



CAROLINE WRIGHT-NEVILLE



Jit saying his prayers

# My Mother India

**T**hirty-five years ago Patricia, an Australian woman, left her home to live in India with her Sikh husband. *My Mother India* explores the challenges she faced settling in to life in India and raising her family in foreign culture. As the years passed and her children grew up, Patricia began to feel a part of her adopted homeland. Then in 1984, the communal violence of anti-Sikh riots forced her to question her real place in Indian society.



Grandma Biji

### CURRICULUM LINKS

*My Mother India* would have relevance for students in senior secondary or adult education courses studying History, Studies of Society and Environment, English, ESL, Politics and Media Studies. This study guide to *My Mother India* has been developed for classes where there are a number of students whose first language is not English.

### BEFORE VIEWING DISCUSSION

There are several layers to this film. Each layer contains concepts that may be pertinent to all Australians. Some of the concepts explored are:

- cross cultural communication
- notions of identity and culture
- the multicultural society



Safina's father, Jit

- the influence of history on daily lives
- childhood and the way it shapes us
- family relationships
- ideas of nationhood

These are some quotes from people in the film to describe their feelings about certain events in their lives. Which concept above might relate to the ideas inherent in these quotes? Discuss why you think they match.

*My mother hung her panties out on the washing line. They were like flags—proudly declaring her foreign origin to the world. They were proof that she belonged to that wicked breed of western women, licentious creatures who showed their legs and divorced their husbands.*

*My fair skin was like a beacon, conspicuously signaling my difference. My only saving grace was my Indian accent—which clearly proclaimed that even if I looked different, at least I sounded like everyone else.*

*I thought Patricia was healthy, virtuous, intelligent and very beautiful. I thought I could make up for my unhappy childhood in that if I could persuade her to marry me, I could leave the world a happier place than how I found it.*

*I could not get across to [my friend] that there was something wrong with killing people who had done nothing—just for being who they were or being born in a certain way.*

*He wasn't an Indian—he was a Sikh.*

*It's hard to love a country that's trying to kill you.*

## BACKGROUND TO INDIA

**TASK 1** | Find India on the map. Which are its neighbouring countries?

Look through newspapers and find an article about India, Pakistan or Afghanistan. Give a short report to the class about what's happening in that part of the world at the moment.



Calendar: Mirabai

**TASK 2** | Find the answers to these questions:

- How many languages are there in India?
- How many states are there?
- Name four religions in India.
- Which countries have colonised parts of India?
- When did India become independent from the British?
- When were India and Pakistan divided into separate countries?

### A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE PARTITION OF INDIA AND PAKISTAN

India had been under British rule for 350 years before winning independence in 1947. On the 14th of August, 1947 India was divided into two separate countries; Pakistan, the Islamic State, and India, the Secular State.

The territorial division between India and Pakistan was based on population majorities so that areas with Muslim

majorities became Pakistan. The Partition caused one of the great human convulsions in history. Twelve million people were displaced as Hindus and Sikhs moved from the newly declared state of Pakistan and migrated to India, while Muslims left their homes in India and went to Pakistan. More than one million died in the rioting and bloody conflict which accompanied Partition.

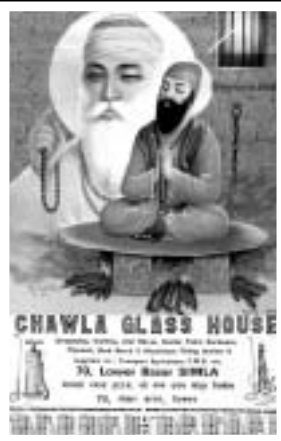
The newly defined territory of Pakistan included the North West of India which was also known as the Punjab and was home to a large number of Sikhs. Over 2,500,000 Sikhs left their homes and moved from Pakistan to India.

Find the answers to these questions:

- How did India achieve independence?
- Who was Gandhi?
- What tactics did Gandhi use in the struggle against colonial rule?
- What other parts of the world have used similar methods to overthrow governments?



T-B: Homage to Hollywood stars; calendar of Sikh Saints



Pat meets the Indian family

## SIKHISM

Sikhs are followers of Sikhism. The religion originated in the Punjab in the North West of India. In 1995 India had approximately 18.7 million Sikhs or 1.9% of the population. There are also small Sikh communities in the UK, Canada, US, Malaysia, East Africa and Australia.

Sikhism was founded by Guru Nanak (1469-1539). Guru Nanak had strong connections with Sufism or mystical Islam, as well as the Bhakti movement which espoused a personal devotion to God unmediated by the traditional Hindu hierarchy of priests and rituals. Guru Nanak was followed by nine Gurus whose teachings were combined into the Sikh holy book the Guru Granth Sahib. The holiest place for the Sikhs is the Golden Temple in Amritsar, which was founded by the fourth Guru, Ram Das. The tenth and last Sikh Guru, Guru Gobind Singh, concretized Sikh belief through the prescription of the five symbols of Sikhism: These include a vow not to cut their hair (*kes*) which was to be worn tied with a comb (*kangha*). Every Sikh was also to wear a steel bangle on their right wrist (*kara*), wear shorts (*kachcha*) and carry a small dagger (*kirpan*).

