting, then dropped two notches to the lowest, and off.

The electric razor. Whizzing up and down his cheek, circling his chin, the other cheek, grazing his neck. Snip, snip and little dark half moon hairs from his nostrils and his side burns cling to the rim of the white sink basin. Wiping up, scrubbing, making spotless these areas, and others, before he returns, are her evidence that she is diligent, that she is, indeed, her mother's daughter.

At that precise time she always expected a handsome aftershave cologne to fill the little bachelor apartment, to bring a moment of frivolity and romance into the room. In one favoured version of her memories, it is what would normally have happened from her parents'



bathroom at this point in the routine. But the husband would only pat on his face a stinging watery liquid with the faintest smell of lime, a smell that evaporated into nothingness the instant it touched his skin.

She held herself tensely, still in the crack between the bed and the wall, as he made his way into the dark corner that he called the bedroom. The folding doors of the closet squeaked open. A shirt slid off a hanger leaving it dangling and tinkling against the metal rod. Vijai could hear the shirt that she had ironed (stretched mercilessly tight across the ironing board, the tip of the iron with staccato spurts of steam sniffing out every seam crevice, finely mimicing the importance of mission which she had observed in her mother) being pulled against his body and his hands sliding down the stiff front with each buttoning.

Then there was a space empty of his sounds. The silence made the walls of her stomach contract like a closed up accordion. Her body remained rigid. Her heart sounded as if it had moved right up into her ears, thundering methodically, and that was all she could hear. She struggled with herself to be calm so that she could know where he was and what he was doing. Not knowing made her scalp want to unpeel itself. Then, the bed sagged as he mounted it, leaned across and brushed his mouth on the back of her head. His full voice had no regard for the

...she pulled herself over to lie in and smell his indentation in the tired foam mattress. She inhaled, instead, the history of a mattress: unwashed hair, dying skin, old and rancid sweat—not the smell she wanted to nestle in. Neither would the indentation cradle her; she could feel the protruding shape of every spring beneath the foam.

sleeping or the time of morning. He said, "Happy Birthday. I left twenty dollars on the table for you. Buy yourself a present."

The thundering subsided, and her heart rolled and slid, rolled and slid, down, low down, and came to rest between her thighs. She turned over with lethargic elegance, as if she were just waking up, stretching out her back like a cat, but the apartment door was already being shut and locked from the outside.

The streets here are so wide! I hold my breath as I walk across them, six lanes wide. What if the light changes before I get to the other side? You have to walk so briskly, not only when you're crossing a wide street but even on the sidewalk. Otherwise people pass you and then turn back and stare at you, shaking their heads. And yet I remember Mama telling us that fast walking, hurrying, was very unladylike.

I yearn for friends. My own friends, not his, but I'm afraid to smile at strangers. So often we huddled up in Mama's big bed and read the newspapers about things that happened to women up here— we read about women who suddenly disappeared and months later their corpses would be found, raped and dumped. And we also read about serial murders. The victims were almost always women who had been abducted off the street by strangers in some big North American city. Mama and Papa warned me, when I was leaving to come up here, not to make eye contact with strangers because I wouldn't know whose eyes I might be looking into or encouraging, unknowingly. It's not like home, they said, where every body knows everybody.

No bird sounds—and there are not quite so many different kinds of birds here. Yes, Papa, yes, I can just hear you saying to stop this nonsense, all this thinking about home, that I must think of this as my home now, but I haven't yet left you and Mama. I know now that I will never fully leave, nor will I ever truly be here. You felt so close, Papa, when you phoned this morning and asked like you have every past year, how was the birthday girl. You said that in your office you often look at the calendar pictures of autumn fields of bales of hay, lazy rivers meandering near brick red farm houses, and country roads with quaint white wooden churches with red steeples and think that that's what my eyes have already enjoyed. "It's all so beautiful, Papa," I said and knowing you, you probably heard what I wasn't saying. Thanks for not pushing further. I couldn't tell you that he is working night and day to "make it," "to get ahead" to live like the other men he works with. That he is always thinking

about this, and everything else is frivolous right now, so we haven't yet been for that drive in the country to see the pictures in the calendars pinned on the wall above your desk. He doesn't have time for dreaming, but I must dream or else I find it difficult to breathe.

The fence around our home and the garden. That's the furthest point that I ever went to on my own—from the house at home, winding in and out of the dracaenas and the

philodendrons that I planted with Mama many Julys ago, feeling the full firm limbs of the poui, going as far as the hibiscus and jasmine fence, and back into the house again. Any further away from the house than that and the chauffeur would be driving us!

And now? Just look at me! I am out in a big city on my own! I wish you all could see me! I wish we could be doing this together.

Papa, you remember, don't you, when you used to bring home magazines from your office and I would flip through quickly looking for full page pictures of dense black-green tropical mountains, or snow covered bluish white ones? Ever since those first pictures I have dreamt of mountains, of touching them with the palms of my hands, of bicycling in them, and of hiking. Even though I never canoed on a river or a big lake with no shores, I know what it must feel like! I can feel what it is to ride rapids like they do in National Geographic magazines. Cold river spray and drenchings, sliding, tossing, crashing! I still dream of bicycling across a huge continent. I used to think "if only I lived in North America!" But here I am, in this place where

these things are supposed to happen, in the midst of so much possibility, and for some reason my dreams seem even further away, just out of reach. It's just not quite so simple as being here.

This land stretches on in front of me, behind me and forever. My back feels exposed, naked, so much land behind, and no fence ahead.

Except that I must cook dinner tonight.

What if I just kept walking and never returned! I could walk far away, to another province, change my name, cut my hair! After a while I would see my face on a poster in a grocery with all the other missing persons. The problem is, then, that I won't even be able to phone home and speak with Mama or Papa or Bindra and Vashti without being tracked and caught, and then who knows what.

Well, this is the first birthday I've ever spent alone. But next time we speak on the phone I will be able to tell you that I went for a very long walk. Alone.

I think I will do this every day—well, maybe every other day, and each time I will go a new route and a little further. I will know this place in order to own it—but, still I will never really leave you.

Mama, Papa, Vashti, Bindra, Shanti,

Mama, Papa, Vashti, Bindra, Shanti.

Mama. Papa. Vashti. Bindra. Shanti.

Twenty four years of Sundays, of eating three delightfully noisy, lengthy meals together, going to the beach or for long drives with big pots of rice, chicken and peas, and chocolate cake, singing Michael Row Your Boat Ashore, and You Are My Sunshine, doing everything in tandem with her brother and sisters and Mama and Papa—this particular character of Sundays, was etched deeply in her veins.

(Not all Sundays were happy ones but recently she seems to have forgotten otherwise.)

It would be her twenty fourth Sunday here, the twenty fourth week of marriage.

The only Sunday since the marriage that the husband had taken off and spent in his apartment was six ones ago, and since he needed to spend that alone, Vijai agreed to go to the library for at least three hours. Before she left the house, she thought to use the opportunity to take down recipes for desserts, but once she began walking down the street she found herself thinking about rivers, and mountains. She bypassed the shelves with all the cooking books and homemaking magazines and found herself racing toward valleys, glaciers, canoeing, rapids and the like. She picked up a magazine about hiking and mountaineering, looked at the equipment advertisements, read incomprehensible jargon about techniques for climbing, and after about forty minutes, not seeing herself in any of the magazines, became less enthusiastic, and even-

tually frustrated and bored. She looked at her watch every fifteen minutes or so and then she started watching the second hand go around and counting each and every second in her head. When three hours had passed she remembered the "at least" part and walked home slowly, stopping to window shop and checking her watch, until an extra twenty minutes had passed.

The strength of her determination that they not spend this Sunday apart fiercely warded off even a hint of such a suggestion.

What she really wanted to do was to go for the five hour drive up to a glacier in the nearby mountains. That way she would have him to herself for at least five hours. But he had worked several twelve hour shifts that week and needed to rest in his apartment.

She went to the grocery, to the gardening section and bought half a dozen packages of flower seeds, half a dozen packages of vegetable seeds, bags of soil, fertilizer, a fork and spade, a purple plastic watering can, and a score of nursery boxes. She brought it all home in a taxi. Enough to keep her busy and in his apartment for an entire Sunday. She was becoming adept at finding ways to get what she wanted.

He never asked, and Vijai did not tell, that from her allowance, she had paid a man from the hardware store to come over and fix the balcony sliding door. She stooped on the balcony floor scooping earth into nursery trays. He sat reading the newspaper, facing the balcony in his big sagging gold armchair that he had bought next door at a church basement sale for five dollars. She was aware that he was stealing glances at her as she bent over her garden-in-the-making.

I wore this shirt, no bra, am stooping, bending over here to reveal my breasts to you. Look at them! Feel something!

I might as well be sharing this apartment with a brother, or a roommate.

