

Anoop Mathur
Narrator

Polly Sonifer
Interviewer

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PS: This is Polly Sonifer interviewing Anoop Mathur on October 7, 2001. How are you today?

AM: Pretty good.

PS: All right. So we are here to talk about SILC [School of India for Languages and Culture] and the history of SILC and your participation in it. But let's start out first with a little bit about you. What part of India were you born in?

AM: Hyderabad. Hyderabad is in south central India.

PS: Okay. Now tell me about the family you were born into.

AM: It's a large joint family. My father and mother, everybody was born in Hyderabad.

My grandfather had, let's see, nine sons and seven daughters.

PS: Wow.

AM: My dad was the oldest of the sixteen.

PS: Okay.

AM: I am told that the grandmother I knew had eight sons and three daughters. My dad and the three daughters were from my grandfather's first wife or adopted. We were all raised to believe we were one family. In my immediate family, we are about six children: four sisters and two brothers, and I am the younger of the two.

PS: Okay, and that's your father's family.

AM: That's my father's family. We all live in the same household, all nine brothers, their families, in that one big house which my grandfather built.

PS: Wow.

AM: It's a large house.

PS: Yes. So when you were born, did you live in that same house?

AM: Yes. It was actually built in—let's see, I was born in 1950. I think my grandfather built that in the mid-1930s to 1940s. It's a fairly large house he built. Maybe he anticipated it'd be a huge family. It was away from the cities. Like, ours was one of the three houses in the entire village. It was a big house and thirty, forty bedrooms in there.

PS: Thirty or forty bedrooms in this house he built?

AM: Yes, it was a pretty big house. Large, sprawling—

PS: Wow. Sounds like a motel.

AM: —and today it's full. There's no room.

PS: And who lives in there now?

AM: The entire family. The families, like, all the nine brothers have kids, and then their kids are having kids.

PS: All right.

AM: So they all live in there now.

PS: So you're unusual that you don't live in India with them?

AM: I am the first one to have come out from the family, yes.

PS: And how was it that you came to leave India?

AM: It was a difficult decision. The family was pressing me to not go, but I had my career to think about. I had applied for a University of Minnesota scholarship. I was selected as one of the two from Osmania University to come to University of Minnesota. This was in 1973. Indira Gandhi was the prime minister. In April of '73, when India declared an emergency at the end of April, she severed diplomatic relations with the USA and cancelled all scholarships and everything, any relationships with the United States. This was on April 29, 1973. I still remember that. So my scholarship was cancelled. I didn't have any money and my father wasn't that wealthy, compared to the other brothers in the family. But I took a loan and came here because I had my mindset on going to the U.S. by that time.

PS: Oh, okay. So you were already in university there.

AM: Yes.

PS: Okay. Was this to work with—

AM: I had the admission at the University of Minnesota.

PS: Okay. So you were working on your Master's [degree] or your Bachelor's at that time?

AM: At the time I finished my Bachelor's, I came here for my Master's.

PS: Okay. Then how did you end up staying?

AM: Here?

PS: Yes.

AM: Well. Like with most people, I mean, I was going to be here just for about three years and then go back. But then you have the opportunity. You start weighing the opportunity with what you will get when you go back. I decided to stay on. I thought maybe I'd just work three, four years and then go back.

PS: Yes.

AM: A typical story of any recent immigrant.

PS: Yes. So when you decided to stay, how did your family react to that?

AM: I don't think I gave them much choice. I mean, they wanted me back but then I said, "You know, I've got to make my life. I'll have to make my decisions." I chose to stay here because of better opportunities, and I liked the environment better where I was working, and I knew the environment back in India, which wasn't conducive to my way of thinking. So I chose to stay back.

PS: Okay. Now were you married when you came here?

AM: No.

PS: How did you get married?

AM: Let's see. Preeti, I'd seen Preeti when she was young. We're all from the same area in Hyderabad. I'd seen her in other weddings, and I thought "Hmm." Perhaps, when I was eighth

grade, I felt, "I'll marry her maybe."

PS: Really?

AM: I liked her. Then in 1977, I think, my—it's a kind of an arranged-marriage thing where somebody will say, "How about this particular girl?" So it was Preeti's name came up. I said, "Sure." Because I had known Preeti before, so I didn't have to think about it.

PS: And she was agreeable, too?

AM: Initially probably not.

PS: Really?

AM: Initially she thought, "I don't even know this person," and she's pretty independent thinker. So she didn't want to commit to it, but then I think reason prevailed. She got enough explanations from different people about me and then we wrote to each other. After a couple of letters she said, "Okay. I'll give it a try. You know, we'll see." A few months later we were formally engaged.

PS: So did you go back to India to get married?

AM: I could not go back immediately because of immigration rules [Immigration and Naturalization Services]. Yes. It was after about—I think we wrote letters to each other for almost a year and a half. Then I received my immigration papers and then I went back and got married.

PS: So she hadn't seen you since eighth grade.

AM: She claims she had never seen me.

PS: Oh, okay. But you know differently.

AM: But I knew her. Again, you know, it's like the boys chase girls, and so I knew her. She didn't.

PS: Okay. All right. Then she came here to live with you.

AM: Yes.

PS: And it was in Minnesota.

AM: In Minnesota.

PS: Okay. And then you started having your life here together. Tell me about what it was like in the beginning for you being here.

AM: In 1973?

PS: Yes.

AM: When I came, it was difficult. First of all, I was coming on my own money, big loan. So it was apprehension about, jeez, will I be able to pay back that loan? What did I do? Did I make the right decision? Because I came against the family—no one in the family really supported, except for my uncle Prem who was an engineer like me, who said, “You know, you should go. There are no opportunities here.”

I came on September 17, and football had started. The old friend from the Hyderabad picked me up from the Minneapolis airport. So we went to his apartment and there were at least seven or eight other students watching the game and everybody’s yelling at the TV, you know.

PS: Oh, was that new behavior for you?

AM: I thought to myself, “Why am I here?” I felt really homesick.

PS: Because that doesn’t happen in India, right?

AM: No.

PS: Nobody sits and yells at the TVs.

AM: Yes, we didn’t have any TVs.

PS: Smart people.

AM: Well, I think it was—the first quarter was difficult.

PS: What was the hardest thing?

