

## INTRODUCTION

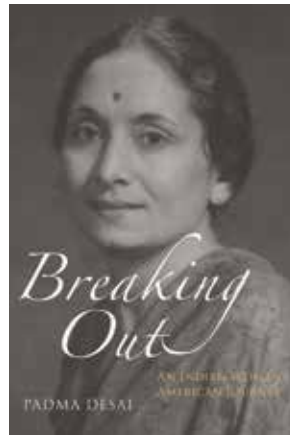
Padma Desai, the Gladys and Roland Harriman Professor of Comparative Economic Systems, is the author of a dozen books on economic topics, including *Conversations on Russia: Reform from Yeltsin to Putin*, which was named the *Financial Times* Pick of the Year in 2007, and *From Financial Crisis to Global Recovery* (2012). Desai's new book shows us a completely different side of this remarkable teacher, scholar, and writer. *Breaking Out: An Indian Woman's American Journey*, is the brave and moving memoir of a woman's journey of transformation: from a sheltered upbringing in India to success and academic eminence in America. Dedicated to Kaki, her uncle's widow, both a spectral presence in her childhood on account of her widowhood and an unfailing source of warmth, Desai's book tackles difficult questions: the place of women in society (both in the U.S. and India), her mother's depression, which she inherited, and seduction by a fellow student whom she was then compelled to marry. But the memoir also celebrates the courtship and marriage to fellow economist Jagdish Bhagwati, motherhood,

her professional career, and gradual assimilation into life in the United States.

In the words of Homi K. Bhabha (Anne F. Rothenberg Professor of the Humanities, Harvard), "*Breaking Out* is a brave and eloquent account of the complex conditions and compromises that connect our professional lives to our personal commitments. Padma Desai has given us a tale of several cities, many worlds, and a testament to lasting love and companionship." *Publishers Weekly* selected *Breaking Out* as one of the "Big Indie Books of 2013."

The excerpt below, from the final chapter of *Breaking Out*, is printed with the kind permission of MIT Press. It is with gratitude that I thank Colleen Lanick, publicity manager for MIT Press, for her assistance with the photo-

graphs. I also want to thank Brett Simison (BrettSimison.com) for generously providing his photographs of Padma Desai at Middlebury College. Due to limitations of space, it was not possible to print the chapter in its entirety—breaks in the text are marked by [...]. —Ronald Meyer



# BREAKING OUT

BY  
PADMA  
DESAI

In a letter to the young aspiring Russian writer Aleksei Suvorin dated January 7, 1889, Anton Chekhov, then twenty-nine years old, talks about how a writer from a humble background must acquire a sense of personal freedom. In a translation by Rosamund Bartlett, Chekhov exhorts Suvorin to write about a young man, the son of a

serf, a former shop boy resembling Chekhov himself. Suvorin must "then go on to tell the story of how this young man drop by drop wrings the slave out of himself until, one fine morning, he awakes to feel that flowing in his veins is no longer the blood of a slave (*rabskaia krov'*), but that of a complete human being."<sup>1</sup>





Teaching fellow, Harvard University, 1957. “My students must have noticed that I looked exotic and my English sounded different, but they took everything in stride.... Soon enough a cameraman came to the classroom and my picture appeared in newspapers, of me instructing four students of the Harvard Class of 1960. Father sent me a cutting from the *Times of India*” (*Breaking Out*, p. 119).

I like to think that my American assimilation represents such a struggle, in which I have managed to become “a complete human being” by wringing out the slave from myself as I searched for personal happiness and professional fulfillment. In 1968, I came to America for good, desiring to marry Jagdish, raise a family, and follow a career. Starting as immigrants, Jagdish and I settled in Lexington, Massachusetts, where we owned a house, planted trees, raised our daughter, made lifelong friends, and celebrated American holidays, among them the Fourth of July and Thanksgiving. The process of immigration, settlement, domestication, and finally acculturation has helped me discover my truest self and acquire a sense of personal freedom.

