Jagadish Desai
Narrator

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Interviewer

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PS: This is Polly Sonifer interviewing Jagadish Desai on July 15, 2003. Thank you for having me over today for this interview time. We are meaning to talk about the beginnings of the India Association of Minnesota. First of all, I’d like to get a little background on you, like, tell me about yourself and how you came to come here from India and so on.

JD: I was born in Jabalpur, in the middle of India, in the central zone, where my father was studying at a seminary. But I’m originally from Gujarat. The city that I spent most of my life in is called Ahmedabad, which for all practical purposes, has been the main capitol city of Gujarat. It’s in Western India. I went to the Irish Presbyterian Mission High School there. I went to the M.G. Science Institute of the Gujarat University there, and graduated in chemistry. Then I also graduated in law from the Sir L. A. Shah Law College of Gujarat University. After graduating from chemistry, I applied to some U.S. colleges to study chemical engineering.

I came to the United States in 1959 and went straight to Montana State University in Bozeman, Montana, for an undergraduate study in chemical engineering. I finished there in 1962 and had a difficulty trying to find a chemical engineering job, because on my student visa, I had to work as a chemical engineer. There were all kinds of chemical engineering jobs available in the country, but they all required citizenship, because they were all associated with the defense industry. That was one of the problems, and the second problem was that I would be allowed to work only for a maximum of an eighteen-month period, six months at a time, on my student visa. The private companies were not too interested in hiring me, because by the time I was valuable to them, I would have to go back to India.

In the meantime, I had met a young woman, Roswitha Bullinga. [She was originally from Holland, but lived in Sheridan Wyoming. She had come to Montana State University to study chemistry.] We decided to get engaged and get married. We were engaged in 1962, when I graduated. Since I did not have any job—Montana was not a place where I could find one—I had to go out of Montana. I could go east or I could go west. I didn’t have that much money, so I borrowed one hundred dollars from Roswitha and flipped the coin and heads it was, so I headed east. [She is still collecting interest on the loan she gave me!]

[Laughter]

JD: I drove up in my old beat up car and came to Minneapolis on May 7, 1962. By the time I came to Minneapolis, I had about eighty dollars left. I was able to run into an Indian student near
the University of Minnesota, and he introduced me to somebody else, and I found a little rooming place near the Farm campus in St. Paul and paid twelve dollars a week, and tried to find a job. I was almost out of money, down to my last ten dollars, when I found a job with a battery company in Minneapolis. Some of the companies that I had applied for took a long time to respond. One of them was the 3M Company. After I got the job, 3M called me, and they were interested in me, but I already had accepted a job, so I never went to them. So I worked for this company; it was called the Gould-National Batteries. They were located at Twenty-Seventh and University Avenue Southeast, not too far from the Minneapolis campus. I started out as a chemical engineer.

I just want to digress a little bit to explain to people what it was like to come to this area as a student, a non-European student. Not too far from where our office was or where our lab was, there was a new apartment building that was going up. I thought it would be nice to find an apartment near where I worked. So I went to look for an apartment. There was a young graduate student couple from the university, they were the caretakers. They were very nice to me and told me that the landlord had instructed them not to rent to any person of dark color in that apartment building. So that’s the way it was. I also went to look for housing in St. Paul, went around the Highland Park area, around St. Catherine’s College, around the St. Paul Cathedral. I could see the sign, “Apartment for Rent,” and as soon as they would see me, they’d say, “The apartment is already rented.” That’s the way things were back in 1962 in this area.

As long as I’m talking about housing, that didn’t change for quite some time. As a matter of fact, in North Oaks, where today many of my Indian friends are living, in the 1960s, they would not allow a person of a darker color or even Jews, to purchase a home! It was a private residential area, and they could decide who was going to live there.

I bought my first house in 1968, but I did live in the Midway area. I rented a place, and then we bought our first house in Maplewood. By the way, I got married in 1962 in St. Paul. We didn’t buy the house until 1968. I had my wife, who is originally from Holland and Germany, [would go to the open house without me, and decide whether it would meet our needs. We did go together in the beginning but were given a very cold reception by the selling agents. So, my wife went by herself to the Maplewood house, liked it] and made a tentative agreement that we were interested. I, then, sent one of my colleagues from the battery company to go and check the house, see how it was structurally, before I showed up. We had experiences, even at that time, as late as 1968, that if I showed up someplace, somehow or other, they’re not too interested in selling me the house. I mention this for one purpose only: that my children or some other Indians who came here way after we came and probably have never experienced anything like that in this area. But they should know how life was at that time.

Eventually, at the battery company that I worked for, I became a manager. By 1968, I had twenty-six engineers who worked for me all over the country. I was the director of quality control. I realized at that time that most of the foreign students, particularly Indians because they were mostly engineering students, once we got out, we did get jobs, but we were always given the jobs that kept us away from the main customers [and our salaries were lower than those of our local colleagues.] We could never get jobs in the sales and marketing or customer contacts and things like that. We worked behind the doors in the laboratories or engineering places. The
reason was that there was a certain feeling among the corporations here or the employers that the customers were not quite ready to accept people of different skin color. Again, my purpose in pointing this out is that life has changed considerably today, and it has changed because there are a lot of people like us who convinced the employers that, yes, they could make money through us, even though we looked different, and if we came in contact with their customers, they would make money. They found us quite reliable, and that has opened up doors for many people today.

When I came to Minnesota in 1962, the predominant social and cultural group that catered to Indians was the student group from the University of Minnesota. They had an organization called Indo-American Club, and they were very successful. I attended many of their events, and I met many people, Indian and non-Indian, at that university organization. Their scope was limited, because they catered, primarily, to university-oriented people. Eventually, their main function was to bring Indian movies from India. They were showing all the Indian movies, and it was a big moneymaker for them, which was very good. That also provided a forum for the Indians whether or not they were associated with the university, to come and meet other Indians. That’s where I met a lot of other Indian friends.

Eventually, many of us who had decided to settle down in this country became aware that we were going to be not transients like most of our student friends, who, once they’re finished studying, would move away somewhere else. We were going to stay here, and we were going to put down our roots here. It became important and necessary for us to become involved with the non-Indian and the general American society, to try and find out how the general society worked, how we could become part of it, and how we could benefit from their experiences.

Along that line, we found that there were several organizations in this area that addressed exactly the kind of concerns that we had. One of them was the International Institute, which was located in St. Paul. As I understood it at that time, the reason why that institute was formed was that [during the previous sixty years] there were a lot of East Europeans [Russians, Latvians, Lithuanians, Estonians, etc.] who were migrating to this area, and they were not openly welcomed by the West Europeans who came from Germany, Scandinavian countries, England, France, etc. So those people who came from East European countries had started their own organization, which eventually became the International Institute. Now, by the time we came around, which was in the early 1960s, the East Europeans had moved along. Their children and grandchildren did not have a need to learn English or get oriented to this society. However, many Asians were coming in. The International Institute had an interest in getting new clientele. [The Asians (many of them did not speak English well) became the new prospects for the International Institute.]

