

Black and white photos, top to bottom: Padma Desai, Leningrad, June 1964; Desai with her sister Savita and brother-in-law Parmanand, Leningrad, 1964; Desai with Parmanand and Savita in the countryside.



My first chance to visit the USSR came surprisingly soon, in 1964. When I returned to India after Harvard, my sister Savita had looked after me in Delhi like a surrogate mother and with the full consent of her husband, Parmanand Desai, who had joined the Foreign Service after earning his master's

degree from Columbia University (which, by a strange turn of fate that marks our lives, would turn out eventually to be where I myself would settle after 1980). She was now living in Odesa, where Parmanand had been posted as the Indian consul to oversee the growing trade between India and the Soviet Union, blessed by the political interests shared by Jawaharlal Nehru and Nikita Khrushchev.

Knowing of my deep interest in the Soviet Union, and also seeking my company, Savita invited me to Odesa. It was an invitation that I immediately accepted and which would define a range of experiences that gave me an



The Potemkin Steps
in Odesa, Ukraine
(Photo by Dean
Conger/Corbis via
Getty Images).

Discovering the USSR

Odesa, Moscow, Leningrad

By Padma Desai

insight into the USSR of which few of my fellow Soviet specialists could boast.

I noticed at the outset that three ships arrived in the Odesa port, with cargo from India, and three Soviet ships left with cargo for India. The Indian cargo consisted mainly of consumer goods such as razor blades and soap, which were in short supply in the USSR, and which paid for the Soviet cargo that consisted mainly of machinery for the heavy industry that India needed as it turned to building its own steel mills and capital goods sector.

The Indian consulate in Odesa was set up because the Indian government needed to have an official representative in Odesa to expedite the handling of this trade. The only other foreign presence in Odesa at the time was the Cuban consulate. The Indian

consulate was located in a quiet, leafy street. Spacious and recently painted, it sparkled in the delicate summer light and appeared inviting to passersby. But appearances can be misleading. A Soviet guard posted in a booth at the entrance kept watch so that no Soviet citizen would enter the consulate without prior clearance. Nor could Savita and Parmanand drop in on local citizens without a similar clearance.

The only local contacts that they enjoyed were confined to official dinners, which Savita gave frequently, assisted by Milina, the office secretary; Olga, the maid; and Keshav, an Indian youngster brought from

the Himalayan valley who cooked, cleaned, and ran errands. Parmanand was a diplomat who carried himself with quiet dignity, a quality which he had acquired from having spent 10 formative years as a teenager in the ashrams with Mahatma Gandhi. His stepbrother, Mahadev Desai, had been the Mahatma's personal secretary. Parmanand's unruffled manner and empathetic temperament was a product of his interest in yoga, long before Prime Minister Narendra Modi turned it into a worldwide preoccupation. My husband, Jagdish Bhagwati, who adored Parmanand, used to joke that Parmanand was protected by his diplomatic status from being sued by his pupils if they wound up tangled into yogic poses

Opposite page: The docks of Odesa Harbor (Photo by Dean Conger/Corbis via Getty Images).



