



The Curious Case of the Curiosity Center

ARJUN SHANKAR

*School of Social Policy and Practice
University of Pennsylvania
Philadelphia, PA 19103*

SUMMARY *This piece narrates the first meeting between an anthropologist and a man dedicated to developing a curiosity center in New York City. As the encounter unfolds, the complexities of the Indian diasporic experience, the emotions of field research, the paradoxes of a man's autobiography, and the concept of curiosity together animate the tale. [curiosity, Indian diaspora, New York City, post-colonialism, postmodernism]*

*When there is distress of nations and perplexity
Whether on the shores of Asia, or in the Edgware Road
Men's curiosity searches past and future
And clings to that dimension. But to apprehend
The point of intersection of the timeless
With time, is an occupation for the saint*

—(T.S. Eliot, excerpt from *The Four Quartets*, to be read
in the voice of an elderly Indian man)

I walked to the “diamond district” in Manhattan on Forty-seventh Street between Fifth and Sixth Avenues. I knew very little about my destination at that time, only that there was a man inside who was enamored with the concept of curiosity, going so far as to have created a “center” for curiosity. What would a man like that sound like? How would he look? What would he desire? This was my curiosity leading me on my way: curiosity being the unquestioned companion of any anthropologist, calming nerves and defining relationships.

An undergraduate student whose father was from India had recommended that I meet this man, a family friend, given that we both shared a deep interest in education, he as part of his philanthropic undertakings and I as part of my anthropological focus. Shades of Indianized brown—a “brown” anthropologist, a “brown” undergraduate, and a “brown” business man—would be the undercurrent of my exchange, never explicitly acknowledged under the veneer of curiosity but imposing a perceived solidarity onto the proceedings.

I walked down the hall looking at the absurdly small signs posted on each door: “801 Bright Emporium;” “803 Right On Time Trading Company;” “805 Diamonds 4 Diamonds Co.” There was no way of seeing inside the doors, each painted the same color as the walls, as if the doors were just trying to blend in.

Behind one of these doors, in a small vestibule, stood a bronze goddess, explicitly, if not also explicitly, Hinduizing the space and laminating the two identities—Hindu and Indian—onto one another.

“What would a white anthropologist see in this opening scene?” I thought, as I stared for a second longer at the idol, uncomfortable in my own, pseudo-Hindu Indian diasporic skin.

As I intuitively moved right, a woman looked up from her work, and I told her in as definitive a voice as I could muster that I was here to meet with “the curious man.” Unfortunately, she had no clue what I was talking about. I tried again, this time with a name.

“Hello? Sir? Arjun is here to see you.” She looked at me and motioned me towards the door.

I reached the end of the hallway and passed through an open door and into a very small office. A metal desk split the office in half. Thousands of papers on the desk. Books strewn on top of one another on the shelves. I thought I saw the faint outline of windows, but things—shelving, souvenirs, pencils, large steel objects—had stacked themselves on top of one another until one absolutely needed to rely on the fluorescent overhead lights to see anything at all. A massive gold chandelier embroidered with jewels of every color hung in one corner, trying to define itself but too out of place to make itself understood. This office was a byproduct of a mad curiosity: boundless and without systematicity, the home of rhizomatic inquisition.

But then, on the left-hand corner of the desk was a small balance scale, perfectly placed and perfectly cleaned, piercing me with its majestic stare, making sure I knew it owned this space. “Here, curiosity’s end is the gavel that I wield,” a warning that the quixotic pursuit of knowledge went only so fast as this scale could accumulate capital.

“Hello Arjun. It’s a pleasure to finally meet you. Please, come sit down.” I shook the hand of an elderly man, easily over sixty years old, who spoke with an Indian accent that he could not hide despite his best efforts to mimic the intonations of the Victorian aristocracy, a Bhabha-ian form of mimicry, at once beholden to and subverting a colonial legacy imbibed as part of this man’s birthright.

