Dear Higher Education
LETTERS FROM THE SOCIAL JUSTICE MOUNTAIN

International Students: My Personal Experiences and Reflections on What We Contribute to American Higher Education

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Dear Higher Ed,

I write this letter in sorrow, but mostly in outrage, as the Trump administration blocks visas for international students aspiring to future opportunity in America, impedes free speech on campus on questionable grounds, threatens even those legally here with incarceration and deportation, and withholds funding for research suspected of subscribing to diversity, equity, and inclusion. When I arrived here from India, some four decades ago, I experienced a different kind of academia, one where new research ideas were received with interest and fostered, where class discussions were open and lively, where, overall, the environment contributed to learning in the best possible way, one which delighted me. These are freedoms I have deeply appreciated over my academic career.

I came to the University of Virginia as the Department of Drama's first international student, graduated with my doctorate in Cultural Anthropology in 1990, and taught at various Virginia schools as an adjunct or visiting faculty member. After two decades in Virginia Tech's Department of Interdisciplinary Studies (now Religion and Culture), then in the Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies program in the Department of Sociology, I retired in 2023 as Collegiate Associate Professor Emerita. My experiences in American academia have involved navigating an unknown culture, and many pitfalls and setbacks. But they have also involved a transformation, through my journey following my right to expand my world and the person I am, my right to realize my potential. I learned, in other words, about feminism, and feminism's profound implications for social justice for all, not just for women. My mother aspired in 1930s British India to become a doctor, and did so, but in her day and her circumstances she was not able to pursue a career (Samanta, 2016). I have reflected on the "multiple patriarchies" responsible for her early death — forces which would not, I vowed, constrain me when I made the hard choice to leave a marriage and come to America.

It is said that one can imagine in America. I arrived determined to persevere and hoping that what I achieved through effort could not be taken from me because I had earned it. This essay is less about the awards and accolades that came my way on my American journey, and more about what I was able to contribute to students and to research, bringing a cultural knowledge, lived experience, and a feminist awareness to courses I developed and research I undertook. I did so with freedom. I share some select experiences.

Early on, I confronted a different style of learning, one that expected an argument, a thesis in written assignments. This was not simply a well-written presentation of an author's point, the Socratic approach as I had known as a college student in India. A thesis-oriented essay, I came to realize, seemed grounded in the American culture of individualism, and in the free expression (substantively supported) of a student's critical perspective. I learned, but anxiously, not least because I saw that such a culture left me largely to my own resources.

An early lesson involved projecting confidence in my views, whether I felt it or not — again, something I saw in Americans, both fellow students and, later, colleagues. As I drafted a grant proposal to fund my eight-month anthropological doctoral research in India on a Hindu goddess to whom my family claimed affiliation, I concluded tentatively that I "hoped" that my work would contribute to the sparse work currently available on this topic. I was advised by a professor to say, with conviction, that my work would be, in fact, momentous. I did so, in extreme embarrassment, coming as I did from a culture where arrogance was the sin of demons! I received this competitive national grant, and another for post-doctoral research. The lesson of being assertive in writing a grant proposal or abstract was one I would pass on to the many international students I later advised.

From my own experience I also learned about the loneliness of the international student, far from home and family, and worked to alleviate it in students I advised, convinced that mentorship needs to encompass more than academic advice — that it also requires cultural empathy. One graduate student from Bangladesh, for example, assigned as my teaching assistant when he first arrived at Virginia Tech, asked if he could address me as Didi, or "older sister," as we Bengalis traditionally address our professors (Dada, for men). This relationship involved mutual respect, on both our parts, but a special responsibility on mine, as he was my "younger brother." We spoke Bengali — a delight for me, as I had found little opportunity to speak my mother tongue. He came to me with health-related problems, or questions on how to grind spices for curry. Now an Associate Professor at a prestigious university in his home country, he keeps in touch, asking me, traditionally, for my blessings as an older sister as he prepared to marry in late 2023, and sends me special thanks on the American festival of Thanksgiving. I would note at department meetings that such mentorship contributes not only to student productivity and success but also to retention.