How did I manage to take charge of my life in America? Which aspects of the land I ultimately called my own contributed to my progression? I came to realize slowly and fitfully how Americans tend to combine individual initiative and self-reliance with voluntary participation in community betterment, amid a vibrant diversity. Perhaps this is a biased view. Outsiders may find it unreal. But this has been my personal experience. In describing my American journey in these pages, I have revived old memories and shed unhappy experiences. Occasionally I have commented

on how Indian practices—for example, that of child-rearing—differ from those in America. But I have kept away from the larger issues of whether American norms are superior or whether Indian arrangements have improved over time. These formidable themes belong in a separate book. My story here simply focuses on how I found fulfillment in my new surroundings, which turned out to be alternately demanding and nourishing.

That happened to me, an outsider, in America where I realized “drop by drop” that anyone can become a distinct person. Once I asked a South African Supreme Court judge to name a noteworthy American trait. “Personhood,” he said, without the slightest hesitation. Personhood, I discovered, implies self-reliance, accountability, and hard work, which again are American markers. Of course, becoming a person does not make everyone equal, but living in America affords everyone an opportunity to take a shot at the American dream. One may of course end up as a garbage collector, but all honest work in America has a badge of dignity, although you know that becoming a garbage collector will not give you social status. But there is a second chance for those who learn to operate in a rule-based, competitive environment.

[...]



## When I finally came to Harvard in 1955, I carried with me distracting memories of a marital relationship that stalked me in the classrooms and the quiet of Littauer Library.

In India, I had learned to accommodate myself to the person I was with, to hold my feelings to myself, and to lead a life in opposition to itself. I was brought up to act appropriately, depending on the context. There was a difference between what I felt and what I showed to others. I realized that the Indian behavioral norms relating to women are complicated, subtle, and ultimately sexist. In America, I learned to step outside my skin and express my deepest thoughts. Acculturation has meant that I must learn to share some of my pain and stop feeling like an immigrant who has settled in a foreign land. I could not have written this book if I were living in India. As for my professional life, it has been marked by continuous striving in American academia with a bit of luck along the way.

When I finally came to Harvard in 1955, I carried with me distracting memories of a marital relationship that stalked me in the classrooms and the quiet of Littauer Library. Despite that, I performed well and got solid grades. But, along with my academic accomplishment, my exotic persona gave me exceptional recognition. I was admired in a way I had not experienced before. I felt special. Occasionally my mind wandered to the events leading to my marriage, and my adolescent days “fostered alike by beauty and by fear.”<sup>22</sup> Unknown to others, I was ceasing to be a stranger to myself and was indulging in introspection. Why did I lose control over my emotions in Bombay? How could I not see through my ex-husband’s manipulative design? Was I wholly responsible for the way I acted? Should I continue feeling guilty and live with a sense of shame? Why should I carry a permanently sad expression on my

face? I realized then how distant India was, how time-consuming and costly the means of communication and travel, and how protected and secure I felt in a place that gave me the courage to seek my salvation. I was away. I was alone. I was wronged. And I must act grown-up. I finally chose to break out and to end the marriage. Had I remained in India, I would not have experienced the necessary self-worth or taken the initiative.

[...]

Living in America, I recall my childhood experiences, and struggle to understand my parents through the light of an American lens and overcome my conflicted relationship with them. These are not moments of instant revelation. I do not rub my eyes and scratch my ears and find solace. What had happened? Who were they really? Would I ask these questions if I had remained in India? I must get rid of the emotional confusion. I must clear the misunderstanding and end the warfare. From my American perspective, they were old-fashioned and I was their daughter with a soaring dream. How could the relationship not be agonizing? How could it be perfect?

In particular, I remember Father’s reaction to my dazzling performance in the statewide matriculation examination in which I missed the first rank (among 48,000 candidates) by two marks: “You are wearing a crown of thorns,” he had said. Even if I were not in a state of ecstasy, I would not have interpreted his pronouncement as a deliberate put-down. I had grown up believing that he cared for me and worried about me in his own way. [...]