AM: Well, in making ends meet with limited dollars in my pocket and the pressures of school, all the different courses you have to take. It’s a different type of teaching, different expectations from the student than Osmania University, the college I went to in India. Then living with two other roommates who had different opinions, living styles and habits even though they were Indian, so it was a little difficult. The first quarter was tough. Plus the cold and snow, coming in October, November, suddenly you have to wear this thick jacket, you know.

PS: And you weren't used to that.

AM: No.

PS: Hyderabad is hot all year around, right?

AM: Hyderabad is hot, yes.

PS: And then it got easier?

AM: Yes, over time. After the first quarter, second quarter, I think, was a little easier but then there were some difficulties at school, I mean, not with my education, but some of the people were taking advantage of me. But—

PS: Like how?

AM: Oh, someone swiped and copied my homework. The professor hauled us both in.

PS: Oh.

AM: I didn't know how to react to that. The other guy started crying and pleading with me.

PS: Yes.

AM: So I sort of took the blame for it, too. And now I repent not knowing how to react, because this other person was also a foreign student.

PS: Ah.

AM: And he was pleading with me. He said, "Don't do it," etc. So—

PS: So as time went by, you finished your degree in what?

AM: In chemical engineering, yes. I believe the professor knew who the culprit was because I received *As* in the other classes from him.

PS: Okay, and then who did you go work for?

AM: I had started working as a student for Honeywell, until 1975 when I was laid off. Jimmy Carter was president then, and the country was in recession. So as a student I was laid off from Honeywell. That was a new experience.

PS: Oh. Okay.

AM: But after six months Honeywell rehired me as a student employee because of the good work I must have done. So I took my training visa, i.e. the eighteen-month visa they give you after graduation. [The INS rule was that at the end of the training Visa period, I must have a full-time employment otherwise I must go back.] So I went through that period, and near the end of my training period, I was still a student at Honeywell. I told my boss, "I'm leaving next month. I'm going back to India." He said, "What? What are these INS papers that you were talking about?" They offered me a job and sponsored me for immigration.

PS: Okay.

AM: And then they gave me a full-time job, too.

PS: And you're still at Honeywell.

AM: I'm still at Honeywell.

PS: How many years has it been?

AM: Twenty-seven now.

PS: Wow. Still doing the same thing?

AM: Yes, and a lot more. I was recently selected as an outstanding Honeywell employee and honored with the most prestigious H.W. Sweatt Award in 1998. In addition, I received a Star Inventor Award for my seven patents.

PS: Do you like it?

AM: There are very few employees who have been there that long.

PS: Yes. Honeywell is having a hard time right now, I think.

AM: Yes. I think it's a real difficult time but we'll work through it.

PS: So you've been here for twenty-seven years now?

AM: Twenty-seven years, yes.

PS: Twenty-seven years. Tell me about how SILC came to be a part of your life.

AM: Let's see, SILC was started in, 1978 then it used to be called Bharat School in 1978. K.P.S. Menon started the Bharat School and I knew him from day one in the USA. He was one of the

guys who was there when I was a—first day. So I knew K.P.S. at that time. Preeti and I met him somewhere, and he said, “Oh, you know, Preeti, you should come and teach at the Bharat School.” So that was the first exposure, and then Preeti was the one who started at the Bharat School. I used to drop her and come back. Then a few years later the Bharat School was dissolved for other reasons. So the parents and everybody got together and essentially removed K.P.S.

PS: Oh, okay.

AM: He said, “You cannot name the new school as Bharat School.” Someone suggested a new name—SILC, School of India for Languages and Culture. So we all got together and essentially created a school with a few students.

PS: So what was it like in the beginning for you? What were your roles?

AM: At SILC?

PS: At SILC.

AM: At SILC I was initially just helping Preeti [Mathur], Neena [Gada], Shanti [Shah] and others. Preeti, became the first treasurer. Then, two years later, I became the treasurer of SILC. Initially I was just helping out, and then from treasurer to secretary. Eventually I served as president in 1986.

PS: Wow.

AM: In 1986, I think, I was president of SILC. SILC went through a lot of changes during my time.

PS: What were the biggest changes you saw?

AM: I think the biggest change probably I made it in '86. As the president I saw that the students were maturing; students like Lisa Gada, Reena Patel, Shibani, others were there for almost six or eight years at SILC, and there was only so much teachers, I mean, the volunteer teachers can offer. They were getting kind of bored. So when I was president, with Godan [Nambudiripad]'s help—so we arranged a SILC conference, a parent-teacher SILC conference, where we invited the parents of all the students and the teachers. We all got together including students. Until then we—adults—were deciding what to teach, etc. So this was the first time that we sought out from students, “What do you really want to learn?”

Several things came out. One of them was the SILC Achievement Project, which is called SAP Okay? It was patterned after the Junior Achievement projects—

PS: Oh, okay.

AM: — which I was used to at Honeywell where the children will choose whatever they want to do. That is something related to India, but they can define their project and I will facilitate. We started SAP and it was pretty popular. The students liked it because they could define what they want. For example, some students wanted to do “One Day at SILC”—a video of SILC, a typical day at SILC. Our yearbook was started at that time, the SILC yearbook, the cook books, mock Indian parliaments, mock court, etc. So all kinds of different things started. It became a little bit more active. That same year we had first student council. We had the student council represented on the board of SILC.

PS: Oh, okay.

AM: And what else? Several new things were done at that time. We started looking into having a regular curriculum. The following year we invited a professional to develop a curriculum in the hope we can make this a credit course for our students. The first SILC library was created as a SAP project.

PS: Yes. Did that ever happen?

AM: We tried. No, it didn't because they said we couldn't offer the caliber that's required because you need really dedicated teachers to do that.

PS: Oh, yes, that's hard with all volunteers.

AM: Yes, but one of the students did get a credit. Dipti Bhalt, she came back and we did give her a test, and she passed it. So we said, “Yes, this is what we administered and based on this, it's up to the school to figure out whether they want to recognize it.”

PS: So tell me about how many students were in the SAP project.

AM: Oh, it's mostly the older kids, twelve and above. In the first year I had eight to ten of them. Almost all the older kids, they were in my class.

PS: And how many hours of the SILC day did they do that project?

AM: It's one hour, just like any other class.

PS: Oh, okay. Just one hour. Okay.

