

Vijay Mahajan

The Incomplete Autobiography of an Immigrant Marketing Professor

At the doctoral consortium held at the Emory University in 2002, Terry Clark, editor of the *Journal of Marketing* book review section, asked me if I would be interested in writing my professional autobiography. I immediately agreed without fully realizing the implication of my commitment. It turned out to be one of the most difficult things I have done in my life. I did not know where to begin or where to end. My professional autobiography spans the previous 30 years and is still incomplete. I believe (and I hope) that my best years are still ahead of me. I still have miles to go.

Coincidentally, after I made the commitment to Terry, my university permitted me to accept a temporary position as dean of the newly established Indian School of Business in Hyderabad. After living for more than 30 years in the United States, I was back in India, the land of my birth that I left in January 1971. The guiding principle of my life comes from a line in the *Gita*, one of the holy Hindu scriptures, that was reinforced in me by my dear mother who died at the age of 88: "Work hard and leave the results to God! Have no expectations!" That line came to me while I was traveling back to Hyderabad to begin my new position. It seemed to be the perfect time to reflect on my career.

The Years in India

My parents came from the town of Udhampur (when they were born, the population was approximately 2000 people) in the state of Jammu and Kashmir. They were married when my mother was 13 years old and my father was

approximately 17 (of course, they did not know their birthdates, and apparently, no records were kept at that time). My grandfather was a small entrepreneur and was uneducated. He migrated from Moud, a small hill village north of Udhampur, where his parents herded cattle and sold milk and cheese to English hunters. My people are called Dogras. Although unrelated to us, Dogra kings ruled Jammu and Kashmir at that time.

My grandfather believed that the best way to fight the Englishmen, who ruled India at the time, was to learn their language and become a lawyer. My father was supposed to fulfill that dream, but he did not. Much to the disappointment of my grandfather, he dropped out of college after he married my mother. Thanks to her parents, my mother was one of the few girls who had studied until the eighth grade. In her thinking, she was many years ahead of her time, and she was determined to fulfill my grandfather's dream and perhaps her dream as well. She bore my father 11 children (unfortunately, one child died because of an unknown sickness) and fulfilled her mission to educate all of us.

I am the eighth child. I was born in Jammu, a neighboring city to Udhampur. My grandfather had pushed my father to go to this "big" city and start a business in textiles with my uncle. Whereas my mother gave us her mission and determination, my father's hard work gave us the financial means to study. They became our mentors and role models. Their large family, consisting of their children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren, now includes doctors, engineers, academics, businesspeople, and bureaucrats. My parents' sacrifices are worshipped by all of us. My father's biggest regret (he died at the age of 92 last year) was that none of his children joined his business. He always blamed my mother for this.

I was born a few months after Mahatma Gandhi was assassinated and India became a Republic. During that time, we had to obtain a "permit" (a kind of visa) to travel to India to study, vacation, or conduct business. It was a turbulent time; Salman Rushdie has called my generation Midnight's Children. Before I graduated from a government high school in Jammu, the education system had been redesigned at least three times. The education system in the state of Jammu and Kashmir is still very weak. Anyhow, I was first among all the high school students in Jammu and Kashmir.

After leaving high school, I took the common examination that is given to all the high school students in India, and to my great shock, I was the only student in my state to pass the entrance examination for the Indian Institute of Tech-

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nology (IIT). Neither I nor my parents nor my parent's friends knew much about the IIT at the time (a high school classmate of mine had filled out my application). However, one of my brothers, who was studying engineering in Assam, insisted that I attend IIT, Kanpur. Because joining my father's business was not an option, I wanted to become a doctor. However, I was advised that there were already too many doctors in the family and that I should become an engineer. I was further advised to become a chemical engineer, but that turned out to be a bad decision because I would never be able to go back to my family in Jammu. Chemical engineers were not needed in Jammu and Kashmir. Indeed, after graduation in May 1970, I could not find any suitable job in India.

As a safety net, I had, as had many other IIT classmates, applied to two U.S. graduate programs, Texas A&M University and the University of Texas at Austin. My thesis advisor, Arvind Kudchadkar, was a graduate of both of these universities. I had a lot of fun at IIT, and I am not sure my advisor thought I was a serious candidate for graduate studies. Regardless, he wrote me a cautious letter of recommendation. After six months of trying to find a job in India, I decided to move to the United States. I promised my father that I would finish my master's degree in one year and return home. That was the fall of 1970.