I have been told by some that I have a certain proclivity for elderly Indian men. I don’t know if that’s entirely true. I really can’t say I enjoy their company more than I do that of twenty-five-year-old Indian women or three-year-old Indian children. If it is at all true it is probably because I associate them with my maternal grandfather, a brilliant man who I lost well before I had learned any of the things he could have taught. I would have loved, for example, to find out more about his time with the Indian Joint Cipher Bureau during World War II, where I imagined he was decoding German and Japanese intelligence. Or to ask him about the Vedic astrology system, which I would overhear him discussing with my mother during my youth. Recently I had been reading his notes about my horoscope, trying to make sense of the symbols, the questions, the moon–star relations, the life predictions it could all beget. I could never make sense of any of it, so I would refer to a handbook that he had left behind and in which his notes were always kept: James Braha, *Ancient Hindu Astrology for the Modern Western Astrologer*. Each time I saw the title and the name of the book’s author I

was reminded of the convoluted relationship between East (brown) and West (white) reflected in everything I did. Was this book the output of Braha "going native," an attempt to mimic and/or appropriate the cultural practices of the uppercaste brown men whom he encountered? Also, why was my grandfather reading Braha's book, like some caricature of a "native" passing an anthropologist a text by another anthropologist about native customs? Who, exactly, was I mimicking when I flipped through his book? Why this affective intensity? Focused eyes, taut muscles, twitching fingers. . .

My body is a postcolonial body.

In any case I can't say this man really reminded me of my grandfather. He was short and round, while my grandfather was tall and skinny. He had a full head of hair and a striking white beard, while my grandfather was bald and wore thick glasses. In fact, the more I looked, the more I only saw difference—religious (Jain/Hindu), regional (North/South), linguistic (Hindi/Tamil), occupational (diamond dealer, teacher), bodily—until the time-space collapse of my own diasporic nostalgia, a longing to feel close to someone who came from where I thought I came from, finally dissipated back into the ethnographic reality: Am I still studying the Other?

He sat in his chair, his belly running itself up against the desk, and smiled. He spoke with a loving eloquence; a joy both for the opportunity to dialogue and, possibly, at the realization that words, syllables, phrases could roll off his tongue so effortlessly. The cadence of sound, jumping from wall to wall, began to take hold of me like some mythical serpent wrapping itself around my body, capturing me in the throes of a space which I could no longer imagine living without.

Or perhaps this is how I wanted to see this man during this first encounter—this man as curiosity, his office as curiosity, this experience as curiosity.

A brief look, later, at my field notes seems to confirm my suspicions:

"We passed the first ten minutes making small talk: about mutual friends, about the ease of finding the place, about how wonderful it was to finally be able to meet. He asked me if I would like to sit for some time and talk or would like to go out and get lunch? We chose to sit and talk."

This distance between reality and Reality is when the ethnographer's craft becomes one of world building: taking the mundanity of everyday life and finding signification, uniqueness, curiosity in it. Hyperbolizing reality in order to demand an attention to it.

Then, slowly, the man's story of curiosity began to unfold. Piece by piece, thought by thought.

"It's a very curious thing. I do an experiment with every new intern who comes here. I give them a copy of the white pages. Do you know the white pages or are you too young for that? You know what they are? They have phone numbers and such things in them. Yes, so I give them the white pages and a notepad and I ask them to write down as many things that they learn from the white pages. Every person comes up with many different ideas. What I find really quite curious is that some write down three things, some fifteen, and even some three hundred. But why? What makes one find three things and one find three hundred?"

He uses this as his "data" on curiosity, a not-so-subtle indicator that curiosity was ripe for anthropological exploration. How might an anthropologist study curiosity? In what practices would different cultures identify curiosity? Would they "measure" curiosity in the same way? What would a curiosity based ethnographic method look like?

As he spoke, a phone somewhere just behind me began to ring. It never stopped ringing and no one cared to pick it up.

Then a joke: "You know, they may say that curiosity killed the cat and that curiosity may also kill us. But I think we are in no grave danger of that happening."