AM: But then typically I start off with—I mean, the whole idea was to give them skills which we know from work, like brainstorming. Okay? So I typically start the SAP project with a brainstorming session so they learn how to brainstorm, where they just put down their ideas and

nobody debates against the idea. Let it be free flowing. Then they have to pick what they want to do, and then they define the project. Over time I introduce them to how to do planning, like using Project, for example.

PS: The computer Project.

AM: Yes.

PS: The program. The software.

AM: The MS [Microsoft] Project, yes. This was not in the first year, but three or four years down the line when I had my computer. Then debating skills, presentation skills. I mean, that was my general idea, is to give them those skills in a different environment.

PS: That was a wonderful opportunity for them to learn about business actually.

AM: Yes, I think it was. I think most of them liked it. It was pretty popular with every kid. The little kids were looking towards, “Oh, we will get into SAP once we are twelve year old.” Okay. Like, my daughter still complains. By the time—she said, when she was twelve—SAP had lost its momentum.

PS: Oh, so she never got to do it.

AM: She never got to do it. She says, “You stopped it when I was ready for it, but we always thought SAP was cool.”

PS: So what happened that SAP kind of ran out of steam?

AM: I think one was, again, it’s a two-way thing. You have to have the enthusiasm from the students and then the enthusiasm from the teachers, too. I think that sort of lost out over time, and I’m glad to see they have revived it this year.

PS: Oh, they have? But you’re not in charge of it now.

AM: No.

PS: No.

AM: Sunil Menon is doing that and doing an excellent job. So I was there for the first kickoff. When they started it, I said, “Okay, I will talk about the history, what it was all about.” So they have started it again. Over time it became like a—the board began to expect that SILC yearbook will be done by SAP students. I said, “There was no expectation. It was a thing that they came up with. It shouldn’t mean that the board expects them to do it.” So I think later it became, like, you

know, you have to do SILC yearbook.

PS: Oh, okay. That dried up some of the creativity.

AM: Yes, yes.

PS: Is Sunil Menon related to K.P.S.?

AM: No.

PS: No. Different family of Menons. Okay. So you were on the board for a number of years.

AM: Yes, I was there till recently, about four or five— Well, on the board after president there's nothing else to do other than ex-president. But I was pretty active in SILC until—for twenty years, almost 1996, '97. About '97, '98 I sort of moved away.

PS: What changed at that time?

AM: I think we are looking at other people to take over. I mean Preeti is still active. Preeti is still going. So I think she is probably the last one from our '78 batch. I was probably the second to the last one.

PS: Yes. But you just were tired of it? Tired out?

AM: I go there once in a while. I think other people have taken over. I think I said, you know, let some other people teach because SAP wasn't being taught. So I said, "General Knowledge, you know, I can't. I'm not a teacher. I can coordinate things. I can facilitate. I'm more of a visionary than a teacher."

PS: Okay. So when you were coming up with SAP, the first day with the first kids what did you say?

AM: Oh, the SAP?

PS: Yes. Yes, the first day of the first class of SAP.

AM: Oh, they were all there, bright-eyed and all looking forward to doing something with Anoop Uncle. So we started with the brainstorm session, and they liked it. I said, "It's all open."

PS: And that was very different from how the rest of the classes were at SILC, right?

AM: Yes, yes. So I think to them it was like suddenly something was being forced on them, and here it's like a different environment. I think that most of them liked it.

PS: Yes. Did some of the other teachers at SILC feel threatened by that?

AM: No, no. I think it was actually the entire—the board, the parent, teacher— It came out of the conference. It came out of the conference where it was voted as pretty high. So then we picked the first two or three initiatives that were rated. The conference was done very well, too. Shanti Shah and Godan and a couple of other people were the coordinators.

PS: So how many years did you do SAP?

AM: Let's see, almost about ten years maybe, ten to twelve years.

PS: That's a long time.

AM: Yes, yes.

PS: And what was the most satisfying thing that kept you going year after year after year?

AM: I think just watching the children change and when some of them came back. Like, for example, Godan's son, I mean, he didn't want to come to SILC, Godan was the one forcing him to come, and he would just sit there. I said, "Guptan, aren't you going to do something?"

He said, "No."

I said, "Okay, you are here in SAP. Don't you want to join one of the groups?"

He said, "No."

I said, "What do you want to do?"

"I just want to read." So he was reading Aristotle at that time, and I said, "Fine. Read it. Read in the class, SAP. That's fine with me. It's an independent thing." I said, "Have you learned Eastern philosophy?"

He said, "No."

I said, "Would you like to read one of these books, Indian philosophy, and I can get you a couple of books?" He wouldn't, but I did bring him the book. I said, "Just look at it and do a comparative study and write me a report." I said, "That will be all the requirements. You can sit and read. You can read Aristotle, Socrates, just whatever you want to read, but read a little bit of Indian philosophy, do a bit of comparative study." I think he did that. He wouldn't write a report, so I had a one-on-one with him. He sort of has read it and compared it, and I think over time he began to identify himself with India. Before that, you know, in the seventies it was a difficult

time, too, for these kids because there were not that many Indians here in Minnesota. They stuck out like a sore thumb in suburban schools.

PS: Right.

AM: So I think this was good from that aspect, that at SILC they were able to see people of their own type. So it gave them that camaraderie, that was very important, and some of them were very lost because they said, “Geez, I’m different.” Like with Guptan maybe it probably was. Then once he got some hold of the roots, I think, you know, later on he went back to India all by himself. He traveled all over India and I think that SAP may have or SILC may have in a way influenced him some. The same thing with Lisa Gada, too.

There are some nice articles they all wrote for the twentieth anniversary. They wrote back on what they thought about SILC. It’s interesting reading. So I think, you know, I mean, just reading that is kind of satisfying, that, you know, you did something. SILC meant something for them. It really changed, it helped them a lot, and it gave them the footing. They were not afraid to talk about India in their classes or identify themselves as belonging to Indian parents.

PS: But that group, Guptan and Lisa and probably Shanti Shah’s son—

AM: Yes, yes, yes.

PS: —they were the—they were the—

AM: They were the core.

PS: Right. They were, like, the first who belonged to SILC.

AM: Yes.

PS: Their parents were the ones who started it, right?

AM: Yes.

PS: And your daughter? Oh, she was a little bit younger.

AM: Shruti was a kind of the second set—yes.

PS: Okay. All right.

AM: We’re the only ones who were non-parent teachers, Preeti and I, for a long time.

