

**From India to Connecticut College — and Back:
The Personal Journey of a Missionary Daughter
(by Martha Alter Chen)**

Good afternoon
Thank you so much:
President Katherine Bergeron
Connecticut College

I have been asked to speak about my personal journey before and after Connecticut College. Thanks to all of you for joining me on this journey.

I seemed destined to go to Connecticut College. My mother went here. She met my father when she was a student here. She told many stories of her years at Connecticut College when I was growing up in India. In 1959, when my family was visiting the US, my mother and I toured Connecticut College.

But I almost didn't go to Connecticut College. My acceptance letter was delivered to a town called Raipur. But we lived in a nearby town called Rajpur. Thanks to the Indian postal service, the letter eventually reached my parents - but only after I had left home for Bombay to catch a ship to Europe, assuming I would be going to my alternate choice - Swarthmore College. My parents sent a telegram to me in Bombay stating that I had been admitted to Connecticut College with a scholarship and that they had accepted for me. So by the time I boarded the ship headed for Europe, I was indeed going to Connecticut College.

Antecedents



My mother, Barbara "Barry" Beach, graduated from Connecticut College in June 1942. Later that month, she married Jim Alter, who had grown up in India as the son of Presbyterian missionaries and had gone to college and divinity school at Yale.



Mom and Dad met through the New England Student Christian Movement. They became engaged in the summer of 1941 when they both worked at a camp for inner city youth in New Jersey. They soon began planning a life together as missionaries in India.

But they had to wait for World War II to end before they could go. During that time, they did domestic mission work in rural Tennessee where I was born. In October 1945, the three of us set sail for India on a troop ship going to the Asian theatre to bring US soldiers home. I travelled on my mother's passport. The ship had no railings and I was 18 months old - so my parents kept me on a leash. My mother was wont to say: "I **walked** to India, Marty was so active".



Childhood in India



During our first year in India, my parents studied Hindi - while I picked up Hindi - my first language - from those around me.

Growing up in India in the late 1940s and 1950s, I was witness to the Freedom Struggle for Independence from the British, Independence itself marred by the violent Partition of India and Pakistan, and the first decade of Independent India: my father's first posting was to a mission college in Allahabad, North India where he became active in the Indian Student Christian

Movement and was blacklisted by the British for being sympathetic to the Indian freedom

struggle. We spent the summer months in a hill station called Mussoorie in the foothills of the Himalayas. In summer 1946, my parents met Mahatma Gandhi who had come to Mussoorie for a rest. In August 1947, when India gained independence and Pakistan was created, I was with my parents and grandparents in Mussoorie; they followed the news of growing violence in the plains of North India with grave concern. The violence between Hindus and Muslims spread to Mussoorie - I remember watching from across a valley the local mosque burning. When it was safe to travel - my grandparents returned to what had become West Pakistan and my parents, new-born brother and I returned to Allahabad. In January 1948, Gandhi was assassinated - two weeks later his ashes were brought to Allahabad where the two great rivers of North India - the Ganges and Yamuna - and a mythical third river - the Saraswati - meet. Gandhi's ashes were immersed at the confluence (the *sangam*) on February 12, 1948 (3 days after my 4th birthday). I remember the charged atmosphere in our home on that historic day as my father set off for the sangam to witness the immersion and when he returned home with Vincent Sheean, one of Gandhi's biographers whom he had met at the sangam.





My parents were ecumenical missionaries, committed to service, education and inter-faith dialogue - not to conversion. In 1954, under the auspices of the World Council of Churches, they founded a Christian Retreat and Study Center in Rajpur, a small town home to several Hindu ashrams situated halfway between where the Ganges and Yamuna rivers emerge from the Himalayas. The purpose of the Center was to provide a place for study and reflection on the role of religion in the social fabric of modern India - not only Christianity but other faiths as well.



