

FROZEN FETA CHEESE LASAGNA WITH CRUSHED HOT PEPPERS

I, a foreigner! It sounded so strange. A foreigner is a person born in a different country. Despite having lived in the United States for more than a decade now, by this definition I will always be a foreigner. In this narrative, I share with you some fragments about growing up in India and how I became a foreigner in the promised land, my experiences of being a foreigner in my adopted home, and how being a foreigner influences my teaching. I will end this narrative with a few words about how I am transforming myself into the hyphen between Indian and American and its implications for my teaching and scholarship.

By
Mahasweta M. Banerjee.

Mahasweta M. Banerjee, Ph.D., is Assistant Professor, School of Social Welfare, The University of Kansas



Constantin Brancusi

A few days ago, I called a Latina client to set up an interview related to starting a micro-enterprise. A young boy answered the phone. I introduced myself to him and asked for his mother. I heard the boy yelling loudly: "Mom, a foreigner is on the phone!" It felt very strange to be called a foreigner. I was on hold for a few minutes, and was ruminating over the strangeness of being called a foreigner, when I heard the boy call out again with urgency in his voice, "Mom! A foreigner is on the phone for you."

I realized I had almost forgotten that I was a foreigner because in social work circles where people are only too aware of diversity, no one openly calls me a foreigner. Politely, I am referred to as an international faculty member. After the phone call, I paused to ponder the new label: a foreigner. I, a foreigner! It sounded so strange. A foreigner is a person born in a different country. Despite having lived in the United States for more than a decade now, by this definition,



I will always be a foreigner. It occurred to me that the young boy honestly said what I had always believed was Americans' first reaction to me—a strange name, a different accent—a foreigner. In this narrative, I will share with you some fragments about growing up in India and how I became a foreigner in the promised land, my experiences of being a foreigner in my adopted home, and how being a Foreigner influences my teaching. I will end this narrative with a few words about how I am transforming myself into the hyphen between Indian and American, and its implications for my teaching and scholarship.

India: Life at my parent's home

Growing up in Calcutta, Delhi, and Bombay—all metropolitan cities of India—I never imagined I would eventually live in the United States, let alone Lawrence, Kansas. I was born in post-independent India in a traditional Bengali home in Calcutta. I grew up listening to exhilarating stories of how the male members of my family were involved in the long

struggle for freedom from colonial rule. Other stories glorified the value of national freedom and pride in nationalism. My family members inculcated in me a strong value base in Bengali culture and heritage. I was reminded how all progressive things in India, such as science, literature, music, religion, and politics, were rooted in Calcutta and Bengal. (Calcutta is the capital of the state, West Bengal. I refer to West Bengal as Bengal because prior to independence West Bengal and East Bengal, later Bangladesh were one state. Even today, people from West Bengal are called Bengali.) I was taught to be a proud Bengali. Isn't it ironic that a proud Bengali and an Indian today lives in America, primarily a land of White people?

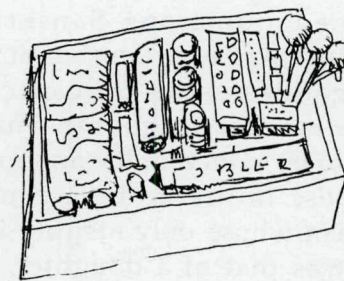
In my family, there were different types of White people: Britishers who oppressed us had to be resisted, but Americans who had never ruled us were to be admired. In fact, there was much to learn from Americans considering the tremendous technological progress they had made within such a short national history. My father studied at Princeton University, and later he and my mother traveled all over the United States. As a child, I heard so many interesting stories about Americans from my parents that I imagined Americans as very open, friendly, and creative people. But my father made it very clear that once enough had been learned, one had to go back and contribute one's talents to India.

During my early childhood, my father very carefully

and progressively selected a rather expensive private school for me that taught secularism and multi-culturalism instead of an Anglo or a Bengali school as was the custom. Anglo schools were primarily Christian schools that used English as the medium of instruction and imparted Christian ways of life. Bengali schools, on the other hand, taught classes in Bengali and grounded students in Indian culture and heritage. My father wanted me to learn English while maintaining a firm grounding in Indian culture. Despite strong opposition from his elders, my father sent me to a school where I soon learned to be bi-cultural. I could operate comfortably both at home where we only spoke and did things Bengali, and at school, where we could only speak in English with girls from all over India who spoke many different Indian languages. In retrospect, my home grounded me in Indian culture and my school broadened and opened up my mind.

