



Professor Emerita Jyotsna G. Singh leaves lasting impact on MSU Libraries’ early modern archives

In the twenty-five years that Jyotsna Singh has remained a fixture in the Michigan State University’s College of Arts & Letters, she has been devoted to ensuring that students recognize the importance of primary source material in their study of English literature and culture. Singh, whose retirement from her position as professor in the Department of English was celebrated on December 1 with a campus-wide symposium at the International Center, is a lifelong library advocate who cites her experience with the Bodleian Libraries of Oxford (UK) and the British Library in the early 1990s as being especially formative.

“In these early forays, I found that the pre-1800 books in these libraries — on history, literature, religion and travel — were crucial to my research for my first monograph, ‘Colonial Narratives/Cultural Dialogues: “Discoveries” of India in the Language of Colonialism’ [1996], and continued to inform my subsequent research on Shakespeare, empire and colonialism,” Singh noted. “My abiding fascination with early texts was strengthened by several library fellowships I received later at the Folger Shakespeare Library, the John Carter Brown Library and back to the Bodleian in 2019 on an Oxford fellowship. For me, libraries, especially for rare books, continue to be magical places — often sharing discoveries with communities of scholars in my field.”

Singh’s emphasis on academic interaction reaches well beyond her own research. In addition to the impact she’s made in teaching early modern literature and culture at both the graduate and undergraduate levels, she is renowned on campus for the relationships she builds with both her colleagues and students, some of whom offered remarks on Singh’s career at the symposium. MSU Libraries Curator of Rare Books and Special Collections Cataloger Tad Boehmer has worked closely with Singh since he started in the Stephen O. Murray & Keelung Hong Special Collections in 2017. Boehmer, who says that he and Singh became “fast friends,” was one of those colleagues who spoke to the lasting impact Singh has had on the greater MSU community.

“The symposium was a day full of lectures and celebrating Jyotsna,” Boehmer said. “One of her mentors from graduate school at Syracuse came and spoke, along with some current and former grad students, as well as friends and colleagues from across the country. The day was such a testament to her involvement with people from all fields and her mentorship to peers as well as students. It showed what a great supporter she is of people in a variety of fields and across all different disciplines.”



HAKLVYTVS POSTHVMVS
 OR
PVRCHAS HIS PILGRIMES
 Contayning a His tory of the World, in Sea voyages, & lande Trauells, by Englishmen & others. Wherein Gods Wonders in Nature & Providence, The Artes, Arts, Varieties, & Vanities of Men, wth a world of the Worlds Rarities, are by a world of Eymyneste Authors, Related to the World. Some left written by M. Hakluyt at his death, Now since added. His also perused, & perfected. All examined, abbreviated, Illustrated wth Notes, Enlarged wth Discourses, Adorned wth pictures, and Expressed in Mapps. In fower Parts. Each containing five Bookes.

By **SAMVEL PURCHAS B.D.**



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The symposium is also where Singh officially announced her generous endowment to the MSU Libraries. The *Jyotsna G. Singh Endowment in Early Modern Studies: Race, Empire, and Global Connections* will primarily support an annual public event on the early modern collections at the Libraries. Funds from this gift will also be used to support Libraries exhibits, classroom projects, pop-up events and further programming related to the early modern period at the MSU Libraries, including digital resources and print materials. Its proposed outcomes will open up research and teaching opportunities in multiple areas such as the history of pre-modern book production, circulation and provenance (ownership); early printed editions of literary works by Shakespeare and his contemporaries; early European voyages of discovery, histories of trade, colonization and enslavement; and early Christian (Anglo)-Muslim encounters, among others.

Singh's decision to place her gift with the Libraries came from her desire to highlight the importance of historical context not only in research into the past, but also in understanding present-day societal issues. "By giving this endowment, I hope to make people aware of the earlier periods and why they are relevant to our current concerns," Singh explained. "Increasingly, it seems we no longer read historically; instead, we read in a very presentist frame, which is good in a sense. But I think you can better study those contemporary social concerns and issues when you have a historical context. To hold in your hands a book published 400-500 years ago is a magical moment in itself. And then to observe annotations and other marks on the paper, which tell an important history in itself. Who was the first buyer? How many hands did this book pass through? Did women own and buy books in the 16th and 17th centuries? Were book owners typically aristocratic European men, who could also be early colonizers?"