Against this dramatic historic backdrop, my childhood in India was quite idyllic - schooling at Woodstock School, an international boarding school, in the hill station Mussoorie - at 7000 feet with views for miles in all directions, north to the eternal snows of the Grand Himalayas, treks in the foothills of the Himalayas, school breaks in Allahabad and then Rajpur holidays in Kashmir, game parks, fishing spots.



My childhood in India ended in 1961 when, aged 17, I set sail for Europe from Bombay - with friends from Woodstock School. After our European tour, we boarded a ship in South Hampton bound for New York. On the last night of that voyage, I stood at the stern of the ship looking out across the wake reflected in the moonlight - knowing I was entering a new world and wondering whether I would ever see India again.

College & Graduate School in the US

During my freshman year at Connecticut College, I was homesick and felt out of place. The few foreign students had a special orientation - I wished that I had been invited to join them. When it rained, I would go up into the attic of Knowlton dormitory to listen to the rain on the roof and cry - the sound of monsoon rain on tin roofs remains an iconic sound from my childhood. I tried to change my somewhat British accent by imitating the Texas twang of Martha Jane Russell, a friend from freshman year who has remained a close friend to this day.

My friends at Connecticut College helped me get over my homesickness - but only partially as being homesick for India is an inherited condition in my family. After his first trip to India, our youngest grandson Caleb then only five, observed: "When I am in India, I am homesick for America but when I'm in America, I'm **India-sick**".

My two closest Connecticut College friends were Suzanne (Zannie) Leach and Madhu Sethi. Zannie's mother Virginia Newberry (Class of 1941) and my mother had been friends at Connecticut College. Ginny and her husband Phil were warm and gracious hosts: they welcomed Zannie's friends to their home on many college holidays. Madhu Sethi joined Connecticut College my sophomore year. With India as a common bond, we soon became fast friends. I visited Madhu's home in Washington, DC where her father worked in the Indian Embassy and her mother taught science at a local college.



Both Zannie and Madhu have remained close friends of mine, and each other, since college - we've met in India on several occasions.

Another close friend was Hinda Bookstaber (Class of 1964). Hinda and I lived in Emily Abby dormitory my junior year. She was engaged to her childhood sweetheart Barry Simon, a senior at Princeton. One of Barry's Princeton classmates was Chinese, raised in New York. Hinda and Barry thought that their two **Asian** friends should meet. And so, on a blind date to a Princeton football game, I met my future husband, Lincoln Chen.

When the Class of 1965 joined Connecticut College, Rosemary Park was president. During our college years, Charles Shain took over as president. At our graduation 50 years ago, when I went up to receive my diploma, President Shain leaned over to say how sorry he was that my parents - still in India - were not able to attend. I was deeply touched.

I majored in English at Connecticut College and remember classes with James Baird, Mackie Jarrell, Gertude Noyes and Jane Smyser. The class I remember most vividly and fondly is Shakespeare class with Dorothy Bethurun who retired our senior year - we students dressed up as characters in Shakespeare plays and paraded into the faculty dining room in a tribute to her. Twenty years earlier, my mother also studied Shakespeare with Ms. Bethurun - as a teenager, I had discovered in an old steamer trunk my mother's notes from that class, which she had brought with her to India.

I also remember taking history from Philip Jordan and philosophy from Robert Jordan. I remember Martha Alter, the music teacher and composer - whose name I shared, and I remember singing Faure's Requiem with the Yale Chorus in New Haven.

After graduation from Connecticut College, I enrolled in the South Asian Studies department at the University of Pennsylvania - my way of reconnecting with India. Two years later, after I had completed my course requirements for a PhD, Lincoln and I got married and I moved to Boston where he was a student at Harvard Medical School.

By pure circumstance, at a dinner party in Boston, I heard that there was a medical research institute in Dhaka, East Pakistan affiliated to the US National Institutes of Health. I persuaded Lincoln that he should do his public health service in Dhaka, East Pakistan rather than Bethesda, Maryland. And the rest, as they say, is Lincoln and my history.