At home, I learned what it meant to be a good Bengali woman. I was raised in a patriarchal family system where authority, power, and gender roles were clearly demarcated. My brother and I were taught some universals such as respecting elders and accepting authority without question. But, I, the girl, was taught to be humble, obedient, submissive, courteous, and dignified. My father tried to rectify my sister's and my misfortune of being born girls by telling us that we were all very special. He would say that I was very special because I was the

oldest, my sister was very special because she was the youngest, and my brother was very special because he was the only son. If daughters were special, I couldn't understand why my brother always got the largest shrimp or the chicken leg when our cook supervised our meals and I demanded equal distribution. He complained to my mother that I was disrespectful of him and that I was a willful child. My mother always disciplined me for having a mind of my own and often told me that I would have a very difficult time at my in-laws' if I didn't learn to eat what I was given and do as I was told. Double standards for boys and girls never made any sense to me. Early in life, I figured out that some privileges such as higher



education abroad and property and wealth would not be bestowed upon me naturally; they were all reserved for my brother. I never valued wealth, but I wanted to go abroad and study. This would be possible only if I excelled in my studies and obtained a scholarship. I did excel in my studies but there was never any recognition of my academic accomplishments. That I would do well was taken for

granted.

Instead, I was exposed to such womanly things as sharing and caring for others and especially giving charity to poor people. Every Sunday morning money was given to poor people and when I was about six or seven years old, I was given the responsibility of distributing the money to all who came to our home to beg. People who begged for a living made me very curious at an early age. I wondered where they lived and why they had to beg. Then, there was a lot of emphasis on being a well-rounded woman by learning to embroider, paint, sing, play a musical instrument, and decorate. Religion was important and when I was about eight years old, my grandmother inducted me into the Hindu ways of worship. Under her tutelage for four years, I learned numerous Sanskrit mantras to pray to the gods and the goddesses. In retrospect, these mantras taught me what was to be valued in life and my purpose in life: to be a good woman whose only identity in life was that of a daughter, a wife, and a mother.

On the other hand, through the Bengali literature, music, cinema, and theater which flourished at home, I was exposed to other ways of living and thinking. Sometimes I felt torn between being a good Bengali woman that was constantly ingrained in me and the possibilities of freedom and expansion that existed in the literature and the arts that I could taste only as an observer. It seemed only men were privi-

leged to write fascinating books, act in delightful dramas, and play enchanting music. The women who accompanied men whether in movies, theater, or dance recitals were unfortunate beings working for a living rather than pursuing their talents. Good women were passive receivers rather than active participants in the arts and literature. I couldn't accept the dogma of Indian womanhood but didn't know then how to create a different life for myself.

Ah! To be in Delhi: The first taste of freedom.

I tasted freedom for the first time in my life when I was sent to Delhi for my undergraduate years. Soon, I realized that I was not a typical Bengali. Very comfortably, I fit into the culture of Delhi where I happily mixed with non-Bengali people, ate different food, wore different clothes, and spoke almost fluent Hindi. The major lesson I learned about myself during these three years was that I loved working with people. Upon completion of my bachelor's degree in Psychology, I moved to Bombay for a master's degree in Social Work. *That* was the first time in my life when I decided something major for myself: I wanted to be a social worker. Becoming a social worker was the best thing I did for myself—I grew and changed tremendously.



Introduction to social work.

I studied social work because I found the theoretical orientation of psychology, especially Abnormal Psychology, inadequate in helping people lead happy lives. In my young life, I had not experienced any major upheavals which pushed me to become a social worker. Additionally, at that time, I had no ideological foundation that urged me to rectify injustice in society. Initially, all I wanted to do was to make a few people happy as happiness was important to me. Because of my background in psychology, I specialized in Medical and Psychiatric Social Work with the intent of working with troubled families.

A few years ago, I was at a diversity training workshop in Lawrence, Kansas, where the facilitators asked us to form groups based on how we identified ourselves. Several groups such as "gays and lesbians," "African Americans," "single mothers," were formed. One group of women called themselves "juice moms," meaning women who were primarily wives and mothers waiting at home for their family with juice, but in their spare time did some social work. I had a hearty laugh at that group because originally I was to be a "juice mom."