She feels his hands on her waist leading her from behind, to the edge of his bed. Her body is crushed under his as he slams himself against her, from behind, grunting. She holds her breath, taut against his weight and the pain, but she will not disturb his moment. She hopes that the next moment will be hers. She waits with the bed sheet pulled up to her chin. The toilet flushes and, shortly after, she hears newspaper pages being turned in the sagging five dollar gold armchair.

Deep-sleep breathing, low snoring from the bedroom, fills the apartment, dictating her movements. She sits on the green and yellow shag carpet, leaning against the foot of the husband's armchair, in front of the snowy black and white television watching a French station turned down low enough not to awaken him.

Something about listening to a language that she does not understand comforts her, gives her companionship in a place where she feels like a foreigner. She is beginning to be able to repeat advertisements in French.



Shani Mootoo is a writer, videographer and visual artist living in Vancouver. For more information about *Out on Main Street*, contact

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i am both colonised & coloniser
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but never stopping
like passing go
i feel no split
my mother too is colonised & coloniser
her mother was scottish & her father english
but she as was her mother
was born in india
six years before independence
she has been more colonised
than coloniser from childhood
my father's parents were both
from a differently colonised part of india
but he was not born there
his parents went to tanganyika as colonisers
he was born under the british protectorate
emigrating before independence
i was born in scotland & taken away soon after
do not speak to me of dispossession
of unhousement

i experienced that countless times before i was born
then i was born & taken away again
i have no memory of scotland
going back it was new to me
the empress of canada

a temporary home in the water
i do not remember that either
then an apartment that means nothing to me
though it a part of me somewhere
then a suburban house a converted duplex

now one house with two master bedrooms & two kitchens
a way station for my father's brothers & their families as they left homes to come to canada
one from east africa & then another from scotland with stepchildren then my father's parents
when my mother left i was left two homes
one ex-duplex & one two bedroom basement apartment
puzzled about what a home apart meant
owning & renting landlord & tenant my pair rents
assuming & subsuming a different apartment & the meanings change
& then two houses two homes new changes & i move to a wooden house
then back to the second which had changed when i went back to the first it was a house
i made it mine until the summer & then
left all of them & began a new language

—damian lopes



River Relations

On our way to the randomly chosen spot
where we could see the towering glaciers above
the memory of Gunga Jamna and Sutluj
was not easy to quell

With my brother standing beside me
slowly I dropped the ashes of my father
into the icy water

Now whenever I remember my father
it is the Squamish river I think about
one rupturing relationship
giving birth to a new one

The strangeness of the place melted
a personal image now flows in memory
perhaps that's what my father meant
by relations of rivers to men

—Sadhu Binning



A SUITABLE BOY

*a novel by
Vikram Seth*

Reviewed by Ali Lakhani

"You too will marry a boy I choose." These words are spoken by Mrs. Rupa Mehra ('Ma') to her daughter, Lata, at the wedding of Savita (the other daughter) to Pran Kapoor, a lecturer in English at the local university in Brahmipur, a fictitious town which is the setting of this acclaimed novel by writer, Vikram Seth.

A Suitable Boy is the latest offering in the protean oeuvre of the Calcutta-born, Oxford and Stanford-educated Seth, whose previous works include three volumes of poetry, a travelogue (*From Heaven Lake*, which describes how Seth hitchhiked four thousand miles across China from Nanjing to Delhi via Tibet and Nepal in 1981), a play (*Lynch & Boyle*, set in Molieresque alexandrine couplets) and a novel (*The Golden Gate*, comprising some 600 interlinked sonnets in iambic tetrameter modelled on the stanza form of Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*).

The travelogue was hailed by *New Statesman* as 'the perfect travel book' and earned its author the Thomas Cook Travel Book Award in 1983.

The previous novel drew for its author comparisons with the works of Pope and Byron, and was described by Gore Vidal as 'the great California novel.' Seth's poetry has won him two Commonwealth Poetry Prizes, while his new novel—his first in prose—has already drawn comparisons with the likes of Dickens, Tolstoy, and Austen, and has earned over \$1 million in advances, a Book-of-the-Month Club selection and a prominent spot on most bestseller lists (the book apparently went into three printings within weeks of its publication in Britain).

The inspiration for the novel was apparently the character of Mrs. Rupa Mehra (an Austenian equivalent of Mrs. Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice*), who is modelled after Seth's own grandmother. The central story deals with Mrs. Rupa Mehra's attempts to find a

'suitable' husband for Lata, whose notion of what is suitable does not necessarily coincide with that of her mother. For Ma, Lata's suitor must be of the right religion (Hindu) and caste (*khat*ri) and must have a good family background, education and job, and must not be too dark in complexion. Lata, like her sister, is expected to conform to the view that Mother knows best, and to accept in marriage only a husband approved by Ma. Like the vine after which she was named, Lata is expected to cling, first to her family, then to her husband.

As the novel progresses, three suitors emerge, not all of whom are acceptable to Ma. One, Kabir Durrani, is the suitor of Lata's dreams, intelligent and good-looking, but with whom marriage would by her family's standards be unthinkable because he is Muslim. Another, Haresh Khanna, is a *khat*ri boy approved by Ma, a practical, straightforward and hardworking businessman in the shoe trade, but hardly Lata's ideal of a husband, and not acceptable to her haughty eldest brother, Arun Mehra (a brown *Sahib* and one of the few privileged Indians employed by a prestigious British trading company in Calcutta), who views Haresh as an unsophisticated upstart, a mere cobbler. The third suitor, Amit Chatterji, is related by marriage to the Mehras. He is the brother of Meenakshi, Arun's wife, and is a celebrated minor poet who has abandoned the law, for which he was trained, in favour of the arts. Being a Chatterji, Amit has the support of Arun and Meenakshi, but not of Mrs. Rupa Mehra who sees the Chatterji children as frivolous and insensitive.

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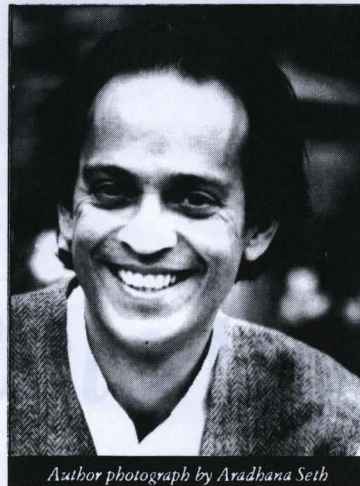
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Seth did not intend this to be a long novel, although at over 1,300 pages and nearly 800,000 words, the book turned out to be longer than *War and Peace*. As he wrote his story about Mrs. Rupa Mehra's quest for a suitable husband for her daughter, Seth found that he was unfolding a vast canvas of landscapes and characters, seemingly as wide and varied as India itself. Each of these is lovingly recreated and explored, not with the swashbuckling penmanship of a Rushdie, but with an urbane virtuosity and realism of detail that achieves the same sweep as *Midnight's Children*, but in slower motion.

Dealing with the interconnected lives of four Indian families (the Mehras, Kapoors, Chatterjis and the Khans) following Partition and leading up to the first great Indian elections of 1952, the book takes us from landscapes that range from squalid to opulent, and characters that range from desperate peasants to idle super-sophisticates. The story is told in scenes that shift between Brahmipur and Calcutta, with sorties to Kanpur, New Delhi, Lucknow, Banaras, and some district towns and remoter district villages. There are detailed descriptions of the natural landscape (Seth is a skilled natural historian and provides his reader with impressive details of ornithology and flora), of the shoe trade (Seth's father is a consultant in the leather industry), of proceedings in the Provincial Legislature and the courts (Seth's mother is a judge at the High Court in Delhi), of religious celebrations (Holi, Pul Mela, Dussehra, Muharram and Bakr-Id, among others) and of Indian music (in particular, a vivid recounting of a ghazal performance by the courtesan, Saeeda Begum, which appears at the beginning of the story, and which captures the mood and interaction between the singer and the audience that is typical of Indian music parties).

The book is animated by the presence of many memorable characters: there is Lata's grandfather, the irascible Dr. Kishen Chand Seth ('Kishy,' who tyrannizes the world but melts like ghee in the presence of his young wife, Parvati); Lata's younger brother, Varun (who is cowed by his domineering elder brother, Arun, and who is happiest in the company of his 'Shamshu'—drinking and gambling friends); Lata's brother-in-law, Pran (whose attempts to influence the English faculty at Brahmipur University are continually thwarted by the whale-like Professor Mishra); the child prodigy, Bhaskar Tandon (who is happiest when discussing obscure mathematical matters with the eccentric and absent-minded Dr. Durrani); Pran's father, the acerbic Mahesh Kapoor, Minister of Revenue of Purva Pradesh (whose passion is politics and in particular the implementation of the Zamindari Abolition Bill for the expropriation of

landholdings as part of an economic redistribution scheme on behalf of the Congress Party); Pran's brother, the carefree and prodigal Maan (whose obsession with Saeeda Begum provides the impetus for an important part of the plot); the Nawab Sahib of Baitar (one of the anachronistic Muslim gentry haunted by the glories and secrets of the past); the boorish Raja of Marh (who is dangerous and comic at the same time); and the irrepressible madcap Chatterjis (with their fizzy brilliancies).