Return to India - via Bangladesh



In June 1970, Lincoln and I plus our 10-month old son Greg set off for East Pakistan via India, where we visited my parents. Lincoln started bio-medical research, I resumed work on my doctoral dissertation. But two major events soon changed our careers: the November 1970 cyclone and tidal wave that claimed so many lives along the coast of East Pakistan and the March 1971 crackdown by the Pakistan military on East Pakistan - targeted at Hindus and the elite establishment. I co-founded a cyclone relief effort - Lincoln and some of his medical colleagues joined as emergency doctors.

After we were evacuated from Dhaka in April 1971, Lincoln and I joined a political campaign to persuade the US government - which under Nixon and Kissinger was backing West Pakistan - to recognize Bangladesh. And so it was that I was witness not only to the partition of India but also to the partition of Pakistan.

In 1973, Lincoln and I plus our two children - Gregory and Alexis (who is here today) - returned to Dhaka - to newly-independent Bangladesh. Lincoln joined the local Ford Foundation office and I joined a local NGO called BRAC, started by a Bangladeshi whom we had worked closely with in the cyclone relief effort. Fazle Hassan Abed created BRAC to rehabilitate Hindu refugees returning to Bangladesh from India, after the civil war - but soon transformed BRAC

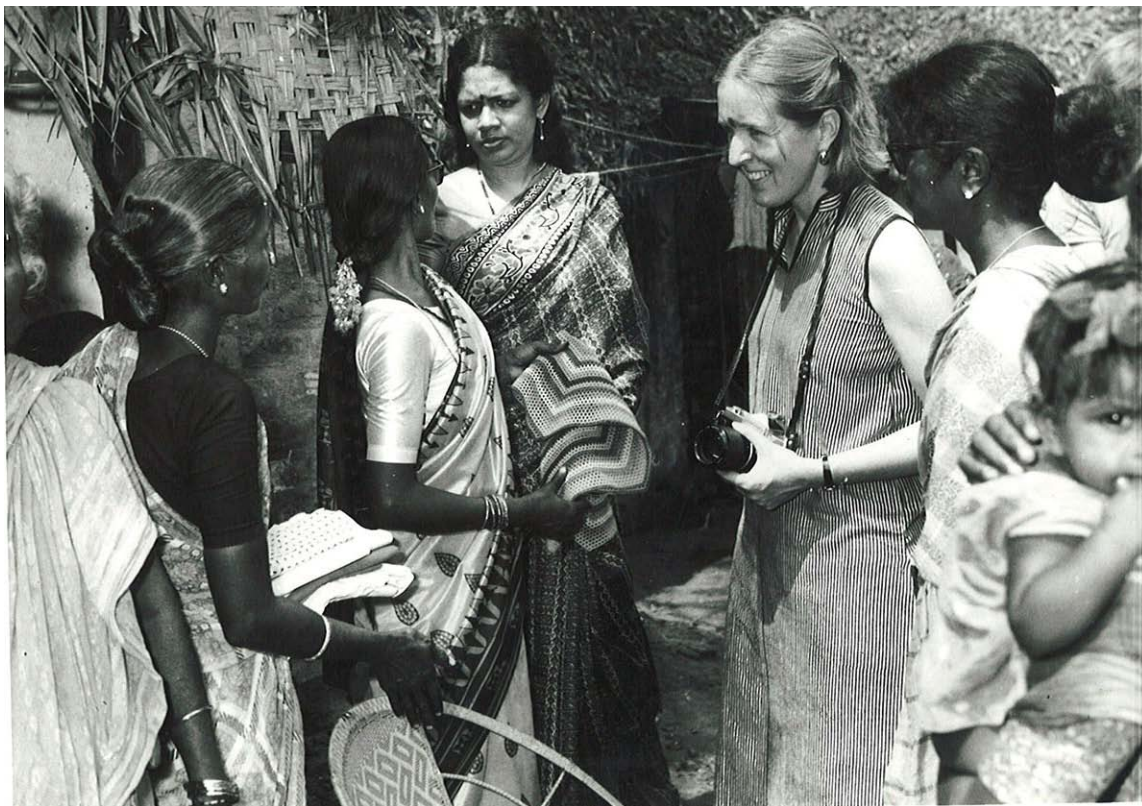


into a pioneering rural development agency. Abed invited me to join BRAC - to develop its women's program. For five wonderful years, together with Abed's wife Bahar and close colleagues Aminul Alam and Putul Hossain, I helped organize village women and develop craft revival, poultry rearing, silk spinning and weaving, and other income-generating schemes for village women.

