April 2000

ATG Interviews Dr. Ravi Sharma-About International Librarianship and Diversity in the Profession

Ron Chepesiuk
110423.2656@compuserve.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/atg>

Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Chepesiuk, Ron (2000) "ATG Interviews Dr. Ravi Sharma-About International Librarianship and Diversity in the Profession," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 12: Iss. 2, Article 33.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.3083>

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.

ATG Interviews Dr. Ravi Sharma

International Librarianship and Diversity in the Profession

by Ron Chepesiuk <110423.2656@compuserve.com>

Dr. Ravi Sharma has distinguished himself at the international level of the profession for nearly two decades as an administrator, teacher, scholar, and editor. Currently the **Director of College Libraries at West Virginia State College** in State, West Virginia, Sharma has held teaching and administrative positions at a number of American libraries since 1970. He is also author of nine books and more than 200 articles and has given numerous papers at library conferences in the U.S., India and Mexico. Perhaps his most important professional contribution has been as the publisher and editor of **Library Times International (LTI)**, a publication that has kept the international community informed about major library trends and developments since 1984. LTI is the world's largest circulating library newsletter. This past June, West Virginia State College, under Sharma's direction and initiative, received a \$200,000 United Negro College Fund grant to enhance the development of an international program at the college and to further expand its contacts with librarians in Benin, Africa. Sharma traveled to Benin in July to set up the program. —RC

ATG: Let's start off by talking about that big grant you got last year. How did it that come about?

RS: As you know, one of my lifetime professional goals has been to work to upgrade the qualifications of librarians from developing countries. I've actually been doing that for many years, but I thought it would be good idea to bring library directors from a Third World African country to the U.S. for training. Our African colleagues need help from us, and we should provide it because we are the leaders in librarianship. If we don't help, who will?

ATG: The grant was your idea?

RS: Yes, but you can't put a grant of this size together without wide support from your university community. Fortunately, the administration and faculty encouraged me to go after the grant.

ATG: What are you going to do with the grant?

RS: We have brought over six librarians over from Benin, and we will send six of our librarians over there as well. It's going to broaden the perspective of all librarians involved, which is good for the library profession. Our librarians will learn a lot about Africa, which is also good, because **West Virginia State** is an historically black college. Our institution also wants to reach out to Africa more. At the end of three years, our library is going to be the depository in this country for Benin materials, which means American and Canadian scholars won't have to fly all the way to Africa to do their research.

ATG: How difficult was it to get the grant?

RS: It took us almost six months. Only four grants were given out this year, and the other three recipients are a lot larger institutions than we are, so we feel fortunate to get the grant.

ATG: But you do have an African connection, which helped?

RS: Yes, our college offers African studies as a minor and we wanted to upgrade the courses we were offering. We also have a strong connection with the state library in Benin.

ATG: Are there are other grant opportunities for librarians who want to reach out to African libraries?

RS: Most definitely, but librarians have to keep an open mind. Most American librarians want to establish a connection with South Africa's libraries. It's kind of ironic because South Africa has the most developed library system in Africa, and many other countries on that continent need our help more. It's also important that the libraries have a genuine interest in Africa because the grant process is so long. Lastly, you also need a library staff that's willing to learn and are not afraid of new experiences.

ATG: In 1997 you won the **John Humphrey/OCLC/ Forest Press Award** for significant contributions to international librarianship. Is winning that award the high-

continued on page 73

A Brief Word in English from page 70

means of expression. It is also the academic lingua franca of the region. English will help their work to move beyond the borders of the English world. A university publication that does not deal with the strictly educational work is **Renditions**, a journal of modern and classical Chinese fiction and poetry in English from the **Chinese University of Hong Kong**. By its very nature its audience is overseas, but at least it is local and at least it takes quality Chinese literature beyond the bars of language and gives us a taste of its riches. Speaking of translation, what does and does not get put into another language is a topic that most people reading a translated work do not consider even for a minute. It is a bit like what has been mentioned before—it fits to our preconceived notions of what China is like—you could call it the comfortable known

exotic--the horrors of the Cultural Revolution, struggles and doom and gloom, which is certainly common enough throughout Chinese history. Dissident work is valued, mainly because anything vaguely official is always bad, always propaganda. We like the bad boys (sic) of the Chinese literary word. **Renditions**, has belatedly started to have some local Hong Kong literature in Chinese translated into English. There should be more of this so those of us who do not speak Cantonese can partly understand this chaotic society of ours here as we try to make sense of it.

