



VISITING SCHOLARS

# From 2015 to now: The impact of the Robarts Centre for Canadian Studies

BY SHILPA BHAT

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Looking back, visiting the Robarts Centre for Canadian Studies in 2015 seems so long ago! How much has changed over this period of time! As I trace my steps back to what I was and what I have become and am becoming, I realize that visiting the Robarts Centre has been a crucial experience, both academically and professionally. We are always constructed out of the opportunities that become our experience and unravel our thought processes, becoming deeper and deeper and more reflective. I wish to congratulate the Robarts Centre at the outset for its unswerving commitment to Canadian Studies and for the opportunities it gives, not only to scholars in Canada but also to those abroad, highlighting the importance of collaborative scholarly engagement and international research. This initiative to reconnect with international visitors and get to know how the Robarts Centre has helped them is timely and essential. Otherwise, the impact the Centre has had on scholars from different parts of the world may never be precisely known. I am delighted to have been invited by Professor Jean Michel Montsion, director of the Centre, to contribute to an issue of *Canada Watch* titled “40 Candles for the Robarts Centre: Celebrating Legacy.”

Following my visit to Robarts Centre, I continued publishing in Canadian Studies. The visit contributed to my personal, research, and professional advancement. Central to my experience at the Centre was the study of the archives—a priceless opportunity to examine the narratives related to M. G. Vassanji, whose work spans different regions closely connected to Canada. My interest in archival research is in the method itself and its access to individual and collective memory grounded in specific experiences, patterns of reception, and textual imaginations. Moreover, the fact that archival material constitutes grey areas in research that have not been explored or are underexplored becomes a vantage point for discoveries, interpretations, and the prompting of new conversations. Interconnecting these aspects to written narratives and the global scenario critically privileges the academic discourses contributing to angularities in theories and praxis. The themes of my publications centre on diaspora, international migrations, and literary narratives—layered entities that are subjective but also open to wide-ranging elucidations. My visit to the Robarts Centre allowed me to reflect on the various angles related to written narratives, archives, Canadian Studies, and the Indian context. I continue my journey in archival studies to this day, the most recent being my visit to Oxford University in 2021, where I again examined archival material.

In the last few years, I edited books on diaspora narratives and international migration after collaborating with researchers at different universities. The chapters in the books include diverse articulations of the Indian diaspora intersecting with international experiences, including Canada, where there is a significant Indian presence. I wish to emphasize that my visit to the Centre trickled into my courses and classroom discussions where, in the context of international migration, displacement, and settlement, I was able to frame and explore questions related to Canada and cascade my research experiences through pedagogical practices to my students and scholars. In framing my analysis, I found that my visit to the Centre helped me in centralizing Canadian themes, rethinking paradigms, and analyzing complexly positioned perspectives especially considering the presence of the Indian diaspora, inescapable transnational mobility, and contemporary political challenges. However, in terms of academics, it is interesting to note that multiplicities of belonging and upheavals help to produce our relational configurations and determine how we negotiate evolving and shifting cultural and political realities. The chance to study and research at the Robarts Centre was a co-creative process—something that was not temporary. Still, it helped me to connect with new intellectual opportunities and theoretically challenge existing conceptualizations in the area of diaspora and Canadian Studies.

I am thankful to President Emerita Lorna Marsden and grateful to the network of colleagues—Professor Leslie Sanders and Professor Colin Coates, who were immensely kind and generous in helping me with their academic and professional experience. And how can I forget Ms. Laura Taman, who coordinated between the Centre and me and helped me with the challenges of adapting to a new place? My visit to the Robarts Centre had an impact not just on my career but also on the careers of others, since the experience allowed me to interrogate Canadian and archival studies in various ways and share my understanding and learning with my students. My publications in the domain of Canadian Studies are another outcome that becomes a point of interaction both for me and for those who read my work on the subject. For this and for all the warmth and intellectual opportunity that the Robarts Centre for Canadian Studies and York University gave me, I remain grateful. ■