**PS:** Which countries, primarily, were they coming from?

**JD:** At that time, there were quite a few coming from China and the Philippines. The International Institute found Indians somewhat interesting, because most of us who came here, came here for education. We were fairly well conversant with English, so we did not need any linguistic skills or education from the International Institute, and we really did not need that many immigration services either, because we were reasonably well equipped to handle those
things ourselves. However, we had an interest, a mutual interest, because we could learn from their experiences and the Institute would benefit from our skills. So we did not have to start from ground zero. I met with four or five other people who were in a similar situation as I was, and we all agreed that it was desirable for us to form an organization that was not student oriented, had nothing to do with any university or any educational organization, and would help integrate us into American society and also find Americans and have them integrated into our culture. That is the background of why India Club came into existence.

**PS:** Tell me about the very beginning of the India Club. You were one of the founders or the founder?

**JD:** I was one of the founders. Actually, we had a big drought in India, and there was a relief fund that the government of India was raising. We felt that maybe we should do something about it. It so happened that at that time a very famous singer from India was touring the U.S. His name was Mr. Talat Mahmood. People of my generation know who he was. We learned that he was traveling through the United States, and we thought that it would be nice if we could plan a program for him to come here and raise some money for the relief fund. I had a very good friend at that time; his name was Dr. Raj Dutt. Raj and I were involved in arranging a lot of musical parties for our Indian friends here. We used to get together informally. I talked to Raj about Mr. Talat Mahmood being in this country, and we together called Mr. Mahmood’s agent in New York. They were willing to have him stop by in Minneapolis. That was in 1973.

So we signed up, and we formed the India Club at that time. Our first program on May 7, 1973 was Mr. Talat Mahmood’s concert. There were four or five people who were very instrumental in getting the whole act together. One was Mr. Madhukar Gupta. Mr. Gupta had finished his study at the university, and he was doing his practical training work in Minneapolis. But he was single-mindedly determined that he was going to go back to India. He acted as our treasurer, and he did a fantastic job for taking care of all the details for Mr. Talat Mahmood’s program. There was another gentleman, and his name was Mr. Suresh Nayak. He used to work for Whirlpool, and he was here for a few years. He also was an excellent organizer, and he got involved. Then we had a couple, Anu Zdenek—Anu was a very good singer—and Anu’s husband, Zeke Zdenek. Zeke was a very good organizer, so he became the secretary. We all put together an excellent program. We made for the relief fund of the President of India. [Everybody purchased a ticket. No exceptions, including myself and all other organizers.]

**PS:** So why was it important to have a club that was sponsoring the singer?

**JD:** Because there was nobody else who would do that. The Indo-American Club would do that, if they wanted to, but the students, at that time, were not really interested. They had a good moneymaking activity of bringing Indian movies and showing them—organizing a professional concert was not part of their agenda.

**PS:** Okay. Was it important to incorporate the India Club?

**JD:** Yes, we felt that a non-profit status would allow us to do not only this program, but many other things. By the way, before we even started the club, some of us had started a newsletter for
the Indian community, and the newsletter was called *Patrika*. I have one of the original issues of the *Patrika*, which I am contributing to this project. Anyone who is interested can look at that. I may mention about one particular event that somewhat was a catalytic event in us forming some organization. Before the club was started, I got a call once from a Christian minister in Duluth [Minnesota]. He had called the University of Minnesota, and he happened to talk to the foreign student advisor. He wanted the help of somebody because there was a sailor from India who was in the hospital in Duluth. No one could understand him. This minister from Duluth was doing voluntary work, and he wanted to find someone from here who could understand his language and can communicate on his behalf with the hospital staff. He talked to Dr. [Josef] Mestenhauser who knew me because even though I was not associated with the University of Minnesota, I had, as an individual, raised some funds for Indian foreign students who had a financial need at the university. I had helped raise some funds, and I’d given them to Dr. Mestenhauser for these people.

Also, back in 1965, there was Indian student from India; his name was Sam Hooroo. Sam died during a surgery at the University Hospital, and, at that time, the foreign student advisor was Dr. [Forrest] Moore. Dr. Moore contacted me, and Dr. Moore and I arranged for Mr. Hooroo’s funeral, his burial in Minneapolis. We took a lot of photographs of him. We prepared an album, and we sent all this stuff, with his belongings, to his wife and young daughter in India.

Then, sometime later, there was another student; his name was Ram Nigam. Ram was going in a car with someone through Minneapolis on the freeway. He heard a pop, so he thought that he had a flat tire. He got out to see what it was, and someone shot him. Some kids were playing around with guns, and they just shot him and killed him. Again, Dr. Moore contacted me, and he and I together arranged for Mr. Nigam’s body to be sent back to India, to his relatives. So I had some degree of involvement with the university.

Coming back to this call about this sailor in Duluth, when I got that call, it was at night. I was in a business meeting. I knew that I could speak his language, because he was from the same part of India, Gujarat, that I was from. I right away contacted one Mr. Ramesh Mehta, who is also from my area. Both of us went on our own the next day to Duluth. We saw this sailor in the St. Mary’s Hospital. When we arrived, he was chanting; his God’s name; “Hey Ram, Hey Ram” The nurses thought that he was moaning with pain.

**PS:** Oh!

**JD:** They were giving him morphine because they thought he needed to be sedated. We explained that he was saying his prayers. He was not in pain. Eventually, we found out from his past correspondence in his possession that he had some kind of stomach problem, a disease that nobody knew anything about. He was a sailor from the Scindia Steam Navigation Company from India. We found out that he also was in a hospital in London for quite some time, and then they had put him back on the boat. And when he came to Duluth, he was so sick that the company just left him there in the hospital and the ship went back. Some people may or may not know, but India has quite a cargo commerce between India and Duluth. The Indian cargo ships come to Duluth.
We couldn’t figure out what his problem was, but, apparently, it was serious enough. The people in St. Mary’s Hospital also did not know what the problem was. Again, there, my friend, Raj Dutt, whom I mentioned earlier, was working for the emergency department at St. Paul Ramsey. This was just before Thanksgiving weekend. I called Raj Dutt and asked whether it would be possible to bring this patient from St. Mary’s Hospital to St. Paul, because, at least, we have some Indians here. There are Indian doctors who could probably better understand what his problem was than the doctors in Duluth. Well, there was no problem. Raj would arrange that we could transport him, and he would take care of him here in St. Paul. The problem was that the St. Mary’s Hospital did not want to let him go. They would not allow him to be transported to St. Paul.

PS: Why not?