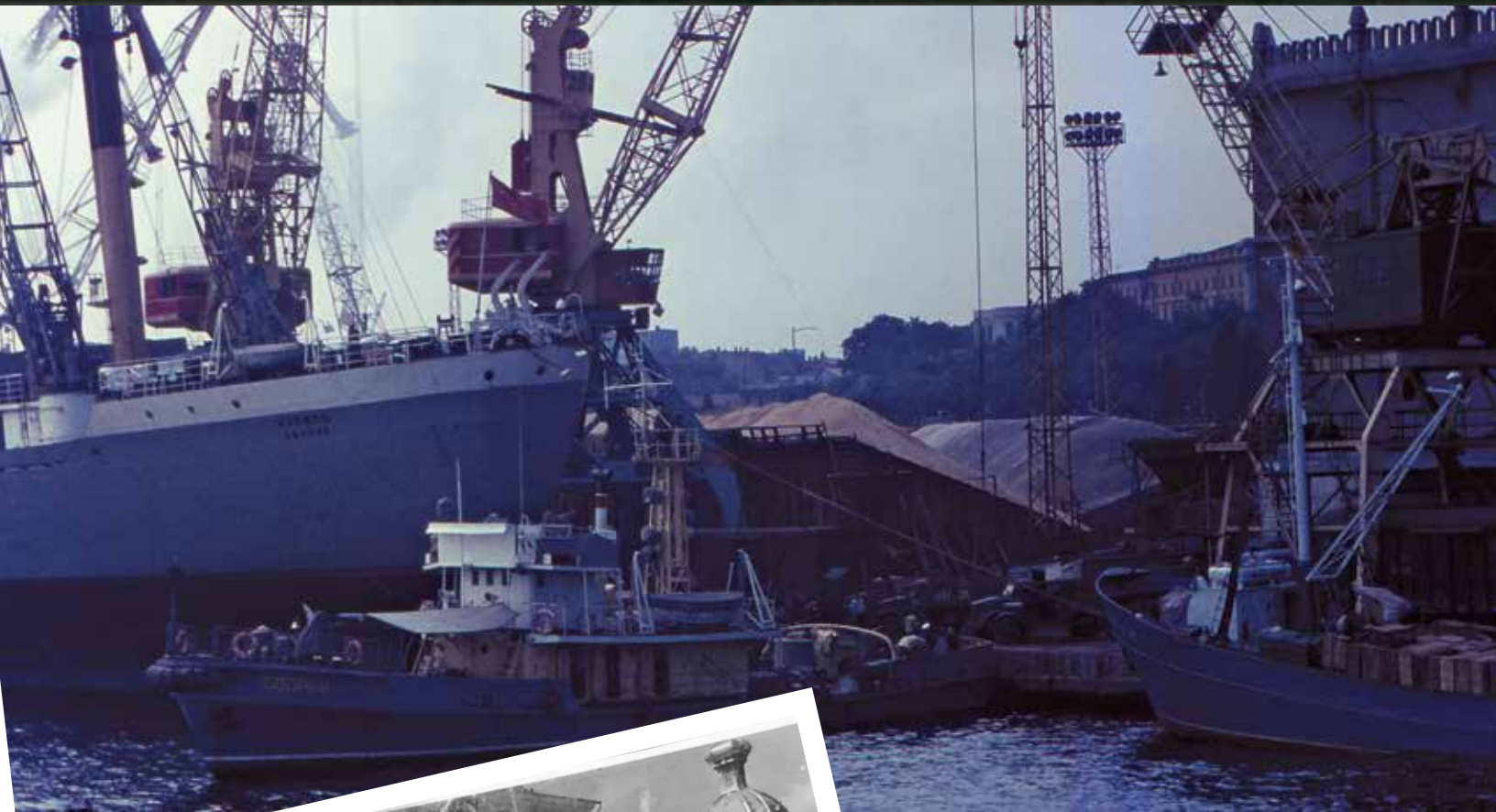
(asanas) from which they could not extricate themselves.

By contrast, Savita was in a state of permanent revolution, as it were. She had boundless energy, a lively tongue, and shrewd powers of observation. She preferred to confront problems rather than shy away from resolving them. She was convinced that the consulate was bugged with listening devices; but she did not hesitate to denounce freely the Soviet communist system, almost hoping that the commissars bugging the consulate would hear her frank condemnation of the system. Amusingly, Savita was also ready to indulge fearlessly Olga, the maid, in her secretive religious observances, which were frowned upon by the godless Soviet regime. Olga even got a bottle of vodka in celebration of her grandson's communion, which had been performed quietly by an Orthodox priest.

But despite her disapproval of the Soviet system, Savita did not fail to carry out her role as the consul's wife. Although she was a vegetarian—the

Gujarat state from which we come is largely vegetarian, and my husband says that he had not even seen an egg until he left for Cambridge, in England, at the age of nineteen—she followed the Indian foreign ministry's rules and served nonvegetarian food at their official dinners. So, she entertained the official Soviet guests with delicacies like beef tenderloin, pork sausages, ox tongue, and calf sweetbreads. Savita doubtless felt that she was annihilating the animal kingdom of the tundra! The dinners





Black and white photos, from left: Padma Desai with Savita, Leningrad, 1964; Desai, Leningrad, 1964; Desai with her nephews, photographed in front of the Consulate of India; Desai, Leningrad, 1964.

were popular; and the invitees, when they could not come, often sent “substitute” guests in their place, as was the custom.