In my family (meaning extended family), women did not work outside the home for pay. Period. Women volunteered and did good work outside the home, but they did not earn a living. Men earned a liv-

ing. In fact, the story goes that when my father was born, an astrologer said that this boy will work all his life. Apparently, there was utter disbelief in the family because no one in the family, men included, worked for a living. They were born into wealth and did not labor to make money. However, my father *did* work for a living for the major part of his life because the zamindari system of land ownership was abolished in free India. Over time, my family adjusted to men working, but it was unthinkable that I would work for pay.

I had changed over the two years when I studied to be a social worker. I wanted to go out and work but could not if I remained unmarried. My marriage was arranged with an electrical engineer who had lived in Germany for some years. Off I went, despite serious reservations, to live my "real life"—life did not begin until marriage. My in-laws were not as traditional as my parents and encouraged me to find work outside the home. I averted being a "juice mom" by getting married.

Professional social work experiences.

As I started to look for work as a family therapist in Calcutta, I realized that the reality of Calcutta was considerably different from that of Delhi and Bombay. Poverty, unemployment, and political unrest were rampant in Calcutta. Over time, I realized that a micro focus on individuals' mental health could not scratch the sur-

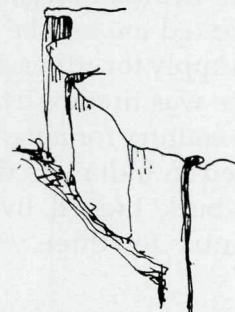
face of the turmoil that existed in Calcutta. Nonetheless, bent on being a therapist, I first volunteered for some time with the Calcutta Samaritans where I got opportunities to work with troubled families. Housed next door to the Calcutta Samaritans was Cathedral Relief Services (CRS) where a social work cohort had just resigned. She encouraged me to interview with the CRS and I was offered a position. It was then that my career as a social worker and life as an adult begun.

CRS worked in 25 slums in Calcutta where mobile health clinics were run and some financial assistance was given to people. My supervisor had recently joined CRS and was unhappy with providing only health care services. She wanted to organize slum dwellers around pressing issues such as housing. I learned community organizing and development from her. Initially, I was in charge of one slum where I did a needs assessment. Later, through focus group meetings I learned that residents did not need health care as free health care was available nearby. Instead, residents wanted an elementary school within the slum and skills training for adolescent girls so they could earn a living, and men wanted jobs. Residents were asking for the basics and not the frills that CRS could provide.

I was able to create each of these services during my two-year tenure at CRS. I convinced the CRS authorities to provide cash for buying building materials for the school. Local resi-

dents provided sweat labor to build the school. We hired local residents to teach children and enrollment increased sharply over time. CRS hired a specialist to teach handwork to young girls; classes were held in the afternoon in the school building when classes were out. CRS sold the crafts and paid the trainees. But, getting jobs for men was the most difficult task as unemployment has always been very high in Calcutta. The concept of micro-enterprise was not so popular in the 1970s. Nonetheless, that is exactly what I did. I connected local residents with banks so they could get a loan. Where necessary, I connected residents with industries so they could get technical expertise in starting their own small business. Three residents started micro-enterprises: one sold snacks, another sold groceries in a marketplace, and a group of men started their detergent making factory in the slum. I felt gratified at being able to make some difference in the lives of local residents.

Work was going smoothly when a sudden thunderbolt struck us. One day, the slum residents received an eviction notice from the local government. The notice stated that residents had built their homes illegally and were being ordered to vacate the land en masse within



a short time. It was frightening for both the residents and myself. That was when I learned advocacy and lobbying. I approached legislators with residents and pleaded for a stay order. Over time, we were able to get a court order to rescind the prior order. The slum exists even today although residents have lost some land.

On reflection, those were glorious days. I learned, grew, and changed tremendously. I had a sense of mission and accomplishment. My greatest sense of accomplishment came when I was asked to work as an organizer for all 25 slums. With the help of other social workers, we organized leaders from all the 25 slums to create a platform through which their voices could be heard. The leaders decided to have a fair to make Calcuttans aware of slum dwellers living there and to sell various crafts made by slum residents. The fair entitled "Who are We?" received a lot of media coverage and was a great success. I resigned my extremely satisfying job at CRS because my husband decided to go to New Zealand. Trained to be a dutiful wife, I followed him.

Coming to America.

