

Doing Business in South Asia: A Conversation by the Penn South Asia Center on behalf of Former Penn Graduates

Today we are talking with Sondra Sen, President of Sherisen International Inc. in Mountain Lakes, NJ. She earned her master's degree from the University of Pennsylvania South Asia Studies Department and is a member of the class of 1969.

Can you tell us a little bit about how you initially became connected to Penn? What was your background up to that point?

Well, I was an undergraduate at The Johns Hopkins University back in the 1960s in Baltimore. At the time I had become academically interested in cultural anthropology, while also working closely with the medical staff at Johns Hopkins Hospital since I had taken on a role doing public relations for its international programs division. My interest in internationalism, itself, was rooted very much in the temper of the times in the US back then.

More generally, I grew up in Annapolis, Maryland and did the first two years of college at Boston University. So when I came back to Maryland to finish my degree at Hopkins, my world simultaneously got smaller (being back in my home state) and larger because I entered this expanding world of health internationalism while working at the hospital.

The other major factor that kept me in Baltimore was my future husband who came to Johns Hopkins to pursue a Ph.D. and whom I had met while pursuing my degree in cultural anthropology. He originally is from Calcutta, so this turn of personal events led to pursuing the Masters I eventually did at Penn in the Department of South Asia Studies and, really, to the lifetime of work I've been doing since with a focus on India.

Will you tell us more about your decision to study at Penn and what the department was like in those days?

Well, after I met my husband, for a time there was some likelihood that we would be moving back to India together. So part of my decision to apply to the master's program in South Asia Studies was very practical and about trying to hone a new set of language skills.

It also fit my past studies in cultural anthropology and my larger interest in the world beyond American borders that was then opening up to so many young people in the United States. So I applied to the department in 1963 when the esteemed Professor Norman Brown, its founder, was still there. Overall, I pursued coursework in Hindi and Bengali languages and in cultural anthropology

with Professor Dorothy Spencer. My program was two years, and during my first summer I received a departmental scholarship to study Hindi. Then I applied for and received the U.S. government NDEA (National Defense Education Act) fellowship for the study of language and culture. The next year I focused more specifically on Bengali, which I had actually begun back when we were still in Baltimore.

The thesis I wrote for my Masters focused on a topic in medical anthropology, as I was interested in physical and spiritual health among middle class Hindus in West Bengal. I selected the topic after coming to know my husband's family who hailed from a traditional Bengali medical caste. We visited India for a time in 1966. In those days my husband was a bit overqualified, which prompted us to come back to the United States for good. Now, 50 years later the diaspora community based in the U.S. are going back to India for professional reasons, and even some Americans are finding work there. Indian companies are also investing in the U.S. and providing jobs to Americans. I have witnessed some amazing changes in the world and in U.S.-India relations!

I considered staying on to advance to the Ph.D., but life events took over. And you have to remember that in the early to mid-1960s it still was relatively rare for women to take on careers outside of the home.

What did you prize most about your experience in the South Asia Studies Department at Penn? Was there anything you wished was different about your program of study?

Pr. Brown's course on Indian civilization really was wonderful. Being in a small program oriented to language and literature in those days, students were able to get to know and work with really great people—like Pr. Brown and the renowned scholar of Indian Art Stella Kramrisch. From those days I also remember Pr. Alan Heston in the History Department. Another strength of the department, then and now, was and is the opportunity to take courses in other departments.

More generally, I feel the Masters program equipped me with a certain philosophical basis that has guided my spiritual journey throughout my life. To become aware of and to appreciate other religions and other approaches to life, especially in your 20's, is tremendously valuable. Intellectually, of course, there was also something extremely fascinating in the Hindu and Buddhist ideas I was studying. I remember I was drawn to knowing more about beliefs concerning reincarnation and past and future lives. In the wider culture of students in the department, I also benefited from the peer interaction. I recall Doris Srinivasan who was an American married to a South Indian and who was studying Indian art. She went on to become a renowned scholar. Likewise, my interest in and practice of Yoga and meditation comes from that time in my life even though it

was not part of the department's formal curriculum.

