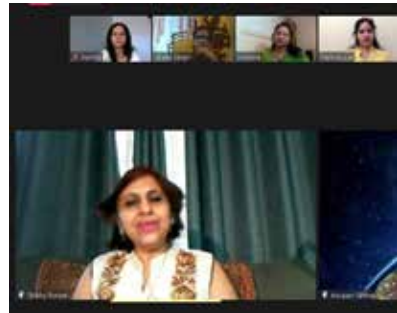


# NURTURING THE ROOTS

**The pandemic gave Asmita, an avid volunteer, poet and writer, an opportunity to bring the scattered writing community under one umbrella to promote Hindi**

**By Dr Neelam Batra-Verma**



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*n Indian may go out into the world, but you cannot take India out of the Indian. No wonder Asmita Lawrence had to involve herself in community activities when she moved to Canada from the United Kingdom many years ago.*

After working in the private sector for over a decade, Asmita Lawrence was looking for opportunities that would give her emotional and not just professional satisfaction. “Sometimes, just taking is not satisfying,” she says. “Giving touches your heart more than

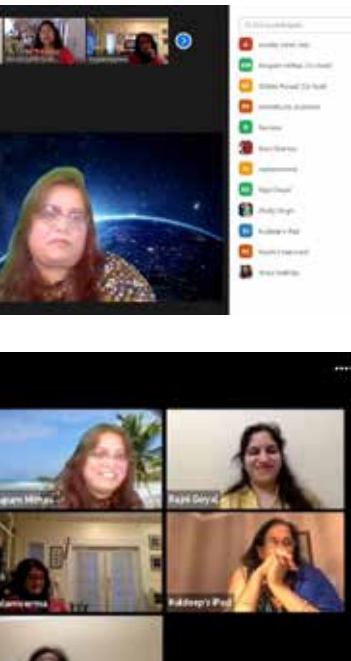
taking, and working in the community not only broadens your horizons but keeps you connected to your roots.”

With an MBA and an MPhil degree from the United Kingdom under her belt, Lawrence has been conducting free mentorship programmes for new immigrants, in coordination with VIF of Vancouver. “Volunteering with these people not only keeps me connected to India, I can share my knowledge and experience with the new immigrants who come to Canada and are totally lost initially. I help them settle, make sure their children are admitted in local schools, show them around and teach them how to avail of the vast social services available to the new immigrants. Sometimes we lose sight of the importance of the human connection in our fast-paced lives, but, in fact, a close-knit community along with your family can give much needed social and emotional strength. In summation, this is happiness.”

Apart from her community service, Lawrence teaches at the elite Ganesh Hindi School, run by the Hindu Temple in Vancouver. “Watching the journey of the little ones, as they learn Hindi and then graduate, is nothing but exhilarating. Ensuring that the children come to class every Sunday morning needs a lot of perseverance and patience, not only on the part of the teachers but also the parents. Parents work weekdays, then have to pull their kids out of bed and get them on

“Writers are encouraged to write and speak in Hindi in the Manasvini group, though English writers are not turned away.”





the road on Sundays as well, instead of sleeping in. This is no minor task.”

Belonging as she does to a family of educators, volunteering in the community and teaching have been a way of life for her. “Both my parents have always worked in academics. Through this voluntary experience I am experiencing the unique joy of interacting with little ones and imparting my knowledge. It enriches my Sunday mornings to engage students in discussion. Their creativity and curiosity is infectious. It is a pure joy to be associated with this work of helping our children stay connected to their roots.”

However, Lawrence considers forming a women’s poetry group, called Manasvini, a dream come true. “We know there are a lot of writers and poets in the community, but we are all scattered. The pandemic gave us an opportunity to organise under a single umbrella, as we all sat in our homes, writing away but not sharing at all. Now, with this group, we come together once a month, maybe on Holi, or Mother’s or Father’s Day or just Canada Day. Everyone has a story to tell. Someone may have lost a parent during the pandemic or have a loved one back in India dying of COVID-19 but is unable to go and visit them. This platform helps them to share their feelings through poems or narration, or just by sharing their pain in the group. It certainly helps their mental health. After all, when you are away from family back in India, your friends are your family. We provide each other with a shoulder of support. Our group is constantly growing as more and more writers join us.”

Writers are encouraged to write and speak in



Giving touches your heart more than taking. Working in the community not only broadens your horizons, but keeps you connected to your roots.

**Asmita Lawrence**



Immigrant Advisory Council and more recently, in 2021, she served as Programme Adjudicator for the Festival of Learning. She also serves on a number of local neighbourhood committees to support community cohesion and engagement.

An avid writer and poet, Lawrence is an active participant in community musical events. She supports event organisation and volunteers as a host. “Community work and volunteering are unique traditions that are part of the Canadian fabric, which I have embraced. As I celebrate Canada Day on 1 July, I am glad to find ways to also remain attached to my Indian values. Volunteering work gives so much joy because it brings us all closer together as people.”

The South Asian community certainly needs more volunteers like Lawrence to keep Indian culture alive for future generations, who may or may not get an opportunity to learn the same anywhere else. ■

*(The author is a Canada-based independent journalist and writer.)*