Then a thought from the past: "Let me tell you about myself. I grew up in a village in Rajasthan. No one in my family had gone to college or had much education. But I remember when I was seven, I saw a girl my age reading an English book. I remember becoming very curious about what she was reading, very curious indeed. I wanted to know much more, you see. My curiosity had been sparked, and I often wonder about this process. Why had I generated this particular curiosity? How was my curiosity so profoundly sparked? Later, when I was supposedly getting my Chemical Engineering degree I was always at the library reading. Till five or six a.m. sometimes. I would consume four or five books at one sitting. I read Yeats, and Dickens, and Frost, and T.S. Eliot, and anything I could find. That is why sometimes I speak using words others would never use. Like *pungent*, or *punctilious*, or *pusillanimous*, or even *perfunctory*. You have heard that poem by Eliot?"

"Is English the language of curiosity?" I wonder with dread, and if so, how could one study curiosity, or worse, even *be* curious without being confined by a colonial past? This is a creeping postcolonial paranoia that I cannot push aside however much I try.

I thought back to when I myself was young. What had I been curious about? An obsession with books, a love of sports, but nothing else registered. It saddened me, sitting with the most curious of people without much of a curious childhood of my own.

I took my ethnographic eye in another direction instead: What would a spark of curiosity look like? Did it strike one's soul like dynamite against the flat edge of a mountain, making way for roadways to places that had always remained invisible? Did it work its way into the body slowly, new rivulets forming as it dug deeper and deeper, until it had consumed everything, an ocean that had once been nothing but ice? I was mesmerized by the thought, the possibility of a future untamed by the experiences of the past, if still associated with it, beginning a search for that which remained beyond one's grasp and taking pleasure in doing so. It was a mystical metaphysic, one that mocked my own selfish sense of Self, though my interlocutor thought otherwise.

"No, no," he said, "One must think scientifically about these things if we are to make an impact." I took notes as fast as I could on my iPad, but even this wasn't quite right. "You need a better method to document these sessions," he remarked.

Like any well-trained anthropologist, I explained the value of anthropological study. I warned against decontextualized knowledge production,

that context matters, cultural practices matter, social relations matter. I showed him my field notes, trying to transmit some of the depth of understanding that came with this methodological tool.

He blinked a few times at my notes, struggling to find a place for this idea of research within his clearly defined scientific universe and finally, speaking with an authority meant to show that he had resolved the problem for everyone everywhere, "Ah, yes, it is the issue that C. P. Snow articulated many years ago. The problem of the two cultures, the humanistic and the scientific. Have you read it? It seems that you are still holding onto the humanistic strand of intellectual life."

Snow wrote *The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution* in 1959. Yet, here we were in 2015 evoking Snow to end an intellectual debate, a fact that gave the man and his office an antiquated tint—the things stacked and stuffed everywhere now more reflective of a stale curiosity, forever frozen in a time long past.

Still, the man was not entirely wrong about my humanistic tendencies. A week earlier I had spent about twenty minutes searching Amazon.com for every fiction text that had the word *curiosity* in it. This was part of my rigorous and systematic "preliminary research." I misspelled curiosity the first few times, forgetting to drop the "u" as part of the idiosyncratic spelling practices of the English language. I tried searching for the word 'curious' instead.

There were 1,448 results for paperback fiction, of which the first ten were: *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night*; *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*; *Curious George the Movie: Touch and Feel Book*; *The Curious Case of the Missplaced Modifier*; *Curious Little Biddy Bear*; *The Curious Savage*; *The Curious Caves of Honey Cove*; *More Than Curious: Three Short Gay Erotica Stories Based on Real Encounters*; *Girl with Curious Hair*; and *The Curious Case of Gondour and Other Whimsical Sketches*. Of course, soon after this search I was reminded by a friend that such research was rendered invalid because sites like Amazon.com use algorithms based on your past buying history to reveal new results. So I was not really doing research on curiosity at all but merely research on my own past curiosities.