As the story is told—of Lata and her suitors, of Maan and his foibles, of Mahesh Kapoor and his political battles—there emerges a picture of the stresses and constraints that infuse and make up the Indian mind, a picture in the end of India itself. To define what is 'suitable' is to place oneself in society, to define one's balance amid certain tensions. There are the tensions of caste (between the *jatavs*, *chamars*, *khattris*, *baniyas* and *brahmins*), of religion (not only in the story of Lata and Kabir, but also in the incidents that presage the calamitous Hindu-Muslim riots that took place over the Bhabri Masjid in Ayodhya last year), of politics (for example, in the multifaceted discussions among the proponents and opponents of the Zamindari Abolition Bill), of status (not only in the snobbishness of Arun Mehra, but also in the rivalry of the classical and popular musicians, each of whom strives for the patronage of the gentry), and of gender (depicting a patriarchal world where a visible—or invisible, yet no less effective—*purdah* shrouds the lot of women).

It is in his ability to identify and explore these tensions through his characters that Seth demonstrates the true richness of the book, and enables thereby to elevate the novel, to make it more than merely a fine comedy of manners. Admittedly, there are no deep anatomisations here. Rather, there is the magic of interesting characters who come alive for us in a world into which we as readers get drawn, whose failings we understand, whose tensions we share. Throughout, the author remains unobtrusive, seeking (as is implied by the two quotations from Voltaire that preface the book) not so much to explicate as to attentively observe, letting his characters speak for themselves, yet portraying them with a sympathy and intimacy that makes us sorry in the end to let them go.

Seth is one of that new breed of writer referred to by Pico Iyer in his recent *Time* magazine article titled *The Empire Writes Back*. It is refreshing to note that this is neither the work of an Indian 'outsider' (such as a Mukherji or Naipaul) nor of a non-Indian 'insider' (such as a Jhabvala or Scott). It is however a book about India and Indians that is neither condescending nor judgmental, told by an Indian 'insider' (another example is

Rohinton Mistry) who writes with an amphibious dexterity that puts both the Indian and non-Indian reader alike at ease. While there are no doubt some nuances of meaning that would be lost to those unfamiliar with the Indian culture (for example, the appropriateness of the fat tabla player being named 'Motu Chand,' or the rustic fibber being nicknamed the 'guppi'), this is a work that is written with an intelligence and simplicity that renders it accessible to all readers.

Nor should the reader be intimidated by the size of the book. Despite its appearance, this book has a buoyancy that might easily lead the critic to (unjustifiably) misconstrue its content as lightweight. This buoyancy is achieved in both structure and content by a combination of rhythm, mood and humour. The rhythm of the book is modulated by its division into nineteen parts, each nicely subdivided into manageable morsels for the reader, while the author bounces back and forth, in thrust and parry, between the different stories he is telling, not allowing any one story to stale by too great an insistence on any one aspect of the plot. The mood of the book as a whole is optimistic (as in his previous novel, Seth manages to handle grief in a touching manner without either trivialising or wallowing in it), which derives in no small measure from the fact that most of the characters are young (the widow, Mrs. Rupa Mehra, for instance, is only 45 years old when the story begins) as it does from the author's use of comic verse and humour. From the Table of Contents to the numerous poems and rhyming couplets which intersperse the story (the Chatterjis have a habit of firing off rhymed couplets in ordinary conversation, for example: 'Rhyming, rhyming so precisely/Couplets, they are coming nicely'), the verse contributes to a sense of levity. Seth's use of humour is a definite highlight of the book. There are so many comic characters and hilarious conversations that appear in the novel, that for this aspect alone the book is to be recommended. The characters of Mrs. Rupa Mehra, Kishy, the Raja of Marh and Biswas Babu are truly Dickensian. And when Seth leads us to the breakfast table of the Chatterjis, it is like having stepped in mid-performance into the drawing room of an Oscar Wilde comedy.

In the end, Seth's genius lies in drawing the reader into his world, and telling his story in a straightforward and compelling manner through generous and intimate characterizations that reflect a reality as complex and panoramic as India itself.



Ali Lakhani is a lawyer and a writer living in Vancouver.

Chandralekha

at Kala Nidhi Dance Festival

Toronto 1993 reviewed by Alicia Peres

It could be the excitement—the week-long event is the first of its kind in Toronto and thanks to two years of dedicated work by producers Sudha Thakkar Khandwani and Professor Rakesh Thakkar—it's very well-attended.

Indian female beauty: jewelled, graceful, with Kohl-rimmed eyes, brows each like the bow of Krishna, and face coyly beckoning. She wears garlands of flowers braided into her hair and yards of bells wrapped tightly around her lower legs. Her hands, with red-painted fingers, are held stiffly and often stretch into poses that have been used for centuries to represent a deer leaping through a forest, for example, or a lotus opening and swaying in the breeze.

As with any dance form, Bharatanatyam can be appreciated on some level by a novice onlooker for the agility and stamina required for complex steps, the discipline that keeps the effort hidden from the audience, and movements or gestures that appear original, interesting, or particularly beautiful. But as a language of dance, Bharatanatyam is full of polysyllabic codes that require study to allow full appreciation of its meaning.

Later that evening I watch a performance made up of simpler phrases. In Sri, performed by India's Chandralekha Group, the images are many that all derive from a few, carefully expressed 'words.' Their slow articulation and constant repetition allow meanings to metamorphose, as they do in the rereading of great poetry.

There are two legs, upside-down and illuminated by a stage light. For several minutes they remain poised there as if pulled up from the body by an invisible hand. They begin to move, barely, as if awakening. You cannot see the body, but catch a glimpse of a simple shift or shirt of a deep plum colour. The Premiere Dance Theatre is silent. There is no music, no beat, no voice. The knees bend slightly, and ever so slowly the feet begin to rub together, first one in front, then the other. Sensual without being erotic. The whole audience seems hypnotized, so intense are these smallest of small movements. But the movements are not stingy; there is no sense of 'What is this? Did I get all worked up to see some invisible person do a shoulder stand and wiggle his feet?' (for by now we are quite convinced it is a man). Instead, the grand leaps and twirls of classical ballet—whose dancers frequently jet into celebrity status outside the dance world, which perhaps helps explain why ballet is such a familiar dance form in North

America—now seems bombastic. These movements are just enough—full but not overblown. You wonder if the dark stage and single spotlight have tricked your eyes: the feet seem to transform into the heads of two animals—giraffes?—nudging each other. You blink and the legs are now lilies, graceful in a breeze. The image of flowers remains as the legs part and come down to rest on either side of the head. And suddenly you know it's a woman; the pose is so like birth somehow. The piece ends...was it ten minutes long or half an hour? It doesn't matter. The lights dim and the performer comes into the spotlight: small, a warm smile, the pure white hair shocking as a frame for an unlined face. A woman. Chandralekha.

The serenity and power of this simple prologue succinctly demonstrates why Chandralekha is often described as 'the most radical choreographer in India.' Here, her minimalist style distills from dance what many would consider its most rudimentary physical element: the legs. But hovering in the air as they do in the shoulder stand, with no ground to brace them, the legs mutely pay homage to two sources of power from which they extend and from which dance is born—the back and the breath—as well as to one source cultivated by yoga—the mind cleared of distraction and tension.

The tone is set for the rest of the performance. Simple without being stark, serene and yet very much of this world. The sound of one stone hitting another begins an unembellished rhythm. The six female dancers are wearing cotton saris in muted earthy colours that remind me of food (mustard, bean). They are completely unadorned except for some simple dark bangles—no make up at all, no flowers, no shiny fabrics, no painted fingers or jewels. Unencumbered with the come-hither glances and smiles that help to hold Bharatanatyam in focus, their faces radiate individually. Their proud, upright postures remain unrocked by the quintessentially Indian gesture that isolates the head from the neck. The focus seems inward, without any attempt to charm, beckon, or express mock anger or happiness.