Another contact with Soviet reality came from Keshav, our handyman, who had picked up a smattering of both Russian and Ukrainian. He came back with stories that deepened our appreciation of the country. He shopped and stood in the queues that were ubiquitous, commiserating with the exasperated and exhausted citizens who stood in the long lines, at the end of which they often encountered empty shelves. He also chatted endlessly with the Soviet guard at the entrance, leading the



Opposite page, top: The docks of Odesa Harbor; photo by Dean Conger/Corbis via Getty Images.

Opposite page, bottom: View of the Odesa Opera and Ballet Theater, Odesa, Ukraine, circa 1960; photo by Archive Photos/Getty Images.

Right: The Moscow metro, 1960s; photo by Chronicle/Alamy Stock Photo.



Soviet authorities to complain to Parmanand: Keshav had to be restrained. But Keshav was a free spirit, much like Savita. Ultimately, the Soviet authorities addressed the issue by changing the guard frequently.

Keshav also brought home to us the fact that the people were traditionally addicted to vodka, a cultural fact that would affect attempts at economic reform. This addiction is so widespread that an old proverb says: if you are looking for a good son-in-law, you do not look for someone who does not drink; you just ask how he behaves when he is drunk. Typically, therefore, when Keshav went out for long walks in the morning, he would turn down offers of vodka from strangers with “*ya uzhe gotov*,” meaning: “I am already loaded!”

Keshav went into hysterics when he went to the beach and saw men plunging into the cold water, with their bulging midriffs and with no embarrassment at their nakedness. Indian men are brought up to avoid nudity in the presence of other men. In fact, this cultural inhibition was brought amusingly home to me in Odesa when, one day, a couple of Indian students arrived at the consulate, with their towels. Savita

told me that they were there to take a bath. I thought this was strange until I discovered that they could not bring themselves to wash in a public bathhouse. There, they were expected to stand naked in a line at the entrance to the bathhouse. Embarrassed, they had tried to cover themselves with their towels, only to find the Soviets in the line shouting, “*Snimai, snimai!*” (Take off your towels!), which frightened them so that they fled from the scene!

But there were also more prosaic activities that the consulate oversaw, giving me yet further glimpses of life in the Soviet Union. For instance, the consulate was where marriages between Soviets and foreigners were sometimes consecrated. Thus, I was once sitting on the floor, chopping vegetables, when I heard a man ask me in an American accent: “Do you speak English?” He wanted to marry a Soviet woman and sought Parmanand’s help in persuading the Soviet authorities to let him do so. Then again, an Indian engineer, a South Indian Brahmin no less, had fallen in love with a local woman: the consulate was happy to help, and Savita and I were drafted to

dress the bride in a sari and to tie the knots in a civil ceremony. When the bride saw a photograph of Mahatma Gandhi, the father of India, she asked who that was; Savita could not help remarking to me wryly and illogically in Gujarati that a woman who could not recognize Mahatma Gandhi did not deserve to marry an Indian!

But the most dramatic episode came our way when Savita declared: “Today is Friday, and we have an American guest for lunch.” The guest was Molly, who taught English to students at a language institute. Her husband, Maurice, was an engineer who worked in the Odesa shipyard. Both had American passports. But both were starry-eyed admirers of Communist regimes and had been on their way to China when their Soviet friends had contacted them in Warsaw and urged them to settle instead in the Soviet Union. This they had done, with their young daughter and a parrot, in Odesa.

But while it took the distinguished intellectuals and authors of *The God That Failed* (1949)* years to suffer disillusionment with Communism and to abandon it, Molly and Maurice

* Subtitled “A Confession,” the collection of essays by Louis Fischer, André Gide, Arthur Koestler, Ignazio Silone, Stephen Spender, and Richard Wright, edited by Richard Crossman (Harper & Brothers, 1949).

had arrived at their disillusionment within months of arriving in Odesa. Maurice had been crazed by the continual propaganda spewed out on the radio about the glories of the Soviet economy under Communism and had often pulled out the electric wiring in rage. They were ready to leave, but they had to get an exit visa, which was denied to them. Molly and Maurice were as good as prisoners in Odesa. Molly put up with the situation, largely thanks to her visit every Friday to the Indian consulate, where she made friends with Savita, who shared her distaste for Soviet Communism.