It was not my idea to come to the United States; my husband coaxed me to take the GRE and to apply for admission. As usual, he was tired of living in the same country for long. We had returned to India less than three years back. Indeed, living in one country for three years

was extremely long considering we had lived in three very different countries, India, New Zealand, and Qatar, and had traveled throughout the northern world during a ten-year marriage. I enjoyed visiting different countries but was tired of moving around so frequently. I wanted to settle down to a home, a job, and bringing up our child. Nonetheless, as usual, I acceded to my husband's wishes. Because our marriage was not working very well in India, I thought a change of environment, free from family interferences, might save the marriage. I enrolled at Washington University in St. Louis; my husband joined me a few months later. The plan was that our five year old daughter would come as soon as we got a somewhat settled.

Hah! Who said, "Man proposes, God disposes?" It does not matter but the most unimaginable happened. My husband got admitted in to an engineering program and received an assistantship, but disliked the hard work and decided he had had enough with the United States. It was time to pack up and go home—one more time. He declared that he was going back to India the week of my finals in the second semester of my Ph.D. course work. I felt pushed to the edge of a cliff. It seemed that if I took the reckless plunge and went back to India, I would die; if I decided to stay atop the cliff, by myself, I would die too. I opted to stay atop the cliff, hoping to survive somehow.

Survival mode.

Commitment is very important to me. I had committed myself to getting a Ph.D. degree, had invested my life's savings in coming to America, and could

Phd

not return without completing my work. So I stayed back. Eventually, our marriage fell apart. I was devastated. I didn't know how to live life without a husband. I kept hearing the old record of my mother's and grandmother's voice telling me the main reason for a woman's existence: be a good wife and mother. Could I possibly survive by myself?

Alone, frightened, rejected, and deeply sorrowful, I continued with my Ph.D. program at Washington University. I kept in touch with my daughter weekly over the phone and visited Calcutta annually. Swallowing tears, I told my beloved child to smile and be brave. Then, my father had a stroke and it was too much for my mother to take care of both my father and my daughter. Thus, I brought back a nine year old who had spent almost half her life away from her mother. It took tremendous work to regain a child's love and trust. Slowly, carefully, I picked up the tat-

tered, scattered pieces of my life and continued to live. At least there was one major reason to exist: I had to take care of a child I loved deeply. My daughter prodded me to finish my work quickly and get on with life. Before long, I completed my Ph.D. degree, got myself a job, and moved, not to India, but to Kansas.

Why live in the United States?

When I came to the United States, I did not plan on staying here. I had a high ranking job with a well-known voluntary social service agency in Calcutta. We had numerous state and federal contracts as well as foreign grants for programs, trainings, and social research. We had just started a two-year social work graduate education program, and I was fully in charge of it. I enjoyed my work and vigorously promoted the new social work school. The dean of a premier social work educational institution in India was my mentor in this venture. I had everything going for me. There was no need for me to come and live in the United States. I gave all up because I wanted to save my marriage, but failed at it miserably. After my marriage disintegrated, I lost the option of going home. My family did not want me back.

Shortly after moving to Kansas, I was startled when an African-American colleague pointedly asked, "Why are you here?" I couldn't give a truthful answer because I was still grap-

pling with my failed marriage. Even today, it's very hard for me to discuss the real reason why I stayed here and did not go back as was expected of an international student. Many Americans don't understand why a marriage break up would close my doors to India. They ask: "Is divorce legal?" Sure, divorce is legal. Indian women have many rights; in fact, they have the right to abortion, which is still hotly debated here. "Well, then, why can't you go home?" they wonder. I couldn't go back home because marriage is sacrosanct and divorce is not accepted *in my family*. I stayed in America because I needed a safe place to hide from the microscopic scrutiny and the ever-stretching tentacles of my super-critical social system that blamed me squarely for the marriage breakup. I know I tried my best. Today, they want me back. But it's too late.

A New Life in a New Place

My heart cried for India, but I made the United States my home. While in St. Louis, I trained my eyes to see poverty. Poverty is relative, and compared to the stark poverty in Calcutta, poverty was non-existent here, but horrific in relation to the rest of America. I wanted to go back to Calcutta because I felt an obligation to serve people there. Poor people needed me there more and I could make a difference there but not here. It seemed there were lots of social workers here who knew how to serve clients. America did not need me. So long as I could not

identify with Americans and accept America as my home, I did not have anything to contribute to America. Yet, I had to stay here and supposedly contribute. It was extremely difficult to make new beginnings when my soul was in Calcutta. It took interactions and reflections to heal, to figure out who I am, and to be who I wanted to be.

