

# A descendant of Indentured immigrants recalls his student days in India in the '50s

By Vidur Dindayal

Memories of my student days at Hindu College in the late 50s are moments of great joy now in the evening of my life. I feel blessed, considering where I came from, that I travelled to India for higher education in Delhi.

I am a grandchild of indentured labourers who were recruited in India like thousands of others to work in the sugar plantations of the then colony of British Guiana in South America, and the West Indies.

I am Hindu and my parents brought me up as an Indian as best they could. They lost virtually all connections with India, mainly language and dress, but doggedly held on to their religion and culture, such as was possible in a world which looked down on anything non Western or European.

Our ancestors worked hard and sacrificed and built themselves up to become the economic engine of their adopted country. My parents started a business which prospered.

Like other Indian youngsters, I dreamt of visiting India to see the famous sites, as well as Indian film stars. In 1955, I was lucky to receive a scholarship to study at Shantiniketan, Tagore's Vishwa Bharati University. My parents prepared my clothes and things, but when booking my passage, they were overcome with distress. They were very worried that I would go very far away, and be away for years. They convinced me not to go. I resigned myself to stay home.

After months had passed by, my mother asked me 'You still want to go and study?' Maa knew my answer. She agreed to let me go. In those days we of British Guiana had to go to UK, USA and the new University in Jamaica for higher education. In 1956, the Indian High Commission secured a place for me at Hindu College, Delhi.

In my first days in India I experienced a 'eureka' moment. For the first time in my life I saw that my people, my race was equal to others. My skin, the way I look, my dress, my customs which in my own country, made me feel inferior, are those of the highest to the lowliest in India. Nothing was wrong the way I was brought up as Indian. In India that was the mainstream.

At Hindu College, what I learnt are nuggets of values and standards which guide my life. The lecturers all without exception were drawn from the highest achievers in their field. Most had authored our text books. The lecturers were all shown high respect by students. They carried themselves without show or pomp, their dress was simple. By their general demeanour they commanded respect. A strong sense of discipline prevailed everywhere.

My student colleagues came from a wide cross section of society, which impressed me. My fellow hostellers came from all over India, from Kashmir to Kerala, Mumbai to Bengal. Foreign students came from Africa, the Far East and neighbouring countries. Many Indian students' parents were in the services, the Army, Navy and Air Force, the Police, business and the professions. We spoke respectfully to one another whether we were close friends or not. They all showed high regard for their respective close knit families.

The aspirations of student colleagues, without exception, were the highest. Second best was not an option. In every field they aimed to be top. One star English student and athlete was offered a scholarship to Oxford University. One led a disciplined life, was the UNI's opening batsman at cricket. Another star scholar was a great writer. He got to the civil service. Another got into the foreign service, while two joined the Air Force and visited one day regaled in their impressive uniform.

I wish I had kept in touch with all my classmates, but I made few friendships which have lasted to this day. One became an Air Commodore, another developed his family business, to include a sugar factory and cotton mill. One was head of energy in one state. A couple live in London and we keep in touch.

I revere greatly those whose work transformed the British colony into a confident thrusting independent nation, led by a highly educated mature leadership second to none anywhere, to make the India I saw the place to be. Words cannot fully describe their achievements creating a nation from near self governing states, notably decisive action by Sardar Patel Ji in bringing it all into line.

One success story which we foreign students benefited from was the Indian Council for Cultural Relations. At a welcome for newcomers in Delhi, I was reminded of the core values of Indian way by a talk by the Ramakrishna Mission Swami Ranganathananda. ICCR organised foreign students summer camps at 'hill station' venues where distinguished Indians would visit and give talks. At Darjeeling we met Tenzing Norgay the first of two to reach the summit of Mount Everest in 1953.

Through ICCR, I spent a weekend in Harijan Colony, as guest of Sri UN Dhebar. He lived the Gandhian way, got up very early, bathed, then read Gita. In the evening his visitors included ministers. All sat on the floor while he spun cotton thread on a spinning wheel.



At the International Festival of Music and Dance, Delhi University, 1958 with guest, Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru.

I was showered with hospitality in India. A Guyanese relation in Mumbai received me when my ship landed at Mumbai. They looked after me until I proceed to Delhi. A business friend of my parents put me up in Agra like their own son, until my college started in Delhi. In Delhi the home of many classmates were like my own.

My sojourn at Hindu college was cut short by a call by my ailing parents to return home to assist in the business. They sent me a plane ticket to travel via London and New York. When I went to India it was by ship to England then on another to Mumbai. My dream of becoming a professional ended abruptly, but fate played a hand. Riots destroyed part of our business, and the future looked bleak. My parents sent me to England to build a new life. Here I worked and studied and became an architect. I have had a rewarding career. Plus, in voluntary public service, I became a JP magistrate, and member

of Tribunals, and of Government advisory bodies on Transport for Disabled people.

My childhood years were full of things Indian. In our house, photos in our prayer room were of Paramhansa Ramakrishna, Sarda Devi, Swami Vivekananda, and Swami Ram Tirtha. In the living room were those of Gandhiji among others, plus photos of Indian missionaries who visited our home. These have all inspired me to make something of my life.

I learnt since my childhood that the soul of the ancient Indian race evolved over millennia, with nourishment from its soil and interfacing with all of nature. That soul contains the blueprint for everyone regardless of race colour or religion for living successfully anywhere in the world. The key components among many are: live and let live, accept that in life joy and sorrow go together, waste not, simple living. I am grateful and happy to live by these values.

## Muslim, Jewish groups meet for greater understanding

By Alysha Aziz

On Monday, February 25, 2019 members of the Imdadul Islamic Centre, a Toronto-based Muslim organization, visited the Holy Blossom Temple, a Jewish Synagogue in the City.

Although the visitors were not fully educated on all aspects of Judaism, they were aware of many similarities existing between the two faith groups. They however learnt many new things about Judaism, things of great interest about that religion.

They found most interesting that there was a scroll sacred to Judaism which contained the Torah, the Jewish Holy Book. That scroll was made of leather, and the ink, of crushed materials from around the time that the scroll was written.

After receiving more information on the history of Judaism, the visiting group got an opportunity to witness the Jewish prayer arrangement. They were enlightened about the Jewish funeral rites and other aspects of the Faith. It was an opportunity to ask questions and be provided with answers. After this session the visitors were introduced to more members of the Holy Blossom community.

They were then split up into groups made up of members of both organizations. Each group consisted of a team leader who headed that group and who helped to break the ice in a question and answer exchange that was meant to elicit information pertaining to the tenets of both religions.

Overall, this was an experiment in information gathering and knowledge sharing for both the Muslim and Jewish communities in Toronto. It's an experiment that enhances the spirit of tolerance and mutual respect for greater understanding.

(Alysha Aziz is a 12-year-old Grade 6 Honour Roll student from Richmond Hill, Ontario. She is an active member in her school where she participates in the drama club and school band. She plays the piano and flute. Alysha is a multi time winner of the Richmond Hill Montessori Principals Award.

Alysha is also an active volunteer with the Imdadul Islamic Centre, and the Muslim Welfare Centre. Most recently she volunteered at the AFMI event in Mississauga.

In her spare time, Alysha enjoys reading, writing, studying Greek mythology and swimming.)



Members of the Imdadul Islamic Centre and the Holy Blossom Temple met on February 25 at the Temple's premises in Toronto for greater understanding.

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