JD: I really don’t know why not, but my sense was that, at that time, that hospital didn’t have that many patients, and losing one paying patient bed was probably more important to them than letting the patient go to some other treatment. That is the comment that the shipping agent made to me in Duluth. Anyway, I think we were there on a Tuesday before Thanksgiving, and we wanted to transport him Wednesday. That didn’t happen, and he died on Friday.

PS: Oh.

JD: We were able to get his body here. I contacted some of my other Indian friends. We went together, went to a cemetery where we had his body cremated, and we got his ashes, and we sent his ashes to his family in India. All these experiences convinced us that we had to work in some kind of formal manner to see what we could do. By the way, we were also getting requests from various schools and other organizations who wanted speakers who could come and talk to them about India.

Also, once I had a call from the immigration officer in St. Paul. I think his name was Mr. Jay Palmer. He said he had about forty or fifty Indians at the airport who were on their way to Winnipeg by Northwest Airlines. They were coming in from India, but the Canadian government refused entry to them, so they had to go back to India. I went to the airport, and visited with them. They were all from Punjab, and, supposedly, they were told that everything was all set for them in Canada. I contacted a few local Indian friends. The group had about eight, nine hours to spend at the airport, so we brought some Indian food for them. We fed them. We calmed them down. We told them, “There’s nothing anyone can do,” that they just had to go back. At least we provided some hospitality for them before they all went back. So we realized that we would be facing all kinds of issues like that, and it made sense to have an organization where we could do things in an organized fashion. That was the motivation to start an organization.

PS: So it was, primarily, for service to other people that you began?

JD: Well, it was service to other people, but also service to us. We learned a lot of things from it. We eventually wanted to get involved with the governmental process in this country, with the political process in this country. We thought that we could do all those things in an organized manner. So this was kind of a learning step for us.
**PS:** When you incorporated the India Association, how did that process happen? It was called India Club at first?

**JD:** Yes, it was called India Club, because we already had an Indo-American Association, which was the student body. The name, India Association, would be confusing. So that’s why we called it the India Club, just to identify it, and distinguish it from the Indo-American Association.

[Tape interruption]

**JD:** We felt that there was a need to educate our children about India and also the children of some of our non-Indian friends who wanted to know about India. So along this line, there was one Mrs. Sekhri. She was a professor, as I understood and if I remember right, at St. Catherine. She and her daughter volunteered to give some classes. I used to go to a church in St. Paul. It was at Fairview [Avenue North] and Dewey [Street North], and it was called First Trinity United Methodist Church. It is now called the Church of Good Shepherd Methodist Church. Anyway, they were nice enough to let us use their facilities free of charge. Every Sunday afternoon, we used to have some classes, given by Mrs. Sekhri and her daughter, about India.

**PS:** Was she from India?

**JD:** Yes, she was from India. The classes went very well for quite some time. Eventually, Mrs. Sekhri, something went wrong with her health and she could not keep up. It’s unfortunate . . . I think she came down with cancer, and she passed away. So the classes came to a stop, but I’m glad to know that there was another Indian school that took over the project, and they started giving classes and doing a lot of other activities. Before that, the India Club did a few things like that, along that line.

We used to get requests from various organizations for speakers on India. We would send out people, different people from the India Club or from the Indian community, who would go. It makes sense to have a central place where people could call in, and then we would be able to contact different people. So that worked out very well. Our association with the International Institute also was very helpful.

**PS:** What kind of tie did you keep with the International Institute?

**JD:** We had a very informal tie. We were able to use their facilities free of charge whenever we wanted to. We learned quite a few things from them and that helped us in our own organization.

Before we begin more and more with the Institute . . . In 1976, this country was celebrating the Bicentennial of the United States. I contacted the person from the state who was designated to be in charge of the Bicentennial activities. His name was Frank Adams. I went to see him, and I asked him, “As new immigrants from India, and what do we have to do to get involved with the Bicentennial celebration of the United States?” At that time, Wendell Anderson was the governor. He said, “Look, you seem to be very interested in that. We would like to have some participation from new immigrants.” So he proposed my name to Governor Anderson, and I was appointed to the State Bicentennial Commission. Eventually, in that commission, I became the
Chairman of what they called the Project Review Committee. That committee of eight people, was responsible for giving monies to anyone who applied for any grants. That was a good experience. We traveled all over the state, and I was able to encourage many Indian organizations and Philippine organizations and also some other minority Asian organizations to apply for grants for the Bicentennial, which they did.

Along that line, I also encouraged the International Institute of Minnesota to apply for a grant. They were planning for the Festival of Nations at that time.

**PS:** That was already started then?

**JD:** No, but the organizational process had already started. They applied for a grant for that. I was helpful to them, pushing the grant through with different committees and so on and so forth. That brought me more in contact with the Festival of Nations, and I was placed on the Festival of Nations Committee back in 1976. For the first time, an Indian organization was included in the Festival of Nations, and it continues even today. The arrangement was that each country was responsible for four different items. One would be an exhibit about India. The other thing will be selling ethnic food. The third would be selling ethnic merchandise. The fourth was the cultural thing, where we would perform Indian cultural things at the festival. Two items were moneymaking: selling food and selling merchandise. The other two items cost money, you know, to have something to exhibit and you had to have people there.

People had to volunteer their time, but they had to pay for the parking and everything else. Then the cultural program . . . we needed a lot people there to perform dances, etc. That cost money. India Club decided that we would contact some people who actually knew about India’s food. They had Indian restaurants here. They would pay a certain fee to come and sell the food. Then there were some people who were selling Indian merchandise. They would come under the auspices of the India Club, and they would pay a certain fee to be able to come and sell the merchandise. The money that we got from them, we were able to use that money to pay for the expenses of the other two items, you know.

**PS:** So it broke even.

**JD:** It broke even, and, sometimes, we even made money on that. The people who sold food made money. The people who sold merchandise made money. But apart from money, it brought us in contact with a larger immigrant community at the Festival of Nations. We met all kinds of people who were immigrants here. It brought a new perspective about immigration. We all were in a similar boat. We all went through similar things.

**PS:** What do you think was the biggest thing that people learned they had in common with the other immigrants?

**JD:** Let me put it this way. We’re all familiar with skyscrapers or the tall buildings in this country. You know, some people enter the building at the basement level. Some people enter the building at the first floor level. Some people enter the building at the skyway level. Different people have different visions of how far they can go. Some people, if they enter at the basement
level, they think if they can make it to the skyway, that’s a big thing in their life. They have accomplished a lot. Some people who come in at the first level and go to the second or third level, that’s a big thing in their life, and so on and so forth. We realized that different immigrant groups who came at different levels at different times had different ideas of how far they could go or once they came there, did they feel quite satisfied? We felt that our group [had a great advantage over the other immigrants because of our education, training, and professional background.