The Sikh religion believes in a single, invisible and indivisible God. It prohibits idolatry, the caste system, *sati* (the burning of widows alongside their dead husbands), the use of wine and the smoking of tobacco. Sikhism emphasizes the importance of the community (*panth*) and socially responsible behaviour.

## INTERNET WEB SEARCH

Type in the address below and search for sites on India. Work in groups and choose a different topic to research. Present your findings to the class.  
<http://www.looksmart.com>

## FAMILY BACKGROUND

Read the text then watch the film and discuss the questions below.

Patricia was born in Canberra, Australia, to a family of Scottish and English origin. Largely professionals, the family boasted of a number of priests and teachers and denied any convict ancestry whatsoever! Patricia's parents were school teachers and were delighted when Patricia went off to study at the Australian National University. Patricia had only been there for a couple of years when she declared her intention to marry a Jit, an Indian PhD student. It was a decision which caused her parents grave concern. Many years later, Jit described his in-laws' disappointment in terms of his not being 'masculine enough' for a sporting Australian girl. After a few years of marriage, Jit and Patricia surprised everyone by leaving comfortable jobs in Australia and going to live in India. Patricia had just begun to settle in to her life in India when she received news that her father had died. Her mother discouraged her from coming to the funeral because of the cost and difficulty of the trip to Australia. It was a moment which brought home to Patricia the widening gulf between her present and her past. Over the years, Patricia wrote literally hundreds



Calendar: Welcome

of letters home describing the normalcy of her new life, but her mother never came to visit her in India.

Safina's Indian grandparents eloped. It was a love marriage of the 1930s and a terrible scandal at the time, particularly since it was a mixed marriage in terms of caste and family background. Safina's grandmother Biji was disowned by her family and her mother never spoke to her again. Safina's grandfather was an intellectual scholar—stylish and elegant. He was seen as Guru, and attracted a great deal of attention, particularly from young (female) American disciples. Biji had been a brilliant student and won a number of scholarships before she married, but her husband forbade her to work or study further. It was a deep disappointment to her and caused great tension within the marriage. The final blow came during Partition. The family was forced to flee their home in Lahore and escape to India. During their arduous journey, Biji became seriously ill and her husband wanted to continue the journey without her. Convinced that he was prepared to leave her to die, if it were not for the insistence of the children, Biji decided to leave him. For the rest of her life, she kept the memory of her failed marriage alive through the telling and retelling of what her grandchildren used to call 'The Atrocity Stories'—stories which were really a vengeful catalogue of every cruel thing her husband had ever done to her.

### Discussion

- Describe the differences between Patricia's family and Jit's family.
- What would be the significance of Patricia's family's denial of any convict ancestry?

- Why would Patricia's family have thought that Jit was not masculine enough for her?
- How did the news of her father's death affect Patricia?
- Patricia was given a set of gold bangles. What did they symbolize?
- What do water and oil symbolize?
- Describe a time when you had to meet a new member of your family for the first time.
- Pavlova and cream cakes were Safina's connection to Australia. What, if any connections, do you have with your parents/grandparents/ancestral culture?
- Give examples of how food might define culture and identity.

### CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

The Director explores her identity in relation to family, culture, religion and nationality. Through her Australian mother, Patricia, we journey through the challenges of migration as she builds a new life for herself in a very different culture.

### Discussion

*My mother hung her panties out on the washing line. They were like flags—proudly declaring her foreign origin to the world. They were proof that she belonged to that wicked breed of western women, licentious creatures who showed their legs and divorced their husbands.*

- Look at the quote above. What is the inference about the difference between Indian and Western women?
- What kinds of challenges would Safina's mother have



faced as she learned to live in India?

- How would you describe a conventional Australian family?
- Have you or your family faced similar or different challenges while learning to live in Australia?

*My fair skin was like a beacon conspicuously signaling my difference. My only saving grace was my Indian accent—which clearly proclaimed that even if I looked different at least I sounded like everyone else.*

### Discussion

- What role does language play in the creation of peer groups?
- What kinds of language are valued in Australian society? How do you know this?

### ANTI-SIKH RIOTS OF 1984

The Partition of India left many issues of national and regional identity unresolved. The early 1980s saw the rise of a separatist movement in the Punjab led by Sikh extremist groups who were demanding a separate Sikh state of Khalistan. There was an escalation of terrorist attacks in the Punjab against both symbols of state authority and innocent civilians. This was matched by increased state repression largely through the use of Police force. In 1983 the Punjab was placed under President Rule and in June 1984, the Government of India decided to send troops into the Golden Temple in Amritsar to flush out suspected terrorists. A fierce battle ensued which raged for three days and brought the entire state to a standstill. The aftermath of this military action saw an increased polarization of opinion as many Sikhs felt that their most holy site had been desecrated. Towards the end of 1984, Mrs Indira Gandhi, the Indian Prime Minister who had ordered the operation, was assassinated by her Sikh bodyguards. Retaliatory riots against civilian Sikhs spread throughout the country but were particularly lethal in the capital of New Delhi. The Uberoi household was, like many other Sikh homes, in danger of violent attack and their lives changed forever.