I had to settle in America and sort out this mismatched father-daughter equation from a distance. American daughters too, I noticed, occasionally battle patriarchal authority. At the end of a pell-mell journey of professional setbacks and personal traumas, I feel sufficiently fulfilled to get over the slow, painful realization of having to swim against parental lack of support for my ambition. Father had a Cambridge degree, but his cultural norms with regard to his daughters were formed years before in the village where he



From left to right: Jagdish, St. John’s College, Cambridge, UK, 1955; the marriage ceremony on Jagdish’s sixtieth birthday, New York, 1994; with Kofi Annan at Jagdish’s seventieth birthday celebration, Columbia University, 2004.

**I have treasured my conversion as an intensely spiritual experience, more so as I became aware of the polarizing controversies between the secular atheists and the biblical zealots during the Bush presidency. I wondered how the brown-skinned pastor who sought to liberate me in a genuine gesture of love would react to the contentious debates between the proponents of creationism and the advocates of evolutionism.**

had grown up. It made no sense to assign to him a role that he was incapable of fulfilling. Nor was I inclined to judge him by taking the high ground and arguing, “Let bygones be bygones.” At the end of the day, I believe that what he gave me far exceeded what he denied me.

[...]

My American viewing also tends to be nuanced and objective, and informed by the transition experiences of American children into adulthood that I hear and read about. I have turned to such coming-of-age experiences to assess my relationship with Mother. Had I remained in India, I would not have put her under a microscope. Was she abusive? I do not think so. Rather, she was sick and lacked proper treatment for controlling her manic-depressive symptoms that Father handled by combining undue indulgence toward her with frequent doses of phenobarbital that the doctor prescribed as a palliative. Psychiatric care was unknown then and is rare even today in India. When I told my New York psychiatrist that Mother lived a totally episode-free life after Father’s death, he was silent. Perhaps he did not want to tell me that Father pampered her, although, as we were growing up, we all thought he did. Did I grow up in a dysfunctional family arising from her illness? This is a very American question. But I do not

think so. The three adults in the family, Father, Mother and Kaki, were highly industrious and, despite the frequent rumblings, the house ran like clockwork.

In my American days, I cannot help but remember Kaki as a vivid, immediate presence. She was the gentle, loving nurturer who passed on to me, patiently and imperceptibly, an acceptance of life’s unpredictability and punishments. Unlike her, I do not believe in karma, but from her I learned to carry out my daily routine in a positive, purposeful spirit. In my most hopeless moments, I have not wanted to give up on life as a meaningless cipher and sink into a Samuel Beckett-like existential void: life is a bitch and then you die. Kaki’s example saved me from the nihilism of postmodern “wastelanders” who believe that to be disenchanted is to be enlightened. She gave me the precious gift of forming close ties, of deepening them confidently, and of repairing them generously. I learned to manage personal relations by adopting her gentle negotiating manner for she never offered me this-or-that, take-it-or-leave-it American-style choices in my childhood. All this, and I gave her nothing in return. I have accepted Father’s lack of indulgence toward me, and Mother’s mood swings, but I find it difficult to come to terms with Kaki’s subhuman position in the family. Had I continued living in India, I would have accepted that



Professor Desai leads a discussion at Middlebury College’s commencement weekend in June 2011. Desai was granted the honorary degree of Doctor of Laws at the commencement ceremony. (Photo © Brett Simison, BrettSimison.com)

as the natural order of the day. From an American perspective, it appears cruel beyond words, beyond forgiveness.

The canvas of my American life has become clearer and softer as I have sorted out my relationship with Father, Mother, and Kaki, the three far-flung characters of my childhood. With the confusion and the guilt behind me, I experience relief with what I have learned. Father imposed many rules but they help me steer my daily routine, whatever the context. I have inherited Mother's mood swings but also her fierce ambition and her indomitable stamina. Kaki provided me with the equanimity and an almost natural acceptance of life's uncertainties. In America I have managed to move on from the very center of my inheritance.

