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Renu Khator oral history interview by Mark I. Greenberg, February 20, 2004

Renu Khator (Interviewee)

Mark I. Greenberg (Interviewer)

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USF Florida Studies Center
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TOPICS OF DISCUSSION

Place of birth

Dr. Khator was born in a small town in the northern part of India, about 200 miles from New Delhi. She has a younger brother and sister. She grew up in a conservative town with a predominantly Muslim population. Both her father and grandfather were attorneys, and her grandfather owned a big business. She describes their lifestyle as largely aristocratic. “I grew up in a very privileged environment.”

Childhood perceptions of Indian society

While traveling extensively in India as a child, she was not exposed to life outside of her own culture, thus, “It was the only reality I knew.” Her experiences were very much entrenched in the traditional Indian caste system, and it was not until she left India that she could reflect on those circumstances.

Early education

Dr. Khator went to a Christian missionary school as a child, “Because that was the best school in our little town.” Her family put a great emphasis on education, though it was primarily her mother’s values, encouragement, and philosophy that ensured her success in academics. “Basically, in her mind, there was just no other choice but to excel – no matter what I was doing.” Though a heavy emphasis on education is fairly common among Indian families, she believes her mother’s attitude was exceptional in regard to the education of her children. “I give salute to my mom for that.”

Secondary education

She was at the missionary school through eighth grade, and then she went on to a “staunchly Hindu” all-girls school for grades nine through twelve. Because her family was uncomfortable with the idea of sending her away to college, Dr. Khator enrolled at an all-girls college closer to home. While the importance of education was espoused for women in her family, the feeling was that they should stay within the safe parameters of the home.

College education

The college that she attended had a very limited program, thus she ended up studying liberal arts primarily, though also taking some courses in math and English. Because she scored so well in the state exams following completion of her bachelor's degree, she was granted a presidential fellowship to pursue her master's degree anywhere she wanted to go. This became a point of contention within the family because of her father's reluctance to send her abroad. Of primary concern to her father at the time was the arrangement of her marriage, a notion complicated by her academic endeavors. Luckily, her uncle "came to [her] rescue," and encouraged the family to allow her departure. She went on to the University of Allahabad where she hoped to study political science. The trip was short-lived however, because eleven months later her father arranged her marriage, "and here I am, in this country."

Religion in Indian society

Her family practiced Hinduism, though she notes that her grandmother and grandfather subscribed to two different branches of the religion. She learned a great deal about Christianity in grade school, and never really saw any tension among the peoples of Hindu, Muslim, or Christian faiths that converged in the region. "It just was part of a harmonious life."

Indian-Pakistani national hostilities

Her mother grew up in Pakistan, and was uprooted during the separation in 1947, losing her father in the process. Yet, she always felt a sense of community in the town in which she was raised.

There were two subsequent wars with Pakistan in 1965 and 1971. Her hometown became the second largest military encampment area during these times, "So we were very patriotic ... we did so many things for our trips." Still, she does not remember perceiving the conflict in terms of religion, recalling that many of her best friends were in fact Muslims. To this day, she is still "equally comfortable" being among people of all faiths.

Gender in Indian society

She began publishing poetry at the age of sixteen, writing primarily about those injustices against women in Indian society. Though she was opposed to the idea of arranged marriages, her protest was relegated to her pages of poetry where she could safely contemplate such issues, suggesting, "I don't think I had the courage to rebel."

Exposure to other political philosophies

While in college in India, she studied the U.S. and British systems among others, giving her advanced preparation for her experiences in the United States. She feels that, as a result of her training in India, she has a very strong theoretical foundation by which to understand the nature and behavior of those societies and institutions. She arrived in the U.S. during the Watergate scandal, and thus she "got right into the politics of everything."