By the way, I also want to make a comment of who formed our community at that time. Most of the people at that time, in the early 1960s or late 1950s, came to this area as students. We already had our education in India before we came. Many of us were engineers, doctors, professors, etc. Around the mid 1970s, early 1980s, some business people from India started coming here. If I’m not mistaken, at that time, if a person could invest $10,000 in the United States, he could get a green card.

PS: Oh.

JD: So there were quite a few Indians who were coming to America by just investing $10,000.

PS: What did they invest in?

JD: Any investment in America.

PS: Any private stock or bond or government—?

JD: You could start up a business or any investment. You can make an investment. I’m not familiar with all the details, whether you could buy stock, bonds, but they needed a $10,000 investment. Today, it probably has gone up much higher, but it still is there. So these were the business people.

Now most of the people, like me, who came to America as students did get some blending or get some exposure to the Americans in this country, because we had to meet the fellow students, professors, etc. We had to live with Americans. We had to do some American things, you know. Even though we did not quite mix as much with Americans as some other people did, we still had some exposure. At least our instructors and teachers, they were all Americans. So we had some degree of Americanization. The people who came for business, had a different kind of Americanization. It came through their customers and other fellow business owners. Then the third kind of people were the relatives of these other two. We can sponsor our relatives to come here, and that was a mixed bag. Some relatives were quite westernized and some were not, so we had this mix of people.

We also found that we had a lot of different religions. Different Indians practiced different religions, so religious organizations evolved. Some of them are: The Hindu Mandir, Gita Ashram, the Islamic Group, the Buddhist group, the Meditation Society. However, when we got together as the India Club, it didn’t matter whether we were from India or Pakistan, whether we were Hindu or Muslims or Christians or whatever. We all got together socially. We all shared the
same culture, the same music, same things. We blended nicely without regard to our other differences.

**PS:** What caused that? In India, those lines are pretty rigid. The Hindus and the Muslims don’t socialize together, and different castes wouldn’t mix together, and different parts of India wouldn’t mix together. Why did those break down here?

**JD:** Polly, that is not quite correct, because in India, I lived in a Muslim neighborhood. There were quite a few Hindus around me, and there also was a Christian family. There were a few Christians. But we all socialized with one another.

**PS:** Oh, okay.

**JD:** The thing about our Indian culture was that we did not socialize in the sense that we did not prospect for marriage partners outside our own community group. We knew culturally that we married within our community. So my best friend, for example, was a Hindu. His sister, even though she was of a marriageable age to me, I would always treat her like my own sister. I never entertained the thought that someday I could date her and I could marry her; and he would treat my sister the same way. That’s the way we grew up. That’s the way our culture was. We did socialize on a lot of frontiers, but it was not the kind of limitless socialization that one finds in America. So that was a difference.

The second thing was that because someone belonged to another religion, that didn’t bother anyone. We did not fight. We didn’t try to convert someone or argue that my religion was better than your religion and so on and so forth. We just never talked about it. It was a given. Many times, people would come to the church that I went to, even though they were not Christians, and I would go to some Hindu religious events or even some Muslim events and vice versa. So we didn’t have that kind of polarization.

**PS:** And the different language groups?

**JD:** The different language groups . . . We spoke in English whenever we could or we spoke in Hindi. It so happened that for a few years, I lived in an apartment building, which, basically, was occupied mostly by the refugees from Pakistan, Indians who lived in Pakistan who had their homes in Pakistan, but all those things were taken away by the Muslims who moved from India there [during the 1947 partition of India.] They had to give up everything, and they came [to various parts of India.] So I had a variety of neighbors. I had one neighbor from Bengal, which is the eastern part of India. I had another neighbor from Kerala, which is the southern part of India. I had several neighbors from Punjab area, from the Sindh area, who were all refugees from the former India that became Pakistan. They all spoke different languages. As a matter of fact, they all cooked different foods. There were smells of all the different foods in this apartment building. In the beginning, it used to drive one another crazy.

**PS:** [laughter]
JD: For example, the people from Bengal, they were fish eaters, because there’s so much water there. They would deep fry fish and so on and so forth. If you’re not used to the smell of burning oil, fish oil, it’s not very appetizing.

PS: Right. [Chuckles]

JD: Then we had some people who used coconut oil. They came from Kerala. The smell of burning coconut oil, if you’re not used to it, is certainly not that appetizing either. But these two were neighbors, and they learned to live with each other, and we were neighbors of them. Then we had some other people who used mustard oil. They enjoyed mustard oil, the burning smell of deep fried mustard oil, but we didn’t. But we got used to it.

PS: What obnoxious thing did you do?

JD: We used peanut oil.

PS: Okay. [Laughter]

JD: I’m sure that the people who used the fish oil, they used to go crazy . . . using the peanut oil. As a matter of fact, along this line, I’m reminded, back in 1964 or so, I had an Indian student friend who lived in Minneapolis in an apartment building. It’s called Erie Plaza. It’s on Erie Street [Southeast] and Essex Street [Southeast] in Minneapolis. [It was occupied by many foreign students.] Quite an aside . . . My friend Raj Dutt, who passed away, and a couple of other people including myself have owned that building since 1982. But it was in 1964, and the friend had a Halloween party. My wife and I went to the Halloween party. There was a car that had pulled up just ahead of us at the entrance, and we parked behind this car. This young mother had dropped off three or four kids who went into the building, and she was waiting for them to come back after the trick or treat. We were just going in, my wife and I, and these kids came running out. The mom said, “How come? Aren’t you going to go in there?” They said, “No, Mom. Let’s get out of here. It stinks in here.”

[Laughter]

JD: When we entered, we could see why the boys ran out! We could smell Chinese food and Indian food and all kinds of other foreign smells in there. So that’s the way it was.

PS: Those divisions just didn’t make any difference in the India Club in the early days?

JD: No, it didn’t, and they still don’t make any difference here. Over the years, we realized that the people we met here were our friends, and these other people chose to become our friends. For example, my wife and I got married in St. Paul in November 1962, and almost all the friends, people who visited . . . We didn’t have a single relative at that wedding. They were all total strangers to us that we had just met three, four months before we got married. Since then, they’ve become such good friends that we have gone around to celebrate the twenty-fifth wedding anniversaries, our fortieth wedding anniversary. We have become part of a family. They’re closer to us than our own family members. That’s a very interesting thing that happened to us.
PS: Now, it’s pretty unusual in those times for an Indian man to marry a woman for love, right?

JD: Yes.

PS: How did that work with your family in India?

JD: Well, I came from a large family, we are four brothers and three sisters, and I was number two. My eldest brother, his marriage was arranged. The sister after me, her marriage was arranged. Then out of all the rest of the siblings, there was only one brother besides me who had a love marriage. He and I, two out of seven, had love marriages. All the others were arranged marriages. We all are married. Nobody got divorced. Nobody had any [more] problems or less problems than anybody else.

