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A Librarian's Passage to India

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Twelve years ago a small item in *American Libraries* caught my eye:

Library/Book Fellow positions open ... Hyderabad, India. American Studies Research Centre; nine to twelve months, assist in development of the social sciences collection ...

Thus began what has become my lifelong relationship with that endlessly fascinating and sometimes baffling country of many cultures, languages, topographies, and climates. I had no idea where Hyderabad, India, was, but I was a social sciences librarian, and I knew English was the lingua franca of the country; therefore I thought at least I would not be linguistically challenged. (This was before I had tried to accustom my ear to the Indian accent.) Not for one minute did I hesitate before applying.

After what seemed like an interminable wait, I received notice that I was a finalist, and then, after a daunting interview in Washington, D.C. with a committee of six or eight



American Studies Research Centre library.

ALA-USIA staff members, I got the exciting news: I had been accepted. In October 1989 the greatest adventure of my professional life began when I left Portland for India.

The Library/Book Fellow program was initiated in October 1986, as a joint venture between ALA and the United States Information Agency (USIA). U.S. librarians were placed in host institutions around the world to work on a variety

American Studies Research Centre library.



of types of projects, depending on the needs of the host. In addition to India, the 1989-90 Library Fellows were assigned to projects in Swaziland, Norway, Taiwan, Ireland, New Zealand, Jamaica, and Syria. Without exception, the experience proved to be a highlight of everyone's career. Sadly, the program was defunded in 1998.

I was assigned to the American Studies Research Centre (ASRC) in Hyderabad on the campus of Osmania University, a large public institution. Hyderabad, India's fifth largest city, is located in the south central part of the country on the Deccan Plateau. Its diverse population of primarily Muslims and Hindus is one of its unique characteristics. Long a center of culture and learning, Hyderabad has seven universities and various research institutes along with cultural attractions such as the Salar Jung Museum, which houses the magnificent art collections of the former Nizam of Hyderabad. The Persian influence is evident in the architecture, food, clothing (especially of the women who wear the *burka* that covers them from head to toe), and historical sites such as the Qutab Minar Complex, which dates to the 12th century C.E. and includes the first mosque built in India.

When I arrived in India, ten time zones away from Oregon, I immediately went into sensory overload. The sights, sounds, and smells of the crowded streets of Delhi, my point of entry, were overwhelming. I soon realized that the concept of driving lanes was very fluid, if, indeed, it even existed. The number of "lanes" seemed to be determined not by stripes painted on the road, but by the size and number of vehicles that would fit into the space. And every imaginable type of vehicle—and some pretty unimaginable ones too—converged, moving forward, left, right, or stopping without warning, honking horns, somehow avoiding man, woman, beast, motorist, bus, bicyclist, scooter, auto-rickshaw, and buffalo-drawn carts. I gawked at everything—the cows that lounged complacently in the middle of the street, the goats and donkeys that wandered in and out of traffic, the elephant being led, and the camel being ridden, all along India's capital city thoroughfares.

As if choreographed by some unseen director, humans, animals and machines all moved with a rhythm and skill that can only be described as miraculous.

As odd as it may seem, within a relatively brief period of time the apparent mayhem of the streets became familiar, though there remained many other cultural adaptations I had to yet to master. As anyone who has spent much time abroad can testify, the difference between living in a foreign country and merely traveling there is vast. Once you have recovered from sensory shock, you realize that you must also learn how to perform the daily tasks of living, such as learn where the market is, how to get there, how much things cost, what isn't available, and what you can live without.

I soon discovered that the most efficient and least expensive way to get around the city was via the ubiquitous three-wheeled auto-rickshaw. Flagging one down was infinitely easier than hailing a taxi in the U.S. The fact that you and the driver did not share a common language proved to be a non-issue. The driver simply drove until he spotted a man by whose appearance he judged to speak English. This man then served as the impromptu interpreter between us, and off we went again. And I always arrived at my correct destination.

For me, one of the most difficult adjustments (which I never made successfully) was becoming comfortable with my own conspicuousness every time I went out. Being fair-skinned, blonde and a head taller than nearly everyone else, I attracted attention and stares everywhere, especially in Hyderabad where few Westerners were seen. I longed for anonymity. One morning, to my dismay, I found that my alien paleness could even create terror in children. While walking along the road near where I lived, a small child, probably only two or three years old, looked up at me, screamed in horror, and ran to her sister, who was only a few years older, for protection. Most encounters were not so traumatic, thank goodness. In fact, as a foreigner, I was generally greeted with friendly curiosity and extended much needed and greatly appreciated assistance.

My library project goals were first to assess ASRC's social sciences collections and make recommendations for purchases that would bring it up to graduate level, and then to train staff in the use of new reference materials. The first of these goals was met, but, because the funds for purchasing new materials never arrived, I was unable to complete the second goal.

However, there were various unexpected "opportunities" that proved to be quite challenging, such as the dubious opportunity to write and present a paper on African American women's views on feminism for an American Women Writers Conference, presented to me simply because I was the only available American woman. Never mind that I could not, and would not, presume to be able to speak from an African American woman's point of view. Never mind that my resources were limited to ASRC's collection as interlibrary loan was not an option. However, using the

sources available to me, I wrote and presented a paper that was well received and subsequently published in *The Indian Journal of American Studies*.