MSU Libraries Director of Development Caitlyn Perry Dial noted the significance of Singh's gift in bringing attention to the early modern materials in Special Collections. "At MSU Libraries, we have several funds which support the preservation and care of our collections," Dial said. "We have very few that are centered on their promotion, ensuring that our campus community knows about them and learns from them. Dr. Singh's endowment, like the Arts MSU initiative, will ensure that every MSU student will have the opportunity to enjoy and appreciate the diverse collection of texts and artistry in our collection, while also understanding their place in our collective history."

Singh believes that the annual event and other activities made possible by her endowment will draw scholars and students to Special Collections to experience these types of histories — not only from MSU, but potentially from other institutions in the Midwest and beyond as well. This dedication to historical context is fitting for the Shakespeare scholar, whose work in early modern literature began with a dissertation on the bard followed by her first coauthored book, "The Weyward Sisters: Shakespeare and Feminist Politics" (1994). Subsequent key publications include "A Companion to the Global Renaissance" (ed., 2009 & 2021) and a recent monograph, "Shakespeare and Postcolonial Theory" (2019). It was her work on Shakespeare that led her research to expand more historically, with Singh becoming interested in how the words of the English writer moved across the continents. She questioned why people in India would be interested in reading him, and why she herself was taught Shakespeare in school in India. Through this kind of historical inquiry her work shifted to travel narratives on colonialism and empire, which, according to Singh, was not a common field of research at the time. She addresses this distinctiveness specifically in a 2020 article published in *Postmedieval: A Journal of Medieval Cultural Studies* titled "Confessions: The Consolations of Literature," noting that when she came to the U.S. to do her postdoctoral work she found that "English studies at the time was an Anglo-centric world and not particularly welcoming to me." Singh explains that she was concurrently experiencing questions about

her interest in Shakespeare studies, and, more directly, why she wasn't focusing on a more "Indian subject matter." This line of inquiry, she notes in her article, "led me to journey back to the disseminations of Shakespeare in colonial India, and to reflect on how and why today we may consider these works as 'universal,' being disseminated among former colonial subjects" (347).

"Part of every early modern course I taught at MSU, both graduate and undergraduate, included visiting rare books in Special Collections," Singh said. "These courses gave students a historical context, as well as the experience of sitting in a library — of perusing old books, which stir their imagination. And frankly, I didn't even discover all the pre-1800 books we had here until about 10 years ago. I found that the Special Collections had some very, very expensive collections on early



Singh and Rare Books Curator Tad Boehmer with Singh's 2022 graduate seminar students in the MSU Libraries' Special Collections Seminar Room. Photo courtesy of Professor Singh.

Singh also faced similar questions about her credibility as an early modern scholar when she began her career in higher education. After graduating with both a master's and postdoctoral degree in English from Syracuse University and following a stint working at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, she found a home with MSU, where she accepted an assistant professorship position in 1998.

"I had loyalty to the English Department at Michigan State because they hired me, gave me a promotion early in my career and acknowledged the value of my work," Singh said. "Our department has great students, and the university overall has a wonderful global environment."

"Initially, I was not encouraged to do Renaissance studies in the profession," Singh continued. "But today, my research areas of interest as reflected in this endowment on 'Race, Empire, and Global Connections' are dominant in shaping early modern studies."

It was during Singh's time at MSU that she also found a home in the Libraries' Special Collections. After spending hours poring through archives in her own research, Singh was curious about the holdings at MSU. She recalled the basement room that the Special Collections formerly occupied and says that despite the time spent exploring the materials, it took her years to fully uncover the resources the collection offers.

modern travel narratives, which is what I was working on. So I started suggesting and ordering books on topics my endowment now also supports, like early modern race, empire, globalization, histories of Islam and gender studies. It is really exciting to see a student totally taken up by, say, an old atlas, a book about herbs and plants — including poisons — or accounts of Africa and Asia going as far back as the medieval period."