My father, by the way, was a minister. He was a Methodist minister in India. He had his education in India. He also was educated in America. My mother was a teacher. She was educated. She was really the backbone of the family. She continued to work as a teacher in India, even when we were young. She provided the financial and social stability for the family. All my family members are fairly open-minded, and they didn’t have any problems of my getting married here. I just happened to fall in love, and we decided that we wanted to get married. Obviously, my wife’s family was not quite as excited, because they were immigrants from Holland and Germany to this country, and to them, I was a Negro. I had a straightforward talk with them, and I told them that, look, if I were in their shoes, I would feel the same way. If my sister ever came back, at that time, and wanted to marry a Negro, I wouldn’t be too excited about that either. So I could understand how they felt the way they did. But I was who I was. I was proud of who I was. You know, I would respect their decision.

It so happened that when we got married in St. Paul, they did not know where we were. They did not know we got married without their knowledge and, obviously, without their permission. That was in 1962. By the time 1964 came around, we got together. After that, we became very close, very close friends . . . relationship, you know. I was closer to them than to my own parents, simply because they were in this country and my parents were not. That’s another lesson. We are all prejudiced. Whether we like it or not, that’s a fact of life. It so happened that I have a niece . . . . My brother who had a love marriage, he lives in Princeton, New Jersey. His daughter is married to a black guy, and she couldn’t have found a better boy for her husband. That’s one thing about America.

By the way, I became a U.S. citizen in 1966, because I came to the conclusion that I wanted to make this country as my country. It’s my choice. [Unfortunately we Indians, unlike the Israelis, could not opt for a dual citizenship.]

Let me digress a little bit. After I became a U.S. citizen, in 1967, I went to a caucus, political caucus. There was a young fellow who was taking some positions in the caucus, and I had taken some positions opposite to him. My position prevailed, so he was somewhat irritated. He asked me, “Mr. Desai, are you a citizen of the United States?” Obviously, I would not have been there if I had not been a citizen. The fact that he asked that question, you know, I was intrigued by that. I told him, “Before I answer you question, please, tell me, are you a United States citizen?”
He was offended. He said, “Of course, I am!” I said, “How did you become a United States citizen?” He said, “I was born in this country!” I said, “You were? What choice did you have about where you were born?”

[Laughter]

**JD:** There was quite a silence. I said, ”Look, my friend, I became a United States citizen last year, and I made a very informed choice between two different countries. You didn’t have a choice. Are you willing to make that choice now? You should go somewhere else, another country, and check it out before you want to decide what country you want to belong to.” Well, obviously, people had not heard that point of view. That guy did become my friend. Today, he’s the mayor of Maplewood.

**PS:** Oh! [Chuckles]

**JD:** There’s one other little incident, when you talk about different ethnic groups and so on and so forth . . . In 1966, I got a call. My father was very serious. That was before I became a U.S. citizen. On a short notice, I went back to India. I had six, seven hours to kill at the Bombay airport.

**PS:** Your father was ill?

**JD:** Yes, he was very ill in India, in Ahmedabad. I had to kill some time at the airport, and I was bored. There was nothing to do. So I would meet the Europeans who were coming in, from different European flights. I could tell them, “You are German. You have a German accent.” “You are Dutch.” “You are Scandinavian.” “You are French.” Many would turn around and tell me, “And, yes, you are American. You’ve got an American accent.”

**PS:** [Laughter]

**JD:** In America, nobody tells me that I have an American accent, even today. They ask me, “Where the heck are you from?”

[Laughter]

**PS:** Within the India Club, tell me about some of the early events or projects that the club got involved in.

**JD:** Well, one of the things . . . India had quite a bit of business with the Twin Cities, particularly the food business. Indians bought a lot of food grains from General Mills, Cargill, and some other companies. India also was buying some other industrial supplies from here and, often, the Indian delegation would come here for that purpose. Many times, that delegation was led by the ambassador of India. So I used to get information whenever a delegation was going to come. I used to get some kind of information from either the Indian embassy or somebody [in the Chicago consulate] that so and so is going to be here at a certain time. India Club would arrange a community reception for these people. In that capacity, we even entertained three, four
different ambassadors. One was . . . I’ve forgotten the names. I think one was Mr. Kapoor. He was related to Mr. Nehru. Then there was one Mr. Zha, who came here; he was an ambassador. Then one ambassador was Ambassador Narayanan. We had a reception [for Ambassador Narayanan] in my house, and he came and had a good time. He was with us until the wee hours in the morning. Mr. Narayanan eventually went back to India and he became the President of India, and was in that office until about two years ago.

Then we had some cultural groups that used to come here. One of them was a very famous Indian dancer, Kathak dancer. His name was Birju Maharaj. He was going to be in this area. We arranged for Birju Maharaj to meet a lot of people of the Indian community. Birju Maharaj was having some health problems. He was a dancer, but he was having some pain in his back and in his heels and so on and so forth. I was able to contact an Indian physician in the Mayo Clinic. He wanted to go to the Mayo Clinic to get checked out, so I took him there, and he was checked out. Unfortunately, it was arthritis. Nothing could be done about it, you know. He had many performances here. We had several local Indian families who hosted dinners for him and his troupe members. We did those kinds of things.

[Tape interruption]

**PS:** Tell me more about this dancer.

**JD:** Birju Maharaj is the famous Kathak dancer from India. As a matter of fact, he has won the highest awards of dancing in India. He has been coming here often. Many of his students are all over the world. I think one of his students here, if I’m not mistaken, that’s Rita Mustaphi. I think Rita is one of his former students. [Rita is doing a fantastic job of promoting Indian dances.]

Then there was a library at the University of Minnesota called the Kerlan Collection Library. They had books from various parts of the world, but they didn’t have any books on India. So we contacted several people of our community who had books on India. They donated. We collected all these books, gave them to the Kerlan Library, and they are still part of the Kerlan Collection Library at the University of Minnesota.

**PS:** What kind of books were those? Non-fiction or fiction?

**JD:** All kinds of books, any kind of books that we could find about India. Then we also told the librarian there in charge of the Kerlan Library to see what kind of books . . . where they can get them. I haven’t been there lately, but they have managed to get quite a collection of books from India.

**PS:** Were they primarily written in English or in Indian languages?

**JD:** I think they were all different, English and other languages. But don’t quote me on that; I’m not so sure.

**PS:** How did you come by these books? Where did you attain them?
JD: Oh, just different people. We brought some books with us, and different people of the community had books they had already read, and they could just donate them to the library, so that’s how we got the books.

PS: Okay.

