

Umeeta Sadarangani

Associate Professor of English

Sabbatical Report
for fall 2005

Hello.

I'm glad to have this opportunity to report on my sabbatical.

Courses I teach

- ENG 101 – College Composition
- LIT 146 – Introduction to Non-Western Literature
- LIT 142 – Women in Literature
- HUM 109 (new in Fall 2006) – Cultural Values of South Asia

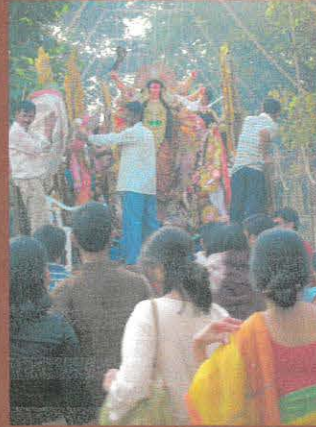
I was the first person to teach LIT 146 at Parkland, in Spring 1998. It includes a unit on South Asia.

I helped to publicize and revive LIT 142.

Materials and insights gathered during my sabbatical will directly contribute to HUM 109, which I am designing and which will be offered for the first time in the next academic year.

What I Proposed to Do During my Sabbatical

Visit India for several weeks in Fall 2005 in order to immerse myself in Indian culture during the height of the festival (holiday) season, particularly during Dusserah and Diwali, major Hindu holidays, and Durga Puja, a major holiday in northeastern India.



The only way to have this experience of immersion was through a sabbatical. The only other time we have a long break is during the monsoons. During my time in India, I read and watched local media, visited art galleries and historic sites, participated in holiday rituals, conducted interviews, and took hundreds of photographs.

Sabbaticals Work!

- Opportunities to make contacts with others in the field
- Opportunities to write and publish
- Opportunities to reconnect with colleagues
- A once-in-a-career opportunity to immerse myself in Indian culture during the height of the festival season and to bring back ideas and insights for Parkland courses.

It was wonderful to have a chance to connect with other scholars and to have an impact by contributing to the field.

During the sabbatical, I connected with a new History Professor at the University of Illinois, Shefali Chandra, who asked me to write an article for an online journal that she helps to edit. We continue to stay in touch. I went to a talk just last week by the New Delhi-based historian Uma Chakravorti. Because of my connection to Prof. Chandra, I was invited to dinner with Uma Chakravorti and had the opportunity to spend the evening with her.

During the sabbatical, I had opportunities to write, revise, write some more—to do what I make my students do all the time! And in this way, I was able to make a contribution to the field. I published “Standing My Ground: Reflections of a Queer, Indian, Immigrant Professor in the U.S. Classroom” in the online journal *Ghadar*. I have already had responses from those who find my article useful, including people I was not acquainted with before. A sociology professor at the University of Connecticut plans to use my article as a text in his class next semester; he says very little work is being done in the area of sexual orientation in the South Asian diaspora. A PhD candidate at the University of Cincinnati wrote me to say my two articles have impacted her dissertation and she wants me to mentor her. And one of our part-time faculty members, who is in graduate school at the University of Illinois asked if she can share the article with her classmates in a course on Identity, Culture, and Education in Transnational Contexts.

Also during the sabbatical, I reconnected with Sharmila Rudrappa, a sociology professor from the University of Texas at Austin when she was a visiting scholar at the University of Illinois. I was able to attend her talks and classroom visits as well as meet with her one-on-one. I had first met her in 1998, when we both presented at an ICISP conference.

The highlights of the visit to India—where I haven’t lived since I was eleven and where the last time I celebrated the holidays was in 1977—included... (see next slide)

Preparing for the festivities



Preparing for the festivities, which includes buying new clothes and decorations.

A modern boutique with festive clothes (top left), and a traditional vendor selling rangoli powder and other holiday wares on the sidewalk outside (right). I'm learning how to do rangoli with a stencil (bottom left).

Sidewalk vendors and international superstores



Buying sweets and flowers is also traditional.

The Colors of Mumbai (Bombay) at Diwali, the festival of lights



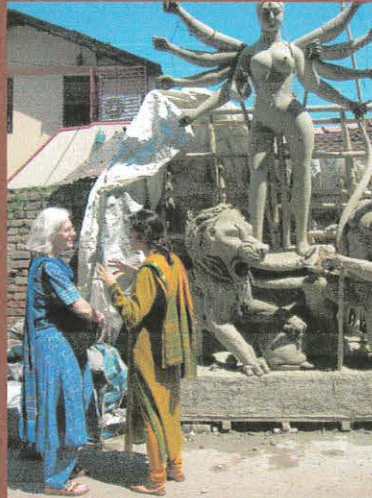
Traditional oil lamps and strings of electric lights brighten the city; bright rangoli powder is used to decorate entrances to homes.