The U.S. Chapter: Becoming a Marketing Professor

Finishing My Education (1971–1975)

I landed in New York City with my certificates, some clothes, a few hundred dollars, and a new identity. I officially changed my name from "Vijay" to "Vijay Mahajan" because I could not obtain a visa without a last name. My cousin, who had come a few years earlier, bought me clothes and showed me Manhattan. I was dazzled. He told me that this country was so free that I could literally do anything I liked, and he directed my attention to some posters of X-rated movies to make his point!

I had come on the I-20 form of the Texas A&M University because I never received the University of Texas's version of the form. However, my cousin advised me to go to Austin first. It seems that the I-20 form from Austin never made it to India. Because I had not responded, I was told that I could join the Texas program, but no scholarships were available for at least a semester. Margaret Kidd, a remarkable woman at the international office, came to my rescue. She found me a job working as a receptionist at a dorm for international students. I worked four nights a week in exchange for a free room. I lived on potato chips, bread, and milk for at least six months. I threw up the first time I ate Indian food at the home of one of my classmates. Although I was mostly vegetarian at that time, I did eat chicken occasionally. I hate to describe my condition when someone told me that the chicken-fried steak that I had eaten and enjoyed at one of the functions was beef!

I began my graduate program in chemical engineering with Robert Gunn and worked on simulation models to estimate the thermodynamic properties of the high-boiling

compounds. My studies were going well, and I was on schedule to finish a Master of Science in one year and go back to India. Part of my plan was to obtain a minor in business so I could have some "easy" courses. My classmates advised that I take "Introduction to Management Science" and "Introduction to Operation Management" with Milton Schoeman, a young professor in the business school who had recently joined the faculty with a doctorate from Case Western in operations research.

After I finished my first course with Milton Schoeman, he followed me like a shadow and eventually convinced me (and apparently a very stubborn associate dean) to join the doctoral program in operations management with a "big" assistantship teaching courses in operations management and business policy. He convinced me that education was always good and that three more years in the United States was not going to hurt my plans to return to India. My father was not happy, even though I was going to earn a doctorate in business. I was never able to explain to my businessman father why I wanted a doctorate in business and what good it is.

In the spring of 1972, I became the first Indian student, if not the first Asian student, to be admitted into the doctoral program in business at Texas. I did not feel challenged and finished the program in less than three years. On the advice of one of my fellow doctoral students from marketing, Dale Achabal, I asked a young associate professor of marketing, Robert Peterson, to serve on my committee. He hated my first dissertation proposal on policy capturing and advised my committee that "Vijay is capable of doing more" and "should look for another topic." I was told that I should talk to Peterson for advice because he was the most vocal person in my committee and that I had to follow his advice. Needless to say, I was not pleased. Peterson recommended that I read two articles that were receiving much attention in marketing in early 1974. One was by Frank Bass on a new product diffusion model in *Management Science*. The other was by Karl Jöreskog on structural equations published in *Biometrika*.

Coming from a chemical engineering background, the Bass article with differential equations intrigued me, but I would be lying if I said I always wanted to be a professor, much less a marketing professor. I would also be lying if I said I always wanted to teach and do research. Nevertheless, my encounter with this article was the beginning of my research career. I must admit that I have no formal training in marketing, economics, psychology, or statistics. One of the conditions for my admission into the doctoral program was that I take the MBA core courses. Thus, my introduction to marketing was the six-week core course taught by Mark Alpert in the summer of 1972.

In the fall of 1974, I gave a copy of my dissertation "Diffusion of Computers in the U.S. Hospitals" to a surprised committee. To write the dissertation, I had learned (on my own during the summer of 1974) discriminant analysis, diffusion models, survey research, and the U.S. health care system. I had also managed to get the dissertation sponsored by the Texas Hospital Association and had convinced an influential health care consultant to serve on my committee. I had no trouble defending my dissertation

in the early spring of 1975. This was the day for Milton Schoeman and Robert Peterson to tell me “we told you so.” I was Milton Schoeman’s first and last doctoral student. A few years later, he had a heart attack and died.

