Student Spotlight: Kirtan Patel

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Kirtan Patel is a master’s student in history and the 2016-2018 Charles Redd Fellow in Religious Studies. Hailing from London, England, and graduating with a bachelor’s degree from the University of Oxford, Kirtan came to USU to study religious history with professors Ravi Gupta and Norm Jones. Kirtan is interested in studying religions through a historical perspective, and specifically those of South Asia. Kirtan is passionate about Hinduism, as well as reading good books, swimming, and traveling. He is especially excited about gaining a “well-rounded experience as well as acquiring the theoretical skills in history” while here at Utah State University. Among the incoming graduate students at Utah State University, Kirtan is a prime example of someone willing to test his limits by moving to a foreign country while working hard at his dreams of becoming a professor of South Asian studies.

Read our edited interview below.

What is your undergraduate Alma Mater?
I studied history at the University of Oxford.

How was that?
Pretty good actually. At first it was quite intimidating and very daunting because everyone is so smart and, you know, you’re dealing with world experts in the field, and you have one-on-one meetings and discussions with them. I don’t think I ever got over, in those three years, how difficult it was, but I think I really needed it because it really pushed me. If I wasn’t there I don’t think I would have progressed as much as I have.

What appealed to you about the graduate studies program at Utah State University?
I mainly came here because of the professors (Ravi Gupta and Norm Jones) and their research interests, which really matched mine. I read Professor Jones’ work in my undergraduate courses, and when I realized that he was here I was quite excited to work with him. Professor Ravi Gupta is the Charles Redd Chair of Religious Studies, and although I have never pursued religious studies before, I was interested in looking at religion through a historical perspective, which I didn’t get to do much of at Oxford. The study of religion and the history of Christianity in America really appealed to me.

Were there any other schools competing for your attention?
London’s SOAS (School of Asian Studies). I’m really interested in South Asia Studies religion and politics, and that choice was confusing. But I thought I needed to push myself and go to a different country and become more independent as well, so Utah State was the option for me.

When and how did you first develop an interest in history?
I was always interested in history, but I never thought I would pursue it as a career or even at a university for that matter. I thought I was interested in the sciences and that I would be doing something like medicine or dentistry. There was a push for that from home as well, but history was always something I was interested in, so I decided to carry on my study of history with the sciences. What developed my interest even further was my inquiry into my own family history. I would ask my Mom and Dad questions about how they were raised. My Mom was born in Africa and she
had to travel to India by a steam ship. Those individual human experiences are something I really enjoy learning about, and I thought history would be a great platform for that.

Did you have any pressure from your family when you told them that you were going to study history?

They weren’t upset but they were concerned with the career options because they were really unaware of what you could really do with a degree in history. There was more worry especially from my mom. Then I told her that there are lots of options I could go into and that history actually opens a lot of doors in terms of the skills you acquire. Once I got into Oxford she was actually really happy.

What projects are you working on right now?

I’m a Charles Redd Fellow and research assistant to Professor Ravi Gupta, so I’m helping with research for his book proposal on a collection of different extracts from Hindu texts from two thousand years ago until now. These are texts which are and have been really important in the study of religion as well as to those who are practitioners. I’m helping him compile that and helping him write some of the chapters for the book proposal. We did a little bit of Sanskrit as well. After my three years at Oxford I spent nine months in India learning Sanskrit so I have some basic knowledge of the language.

I want to get all of the experience and exposure to the field as I can because I want to carry on my study of history with a doctoral program. So I’d like to do a lot of research, go to archives, present at conferences, write book reviews, get myself published. I want to get that well-rounded experience as well as acquiring the theoretical skills in history.

Is there an article, movie, blog, or book which inspired you that you recommend to others?

I wasn’t really into reading a lot as a kid (other than my craze for Harry Potter), but what really inspired me was travelling. I was used to going on trips from school with my family. We’ve been to India quite a few times and we’ve traveled all over Europe as well. We would go to sites and my parents encouraged me to read up on the history, and I would write stuff in my diary when I was a kid about what we went to see.

What are you passionate about, other than history?

My faith. I’m a practicing Hindu, and it takes up a lot of my time. Back in London I was regularly going to activities with my friends, but here obviously it’s a little different. I’m not as exposed to it as I was back in London, but I’m really passionate about that. Now I’m really into reading fiction, swimming, and traveling.

What is your favorite part of studying at Utah State University so far?

I think it has to be the help I get from the professors. There is no PhD program here so they give us a lot of attention as graduate students. If we need any help we can just knock on the door and they are really helpful in that respect. Also, Logan itself is a really nice place. It’s very scenic and very different from London, where I’ve lived most of my life, so I think it’s a nice change.

If interested individuals want to follow you on social media or find you on the web, what is a good website or twitter handle for you?

I have a Facebook, but I would probably respond more quickly with email.
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What is your number one goal as a graduate student at Utah State University? Where do you hope your degree leads you? What skills do you seek to learn in order to take you there?