The lucky break for Molly and Maurice came when a reporter from the *International Herald Tribune* arrived in Odesa. Savita was excited; she knew that the Soviets disliked adverse publicity in the Western media. If the sordid plight of Molly and Maurice was brought out in the *Tribune*, exit visas for them would soon follow. Savita's guess was correct. Meanwhile, Savita, I, and her two teenage sons, Manoj and Sukumar, who were visiting their parents because of the school holidays in India, soon set out for a trip on the Black Sea (a memorable trip that I describe below). By the time we returned some weeks later, Molly and Maurice had been liberated, just as Savita had predicted. Their plight had been detailed in a *Tribune* story by the visiting reporter: Savita had informed Molly about the reporter's hotel. The exit visas predictably came soon after, with the ritual condemnation that Molly and Maurice were being expelled because they were Chinese spies!

Adding a light touch to their departure from Odesa was the sale by Molly of her furniture and linen—even some of her clothes and a sewing machine (highly prized by Soviets who did not have access to one). Someone wanted her parrot, the *popugai*. Molly was resolute: “No, my *popugai* is going back to a free country.” Many years later, when Jagdish and I joined Columbia University in 1980, I tried to locate Molly and Maurice in New York, where they had lived prior to their Soviet misadventure. Alas, there was no trace of them. The land of the free had swallowed them up, leaving me only with my memories of them.

The Black Sea trip from which we had returned to find that Molly and Maurice had vanished from Odesa was memorable and provided me instead with insights into recent Soviet history. We had sailed on the Soviet ship *Abkhaziya*. As a result, the crew was aware of our diplomatic status and obliged us with commentary on the highlights of what we were witnessing. Thus, at Sochi and Sevastopol we were escorted to witness the eternal flames commemorating the Ukrainians who had died during the German invasion.

We were told that virtually every family in Ukraine had lost a member in the war that the Germans had

waged against the USSR: Ukraine had suffered alongside Russia. I was also aware that the great writer Nikolai Gogol was of Ukrainian origin, with both Russians and Ukrainians claiming him as their own. Years later, when President Putin annexed Crimea, my memory went back to my days in Odesa.

Our Soviet ship had also taken us to Batumi, in the Georgian Republic, where we climbed up the shore to a botanical garden and waved from there at the handsome Georgian men as we enjoyed watching the foliage.

When we returned to Odesa, our joy at coming home was marred by the news, announced on the ship's loudspeakers, that Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, an iconic figure to Indians, had passed away. The ship's captain came to offer us his condolences. I should add that the close interaction between us and the Soviet crew during the Black Sea trip, which was novel and not permissible when we were in the consulate and were denied free interaction with Soviet citizens, made us acutely aware of some of the cultural differences, especially concerning food.

At the consulate, Savita had offered nonvegetarian food to her Soviet guests. But she and Parmanand themselves had remained strict vegetarians. On the Black Sea voyage, they realized much to their chagrin, even horror, that the Soviet



Left: Paintings in The Hermitage, Leningrad, 1960s. Right: Palace Square, Leningrad, 1960s. Both photos by Chronicle/Alamy Stock Photo.

conception of vegetarian food was not the same as the Indian. Savita had requested vegetarian food for herself, Parmanand, and the two children. The captain obliged. But then we realized that the cooks had no conception of vegetarian food. They simply removed the meat from the cooked dish.

That would not do in India, where vegetarian food was cooked without any contact with meat, fowl, or fish. The Indian concept of vegetarian food is informed by the Hindu notion of pollution, a concept foreign to the Soviet practice. This difference was brought home to Savita again when we were in Istanbul, where Savita searched for hours for vegetarian food, only to be obliged by a waiter who had simply taken the offending meat out of the dish, leading Savita to cry in horror when she detected some remnant of the meat in her “vegetarian” dish!

When we returned to Odesa from our Black Sea trip, the two boys left for India as their school holidays were over. Savita, ever restless, next arranged for us to travel by car to Kyiv and then by air to Moscow and on to Leningrad. We would then see the Soviet Union far more intimately than during the Black Sea trip.