PS: And so that group of children were the definition of SILC for a long time, right?

AM: Yes, yes. I think though those were good kids. I mean, they are the ones who made SILC—

PS: And do you think most of them were coming willingly? Or were most of them like Guptan, being forced to be there?

AM: I think so. I think, yes, like with Lisa and all, they were pretty excited. I mean, over time they were getting bored until SAP started. It was coming to the point where “Gee, what do I have to come here for?” because they were getting older, about thirteen years old, you know, teenagers.

PS: Do you think a lot of children developed fluent language skills because of coming to SILC that they wouldn’t have developed otherwise?

AM: I don’t think so. I mean, the language, the Gujarati, most of the Gujaratis, I think they speak Gujarati very well because they do it at home. From a language standpoint they pick up a little bit here and there, but I think largely they speak at home. That’s where they learn the language. I mean, SILC just gives them the exposure. I don’t think you can teach a whole lot in one hour per week.

PS: Right, and take the summer off.

AM: Yes, yes.

PS: So it wasn’t really a place that people got fluent in languages.

AM: No, no. I think our goal was if they can just communicate a little bit to their grandparents in India. That was the goal. That’s it, just say, “*Namaste*,” “Hello,” or “How are you?” a few, five or six sentences that they can say. The grandparents will be happy they’re speaking something. Okay?

PS: Okay.

AM: So we’re not that ambitious that they have to be fluent.

PS: Was it a goal for most of the parents to have their children grow up being bilingual?

AM: For those coming to SILC?

PS: Yes.

AM: I think they wanted it. They thought that that’s one of their expectation from SILC. But then we said, “I don’t think they can learn the language, not until you reinforce at home.” Some

understood that. Some didn't. They thought sending them to SILC, they can learn the language and that little bit of measure, and we can't.

PS: So what stopped some of those parents from speaking Indian languages to their children at home?

AM: It depends. With Preeti, for example, with Shruti and Sujana, while Preeti and I speak both languages, most of the time it's easy to get by in English, okay? To tell them something, I mean, we speak in English sometimes, most of the time, and discussions and arguments are in English. It's just that difference on parents. With Neena I know they speak Gujarati at home, so the kids picked up Gujarati.

PS: So when you were on the board, tell me about how board meetings went.

AM: When I was president? Or before that?

PS: Any time. Whatever stands out in your mind.

AM: Well, I think most of the board meetings, I mean, we used to have the first board meeting, which was before school started. It used to be a big one where you have to plan out everything. So that used to be the big one. We used to spend, like, about six to seven hours planning out the first day, etc. Who will do all the—assigning teachers, calling up people? Who is going to teach what? Then what they will, what each kid goes to. We talked about each language, social studies, who'll be going to SAP or cooking or music, etc., so we'll be prepared.

We were looking at what needed to be done for the first day at SILC, you know, what courses to teach, and how many parents will be there, how many teachers will be there, how many students will be there, and how do you distribute them, where the classes will be, just essentially planning out. That's what used to happen. Generally the principal, it fell on the principal largely.

PS: Did people take turns being the principal?

AM: Yes, I mean, that was a difficult post. Yes, the principal has to continue for two to three years. So that was the rule. But the president is more of an administrative job, so mine wasn't that important, other than for administrative purposes. But the principal's job was probably the most important at SILC, so someone like Mahest Jeerage was principal for a long time. I mean, he did an excellent job in keeping the books and set the right trend. Then after that—again, we used to keep the principal until they are burnt out.

PS: And then you just bury them really deep, huh?

AM: Yes.

PS: Yes, that's a really big commitment because if you're the principal, you have to be there the whole time of class.

AM: Yes, yes. Yes, that's a difficult job. Yes.

PS: And it's not paid.

AM: It's not paid.

PS: It's not a paid position.

AM: No.

PS: No. Wow. So why didn't you become a principal?

AM: Like I said, I'm not a teacher. I facilitate.

PS: Okay. But did the principal actually teach a class?

AM: No. I think it's—they did sometimes, once in a while.

PS: If somebody was sick or gone?

AM: Yes, but it takes a lot of commitment, I think. It takes a lot of commitment.

PS: Were there some teachers who you saw just teaching forever and forever and forever, never getting burned out?

AM: Preeti.

PS: Is she the only one?

AM: I think she is, yes. I mean, she likes children, for one, and I think you have to have that kind of enthusiasm. So I think—so she has been there, even now, almost twenty-five, twenty-six years now. So, twenty-five years.

PS: Tell me about the involvement of SILC in the festivals in the spring or the fall.

AM: Yes, that was the other thing that SILC did. The Festival of Nations started. I think 1975 was the first one. Then Bharat School was there. They didn't know who from India should represent. There wasn't any Indian organization. There was India Association that was open only to immigrants at the time, and it was like an exclusive club.

PS: Really?

AM: Yes, in the seventies, mid-seventies. It was a real exclusive club and they made sure that none of the students came to those meetings.

PS: The students being the college students?

AM: Anybody, non-immigrants. They're not even informed about it.

PS: But you would have been an immigrant, right?

AM: Not at that time. I was a student.

PS: You were a student. Oh, okay.

AM: Yes. I became an immigrant in '78, '79.

PS: Okay.

AM: So the Festival of Nations contacted them because it was the only legitimate organization at the time, and there were, like, about five or six of them.

PS: Five or six people?

AM: People, in the organization. So they said, "Oh, yes. We can do Festival of Nations." They didn't know how to do it. They contacted K.P.S. Menon. Menon was the one who did the first booth, the exhibits booth, and then he coordinated the kitchen. So that made a lot of money, and part of the money was given to SILC. So that became a tradition, that SILC will do the booth, the exhibits booth, and the food booth will be done by India Association.

PS: Is that still continuing?

AM: Even now SILC does the exhibit booth and the money raised in the food booth, up to a thousand bucks or a certain percentage would be given to SILC. So even now I think they do that. At one time it used to be fifty-fifty percent. Fifty percent of the proceeds used to come to SILC. Fifty percent India Association will keep it.

PS: Why did that change?

AM: Well, one of the presidents said, "Why are we giving this to SILC?" not knowing the history, you know, and things have changed and there are a lot more Indians in town. So somebody came in and said, "What is SILC? Why are we giving this money to SILC? Who are they? They aren't even affiliated with India." So they started questioning in the board, but a few

officers were there to straighten them out.

