

# In Looking for Family, Writer Finds Self

By **SUNITA SOHRABJI**  
India-West Staff Reporter

The process of tracing five generations of her family's migration from five villages in India across five continents became a very intimate journey for writer Minal Hajratwala.

Each of her family's stories took on a personal quality: "I began looking in their lives for what made me," she writes towards the end of her new book, "Leaving India: My Family's Journey From Five Villages to Five Continents," released earlier this year by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

The former San Jose Mercury News reporter spent seven years writing and researching her family's exodus from its ancestral village in Navsari, Gujarat, to Fiji, South Africa, New Zealand, Australia, England and the U.S. She logged in 40,000 air miles in the process of finding and interviewing 75 members of her extended family, which includes 36 first cousins in nine different countries throughout the world.

"I was looking for a common understanding of what it means to be a family," Hajratwala told **India-West** in a telephone interview from her home in San Francisco's foggy Sunset district.

Hajratwala harks from the Solanki dynasty of warriors who ruled Western and Central India from the 10th to the 13th centuries. She writes about the legend of a goddess who told the Solankis to quit warring and take up weaving.

The family followed the goddess's advice and spent the next few centuries as weavers. But in the early 20th century, conditions in Gujarat began to change. The mechanization of cloth production, along with famine and drought, led a great many workers to leave India.

Some went to Fiji as indentured laborers. Hajratwala's family did not qualify for that program. Her great grandfather Motiram set out to the Fiji Islands in 1909, as a paying passenger on a boat. He opened a tailor shop that within two generations became the largest department store in the Pacific Islands.

Great-uncle Ganda, who set off for South Africa at the tender age of 11 to live with his uncles, invented the Durban version of fast food, bunny chow – hollowed out loaves of bread with curries in them that black Africans could take away from the restaurants they were banned from sitting in under apartheid. Decades later, Hajratwala found a portrait of Ganda hanging in a local museum.

Hajratwala began her voyage in Gujarat, where the family's archives had been written on leaves. The leaves chronicled the life events of only the male members of the family, so Hajratwala had none of the names of

her female ancestors.

Looking through family photo albums would often bring out the best stories, said Hajratwala on a webcast organized by the South Asian Journalists Association. "I'd ask 'oh, who's that? and a great story would come out,'" she said.

Through her interviews, she found many common elements that the entire clan continued to observe, despite its far-flung geography. Wedding and death rituals, and food — including a lamb dish — remained constant

throughout the global family.

Clothing and language habits were a bit more fluid, Hajratwala found. Only those migrating to a large community of Indians would continue to wear Indian dress and speak Gujarati, she said.

Hajratwala herself was born in Iowa and grew up in a suburb in Michigan, an experience she characterized as "very isolat-

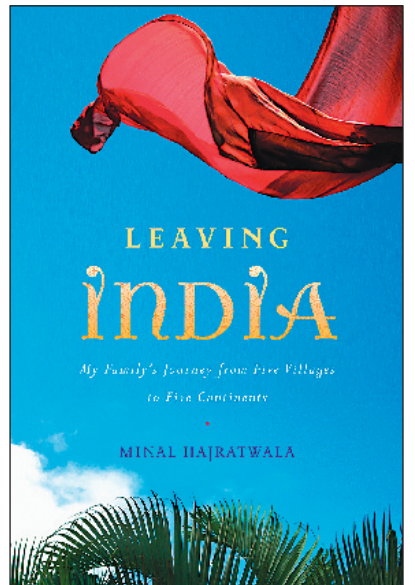
ing."

"That whole period of time was very difficult," she said. "Indians in the 60's and 70's found work in mainstream white communities and they went where there were jobs."

"So there were many South Asians who grew up in the suburbs of America and went

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"Leaving India: My Family's Journey From Five Villages to Five Continents," Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2009; \$26.