As for what could have been added to the program, we are talking about 50 years ago when it was very academic and scholarly, with a focus on language and preparing students to teach, do research, or go into government work. I would hope today the approach to learning is also practical and applied. To work and be successful in a global world, one needs to understand behavior, what we are calling intercultural intelligence. When I was in the department there was not any offering that helped one grapple with cultural values at the level I find myself now in my career trying to help non-Indians understand. In other words, while in the curriculum some courses touched on questions of family structure, religion, and social hierarchy, we didn't examine such issues on the basis with an eye toward understanding Indian behavior and values and associated questions about interacting with Indian colleagues on a day-to-day level while doing business. A course focusing on interacting and communicating across cultural divides could have been very useful to me professionally. In today's complex, interconnected world of diversity and inclusiveness, it is essential to have awareness, skills and knowledge about other cultures, and in my case, specifically India.

You just alluded to your career after the Masters Program. Can you tell us what came next? How did you end up being able to maintain professional ties to India?

At around the same time as the events I've been describing we also became involved in the founding of the first Indian voluntary association in the US. This was called the Association of Indians in America (AIA). The organization was set up in Princeton, New Jersey in 1967 by Professor Manoranjan Dutta, an economist who earned his Ph.D. from the Wharton Business School and who was teaching at Rutgers University. We formed the organization with a mission in relation to the community of Indians living and working in the United States: to advance the community's Indian heritage and American commitment.

My husband and I were part of the AIA from very beginning. One of the first annual events we organized was an AIA Honor Banquet recognizing people who helped to foster the ideals and goals of the organization: the dual commitment to India and the U.S. Dr. Norman Brown was an honoree at that event, along with Professor R.C. Bose, Ambassador Chester Bowles, and Pandit Ravi Shankar. The Banquet was held on November 3, 1973 at the Hotel Commodore in NYC. I was very excited personally that we were able to recognize Dr. Brown's early and continuing contributions to advancing South Asian Studies scholarship and bringing the lessons of academia to a larger audience.

Another activity on behalf of the Association of Indians in which I participated

together with Dr. Dutta in the late 1970's was to apply for a U.S Department of Education Ethnic Heritage Grant to look at the growth of the Indian community in the United States. We successfully proposed to develop curriculum materials for use in schools and to hold a series of teacher-training workshops, one of which was held at Penn.

At the time, work-wise, I was teaching both high school and college in New Jersey and had begun to get into import/export work as well, starting my own small firm, Sherisen International, Inc. Therefore, it was really from this base that my professional expertise started focusing on what is now called the field of cross-cultural education and training. You have to remember that in the 1980s and 1990s there was a real need for such training, but that it was still very new, especially as relating to India. American companies had been starting to send their employees to live and work abroad, and some were offering them language and cross-cultural training programs as part of their relocation package. As a cultural anthropologist and cross-cultural trainer, I could conduct programs on numerous cultures. However, India was a "back office of the world" would factor into my training work more heavily only in the future. As the years progressed the situation did evolve, and working with people headed to India became an important part of my own client profile. In addition, multinational companies began hiring locally in other countries and sending those employees to corporate headquarters here in the United States to learn their firm's values, to better understand the partners in the host nation, and to build networks. So my work also expanded to include more and more clients coming in the opposite direction from India to the U.S. Today, my client profile includes white-collar professionals from India whose companies are looking to ease the process of adapting to the different social and business culture that awaits them in this part of the world.

What is it like managing your own firm and how would you say the field of intercultural training has evolved over the years?

I started my own firm back in 1983. As I've mentioned, since that time the field of intercultural training has grown a great deal. It really started as a part of the education field with foreign students and study abroad programs. The other major early constituency consisted of the government given its need to prepare diplomats to work abroad. A new phase opened up as the corporate world found itself enlisting the services of relocation companies. Those companies were really important in expanding the reach of the field because in addition to helping expatriate families with home-finding and settling-in services, they offered to assist in the process of cross-cultural training as well. Prudential, for example, was an early player in adding cross-cultural training to its relocation business. The language company Berlitz added a department for cultural training to its mix of products as well. By the present, not only are there degree and certificate programs in the field of cross-cultural or global training, there is also a global

network of larger firms specializing in the same. With the Internet a lot of activity has now moved online, with trainings occurring through the webinar format. Interestingly, as I touched on before, in recent years a new source of demand for intercultural awareness training is coming from companies who are looking for local talent to spearhead their operations in other countries, including in developing world/emerging markets. Such companies often now bring that local talent back to corporate here in the US on assignment so they can get a more vivid sense of the business culture before sending them back to their home market or elsewhere in the world. A good deal of the demand for services firms like mine or the bigger players in the intercultural business training market thus comes at the stage when local actors are stationed here in the US.