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Singh's former student, Anna Jeffries, noted that her introduction to the Libraries' Special Collections in a 2022 graduate seminar taught by Singh was especially formative. "Dr. Singh's seminar introduced me to the Special Collections and reignited my passion to pursue a career in books," Jeffries said. "Even though I was an outsider as a new student at MSU in a STEM master's program, Dr. Singh welcomed me and opened the door to a wonderful

new world. Now, even though it has been over a year since I participated in her seminar, Dr. Singh continues to take an interest in what I do and has been an invaluable mentor and, dare I say, friend. I have also remained engaged with the Special Collections, working closely with the curator in a variety of contexts such as Dr. Liam Matthew Brockey's 'History of the Book' seminar and my own independent work. Looking forward, I hope to still benefit from Dr. Singh's guidance as I plan to obtain my Ph.D. in Digital Humanities with a focus on the early modern archive."

Some of the materials Singh cites in the Special Collections as having made her “jump” are the travel narratives, specifically five volumes of “Purchas his Pilgrimes” by Samuel Purchas, an anthology published in 1625-26. These particularly caught her attention, she said, because she had become familiar with Purchas during her time at the Newberry Library Renaissance Center, where she hosted workshops on early modern Anglo-Muslim archives in 2011 and 2012. As a Shakespeare scholar and former Folger Shakespeare Library Visiting Fellow, she also took notice of the MSU Libraries’ collection of his works, particularly “Mr. William Shakespear’s comedies, histories, and tragedies,” (1685), also known as the “Fourth Folio.” Singh additionally noted “The herball; or Generall historie of plantes”(1636) by John Gerard; the “Geographie blaviane” atlas (1667) by Joan Blaeu; and “The Turkish history” (1687-1700) by Richard Knolles as standout materials in the MSU Special Collections.

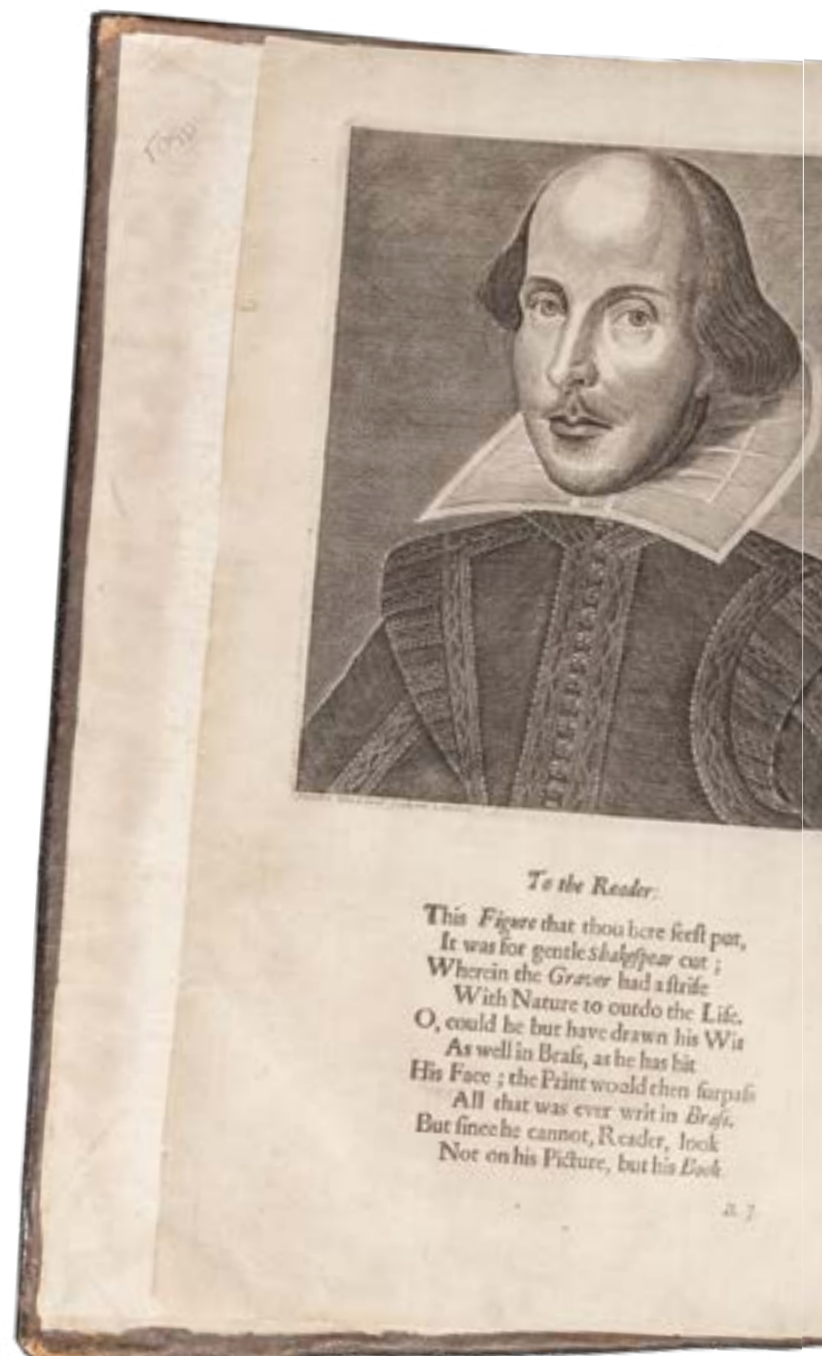
Head of Special Collections Leslie McRoberts was thrilled about the future impacts Singh’s endowment promises for the early modern materials holdings. “At the Murray & Hong Special Collections, our early modern works set the stage for the greater whole of the popular culture collection, providing a deep contextualization of our current selves in the contemporary world,” McRoberts said. “The past and the present continue to intertwine themselves with one another; our recent acquisition of Richard Hakluyt’s ‘The Principal Navigations, Voyages, Traffiques and Discoveries of the English Nation’ [2nd ed., 1599-1600] emphasizes deep exploration for empire building while simultaneously promoting the expansion of trade. Hakluyt is considered a significant figure in the foundation of the British Empire. This title is exciting and a significant acquisition among the aforementioned holdings, and it aligns perfectly with Singh’s scholarship as well as the scholarship of others in the field.”