Of all the early experiences, the dissolution of my first marriage turned out to be the most wrenching. I converted to Christianity when my ex-husband signaled via his lawyer that he would be ready to file for judicial separation by invoking the ground that I had changed my religion. The law allowed the dissolution

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of a sacramental marriage on that basis. Having learned of my conversion, he informed Father via his lawyer that he had changed his mind. “The light at the end of the tunnel turns out to be a tiger’s eye.”<sup>3</sup> How could we have been so trusting? On the other hand, I have treasured my conversion as an intensely spiritual experience, more so as I became aware of the polarizing controversies between the secular atheists and the biblical zealots during the Bush presidency. I wondered how the brown-skinned pastor who sought to liberate me in a genuine gesture of love would react to the contentious debates between the proponents of creationism and the advocates of evolutionism. Did he need a cosmic designer in order to rescue me? Whom would he have sided with in the culture wars?

Seeking to end the marriage while teaching at the Delhi School of Economics, I felt I was earning my living in an academic environment that lacked the stimulus of the creative challenges and the spirited camaraderie that I had experienced at Harvard. My Delhi years could best be described by the American expression I learned later, “the double whammy”—of a challenge-proof academic environment and an unsolvable personal problem. I should have been in a different place. But there was a saving grace. I felt I had lost the external battles, but the pursuit of Russian grammar and north Indian vocal music subdued my

anguish and gave me internal composure. They almost became substitutes for the unfulfilled longings, my relationship with Jagdish having failed to acquire romantic power or intimacy or the daily interaction of a married couple. At the end of a Russian language lesson or a training session with my music teacher, I felt relieved of the burden of the deprivations and uncertainties of my life, and energized to handle my teaching obligations.

I often think about the Delhi phase of my relationship with Jagdish and wonder about his steadfast commitment to me during nine years of my unresolved marital situation. It provided me with not only an emotional anchor but also respectability and a protective shield. His unwavering attention lifted my status. I also knew that his prestigious family, dedicated to remarkable professionalism and public service, was traditional and deeply religious. His parents not only did not object to his decision to cast in his lot with me but also made me feel welcome. Were they practical? Did they love him unreservedly? Did they trust his judgment? Did they think I was ultimately a suitable choice? Living in America, where marriages tend to dissolve frequently, I have come to value my fifty-year relationship with him as precious, although a bit old-fashioned and perhaps exceptional from an American perspective.

My daughter, on the other hand, is an American explorer with abundant traces of a rule-bound routine. Her life is informed by principles rather than by shrewd considerations of self-preservation and advancement. Now in her mid-thirties, she has me alternately concerned and elated by the strength of her convictions and the steadfastness of her heart. In turn determined and mellow, open and reserved, she has managed to craft an American-style mother-daughter relationship with me. She reveals details about her life in measured doses but also shares her worries with me with rare openness and a concern for my well-being.

I recall a conversation with her in her mid-teens that was marked by a stark American content and startling forthrightness. It threw me completely off guard. It was close to midnight and she was perched on top of the clothes dryer in the kitchen. “Mama, what would you do if I were to become a lesbian?” This came as a bolt from the blue. I stalled and struggled for a few seconds and said, “Why? Are you thinking of becoming one?” As if seeking to protect me, she said, “Not right now. Maybe in a few years.” Instead of sizing up the situation, I blurted out a response that I regret to this day: “Then I will jump out of the window.” That was the end of the conversation then but, years later, I remember her saying: “How could you say that to me? I was so scared that I was going to lose you!” By that time, I had come to view lesbian relationships so empathically that I felt ashamed at my initial response and guilty at her subsequent revelation. Why did I not tell her then that I would love her no matter what?

[...]