How Americans respond to me

There are exceptions, and I can immediately recall a few faces of men and women who extended themselves fully to me, but generally speaking, it was much harder to get to know White Americans. People of color, on the other hand, made the effort to reach out to me. But before I knew what was happening, again with a few exceptions, a wall existed between us. Thus, developing strong friendships with Americans was not easy. I have struggled with this issue for a long time because I wanted as many good friends as I had at home. I have not succeeded. Recently, I compared my friendship circle with that of my daughter's and noted that she has many very good friends. Thus, I concluded that age and stage in life, not race or nationality, are related to the friendships I have been seeking. Establishing strong, deep, loyal friends requires a lot of nurturing, effort, and doing many things together. Adjusting to the pressures of living in America, I did not have the luxury of time that I had in India for friends. Nonetheless, I have wondered

whether Americans would have responded to me differently had I stayed here temporarily. With all the anti-foreigner feelings that have been fermenting here, it seems that once Americans knew that I wanted to stay here and stake out a future for myself *in their country*, the ball game became very different. Here, I will share some memorable experiences—positive, negative, and mixed—through which slowly I figured out my identity and began the process of transforming myself in desired ways.

"Do you have a shorter name?" is an almost universal first question when I meet an American. I don't get offended by the question because I know mine is a rather unique name and difficult even for Indians. Many years back when I was in New Zealand, people asked me the same question. Then, I was younger and more willing to go the extra mile. I had agreed to being called "Maha," but it almost felt schizophrenic to be called by part of my name. When I had to learn so many different and new names and say them correctly, I wondered why my hosts couldn't extend the same courtesy and call me by my name? Since then, I have stuck to my given name. Not merely "great" (Maha) or just "white" (Sweta), but Mahasweta which despite its racist connotation is one of the 108 names of the Hindu Goddess of Learning.

After working through the hurdle of my name, I often deal with other barriers that come with being a foreigner—my accent, my clothes, my food habits—in short, my identity

which is tied to my cultural heritage. Other than being difficult by insisting on being called by my given name, I am rather accommodating with Americans. I have learned that Americans are most comfortable with people they are familiar with. So, I have modified some of my English pronunciations of words such as schedule, route and class to sound American, and have learned to use American phrases such as "mail a letter" rather than "post a letter." Also, I always wear appropriate American clothes when I meet people for the first time. Later, if I feel more comfortable, I wear my Indian clothes—sarees and salwar kameez—and my "bindi" or the dot on my forehead. Many compliment me on my beautiful sarees, and some even ask me when I am going to India next so I can bring back a salwar kameez for them. Everyone asks, "What does the dot on your forehead mean?" I have fun explaining, "It's just makeup—like lipstick. It doesn't have any spiritual or religious significance for me." If appropriate, I also pull the bindi off my forehead and stick it on my friends' forehead. Most enjoy it.

"What is your caste?" and "How come you are not a vegetarian?" are two often asked questions. People in general like to classify others to simplify life. We all have many stereotypes about people. I resist disclosing my caste when asked directly or indirectly because the only purpose such information can serve is to pigeonhole me. Also, it seems that Americans

believe all Indians are vegetarians. I grew up eating fish, meat, and eggs and my chaste Brahmin caste permits it! It is sacrilegious to eat beef and pork, but fish and mutton are permitted. Many Americans don't realize that a vegetarian diet among Indians is tied to regions of India. Bengal has many rivers and Calcutta has a large sea port. Fresh fish is plentiful and an integral part of our diet at home and has nothing to do with caste or being Indian.

"Tabasco sauce with hamburger? You gotta be kidding!" remarked a friend when I encouraged her to try it. Unlike Indian women, I dislike cooking and often eat out. When eating with an American friend, if I am sufficiently comfortable, I ask for Tabasco sauce or crushed hot pepper to add to my hamburger, lasagna, or beef stroganoff. Some look at me in utter disbelief! I encourage many to try their food with Tabasco sauce to add flavor to the bland American cooking. Some daring folks do; others laugh at me. They can laugh for all I care because like my name, my accent, and my gorgeous sarees, I can't give up my taste for hot, spicy food. I am willing to adapt to eating frozen feta cheese lasagna for lunch, but I must add to it the crushed hot pepper which sits in the top drawer of my desk.