Thanks to BRAC, I had found my **calling** - to promote the economic empowerment and economic rights of working poor women through a mix of activism, research and advocacy.

In 1980, after nearly a decade in Bangladesh, we returned to the US: Lincoln was a visiting professor at Harvard's School of Public Health; I was a visiting scholar at Harvard's Institute for International Development where I wrote a book on the BRAC experience.

Towards the end of that year, by some kind of miracle, Lincoln was invited by the Ford Foundation to be their representative in India and I was invited by Oxfam America to be their representative in India.



This was a dream come true - at last I was truly going home. For the next seven years, I developed a portfolio of grants and partnerships in support of women's economic empowerment with 60 local NGOs, both urban and rural. Lincoln and I had the privilege of traveling across India for our work and on family holidays with Greg and Alexis.



During this time, I forged a life-long partnership with the well-known Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) of India, a trade union of working poor women. Thanks to SEWA, I have been able to follow my passion, my calling, until today.



In 1987, Lincoln and I returned to Harvard University. Lincoln rejoined the School of Public Health, I rejoined Harvard's Institute for International Development and, later, the Harvard Kennedy School. For a decade, I found ways to get back to India and Bangladesh - through research projects and consultancy assignments. And then in 1997, with SEWA and others including Joann Vanek who is here today, I co-founded a global network to support the working poor, especially women, in what is called the informal economy.



This global network, Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (or WIEGO for short) is part think tank, part social movement. Our goal is to increase the Voice, Visibility and Validity of the working poor in the informal economy - through stronger organizations, improved statistics and research; and policy dialogues. We work closely with organizations of domestic workers, home-based producers, street vendors and waste pickers. We have members, partners and activities in over 75 countries.



I feel truly blessed to have been able to follow my calling and forge a career dedicated to the economic empowerment and economic rights of working poor women. A career that started in South Asia and now, through WIEGO, takes me around the globe.

And I am truly grateful to Connecticut College for the education I received and for the friendships that I made - both of which have been a source of inspiration and strength throughout my life and career.



Last year, I celebrated my 70th birthday in India with a group of 15 friends: three of them from Connecticut College - Zannie Leach Charity, Martha Jane Russell, and Hinda Bookstaber Simon - and one from WIEGO - Joann Vanek. We went to Maheshwar - a pilgrimage and weaving town with a fort palace on the banks of the sacred Narmada River - and to Mussoorie, my hometown in the foothills of the Himalayas.



When we were in New Delhi, Madhu Sethi Jain hosted a dinner for us. It was a joy to celebrate my 70th. with my Connecticut College and WIEGO friends - to show them my home country and my hometown.

But my most recent reconnection with Connecticut College was not through friends - but through my work. In January this year, Lincoln and I visited Vietnam. While in Hanoi, at the recommendation of a WIEGO colleague from South Africa, I went to the national women's museum to see a film on women street vendors in Hanoi.

You can imagine my surprise when I saw Connecticut College listed in the credits at the end of the film. I was hoping to meet Professor Rolf Jenson who made the film during this reunion week-end - but he is still in Hanoi on sabbatical.

In closing, I would like to thank Connecticut College for reinforcing and reaffirming the sense of social responsibility and public service instilled in me by my missionary parents and grandparents. I trust I have, in some small measure, lived up to the mission of Connecticut College which is to "educate students to put the liberal arts into action as citizens in a global society".

Thank you so much for joining me on this journey!