I also did not take too many courses in management science, other than one with Abraham Charnes, who made me cry because he did not like my research presentation. I had no idea what he was teaching us in the class. However, I did pass the class. My committee recommended that if I passed the doctoral exam in the Industrial Engineering Department, I should not be required to take additional courses. As luck would have it, I passed the exam with very good marks and thus missed the opportunity to take additional courses from some bright faculty.

I thoroughly enjoyed my stay at Texas. I learned Latin dances, ate too many dinners at Milton Schoeman’s and Robert Peterson’s homes, and drained too many whisky bottles. I also made several professional friends, including Dale Achabal, Mark Alpert, Randy Batsell, Eli Cox, Bill Cunningham, Linda Golden, Bob Green, David Huff, Roger Kerin, and Bob Witt. Even after I left Texas in 1975, they continued to help me evaluate my career choices. On the advice of several of these friends, I decided to explore opportunities in the United States. By this time, my father had given up on me. He could not understand what I was doing in the United States, and he had already classified me as a “lost son.”

I applied to several schools for a position in operations management without any luck. Unfortunately, there were not too many faculty of Indian origin in business schools at the time. The track record was unknown. Around that time, Mark Alpert suggested that I move to marketing, and he contacted a few schools for me. Joel Cohen, at the University of Florida, wrote to Mark and offered me a visiting position for a year. The Management Department at Texas agreed to keep me for one more year as a lecturer. Somewhat discouraged, I set my mind on going back to India. However, as luck would have it, in May 1975, Milton Schoeman received a call that the School of Management at the State University of New York–Buffalo was searching for someone in operations management to teach in the health care area. Excitedly, I flew to Buffalo for an interview in the middle of a big snow storm without winter clothes. However, my presentation and several appointments were canceled. I was desperate to leave Buffalo.

To my great surprise, I received a call the following day and was offered the job. To this day, I have not been able to figure out how I could get this job other than destiny. The school also agreed to sponsor me for a green card if I could obtain a “training visa” for one year from the immigration office in San Antonio. The immigration office declined, stating that there was no match between my education and the job. The position at the State University of New York–Buffalo was for an assistant professor of management, and my certificate from Texas stated that I had a doctoral degree in business administration. I was given a one-week notice to leave the country. To say the least, I was amazed by the action of the immigration office.

This news got to George Kozmetsky, who was then the dean of the business school. To my great surprise, I discov-

ered that he had been tracking my performance throughout my doctoral program and had even read my dissertation. I realized that that was why he asked me about my grade point average whenever he saw me. I learned to avoid him. George was a first-generation Russian immigrant. Along with Kingsley Haines of the LBJ School for Public Affairs, he sent a strong letter to his friend Congressman Lloyd Bentsen, along with my passport. I was told to lay low for a week. The day before I was supposed to leave the country, the dean’s office gave me my passport stamped with the training visa. George kept track of me until he died in 2003. I guess he loved for an immigrant like me to succeed. He had been a very special person in my life.

Become a Marketing Scholar (1975–1982)

Moving into marketing was a pure coincidence. Although I was born in a place where it is very cold during the winter, I could not adjust to the Buffalo winters. Otherwise, my stay at Buffalo was fun. I had great times with Arun Jain and learned a lot from him and Brian Ratchford. However, I was ready to go back to India.

I called my Texas friend, Dale Achabal at Ohio State, to discuss my decision. He was keen on my exploring possibilities at Ohio State. After the Operations Management Department declined to hire me, Dale worked with Alan Sawyer, Jim Ginter, and Fred Sturdivant to hire me at Ohio State in marketing. During my interview, Jim Ginter gave me a copy of the most recent issue of *Journal of Marketing Research* and asked me if I could understand the articles. In his strong desire to hire me, Alan Sawyer drank with me most of the night. He was helping me “prepare” a marketing presentation for the next morning. Despite the hangover, I was hired.