ASRC is an institution for graduate and postgraduate research. It does not grant degrees, but, in addition to providing library resources to scholars, it serves as an intellectual center for speakers and symposia on many topics related to American studies. To my chagrin, I met many Indians there who were much more knowledgeable about American history and other disciplines than I. ASRC was an intensely energetic and stimulating environment in which to work.

While in India, I also had the opportunity to attend the All-India Library Conference in the "Pink City" of Jaipur, visit the Taj Mahal in Agra and the incredible erotic sculptured



Hyderabad Street scene.

temples of Kajuraho, spend many hours on hot, dusty buses, tour public and university libraries, attend a Hindu wedding, learn how to wear a sari, expand my previously limited repertoire of Indian foods, and make many wonderful friends. The hospitality and generosity of everyone was invaluable to me as I strove to learn how to survive in this fascinating, and utterly different, cultural milieu without committing too many unpardonable faux pas.

In 1996 I returned to India. I flew into Delhi and visited old friends at the American Library and met the recently-appointed new Library Director, Henry Mendelsohn. The American Library in Delhi is funded by USIS, as USIA abroad is called. In addition to operating a library of American books and journals, USIS also sponsors educational programs within its host countries on a variety of topics. By e-mail, Henry had asked me to make presentations to Indian librarians and library science students on information technologies used in American libraries at three north Indian universities in Delhi, Chandigarh, and Patiala.

At each location I found that the audience—numbering usually around 80—was hungry to hear how computers and the World Wide Web were impacting library services in the United States. In my presentations, I discussed CD-ROMs, the then-fledgling Web, networking among libraries, and the impact these technologies were having

both on our libraries and on librarians as we tried to keep abreast of the many fast-moving changes in our profession. I found that Indian librarians were well informed about information technology but generally had little or no access to it in their personal work. In addition to limited funding resources, the telecommunications infrastructure at that time was insufficient to support the Web and e-mail. However, it was evident that India was on the brink of the Information Revolution that was already transforming American libraries.

In 1996 I also took an overnight train to Dharmasala, north of Delhi in the foothills of the Himalayas. Dharmasala is the home of the Tibetan Government-in-Exile and the residence of the Dalai Lama. While I did not get to see the Dalai Lama, I did have a meeting with his sister-in-law, Mrs. Rinchen Khando Choegyal, the Tibetan Minister of Education, who told me about the education and training programs they provide for Tibetan refugees. I also toured the Tibetan Library which houses an extensive collection of contemporary books about Tibet, as well as many ancient Buddhist texts that were smuggled out of Tibet. When the Chinese military invaded Tibet in the 1950s and in subsequent years, the Chinese military destroyed many Buddhist temples and sacred writings, and killed or imprisoned many Buddhist monks and nuns. The Library attracts Buddhist scholars from around the world and is engaged in a huge project to preserve the valuable manuscripts that were smuggled out of Tibet.

In 1999 I was invited to Guwahati, Assam, to give a paper at the International Conference on Educational Culture in the 21st Century. I eagerly accepted, particularly because Assam is one of India's northeastern states rarely visited by foreigners. Its borders touch Bhutan on the north and Bangladesh on the south, with only a narrow corridor to the west connecting it to the larger Indian subcontinent. Two of India's wildlife reserves are in Assam, including Kaziranga National Park, home of the endangered one-horned rhinoceros. A high point of this trip was my pre-dawn elephant ride out into the savanna to see these magnificent animals. I did discover, however, that an hour or so straddling an elephant is quite long enough.


Faye Powell in her ASRC office.



I also wanted to see what changes had occurred in libraries in the three years since my previous visit. They were astounding! Internet connections and e-mail communication were widely available. More libraries had or were developing computerized catalogs. CD-ROM databases were much more prevalent. Just as the Internet has revolutionized libraries elsewhere, so it is doing in India.

As personally enriching as my travels to India have been, these experiences have also been of enormous benefit to me professionally. Of course, I care more about what happens to India and its people in a personal, rather than an abstract, way, having spent time there. From on-going exchanges with Indian library colleagues, I have learned much about how and why Indian library systems work the way they do in order to support an educational system that differs in many ways from the American one. For example, because educational success, at least at the undergraduate level, relies more on mastery of textbook and lecture materials than on individual research products, libraries provide comprehensive textbook collections and reading rooms for students to use and less reference service as we know it. And at Osmania University, books in fifteen languages must be originally cataloged, as there is no cooperative cataloging network.

Having been a foreigner myself for a while has certainly increased my own empathy with the cultural challenges faced by international students and visitors to our country. International students often bring expectations about how libraries function and what they offer based on experience with the libraries of their native countries. By understanding these expectations, librarians are in a better position to tailor instructional and outreach services in order to meet their particular needs.

Each region of India is unique, almost like its own country. No wonder India continues to beckon me. I am continually reminded of how much of this amazing country I still have not seen, and of how much my relationships with Indian colleagues have enriched both my personal and professional life. Now, let's see, where is that travel agent's number ... 



Hindu god and goddess, Krishna and Radha.