PS: Okay.

AM: But then they said, “We’re not going to give fifty-fifty,” and they said, “It’s thousand dollars—it’s fifty percent or a thousand dollars, whichever is lower.”

PS: Oh.

AM: They passed a resolution and since, you know.

PS: But SILC is still happy to keep doing the booth.

AM: Yes, I think yes. I think they still do that.

PS: And the kids from SILC dance.

AM: Kids from SILC dance, too. There’s a children program so SILC students can dance.

PS: The Festival of Nations is a really important event for SILC.

AM: Yes, for India Association and for SILC both. Yes, it is.

PS: Okay. What are the other important events?

AM: SILC Day. I think there are two of them. There’s one in January we call the SILC Day, when all the kids demonstrate to the parents whatever they have learned in the languages. Then the last day of SILC is, except for languages, all others, which are optional, drama, music, dance, General Knowledge will be demonstrated to the parents.

PS: Yes. Yes. So they do skits and plays. They tell stories.

AM: Skits, plays, dances, yoga, whatever. So the teachers would introduce the kids one by one and then together they will do some small demonstration, because that’s the last day of SILC.

PS: And is there food?

AM: Oh, yes.

PS: Cooked by who?

AM: Typically the parents.

PS: Oh, but they have kids' cooking classes sometimes, right?

AM: We tried that once. One time the cooking class said they'd provide for SILC Day.

PS: Yes?

AM: They did.

PS: It wasn't so good.

AM: Once. Oh, they can.

PS: Oh, okay. So SILC Day is a big event.

AM: I think yes. Those two days are really important for SILC, and Festival of Nations is something you have to do. So it became part of—that's when the dance classes were added on, for Festival of Nations.

PS: Yes, and then the India Day or the India Festival?

AM: India Day is the afterthought that came—I think India Day started in 1986, was it? '86, '87, which was the hundredth birthday of Mahatma Gandhi. October 2 fell on that time.

PS: Oh, okay.

AM: So we said, "Hey, we've got to do something for the hundredth birthday." So then India Day was conceived, at that time. I was a community affairs director of India Association at that time.

PS: So they finally let you in.

AM: Once a volunteer, a volunteer for life. Like, Preeti, you know, was really active in the India Association. They all were in the association, after SILC. So I think volunteers are forever. So I was in the board at the time, and I was a community affairs director.

PS: You started it.

AM: No. I was on the board and coordinated it. Sudan Mishra was the president at the time. So that was the first India Day. It was held in 1986, the day Sujana was born, too.

PS: Oh, really?

AM: My son was born on that day. Amazing.

PS: Were you at the festival or were you at the hospital?

AM: I was at the festival and the hospital.

PS: Both.

AM: Both.

PS: Wow.

AM: So someone called me. “What are you doing here?” I said, “Well, Sujan was born yesterday.”

PS: Was he born truly the day before?

AM: Yes, yes. September 5 was when that fell.

PS: Okay.

AM: That probably was the second India Day.

PS: What did Preeti think of your priorities?

AM: I was there all through with her. I was supposed to have gone home to rest.

PS: Ok, okay.

AM: See, the morning before—I mean, I was there all night. Then I went straight to Landmark Center.

PS: And you announced to everybody—

AM: Put up the stuff and came home, took my shower and then went back to the hospital.

PS: That’s amazing. Super-volunteer.

AM: I think there are a few dedicated volunteers. I mean, I wasn’t that dedicated as some others—like Neena, Preeti, Godan—

PS: So now does the India Day run itself more or are you involved with that still?

AM: No, I think it’s an India Association thing. They do it themselves.

PS: And are you still a volunteer with India Association?

AM: Off and on. I don't want to be on the board. I said, "You know, that's enough for me. I'll help out when I can."

PS: So what do you do now in your free time?

AM: Free time? Raise kids.

PS: Oh, okay. So that Preeti can go and teach.

AM: Yes, Preeti can help. Preeti's still volunteering and she's now director in India Association. That's where she is tonight, today.

PS: Oh, okay. From my perspective, SILC is a very unusual organization because it's been going for many years completely on volunteer labor, a hundred percent, and it's never become—any paid positions, right?

AM: No.

PS: In your mind what was the magic or whatever came together that made that happen and kept it going for so long?

AM: I think it's the parents and the teachers. Even now it's still sort of that same spirit is there. When I go there and see the discussions among parents, "You know, this is what we should do," exactly the same discussions we used to have. Okay? I mean, I have to stop myself from telling them, "You know, we discussed that, too." You know, you let them do it. So I think, you know, it's that they—it's just rejuvenated.

The same issues were there, and the same issues are here today, too. Finding volunteers, getting students into SILC. How do we keep it going? How do you raise funds? How do you find volunteers? What do you teach? Are these people really learning? Same issues as before going over and over every time. We just let it be, and you don't get in there and say, "You know, we went through the same thing. This is what we did." It just won't work. That won't work.

PS: Okay. You just let them work it out.

AM: No, I don't think we should do that as people who—we have a tendency to do that. I don't think we should, but it happens. I mean, they'll figure out another path which may be exactly the same thing, as what we did. But I think that's what keeps it going.

PS: Yes. So what is it that comes up in people who are immigrants or even—I know some of the

people who bring their children are adoptive parents—what is it inside of them that says, “This is important for my child to know”?

AM: I think with some parents it’s—I mean, like, with our kids we wanted them exposed to other cultures, too. I mean, we wanted to make sure that they are not just only Hyderabadis and move with only Hindi-speaking people. We just wanted to make sure they are exposed to all others. India is big. So SILC offered that environment where you have people from North India, South India, east, west, different languages, different cultures, different backgrounds. That’s what we really liked, and I think there are some parents who like that. They are the ones you find that are more active in SILC. There are some who come in with the attitude, “just teach my kids this language.” Some have limited ambitions. Some have bigger ambitions. So I think it’s a mixture of people and parents. That’s what keeps SILC going, too.

PS: What percentage of the parents would you say get very involved, serve on the board or become a teacher?

AM: I’d say about some twenty, twenty-five percent of them who—

PS: And the other seventy-five percent just bring their kids and drop them off?

AM: About fifty percent probably do that. The other twenty-five hang around and help out when they can or volunteer to help when they can. But then a few who are just active for day-to-day, and for the principal you have to be committed.