The first section derives from prehistory. A series of poses inspired by 'Matrika'—female fertility statues made from stone and clay that are still found in India—flow into confrontational positions and movements that have their source in martial arts. Another section in which a seventh dancer joins in, the only man, depicts a courtship. The man and one woman dance close together, looking each other straight in the eye. Their movements are equally decisive and strong. Three others lie in a circle around them with their feet together and knees on the floor, and begin to move their hips and legs in ways reminiscent of the birthing gestures of the prologue. The rest of the dancers join in and there is a joyous celebration. Suddenly the man reaches down, as if to touch the woman's foot in respect. But instead, he gently guides her foot towards him. Turning his back to her, he begins to trace a slow, small circle with his footsteps, his posture growing straight and then extending into a triumphant pose, allowing his gaze to move higher until it finally fixes on some lofty

"What Theatre Fakes, Dance Does Real."

and distant point. The woman, in the meantime, has followed the same small circle close behind him, while her gaze and posture slowly drop in antithesis to her new husband's, until her back is curved down, and she stares at the floor.

The next section is lively with interesting patterns of collective movement. When the group runs across the stage, the grand sweep is as refreshing as a ride on a swing. Feet pound out strong beats. High kicks are absorbed back into a seated half-crouch, the kicked leg bent to the side, foot flat on the floor, the other leg extended. Later the women crouch down on their heels, knees impossibly wide apart to allow their hands to reach out in careful, sweeping gestures low to the floor. Are they spreading grain to dry? Washing the floor? The gestures are evocative but not realistic; surely having knees on the floor would be a more natural position, greatly easing the difficulty of the movement.

Telling Relations:

Sexuality and the Future

The movements throughout the performance are extremely intense, yet there is never any sign of strain. The contained energy blossoms through every move, no matter how slow or simple. Nothing is done carelessly. Chandralekha insists on making sure that dancers don't 'fake it.' The movements have to be internalized so that the audience is engaged. This is why the result is mesmerizing; the group is not merely putting on a show by going through the motions.

These are women dancing as real women, not swans, fairy princesses, or perpetually waiting lovers. It's as if being just a woman is not enough in ballet—you have to conform to the shape of some fantastic bird with the elongated neck of a great egret, the legs of a stork, and the humanly unnatural lightness of a hovering hummingbird. And if balancing yourself on a few square inches of toe isn't enough, an equally fantastic man has to come along and hoist you up into the air.

Their peacefulness and confidence is striking. When their gazes meet or cross, they look directly in each other's eyes with no change of expression, as if they can see within the other a reflection of themselves. It is a variation on a common element in traditional Indian dance: the dancer transcends the effort of the physical movement and seems the very epitome of grace and tranquillity. An eye of peace in the whirlwind of choreography.

The short epilogue to the programme layers a multitude of codes from traditional dance. The dancers, one behind the other, extend arms and legs in a multi-limbed array of poses. These are held for a moment and then extended, fingers blossoming open. The final, breathtaking result is, in Chandralekha's own words,

...a vision of the future
an iconic vision of woman
who is both auspicious
beautiful
luminous
and empowered
who is both Sri and Durga
with multiple hands
with multiple capacities
with multiple energies



Under the guidelines of one of India's most radical choreographers, The Chandralekha Group won London's 1992 Time Out/Dance Umbrella Award for best production of the year. Their Toronto performance of Sri fused yoga, martial arts and Bharatanatyam. Photo Dashaarath Patel

DASHABUJA—with ten hands
who can change all space
who can charge all space
it is the vision of the future woman.

The next morning, so moved by the performance, I go again to Harbourfront to hear her speak. As Chandralekha points out, "What theatre fakes, dance does real." Take for example, the 'drag walk' of the final section of the performance from the previous night. The dancers move across the stage, as shown in the photo, bent at the hips and knees, their feet dragging slowly while remaining flat on the floor throughout. It's a difficult move that begs for relief by at least allowing the back to curve down, and the head and arms to fall. But what an oppressed image would result! Instead, the dancers lift their heads to look forward in a way that is vulnerable, defiant, and much more 'backbreaking' than the more realistic, curved back position would be.

Among the many things she talks about—in refreshing, non-academic terms—is the flow between life and dance: 'There are no compartments between [them]...the principles of work are the same as the principles of dance.' Suddenly she jumps up from her seat at the long conference table on stage to demonstrate what she means. "Say you are cooking in the kitchen..." A spontaneous Mustard Seed Dance emerges! You can see the hot stove by the way she holds the drape of her

sari back to avoid having it catch flame; you can almost hear the insistent spit and crackle of the heated oil threatening to burn if she doesn't pay attention to it now; you understand the way her body contracts and virtually hops about in the effort to work as quickly as possible, while her hand pecks like a bird to pick up the different spices and drop them into the pot. You can hear the mustard seeds pop as they absorb the heat of the oil; in fact, you almost begin to smell the curry. "Performance," she says, settling back into her seat, the kitchen disappearing as we stare at this delightful woman, open-mouthed, "can happen or not. It's a secondary thing."



Alicia Peres lives and writes in Toronto. An earlier version of this article appeared in the Toronto *Canorient Contact*.

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Telling Relations: Sexuality and the Family

Reviewed by Karlyn Koh

There are many stories and many secrets to be told. How then to write about the divergent and specific (re)creations of family and sexuality without falling into generalizations and compartmentalisations? Certainly I write not to review, but to respond to this celebration of (re)telling of and (re)departures from the sites of identities. I realize that my response will never be impersonal, and that my story, my looking, will be intrinsically tied to theirs.

Telling Relations brings together works of several women of colour in an attempt to express the complex variables that constitute 'identity' in a context where women of colour are the primary audience. The show is informed by several groundbreaking explorations and discussions around the

"Between sexuality and the family is a centre of power, like a source of water buried deep beneath the surface. It can be a site of oppression; it can be a site of release, of reclamation, of reconstruction..."

Let me tell you a secret... The kinds of things one chooses not to talk about are the things which show the underlying power structure for what it is—but often at a great risk, or even a great cost, for those who choose to tell. Tell me a secret, woman to woman, sister to sister, because in that way, I will know where your strength is and where your struggle is. In the telling, a secret emerges, as though from a cocoon, transforming itself and its environment as it takes flight."

Larissa Lai, May 1993

Telling Relations: Sexuality and the Family curatorial essay

issues of race, gender and sexuality (**Tapestry, to visit the tiger**, [Vol. 1, No. 4] **Gatherings, Voices, Yellow Peril: Reconsidered, Piece of My Heart and Many-Mouthed Birds**). Yet it pushes new boundaries by addressing what curator Larissa Lai calls 'the grey area' where sexuality and family intersect in the lives of women of colour.

Entering this grey area, I find that it is a place of beginnings and (re)departures, not an end-point to arrive at. The banners of 'women of colour' and 'sexuality' and 'family' fragment into specificities of strategies, locations, directions and objectives. I look at the works, am led to the works, savouring these individual fragments—gifts from the women. I cannot, do not want to, assimilate the pieces, or pose any of them in opposition. Each installation, each carefully put

together art work, seems to be a translation of self which cannot be fixed or arrested, but is always in process. For the artist and possibly the onlooker, these processes are often difficult, sometimes disturbing, and yet potentially empowering. Yes, complicity is always there, in its varying degrees of awareness. And so my eye traverses the room...

Anne Jew's piece consists of a set of four frames, each divided into four squares and contains three colour photocopies and one black, blank square. Entitled **Life's**, the images offer snippets of a life—two girls laughing on the beach; a delicate doll in kimono left out on the balcony; feet resting on an ottoman; light coming through from under a door, a headless female body... In the centre of each frame is a diamond shape also divided into four, with the numbers one to four seemingly put at

random in each section. The suggestion is that of the childhood game of **Chance**, in which the choice of a particular number reveals one's fortune.

Life's what? Memories? Choices? Fortunes? Mysteries? Miseries? Laughter? The images are a mixture of innocent childhood and its unexplained/unexplainable fears, terrors and taboos. I stare at the black squares. The moments of stillness and blankness, which the black squares seemingly contain, suddenly betray movement—and then a reversal of perception takes place. So much is going on within those oak frames that the latter become almost ironic for their inability to contain anything in the end. The subject of this piece retains the power of naming...and withholding. The black spaces—the flip sides of the images of happy childhood—contain echoes of ominous and ambiguous images. What is it that cannot be told, even after so much has already been revealed? Childhood abuse? What kinds of shame still need to be hidden? The images collapse into those black spaces, and I think I can make sense of the movement that might tell the full story. But it still eludes me. I am left with only my own image reflected in the glass protecting the framed images. I hear the story but am ultimately confronted with the limits of knowing the elusive.

Sulih Williams' installation, **African Artifacts, Circa the Past**, consists of a headless model, hung from the ceiling, and draped with layers of material—some bloodied, some parts of old pyjamas, some unplaceable. There is writing on the wall behind the model. Below it, on the floor, lie more items: a cocoon in the corner; pieces of cloth; and handkerchiefs laid out variously on a piece of canvas. Deanne Achong's **Blushed, Cameo, Flushed** is a series of three photographs. In the left and right frames are images of the torso of a bare-chested woman powdering her breasts white. 'Family' here is present symbolically through the paraphernalia of her father's and mother's medical professions—surgical gloves, stethoscope, and bandages.

