

Doing Business in South Asia: A Conversation by the Penn South Asia Center on behalf of Current Penn Undergraduates

Today we are talking with Dr. Anjan Ray, Regional Commercial Director, Renewable Energy & Chemicals (Asia Pacific) for Honeywell UOP. He earned his PhD from the Chemistry Department of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences and is a member of the class of 1989.

Thanks for sitting down to talk with us Dr. Ray. Can you tell us about yourself and your work?

I've had a long and varied career, though at present I am the Regional Commercial Director for Honeywell UOP based in Delhi, where I spent much of my youth. While I am now working on the business side of operations (and have been previously as well in past positions with other companies), my academic background is in Chemistry, which is also how I was first connected to Penn—the institution from which I earned my doctorate.

Can you tell us more about your path to your studies at Penn and your path after Penn?

I came to the Graduate School of Arts & Sciences in 1984, when there must have been relatively few South Asians at the University overall. My path to Penn grew out of an interest in polymer chemistry, which involves the study of large molecules. As an undergraduate at the Indian Institute of Technology in Delhi, I had studied engineering and chemistry but was also interested in mathematics. So I was somewhat torn about what to study at the doctoral level. In those years though, polymers were becoming more of a subject of interest to chemists, so this helped me ultimately decide to apply for graduate study in chemistry...In applying for advanced study in Chemistry my thinking was initially to pursue an academic career...[But w]hat happened was that within the first year of being enrolled in the Chemistry department, because of interactions with seniors who were taking up industrial jobs and peers who came back to further studies after stints in industry, I decided I wanted to use the skills I would be gaining as a chemist to help solve practical or, maybe I should say, more immediate problems.

Given your quite varied path from academia to industry, can you speak a bit more about your years at Penn. Looking back, what aspects of your experience do you prize most?

Well, of course, closest to home was the academic programming in the Chemistry department. As many PhD students know, the preparation one does for one's cumulative exams is and for me was the greatest part of my learning. And as my earlier comments suggest, beyond the cumulative exams my studies were rather highly specialized and yet interdisciplinary, which is only possible

under an adviser like Professor MacDiarmid and in a department devoted to excellence like that at Penn...Outside of the Chemistry Department, though, there were other riches the University offered. For me, part of this had to do with just getting to meet many people from different places in the world. In fact, there was something of a minor epiphany to be experienced as someone born and raised in India when I found myself also to be part of Penn's small but uniquely identified "South Asian" community. It was very noteworthy to not only be interacting with other people from the region but to see how in the U.S. there was a different identifier attached to us based on a common regional background. Beyond this, at Penn I also greatly benefitted from what was then called the University Museum's "International Classroom" program, which focused on getting those who had come to Penn from different parts of the globe to participate in cultural educational talks at area elementary schools. I, myself, for example, did so in the school districts of Cherry Hill and Camden, New Jersey.

To close, could you tell us what advice you have for current Penn undergraduates who are interested in working in South Asia?

That's a good but hard question—because I don't think there is any one-size-fits-all approach. I guess the first thing I would advise, which might sound counter-intuitive, is that students should read South Asian literature! Because I really do think that cultural understanding is very important—whether about South Asia in specific or just the world in general. In fact, I think this might be especially the case if you are coming from an American perspective, because there is perhaps a tendency in the U.S. to see the American way as being the best way without appreciating other possibilities...Regardless of how things have been and how they are changing though, increased cultural awareness can only be a good thing. So I would encourage students to start there.

N.B. The opinions presented here are solely attributable to Anjan Ray and not to any of his employer organizations, past or present