Arranged marriage

She was eighteen years old when she married a man whom she had not previously known. Her father called her home from the university in order to arrange the marriage, to which she protested. She recalls feeling humiliated by the ritual, but gives her husband a lot of credit for his behavior. She feared the marriage because she felt that it would compromise her commitment to academics and, “My life would be over.” At the time, it was rare that a woman would continue her education after getting married. Nonetheless, she was married ten days later, and a week after that she was in the United States, where her new husband was working on his Ph.D.

Marriage ceremony

She recalls the ceremony was very long and drawn out, “the way Indian ceremonies are,” lasting several days. In protest of the arranged marriage, Mrs. Khator went on a hunger strike. Despite her opposition to the convention itself, she thought very highly of her husband, and remembers liking him a great deal. She was relieved to hear of his promise to support her academic pursuits, telling her that he would “not want my wife any other way anyway.”

They moved to Purdue University, where he was studying at the time. Her English was very rudimentary, and she recalls having a great deal of trouble understanding the American accent. Thus, using her husband as a translator, she was admitted as a student at Purdue, first as a non-degree student with the opportunity to prove herself as a capable (though young) graduate student.

Language barrier

She recalls crying every single day because of the difficulties she was having, particularly with the language barrier. Although she understood very little English her first days in class (the professor was from Texas, and his accent made it more difficult for her), she had a great deal of help from her husband, and also watched television frequently to increase her familiarity with the language. “I loved the freedom of being in this country ... and never shied away from the struggle.” She remembers one “particularly liberating experience” when she walked out on her own to get ice cream, thinking, “This is freedom!” She valued the opportunities afforded to her by western culture in the United States, and intended to take full advantage of them. “I was willing to do anything for it.”

Classes

The first class that she took in the U.S. was the American Presidency, at the very time, in fact, that the Watergate scandal was unfolding in Washington. “I don’t know how I survived ... but I learned to swim ... I loved it!” She wrote her thesis on the influence of interest groups on the Indian political system, a new perspective that she enthusiastically applied to the studies of her homeland. Afterwards, her committee recommended that she go on for her Ph.D.

Return to India

Rather than continuing her studies, she and her husband decided to go back to India in 1976 because the scholarship that sent him to the United States required that he return after completing his studies. Though they had options, they both decided it would be best

to make the return trip. They stayed in India for five years, at which time Dr. Khator became pregnant with her daughter, a period which allowed her to stay home and write fiction for Indian magazines. She had her second daughter while still in India.

Return to the United States

While she was in India over the course of those five years, what she dreamed about most was sitting in a library and returning to her studies. “It was just so empowering to me to be in the middle of so much knowledge.” After receiving a letter from her academic advisor, Dr. Khator decided to return to the United States, and, “We packed up everything within a month and we were here.” While she completed her studies, her husband was able to find work as a visiting professor in engineering.

Speaking of her husband, she says, “The kind of support he has provided me is very unique of Indian culture...I think unique for any culture.” She remembers a particularly empowering moment when he told her: “You have to realize that you’re not just your father’s daughter, you’re not just my wife, you are you, and you have to find yourself.” She does not think that without his support she would be where she is today.

Coming to USF

Coming from Purdue, her husband had seven job offers across the country. He met someone from USF while at a conference in Orlando in 1983, and took the occasion to visit the university. They decided that they would come to Tampa, at least for a short time, and she planned to finish her Ph.D. while he worked in the engineering department. In 1985, after two years in Tampa, she got a call from the political science department at USF, and agreed to teach a course in statistics as a visiting professor.

Dissertation topic

She wrote her dissertation on “the factors that prompt a state to engage in environmental dialogue and adopt policies to protect the environment.” She had a fellowship from Purdue that allowed her to travel back and forth to India frequently in order to conduct her research.

Career at USF

After two years at USF as a visiting professor, an assistant position opened up in the department and Dr. Khator was selected. She also had the opportunity to teach in the Honors Program and Women’s Studies departments, experiences that she believed “had a lot to do with the ... formation of my character.” She now encourages her students to take such interdisciplinary courses, suggesting that, “[They] might change the way you look at things today ... because that is my personal experience.”