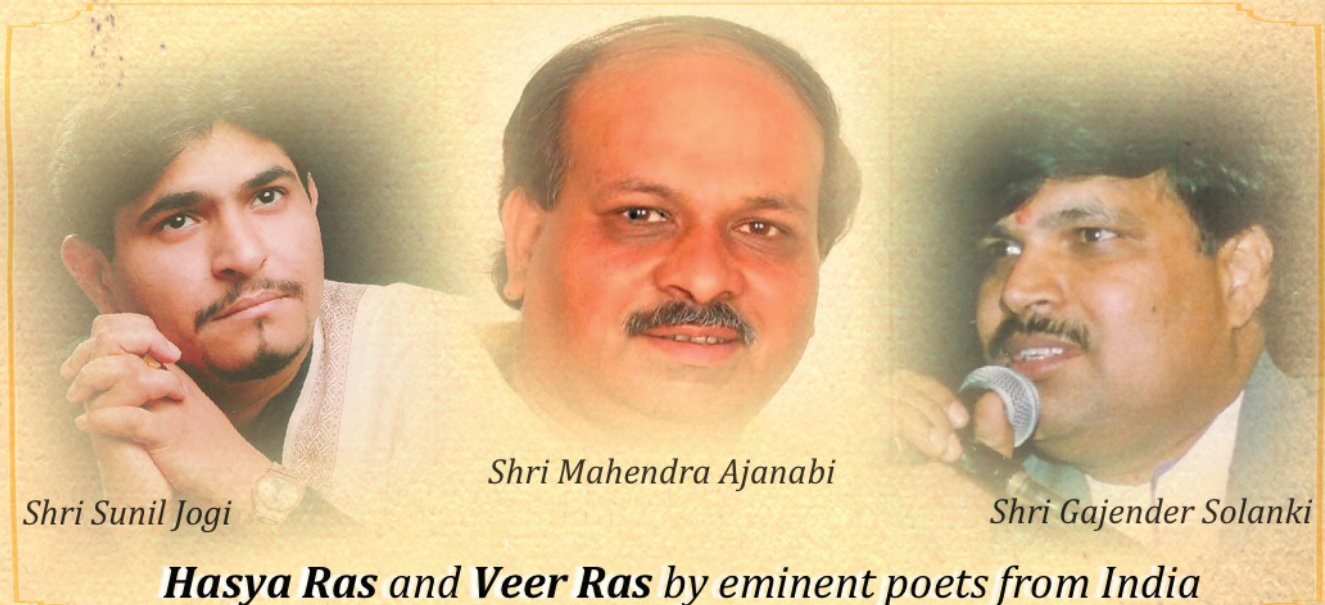
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to all-white schools where they were virtually invisible.”

Close to the end of her book, Hajratwala tells her own story of growing up in Michigan and later coming out as a lesbian and making her own migration into that new community.

She came out to many members of her family as she interviewed them for the book. “It helped to create an intimacy between me and my family members as we let each other into our lives.” The 37-year-old lives with

## NY Artist Nearly Killed by Neglected Staircase

By a Staff Reporter

NEW YORK — An artist who donates a portion of her profits to benefit women in India and other countries was nearly killed after a neglected staircase collapsed, according to a New York Daily News report.

Nicole Gagne, 37, was in critical condition in the trauma unit of Bellevue Hospital recently after a staircase collapsed and trapped her under 20 feet of debris.

“The preliminary investigation revealed the collapse was caused by neglect and failure to maintain the building,” said Carly Sullivan, a Queens Buildings Department spokeswoman.

her partner of six years George Ophelia.

Hajratwala went into virtual isolation as she wrote the book, cutting off internet access, the newspaper and her home phone, to avoid interruptions.

She has now mastered the web for promoting the book: Hajratwala has her own Web site, created by the Internet pioneer Mary Anne Mohanraj, and one of the first book “trailers,” a short video clip created by Amber Field. Fans can find her reading schedule on the author’s Facebook page.

Her family’s relationship to India was quite diverse. People

who had left at an early age had a longing for the home country, where others had very difficult memories. “It ranged from wistful nostalgia to extreme aversion,” Hajratwala told **India-West**.

“One of the things that writing the book did was to give me a sense of the migration experience that I never had,” said Hajratwala at the conclusion of the interview. “I have such an admiration and awe of those who pick up their entire lives to move to another country, experiencing the loss that always comes along with the gain.”

“Immigration is such an amazing achievement,” she said.



Former Mercury News reporter Minal Hajratwala chronicled five generations of her family’s migration out of India to five continents. (photos courtesy of Houghton Mifflin Harcourt)

## Professor, Hindu Priest Re-issues Novel

By a Staff Reporter

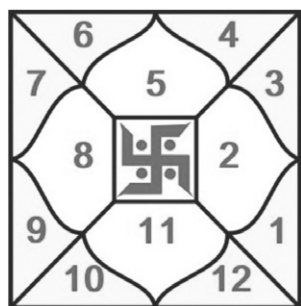
A well-known emeritus professor of East Asian Studies at the University of Arizona who doubles as a Hindu priest has re-issued a novel based on his own double-life, “The Dharma Videos of Lust.”

The novel, first published in 2005, is now being re-issued by UKA Press in a revised, unexpurgated edition.

The novel tells the story of Mohan Chaube, who is both a

Brahmin priest and a radical university professor, and his exploration of Hindu myths, rituals and festivals which wallow in sex and violence, exposing the dark side of a religion followed by over a billion people, according to a press release.

The novel was called a “rare feat” by Michael Witzel, Wales Professor of Sanskrit and Indian Studies at Harvard University, who described it as “religion-wise, philologically and linguistically correct.”



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