These rather general musings are not an in depth survey of the local publishing scene, but merely some thoughts on publication and language. Being in a commercial hub, pub-

lishers and printers in the **Special Administrative Region** are kept busy with government reports, commercial proceedings, annual reports and so on, which are all in English. But these hardly find their way to a bookstore near you. The bottom line is the bottom dollar, and material that is not strictly necessary for one's work and education has to compete in the marketplace like everything else. English is used widely in one sense—it's because one has to—for enjoyment one reads in the comfortable confines of their own language. And in Hong Kong that makes Chinese language publishers more numerous. I am sure the Chinese publishing scene has its own problems, for example, cheaper production costs on the Mainland, but I am really not qualified to say. 🌊

est recognition you have received in your professional career?

RS: I have received many awards in my professional career, but as recognition for my contributions to international librarianship, it is certainly the highest recognition I have received.

ATG: What other milestones have there been in your professional life?

RS: It is very difficult to remember all of them, but covering the 1976 Olympics in Montreal for an Indian weekly, serving as President of the **Asian/Pacific American Librarians Association (APALA)** in 1993-94, and an invitation from the Vice Chancellor of **Jawahar Lal Nehru University (JNU)**, New Delhi, India, in 1994, to become University Librarian of JNU (one of the finest institutions of higher learning in Asia) are a few I can remember.

ATG: By the way, how did you become a librarian?

RS: Many years ago, I migrated to Canada from India and wanted to work as a journalist because of my experience in journalism but did not get even one interview. I wanted to teach history because of my qualifications but never got one interview. So I had to change my career and I decided to become a librarian because I knew that it would be possible to use my teaching and writing experience in the library profession.

ATG: You are a strong advocate of diversity in librarianship. Why do you think that diversity is important and vital for our profession?

RS: The United States is blessed with many talented people from all over the world. In my view, diversity is the strength of this country, but it has not been fully implemented in many professions, including the field of library science. We have highly qualified and experienced professionals in our field, but they are not being given an opportunity to perform and rise to top leadership positions. America has become a multi-cultural society, but top positions are still being offered only to people of one color with a few exceptions. Many professionals have left the field in frustration and have done very well in other professions or have returned to the country of their birth and have become directors, deans, and even vice chancellors. It is our loss, and we cannot afford to function in this manner.

It is in the best interest of the library profession that we should hire and promote the best talented people, regardless of their color, religion, nationality, and age. Only then, will we be able to attract more minorities to the profession. I believe in superb quality and in hiring talented and productive professionals. Diversity brings more talent, charm, color,

ChoiceReviews.online

More than reviews, it's a complete

Reviewing Revolution!

- ★ access to some 70,000 reviews via the Internet
- ★ database includes all CHOICE reviews since September 1988
- ★ e-mail notification of new reviews, based on individual subject interests
- ★ individual, customized list creation and management
- ★ **SUBSCRIBE for only \$395!**
Annual subscription includes password-controlled access for up to 20 users and all corresponding print issues of the magazine

Fax your order (860-704-0465) or e-mail
subscriptions@ala-choice.org

Or sign up today for a 60-day free trial:
www.ChoiceReviews.org

CHOICE

100 Riverview Center Middletown, CT 06457-3445
CHOICE is a publication of ACRL, a division of ALA.

and life to the society. It is needed in the field of library and information science also to serve the multi-cultural population of the United States. I know that the **American Library Association** is spending lots of money to recruit and attract minorities to the profession. This plan may not work unless we make a commitment to retain them, develop them, and promote the deserving candidates to administrative positions.

ATG: Are enough librarians from Third World countries serving as important role models in the library profession at the international level?

RS: Yes, a few, but the majority of them work for the **United Nations Libraries** in New York. I can recall **Professor P. D. Mangla**, Chair of the Department of Library and Information Science, **University of Delhi**, India, was elected Vice President of IFLA and served the organization from 1987-1991.

ATG: What can the library profession do to create the conditions that lead to more diversity in the profession?

RS: We need to educate our leaders, administrators, library directors, and librarians

continued on page 74

ATG International Interview
from page 73

in the value and importance of diversity, team work, high quality performance, and hiring the best professionals. We must educate library administrators of our library schools to hire more minorities, retain them, and reward them for their contributions and success. We need to educate members of the **American Library Association** to vote for the best candidates, and we need to educate our elected leaders of **ALA** and its divisions to appoint more minorities to all committees and give them an opportunity to lead major committees by appointing them as chairs. Only then, will we be able to say that we have created proper conditions to have real diversity in our profession rather than have only lip service and no action. If we do not create proper conditions now, it will be too late, and the profession will not be able to recover from its loss of talented professionals.

