My Experience Of Being A Part Of The Fulbright FLTA Program As A Hindi Language Teaching Assistant

I aspire to be a part of the Fulbright FLTA Program as a Hindi Language Teaching Assistant to boost and strengthen my continued engagement with teaching as well as learning of languages, cultures and literature that goes back a long way. I currently hold the position of Assistant Professor at Sharda University as part of the School of Languages and Culture (SOLC). I hold a Bachelor's and a Master's degree in English Literature from the University of Delhi. I wish to pursue a full-time PhD degree in Culture Studies and African-American Literature to continue my exploration of new cultures and literature academically and otherwise.

Teaching English as a foreign language, to a batch of students from all over Asia and Africa and some parts of the Middle- East, at Sharda University since September 2017, has granted me access to Homi Bhabha's interstitial cultural space- where cultures collide to form a new hybrid identity blurring the old binaries- by way of translation. Translation of basic courtesy words like 'thank you' to dhanyavaad, which derives its existence from India's ancient Sanskritic tradition, whereas the variation shukriya signifying Hindi's rich Urdu affiliations helps me decussate cultural registers and stir up a discussion based on cultural intersection and difference. As part of this 'culture exchange' I myself have learned to traverse new linguistic-cultural spaces by way of learning some Pashto, French, Urdu, Bengali and Nepali. As Chomsky once said, "A language is not just words. It is a culture, a tradition, a unification of a community, a whole history of what a community is."

Being bi-lingual has also come in handy in cutting across communication barriers and forming a bridge between the mutually exclusive speakers of English and Hindi. Knowledge of both Hindi and English aids me to understand the broken Hindi and Urdu spoken by the Afghani students and translate it to their French-speaking Algerian classmates who understand a little bit of English. The experience has also given me practical insight into the challenges a non-native speaker can face while trying to learn a new language. The skill of teaching a foreign language in varied and novel ways to non-native speakers (using L1 to learn a foreign tongue via translation, speaking and listening comprehension activities, games, extempore, and so on) as well as the experience of gaining entree to new languages myself is not specific to teaching English alone. I'd like to utilise these insights as a Hindi Language Teaching Assistant in the US classrooms too.

My association with languages and cultures started quite early in my life and has ever since shaped my cultural frame of reference. My father would sit with me late in the night reading from Milton's Paradise Lost and Vyasa's Indian epic Mahabharata alternately, and I would grow up hero-worshipping Satan and Karan concurrently. Whereas my mother would introduce me to poets like Jaun Elia and Rahat Indori. In addition to that, my family was also a microcosmic reflection of India's ethnolinguistic diversity. My father hailed from the state of Haryana, whose Hindi's rough tonal exterior is diametrically opposite to the tone Hindi adopts in Delhi, where I grew up. Our parents also gave us access to India's vast spectrum of cultures – from Punjabi to South Indian to East Indian – in terms of the daily meals we ate or the songs we listened to. Both my parents could speak fluent Punjabi, Hindi and English, in addition to my father's command over Haryanvi.

The multi-lingual and multi-cultural classrooms I teach now also introduce me to the disparate socio-historical paradigms that once shaped my early education. The convent school I studied in demonstrated the skewed power equation between English and regional languages/literature that exists in the Indian education system. While speaking in Hindi was discouraged with the imposition of a fine, English was rewarded. The English textbooks always had fewer Indian writers. A watershed moment came when I decided to pursue English Literature as the subject of my graduation (2010-13) and post-graduation (2013-15).

In Delhi University a course in English Literature is not limited to or European literature and includes literature in English (translations too) from across the continents. Access to writers ranging from Wordsworth and Shelley to Hawthorne and Melville to Indian regional writers like Mohan Rakesh, Vijay Tendulkar and Jayanta Mahapatra gave me an opportunity to engage with the discourse around (re)presentation of Indian identity. My acquaintance with American writers of Indian origin like Jhumpa Lahiri and Bharti Mukherjee, and linguists like Saussure and Chomsky, led to an understanding of how (re)presentations are grounded in linguistic manipulations and how writers use their writings to sell a customized, formulaic image of South-Asians to build the tastes of the audience in the US and dispense an equally handmade impression of the US to Asians. FLTA grant gives me the opportunity to carry these insights about my cultural history to the USA and initiate a new narrative around ‘India’ and ‘Indian’ per se through language teaching, while also acquiring a new attitude towards the States myself in the process.

My grasp of Indian culture and history has also been further cemented by the paper I teach at Sharda University – The Evolution of Indian Culture. This paper is designed to capture the periodic development of Indian culture through the course of history - beginning with Indus Valley Civilization, when the Aryans invaded the small patch of land along the banks of the river Indus, stretching up till the period of colonization in India in 19th century - tracing alongside the birth and evolution of Indian aesthetics, architecture, religion, music, laws and customs through texts like Bharat’s Natyashastra, Chanakya’s Arthashastra, Manusmriti, etc. The paper has enhanced my comprehension of India as a potpourri of cultures, histories, laws and customs which I’d like to share with students in the US classrooms making the cultural exchange holistic.

The FLTA program provides the right platform to iron out as well as revisit the pecking order between languages and cultures, and usher in new perspectives at an individual as well as a communal level. To facilitate this further, as part of my community outreach, I’d like to set up a small literary section in my university in the US, which would make available novels/texts/poetry by Indian authors in English (translations too to address the need of readers who could read India’s other regional languages) as well as the Hindi language, from my personal collection to the students/teaching/non-teaching staff and other members from surrounding communities to give a more nuanced picture of India’s culture(s) and tradition(s). It will also give me the opportunity to interact with the locals and understand the range of their cultural paradigms and how they view India vis-à-vis these paradigms which will further help me work more viably to develop and enhance Sharda University’s foreign exchange cell on my return to India, while also enriching my repertoire of experiences as a person for future work in the direction.