As Safina's grandfather grew old and sick, he began to speak about the riots and civil unrest that had marked the Partition of India in 1947. Patricia describes him as having a kind of 'stylish dementia' that manifested itself in a recreation of Punjabi history. In hindsight, she also saw it as a prophetic account of the communal violence that was, by tragic coincidence, to follow his death.

After the military action in the Golden Temple, Safina's father decided to reclaim his religious identity as a Sikh. While Patricia was prepared to embrace Jit's decision on a personal level, she found it much harder to accept the repercussions of his action on the lives of their children. In a time of social disharmony and tension between Sikhs and Hindus, Jit's assumption of a Sikh identity made their children particularly vulnerable.

### Discussion

The action in the Golden Temple occurred at the same time as the death of Safina's grandfather. Conducting the traditional Sikh funeral ceremony became extremely difficult and even dangerous as the entire state was placed under curfew and strict military control. Nonetheless, Patricia says, 'Everyone wanted the ceremony to be gone through as if it were the last thing on earth that anyone did.'

- Why was it so important at that time to continue with the Sikh ceremony?
- Why do you think Jit turned to his religion when it would have been safer to deny it?
- Why was Patricia upset by her husband's actions?
- What influence do the religious beliefs of parents have on the beliefs of their children?

### RETURN TO AUSTRALIA

After the military operation on the Golden Temple, the life of the Uberoi family changed dramatically. Jit's turban marked him out as a Sikh and conflict arose between friends and neighbours. As Sikhs, the family found themselves unwelcome in many places of worship they had visited in the past. The riots of 1984 placed the family in direct danger of anti-Sikh mobs. After the riots, Patricia, still concerned about her family, sent her son and then her youngest daughter to Australia. She says it was the most cruel and ruthless thing she had ever done.

### Discussion

- What was the 'cruel and ruthless' act?
- Do you think it was 'cruel and ruthless'? Why?
- Why do you think she didn't tell her husband?
- Why did she begin to wonder what she was doing in India?
- What was Jit's project in returning to India and why did he feel his project had vanished?
- What are the differences between brother (Prem) and sister (Simeran Zoe) on their reflections on living in Australia?
- What problems did Zoe face in Australia? Why do you think she changed her name?

### FINAL WORDS

While Safina's sister and brother left for Australia, Safina remained in India. After the riots, she and her mother worked in refugee camps to ease 'the terrible guilt of having survived'. Several years later, Safina moved to Australia.

On her first trip back to see her parents, Safina is struck by a change in her mother's relationship to India. Safina decides to marry her Indian boyfriend in a Sikh ceremony. She is impressed and a little surprised by her mother's aplomb in arranging the traditional wedding celebrations.



L-R: Safina and her Australian grandma; Patricia and Jit

### Discussion

- What is the first thing that Safina notices about herself in Australia?
- What does Safina finally realise about her mother?
- What makes her realise this?
- What is the one thing Patricia doesn't do at the wedding?

### TASKS AND PROJECTS

#### Writing Your Own Documentary

The documentary uses some visual metaphors as text. For example:

Patricia wears a set of gold bangles given to her by Biji. She never takes them off and their familiar clink seems to link her to all the other Indian mothers who wear such bangles. On the other hand, Patricia's panties on the washing line mark her out as 'different'. At the end of the film, Safina shows her mother making Indian bread (*chapatis*). It is an image which marks Safina's realisation that her mother is now at home in India.

Choose a family member and write a script for a documentary about their lives. Include images you would use that would symbolise aspects of their life. You can use visual metaphors that might reflect the nature of the person and/or their cultural identity.

### TV RESEARCH

In TV and film, language is often used as a means of finetuning the characters.

Watch your favourite TV shows and take notes on any specific phrases or terms certain characters use.

Compare your findings with your class. Is the language realistic? Why? Why not?

Is there a pattern?

**TASKS** | In the film, Patricia and Jit had an obsession with collecting popular Indian calendars. Their theory was that the calendars portrayed shifting cultural values in Indian society. They could be used as a kind of historical metaphor.

Look through popular Australian magazines and newspapers. Make a calendar that depicts Australian society at the moment. Compare your calendar with your classmates and explain why you chose certain images as representative of Australia today and how you would explain your calendar to your great grandchildren.

**TASKS** | Interview some elderly people about their life and the changes they may have seen over the years. What, if any, advice do they give you about your future?