Thus, I began my first job in marketing in the fall of 1978 as Assistant Professor of Marketing at Ohio State University. Next, I went to Wharton as an associate professor in the fall of 1980. In the fall of 1982, I became the Herman W. Lay Chair Professor in Marketing at Southern Methodist University in Dallas. This was my first tenured job. These four years were the most grueling of my life. I was learning, teaching, and researching marketing simultaneously. I literally learned marketing on the job at Ohio State and Wharton, and I had to compete and survive.

Jerry Wind called me during my first week at Ohio State to explore my interest at Wharton. Although I had heard about Jerry from Arun Jain, I did not know him at the time. During my first visit to Wharton, Jerry introduced me to Eitan Muller, a Kellogg graduate in the Economics faculty at Penn State University, who had also done a dissertation on diffusion models. I developed strong professional and personal relationships with Jerry and Eitan. To this day, I do not understand why Wharton decided to hire me, though I suspect that my Texas friend, Randy Batsell, who was then on the Wharton faculty, may have had something to do with it.

My return to Texas at Southern Methodist University was prompted by another Texas friend, Roger Kerin. He was aware that I disliked winters and caught me at the right moment in the winter of 1981. He worked with Mike Harvey and Tom Barry in his usual comical style to tell me,

“Come back to Texas! Come back home!” I was 33. In 10 years, an immigrant from India had become an endowed chair professor of marketing.

My Academic Life

Dogra people from North India usually do not aspire to become academicians. We are happy to be small entrepreneurs, work for the government, or join the army. Although I never dreamed of becoming an academic, I thoroughly cherish my career as an academician. After all, what other profession would give me an opportunity (1) to travel to more than 20 countries to give more than 100 research presentations at major universities and be stimulated by comments of some of the brightest scholars and students on my research; (2) to work with and learn from more than 30 bright and energetic doctoral students in marketing, operations management, economics, strategic management, and information systems; (3) to be pushed to the limit of anxiety by senior executives in North America, Asia, South America, and Europe in executive development programs; (4) to be challenged by some of the most influential businesspeople, chief executive officers of *Fortune* 500 companies, and powerful heads of the government to establish a new world-class business school in India; (5) to provide consultancy on some of the most fascinating marketing problems to both entrepreneurial firms and large multinationals and realize that I am not that smart after all; (6) to be entrusted with the responsibility of editing major journals—*Management Science* (Planning and Forecasting Department) and *Journal of Marketing Research*—and realize that I cannot pretend to be an expert on every marketing issue; (7) to work with numerous coauthors, each of whom has left a permanent mark on my thinking; and (8) to serve on the editorial boards of several journals, including *Journal of Marketing*, *Journal of Marketing Research*, *Journal of Consumer Research*, and *Marketing Science*, and have the opportunity to learn from every article that I review?

All of these exciting things notwithstanding, the most exciting aspect of the academic life for me has been the opportunity to do research. Because I did not have my formal training in marketing, Frank Bass’s diffusion article initiated me into diffusion research, and Philip Kotler’s (1971) book, *Marketing Decision Making: A Model-Building Approach*, initiated me into marketing modeling research. Given that there was hardly any marketing modeling literature in the 1970s, I found Kotler’s book exhilarating, and even now, I read it before writing any modeling article. I also find Paul Green’s articles to be brilliantly written; they are a real inspiration. He knows how to converse with and lead the reader.

Under the inspirational guidance of such great examples, I have written more than 100 peer-reviewed journal articles on innovation diffusion, new product development/marketing strategy, and marketing research methods, 38 of which were published in the select circle of journals that includes *Journal of Marketing*, *Journal of Marketing Research*, *Marketing Science*, *Management Science*, and *Journal of Consumer Research*, and I have written nine books.

It has also been my great privilege to work with more than 60 coauthors (excluding my doctoral students, such as Chris Ensingwood, R. Venkateh, and Ashutosh Prasad), including Dale Achabal, Sridhar Balasubramanian, Frank Bass, Rich Bettis (strategy), Bart Bronnenberg, Bob Buzzell, Abe Charnes (operations research), Wayne DeSarbo, Moshe Givon, Paul Green, David Huff, Dipak Jain, Arun Jain, Shlomo Kalish, Roger Kerin, Naresh Malhotra, Charlotte Mason, Bob Peterson, Brian Ratchford, Vithala Rao, David Schmittlein, Subhash Sharma, Seenu Srinivasan, Raj Srivastava, Joel Steckel, Wilfried Vonhoner, Rajan Varadarajan, Andy Whinston (information systems), and Manjit Yadav.