On a cold November evening in 2006 I spoke at the invitation of the Asian American Student Union at Virginia Tech on the racist attacks on Middle Eastern and South Asian people in the US in the aftermath of the attacks of 9/11, which my daughter and I had also experienced (Samanta, 2007). After my 30-minute talk (which I supported with statistics), the audience of some 60 people, largely but not entirely comprised of diverse Asians, had much to say. Centrally, they asked: how do we [Asians] belong in America? As I was leaving, the AASU President ran up to me and asked if I would develop a course on Asian America. "There is nothing for us here," he said. I said I would.

I learned that Asians, in their diversity, constituted by far the largest minority student body at Virginia Tech. I developed and then, starting in the fall of 2007, taught a course called Asian American Experience (AAE). Along with learning from the textbooks, oral histories, fiction, and documentary films which comprised the syllabus, students and I learned much about ourselves as we shared our stories. On the first day of class, Asian students said they simply wanted to be with other Asians! Non-Asian students said they attended to learn about their Asian friends. We read about Asian activism in the Civil Rights Movement; about students at San Francisco State University on strike in 1968, demanding an Ethnic Studies program (successfully); and about third-generation Japanese Americans protesting the internment of grandparents during WWII, and getting reparations. Often a documentary film would bring all of us to tears as we witnessed, for instance, the pain of forced relocation of refugees from American wars, to possibly never see family again. During a lively discussion on gender norms in the Asian diaspora, I mentioned that I did not tell my Indian family that my daughter was dating! Students read about my work with poorer Asians in community colleges, and of the struggles of immigrants and refugees to avail themselves of educational opportunities at this undervalued American institution (Samanta, 2015). They commented with sympathy on the words of a Filipina immigrant, studying engineering and at risk of deportation as her legal papers were delayed, that she was glad I would be publishing this work. "People should know what we go through," she said (Samanta, 2018).

One semester-long assignment required that students, both Asian and non-Asian, research their life story by speaking with parents, grandparents, and other family members, and share that story in class so their peers could learn from them. Japanese American students wrote of grandparents interned on the West Coast during

World War II, and of grandparents who had fled the war in Vietnam and Cambodia as boat people. A Korean American student concluded her assignment with the words: "I now know who I am." With support at all levels of governance, and letters of support from students of all races, AAE was unanimously approved in 2011 and is now included in Virginia Tech's Core Curriculum.

I brought my own experience of Hinduism, including scholarship, to Asian Religions, a course I taught over many years. Along with Hinduism, it covered Buddhism, Sikhism, Sufi Islam (which has a large presence on the Indian subcontinent), Daoism, Confucianism, and Shinto. I addressed not only the central tenets of these religions, but their social and political implications, such as the unequal gender norms prescribed in ancient Hindu texts, to which contemporary Hindus subscribe, even in America. My students, primarily Christian (of different denominations), encountered religions without a "book," with human founders and no central deity, with major goddesses, and above all, with different paths to the moral life. In Sufism, they learned about this mystical version of Islam (as compared to more legalistic, orthodox Islam). A Bangladeshi student learned from his parents that he was indeed a Sufi! In final assignments, where I asked them to reflect freely on these diverse religious paths, some students noted that they had "returned" to their own faith, newly informed and reassured. Others commented on the freedom other religions allowed and were impatient with faith as mandated in Christianity. One student, a self-avowed atheist, responded angrily at being given such an assignment at all, but wrote an excellent paper supporting his stand. I gave him an A. And a cadet, in his final presentation, projected the Hindu elephant god on the screen and opened with the declaration, "Ganesh is my guy now!" He had learned to go beyond the alien and exotic to Ganesh's profound meaning.