Another man walked into the office with an envelope in his hand. "Sir, this has just come for you."

"What? What is this? I am not expecting anything." He opened the envelope and out fell a ring with one of the largest diamonds I had ever seen. He began inspecting it softly, carefully, with eye and finger movements revealing the utmost discrimination.

I, too, wanted to pick it up and look at it closely. I wanted to grab it and run out of the room, holding in my hand more than I had ever made in my entire life. Where could I sell such a diamond? How much would I make? Maybe, instead, I would save it and, when I finally found my true love, I would make the most romantic of gestures.

It was a lovely thought until another question crept inside of me: for whom? Then there was only melancholy, women who had passed through my life, leaving scattered traces in my memory.

"I must apologize. I work in a very archaic profession. In fact, I very much dislike what I do. When I first came to this country in the 1980s, I

was completely disenchanted with the profession. The social dynamics here were completely different than anything I had seen. Yes, I had already learned the basics of the diamond industry. But I had not yet grasped how to interact in this context. Many times I thought I would give up this profession completely. These days, however, I am content knowing that all this is merely a means to an end, to allow me to work on all of the projects I am passionate about."

Somewhere in the past there was Koh-i-Noor, villages in coastal Andhra, wartime spoils, Mughal kings, unwashed *dhotis*, ambition, status, mythical curses, British colonialists, crown jewels, cholera, public exhibitions, and desire.

Somewhere in the past there was blood, and sawed off arms, and guns blazing, human intestines, warlords, civil war, desire, backroom dealings, fist fights, racism, mercenaries, mines, long nights of labor, Angola and Sierra Leone, desperation, UN resolutions, dust-caked knuckles, money. More and more desire.

"Actually, it is quite a curious reason why I joined the diamond industry in the first place. Well, my family had been in the diamond business for generations, this is true. But I was never much a part of this. In fact, I had gone to engineering college then had gone to Dubai to work. But when I came home, I saw my brother dealing in diamonds. It was quite a curious thing, I would see him buy diamonds from a dealer and then sell the diamonds to another dealer for more and make money. And I began wondering how he could make money from nothing ... Shall I show you my special collection of diamonds?"

He picked up his iPhone and began scrolling through images. A diamond of two colors that he claimed was one of only three such in the world, another as large as my thumb, another shockingly blue. But the thought of making money from nothing made me squeamish. Wasn't that what drove all of Wall Street?

Another phone in the room rang. This time he picked up. "Yes, hello. So I have this diamond here. Let's see ..." He described the diamond in terms I could not understand. "Oh, okay, good. Yes, yes I'll send it out." He yelled out the door, "Sunil, please come here for a moment. Listen, this is not ours. Can you please send it to ..."

Then he looked at his watch and remarked, "Ah, but it is time for lunch. What would you like to do? Would you like to stay here and eat or would you like to go someplace else?"

I suggested that we stay here for lunch and then excused myself.

I walked out of the room, into the hallway, back through the locked doors, and looked for the bathroom. "You need the key," said the receptionist as I walked out. "Down the hall to the left." I moved quickly to another locked door, went in and stared at myself in the mirror for nearly three minutes. I let my mind slow down and wondered exactly where I was. The world that I knew seemed not to exist here, replaced by a space-time that continued to expand in every direction, something akin to curiosity as vertigo. This was an ethnographic reality standing at the precipice of an ethnography of infinity, Borges' "Library of Babel" suddenly playing out in the continued unbinding

of my ethnographic eye: two, then three, then four continents; five, then fifty, then five hundred years into the past; diamonds, then diaspora, then derelict methodology. Where would all this curiosity end?

I only realized two days later that I had never returned the bathroom key. It remained on my dresser for months, a taunting symbol that something was unlocked that could not be re-locked and, in turn, creating its own cage in the inexhaustible quest for knowledge.

Instead of returning to the man's office, I made a left at the end of the hallway and entered a new room I had not noticed upon my arrival. In it there was a circular table and four chairs. Behind there was a water cooler, a counter with a dish rack, a sink, along with four wall cabinets.