I have had 44 articles published with two very special people, Eitan Muller and Jerry Wind. I am proud of my association with them. Eitan is a well-trained economist, and Jerry is simply excellent at everything. I have especially adored my relationship with Jerry and Eitan. Some people have suggested that one of the lost tribes went to my homeland in Jammu and Kashmir, and Jerry and Eitan have often kidded me for belonging to the lost tribe. I have learned so much from both of them: how to think analytically, how to think strategically, and about work ethics. Eitan and I have written 22 articles and one book on various aspects of innovation diffusion and dynamic marketing models, and Jerry and I have written 22 articles and five books on new product development and various strategic issues in marketing. It is heartening to know that our professional colleagues read and cite what we wrote.

Although I believe my best work is yet to be written, innovation diffusion is still my passion, so much so that I sometimes think I am still working on my dissertation. Even after 30 years, I am still fascinated by the power of differential equations and the dynamics of innovation growth. Among all my work on the topic, two stand as favorite children: (1) “Innovation Diffusion in the Presence of Supply Restrictions” (Jain, Mahajan, and Muller 1991) and (2) “Software Piracy: Estimation of Lost Sales and the Impact on Software Diffusion” (Givon, Mahajan, and Muller 1995). Both articles address innovation diffusion issues of developing countries in which 86% of the world population lives. Having traveled in many developing countries, I am convinced that academics have ignored the marketing issues of these countries. Living in India for the past two years has also convinced me of that. I have explored this conviction further in *The 86 Percent Solution* (2005).

Two other favorite articles come from my interest in new product development and marketing research methods: (1) “Issues and Opportunities in New Product Development” (Wind and Mahajan 1997) and (2) “A Conjoint Model for Measuring Self- and Cross-Price/Demand Relationships” (Mahajan, Green, and Goldberg 1982). I had great pleasure working with Jerry and Paul on these articles. I continue to learn from the best and brightest wherever I can find them, and every problem is interesting to me.

Miles to Go

My professional journey is probably not very different from many who, for one reason or another, decided to make the

United States their home. I was fortunate to have met and worked with some of the brightest and kindest people in my professional life. I thank my professors, my colleagues, my doctoral students, and my coauthors. I learned something from each of them. My life has been full of coincidences, with nothing planned or crafted. Yet I believe that everything happens for a reason. I accept every coincidence, bad or good, though sometimes with a bit of anxiety. I hope that each coincidence has made me a more mature, tolerant, and grateful human being.

This is an exciting time for marketing. I hope that the field takes a lead with some of the challenges, including studying the issues of developing countries. We simply cannot afford to ignore 86% of the world's population. I remain a blessed and lucky Dogra boy from the hills of Jammu whose parents set no limits on learning. However, I do sometimes wonder what would have happened if I joined my father's textile business in Jammu.

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The Marketplace of Revolution: How Consumer Politics Shaped American Independence
by T.H. Breen (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004, 370 pp., \$30)

When I was a graduate student in U.S. history 35 years ago, one of the burning questions was the following: Given that the colonies were highly independent of one another and would not cooperate even in the face of an invasion by the French and their allies during the French and Indian War, how were they able to agree to mutual defense and independence from England in 1776? After all, a generation before, Benjamin Franklin and others tried in vain to create a loose confederation embodied in the so-called Albany Plan of Union. Answering this question would also require the explanation of why these particular 13 colonies, and not any of the other British colonial settlements in North America and the Caribbean, became the United States. Theories abound, mostly along various political lines, that suggest that similar cultures and political histories made ties that bound the 13 colonies despite their vast differences.

