

BY JILL CUENI-COHEN

Visiting Fulbright Scholar Puts Islamic History in Perspective

When Naimur Rahman Farooqi was preparing to travel to the University of Pittsburgh in April 2004 as part of the Fulbright Visiting Specialists Program, he was told to expect trouble.

"When I came, I was given to understand there were anti-Islamic feelings after 9/11," recalled Farooqi, who is chair of the Department of Medieval and Modern History at the University of Allahabad in India. "In fact, I was warned that if there should be an incident, it could be quite hostile. But nothing like that happened."

During his six-week stay, Farooqi was pleasantly surprised by how well received he was, evidenced by the large turnouts for his lectures in and around the Pittsburgh area. "The students were unexpectedly receptive and interested in what I was talking about," he said. "I had a very rewarding experience."

The Fulbright Visiting Specialists Program: Direct Access to the Muslim World is sponsored by the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs of the U.S. Department of State and is administered by the Council for International Exchange of Scholars. A relatively new program, it is designed to promote understanding of the Muslim world by providing opportunities for U.S. higher education institutions to host specialists for short-term programs of lecturing and public outreach. As many as 30 specialists a year come to the United States for three to

six weeks from Muslim communities in the Middle East, North and Sub-Saharan Africa, Central and Southeast Asia, and the Balkans.

Richard Cohen, associate director of Pitt's Asian Studies Center, hosted Farooqi during his stay. Cohen noted that cultural exchange promotes greater understanding, resulting in less stereotypical thinking and more opportunities for peaceful co-existence.

Cohen noted that Farooqi's visit infused information, awareness, and enthusiasm into his audiences. "He was able to [address] a wide variety of questions about the Islamic world. He ... had a good sense of self-worth and pride, which is very important and clearly made a good impression."

Farooqi earned a doctorate from the University of Wisconsin and is currently writing about Islamic mysticism—or Sufism—in India. He team-taught several courses at Pitt, including Introduction to Islamic Civilization, Islamic Law and Society, and Indian Religion. He also lectured to classes and the public at six colleges and universities in Western Pennsylvania and talked about the political situation in South Asia as a guest on KQV-AM.

Medieval Islamists, said Farooqi, including those who lived during the Muslim-ruled Mughal Dynasty (1526–1858), were secular people who respected all religions.

"[The Mughals] were Muslims, and the majority of their subjects were Hindus, and they tried to bring the two communities together," he said. "They're also known for their



Naimur Rahman Farooqi

architecture, literature, and the kind of paintings and music they've left behind because these things are a great heritage for mankind. For example, they built the Taj Mahal, which is one of the most well-known buildings in the world today."

Farooqi's visit was a thrill for Joseph Heim, history and political science professor at California University of Pennsylvania. "Farooqi made it clear that some of Islam's greatest governments have actually worked—particularly in how they related to the rest of the world—and that's valuable," said Heim.

"Islam is a religion which spreads a message of peace and universal respect for other religions," said Farooqi. "Unfortunately, people in the world today see Islam only as Taliban and Al-Qaida. But they are not Islam; Islam is so much more than that." ●

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