



Singh, Brijraj. (2016). *Professing English on two continents*. Gurgaon: Zorba Books. (205 Pages)

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*Reviewed by R. W. Desai*

With fine understanding, passion, and total commitment to his students, Professor Brijraj Singh's superb book should be read by teachers of English, not only in India and the United States as its title announces, but all across the world. His verve and panache carry the reader irresistibly along, as he experiments with various pedagogical methodologies in Agra (St. John's College), Shillong (the North-Eastern

Hill University), Delhi (St. Stephen's College and Delhi University), and New York (Hostos Community College of the City University of New York). Never dull or boring, the book's wide coverage makes the reader share the author's exuberance in meeting every situation with unflagging optimism. Apart from his impeccable stylistic sophistication and professional excellence, his personality has a deeply humanistic dimension—firm without being obdurate, sympathetic without being partial and critical without being biased. He instils in his students without their conscious awareness, the Arnoldian values of culture and education as opposed to anarchy, not by precept alone but by example as well.

He did his B.A. and M.A. from St. John's, followed by a B.A. Honours from Oxford as a Rhodes scholar, and a Ph.D. from Yale as a Fulbright awardee. Recognized as an outstanding teacher, he was my colleague at Delhi University from 1978-1985, having spent a total of 20 years in India as a teacher of English. In 1985, he and his wife Frances along with their 5 year old son Viru left India for the US for good. He joined the faculty at Hostos, where the students were of Hispanic origin, "from the poorest Congressional district of the US" (p. 115). Here, his teaching skills were rigorously challenged as this extract from the book demonstrates: "My friend Maria she have a son that watch Superman Movies.

He think he Superman and jump out the window and killed” (p. 120-21). In his account of the strategies he adopted to teach such students, he addresses the problem they faced in finding suitable textbooks. True, there was no dearth of books in the market, but these were “huge, thick anthologies... [and] students would have felt cheated at having to spend a lot of money on a book of which they used barely 5 percent” (p. 153). Downloading from the Internet provided the solution, and this “made mine the cheapest course my students ever took” (p. 154).

Readers of *Fortell* will find equally interesting his memories of his student years in India. Amongst his teachers at St. John’s were Mr. David and Mr. Banerjee, both “charismatic” and with “different styles of teaching. Mr. David was impassioned while Mr. Banerjee had a dry sense of humour and could give his voice ironical inflexions” (p. 4-5). *Professing English* abounds in similar captivating vignettes, but what strikes me is the author’s total lack of malice towards people who were perhaps envious of his success as a teacher and a scholar.

Those who have links with Delhi University will be curious about his impressions of its academic climate—all who came in contact with him, including students, are treated with generosity and unimpeachable objectivity. Although living in the US, his heart is still in India: “I do keep abreast of Indian news and think of India all the time, so that I may be said to inhabit India mentally and emotionally” (p. 185). His book is a testimony to this attachment.

*R.W. Desai* was formerly Professor at the Department of English, University of Delhi. He is a renowned Shakespeare scholar and has published extensively. He is also the founder and editor of *Hamlet Studies*, the only journal devoted exclusively to a single work of Shakespeare.

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