What do Williams' and Achong's work say? *Theirs is a celebration of voices and identities and, sometimes, necessary silences. The intimacy of the revelations also carry with them some degree of ambiguity. Telling Relations; the telling of relations and also telling in relation to the family and the viewer. Perhaps it is enough to feel and share the energy coming through the work, and to respect the contextual boundaries that the artists have defined for themselves. Williams' writing behind the installation strikes my eye/mind: "Who am I/ to speak/ my voice." Is it—"Who am I? To speak my voice."*

Or—"Who am I to speak? My voice." Or—"Who am I to speak my voice?" I am now thinking of the strategies of language and images used by these artists. In what ways are written language and images accessible, effective, or deliberately multivalent in art? How is language used to challenge the construction of meaning, to reclaim the power of articulation, and to break the master narrative? The visual images in the show subvert ideologically loaded modes of representation, so that the relationship between artist and viewer is constantly repositioned and the act of 'looking' no longer allows privileged entry into the subjects' texts, nor does it allow the spectator to position the subject as desired object in his/her own discourse. 'Woman of colour' (re)presentations that ring with recognition and/or non-recognition. Moving across the room, I encounter fragments that blend together, are familiar, and are in conflict.

Entitled **Last Night I Dreamt that My Mother and Lover Stood Together in a Line Up at a Corner Store Discussing the Indian Restaurants in Vancouver**, Shani Mootoo's colour photocopy installation consists of a written text placed between collages of interposed images of herself and her father. The lines between woman-man, daughter-father, self-other become blurred. What constitutes identity? Certainly it is a point of (dis)placement. The eyes that look out at the viewer are both Mootoo's and her father's. The beard, the hair, and the clothing, all of which blend in dis-

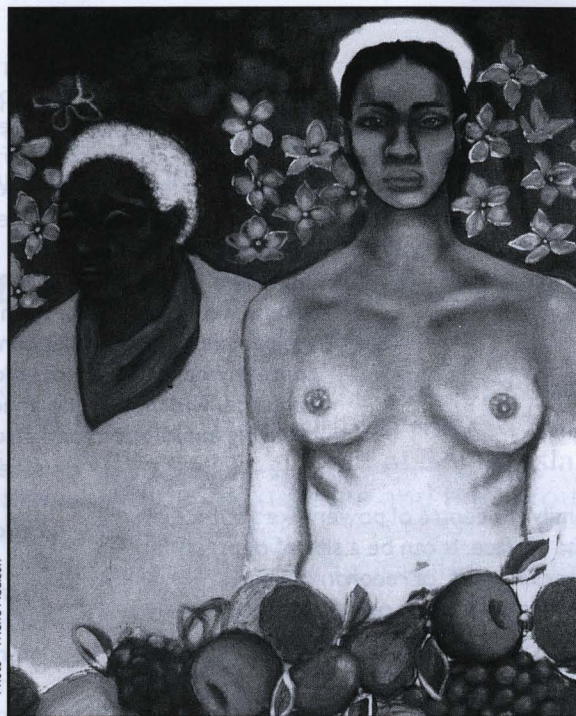


Photo: Marie Addison

Demeter's Despair Kathleen Dick, 1993

junctionive continuity. The text tells a moving story of a daughter's coming out to her father and the accepting love of the father. At the end, Mootoo writes: "But when I stepped out of my apartment on to the street I could still be bashed to bits by some stranger who would not give a damn about what my parents thought." Even when the family is supportive, the larger 'family' is out there to mete out judgement.

Mootoo uses the power of words, but even more so, utilizes the striking poignancy of images. The piece plays on 'like father, like daughter'; but each is still so much an-other, where familiar/familial relations are destabilised and where Same and Other are less distinguishable. In my eyes, the images which frame the text trace and retrace relations (of family, gender and sexuality) in order to reposition them. I wonder at the tenuous connection between the subject's sexuality and her family. How is lesbian sexuality (re)configured in those terms? There is no origin and end to turn to. The piece signals the ongoing dialogue in which the viewer is invited to share.

Another piece which attempts to dismantle fixed categories is Sarinah Haba's mixed media work called **Second Wife**. In the piece,

there are two photographs of two women in traditional western wedding costumes. In one photograph, one is the groom and the other, the bride. The roles are reversed in the second photograph. The piece is presented in a style, suggested by the wallpaper, table frames, and the poses of the models, which resonates with nuances of a certain time, place and context.

Upon reflection, I see that it is all a play again. Once more, man-woman, husband-wife, east-west, past-present, heterosexual-homosexual and butch-femme relationships are displaced so as to subvert the norms. Also apparent is the tension in these representations between working with the normative structures and not being subjected to them. A simple and provoking piece.

Sur Mehat's mixed media installation, **The Spectacle of Things that are Suspect**, engages the viewer's active participation. Covered with patterns from the carpets from her home, the piece uses round windows of various sizes which open to reveal words and/or images. Some of the windows are permanently open due to their position in relation to the pull of gravity, some remain closed until someone lifts the lid, while others stay open only if an adjoining window is open or closed. Beside the piece is a letter, dated some time after the piece was completed, addressed to Mehat's mother. The letter is Mehat's response to her mother's anger at being used in this work. The artist apologizes for trespassing into her mother's private world.

I spend much time in front of this piece lifting lids to read all the words, many of which are painful in their honesty. I also look at the representations of the human heart, one a scientific rendition, the other the romantic symbol, alongside the images of a younger mother and a much younger Mehat. Stories laid bare in the always opened windows—"Why is my anger always so inappropriate?" Stories that still lie hidden in the closed windows of childhood memories contained in the photograph of the girl. My own heart swells with fearful anticipation and/or excited voyeurism each time I open another closed lid to discover what is underneath. The addition of the letter layers on another development by signifying the in-process nature of the work. I wonder at the many works in this show which continually point back to themselves as subjects-in-process, pushing the limits of knowing what one is and what one is not. Speaking from sites of hybridity, the works come before the reflexive questions of when, where and how sexual, racial, gender and cultural identities are (re)presented. The letter reminds me of the secrets the artists have chosen

to reveal and of the presence of their families and memories always there in their works. Sometimes this presence/memory resists involvement, while other times they are often inextricably intertwined with the subject, frequently imparting pain and/or liberation to the respective parties. How far should one go? How many windows does one open?

Kathleen Dick's acrylic painting, **Demeter's Despair**, shows a young woman in the foreground, looking straight out at the viewer, while an older woman stands behind her, her gaze averting the onlooker. In both the foreground and the background, there are signs of fertility and blossoming youth, through the use of fruits and flowers and vibrant colours. Juxtaposed against these is the darkened face of the mother whose eyes are blackened out spaces.

At first I am attracted by the sheer sensuousness of the play of shapes and colours, and then I am disturbed. A link has been severed and the pain of that is reflected in the dark abysses of the mother's eyes which the artist daughter can not paint in. As with some of the other pieces, the eyes and poses say so much. While the younger woman in the painting is discovering her sexuality, the older woman wears the blank white cloth of society's ageism. Her sexuality is the unwritten text of no-sex and the silent space that is rendered invisible. Where and how can mother and daughter meet in this polarized context? I find no answers here.

The works in **Telling Relations** continue to challenge general social stereotypes with the realities that make up individual lives. In the show, there is a preoccupation of the subject with her selves, a process which involves the double gesture of reflexivity and vacillation. It is no longer enough to proclaim 'I am a woman,' or 'I am a lesbian,' or 'I am black/chinese/south asian/mixed heritage.' Rather, one must grapple with living life with differences and contradictions without desiring some sort of metaphysical synthesis.

Memory. Desire. Identity. The pain, frustration and joys of un-naming so as to (re)name. I have come to the end of the show, but I know that the stories will go on. They must go on. Already, they play inside my head. They are gifts I take back with me to (re)create in my own stories.



