

## Reflections on History as Performance (an afsana for Abu)

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I recently traveled to India with my father, a muhajeer — "refugee" — who was returning home after fifty years. After leaving India to go to Pakistan in 1954 during the turbulent years following partition which displaced millions of Muslims and Hindus in the subcontinent, he entered engineering college in Karachi. At the age of fifteen, cut off from most of his immediate family, he threw himself into his studies, spent the summers on campus (not by choice) while other students went home, and, as a result, ended up graduating at the top of his class. Soon after graduation he received a Fulbright Scholarship to attend the Georgia Institute of Technology in Atlanta. Traveling from one end of the world to another, he entered yet another tumultuous time and place: the Jim Crow South, where the modern civil rights movement — whose most visible leader, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. had been inspired by the non-violent political practices of Mahatma Gandhi — was under way.

Finishing up his studies at Georgia Tech in record-time (taking double the course load), my Abu began working as a civil engineer in the United States, first in South Carolina, then moving to sunny California upon the urging of his buddy from Karachi, Zaheer Khan. My father has always loved the idea of "America" — its efficiency, openness, and enormous wealth — even as he acknowledges its limitations. While having taken a number of overseas jobs (in North Africa and the Middle East) with the U.S. engineering firm Parsons to maximize his earnings, he never expressed a desire to go back to India, but only focused on doing the best he could for my mother, sister, and I — to achieve an American dream. Only recently had he decided to actually look back to India, partly through my own years of bugging him; partly because he was finally ready to do so. But over the course of his half century away, through storytelling, he never forgot where he came from, and even deepened his many precious memories of life back home amidst, no doubt, equally wrenching memories of leaving family and friends at such a young age.

### *How many immigrants must feel this way?*

On our way from London, comfortably seated on an Air India Boeing 747 on a flight path taking us directly in between Baghdad and Teheran, some ten hours later we land in Mumbai. We arrive just as news hits of the impact of the tsunami devastating the Andaman Islands, Sri Lanka, and the southeastern coast of India. We would spend a couple of days in the western port city before traveling up to Poona, where my father had grown up. Located on a plateau of the western Ghats three hours outside of Mumbai, my Abu found his once familiar and relatively quiet town transformed into a highly congested city, where bicycle rickshaws have been overrun by herds of honking motor rickshaws. No matter, he was home. The many family members who greeted us could not have been more warm, kind, or generous. At one reunion there were over forty of us (because that's all we could fit into the apartment!). Despite the growth of Poona, the single-story home in which my Abu grew up was miraculously still there — tucked away in between two apartment complexes.

I had never been to India but had heard about it in countless ways growing up with stories — some real, some magical, all intermingled — vividly told by my father (that is, in addition to having seen *National Geographic* documentaries and snippets of Bollywood films over the years). But my father's stories, or *afsanas* (the Persian and Urdu word for "tales"), were more personal and intriguing. Stories of him climbing *neem* trees with his best friend Shafi at the age of ten; the dreaded *Munja* — the jaundiced ghostly character that teased and toyed with children (like the dreaded *Coco*, the fear of Latin American children, of which I'm one, being Peruvian on my

mother's side); stories of my grandmother Riasat, whose generosity was matched only by her inability to bargain (fruit and vegetable sellers relished coming to her home, knowing they would always make a nice little profit); my father's elder brother Shabbar, a golden gloves boxer at Wadia College and veteran of World War II, in which he fought fascist Italian forces on behalf of the British, but later took particular pleasure beating up British officers who slighted Indians on the streets of Poona; the neighbor's daughter who my father clearly had a crush on (but to this day insists on speaking about her strictly as his "friend"); or, stories of my grandfather, Meer Qasim, a larger-than-life figure in the family, a decorated detective with a handlebar moustache (and the keeper of the family tree dating back to the late Mughal era), who served as district superintendent of police of Maharashtra under the British Raj, and who was later called out of retirement to investigate Gandhi's assassination in 1948.

These were some of the stories that have come to shape me — and probably drive my sense of curiosity. *What's going to happen next? What other detail is he going to add this time? Wait, I've already heard this one before?* (No matter.) *Papa, tell me again, what did the man with the turban do?* Abu's stories, often told inconclusively so as to leave his listeners guessing, are performed with all the excitement, tension, and humor of the best in oral history traditions — wonderful performances, truly full of wonder.

In addition to being my father's first home (he and my mom are now firmly ensconced in the U.S.), India — "the world's largest democracy" — is home to over one billion citizens. Over the centuries, however, Indians have migrated in droves across the globe. From the indentured servants (derogatorily called "coolies"), who went to the West Indies in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, to the technocrats, engineers, and doctors who landed on the streets of New York in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, East Indians have made their homes across the Americas, Caribbean, Europe, the Middle East, East Asia, and Africa. Rich with an array of age-old traditions, visual and musical arts, exquisite cuisine, architecture, and religious and secular customs, India, with its 28 different states and dozen languages, is also a land of mostly dirt-poor men and women, street children, and animals forming the hustle-bustle of its cities and countryside. There, in the countryside, mango trees, rice fields, twisting rivers, and arid deserts not only share their respective spaces, colors, and rhythms, but meet the world of high tech, dance halls, movie studios, and scholarly metropolises from northern Delhi and West Bengal down to Tamil Nadu.

It is against this backdrop that I think about history, how to teach it, and its possibilities for being developmental through performance. After all, there's nothing quite like a heartfelt performance — not the kind that necessarily takes place on a stage under lights and in costume, but the performance of storytelling and reenactment that people do every day at work, taking their kids to school, at the kitchen table, driving to the market, at the museum, the laundromat, or on the train. Performance, the unique capacity that humans have to be *other* than who they are, it turns out, can also be a developmental activity — emotionally and intellectually. Scholars and clinicians alike have begun to better understand just how powerful performance can be as a tool for development — which may be described as the social creation of new ways of seeing and being.

In their book *Unscientific Psychology: A Cultural-Performatory Approach to Understanding Human Life* (Praeger, 1996), the philosopher of science Dr. Fred Newman and developmental psychologist Dr. Lois Holzman deconstruct the ways in which the activity of performance has been used developmentally in community-based educational and therapeutic programs (particularly in New York City) over the last quarter century. Others, such as Professor Rhonda Williams of Case Western Reserve University in Ohio, in her essay "Raising the Curtain: Performance, History, and Pedagogy" (in *Teaching the American Civil Rights Movement*, Routledge, 2002), urges using performance in the classroom as a way of teaching history.

As someone who teaches history, and who enjoys participating in a good performance (it takes at least two people to make a performance, since it is a social activity), I have come to deeply appreciate performing as a learning/teaching methodology. In years to come, I hope to see this approach infuse our educational institutions at every level, and not only in the study of history (or, for that matter, any subject), but in our ongoing collective creation of it.