A colleague and scholar of Biblical studies asked if she and I could co-lead a study abroad trip over the two-week winter break in 2011–2012, traveling to my hometown of Kolkata to study Indian religious diversity. We took a cohort of eight students, all women, two of color and the others white, on a journey that, in their words, amazed them. With a multi-generational family history in this city, and being a native Bengali speaker, I was able to inform our students beyond textbook learning even as I looked through their eyes at so much that had been familiar to me. The Americans noted with surprise that a Sikh temple and a mosque stood across the road from each other — despite, as they had learned prior to the trip, of the brutal torture of Sikh religious leaders by then-Muslim emperors. They commented that in America houses of worship were distanced from each other — a learning moment for me. I shared my family's history, its loss of home and land in what is now Bangladesh, as my Hindu grandparents left for Kolkata in what would become India at Partition in 1947.

Bedecked in colorful saris (which I helped the students wear), we (including a Hindu, a Muslim, and an atheist) attended an ecumenical New Year's Eve service at St. Paul's Cathedral. To the Catholic students, it was especially meaningful that we visited Mother Teresa's institution, Mother House, walked where she had walked, and volunteered at a home run by her Sisters of Charity for women with disabilities abandoned by their impoverished families. The students may never have been east of western Europe before, but now, besides learning about India's diverse religions, they savored ice cream with pistachios and saffron, and marveled that I could switch between three languages. Some wept at the discrepancy between the very visible affluence in a marble Hindu temple, established by an industrialist, and, across from it, a family with young children living on the street beneath a tarpaulin. Some students made career decisions based on their experiences on our trip (Samanta, 2013).

It was in the Women's & Gender Studies program that I would find that my mostly female, mostly American students had yet to learn of their worth — as persons, with rights — even into the 21st century! Here were young women (and a few men), diverse by class, race, and sexuality, whom I taught to look critically and with a feminist lens at the many unjust forces which kept them from their aspirations: sexual violence, pay inequity, reproductive injustice, and more. To offer perspective on the many forms which injustice takes in other cultures, I added global context on issues like gender violence, low literacy rates among women, and the lack of access to reproductive healthcare. I drew from my own knowledge as well as from field research (Samanta, 2017). In an essay

assignment, I asked students to research feminist activism and resistance in the US and elsewhere in the world. They learned that activists around the world pushed back, made a difference, achieved change.

I concluded this introductory course with a segment on gender violence. "It's a matter of gender equity," I said. You can't move forward if you're watching your back." As I presented statistics on gender violence in our own area of the New River Valley, in the US as a whole, and on a global level, there was a stunned silence. "Remember, there's a face behind every statistic," I would say, and share my own encounters with Indian women illegally harassed for dowry, and in one case, murdered. A Vietnamese immigrant told me about her immigrant family of modest means, and that her stepfather was abusing her mother. She had been accepted at medical school in New York but could not attend if her parents divorced. I offered the student a list of resources, including a lawyer's phone number. She returned after missing two classes and informed me that she had told her stepfather that she would call on the resources if he did not back down. "My knees were shaking under the table," she told me. He did. That fall, she emailed me with an invitation to attend her induction ceremony at medical school. I could not attend but often shared this story with future classes as an example of how domestic abuse could have kept this student from achieving her dreams.

In America, a multitude of peoples, cultures, and histories constitute our democracy. I taught from my own life experiences, and tried to bring my world to my students, often in story, wanting to expand their horizons. I encouraged students to offer their own stories, freely, critically, in class conversations where they learned from each other, and in written assignments, to move beyond textbook and lecture to an education that would be pertinent to their lives, and which would stay with them long after our course was done. When an international student flourishes, when an Asian American comes to appreciate her difference while "belonging" in America, when a male student comments that he will "never look at women in the same way again," I see my own journey in American higher education as activism, in what I taught, published, and accomplished. I could do so freely. It's a freedom and privilege we must fight to keep.

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