My daughter sticks to her views adamantly and expresses them openly in a manner that, I think, is un-Indian. In India, she

would tend to be less argumentative and more accommodating of my opinions. From that perspective, my bond with her would be different if we were living in India. But I do not regret it. We both guard our independence but we also express our emotions

## In America, I learned to balance my ambitious drive with an altruistic impulse to give something back to my students in the classroom and outside.

in intimate moments. How can I deny her the sense of herself that I have managed to develop for myself?

That said, my relationship with her and her father as well has required steady understanding and continuous balancing. They are undoubtedly the anchors of my American existence. My daughter has provided the nourishment without which I would feel emotionally bankrupt, and my husband, the glow of companionship without which I would remain lonely. Nevertheless these have been testing relationships that remind me of Ivan Turgenev's lyrical rendering in *Fathers and Sons* of a woman's predicament as a wife and a mother. In this story about generational tensions in mid-nineteenth-century Russia, the mother Arina Vlas'evna reacts to the abrupt disappearance of her son Bazarov (after only three days) from the crushing provinciality of the family home. Pressing her gray head to her husband's, she says, "What's to be done, Vasya? A son's a piece cut off. He's like a falcon: he comes and goes whenever he likes; while you and I are like mushrooms growing in the hollow of a log: we sit side by side and never budge. Except that I'll always be here for you, as you will for me."<sup>4</sup> My daughter's brief appearances and sudden departures have left a similar impression on my permanent union with Jagdish.

[...]

In America, I learned to balance my ambitious drive with an altruistic impulse to give something back to my students in the classroom and outside. When I read William James, I also realized that I must nurture my mental health with the mysterious potential of the mind he discusses. Despite having inherited Mother's depressive tendency, I feel I have remained mentally healthy because of the therapeutic spark of continuing contacts with students.

In the end, my accomplishments represent American-style searching, striving, and giving that at their best imply community involvement coupled with personal gratification. In my most joyful moments, I identified myself with my students with a vibrant immediacy that made them feel as if they were sharing an experience with me and giving me something in return. In my last lecture in the spring of 2010, I talked for a few minutes to the full class of Columbia College freshmen about the idea of leading a purposeful life. I referred to the remarkable idealism unique to American youngsters whom I had known over the years. I told my listeners that they should travel to distant places and discover how millions of people live on a dollar a day. Of course, at the end of that life-altering experience, I concluded, they might want to work for Wall Street and make their millions; in which case, I suggested, they should give a fraction of their fortune to Columbia College. A loud applause greeted my grandmotherly remarks. As I was leaving, I noticed a short line of students waiting to talk with me. "What can I do for you?" I asked. "Professor, can we hug you?" That was such a touching American gesture.

Beyond students and teaching, I have felt driven to pursue ideas, undertake scholarly work on Russia, and establish my reputation as a leading American analyst of the Russian economy. Had I not felt fulfilled as a scholar in my discovery of Russia, I would have remained aware of my mistakes that could not be altered and of memories that could not be eradicated. It was that important. The moment of reckoning came after a long wait on my seventy-fifth birthday celebration at Columbia University in April 2007. Nobel Laureate Robert Solow, my former teacher, described me as a



From left to right: Desai addresses the audience at the launch of the Penguin Books India edition of her memoir *Breaking Out* (New Delhi, November 2012); speaking at Middlebury College (June 2011); with her husband Jagdish Bhagwati at Middlebury College. (Photos 2–3 © Brett Simison, BrettSimison.com)



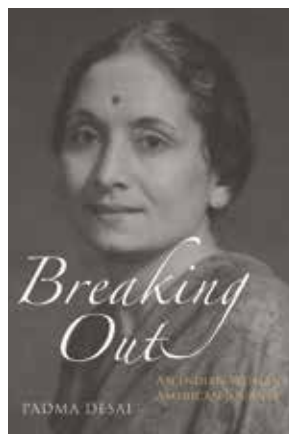
serious scholar, albeit not a flashy one, who searched for truth. I felt flattered and fulfilled because my scholarly status was recognized in three pithy attributes. It seemed I had combined the fulfillment of my deepest ambition with an upright academic record.

