

Veritas
VED MEHTA

Author's Note

From 1971 to 2004, between bringing out other books, I wrote and published eleven connected but independent autobiographical books under the omnibus title *Continents of Exile*. The work is intended to tell a cross-cultural story, from the late nineteenth to the end of the twentieth century, focusing on India, America, and England, among other places—the worlds in which I grew up and still emotionally and intellectually live. A sympathetic friend once asked me, “How can any life justify such a voluminous work?” (The books, taken together, add up to nearly four thousand pages.) One answer is that *Continents* is a saga about hundreds, perhaps thousands, of people, and in it I am a narrative thread.

In the course of publishing the *Continents* series, one integral part of the story, which concerned the year and a half (1959–1961) that I spent as a Ph.D. student at Harvard and Residential Fellow of Eliot House, was dropped. As it turned out, the Harvard story, though significant because it dealt with the end of my aspirations to be a conventional scholar and teacher at a university and my embarking on the hazardous profession of writer and journalist, was too short to stand alone easily as its own book. At the same time it was considered too long for the *New Yorker*, where its predecessors had originally appeared, the magazine’s owners and editors having been changed in the interim. Over the years, discerning readers have continued to point out the lacuna—most recently, Nathan Glazer, professor emeritus of Harvard, who had read several *Continents* books, seemingly in one sitting. What follows is an attempt, finally, to fill that lacuna.

Rereading the Harvard story today gives me a jolt; it is an odd sensation to hold up a mirror to my concerns of time past in isolation from the rest of the saga. But then, each installment of the *Continents* story was intended to be freestanding, and the Harvard piece

is no exception. But, unlike the *Continents* books, which I never read once they were in print, the Harvard piece, which I finished some sixteen years ago but which lay since then in a desk drawer, I have now been forced to reread. By and large, I have resisted the temptation to revise the manuscript, feeling that it should be true both to the spirit of my experiences at the university and to the time in which I wrote it. I should say that if I were writing it today my perspective would be dramatically different.

In what way was suggested to me by an old Oxford friend, Jeremy Knowles, who later became Amory Houghton Professor of Chemistry and Biochemistry and Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences at Harvard. He kindly agreed to read the piece, and had these observations:

you . . . illustrate the sad unawareness of many senior faculty (at Harvard, but also nearly everywhere else) of the dramatic changes in institutional mores and habits that were to occur in the late 1960s. People like your four examiners in the General Examination were still operating as if it were 1931, and not 1961. And when the troubles of the late '60s came, many faculty and administrators felt betrayed, in that the social compact with their students had been broken. It took Harvard more than a decade to recover, and of course recovery did not mean a return to the old place. Today, much as we might sometimes wish it were otherwise, there's much more of a sense of the students being consumers of an educational service, and much less of the ideal of intellectual apprenticeship.

I had a similar impression when, as a refugee from the so-called new *New Yorker*, I held the Rosenkranz chair at Yale and moonlighted at half a dozen other colleges, teaching history and writing.

V. M.
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Afterlife

In the summer of 1958, when I had just turned twenty-four and had completed my penultimate undergraduate year at Oxford, I was confronted by the question of what I would do in my “afterlife,” as my tutors referred to life following going down from the university. I was bedeviled by the problem of where I would live—India, America, or England. Those were the countries where I had lived and studied and where I imagined my languages and qualifications might open doors, yet I didn’t really feel at home in any of them—I was waking up to the fact that I would always be in exile.

Just then, my father stopped to see me on his way to America. There was no one who knew me better than he did, so, naturally, I turned to him for advice. When I was growing up, he was fond of repeating the saying “Children are their parents’ continued growth.” That was his way of saying that children fulfilled the unfulfilled ambitions of their parents—that parents lived through their children. Indeed, my father and I were so close that when we talked it seemed as if two halves of me were conversing: one, like my father, was clear; the other, like my self, was confused.

“I’m worried about what will happen to me when I go down from Oxford,” I said, pouring us each a glass of sherry. “Whenever I think about that, I get very gloomy.”

“You have always wanted to be a teacher and a scholar and pass your life at a university,” he said. “Would you like to stay on at Oxford?”

“I don’t think that’s in the cards. Even if I got a teaching job here, I don’t think I would enjoy being an Indian in England.”

“I thought that you had never encountered any racial prejudice here.”

“I haven’t. But if I ended up living here I would always feel like a traitor—when I was growing up, the struggle for independence had too great an influence on me for me to ever feel comfortable settling in England. Still, I sometimes feel that only at Oxford have I ever been happy. To teach at a university here, a First from Oxford is all I need—that’s all my tutors have. Still, I’m wondering whether it

isn't time now for me to go back to India and make use of my Western education there—for instance, trying for something like the Foreign Service.”