One day, a female White colleague and I were discussing welfare reform. I mentioned that poor people could start a micro-enterprise with a small loan and then use the savings from such small businesses to build their

**NO, THAT IS NOT
GOING TO WORK. YOU
ARE NOT AN
AMERICAN, YOU DON'T
KNOW HOW THINGS
WORK HERE.**

own assets. My colleague's prompt response was, "No, that's not going to work. You are not an American, you don't know how things work here." I was stunned! I felt hit below the belt. I became silent temporarily, but have thought through this incident since then. After much self-examination, I know that I was not being arrogant and superimposing a policy option for Americans. All I did was discuss an idea. Despite a great deal of intellectual openness, and strong commitment to rectify injustice, she over-reacted. It seems that because many social workers are paid professionals, they can not think beyond what works for them: job training and wage employment. Also, it is possible that my colleague felt threatened by a novel idea that has much potential; evidence is mounting up that micro-enterprises work for poor people in the United States. Consequently, I had to be put down with a major weapon: I am not an American. How could a non-American possibly come up with a policy option for Americans? Only America, the super power, has the right to fix other nations' problems.

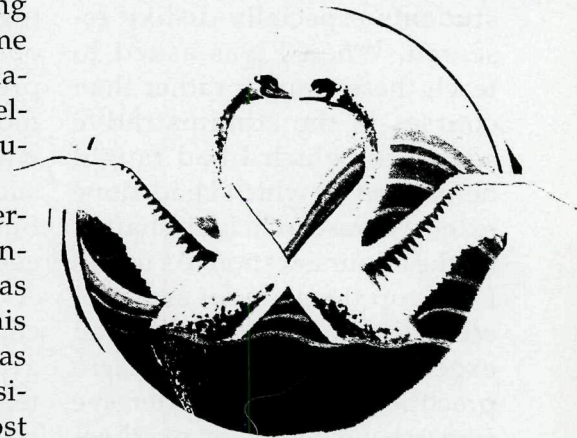
Others are not so overt about my not being an American. Nonetheless, sometimes I have noticed that when I am rather comfortable with my col-

leagues and am enjoying some discussion, suddenly someone chimes in and starts discussing old American music or films that I have not heard or seen. Bingo! I shut up because I am not a part of that American history. It seems that these are subtle ways of excluding me from a conversation. Lately, I've felt tempted to say, "Hey! Let's discuss things I am more familiar with. What do you think of Ray's film *Agantuk--The Stranger?*" I have come to the conclusion that power plays an important role in social interactions and always will be used against me by some. Even social work faculty have a long way to go with embracing human diversity. Folks reading this, please don't stop talking with me. The editors asked me to revise and address race relations and discuss *my* true feelings and reactions to these situations.

"You took up an American's job!" said an African-American student in class. I was shocked at the animosity of his comment. I retorted, "There was a national search for this position. I was considered the most suitable person for the job." Those were the early years of my tenure as a faculty member. Now I wonder why I had to give such an explanation. Others—students who have known me for a couple of years, faculty members from other departments, and prospective funders—have asked me when I will finish my Ph.D. or how my Post Doctoral work was going. I interpret these remarks to mean that I, an Indian woman, could

not have a Ph.D. or be a faculty member at an university. Traditional Indian modesty prohibits me from flaunting my degree beside my name and is misunderstood as frailty here.

And then, there are those colleagues and students who don't consider me a foreigner! Some acknowledge that I am different, just as no two Americans are similar, but my difference does not come in the way of establishing relationships. I have found that this group of people either had prior experience with foreigners or have an intellectual maturity that enables them to be open to people who are different from them. I feel most comfortable with this group. They are my dear



friends. When I have oppressive experiences, I process them and try to get over them. Often, a sense of humor and taking an observer stance helps me handle many difficult interactions with Americans. So long as acceptance from all Americans was important for me—a legacy of my upbringing—I could have been hurt. Now I know many Americans will not accept me. But, it is no longer my problem. Do all Indians accept me?

