

UNDERGRADUATE PROFILE: Abhijnan “Obi” Rej



There is a standard path to becoming a UConn undergraduate, and it goes straight from secondary school to one of our campuses. One of our least conventional students, Abhijnan “Obi” Rej, trod the road less traveled, and continues to proceed in a manner that distinguishes him as a person and as a scholar.

Born to an intellectual family in India, Obi completed his secondary education in Calcutta, early developing a taste for physics and mathematics, with a special passion for relativity. During eleventh grade he was an invited visitor at the Inter-University Center for Astronomy and Astrophysics in Pune, India. During his last year of secondary school he gave a talk at a December 1997 conference on mathematical physics organized by the Calcutta Mathematical Society, and was “discovered” by UConn Psychology Professor Robert E. Shaw; it would take another three and one half years to get Obi here. Meanwhile, he had a paper appear in the proceedings of an August 1998 conference on relativity organized by the British Society for the Philosophy of Science.

During a two-year period beginning fall 1998, Obi earned his international baccalaureate in Norway, while studying physics at universities in Trondheim (where his uncle taught) and Oslo during breaks.

In his studies, Obi came to appreciate the central role of mathematics in many disciplines, as well as the beauty of mathematics in its own right. In particular, symmetry became a special passion. A college fair in Calcutta led him to matriculate at Seton Hill College in Greensburg, Pennsylvania in fall 2000. There he studied lots of mathematics and little “general education,” at least formally. Parenthetically, from his secondary education in India, his baccalaureate studies in Norway, his voracious reading habit, and his curiosity and penchant for investigation, Obi had in fact acquired an education of considerable breadth and depth, but much of it showed up on no college-level transcript.

During summer 2001 Professor Shaw brought Obi to UConn for two weeks as a visiting scholar at the Einstein Institute, where he gave a talk entitled “Reflections on symmetries and dynamics.” (If you are unfamiliar with the Einstein Institute(s), check it out on the Web; you will be impressed.) Professor Shaw and Psychology Professor Michael Turvey then recruited Obi to come to UConn to continue his studies and do research for them, which he has done for the last two years as a University Scholar in mathematics.

Highlights of his career during the last two years include presenting a poster at “Coordination Dynamics 2002,” a March 2002 conference in Delray Beach on non-linear dynamical models of brain behavior organized by Florida Atlantic University, and attending as a student the prestigious summer course offered annually by the Institute for Advanced Study in Park City, Utah. The course subject in summer 2002 was automorphic forms, and Obi was much inspired by it.

Obi is completing his bachelor’s degree this August, and will continue to grace our department as a graduate student this fall.