What about your work with South Asian clients in specific? Can you tell us more about that?

Most of my South Asia-specific work has been in training individuals coming from or going to India. In addition, I have conducted group training for global teams who need to communicate effectively, including virtually. I've worked with clients in various industries, such as financial services, pharmaceuticals, and consumer products as well as with employees at all levels of the companies I deal with. While it used to be mainly men that those employed in my field were training, by today there are always a lot of women at the trainings also.

The past few years I've worked with an Indian-owned pharmaceutical company in the US. The trainings have been conducted in tandem with an Indian professor who works with the client's Indian personnel on the first day of the training while I do the same with the Americans. On the second day of the training we bring everyone together in the same space, focusing on intercultural communication, team-building, and intercultural competency. In a way, therefore, the essence of the work is to open up the possibility for discussing perceptions and preconceptions of the culture that is not one's own. Especially when I'm working with clients who are trying to coordinate teams across their operations in the US and India I can see how important such discussion can be. For example, one issue I have seen is that staff based in India often do not say "no" to requests made of them because it is thought to be impolite. This is especially the case with regard to anyone from the other side of the team who is more senior to them. In these situations people on the American side of the team tend to mistake the lack of a "no" for a "yes" when that is not really what is intended. Rather, there is a different norm about respecting one's superiors or elders that carries from the home into the workplace in India and the perception or misperception of the implications of that norm, therefore, requires discussion.

Another example that comes to mind has to do with an outsourcing company in India that specializes in medical transcription work, which my husband started.

Unusual as it may sound, initially he experienced some of the same cultural and communication issues in doing business in India that the major multinational companies have encountered. I have been able to assist the firm by conducting training programs on Working with Americans for our own employees. This just goes to show you that there is always a need for cross-cultural training in helping to minimize cross-cultural blunders.

Is there anything else you would like to share about your work in recent years?

Given how much views about India have changed over the years, from perceptions of the Old India to the New India, and how much depth there is to Indian civilization, I find that my education at Penn has continued ever since. I also continue to enjoy sharing my awareness, knowledge and skills in helping interpret India with non-Indians. Another very exciting aspect of my work in recent years has been in the area of mindfulness training, which is making inroads in major corporate settings. Having engaged in the practice of meditation since my days at Penn, it is very gratifying to witness its widespread acceptance and a broader acknowledgment of its benefits. Of course, along the way of doing the intercultural training work, there are other aspects of my career path that have developed as well, which you might not expect. For example, I have taught Indian cooking classes and written a cookbook on Indian cuisine, which was great fun!

Finally, what advice would you offer to current Penn undergraduates?

Well, I think we are living in an age when what they call ‘soft’ skills are increasingly important and increasingly seen as important. To both be a participant and leader in today’s global world, understanding what cultural competence means across cultural boundaries is vital. I do, therefore, think that learning about society, history and culture when you are trying to work in or with people in a country other than your own is important. The deeper level of knowledge one acquires can only enhance one’s ability to style-switch and to be more cognizant of perception and behavior. Overall, I’d urge students to be aware of and open to differences and more comfortable with cultural diversity. As an example, our culture here in the US can be very direct, in addition to being coded in specific ways (male, Anglophile). So I’d remind students to be aware that business in other parts of the world is often done through more indirect or just culturally different ways of interacting. Being sensitive to such realities can only be a positive in an age when so many companies are trying to create synergies across national borders by forming global teams in the emerging markets. Finally, for students who want to pursue careers in business and travel or work globally, especially with companies doing business in South Asia, a South Asian Studies background—including through language study—provides tremendous credibility and added value. I wish them all success.