A Bengali Woman in U.S. Academia

Do I teach differently because I am a foreigner? My first reaction was to say, "No. I don't do anything differently. I am fully myself as a teacher." Well, there lies the catch. If I am fully myself then I must be different because I am a foreigner. So, I did some serious thinking. I realized there are some universals about my teaching just as there are some unique aspects to my teaching. I teach both of the research sequence classes as well as the macro component of the Human Behavior and the Social Environment (HBSE) sequence. Both are required courses and students especially dislike research. When I was asked to teach these courses rather than courses in the administrative sequence, which I had taught before and on which I had done extensive research, I felt shafted by the administration. As usual, I took up the gauntlet and proceeded to do the best job. I had experience working as a macro practitioner and doing extensive research. So, I blended my theoretical knowledge with my practical experiences in teaching these courses. As I learn best by understanding theory and then applying it to practice, I follow the same philosophy in teaching where I discuss concepts and theories and require students to participate in simulations and actually work on a research project from beginning to end. In terms of the broad cut on content and method of instruction, I don't do anything differently

except show a videotape of my research in a slum in Calcutta to address diversity. But some of my teaching techniques are different.

There are times when I emphasize my difference, and there are times when I build bridges by focusing on our common humanity. Earlier, I used to routinely announce on the first day of class: "If you have difficulty in understanding my accent, please stop me immediately and ask for clarifications. Likewise, if I don't understand something you say, I'll ask you to repeat." Acknowledging up front that both parties may not understand each other helped bridge our differences and led to an open atmosphere for learning. Over time, through close observation of students' eye expressions, I have realized that most students easily understand what I say. So now, I don't make such a routine announcement. But I continue to maintain close eye contact with the entire class. A very simple action such as eye contact which is rooted in my great desire and serious attempts to be clearly understood pays off in various ways. Through eye contact I can easily tell where students are in terms of their learning, and it makes each student feel special and valued. Also, it helps a great deal in establishing relationships.

Moreover, because I want to be accepted by all students, I expend tremendous effort in making sure all students know they are accepted by me no matter where they are in terms of their learning. I never

move on to new concepts until I have ascertained that the entire class has understood what has been covered. I realize this process can be frustrating for students who want to jump ahead and learn more and for students who don't really want to be in class. I make it clear that I am there to teach everyone and not a select few students. I have observed that this approach helps pull the entire class together.

Does my cultural background rooted in gender, power, and authority issues play a role in my teaching? Male students are a rare breed in social work classes. I enjoy discussing issues with male students in my HBSE classes because they bring a different orientation to their questions and comments. Sometimes they are more rigid than women, and at other times they challenge me because I am a woman. Overall, I enjoy them. Perhaps, I am a little more courteous to male students than my role requires. Although as a sign of respect teachers are never addressed by their first name in India, and I found it extremely hard to call my professors by their first name, I now routinely tell my students to call me Mahasweta. From my teaching evaluations, it appears that power and authority are not major issues with regard to my teaching. However, some students believe that I am disrespectful of them because I push them beyond the mundane and the routine. Also, they dislike it when I tell them not to obsess with grades but to learn for life—another legacy of my Indian heritage. However, I used

to get very surprised when some students asked me to decide for them because my parents' stories had led me to believe Americans were fiercely independent people. Over time, I have realized there is a whole normal distribution with regard to students' self-direction and ability for independent thinking.

One of my major issues with studying in America was questioning authority and critiquing others' work. In India, we were taught to accept authority without question. It took a great deal of effort on my part to read between the lines, recognize the gaps, and raise questions. I am still growing in this area. So, I marvel at students who can ask opposing questions in class. I don't feel threatened by these questions; rather I admire such quick-thinking and questioning minds. If I have an answer or a possible answer, I share my thoughts; else, I affirm the validity and thoughtfulness of the question and try to come up with an answer or recognize a gap or contradictions in our knowledge base.

Moreover, I have realized that although relationships are critical in creating an atmosphere conducive to learning, relationships by themselves are not adequate in being respected as a teacher. Command and mastery over subject matter are imperative in gaining respect from students. Translating complex concepts into simple language requires a great deal of mastery over the subject matter. Unless I understand the concepts clearly, I cannot explicate

them easily. I see myself leaning as a teacher rather than being the expert. I know students test me to see if they can raise questions to which I will not have answers. Over time they have realized that I can answer most questions to their satisfaction. Mastery over a subject matter also helps in building a reputation. I have heard that now students recommend me to new students. Overall, I believe I am an effective, albeit foreign, teacher.