The journey by car from Odesa to Kyiv was the first lap of our marathon trip. Already, it had paid dividends, revealing to us the deplorable conditions in which Ukraine was mired under Communist rule. Barring a few trucks that we passed, our car was the only vehicle speeding along the highway to Kyiv. There was also just one gas station, where we stopped because Savita wanted hot water to make her tea. We were wearing saris, and we were literally mobbed by a group of local women that materialized from nowhere. They wanted to know everything about us: did young girls also wear saris; did your mother get married when she was a child; are you married; if so, where are your husbands; what does the red dot on your forehead mean; what do you earn as a professor in India; and so forth. Their curiosity, stifled by the Communist regime, was unbridled with us.

When we finally reached Moscow, our Soviet hosts took us to Lenin’s Mausoleum, where we were brought to the head of the long line to see Lenin’s embalmed body—a ritual honoring the founder of the Soviet Union. Once again, we became the object of curiosity to Russian women who crowded around us when we took time to rest on a bench. They were fascinated by Savita when she took out her knitting and began weaving the woolen thread with her knitting needles. They had never seen raw wool

and had no idea how to knit a garment such as a woolen sweater with knitting needles: it was magical for them! Pretty soon, as always in the Soviet Union, a policeman appeared and told them to leave the distinguished visitors alone, a demand that was summarily rejected by the women, with our approbation and indulgence.

Later, in the evening, we were treated, as suited our diplomatic status, to a ballet. We were pleasantly surprised, however, to discover that the ballet we were to see was based on the classical Sanskrit play *Shakuntala* by the poet Kalidasa, one of India’s literary gems from the fifth century and often considered India’s greatest literary achievement. The play had enthralled Goethe, Herder, Schiller, and Friedrich von Schlegel. The Russian ballet unfolded on the stage with Indian touches of music and dance rather than classical Russian choreography. During the intermission, I walked up to the stage with a bouquet of flowers, which I presented to the lead ballerina, at which the audience got to their feet with thunderous applause. We realized that music and ballet were two Russian achievements that even the Soviet state could not control or eliminate, though literature remained captive to Soviet propaganda and the Gulag faced those who strayed from the Communist path.

From Moscow, we drove to Leningrad, a city whose beauty dominates the Neva River. We were aware of this city’s tragic history during the Second World War, when it was subjected to a horrific blockade by the Nazi troops. Artistic treasures were to be found everywhere in this historic city. And, as honored diplomats, we got to see the treasures in the famous



Hermitage Museum, which was housed in six historic buildings on the Palace Embankment. Unfortunately, we were unable to visit the Kirov Ballet and Opera, now the Mariinsky Theatre, as it was not in season.

From Leningrad, we returned to Odesa, where Parmanand's consular duties related principally to his management of the Indian ships that brought Indian goods to Odesa. As it happened, an Indian ship had docked at Odesa just when we had returned. The captain was gracious and invited us on board. Parmanand was the point man for solving, expeditiously, several headaches that Soviet procedures posed for the Indian ships. Delays, no matter what the reason, led to fines. Thus, the Soviets insisted on fumigating the Indian ships, even though Parmanand pointed out that they had been fumigated in India in the presence of Soviet representatives. The Indian shipping company often sent telegrams to the consulate, with uniformed Soviet personnel waking up Parmanand in the middle of the night, despite his instructions that such communications be delivered to him only in the morning.

The fumigation process was hilarious, if annoying. It went beyond spraying the ship and involved an examination of the fresh produce on board. The captain told us that a group of women officers had boarded the ship, saying "we are the doctors who will 'inject' the potatoes you have on your ship." When Parmanand tried to board the ship, he was confronted

by a young guard posted alongside the dock. Amusingly, he addressed Parmanand with the familiar "*dyađya*," meaning uncle," instead of the formal *gospodin*, meaning "sir." Savita was amused and told me in Gujarati: the poor boy; they picked him up in a village and dressed him in a uniform and put him here as a guard. We surrendered our passports to him.

The tales of woes by the captain of the Indian ship brought home to us the ways in which the Soviet system worked (or rather, did not work). The workers at the docks, ever slow, followed the Soviet adage: "We pretend to work, and they pretend to pay us." With no liability for damages when a crate full of vegetables, tea, and dry fruit was dropped from the ship—intentionally, so that the crate broke open—the workers would crowd around the crate and walk away with whatever they could grab.