“That’s exactly what I wanted to talk to you about,” my father said. He added that the public praise of *Face to Face*, my first book, by a former Prime Minister of Britain, Clement Attlee, had come to the notice of Prime Minister Nehru. (My English editor at Collins, Mark Bonham Carter, was a friend of Attlee’s and had sent him a copy of the book. Attlee had written back a warm letter of appreciation, and it had been quoted widely in the publisher’s advertisements.) Nehru thought that the country should make use of me and had therefore asked Sir Raghaven Pillai, who as the Secretary General of External Affairs was the highest-ranking civil servant in India, if there might be a post in the Foreign Service for me.

I was stunned. It was one thing for Lord Attlee to praise my book, and quite another thing for the sitting Prime Minister of India to take an interest in me because of the book. “How do you know all this?” I asked.

“I met Sir Raghaven at a party, and he told me about it at great length. You should lose no time in following up this lead.”

My father said that Sir Raghaven had asked why I wasn’t interested in doing work for the blind. (Two months short of my fourth birthday, I had become blind, and one of the themes of the book was my struggle to get an education in spite of this.) My father had explained to Sir Raghaven that I didn’t want to do anything connected with my disability, impressing upon him that, on the contrary, I was determined to fight any and all limitations popularly associated with blindness and to test my mettle by competing as an equal with the sighted in the largest possible arena.

“I’m not sure that Sir Raghaven understood why you feel the way you do,” my father said, “but he was sympathetic, and that is what will count in his discussions with his colleagues on your behalf. It will be wonderful for you to come home with a government post waiting for you. Government service still provides the most prestigious and secure career in our country.”

“I wonder how I would fit in—I mean, being back in India,” I said. I had not been in India since I was fifteen, and I had almost put out of my mind the attitude of Hindus toward blindness: that it was a retribution for misdeeds done in the previous incarnation and that the blind were therefore condemned to pass their days as beggars. The image of a beggar, shuffling barefoot and unheeded, groping and holding out a begging bowl, had been branded on my brain since childhood. Though I was now an adult, the image had not faded. It was the Hindu superstition and prejudice that had propelled me to come to the relatively enlightened West for education in the first place. Could I go back? Could I ever hope to dispel that darkness? I didn’t think so. I did not want to be preoccupied with the very disability I was determined to rise above and prove irrelevant to my life.

“I wonder if I can ever live in India,” I said mildly, so as not to alarm my father.

“I don’t think, son, you could live in India,” he said, “but the beauty of your Foreign Service post would be that, most of the time, you would be living abroad and moving in an international circle.”

It was more than a month after my father’s visit that I got off a letter to Sir Raghaven. I wrote, in part:

30th July

As you may know, I will not complete my examinations until mid-July, 1959.

I have been away from home for almost nine years, and it is hard for me to assess what possibilities for service exist in India. On the other hand, the prospect of returning home without some hope of a useful living seems a little forbidding. It is perhaps best, therefore, to begin my search now. In this I shall be grateful to you for whatever assistance you can give me.

I have been personally inclined towards the Foreign Service for some time but have regarded it as out of my reach since the Indian Embassy in America seemed to feel that there was no hope of entering it on an equal footing with the sighted members. Naturally I have been reluctant to furnish my mind with

hopes of a career which would mean first winning the right to enter, only to discover I have to run a life's race with a permanent handicap. I am sure you understand that I am not unaware of limitations imposed by blindness, but I have no doubt that, given the chance, these limitations need not be fetters for either elevation of the mind or service in one's chosen work.

To return from attitudes to facts, I should formally like to apply for a career in the Foreign Service with a definite understanding that if selected I should be treated according to my deserts. I cannot bring myself to enter any career if it carries with it a hint of discrimination. I wish little more than a chance to shoot at a target with the same rules as others in the service.

Sir Raghaven wrote back in August and said that he had to consult his colleagues and make some inquiries, after which he would send me the government's considered reply. During the following six months, however, I heard nothing from him, except for one reassuring message through my father—that I should concentrate on getting a First, and that something would be worked out.

It was hard to explain to someone who had not been to Oxford the significance of a First. In my day, it was regarded as more desirable than even a D.Phil. The one indicated luminous brilliance proved in competition; the other, a talent for dour, solitary research. In fact, a First automatically made one eligible for the position of tutor at a college in the ancient universities and for many other plums of the British establishment, and it served as a handle to one's name for the rest of one's life. In the parochial atmosphere of the university, the class of degree someone got was remembered long after that person had made his mark in the afterlife. Thus, it was well remembered that A. E. Housman had got a Fourth, Graham Greene a Second, W. H. Auden a Third; and missing a First was apt to haunt a career beyond the grave. For instance, it had gone into the history books that the overweening behavior of Lord Curzon as viceroy in India might be explained by the fact that he had missed getting a First. For an undergraduate, there was no compliment higher than,

“You’re First material,” something that had been said about me and to me by my tutors.