Current MSU doctoral candidate April Best is another former student of Singh who cited her experience with the Special Collections under Singh as an instrumental part of her graduate coursework. “My work with the Special Collections at MSU Libraries [in her 2022 graduate seminar] was one of the most valuable experiences of my graduate studies,” Best said. “I spent the most time examining and engaging with “almanacks” from the 17th century and Samuel Purchas’s five-volume ‘Pilgrimes.’ Sitting with the physical texts and considering their materiality impacted my research in visceral ways. I thought about the long history of others who held and looked at the texts as well as their provenance and the way they arrived at MSU. I still think about the early modern ecological imagination because of my work with the texts, and in another life — or maybe at some point in the future — I would pursue that research.”

While Singh has built her career on, among other things, travel narratives across the globe, she maintains a firm belief that there is also value in staying in place, especially for scholars who have started building professional homes at institutions like MSU. “We live in a very competitive society, and the advice people always give younger scholars is to keep applying to other jobs, try to get other offers. When I came to Michigan State, a

lot of people assumed that I would try to leave MSU. Instead, I worked with some great colleagues to bring in international students and build a global department — I helped to make our department grow and thrive. And now, in leaving the Libraries endowment, I can continue to help build at MSU.”

As Singh made her home with MSU, she said that the Libraries always provided a special sort of repository. Singh noted that she always felt supported in her work by the “amazing administrators and curators of the Rare Books Special Collections, from Peter Berg to Pat Olson, and currently Leslie McRoberts and Tad Boehmer.” She is particularly excited that her endowed collection will be housed in the new East Wing space on the third floor of the Main Library with the rest of the Stephen O. Murray and Keelung Hong Special Collections in the MSU Libraries. “MSU Libraries have a great leadership in the new dean, Dr. Neil Romanosky, and Head of Development, Dr. Caitlyn Dial. And in this list I would also like to include the former dean of the Libraries, Joseph Salem. It was Dean



Salem's initial support and encouragement that led me decide to give my endowed gift to the MSU Libraries. I am grateful to him."

In closing this interview, Singh provided one final reflection: "Giving and shaping this endowment has been an enriching journey for me. And I hope the events and activities of the endowment will continue to open up new and exciting journeys for students, researchers and academics, as well as for members of the larger community." My love of books and intellectual pursuits developed at home with my parents in India — Mr. and Mrs. M.S. Gujral. A special thanks to my niece, Shreya Dua, who studied the classics in Oxford as a graduate student. It was she who urged me to give a gift to the MSU Libraries for an area of my own research. Finally, this is also for my younger niece Rhea Anand — a burgeoning intellectual!" 🍷

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—MSU doctoral candidate April Best, former student in Singh's 2022 graduate seminar