PS: Has the kind of parents changed over the years? Do you see different regions of India or different economic backgrounds or different class groups, different language groups?

AM: Yes. Yes, I think it changes every time. There are, like, three big changes. One was when we invited the parents of Indian children, all parents who have adopted. So we used to meet on Sundays and they said, “You know, you guys meet on Sundays. We have our kids here. We want them exposed to Indian culture, too. But we have church on Sundays.” So that’s when we switched to Saturday. So Saturdays became, you know, it was to accommodate for the parents of Indian children.

The second, all the language groups changed. It used to be like a big Gujarati contingent at one time, and Marathi contingent. That disappeared completely. Today there’s no Gujarati [taught] at all.

PS: Why did it disappear?

AM: I don’t know.

PS: Okay.

AM: Then there was no Malayalam back in the early days. Now it's big, Malayali group. I think it just depends on who is active.

PS: And who's willing to teach?

AM: Yes. Again, right now you see, like, the president is a Malayali. The principal is a Malayali. I mean, those who are really active and committed, they campaign within their people, their own community, and they make sure they get the following to it. Again, if you're committed, you will talk a lot about it. Same thing when Neena and Shanti and all those guys were involved. It was a big Gujarati contingent, because they were all there.

PS: So their children and their friends' children—

AM: Yes, and then once they left, there was no one there to teach.

PS: Are there different kinds of people emigrating from India now than there were?

AM: Yes, that's the other change that had happened now, the needs are different. When I came, there were very few Indians. Now there are a lot more Indians. It's people with a lot more money. I mean, software has changed it, too. People with the software background, I don't know, the—what are you calling them, the software people?

PS: Programmers.

AM: Programmers? So their kids, they have different motivation. Then some of them are here for a short time. It's a different kind of issues.

PS: Do you think they're really here for a short time or are they doing the same thing you did, thinking you'll work for a couple of years—

AM: They probably would like to do the same thing, but some of them are going back, too. So still there are net immigrants here. If a hundred people come, maybe about eighty will stay back. Twenty will go back, that kind of thing. Before, in my time, a hundred would come in and a hundred will stay back.

PS: Oh, okay. So the people that are coming now, who are the software engineers, you said their needs are different. How are their needs different, from your generation, for instance?

AM: I'm not sure. I mean, this is just the feeling I get when I go to SILC. From a commitment standpoint they are there to offer something to their kids because, hey, we are here. They should go somewhere to some SILC, some school. The larger community sense probably is not there with some parents, that they have to—I don't know. I'm maybe old fashioned, the old-fashioned

thinking where you have to have community outreach, too, since you are settling into this community. Your kids are going to grow up here, so we thought about the longer term. We already knew we are going to stay here. We didn't have an option, so we had this community outreach thing and we knew it was important.

With the current immigrants I think that that's there, too, but I see that coming back with the newer generation. They are much more active in the community.

PS: Oh, okay. Even the ones that are here for a short time?

AM: No, the newer ones are more—it's a different group. I mean, they are much aware of America than we were even.

PS: They're much aware?

AM: About the life in America. When I came here—

PS: Oh, okay. You came here not knowing what to expect.

AM: Yes, 1970s, we had very little interaction. 1969 was around the first influx of Indians. 1973, when I came, there was about three years of [collective] experience. It was mostly through letters. Today you have Internet, web, CNN, everything. So they know what to expect, what happens here, and a lot of that has been adopted back in India, too. So they know. That awareness of the lifestyle is there.

PS: So it's easier to come now, do you think?

AM: I think so, yes. I mean, for them it's easier to adapt to the culture here and there's not a huge difference in the culture. They grew up in Western culture. They will adapt if they come here. So, like, these kids here, okay, my sister's son who was here. He knows about CNN. He has seen "Lucy," "Ellen," all those things. So they know about what to expect.

PS: That would make it very different, yes.

AM:

PS: So when those people send their children to SILC, what kinds of different things are they wanting SILC to provide?

AM: I'm not sure how to answer that. I could be just guessing. So I don't know exactly if that is the truth or not. So I don't know what the motivation is.

PS: When you don't live in India for twenty-five years, does it make it harder to teach about

India?

AM: No.

PS: No?

AM: Actually you gain—I mean, in my case, I mean, I learned more about India being here than when I was in India.

PS: Say more about that. That's a very curious statement.

AM: I mean, it's essentially, I mean, you begin to read about, I mean, Hindu religion, for example. I said, "What is a Hindu?" You just do rituals in India. No one really teaches you the background and it's by exposure. You learn by exposure. Here you begin to read and you begin to discuss. You begin to see criticism about it, and you see analysis, etc. So you gain much more that way.

PS: Do you think you would have gained that had you stayed in India as well?

AM: Probably. Probably.

PS: So it's part of just maturing.

AM: It could be. It could be. But then this kind of—at least for me here being exposed to people from all over India at SILC, for example, you get different opinions. If I were in Hyderabad, it would be just local. So it's a much more richer environment here when you're interacting with people.

PS: Now these are other Indian people.

AM: Other Indian people, and then you begin to see the other cultures. Like, when I came here, my roommate was a Chinese. I mean, you could never even dream of, you know, 1962, we went to war with China, and China is the enemy. You come in with that notion.

PS: And now you're using the same kitchen.

AM: Yes.

PS: With an enemy.

AM: Yes. I mean, it's—well, then again you see, hey, it's no different. So it opens up your mind much more.

PS: Regarding the balance between Indian culture and American culture or American mainstream culture, what role do you see SILC having there? One of SILC's roles is to preserve Indian culture. Does that mean that SILC does not want the Indian people to assimilate into American culture?

AM: No, I think it's just basically right from day one, when SILC was started, it was that we cannot really offer them everything. They're exposed to the American—the local culture six days a week or seven days a week. It's just a few hours they spend in SILC. We wanted to just create that environment where they learn something, some exposure rather than nothing. So that was the goal. It wasn't to teach them about this is the right thing, this is the wrong thing. The one decision we made all through was not to be focused on religion and we stuck with it. Even today the parents—that's what makes it different, SILC, versus other schools in town.

PS: Because the other schools had a religious focus.

AM: They several times were pulled into joining these religious organizations. They said, "No, we are not teaching religion here, period." So that was one fundamental thing and it's still there. I said, "We will expose them to all religions: Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Judaism, Buddhism, Jainism." So we teach all of that at SILC. Then, again, it's just giving them exposure to it and then camaraderie in the standpoint like when we were there.