ATG: *It is a well-known fact that there are many Asian-born librarians in the United States; however, very few have top positions in the American Library Association or in library education. What are your views on this issue?*

RS: As I said earlier, we need to create an atmosphere where not only Asians but other minorities are welcomed. Only two Asian-Americans are directors of the **Association of Research (ARL) Libraries**. Only a few other Asian-Americans are directors of small or medium-size academic, special or public libraries, and no Asian-Americans have a top level position in the **American Library Association**. There is only one Asian-American who was recently appointed director of a library school. A majority of Asian-born librarians are highly qualified but are underemployed and underpaid. **IBM, Microsoft, the National Institute of Health (NIH), AT&T, Sprint, MCI** and many other companies are proud of the services of Asian-Americans. They have done very well in the fields of medicine, business administration, computer science, engineering, math and many other areas.

Even **President Clinton** spoke very highly of their success and contributions during the fall of 1996 while in Chicago. The Asian-Americans are hard-working and committed professionals, a fact which is the key to their success. They are not willing to compromise when discriminated against in hiring practices. The library profession should take advantage of these highly-qualified professionals rather than ignore them.

ATG: *Have you yourself experienced discrimination during your distinguished career in American librarianship?*

RS: I wish you had not asked me this question because I do not want to open a can of worms. Still I will say that under the circum-

stances, I have done well in the profession.

ATG: *You organize conferences, write prolifically, raise funds, network. I know the time and efforts you put into Library Times International. Where do you get the energy to do so many things in the profession?*

RS: I want to contribute to the development of librarianship and set a good example for younger librarians. Therefore, I work hard, and I enjoy doing a variety of things to promote the profession.

ATG: *Any advice to other librarians on how they can best organize their careers for success?*

RS: In my view, hard work is the key to success. All librarians should keep up-to-date with the developments and changes in the field by attending workshops, seminars, conferences, and reading the library literature. They should be active in regional, national, and/or international library associations. They should be productive librarians, take interest in research and publishing, present papers at conferences, and test the job market every five years for advancement in the profession.

ATG: *One of your most notable achievements is publishing Library Times International. How did that publication get started?*

RS: **Library Times International (LTI)** was started in 1984 after **CanStats Consulting Company** of Toronto, Canada, discussed with me its plans to publish a newsletter in the field of library and information science.

ATG: *Why has LTI been successful?*

RS: **LTI** has been successful because there was a need for such a publication. It was a new idea, and our readers all over the world have enjoyed reading **LTI** and have learned from our coverage. A few library educators use **LTI** in their courses on international librarianship and comparative librarianship as a source of information and require their students to read it on a regular basis.

ATG: *What do you see as its purpose in international librarianship?*

RS: **LTI** is a digest in the field of library and information science. Its purpose is to bring librarians, library educators, and information specialists together and to give them much needed up-to-date information about international conferences, new publications, book reviews, views of library leaders through our interviews, and news coverage from around the world in one newsletter. Our reporters, contributing editors, and others work very hard to send their reports on time. The production staff also works very hard to produce each issue. We have been successful because of the solid teamwork, commitment to excellence, and the desire to serve the international library community.

ATG: *ALA has 57,000 members but only about 700 are members of the International*

Relations Roundtable. Why do you think American librarians generally are not interested in international librarianship?

RS: We need to educate American librarians about the need and importance of international librarianship. A majority of American librarians are happy within their local, state, or national environment. Many of them are not interested in progress and knowledge in the field because they have the view that the **ALA** and American libraries are the leaders of the world; therefore, there is no need to know what is happening in other libraries around the world.

ATG: *What can be done to improve the situation?*

RS: We must educate American librarians about the importance of international librarianship. We must tell our librarians the advantages of cooperation with libraries of other nations. We must tell our librarians that knowledge is power and the more we know about international librarianship and other cultures, it will help us in our performance, and we will be able to serve our students and multi-cultural societies better. Times have changed, and we live in a global village. American librarians should remember the words of First Lady, **Mrs. Hillary Clinton**, that if you visit other countries and meet people of other cultures, you always learn something from them, just as she has learned from visiting other nations. Foreign-born librarians who have settled in the United States have learned a lot from the culture of their country, have become better librarians, and have become part of the melting pot. These examples should help American librarians to change their views and become interested in international librarianship.

ATG: *What are your future professional goals?*

RS: Only time will tell. I must say that I have enjoyed being active in national and international librarianship, and working with developing libraries and librarians. I have also enjoyed doing research and publishing and editing library newsletters, and I will keep working hard to improve libraries, librarians, and librarianship. 🌱