Durga Puja: A City-Wide Celebration in Kolkata (Calcutta)



In October 2005, I visited Kolkata (Calcutta) after an absence of twenty-four years and for the first time during the annual Durga Puja festival. Durga Puja is an annual holiday during which the focus of the entire city is on the *pandals* (temporary temple-like structures) created in each neighborhood to welcome and worship the Goddess Durga. The city is transformed for the holidays—with pandals, drums, lights, and community entertainment.

Kumartuli, in old Calcutta, where it all begins



I was struck by the artistry and devotion with which each *pandal* and each idol seemed to have been created and the excitement the community shared as they created their neighborhood shrine and then worshipped at it. My appreciation of Durga Puja was enhanced after visiting Kumartuli, the old Kolkata neighborhood on the banks of the Hooghly River, where many of the idols are designed and created. I watched artisans create Goddess Durga from scratch, beginning with a straw frame, adding mud from the river, painting the idol, dressing her, and adorning her. Knowing the idols would be immersed in the river after the festivities reminded me of the circle of life. While in Kumartuli, I took photographs of the Goddess in many stages of becoming herself. Some idols make her appear all-powerful, even intimidating, while others make her appear benevolent.

It was exciting to be in a part of Kolkata that even many natives of the city have not visited.

Goddesses in the making



Artisans at work



One neighborhood's celebration



The pandal is commissioned and paid for by the neighborhood, and it is constructed on a street that is closed off (top two photos).

Crowds line up to view the pandal, and a security guard keeps watch. Impressive crown control!

The First Aid stand also follows the theme of the pandal.

Mother Teresa's Mission



It was moving to visit the mission where Mother Teresa lived and worked until her death, and especially to visit the adjoining orphanage. I even caught a glimpse of Mother Teresa's successor.

Loreto College, Kolkata



Loreto College is one of the best colleges in Kolkata. My guide, one of my cousins, is a geography professor there.

Top right, a typical classroom.

Bottom left, a view of the chapel from the classroom.

Bottom right, the college chapel, where Mother Teresa's body lay during visitation.

Everyday life in an Indian city



Top left: Vendors come to the door in Mumbai, still a fairly common practice.

Top right: I interviewed this CEO of a computer animation company in Kolkata.

Bottom right: Malls have been popping up all over urban India.

Bottom left: A taxi and an old tram in Kolkata, where there is also a relatively new underground rail system.

In every city, find a good café and
a good bookstore!



A final piece of advice if you travel: in every city, find a good café and a good bookstore. They especially allow one to pause and reflect during a sabbatical.

From: Umeeta Sadarangani, Professor of English



Date: November 11, 2008

Subject: Addendum to Sabbatical Report for Fall 2005

In the three years since my sabbatical, I have had several opportunities to share what I have learned with others on campus, in the community, and in the profession:

“An October in India” slide presentation and lecture, Verde Gallery, downtown Champaign, May 4, 2006.

“An October in India” slide presentation and lecture, with Marilyn Ryan, at Parkland College CETL, October 3, 2006.

I gave another such presentation in fall 2007 at the Unitarian Universalist Church to help raise funds for schools in northeastern India.

I displayed the photographs taken in India during the sabbatical in two solo art shows: one at the Asian American Cultural Center at the University of Illinois in Spring 2007 and another in the Parkland Gallery Annex in the library in Fall 2007. I gave an artist’s talk during each show. In Fall 2007, I also participated in the Essence of India cultural festival at the University of Illinois, where I displayed and spoke about the photographs taken during my sabbatical.

Because I found it so gratifying to write and publish an article during my sabbatical, I worked on another article this past summer, and it was published in *Modern Language Studies*, a journal of the Northeast MLA, this fall. I find that writing for publication reminds me of the work I ask my students to do even as it gives me an opportunity to reflect on my teaching.

I am now teaching HUM 109 for the fourth semester in a row, and I have developed an oral presentation assignment around festivals and holidays; the assignment is enhanced by what I learned during my sabbatical. In my classes, I also regularly use photographs taken that fall. In an even more subtle and more significant way, that recent trip to India gives me insights into contemporary India that come only from travel.

I am a member of the Parkland College Speakers’ Bureau, and I gave a slide presentation and talk to the Business and Professional Women’s Group on September 2, 2008.

I am grateful to have had the opportunity to enrich my personal and professional life through a sabbatical, and I expect I will continue to feel the benefits in the long term.