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Going Home: Far and Near

By NIKKY-GUNINDER K. SINGH

*Home is where one starts from. As we grow older
The world becomes stranger; the pattern more complicated
Of dead and living. Not the intense moment
Isolated, with no before and after;
But a lifetime burning in every moment...*

T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*

When I started teaching at Colby in 1986, I chose to live in an apartment complex off West River Road. Having lived in dorms for many years, its spacious rooms with balconies where the birds chirped was just what I wanted. But once I moved in I was horribly ill at home. For the first time I felt a foreigner in America. I missed the open and welcoming spirit I experienced on campus. So that January when a faculty apartment opened up, I quickly shifted, and Colby became my home, and has been ever since.

My Taylor apartment was a hop away from my office in Lovejoy, so the personal and the professional elements got richly fused. Some of the students with whom I ate meals, shopped, cooked, watched movies and plays, did aerobics, rehearsed for Divali celebrations, and chatted late into the night also happened to be in my classroom. Those outside friendships generated informal currents within the classroom, making our discussions fun and dynamic. Annually, students from Religions of India class adapted the epic Ramayana into their modern syntax and produced splendid performances that drew large audiences. The actors playing the role of Rama, Sita, Laxmana, Ravana are deeply imprinted in my mind.

It was with students that I first met my future husband; it was with students I shared my grief about my mother's sudden death; it was students who first saw my daughter as we brought her from the hospital. Those five years in Taylor are memorable indeed.

And I had my home in India, too. Across the miles I derived my sustenance from its soil. I would visit my parents over the summers, and they would visit me here. My father even led one of my seminars on Sikhism in the Taylor apartment, and my mother

cooked us a Punjabi lunch. The two parts of my life were perfectly synchronized. However, with my father's death in 1998 my home in India was gone. With it, my past. My life was ruptured. Issues of identity and belonging hit me as never before. For years I did not go back to the Punjab. I could not face that loss. My host parents from my undergraduate days at Wellesley urged me to make a visit to Patiala, and with them I did—though we steered away from “the house” as far as possible.

Last year I finally faced going home. That was a transformative moment. The Punjabi University honored me with a fellowship and invited me for a lecture. To be welcomed as the “daughter of the university” made it even more precious.

The Punjabi University, from its very inception in the early sixties, had been my home. My father served as the member-secretary of the commission that led to the creation of the university in Patiala in 1962. The university was set up in postcolonial Punjab for the advancement of Punjabi language, literature, and culture (the Hebrew University in Israel perhaps is the only other university founded on language as such). The Punjabi language popularly spoken by Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs alike in precolonial Punjab was severely marginalized during the British Raj, and the linguistic divisions fomented by the colonial state led to the violent Partition of India in 1947. The founders of the Punjabi University knew well that human language does not simply mirror reality, it also has the power to transform reality, and so language was to be the resource for understanding both the heritage of the Punjab as well as its entry into future horizons.

The headquarters of the university were lodged on the first floor of the main guesthouse in the beautiful Baradari Palace, and my family lived on its upper floor. From the balcony in its haloed senate hall with elegant chandeliers, my friends and I would watch lectures being delivered. Layers of history enriched this site, for once upon a time it was from here that the royal women in purdah watched affairs of state—without being seen. Of course we were not interested in the happenings below. Mere kids full of pranks, all we wanted was to distract a few sets of eyes from the lecturer towards us, and for our success we got into terrible trouble.

My parents spent a year at the Center for World Religions at Harvard, and upon his return my father became the chair of the first academic department of religious studies in India. The



Crawford Family Professor of Religion Nikky Singh, standing, hosts students from her seminar on South Asian women in her house for a home-cooked Indian meal.

department launched the *Journal of Religious Studies* and hosted many international conferences bringing distinguished scholars to the campus to foster understanding and peace amongst people of different religions and nationalities. My father also traveled extensively, lecturing on different facets of Sikhism in Japan, Belgium, Holland, England, and the United States. He was an active member of the World Conference on Religion and Peace, and joined the International Consultation in Search of Non-Violent Alternatives in Derry, Northern Ireland. Through his scholarship, travels, and warmth of personality he developed many lifelong friendships. Since there were barely any hotels in Patiala those days, we often had dear friends from afar, youngsters then but now distinguished professors, stay in our home. Local friends and relatives would drop in, and our house would resound with animated discussions on Sikh politics and history. My larger home was the vibrant university campus where I was exposed to the social and cultural side of the Punjab during its many events and celebrations. There were poetry symposiums and theater productions. It was from here that I left for America in the 1970s. That at-homeness I felt on the Punjabi University campus carried on, for I invariably lived on U.S. campuses as a student in high school, college, graduate school, and as a faculty member at Colby.

Just as it provided great joy and freedom, coming home to the Punjabi University invested me with responsibility too: I must

work harder to create arabesques of understanding between East and West. I must take up new scholarly projects, which would join the two spheres into one home. I must intimately familiarize my students at Colby with Asian spiritualities so instead of merely producing technological webs in this global market they create meaningful connections and a real sense of home. As Martin Luther King Jr. said decades ago, “We have inherited a large house, a great ‘world house’ in which we have to live together—black and white, Easterner and Westerner, Gentile and Jew, Catholic and Protestant, Moslem and Hindu—a family unduly separated in ideas, culture, and interest, who, because we can never again live apart, must learn somehow to live with each other in peace.”

My wish for my Colby students is to build us something even more than a large house: in the Maine winter, it should be a warm and cozy home where we can be individual with our unique talents and interests and yet enjoy enduring connections. The shawl I received that December morning in Patiala keeps me snug here. The words that greeted me charge me to take up my “daughterly” duty, and they reveal the phenomenal force of language. Yes, “home is where one starts from.” Now I always look forward to homecoming, in the Punjab and on Mayflower Hill.

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