JD: As I said, we arranged speakers on India for many educational, cultural, social organizations throughout the Twin Cities. Every now and then, we would get a word that some Indian had come under some program with some organization, and then we would bring that person or try to help that person meet some other Indians and other Americans, to just act as a bridge and try to make some people at home, both make Indians at home with us and make Americans at home with the Indians.

PS: When those people would come through, did you put them up in your homes or did you just have receptions for them? How did you handle that?

JD: Not many people needed the places to live because they already had arranged them. We would arrange receptions for them or informally get them to meet other people. Oftentimes, we would just give them information over the phone. They wanted to know where to shop, where to buy Indian stuff, you know, who to meet. Sometimes, we can make connection, by where they’re from, with two or three people they could meet, that they could relate to, and they could then get them oriented to this place. We had cases where some Americans would call us. They wanted to meet some Indians because they had been to India, in some part of India, and they wanted to meet some people. So we would introduce them, refer them to the people from that part of India so they could meet them and get reconnected. So it was a two-way street.

PS: Did you tend to group the newly-arrived Indians with people who spoke their mother tongue?

JD: It’s more than mother tongue, because whoever came here spoke English anyway.

PS: Okay. So what basis did you use to figure out who they would—?

JD: Oh, I think that we could tell where they were from. In India, most of us can tell by our name where we are from. Our names indicate the part of India we are from. So that’s not very difficult to figure that out.

PS: Unless you’re not from India. [Laughter]

JD: That’s right.

PS: So you could figure that out?

JD: Yes.

PS: So the Patels met the Patels?
JD: Right.

PS: The Nambudiris met the Nambudiris?

JD: Right.

PS: Okay. But they didn’t always have exactly the same last name?

JD: Not necessarily, but they would tell, when you talked to them. They didn’t necessarily want to meet people from their part either. They just wanted to meet other people or they had some special needs. Sometimes they needed some help for their immigration situation, what they could do. Sometimes they needed some legal service and we would refer them to the appropriate people.

By the way, I came to the U.S. to study chemical engineering, and after I finished chemical engineering, I started as a chemical engineer, and became a manager of a local company. Eventually, I got out of that job and I went into my own business. I had an insurance business. I did my Charter Life Underwriter (CLU) education from American University in Bryn Mawr [Pennsylvania]. Then many years later, I redid my law education (I already had a law diploma from India) and I went to William Mitchell Law College [in St. Paul, Minnesota] and started from scratch. They wanted to give me credit for my education in India and I didn’t want it. So I started from ground zero, and I obtained my J.D., Juris Doctor, from William Mitchell in 1990. I became a licensed attorney in Minnesota and about two years ago, I retired fully. I gave up my legal license. I also gave up my insurance license. I’m fully retired. I have no desire to do any work for money, for profit.

PS: [Chuckles] All right. And you’re happy?

JD: Yes!

PS: Let me see what questions I have left here. Tell me about any events in India that may have had some effect on the Indian Association in Minnesota. You said that you did some fundraising sometimes for different things.

JD: Yes.

PS: Did you stay connected politically or geographically or to education?

JD: No, I don’t think that there is any particular thing that happened in India that I can point to that would have affected us here in any sense. Different people in our group had different interests. For example, a few years ago, there was a Republican legislator from Wyoming, a Mr. [Mike] Simpson. He was trying to rewrite the immigrations laws to this country. Some of his proposals, rules, were not that favorable to immigrants from countries like India. So there were many people here who on their own brought that subject to the India Association and how other people felt. They wanted to get involved and see how they can prevail upon our Minnesota delegation to change Mr. Simpson’s proposals. So there was some political involvement there.
Every now and then, I find that there is a need to help somebody to get the visitor visa to come from India. For example, we have had situations where somebody is not well here, and they want a parent or brother or sister in an emergency to come and take care of that person or just visit them. The American Consuls in India generally are not very open to granting such visas, as they would be to give similar visas to someone from, let’s say, England or Germany or other West European countries.

PS: Really?

JD: Because their assumption is that people would use any means to come to America from our part of the world, and once they come, they won’t go back. I’m sure that the Consuls probably have their reasons for their policy. There are some genuine cases for visitor visas and we have sought local help. I have had some good relations in the past with Congress people here, with the congressmen particularly in this area, you know. I knew Congressman Bruce Vento, Joe Karth, and Betty McCollum. Sometimes, seeking assistance from these people helps to get the case expedited and add some more validity to their cause. We have been successful sometimes in doing that. I’d like to see this happen more, but I think time will tell to see whether that happens or not. The new people in the Association are making every attempt to get politicians, the legislators, etc., to become familiar with our community. They had good relations with [Senator] Paul Wellstone. [Senator] Satveer Chaudhary is our state legislator. I don’t know how much he’s involved in getting this done but, eventually, when he becomes familiar, he’ll get involved. The community, as it matures, faces different types of situations that we as students or new immigrants didn’t face. In that respect, I think there’s a great value to this kind of organization.

PS: Are you still involved with the India Association?

JD: I’m kind of retired. I’m always involved as a member. Every now and then, someone will contact me, and if someone needs some help about something that I know about, I do it, you know. But, other than that, I am not active. It’s our Indian principle that you go through certain stages in life. One stage is called Sanyasi. Sanyasi means you give up everything and you simply leave it to other people. Let them do what needs to be done. Now, formally, I have given up everything about India Club. I turned over the charge towards the end of 1982. So from 1973 to 1982, I was practically totally in charge. In 1982, I turned it over to then existing officers and the other people of the community. My withdrawal process started in 1982, and by about the year 1999 or 1998, it was pretty complete. That’s the way I think life should be. One should not be forever in something. I don’t know who said this; I think Alfred Lord Tennyson said it. “Old order changeth, yielding place to new.” So we are part of the old order. I’m proud to say from whatever I have seen that the new order is doing an outstanding job. I’m very happy to see how far everything has come.

PS: Yes. What are the biggest changes that you’ve seen in the organization from 1973 until 1999 or so?

JD: I think the biggest change that I could see is the composition of the people of the community has changed.
PS: Say more about that.

JD: The people of my generation who came, we did not have both parents or mentors or somebody else who held our hand to tell us what to do and how to do it. We basically fumbled around and did everything in our own way. Most of us did very well. At least those of us who came here for an education realized that education was the basic foundation for who we were, and we instilled that in our children. We spared no effort. We spared no money to give our kids the best education we could, you know. I know there was a time when I had two kids in the so-called Ivy [League] schools and I, myself, was in the law college, and I was spending enough money every year that I could buy a brand new Mercedes every year with that money. I know that some of my American friends who were driving Mercedes were wondering why I wasn’t. But that was their priority, and my priority was the education of my children. And I’m not alone. Many of my contemporary Indians, who came at the same time, have done the similar things with their children. It’s our children then who, some of them, took over the leadership of the Indian Association. Their experience is different. Their backgrounds are different. I gave you the example of a tall building, skyscraper. They entered this society at a very high and different level, and they are looking at the penthouse to feel that they have arrived somewhere. They are running the organization with that perspective, which is very good. That’s progress.

