

Chancellor Dharker,

It is our honour today to welcome someone who is known to generations of her students simply as "Madam Bollywood". Over a truly impressive and prolific academic career she has become renowned both as an ambassador for Indian culture and for her pioneering work as a teacher and researcher in the field of Hindi cinema. Our honorary graduand and guest today is Rachel Dwyer, Professor Emerita of Indian Cultures and Cinema at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London.

Rachel began her long relationship with SOAS as an undergraduate studying for a BA in Sanskrit. She then moved to Oxford University and read for an MPhil at Magdalen College. After some intriguing detours from academia including a stint as a computer programmer at British Airways and working in the Indian Office at the British Library (where she met her husband Michael) she returned to SOAS as a Training Fellow in Gujarati and embarked upon her PhD. There followed over her long career a wide range of authored books (including the still popular Teach Yourself Gujarati), edited collections and a prolific number of articles and book chapters largely focusing on Hindi cinema and culture.

When Rachel established her first teaching module in popular Hindi cinema it was in the face of some opposition. Was this a suitable subject for serious study? Rachel herself says that if it hadn't been for her scholarly work with Sanskrit, including the ceaseless toiling over German philological texts that involved, then she might not have been trusted to establish the module in the first place. But Rachel had little time for the idea that millions of cinemagoers had no taste and strongly believed that commercial cinema could provide valuable insights into the popular and the demotic. It's a tribute to her

contribution in this field that Hindi cinema is now taken seriously as a field of study.

It takes tenacity and strong mindedness to be a pioneer, but more importantly perhaps, colleagues and family mention her sense of humour and mischievousness. This has proved invaluable on the many University committees she has attended over the years and even more so with the many connections and friendships she has made all over the world. "I'm constantly struck by the fact that Rachel knows everyone" says her colleague Dr David Lunn, and these relationships range from the glamorous stars and powerful industry players in Bollywood, to influential cultural commentators, as well as the countless people she has encountered because of her voracious appetite for travel.

Rachel has always been keen to expand her horizons. She was brought up in Tynemouth in the 1970s within easy reach of the view out to sea between the Tyne's piers, and her father worked in the Royal Fleet Auxiliary service. As her father's ship sailed up the Tyne, he would announce over the tannoy 'Hello Rachel' as the fleet passed Tynemouth so that she knew he was on his way home. Perhaps this proximity to the sea and ships first planted the idea of travel to far-away lands but despite moving away, Rachel has always identified as a North-Easterner. In one of her recent articles, she wrote:

"I AM A GEORDIE, or a Northumbrian - that is, a person from the northeast of England. We're a distinctive group, known for our strong to incomprehensible accents, directness (to put it politely) and a fondness for the good life. We are seen as the Punjabis of England: jovial but lacking sophistication and learning. Just as with them, this is easily disproved."

I don't think I could claim that all of Rachel's admirable qualities stem from her Geordie heritage, but her openness, her irreverence, and her disarming impatience with pomposity have contributed greatly to the warmth and respect in which she is regarded across the world. She loves hosting large dinner parties and although she told me that she regards her culinary skills as being more that of an "army caterer rather than a showstopper" she clearly does something right as David Lunn told me that "one of the great joys of life is going to a dinner hosted by Rachel and Michael."

Despite her recent retirement, she continues to write for numerous publications, and since the beginning of the pandemic in 2020 has been learning Bengali and Marathi. She is also hoping to write a book about the Asian elephant in India and in cinema, something very dear to her heart as can be seen in her membership of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Resources, Species Survival Commission, Asian Elephant Specialist Group.

As for retirement, Rachel has herself suggested that rather than age "the concept of the four ashramas or stages of life is more helpful as a way of understanding retirement, not as giving up work but as retiring from one stage of life and moving to another... Retirement is the third stage, after brahmacharya (studenthood) and grihastha (householder), called vanaprastha (forest dwelling) before sanyasa (renunciation). The idea, in a nutshell, is this: of handing over to the next generation, whether one's children or one's colleagues, and taking a backseat, but still engaging with the material world."

In terms of her legacy, she is proud of the connection she has made with India, and that she has become one of the best-known Western commentators on Indian culture. In her scholarly work on Hindi cinema, she has helped establish and define a field of study. But her greatest sense of achievement is when she sees her former students "here, there and everywhere – that's a real joy."

PROFESSOR RACHEL DWYER: DLitt

Generations of her friends, students and colleagues live all over the world as the Dwyer Diaspora. They have all benefited from Rachel's insight, generosity, and support.

Chancellor Dharker, for her outstanding contributions to the study of Indian Cultures and Cinema, I present to you Professor Rachel Dwyer for the award of Doctor of Letters, *honoris causa*.

Citation by John Williams, Public Orator

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