Karlyn Koh is a graduate student living in Vancouver. For more information about **Telling Relations**, or for the catalogue, please contact
 grant gallery 209 East 6th Avenue Vancouver BC V5T 1J7

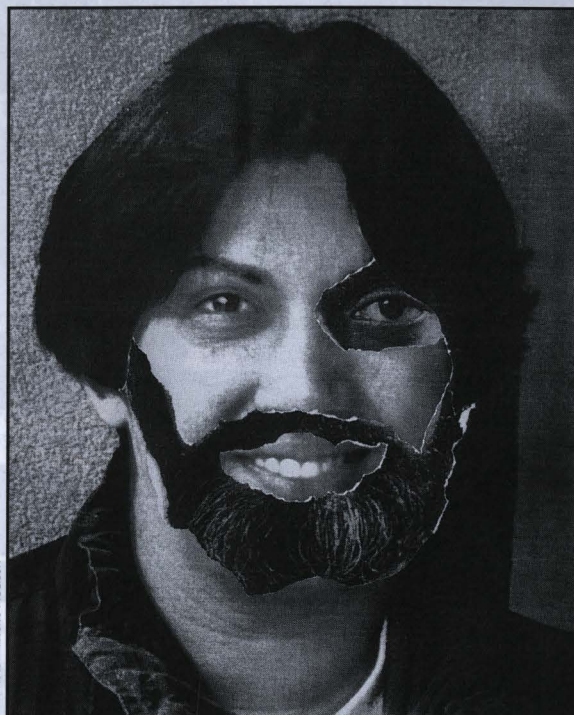


Photo: Merle Addison

Last Night I Dreamt... Shani Mootoo, 1993 (detail)

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A Balancing Act: Family and Work

Directed by Helena Cynamon
National Film Board, 1992

This release by the National Film Board of Canada explores the everyday working realities of women and men in the work force. This video, which is a part of the **Women and Work** series, clearly articulates the difficulties of juggling the many needs of a family with those of a competitive work environment in the 1990s. Through the examination of six different families, the video explores such strategies as flex-time, job sharing, satellite offices and telecommuting and their effectiveness in insuring a better quality of life for workers.

The job sharing scenario examines the life of Pat Crowe and her work as a publicist who arranges author's tours and publicity for books. She emphatically states that job sharing does not mean that she works part time. Rather, she shares a full time job with her co-worker and is entitled to benefits like other full time workers. By working only three days a week, she is able to spend more quality hours with her children.

Tazeem Nathoo, a Personnel Manager at British Columbia Hydro, uses her days off to spend time with her mother who does not speak English and who needs her help to function in an English speaking environment. BC Hydro provides its employees with 'core days' which they can take off as needed. As a manager, Ms. Nathoo values creative approaches to meet the competing demands on employees in the company.

This film is targeted towards the education market and conveys its message in easy to understand and clear terms.



B.K. Gosh lives in Vancouver.

dancing from scene to dream and back in time for tea and talk...there is magic in every breath

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ST. JOHN'S

Wordplay

Latifah and Himli's Nomadic Uncle

by Alnoor Dewshi

16mm B&W 1992 15mins

Distributed by the London Film-Makers Co-op

Winner of the 1992 DICK award, given out by the LFMC and independent filmmaker, Jo Mennell to the most innovative and humorous short film of under 20 minutes.

Where do you come from? is a question often targeted at Black people living in the West. An innocuous question, some may argue: an innocent query meant to solicit a sense of context, meaning and reference. To others it is a diabolical question: 'other'-ising and alienating—an insistence that a Black person's point of reference in the world has to exist elsewhere from where s/he is currently situated. But for most of us the question is confounding: in a world of changing boundaries and (for some) easy migrations, we find that we are all from so many different places, and have so many different homes.

Alnoor Dewshi has taken the question on and is offering, with this short film, a somewhat cryptic but nevertheless delightful solution. He introduces us to two identically dressed, sharp-tongued nomads: Latifah and Himli. They take us on a miniaturised epic of a journey across many landscapes—all of which exist in a mythological, and often beautifully shot London of ambiguous time and place. We follow Latifah and Himli through all of their contexts and conversations. They are concerned, if only for a moment, with the problem of their identity. They take it to their savvy and sexy uncle who, over a game of ping-pong, offers them a couple of clever conundrums and a few wicked backhands. Satisfied, the two women continue on their travels, content to just hang out from time to time and to use the tools of whatever culture is available to serve their purposes. The problem of their identity has not been solved. They are not able to fix it—to pin it to a bulletin board of history. They just continue on against an ever shifting backdrop, exchanging breezy wisdoms and checking out the territory.

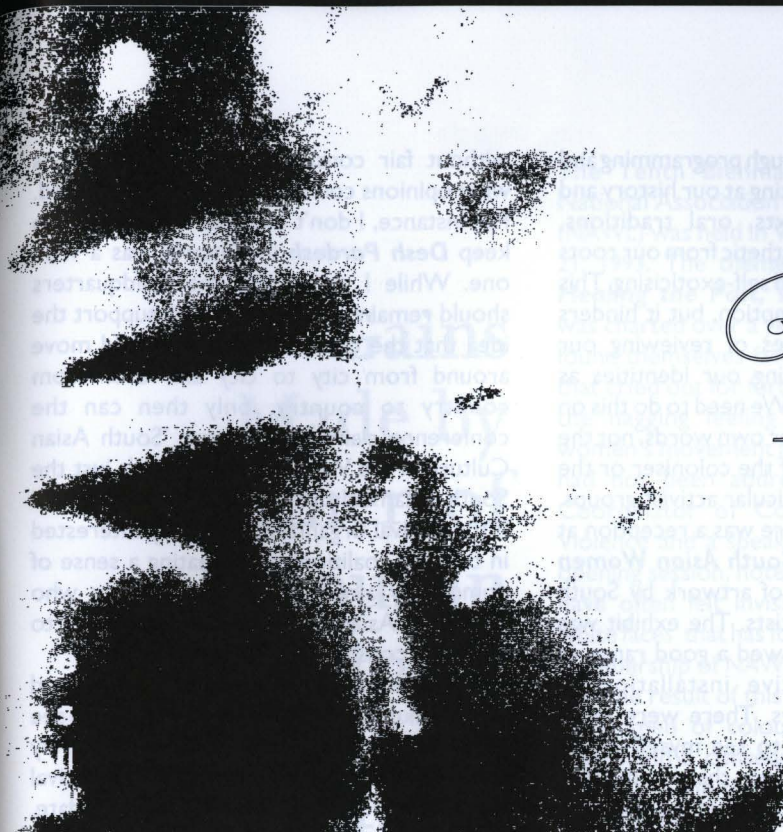

Alnoor Dewshi, at a time when many filmmakers are grappling with issues of identity, seems to be rejecting the terms of that project entirely. It's as if he was insisting that identity is not a fixed solution but is fluid and in perpetual motion like Latifah and Himli, and that it's just about as linear and even a concept as their meandering and contradictory conversations. Visually, the film moves at the same undulating pace as the picaresque

narrative: just as you think you've got the rhythm of the film down, it's over. The central question of belonging is fully conceived: this film is thoughtfully written, photographed and edited. Dewshi is among a handful of young Black experimental filmmakers associated with the London Film-Maker's Co-op (Alia and Tanya Syed, Sogand Bahram, and Pier Wilkie are some of the others) who are making innovative and unpredictable films around issues of race and subjectivity. Like Dewshi, they are concerned with aesthetic and formal as well as political and cultural problems. And they are coming up with some sophisticated answers offered often, as in this film, with humour and pleasure—and without the hair shirt.



Ian Iqbal Rashid is a Canadian writer and independent film and video programmer currently working in London, England. A collection of his poetry, *Black Markets, White Boyfriends* was published by TSAR press in 1992 and a second collection, *The Heat Yesterday* is forthcoming. Ian is currently organizing touring video/film seasons for the Ikon Gallery, Birmingham (*Beyond Destination: Recent South Asian Film & Video*) and the ICA (*Institute of Contemporary Arts, London: Does it Come in Another Colour?: Race & Desire In Film & Video*).





Desh Pardesh

Are We Family?

This year's third annual **Desh Pardesh** (Home away from Home) conference, about the politics of South Asian Culture in the West was an undoubtable success; it was an empowering five days (March 24 – 28th, 1993) in Toronto where many artists, activists, performers, musicians, writers, poets, filmmakers and other cultural workers of the South Asian diaspora (and others) gathered to confer and celebrate. The organizers and volunteers that made the conference possible should be thanked and commended for their excellent efforts. Except for some unfortunate technical problems on opening night, the programming seemed to flow smoothly and was almost always interesting. There is a comprehensive review of the conference which appears in the Spring, 1993 issue of **Montreal Serai**, (Volume 7, No.2 available by calling 514 445.0532), which gives a more detailed account of conference programming. In this article, I would like to raise some questions about the conference itself and the direction in which it is headed.

I attended every single performance and panel that I possibly could. I was not, however, able to participate in any of the caucuses that were organized. There didn't seem to be a caucus for me at the conference and this got me thinking about the great responsibility that a festival like **Desh Pardesh** has to South Asian cultural workers in the West. After all it is the only conference of its type in Canada, and perhaps the entire West. I'm South Asian, I'm an artist, a curator and an educator. (For some reason the fact that I'm male and heterosexual seems to be important to some people as well). I see a need for **Desh**, for others like (and unlike) myself. I expect a lot from a conference that calls itself a 'conference and festival exploring the politics of South Asian Cultures in the West.' I expect such an entity to have the capacity to include a vast diversity of thought, perspectives, and work. It should reflect the great heterogeneity of our diaspora and provide space for all of us who are marginalised in the mainstream.