I forgot to mention another thing. For the last six or seven years, another friend of mine who came, who was [here] in 1962 when I came to Minnesota, and then he moved away [to Florida], and then he came back. His name is Sudhansu Misra. Sudhansu, when he came back, also became the president of the India Club. He and I often talked, and we felt that there was a need to take care of the parents of the people who have come here to live with their children. The parents, once their kids are gone to work and their grandkids have gone to school, have nothing to do, no place to go. They feel like birds in a golden cage, you know. Many of them don’t speak English. What are they going to do? So there was a need to bring some of these people together and establish a forum where they can meet.

So we came up with an idea as a part of the India Association, to start a group for the older people. Now, the word ‘old’ is a very subjective word. [Chuckles] Some people get offended when you call them “old,” and some people feel dignified when they are referred to as “old” or “elderly.” We decided to use the phrase: “Fifty-five plus, anyone over fifty-five.” We formed a subgroup of the India Association, and it’s called the “Fifty-five Plus Group.” We’ve been meeting regularly, often, sometimes once a month, sometimes twice a month at different people’s places. We’ve even gone out on overnight trips, rented condos and stayed in there. The turnover is high, because many of those people who started out have died. But that has also provided mutual support.

JD: I feel as good with the parents of my younger contemporaries, and sometimes better than they do, which is very nice. It opens up another kind of cross-age type of relationships. That’s a natural evolution that has occurred. The original people who started in the India Association are now phasing out. We are the group where the only way we’re going to leave that group is by moving out of this area or by dying. That is a big change, and that’s a very welcome change. By the way, this group is not limited to Indians. We’ve got a lot of non-Indians who come there.
PS: I’ll join when I’m a little older, just a few more years.

JD: Well, we also accept younger people.

[Laughter]

PS: Okay.

JD: That’s the way things have gone. We hope that this goes on. I’m sure that the mission of the India Association will change. The mission is simply mutual integration of people from India and that part of the world with people of this part of the world. That’s all.

PS: Because your wife is non-Indian, was she helpful for you in terms of getting more mixed in with the mainstream American? She’s not a mainstream American either, though?

JD: Well, yes and no, because she’s more Indian than I am.

PS: She is?

JD: She has better relationships. She’s more involved with the Indian friends and so on and so forth than I am. She has no problem meeting with foreign people. But she’s also quite involved with non-Indians through her work, through her church, and through many other organizations. And because I grew up as a Christian, it has also come in handy because I feel quite at ease when I go to the Christian groups or the Christian churches. Sometimes I find that to be a detriment because I know too much about Christianity; more so than some of the people here know about.

PS: [Laughter]

JD: And they don’t like me to present a certain point of view that they may not either agree with or may not be aware of.

PS: Do you think they have that reluctance because you don’t look like what they think an Indian would look like?

JD: Oh, yes.

PS: Or you don’t look like what they think a Christian would look like? They would expect you to be Hindu or something else?

JD: Oh, yes. Most Europeans think that Christianity is all European. They don’t realize that [Christianity originated in Asia, and the Europeans] were pagans until six hundred years after Christ, you know. [Chuckles] But that’s a different issue.

PS: Yes. Let’s go back to the India Association. How did you, at the beginning, find your members? Was it word of mouth or did you do paid advertisements? How did you solicit members?
JD: Just word of mouth. We had a good nucleus of people, and one thing led to the other. When we arranged programs, they would come, and they would know that we existed. Our membership was fairly informal. We never insisted that someone had to pay so much to do all these things. You’re there. Raising money was never an incentive for this kind of group, you know. Anything that you get free . . . even if there was some value to it . . . People don’t assign value for something if they don’t have to pay something. That’s a given. So we did have a small fee for belonging. Our relationship with the International Club, we didn’t have to pay them anything. Eventually, when they built the building, I understand that they had certain costs associated with their building. I don’t know whether the new organization, after I left, whether they have to pay or not. But as long as I was there, we didn’t have to pay anything to them. We enjoyed mutual benefits.

PS: What sort of things did you help with?

JD: Oh, we’ll translate some documents for them that they needed to be translated. We’ll meet some people that they wanted us to meet. Sometimes our knowledge of immigration was a little more relevant to the situation at hand. That applied, also, to the people from other parts of Asia, not just India. We had connections. We made connections with the different departments of government and so on and so forth. I happened to be, at one time, on the Metropolitan Arts Advisory Committee. Its function was to give funds to different arts organizations throughout the metropolitan area. We were part of the Minnesota State Arts Board. In that capacity, I was able to get many of our art organizations to come and get some grants and fund them. A lot of the ethnic groups that they catered to were not quite as financially independent as we were. So, through them, I was able to communicate their situation to this committee. There’s a symbiotic relationship in all these things.

PS: Everything is hooked to everything else.

JD: Oh, that’s right.

PS: Were you involved with the organization when it changed its name?

JD: I was as a member. I was involved in the sense that some people proposed the change of the name and I attended the meeting when the name was being changed, and I agreed with that. I told them why we did not call it the India Association when we started. At that time, the Indo American Association was the association for Indians, that’s why. But now, the student group is quite distinct from the non-student community, the word association made a lot more sense than club did. That was a very good change.

PS: As far as you know, are there other organizations like the India Association in other parts of the United States?

JD: Oh, I’m sure that there are, but I don’t have any direct personal knowledge of any one of them. I read in different Indian magazines about different organizations everywhere else, yes.

PS: But you’re not connected to them?
JD: No, I’m not connected, no.

PS: What do you think has been the secret of this organization having such a long life span, and it’s run on completely volunteer energy, right? There are no paid positions?

JD: No, there are no paid positions. No one gets any money paid for anything. Oh, I don’t know. I think it’s just that people kind of feel that this is our adopted home, and we also have another home. This gives us a bridge between the two homes, with the activities of the organization that we can do and, also, with the people that we meet.

For example, the fifteenth of August is the Independence Day of India, and every fifteenth of August, the Association has a special celebration. That’s when India in 1947 became independent from England. They recognize the independence of India, and they have a special ceremony where we raise flags of India and United States and say a few words about where we’ve been, where we have come and so on and so forth. I have been asked to be the person to raise the flags, during the 2003 celebration, because this is the thirtieth anniversary of India Association. So this fifteenth of August at the event that’s going to be St. Paul, I am supposed to do that. Of course, the person who asked me, the person who is now quite actively involved, is the daughter of a friend who is now very active with me in this “Fifty-five Plus” group. That’s how the generation has changed. She is my daughter’s age.

