

# Child of Many Cultures

Budhos's latest novel—like her earlier one—explores the pull of the homeland



**E**VERY SUMMER PROFESSOR Warren Singh, his wife Sonia and their daughter Meggie pack their bags, leave New York City, and move to the red-roofed home of Aunt Inez and Uncle Tom in England. There the professor struggles to write a book on one of the paradoxes that has confounded thinkers of the 20th Century: the nature of light as both particle and wave. But Warren himself is confounded by the fate of being physically estranged from one's homeland.

The Singhs in Marina Tamar Budhos' new novel, *The Professor of Light* (Putnam Publishing Group; \$23.95, 254 pages), have a lot in common with the writer herself. "It has, of course, many autobiographical elements. I wanted to take the autobiography to both a fictional realm and a magical realm," says Budhos.

Warren is Guyanese of Indian ancestry and Sonia is a Jewish-American. Meggie adores her father and the tales he passes down to her, which illuminate the history of her family scattered over India, Guyana, the US and the UK.

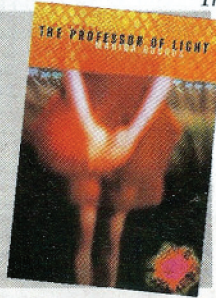
Budhos's father, Walter, too, grew up in a small village in Guyana that was entirely Indian. He migrated to the US in 1948 and married a Russian-Jewish woman. A student of international affairs at New York University, he came into contact with many Indian students. "He got so enamoured with India that he took up a job with the Indian Consulate in New

York to be near to Indian things," says Budhos, who grew up in New York.

The only trip Walter made to India was a few years before his death. "However, he never ceased to be Indian. Politically he was shaped by India," says Budhos. "In Guyana, he would listen to what was happening in India on his short-wave radio."

However, the India Budhos, the great granddaughter of indentured labourers who left India for Guyana

**Budhos wrote part of the novel in Calcutta during the Babri Masjid controversy.**



about a hundred years ago, discovered was different from what her father had described. "When I went to visit India in 1988 and in 1992 I found that India had gone on, but the notion of India was frozen in people's minds from when they left. I think this is an extremely common condition among immigrants," she says.

A large part of *The Professor...* was completed in Calcutta, where she was living as a Fulbright scholar. This was at the time of the Babri Masjid controversy. The tension led to classes being

cancelled and gave her time to write.

Back in the US, Budhos took up various day jobs and found time to write for publications such as *Ploughshares*, *Bomb*, *Ms*, *The Nation*, *Forward*, and *Travel & Leisure*. She has won awards from the Rona Jaffe Foundation and *The Kenyon Review*. She has covered international news for *Ms*, and recently won an EMMA (Exceptional Media Merit Award) for an article about sex tourism in Asia.

*The Professor of Light* has received raves from *Newsday*, *Publishers Weekly*, *Kirkus Reviews* and other influential publications. Budhos's first novel, *House of Waiting*, a political story set in Guyana, was published by a small New York press about four years ago. In it, too, she explores the pull of the homeland. Though *House...* brought her little fame and fortune, Budhos resolutely kept on writing.

Immigrants and immigration are a preoccupation with Budhos, now in her 30s and married to an American of Russian-Jewish extraction. Her forthcoming non-fiction book, *Remix: Conversations with Immigrant Teenagers*, is due for release in about three months. "There's a growing awareness of the Indian Diaspora," she says. "There are so many overseas Indians. When I was in India, I found people were doing research on them. I felt there was a lot of curiosity."

—ARTHUR J. PAIS