



Finding Common Ground

Caught between the romantic India of her roots and the South Africa of her birth, it took the story of her grandfather's life for **SHUBNUM KHAN** to find her identity.

MY FIRST VISIT to India was bewildering. I was young and thirsty for an adventure, but the constant noise, rich smells and vivid colours were just overwhelming. My parents, however, settled easily into the dusty villages, and tucked into their spicy samosas, smiling kindly at every man, woman and wandering goat. Me? I sneezed at the dust, grimaced at the oily samosas and shooed the goat away with the toe of my shoe.

However, once I had overcome my initial shock, I began to enjoy the trip, but it was as a tourist taking photos, not as a long-lost traveller finally returning home to the motherland. I didn't behave at all like the locals – I didn't dress like them or eat like them, and I certainly couldn't converse with them. I felt like an impostor – a wannabe Indian whose only links to the motherland consisted of a common surname and a pair of skinny legs. No one seemed to understand my dilemma, and it felt like I was being flung into a culture that I was expected to understand naturally.

India and South Africa each hold such unique histories and cultures that I constantly find myself caught between the two. From a young age, family elders enthralled me with tales

of romantic India, with its ancient traditions, its detailed palaces and sequined saris. But while they were trying to teach me Urdu at home, I learnt Afrikaans at school; while my mother loved her Indian soaps on Zee TV, I watched *Egoli*; and while I had a sketchy idea of partition, I knew much more about apartheid.

The clash of cultures left me feeling conflicted. To be true to myself I had to know who I was and, to know who I was, I had to decide which country I held allegiance to (or so I thought). However, that proved to be extremely difficult. On the one hand, I felt guilty when my family supported India against South Africa in cricket. But on the other, I was quick to proudly point out to anyone that an Indian woman often won Miss Universe. These emotions didn't make sense to me.

I lived with these unresolved feelings for a long time, until, one day, by accident, I stumbled upon the answers. While completing a thesis at university, I decided to incorporate my family history into my project. The aim was to interview three generations and then analyse how technology had advanced in each era. I resolved to use my grandfather, my father and myself as subjects.

I was somewhat apprehensive about my grandfather's interview, because while we lived in the same house, we didn't talk often and I suspected he found me a tad too modern. In the past, this same grandfather had gathered me and the other grandchildren around to tell us stories. There were Aesop's fables, Indian folk tales, Br'er Rabbit adventures and Arabian night stories, and each one *always* held a moral for us to learn. My grandfather was passionate about his stories – he would re-enact the scene where Br'er Rabbit crouched in a dark sooty chimney, and he would change his voice to a whisper for the hidden thief in the sultan's castle. For many years, we would crowd on his bed and listen in wonder. That was until, one by one, we started growing up.

I became busy with important things like building weather vanes, crushing on boys and dressing fashionably. I talked to him less and less, until eventually, our meetings consisted of quick conversations about the weather.

I had even forgotten he was a storyteller, until our interview began. His eyes lit up as he took up his old position and began the story of his boyhood in the little village of Rander, India, in the 1920s. His village had no electricity and no running water. Street lamps were manually lit every night and his family used paraffin lamps in the house. He conjured up images of ox wagons, coal

or the fox gets the grapes – it was a real story. These things *really* happened. I sat and listened like I was 6 years old again. In that story of his life, he answered the question that had plagued me for most of my life: Who am I?

It was his story and my *history*.

I suddenly had a personal history to attach myself to. I didn't feel like I was flung into a foreign culture anymore. His description of his Indian village, the journey by sea to unknown Africa and his experiences in learning about South Africa helped me to find my own link between the two cultures. I *really* did come from that dusty village with the wandering goats. He helped me understand the process that had led me to where I am today.

I realised some things after that day. I am Indian, but also South African. It's a comfortable truth for me to accept now. I may not speak Urdu and I may not understand Zulu properly, but I do know that I am at liberty to learn whichever one I choose. The realisation is rather like when Br'er Wolf used sticks to pretend he had horns – he

knew, along with everybody else, that he was trying too hard to fit in where he couldn't.

My grandfather didn't give a moral to his story, but I drew my own one anyway – to be true to yourself, you have to *know* yourself, and that includes your history.

Today, he and I still have conversations that revolve mainly around his health and the weather, but I have a much deeper appreciation of him. When I have children, I plan to send them straight to their great-grandfather for stories, but more importantly, for some history lessons. Hopefully, when they visit India, they won't be as bewildered as I was, and will be wise enough to leave the poor goat alone. **Q**

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Shubnum's grandfather and grandmother.

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stoves and women waiting with earthen pots on their heads at watering holes. He left India when he was 13 years old and arrived on South African soil in June 1936, aboard the SS *Takliwa*. He was afraid and in awe of this new land, but he gradually settled in. He found work, bought a house, married my grandmother and started a family in the same house I live in today.

The interview quickly dissolved and a story began. But this wasn't one where Br'er Rabbit meets the tar baby

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