I also would expect such a conference to be a place where artists can share their work and ideas with each other, and where we can show our work to our (true) peers and to new audiences. This concern was also voiced at the plenary (*Are We Family?*) on the last day of the festival. I don't feel that the chair fully understood the statement/question being made/asked. I read it as a plea for the conference to develop so that there would be some space created for the discussion of process and aesthetic. Some attention should be paid to not only the political discourse(s) but to the work done and, as well, to help develop the art and the artists who create it in its many forms. It was not as an activist or a politicised being that I (and others) felt excluded, but as an artist(s).

It's really difficult to be critical of the fledgling *Desh Pardesh*, but it is also necessary to be so at this stage, in order to can move on with the work to be done. The programming of the festival has evolved through asking questions about access and dealing with overt and 'hidden' racism as South Asians in the West, into a highly politicised and relatively narrow set of 'politically correct' agendas. This no longer makes *Desh Pardesh* about "South Asian Culture in the West." It is significant that the cut line for the conference/festival is no longer 'A Conference and Festival Exploring South Asian Culture in the West.' It is now, a 'Conference and Festival Exploring the Politics of South Asian Cultures in the West.' That's all fine for the activists and some of the writers and artists in the cultural sector but not inclusive of many of us.

As cultural producers, we need safe spaces (like *Desh Pardesh*) where we can meet and talk as professionals. Our aesthetic as artists is new and fragile; it is still developing and needs a nurturing environment in which to grow. Yes, all cultural production is political, and therefore it has the strength and capacity to not only serve a social purpose but can also itself be an inspiration for change and amelioration. Art whose sole purpose is to serve a political cause always fails. We cannot allow a space like *Desh Pardesh* to go; we need it to progress. There are too few safe spaces for artists in our traditional South Asian communities and families. Being marginalised at a conference about Diasporic South Asian culture, because of my sexual orientation and gender, is not acceptable. Perhaps future festivals could include more workshops and caucuses for artists working in different media. A chance to present work and ideas as well as to share with others working in the same field would be welcome.

There seems to be an attitude at *Desh*

Pardesh expressed through programming and media reviews, that looking at our history and reclaiming images, texts, oral traditions, traditions in craft and aesthetic from our roots is somehow nostalgic and self-exoticising. This is not only a false assumption, but it hinders the important processes of reviewing our heritage and constructing our identities as diasporic South Asians. We need to do this on our own terms and in our own words, not the borrowed definitions of the coloniser or the political agendas of particular activist groups.

On opening night there was a reception at the Art Metropole of *South Asian Women In-sight*, an exhibition of artwork by South Asian women visual artists. The exhibit was well presented and showed a good range of work, from interactive installation to traditional folk paintings. There were many images that I was able to see myself in and there were many questions that I had about the art. I wanted to meet and talk to each one of the artists represented, but there was no formal effort made to facilitate such encounters and dialogues. There wasn't even a catalogue or proper curatorial essay to accompany the work; the type of documentation which, in my opinion, is crucial for this type of event. Why wasn't there a caucus for visual artists? Maybe artists working in different media would like to meet and discuss issues with other artists; maybe we'd learn something from each other. *Desh Pardesh* has provided a much needed platform for gay and lesbian-identified cultural work, but its challenge and responsibility lies in trying to define and expand its conception of who actually are its constituencies. *Bus-bus*, enough.

One other criticism focuses around the three panels which were all held on the same day at the festival mainstage (the Euclid Theatre). These were entitled, *Arranging the Marriage of Art and Politics*, *Running from the Family*, and *Fundamentalism and Communalism*. Except for the *Running from the Family* panel, I felt these meetings to be situations where the converted were being preached to. There weren't any viewpoints presented that challenged the orthodoxy of thinking that prevailed at each panel. Perhaps because there was no safe space created for alternate views to be expressed. The question periods were too short and in many cases the panellists seemed to be there just to further their own causes. Many important questions were flippantly answered or even ignored.

The plenary to establish *Desh Pardesh* as a permanent organization was one of the most interesting gatherings of the conference. It turned out to be a rather squeezed meeting, where many resolutions were passed through

without fair consideration. It was obvious what opinions could and could not be voiced. For instance, I don't feel that the decision to keep *Desh Pardesh* in Ontario was a wise one. While I agree that the headquarters should remain in Toronto, I also support the idea that the conference itself should move around from city to city and even from country to country; only then can the conference claim to be about 'South Asian Culture in the West.' Otherwise, it's just the South Asian culture of 'Ontario and friends.' If the festival organizers are really interested in building coalitions and creating a sense of community amongst cultural workers who are South Asian, this is a point they need to seriously consider.

I started this article on a positive note and I would like to end that way. I would like to see *Desh Pardesh* grow and develop into a truly international and inclusive festival. The festival has done a more than respectable job to date. I did experience a great sense of empowerment, what with all those brown faces in one room and all of them working in the Arts or involved in working toward social change. I was entertained and impressed with a great deal of the creative work that was showcased. I also met some very friendly, open, and interesting artists, writers, and performers with whom to share ideas in between events.

Since the conference and the founding membership meeting (plenary), the organizers have requested feedback (and this is mine) on the programming, and have held a community forum *Rap On!* (June 6, 1993 in Toronto) to evaluate feedback and to develop future strategies. I hope that the new membership and executive rise to the challenge of truly making *Desh Pardesh* a conference and festival exploring the culture and politics (culture is never apolitical by-the way) of South Asians in the West. Just exploring the 'Politics of South Asian Culture' is not enough. Where's the Art, I ask? If the conference refuses to accept the challenge, it cannot continue to present itself as an organization which represents South Asian culture in the Diaspora, unless culture is defined as only that which is overtly political or predominantly gay and lesbian identified. We need to get to a point where the race, gender, or sexual orientation of a human being is not used to classify and stereotype them; who I fuck is my business and seldom affects the work I produce. Okay *Desh*, are we family?



Amir Ali Alibhai is a Vancouver based artist, curator and cultural activist. He is currently co-curating one segment of *ARTROPOLIS 93* (October 22 to November 19, 1993, Vancouver, BC).

Gains Made by Women of Colour in National Women's Organizations

The Tenth Biennial Conference of the National Association of Women and the Law (NAWL) was held in Vancouver February 19–21, 1993. The theme of the Conference—*Healing the Past, Forming the Future*—was charted over a year ago when organizers found themselves faced with a host of issues that cried out for further comment, and with the nagging feeling that criticism of the women's movement as elitist and race-bound had not been addressed. Chandra Bhudi, Coordinator of Community Action on Violence and a speaker at the Conference's opening session, noted that women of colour have often felt invisible amidst the 'sea of white faces' that has formed the executive and membership of NAWL. Ms. Bhudi maintained that the result of this has been an absorption by women of colour of 'white' reference points and a consequent distancing of their ethnicity—and this in a world where 75% of the population is non-white.

In an effort to address these concerns, a two-part workshop focusing on the dynamics within and amongst women of colour groups was, for the first time, part of the Conference agenda. Titled *Women of Colour Strategies*, the panel discussion was led by a cross-section of women, including Toronto community organizers, Punam Khosla and Eun-Sook Lee, Women Against Violence Against Women activist, Zara Suleman and Black History Month organizer, Carolyn Jerome. The focus of the panel was to identify other women of colour communities, and to utilize shared strengths as well as to learn from common experiences. Both workshops were closed caucuses for women of colour only, in order to encourage this sector of women to engage freely in dialogue and 'form a future' amongst themselves. Although there was also a restriction imposed on the publication of any of the discussions, a number of resolutions were arrived at and were presented to the NAWL executive at the annual general meeting held on the last day of the Conference. The main resolution submitted was a request that NAWL make it a priority to fund a permanent advisory committee on women of colour in order to:

- a) encourage the participation of women of colour in NAWL;
- b) consult and strategise with NAWL on all initiatives with a view to the impact of these initiatives on women of colour;
- c) support women of colour in their struggle to obtain representation at all levels of the legal profession—as students, lawyers and judges;
- d) review the credentials from a legal and

social perspective of persons who speak at and for NAWL; and
e) ensure that NAWL's panels are inclusive, and reflect the broad concerns of women of colour.

In passing this resolution, it is clear that NAWL's executive is preparing to give women of colour a larger role in the direction of the organization.

In giving women of colour a stronger voice, NAWL is following in the footsteps of Canada's largest feminist organization, the National Action Committee on the Status of Women (NAC). In the 1970s, NAC was almost exclusively a white, middle-class network of professional women and academics. Today, after a robust campaign of affirmative action under the leadership of Judy Rebick, over a quarter of NAC's executive members are from visible minorities, and the organization has a woman of colour caucus with a direct role in setting the agenda for meetings.