Concluding thoughts

Transforming myself from a submissive Bengali woman to an independent faculty member at an American university has been a long journey. How am I accomplishing this transformation? Reading, thinking, writing, experiencing, distancing, and reflecting have helped in various ways. Watching some films, especially "Schindler's List" and "Heaven and Earth," taught me that my pain was minuscule in relation to what others have endured and overcome. And meditation, chanting, and reading the Bhagavat Gita allow me to get focused and accept my life. But, a meeting with the dean of my school turned out to be a critical juncture in this process of change. When I was floundering with carving out an area for my research and scholarship—both of which were as fragmented as my life then—she very simply said: "Find out who you are and be yourself!" What? I didn't have to live up to anyone else's expectations of me? I could be

myself? It was the most liberating experience in my life. At the same time, I was afraid of being free: Who am I? How can I become a person in my own right? The Dean empowered me to consciously work on liberating myself. Slowly, I started to reconnect with myself, working through the chasm that existed between the person who had left India hoping to go back one day, and the person who worked as a faculty member in America unable to go back to India.

What are the implications of the focal exemplar—the unique process of personal transformation—for teaching and scholarship? It is hard for me to address this question as I am still working on it. It seems that my metamorphosis does not impact what I teach, but certainly it has affected my relationship with students. By sharing appropriate life experiences, I encourage students to dream of a future they may not have envisioned for themselves personally and professionally. Moreover, the encouragement and kindness bestowed upon me, a poor graduate student, by some of my professors at Washington University allow me to emulate them every time I hear that a student is juggling personal life, work and school. Always I go the extra mile to help them in various ways, such as making extra time or scholarship recommendations or providing research assistantships.

A very few times I have shared my story of abandonment the week of my finals when students have disclosed similar issues in their life. In-

variably, they ended by saying, "And, you survived!" I added, "Not only will you survive, you will thrive."

With regard to scholarship, earlier, I did a bit of disaster preparedness and response effectiveness, a bit of organizational effectiveness, and a bit of child support personnel's training effectiveness. My soul was not in them as I was still debating between somehow going home, perhaps by not getting tenured, and staying here. I was restless as long as I could not reinvest the fruits of my American education in India.

As a first step, I got a grant to study the Interplay of strengths and constraints in the life of slum dwellers in Calcutta." Going back to Calcutta, and working with people I had cared about since the age of six, I somewhat healed the wound that had been festering for a long time. Later, I replicated a similar study among public housing residents in Kansas City.

In America, we obsess extensively about differences among groups, so I thought perhaps there were major differences between poor people in India and in the United States.

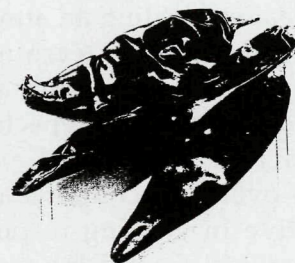
However, while interviewing welfare recipients, I realized how similar poor people were with regard to their dreams and aspirations as well as their barriers and constraints in the two hemispheres.

It was then that I was able to integrate a little more intellectually and emotionally to living and working here. This study confirmed my earlier belief: people are people. It did not matter whether I worked with people who were poor in Kansas City or in Calcutta. We have different names, skin colors, accents, languages, culture, and heritage, yet we are all of the same human race. Poor people here deserve all my care and attention. As I am integrating more fully with my true self, my research and scholarship also are becoming more focused on community economic development.

Before ending, I will tell you about a major test that I had to pass. I felt a great deal of tension when I applied for a grant to start a micro-enterprise loan program. I was torn between the desire to split the grant into loans for people in Calcutta and people in Kansas City. Once I got the grant, I realized that I

could not do both because the loans would get watered down tremendously if the money was split between the two countries.

So I decided to start the micro-enterprise program with welfare recipients in Kansas City. Once this dilemma was resolved, it felt as though I had finally severed the umbilical cord that tied my soul only to India. In the meantime, my daughter, who had made life worth living earlier but craved annual visits to India, has become so much of an Indian-American that I cannot visualize her being happy in India. So, for our sake, America is our home. I am the hyphen between Indian and American. I will continue to live and grow in the United States which has unshackled me and where one day I will fully actualize my maximum potential. And I will keep my ties with India, my dearly beloved birth land, which has shaped me so powerfully and has hurt me so immeasurably. I will contribute my best talents both to America and to India in the years to come. I will cheerfully bite into my frozen feta cheese lasagna with crushed hot peppers. □



Copyright of Reflections: Narratives of Professional Helping is the property of Cleveland State University and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.