As for Savita, the arrival of the Indian ship was like a gift from the Indian gods! She quietly went up to the ship and collected her own bagful of green chilies and coriander, garlic, and ginger—luxuries in Odesa (and even in the United States at the time, before the huge influx of immigrants from India would make them available in ordinary grocery stores). Savita smiled and walked past the guard with a friendly *do suidaniya*, as we picked up our passports and headed home to the consulate.

Savita longed for feminine company to chat with and relieve her isolation in Odesa. But she had to settle for what she could get. And this was largely circumscribed to playing hostess to the many Indian students, all men, who were in Odesa to train as engineers and technicians in Soviet institutes. Their experience



was generally positive, though most of them would rather have gone to the United States, their destination of choice. On rare occasions women had been chosen to study in the Soviet Union. A prominent example would be Amina Mohamed of Kenya, who studied in Kyiv and would later become a distinguished trade expert and then a leading contender for the vacant post of director general of the World Trade Organization.

Savita would quiz the students to see if they had experienced any racial discrimination but found nothing. Evidently the racial discrimination did not extend to Indians; African students, we found, were another matter. We were told—through the student grapevine, not reports in the state-controlled media—that the African students at Patrice Lumumba University in Moscow had been sufficiently upset to set out on an impromptu march to protest the disappearance of an African student. We were told that several African students had joined the procession, assuming that the protest was officially sanctioned, only to find that the march was illegal and therefore was disbanded.



Schoolchildren seen here in Red Square, Moscow, following a visit to Lenin's tomb, 1960s; photo by Trinity Mirror/Mirrorpix/Alamy Stock Photo.

The Indian students were the source of much of our information in a Soviet system that allowed no respite from draconian restrictions on free speech. In particular, these students, who had picked up Russian, were a source for us of the jokes that the people told among themselves about the Communist regime and even about some of the leaders. But the students also brought us the tragic anecdotes that they heard, which described the wanton cruelty of the Communist regime and of Stalin in particular. One especially stayed in my mind for years, haunting me for the tragedy that had befallen the land of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky. Apparently, after having met a delegation of visitors, Stalin discovered that his pipe was missing. So, he sent Beria, the KGB chief, in pursuit of the delegation. On

returning, Beria told Stalin that he had sent half the delegation to the gallows and the other half to the Gulag, only to be told by Stalin that the missing pipe was in his desk drawer.

Stalin's cruelty was the subject of dark humor, and the terrified populations coped with it as best they could. So arbitrary were the arrests and resulting disappearances that a perceptive observer of the terror remarked that, when the KGB struck a household, the neighbors coped with it by convincing themselves that the victims were indeed guilty; for if they were not, what could prevent themselves, innocent as they were, from being swept into the terror and extinction?

Odesa had also impressed on me that in the czarist days the city was widely regarded as the "Pearl of the Black Sea" and "Little Paris." Now, however, under Communism, it seemed to be in permanent mourning. The French and Italian cafes of its cultural heyday, which I imagined had been frequented by Pushkin and Tolstoy, had disappeared. Indeed, when Mark Twain passed through Odesa in 1869, he wrote: "We saw only America. There was not one thing to remind us that we were in Russia." ■

Padma Desai, Gladys and Roland Harriman Professor Emerita of Comparative Economic Systems, is a leading scholar of the Russian economy. She is the author of over a dozen books, including Conversations on Russia: Reform from Yeltsin to Putin, which was the Financial Times Pick of the Year in 2007, and From Financial Crisis to Global Recovery (2011), which Paul Krugman hailed as the "best book yet on the financial crisis." Harriman Magazine published an excerpt from Desai's memoir, Breaking Out: An Indian Woman's American Journey, in its Winter 2014 issue.

Editor's note:

Due to an editorial error in the original print version of this issue, Professor Desai's contribution appeared under the title "Discovering Russia: Odessa." This text is an excerpt from a longer work titled "Discovering Russia," in which her account of the Ukrainian city represents an interlude in the story of her study of the Russian language and culture and the Soviet economy and of her travel in the USSR. The text of the print version also contains passages that can cause confusion concerning Odesa's relationship to Russia, and other inconsistencies. The Harriman Institute did not intend to imply that Odesa is anything but a Ukrainian city, which was, in the 1960s, located in the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic. We apologize for this error in the original print version and have reissued the magazine with an updated article.