I did begin my Russian discovery motivated by my love for Russian language and literature, but I have avoided converting it into a sentimental journey. I believe that Russia will move into liberal political and economic arrangements of its own choice at its own speed because it is today a vastly different country from the time I visited it as long ago as the summer of 1964 and lived in the Indian consulate in Odessa. In the Czarist days, Odessa was known as the “Pearl of Russia” and as “Little Paris.” During my stay under Soviet rule, it appeared morose and preoccupied as if it were in permanent mourning. The French and Italian cafés of its cultural heyday, which I imagined Pushkin and Tolstoy had visited during their stay, had disappeared. When Mark Twain passed through Odessa in 1869, he wrote: “We saw only America! There was not one thing to remind us that we were in Russia.”<sup>5</sup>

I, on the other hand, realized that I was in the Soviet Union. I remember the perennial lines in front of the stores combined with exquisite orderliness. Beyond orderliness, I noticed pervasive fear. Indo-Soviet relations were at their friendliest during my visit, and yet people were afraid to communicate with me. The overpowering signs and signals of the drab, fearful, regimented Orwellian reality were everywhere, prompting me to recall a wry witticism: religion comforts the masses by assuring them that there is life after death, whereas communism does so by assuring them that there is death after life.

More than four decades later, millions of Russians, urban, educated, and feeling European, had begun earning their living as citizens rather than as employees of a communist state. The steady economic growth of 6.5 to 7 percent in the seven years starting in 2000 offered Russians greater occupational mobility, higher earnings, and improved standards of living reflected in more housing, cars and telephones, and travel. The lives of most ordinary Russians on the eve of the financial crisis that hit Russia in September 2008 were far better than ever before. Russians, it would seem, had entered into an implicit contract with their authoritarian president Vladimir Putin and agreed to surrender critical freedoms to him in exchange for a better life. On the other hand, from an American policymaking perspective, Putin had damaged the prospects for Russia’s democratic evolution.

Nevertheless, I have steadfastly argued that isolating Russia politically and economically is counterproductive. A stance that relies less on confrontation and more on bargaining, initiated by the Obama administration in Washington, DC, on contentious bilateral issues (such as placing US missile defense units in Eastern Europe), and greater Western economic participation in the Russian economy will push forward Russia’s evolution toward a liberal law-based system.



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from the publisher, and  
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Looking back, it was an uphill battle for me to advance this position among mainstream American opinion makers and analysts, especially during President Putin’s authoritarian governance, which has been marked by occasional muscle flexing. Typecast as a Russia specialist, I also failed to get adequately acknowledged by fellow economists for my technical contributions that pioneered the application of rigorous analytical tools to problems of the Russian economy. At the same time, I had to overcome barriers in Russia to gaining acceptance as an American scholar of the Russian scene. In other words, I had to bridge the gap between my hyper-attenuated academic aspirations and the persistent awareness of my foreignness in the eyes of Russian and American beholders. Wouldn’t it have been easier if I had continued working on India? I had to put behind my Indian professional interest and also acquire an American identity before I could aspire to be recognized as an American scholar of Russia in the United States and Russia. [...]

<sup>1</sup> Anton Chekhov, *A Life in Letters*, ed. Rosamund Bartlett (London: Penguin, 2004), 171.

<sup>2</sup> William Wordsworth, “The Prelude,” *Selected Poems*, ed. Roger Sharrock (London: William Heinemann, 1958), 1.

<sup>3</sup> Wyslava Szymborska, “Slapstick,” *View with a Grain of Sand*, tr. Stanislaw Baranczak and Clare Cavanagh (NY: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1995), 20.

<sup>4</sup> Ivan Turgenev, *Fathers and Sons*, tr. and ed. Michael R. Katz (NY: W. W. Norton & Co., 1996), 106.

<sup>5</sup> Mark Twain, *The Writings of Mark Twain: The Innocents Abroad*, vol. 2 (Holicong: Wildside Press, 1911), 101.