From professor to administrator

While aspiring to a full professorship at USF, she recognized the need of having some “university service” on her resume. Due to a suggestion from one of her colleagues, she elected to join the faculty senate. As a result of her experiences there, she was encouraged to run for office at the university. She was first elected secretary of the senate, then speaker of the faculty senate. Upon the arrival of President Betty Castor to

the university, Dr. Khator was chosen to serve as the faculty assistant to the president. “I guess everything just came together ... it was never planned.” She continued to teach in the evenings during this time, an extremely busy period for her.

During the years she worked with Betty Castor, she established important connections to the faculty at USF. She noticed the disparities among different groups and interests in the administration, and an overall lack of synergy among them. Thus, she started a diversity forum in which all committees came together to share concerns and issues among one another. Empowered as a voice for the faculty, she also started important dialogues within the administration about the role of academics. At the time, tenure was a particularly contested issue that she worked on. She saw her role as twofold: First, building a connection with the faculty, and second, making sure that the voice of the faculty is represented and heard.

After serving for two years as assistant to President Castor, she took an opportunity to direct an Environmental Science and Policy program.

Administrative career at USF

In her duties throughout the years, she has served as chairman, dean, interim provost, and now provost. Still, she sees herself still, “First and foremost as a faculty [member]... I always do that ... If there is a conflict, I stand with the faculty – that’s where I see my role, as a chief academic officer ... that’s what a university is – it’s academic domain.”

Role of an administrator

She does not see the interests of faculty and administrators as mutually exclusive in nature. “Honestly speaking, the work is done by the faculty ... the job as an administrator is to create an environment to do whatever necessary ... to create an environment in which faculty can do their very best ... [they] have never disappointed me.” Dr. Khator emphasizes the need to trust the faculty and work with them to guarantee the success of the university. “I hope I don’t disappoint the faculty body, because if I [do] that, then I am not effective.”

Personal philosophy

In her interview for the provost position, she began with her philosophy for life, “When life gives you lemons, and everybody else is busy making lemonade, I think it’s possible to make margaritas.” She espoused the importance of having positive energy and an optimistic attitude in any aspect of life. She also believes she relies upon her inner strength, which comes from an amalgamation of culture, upbringing, experience, and a reliable support network. “I guess people have made me what I am here today ... I am just a reflection.”

What she hopes to accomplish as provost

She believes that the USF faculty, for a number of reasons, feels disconnected and demoralized, and “If I can make things a little bit better for the faculty here ... that would be great.”

Personal goals and faculty expectations

She believes her own goals are “totally aligned” with those expectations espoused by the faculty at USF. “That in itself means that I cannot let them down.” Dr. Khator also emphasizes the importance of meeting the needs of the students, a notion consistent with a focus on academics and faculty concerns. “[The students’] journey should be as smooth, as pleasant, as hassle-free as possible.” She also believes in the importance of reducing the bureaucracy at USF, allowing people to think and act more creatively.

Collective bargaining

Dr. Khator sees her responsibility as a negotiator being primarily to academics. “Ultimately, it’s all about strengthening the hands of the faculty and empowering their creativity.” While she recognizes the complexity of the issues, she believes progress is being made in the right direction. “I’m making sure that in all of this noise, academics are not ... undermined.”

Concerns

She expresses some concerns over particular issues at the university, specifically such volatile matters as the state university governance system, an arrangement in which politics often regrettably trump the interests of higher education. Also, the relationships of the peripheral campuses pose particular challenges to the university system, and require future attention. She attributes some problems to the youth of the university, suggesting, “This is just a part of growing up.”

Future of the university

Overall, she believes in the next five or ten years, USF will make a name for itself both nationally and internationally, becoming more research oriented, with a positive emphasis on academics over politics and bureaucracy. As for her position in five years, Khator asserts, “I am absolutely focused here, I am totally committed here, and I am going to enjoy every single minute ... then leave the rest to destiny.”

End of Interview