I remember in SAP we had discussions on dating, abortion, on all kinds of things kids wanted because since it's a free environment, okay. They're trying to ask, they're trying to see, hey, how come these parents don't allow me to date? What's wrong with this culture? They asked me, in the larger culture dating is accepted, no problem at all. So we had some students, who had real issues about it, and they were going through some problems with that themselves, and we addressed that in SAP. So I had a discussion. We had a mock trial in one.

PS: What did you try in the trial?

AM: Well, the kids picked mock trial. They wanted a mock trial, and I said, "Yes, let's do it." So then she said, "I want to talk about dating."

PS: As a trial subject?

AM: As a trial subject.

PS: So dating was what was trial?

AM: That became kind of controversial.

We turned that into a discussion on dating instead. Again, it's an environment—you can open it up to even that.

PS: So how did the trial turn out?

AM: We didn't go to trial with the parents. We just turned it into a discussion. I didn't want to have controversy there.

PS: Oh, okay.

AM: So I think that's the other thing, you know, SILC can offer, is how you assimilate with a larger culture. It was real issue with the teenagers. That's what I was hoping SAP could do, is, you know, they have issues, they may have issues, it gives them a forum.

PS: Yes. For the kids that were born here and now they're grown up and now they're having children, like, Lisa's got two children now, right? Do you think that they'll send their children to SILC?

AM: I hope so.

PS: And what will be their purpose? Because those kids don't have a—now, the young parents don't have a big connection to India. They may have some connection but not a big one. What would motivate them?

AM: I think probably—you might have to check with Lisa, but I would assume, like, she probably wants to expose them to what she was exposed to at SILC. I mean, for her she was born here, too.

PS: Right.

AM: So as far as she was concerned, she was in the dual situation. Home is Indian culture. School is the larger culture. So she was in a different mode. So it helped her a lot, SILC. With her kids maybe she just wants them to know a little bit which she can't really explain about the Indian culture. She may expect that SILC might be able to give more than what she really can, because she knows the Gujarati side of it quite well. Maybe that could be her motivation. Yes.

PS: And then there'll always keep being those immigrants—

AM: Yes.

PS: —who will come in with those other expectations.

AM: Yes, you can see that at the University of Minnesota, too. That's changing.

PS: Really? How's that? I'm not connected close to the University. How is that?

AM: You know, Shruti was born here, and she's going to the University of Minnesota. Then you also have students coming from India who are also at the University of Minnesota. So you see, like, they called themselves what? ABCs and IBCs? Whatever.

PS: What does ABC stand for?

AM: It's American Born—A, B, C—American Born Confused Desis.

PS: And then what does IBC—Indian Born.

AM: Indian Born Confused Desi.

PS: Oh, that's cute. But then do they hang out together in the Indian Students Association?

AM: Probably, yes. I think so, yes. You should check with Shruti.

PS: Well, is she here?

AM: Maybe you could interview her, too, right?

PS: I have her tape from a year ago.

So things just keep changing. You went to the twenty-year celebration for SILC, right?

AM: Yes.

PS: What was that like for you? Tell me about the day's events and how that was.

AM: The twenty-year one, I think Preeti was the principal at the time, and we wanted to make it big. We wanted for them to get people—It was Preeti's idea actually, and she said, "I want you to be the coordinator." So I was the coordinator.

PS: Oh, so there you were in charge again.

AM: Yes, I was of the twentieth anniversary celebrations. They wanted to do it in a big way, which we did.

PS: So what were all the events that were happening that day? What were the things that went on as part of that?

AM: Well, we invited, contacted all the students, every student that had gone through, to write something on what—now that they are back in a different environment, just recall what did they

think about SILC and what had SILC meant to them and what it means to them now. So they all wrote back, which was kind of good. We put a book together of the twentieth anniversary. The parents wrote the same thing, the parents of those kids. The teachers at the time. And then, sort of the chronology and Preeti was good at that, at doing the chronology every year. So she was the record keeper.

PS: Oh, okay.

AM: So in the chronology that's kind of a good documentation of what all happened in twenty years. Then the get-together in the evening was a real good one, too. We had a fairly large get-together, bands and recollections and it was pretty good.

PS: And food?

AM: Food, of course. Every Indian get-together they have to have food. Put out food and there'll be an Indian get-together. Okay?

PS: So how many people came?

AM: I think about close to about a hundred, a hundred and fifty were there.

PS: Oh, good. That's a lot.

AM: Yes, quite a few people. They're going to do it at the St. Paul Student Center. Then finally when it came, we decided to do it at the school where we meet.

PS: The Como High School?

AM: Yes, it was a good get-together.

PS: And that was a year ago? Two years ago?

AM: 1998.

PS: Oh, okay.

AM: Over twenty years, so '98, 1999 is when we did it.

PS: Yes. What do you see happening as SILC goes forward?

AM: I was at SILC the other day. I think it's going pretty good.

PS: How many students are there this year?

AM: About forty, fifty, I think. Fifty students.

PS: At its highest how many did you have?

AM: The highest was—what was it? We couldn't handle it. It was 120, I think, 110, 120. We couldn't handle that year. Then it dropped to eighty-five. Even eighty-five was big. I think about sixty, seventy is probably about optimum. With the volunteer teachers, I mean, if you need a regular—if you have to handle about 120, 120 you needed someone paid.

PS: Right. That's a lot.

AM: We had talked about that. You know, let's pay somebody. Let's pay somebody and then it was the cause of discussion every board meeting every year.

PS: Oh, and then nothing ever happened.

AM: Nothing ever happens, and the association is doing the same thing. We all should pay somebody. We're all professionals. We don't have time for this thing, let's pay.

PS: But they don't.

AM: They don't.

PS: What gets in the way of deciding to pay somebody?

AM: I think they should. Let's see, maybe they might this year.

PS: This year?

AM: Well, you know, once we have money available, I think that the India Association, they do now, then they should be able to pay somebody to do the mailing, keeping up the directory, keeping the minutes. All the day-to-day administrative stuff. Everybody is working. We have professional jobs, and it's a question of the value.

PS: Right, how do you want to spend your time?

AM: Yes. Yes. I think they might do it next year or this year.

