



# Firooza Pavri (1970 -Present)

Assistant Professor

**Department of Geography-Anthropology,  
University of Southern Maine**

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*"Look for the next challenge and work hard." Firooza Pavri, 2006.*

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## Overview

Firooza is a Professor of Geography and joined USM in 2004. Prior to joining USM, Firooza lived in the Midwest and received her M.A. and Ph.D. degrees at the University of Toledo and Ohio State University respectively. She is originally from India and research and family take her back there frequently. She is currently also the Chair of the Master's program in Policy, Planning, and Management at the Muskie School.

*This interview was conducted in 2010.*

## Early Life and Education

Firooza Pavri was born in 1970 in Bombay, India. Her father was an architect and her mother a kindergarten teacher. Pavri's parents took her and her sister on a number of trips across India while they were growing up. Pavri says those travels allowed her to experience India's cultural and environmental diversity, and "that sparked an interest in me. I didn't know I would make a career out of it [environmental science], but it was something that was in back of my mind."

Pavri completed her undergraduate studies at the University of Bombay, graduating with a bachelor's degree in geography in 1991. As an undergraduate, she developed an interest in the emerging field of Geographic Information Systems (GIS). GIS is a method used to look at satellite images of the earth, and can be used to document and monitor environmental change over time. Pavri saw GIS and remote sensing as perfect mergers between her interest in technology and environmental studies; however, that technology was not widely available in India at the time. "That was my primary reason for coming to America – to gain access to that new technology", she says. Thus, following her undergraduate studies, Pavri left India to attend the University of Toledo in Ohio, where she obtained a master's degree in geography and planning in 1994. She went on to pursue doctoral studies at Ohio State University, and received her doctorate in geography in 1999.

## **Career**

After receiving her doctorate, Pavri spent five years as an assistant professor at Emporia State University in Kansas. She taught classes that melded geography and environmental issues and emphasized her expertise in GIS and remote sensing. Pavri says as her first teaching experience, the position was challenging and sometimes overwhelming (she taught classes of up to ninety students) but though “it was daunting initially, it was also great.” She also developed a love for the Kansas landscape: “It was the first time I lived in the Great Plains and the environment and culture was unique. It was a wonderful experience.”

Pavri is currently an assistant professor of geography at the University of Southern Maine where she teaches courses in geography, environmental studies and remote sensing. Her research seeks to explain environmental change in two geographic contexts; the Western Ghats of India, and the American Great Plains. Pavri’s move to the University of Southern Maine allows her to serve as both a formal advisor and informal mentor to students in the field, a position she enjoys. “Interacting with these students has been my greatest reward since moving to this University,” she says.

## **Importance of Mentoring to Career**

Pavri knows from personal experience how helpful a mentor can be. She cites two as being particularly important in her academic and professional career. The first, Lawrence Brown, was a geography professor and her doctoral committee chair at Ohio State University. Pavri says Brown was instrumental in helping her navigate the doctoral process, and was always available to answer her questions. She says Brown has continued to shape her professional development over the past ten years, and the two remain friends to this day. Pavri’s second mentor, James Aber, is a professor at Emporia State University. Pavri has worked with Aber on a number of published scientific articles and research projects. “Because our research interests in satellite imaging coincide, Jim Aber and I have collaborated on research projects aimed at documenting changes in rural resources (both forests and wetlands), due to human influence and climatic factors,” Pavri says. Though he was a more informal mentor, Pavri cites Aber for his encouragement and re-enforcing her professional goals.

## **Highlights**

Pavri says she loves her chosen field, and that love is reflected in her professional success. She has received numerous grants for her research, perhaps the most notable being a National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) grant for her research involving the use of satellite imagery in documenting environmental change. “The research I’ve accomplished thus far has been related to resource use and sustainability in forest and wetland environments,” Pavri says. These grants have allowed her to pursue her areas of interest and have helped her gain recognition in the scientific community. She is currently conducting studies in both the Western Ghats of India and the American Great Plains, both of which examine the decline of biodiversity in those areas. Pavri says that in addition to her research, she also enjoys teaching. “Teaching is my way to give back to the community,” she says. While working at Emporia

State University, she co-directed a GeoSpatial Analysis Program. She has also published articles in several scientific journals, including *Geoforum* and *Physical Geography*.

## **Challenges**

Despite her many accomplishments to date, Pavri believes that she still has a great deal of work to do. She says it is too soon for her to cite career highlights. She acknowledges that she has also faced challenges in her career, but does not dwell on them, stating that challenges are temporary, and can be learning tools when necessary.

One of the challenges Pavri faced was the experience of being an international student at an American university. This experience taught Pavri to be active in diversity and international student issues throughout her academic and professional career. While teaching at Emporia State, she joined an international student association and says she found the group to be very positive and supportive. Pavri is currently involved in the international student group at Southern Maine, where she enjoys a mentoring relationship with many students.

## **Advice to Young Professionals**

Pavri says she remains in geography and the environmental field because her work is fulfilling and combines her interests with pressing challenges. "I have always been keenly interested in environmental change and resource scarcity issues," she says. "There is much to be done in promoting awareness, and identifying more appropriate policy mechanisms to deal with environmental degradation." Drawing on her own experiences, Pavri advises students of color interested in an environmental career to get involved in something that they are passionate about. "Look for the next challenge and work hard," she says. "That's what keeps me in this field, and interested in the work that I do."