"Please come sit, sit."

I watched as one of the Indian men I had seen working brought out bowl after bowl of food. First, a bowl full of rotis. Next, a bowl of daal. After, a bowl of bhindi. Further, a bowl of cauliflower. Subsequently, a bowl of white rice. Thereafter, a bowl of carrots. Followed by a bowl of fruits. Finally, some beans. There was, of course, yogurt, pickle, onions available as well, and kheer for dessert, and a glass full of utensils.

I stared blankly at this incredible feast, the smells of North India recreated in this New York City office building. From whence had it come?

This was cultural difference as commensality. But what culture and from when? I could not help but notice that the food was all vegetarian, a situation that matched with my own vegetarian upbringing but in this case was passed down from a Jain religious tradition that I knew very little about. I had read one book on Jainism, given to me by one of my oldest friends, the only other brown person who went to my mostly white high school. The book, entitled *The Jains*, was written by University of Edinburgh professor Paul Dundas, yet another instantiation of that postcolonial paranoia I felt while reading my grandfather's notes in Brahma's text. The title was slightly off putting given the tendency to all-encompassing knowledge it insinuated, as if reading his book would mean one would know everything one needed to know about this bounded culture known as "the Jains." I did learn from Dundas' text that Jainism prescribes a path of non-injury (*ahimsa*) toward all living beings, and that nonviolence and self-control are the means to liberation, from which I gathered that Jainism was an older cousin of the puritanical faiths. Dundas spends only five pages, in a nearly three-hundred-page book, on the "Jain diaspora and the modern world." I wondered where this man, this meal, and this room in the middle of New York City would fit into that chapter. Would Dundas see a 2,000-year old tradition in this meal?

Two more Indian men walked in and sat down at the table. They were introduced to me quickly: Sunil and Guru.

"Please help yourself."

Words were spoken in a mix of Hindi and English before being subdued by total silence as everyone began to reach for bowls and fill their plates with food. Maybe such quiet was associated with the peaceful contentment of ritual. Or satiation from hunger. Or nostalgia for people and places that were far away. For me, the quiet was the anxiety brought on by a new place, new etiquette, new rules. No matter how like home, its newness

inhibited me, kept me from that comfort that was just across and beside me. It was all so strangely familiar. Or did I mean familiarly strange?

Finally, the man broke the silence. "So we have a very fortunate system in place. Each day one of my employees brings food from home for the entire office. Today I think it was Sunil's wife. She is a wonderful cook isn't she? I myself have never been married. Instead I get pleasure through all of my nephews and nieces and grandnieces and grandnephews. I am proud to say I have put many children through college, if not completely, at least partially."

I started thinking about Sunil's wife, where she was, how she cooked, what she did the rest of the time. There was a quaintness about the whole idea of cooking for the entire office, and yet it also reeked of something from 1960s middle America; gender roles that barely made sense in the world in which I lived. What would it be like to follow Sunil's wife around for the day and find out how she felt about her life? Was she content? Did she long for something else, something different? What did she dream for/hope for in the future? I imagined that she would remind me of my mother, then realized almost immediately that I was letting the clichés of my own longing delude my present, creating relationships as artificial as the building in which I sat. Yet, I knew it was too late. Now these relationships were as real as the building in which I sat.

Still, commensality always sets its boundaries, including or excluding people according to a set of cultural affects that define space. In this case those criteria evoked in me a long tradition of South Asian women, whether working or not, cooking, serving, then doting on their husbands, waiting to eat until their husbands had been fully satiated. Here, in the public sphere of diamond dealing, that trope was transmuted, a women's presence now only in the food that she had sent forth, her body safely hidden out of site.

How exactly would this space change if a woman was sitting at the table with us, such as the receptionist who had not made her way to the lunch table? Or one of my female colleagues? What would she see? How would she feel? How would she be positioned? In my initial imaginings this woman was Indian, but as I extended these visions, I wondered how it might change if she was white, East Asian, or from another part of South Asia, say Pakistan or Bangladesh. At minimum, this space would not carry those assumptions of perceived solidarity and comfort as it had for me when I had entered. At maximum, patriarchy and paternalism would emerge in a more overt form, like the Chimera singeing its female victims with its eternal flame.