The growing influence of women of colour within NAC is symbolized by Ms. Rebick's successor, Sunera Thobani, a Tanzanian-born woman of colour. Ms. Thobani has stated that she wants to see more and more women of colour within NAC's membership and executive, and that she is committed to continuing Ms. Rebick's efforts to make the organization more diverse. Ms. Thobani has said, "It is unfair to allow a few women to monopolize the gains made by the women's movement collectively, and to thereby slam a door in the face of the women behind them."

From the directions taken by both NAWL and NAC, it appears that the face of the feminist movement is changing. Traditional outsiders—immigrant women, visible minorities—have become a dominant force and are shifting the balance of power within the movement. The result of this shift is that women's groups are beginning to more accurately include and reflect the diversity of women and women's experiences.



Nazlin A. Nathu is a lawyer and a writer living in Vancouver.

Samachar

Calls for Submissions

SHE travels is an international magazine designed to give women a place where they can share travel experiences, including international, cultural and social commentary, and inform women on travel destinations, travel literature, travel/work opportunities, adventure/eco-travel programs and much more.

SHE travels is looking for articles, reviews, essays, literature on: *Women and adventure/eco-travel* (deadline **October 15, 1993**); and *Volunteer/work abroad opportunities for women and feminist activists* (deadline **February 15, 1994**). Tell us about your ideas and experiences of how women move through the world. Please send all submissions with a SASE to:

SHE travels
Box 6142
Whitehorse, Yukon Y1A 5L4

Seeking Asian Poets of North America

Stephen Gill is editing an anthology of poems by Asians of North America to be released by Vesta Publications Ltd. in December, 1993. Translations from other languages are acceptable.

Poets are requested to submit their five to ten poems in English with a page of biographical information. Poets from Canada should include a SASE and from the US, international reply coupons.

Submissions should be typed, not more than one per page and every page should bear the name and address of the sender.

Send submissions to
Vesta Publications Ltd.
PO Box 1641
Cornwall, ON
Canada K6H 5V6
Tel 613 932.2135 Fax 613 932.7735

Calling All Bisexual Women

An group of six feminist bisexual women who are Black, Black Asian, South Asian, Ashkenazy Jew and White, able-bodied, working and middle class are editing a **Bisexual Women's Anthology** which will be published by Sister Vision Press, a Black Women and Women of Colour Press. At least half of this anthology will be written and produced by Women of Colour. They are especially seeking the voices of bisexual Women of Colour and call for all forms of written and visual work for the anthology. **Final Deadline: October 31, 1993.**

If you can, please send your writing on IBM compatible disc and a printed copy. Within Canada send a SASE, and from outside Canada also include International Reply Coupons for return.

Send submissions to
Bisexual Women's Anthology
c/o **Sister Vision Press**
PO Box 217, Station E
Toronto, ON
Canada M6H 4E2

Proposals/Submissions are sought for an edited volume dealing with contemporary South Asian art practices. The focus is around South Asian visual artists in the diaspora whose work explores constructions of race, identity, gender, sexuality, class, nationhood, or the politics of location. **Deadline: October 1, 1993.**

Send proposals/submissions to the editors:
Allan de Souza/Saloni Mathur
252 Franklin Street - #1L
Brooklyn, New York
USA 11222

Upcoming Events

Women's REEL Vision is a group of feminist women whose common goal is to promote women's expressions of their distinct perspectives through films and video and to create opportunities for women to learn about the creative and technical aspects of film and video making. **Women's REEL Vision** will be presenting its first independent festival, the **REEL LIFE WOMEN'S FILM AND VIDEO FESTIVAL**, on **October 21 - 24, 1993**. The festival, held in Halifax, Nova Scotia, will include four days of videos and films, workshops, and a community video information exchange room.

The Festival has welcomed submissions of documentary, video art, animation, experimental and dramatic works from the local, national, and international community.

Direct all inquiries to:
Women's REEL Vision
PO Box 36035
Halifax, Nova Scotia
Canada B3J 3S9
Tel 902 422.5324

Disrupted Borders

A Touring Exhibition curated by Sunil Gupta for OVA/INIVA in collaboration with the Arnolfini and The Photographer's Gallery featuring the work of: Shahidul Alam • Emily Andersen • Monika Baker • Karl Beveridge • Sutapa Biswas • Kaucyila Brooke • Sheba Chhachhi • Carol Condé • Darrel Ellis • Jamelie Hassan • Doug Ischar • Jorma Puranen • Samena Rana • Renée Tobe • Millie Wilson

The show opens **September 17, 1993** and continues to **November 7, 1993**. Gallery Hours are from Monday-Saturday 10am-7pm and on Sunday from 12noon-7pm. **Disrupted Borders** at

ARNOLFINI
16 Narrow Quay
Bristol, UK BS1 4QA
Tel 0272 299191

The Vancouver International Writers Festival presents Vikram Seth, author of **A Suitable Boy** [see review on page 55]. Mr. Seth will join the more than 50 authors, poets and playwrights on hand from October 20 through 24, 1993 on Granville Island, Vancouver, BC. For the complete Festival program and ticket information, call 604 681.6330.

A•R•T•R•O•P•O•L•I•S 9•3

Public Art & Art About Public Issues

Vancouver's largest art show, **October 22 to November 20, 1993**, opens at the Old Woodward's building on Hastings Street. The show will feature the work of 270 BC-based artists whose work will be divided into six sections: The Unbuilt Environment; Temporary Outdoor Public Artworks; Bridgeworks; Living Art; Art About Public Issues; and Home, Identity and Hybridities-Claiming Space.

For more information or the catalogue contact
ARTROPOLIS 93
1447 Hornby Street
Vancouver, BC
Canada V6Z 1W8
Tel 604 689.5811
Fax 604 689.5371

In Progress...

Desh Pardesh 1994

Organizer Steve Pereira writes... "In the planning stages for the Fall, we have **Brick by Brick, Bridging the Gap—Building Coalitions within the South Asian Community**. Essentially what we would like to do is ensure a continuing dialogue between Desh Pardesh and the different constituencies and sectors in the South Asian community. We need to work together towards strengthening our public presence and increase the artistic and cultural profile within and between the different communities. We would like to meet and organize with cultural producers, artists and community activists from the different communities to provide an opportunity to strategise on issues of cultural production and its role in effecting social change. Any concerns, ideas, suggestions, help to offer? Please let us know." Contact

Desh Pardesh
141 Bathurst Street
Toronto, ON
M5V 2R2
Tel: 416 601.9932 Fax: 416 601.9973

Wanted...

Rungh is looking for book reviewers.

Send us a sample of your writing and the subject areas you would like to review (race politics, fiction, poetry, communications, cultural theory, etc.). You can either suggest book(s) you would like to review or leave that up to us. Typical reviews range from 250-500 words. We pay for what we publish, \$30/Rungh page (approximately 500 words).

We will receive work on disc for either a Mac or IBM environment. Fax us your writing samples or your ideas, or write us at

Rungh
PO Box 66019, Station F
Vancouver, BC
Canada V5N 4L5
Tel 604 876.2086 Fax 604 662.7466



Look for it!

Volume 2, Number 3

THE D L E G M A J T I R
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- Fiction
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Call for Submissions

Volume 2, Number 4

The Visual Arts Issue—
Where *mendhi* takes
Modernism
beyond the Post.

- Send us your slides
- Tell us about your art practice
 - Describe your process
- Theorize about curating Race
 - Review and interview
- So, is there an emerging South Asian aesthetic?

Deadline November 15, 1993

Send your submissions to



PO Box 66019, Station F,
Vancouver, BC V5N 5L4
Tel 604 876.2086
Fax 604 662.7466

Call or fax us your ideas.

We prefer submissions on disc—PC or Mac, unformatted text.

The first installation using turbans was created in 1987 and titled, *The Last Wedding—The Male Guests*. It was inspired by the stress of my brother's marriage. I swore it would be the last wedding I would attend.

Over the years the turbans have become stand-ins for the men and women that might have worn them; comments on segregation by gender, by class, by religion and by colony. One can always tell a Ugandan Sikh by the peak and folds of his turban. Old men from rural villages are morally restricted to wearing loosely tied turbans in washed-out hues. A bridegroom must wear festive red or pink. Militancy or religious fervour is indicated by tightly bound regimental black or blue. So the fabric itself becomes charged with the social nuances of position, status, belief and mores. The tying of the turbans by different people gives each turban uniqueness, and the fact that material cannot stay rigid forever imparts a fragile ephemerality to the piece—a contrast to the society they represent, which is unbending and intolerant of change, and which seeks to suppress any manifestations of individuality in the interests of familial stability.

Sarindar Dhaliwal,

Artist's Statement

Photo Deborah Brown