T.H. Breen of Northwestern University attacks the problem from a new and illuminating perspective: the world of goods and what they meant to the people who possessed and used them. Breen states that between the Albany Congress of 1754 at the beginning of the French and Indian War and December 1773 (the date of the Boston Tea Party) and the following two years, mainland American colonists had gone through a sea change. Before 1754, many people were still living on the frontier of the British world, and survival was their primary concern. However, by 1773, a large percentage of the American populace had undergone what Breen calls (p. xv) the "transformation of the Anglo-American consumer marketplace." This transformation began sometime during the middle of the century, and "as modestly wealthy families acquired ever larger quantities of British manufactures—for the most part everyday goods that made life warmer, more comfortable, more sanitary, or perhaps simply more enjoyable—the face of material culture changed dramatically. *Suddenly, buyers voiced concerns about color and texture, about fashion and etiquette, and about making the right choices from among an expanding number of possibilities*" (p. xv, emphasis added). In the generation from midcentury to the Revolution, colonists from Georgia to Maine tried to bring comfort and beauty into their lives through the use of imported consumer goods. This all sounds very twentieth century and is not completely consistent with traditional views of eighteenth-century America.

Breen's insight came to him at Colonial Williamsburg in Virginia as he walked through the Wallace Gallery, an out-of-the-way museum that showcases an array of manufactured goods that were imported to the colonies from Britain. This prompted Breen to dig into scholarship on the material culture of the eighteenth-century Anglo-American world rather than the more conventional route of examining the intellectual roots of the revolution (for a good entrée into the vast scholarship on the material culture of the time, see Brewer and Porter 1993; McKendrick, Brewer, and Plumb 1982). His point is that without the transformation of the consumer marketplace, the intellectual climate of revolution would not have been able to strike the spark that it did. The colonists were drawn together as "Americans," not by their hatred of the tyranny of Parliament but by their love for "English fripperies," which were still being decried from the pulpits almost at the eve of the Revolution.

Breen also makes the point that perhaps by the time of the Stamp Act Crisis of 1763 and certainly by the time of the Boston Tea Party and the continuing crisis that the act caused, colonists along the Atlantic seaboard learned to trust one another. Because they shared similar goods and services from one end of the seaboard to the other, they found that they were similar. This similarity and the mutual confidence that it engendered made possible the popular upswelling of the Nonimportation Agreements. These agreements were truly the precursor of the Second Continental Congress (that which in 1776 passed the Declaration of Independence).

Breen's analysis runs from a discussion of the myth of the hospitable colonial consumer causing the demand for British fripperies; to the change of merchant advertising in

the mid-eighteenth century from mere lists of goods for sale to more descriptive lists in the newspapers; to the quintessential frippery and true hospitality product of the era, tea. Tea required a matrix of associated products to prepare and serve: pots, cups, spoons, sugar, and tea itself. The latter two were imported and thus bore a duty to the Crown. Tea had been drunk in large quantities in the colonies; however, it was foresworn by patriots after the Tea Party and in the face of the Nonimportation Agreements. Many historians claim that the Tea Party turned America into a country of coffee drinkers almost overnight.

So why review this book in the *Journal of Marketing*? One reason is that Breen is taking consumer behavior and giving it a front-and-center seat at the “nation-building” table. The political revolution was preceded by a consumer revolution, without which it would have been more difficult to accomplish. However, this is not a marketing book, nor even a book on consumer history, though there is a lot of consumption history between the covers. Breen is a historian, not a marketing or consumer scientist. He has not quoted any of the works that those who labor in such areas are used to seeing. Some of his arguments would have been stronger had he cited Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) on what goods mean to consumers, McCracken (1988) on the symbolic meanings of goods, and Rudmin (1991) on the ownership of possession. The essence of his argument is that people became patriots partly because of what they wore, ate, and drank and that such things marked them as patriots or loyalists. People who were willing to sign their names to the Nonimportation Agreements were perhaps more outspoken in their Whiggish proclivities, but if they shifted to homespun and

returned to small beer from tea for breakfast and withdrew from the newly introduced custom of sharing tea with friends, their Whiggishness was just as evident. However, considering the rigid boundaries of academe, it is unlikely that Breen is familiar with any of this literature. However, those who know the literature will nod knowingly when Breen makes his points in the mid-eighteenth-century context.

Scholars working in consumer behavior and the history of marketing will find this book interesting and suggestive. Without exactly meaning to, Breen makes a strong argument for the importance of mundane marketing activities in turning the wheels of history. In 370 dense pages, he takes late-twentieth- and early-twenty-first-century marketing minds back 200-plus years and shows some familiar things in an unexpected context.

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