There is quite a bit of collegiality among us. We don’t have any acrimony that many of the other people who have come from countries. For example, one of the things that the International Institute requires during the Festival of Nations . . . No one is permitted to display the flag of their original country. It used to be, unless they changed it. When I was there, that was a very cardinal rule: no flags allowed. I was wondering why. Then they told me that when East Europe broke up, or when it became consolidated under the Soviet Union, then different countries of the people who were here already before the communists took over, wanted their own individual flags, and that created a tension with those who came here after the Communists took over and had different flags. To eliminate all of that, the Institute said, “No flags whatsoever.” Flags created conflicts and acrimony in those different groups. We have nothing in this organization that we do that creates such acrimony.

Now, we do have, you may know, within the Indian community, some regional groups, like I am from Gujarat. There is a Gujarati Samaj. Then there is people from Punjab, their group. The people from Kerala, they have their own social group, and so on and so on. There are umpteen groups. I don’t keep up with all those groups. I, personally, have not actively participated with any one of those groups. To me, this Indian American is the group. Now, that has something to do with my whole background, because when I was in Montana as a foreign student, we had no foreign students from where I lived. We had students from thirty different countries. We did not have a single one-country organization. We had only the International Club. We all got together, and I was the president of that International Club. We had Iraqis in there and we had Kurds in there. They fought with one another in their own country. But we all worked together when we were in our International Club. We had Greeks in our club and we had Turks in our club there. Politically, they fought with one another, but not when we got together. We had Jewish people in the club and we had Arabs. They hated each other, but not in that.
JD: My very first experience of America as a student with the international organization really taught me quite a few things. The largest foreign student group in my college, at that time, were Canadians. Canadians were still considered foreign students. We had a lot of Arabic students in the International Club, and they were doing an outstanding amount of work. There were only five thousand students in that whole college. The president of the university and his wife would show up at every event of the club. At the international ball, we were absolutely sold out. That was the largest non-college organization on the entire campus. That was my vision. It was a baptism by fire. My very second year I was there, I was elected president. I learned a lot from all these people. That’s what I thought I was bringing to the table here, that we are not just one segment, that we are part of the whole world. Of course, being married to someone like my wife has also enlarged the scope. But most of my friends that I have—we all matured here—are like that. I’m not that unique in that respect.

PS: Did you meet your wife through the International Club?

JD: Yes. I met her through the International Club in 1960. The very first day, I was going to have an orientation meeting for the foreign students, and because she was on a Dutch passport, she got an invitation. She came. I went on and on and on in orientation, and she had to go to another meeting, and she missed her ride. I didn’t have a car. It so happened that I was going to the same meeting that she was going to go to, and I had my ride, so she went with me. That’s how we met. [Chuckles]

[A few comments about my wife, Roswitha. When I met her she immediately blended with both American and foreign students. She had no racial, religious, or national bias. When we settled down in Minnesota, she welcomed my Indian and Pakistani friends and acquaintances warmly and unconditionally. She learned to cook our type of food. It was she who always supported and encouraged me to get involved with the community we lived in, both Indian and American. Without her backing I may not have volunteered to form the India Club.]

PS: And the rest is history.

JD: Yes. By the way . . . I came to Minnesota from Montana with a hundred dollars in my pocket. On May 7, 1962, I came to Minneapolis. By the time June came around, I was down to ten dollars. I had no job. I was going to use the ten dollars, and go to Chicago, but I did find a job in June. I started in June 1962, and have worked since then doing one thing or the other until I gave up all my licenses in the year 2001. And I still owe the hundred dollars that I had borrowed to leave Montana for a job. I’m still paying interest on that money.

Mrs. Desai: Yes, yes, yes.

[Laughter]

JD: I owe that hundred dollars to the loan shark who gave me the money. I’ve been paying interest for that the rest of my life, because I married the person who gave me the money. So my
yardstick is that if my net worth at any given time is at least the hundred dollars that I came with, then I have been even. If it’s a little bit more, then I have done better.

PS: [Laughter] Here’s the last question: do you have any other things that you want to tell me about? Things you think people might find interesting or anything you want to add to what you’ve already said?

JD: Well, not particularly. I think that the community here, both the Indian community and the American community, is growing very well. From the time that I have come and the time that I have spent, a lot of things have happened. People are becoming far more open minded about one another. There is a mutual acceptance of one another in our society. I think that has been all for good, and I hope that this country and the community continue to grow like that. That’s all I’ve got to say.

PS: Thank you very much for taking time to meet with me this afternoon.

JD: You’re welcome.

APPENDIX

The original mission of the India Club was to help a mutual integration of the Minnesotans of Indian descent with the rest of the Minnesotans. I carried out that mission by becoming the first Minnesotan of Indian descent in the following organizations:

- Member of the 1973 Festival of Nations Committee of the International Institute of Minnesota and influenced it to include India as one of the countries of the Festival.

- In 1976 I was among forty Minnesotans to be appointed by the Governor of Minnesota to the Minnesota State Bicentennial Commission and I became the Chairman of the Project Review Committee, which evaluated and funded the Bicentennial-related projects throughout Minnesota. For the first time the contribution of various Asians to Minnesota was recognized by a statewide organization.
• In 1980 I was appointed to the Metropolitan Arts Advisory Committee. In that role I was able to fun the Indian Music Society and the Filipino Association for the first time in the history of both the organizations and the Metropolitan Arts Council.

• In 1982 I was appointed to the Ramsey County Employment and Training Advisory Council and I eventually became the Chairman of the Ramsey County Private Industry Council. Our mission was to train unskilled workers and find employment for them. We helped many Asian and other minority residents of Ramsey County.

• In 1984 I was elected by my fellow professionals to be the President of the Minnesota State Association of Life Underwriters, now called the Minnesota Association of Insurance and Financial Advisors. It is one of the major professional associations of Minnesota with over two thousand statewide members. In that capacity, I personally visited Minnesota’s U.S. Congressional delegation in Washington, D.C. and spoke at many local chapters throughout Minnesota.

• In 1987 I was appointed by the Governor to the Council on Asian-Pacific Minnesotans.

• 1988-90. Member and Vice-Chairman of the Governing Board of the Minnesota Property Insurance Placement Facility of the Minnesota Department of Commerce. The main function of this organization is to provide property and casualty insurance to the individuals and businesses in Minnesota who could not obtain it through normal channels. Basically, we operated like a Property & Casualty insurer funded by all the property and casualty insurance companies doing business in Minnesota.

• 1993-95. Member of the Insurance Committee of the Minnesota State Bar Association. We determine the level and funding of the life and health insurance for the members of the Minnesota State Bar Association.

• 2000-Present (2007). Member of the Minnesota Methodist Conference Board of Pensions and Health Benefits. We determine the level and funding of the life, health and pension benefits for all the employees of the Minnesota Methodist Church.

- Jagadish Desai