PS: Yes. How many Indian people live in Minnesota now? Do you know? Do you have a sense?

AM: The last census they did, the recent census, I think they said about twenty thousand.

PS: That's a lot.

AM: Yes.

PS: And if SILC really reached out, they could easily have classes of a couple hundred, right?

AM: They could, yes, they could.

PS: What's the barrier there?

AM: I think the word getting out, for one. Number two is the parents' commitment. A lot of them feel they get enough through other activities, or they have their own get-togethers on weekends. That's what we see with [unclear] now. Every Saturday they have get-togethers so their kids get that exposure [unclear].

PS: Oh, okay.

AM: The camaraderie thing which we thought was good. But there are a few who think there should be exposure to all of India, and those are the ones which we see coming to SILC.

PS: Oh, okay.

AM: Not just their own Marathi Indian culture or other South Indian. It's generally—

PS: So one of the things that SILC did very effectively because of its small numbers of people was bridge people across Indian subgroups as well.

AM: I think so. I think that's the good part.

PS: And now that there's more Indians here, they don't feel that need. They can just hang out with their own people who speak their own language.

AM: Even that part they probably are getting that, too, and from their professional background they meet other people at work. So they probably get together and get that exposure. But then again it's limited. It takes effort for a kid to come on a Saturday. Then they look at the value—hmm, what it is, you know. They think they ought to get fluent in the language. They can't. We can't teach somebody. So the expectation could be high, too, and it doesn't go [unclear].

PS: Running back to that idea of assimilating into the culture around you or keeping ties with your own roots as an immigrant, did you find that being highly involved in the Indian community took up the time you might have otherwise spent making friends with [unclear] American people?

AM: Well, I mean, it's a question of interest, and I was interested in doing it. This is the way I could reach out to both, and this was my way of reaching out. I don't think I would have done anything different. If I wasn't a volunteer, I don't know if I would have gotten involved in any other way, [unclear], skiing and all that.

PS: Right. Now, I mean there are some other sort of hobby things. You know, people play on baseball teams or they get involved in a chess club or something like that but a social outlet. I think all your volunteer time or free time is going to the India Association. Did that stop you from connecting more with other Americans?

AM: No, I don't think so.

PS: No?

AM: I think I found this was a better way for me to get connected with everybody.

PS: Did this group connect you with other Americans or just with other Indians?

AM: I mean, India Association, for example, I mean, they're very nice and involved in some way or the other. Then, I mean, at home I'm—at work you do meet, so you don't lack it.

PS: Oh, okay.

AM: So at work you get that exposure, so it's not a big deal.

PS: Okay. You don't feel that this deprived you in any way of other time you would have spent with something else.

AM: No. No.

PS: Okay. Okay.

AM: In fact, it enhanced it, like when you expose your other friends from work to what you are doing.

PS: Did they come?

AM: No, in your discussions with them.

PS: Oh, okay.

AM: You have one more topic to talk about other than the other things we generally talk about.

PS: Ah, okay. So if you invited them to Festival of Nations, would they come?

AM: Yes, I think [unclear].

PS: The displays and—

AM: Festival of Nations, again, it's—everyone goes there so it kind of becomes a common topic. Everyone knows. Everyone is an immigrant. So they know about Festival of Nations.

PS: But if they came to the Festival of Nations, they might make a point of finding the Indian booth or having Indian food because they knew you?

AM: Could be, yes.

PS: Not sure.

AM: Yes, some of them.

PS: Okay. Are there any other things that I haven't asked you about that you'd like to tell me about?

AM: About SILC?

PS: Or anything else.

AM: Or—

PS: You've got the microphone.

AM: No, I think nothing other than I think things will go on and we just have to see what happens with after the September 11 thing. That's going to make a big change.

PS: How do you see that changing SILC?

AM: SILC, maybe not. But then again the outlook of our people to see, I don't know how it will be. Until now the trust that was built from seventies to now, when the gates opened to America from India, too, that trust hopefully will continue. Again, you cannot educate everybody, just only a few people, expose them about the culture, too. It takes a few generations before you really assimilate and you see that with the other immigrants, too, it takes a few generations. Hopefully that trust will continue and things will right itself.

PS: Have you heard of any incidents with people of Indian descent here in the Twin Cities experiencing discrimination because they're being mistaken for Arabs or Muslims?

AM: Just a few stray incidents. Again, we have become very sensitive to it, too, internally and anything you see you become sensitive, too, because being a first immigrant you're very sensitive if anybody looked. They didn't look at me really because of that. I mean, they probably would have looked at you even before, too, but then you become sensitive. So maybe largely people are sensitive to anything and everything that's happening around them. Few incidents have happened, but not a big deal. There's more positive. We just have to wait and see. I don't think it's that bad as compared to what it would be in some other places.

PS: Why do you think that is?

AM: I think it's a fairly mature culture here, for one. I mean, America has gone to, I mean, everyone knows that everyone is an immigrant. It has been drilled into them, and there's diversity training at work, we got exposed. People are being taught how to, you know, diversity, why diversity is important, and the companies have seen the benefits of diversities. So I think that's there, as opposed to other countries where economy is not that strong. So when the economy is strong, these differences vanish. The test will come when the economy is down. That will be the big test. So if we go into a big recession or depression, that's the time to see how logical [unclear] is.

PS: We're in there, aren't we?

AM: We're getting there. So hopefully America will show that they are a mature country.

PS: Do you have a sense of yourself being the foreigner?

AM: Myself, personally, yes, sometimes you go through that. But for the kids, it's not.

PS: So the kids don't have any sense of being foreign.

AM: In their mind it's not.

PS: Okay.

AM: In their mind, it's not. In their mind, to them India is foreign.

PS: Okay.

AM: But in our mind—we think it's the same in their minds, they think they're Indian, but they don't. So we have to again adjust to their thinking.

PS: Yes. I think it has a lot to do with what language was your first language.

AM: Yes. Yes.

PS: And if it was English, then you forget your—

AM: Well, for Shruti and for Sujan, I mean, he says, “I don’t know anything about India,” even though he had gone to SILC. He doesn’t identify at all.

PS: Yes. Anything else? For not having to say, you had a lot.

AM: No.

PS: I’ll check once more.

AM: Sorry. No.

PS: No?

AM: No, I think that’s it.

PS: Okay. Well, thank you very much.

SILC Oral History Project
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