Somewhere there was *sati*, widow remarriage, menstruation as contamination, the pink *chaadi* campaign, public harassment, strategic essentialism, domestic violence, Hindutva, sexual liberation, honor killings, Nirbhaya, the colonial savior, and *Mahila Samakhya*.

Somewhere there was intersectional feminism, a politics of love, catcalling, seventy-eight cents to the dollar, anti-miscegenation laws, more domestic violence, woman's suffrage, anti-abortion campaigns, and respectability politics. I could barely even scratch the surface of a musing that was not heteronormative.

For however much I wanted to salvage this man's curiosity, it was an inherently brown male curiosity, constricted by the very fabric of his social relations, a thought that broke with those universalizing masculine dreams that I had entered with and instead left me with a more traditional anthropological line of questioning: Curiosity for whom? Curiosity about what and why?

I quickly finished eating and got up to wash my plate, just as I would have if I were at my family's home, another moment of affective resonance repositioning me as an insider to the culture of this space and preventing the more direct and heavy-handed critiques that I otherwise might have laid at the feet of those who worked here.

I shook the man's hand, said my goodbyes, and thanked him for a wonderful, stimulating afternoon. He agreed and hinted at a future together "We have much more to discuss. I believe curiosity is the basis for a civic society. It is the basis for how we learn. It is the basis for nearly everything. And when I tell others about curiosity, they always say, 'Why didn't I think of that?' But, of course, I have thought of it and now I would very much like to fund the study of curiosity. Unfortunately, I do not have the time to do it on my own. I hope you will be able to help."

I assumed he wanted me to discover some secret basis of curiosity, to conduct an anthropological study of curiosity as it were, and on the surface, his suggestion was compelling, the grandiose dreams of a grandiose dreamer. Yet, there was a festering concern rooted in contradiction: What happens when curiosity becomes a dogma, if one wanted to control curiosity itself, to patent it, and brand it? Perhaps this was a trap set in place for the unsuspecting idealist, a tryst with the devil disguised as the opening of infinite potentiality. Or perhaps this was merely the pragmatic circumstance that capital produced, the benevolent hand that we were all seeking in order to lay stake to our dreams, both selfish and altruistic.

The man's earlier words, "I get pleasure through all of my nephews and nieces and grandnieces and grandnephews. I am proud to say I have put many children through college, if not completely at least partially," flipped to the perspective of the grandnephew and grandniece and what I heard instead was, "I serve at the pleasure of my granduncle," emplacing that form of Maussian obligation always embedded in the Gift and constituting a profound change in my ethnographic ear.

I walked out of the office, back through the hallways, through the glass doors and out into the world, suddenly appreciating the fact that all of my visit had occurred in the heart of Manhattan. People muttered in English and I smelled those familiar smells of hotdog smoke and sweet nuts. A Jewish man beckoned me towards his shop, and I saw the glitter of jewelry behind a glass windowpane. I thought I heard the sounds of Arabic and another language—something Eastern European—that I didn't recognize. The sunlight hit my face, and I was blinded for a moment. Then people and more people, and buildings and colors, and far too many sounds; like History had packed itself too tightly and released itself directly into my senses.

I thought I would tell some of my friends and colleagues about this day, but I wasn't sure they would understand. At this ethnographic moment

there was something beyond a DuBoisian double consciousness, something far more fractured given the cognitive dissonances that were continuously emerging, cratering any stable experience of cultural identity, whether one-ness, two-ness, or beyond, producing shattered pieces of Self in the world, a multiplicity that kept multiplying and congealing as I walked.

There was nothing I could do but submit to this fate of mine: that there could never be any resolution to this addiction but only the recognition that it was all so exhaustingly and indescribably curious.