

**Preeti Mathur**  
**Narrator**

**Polly Sonifer**  
**Interviewer**

**July 9, 2000**

**PS:** I am interviewing Preeti Mathur on July 9, 2000. How are you this evening?

**PM:** I'm Preeti Mathur. I'm doing well.

**PS:** Tell me about yourself, like where you live, how old you are, your family.

**PM:** I am forty-four years old and I live in Shoreview. I have two children, Shruti is eighteen and Sujan is thirteen. My husband, Anoop, is an engineer with Honeywell, and he came here first, in 1973, to the University of Minnesota, and I came in 1978, after we got married. And in 1979, I joined SILC [School of India for Languages and Culture].

**PS:** Was your marriage arranged?

**PM:** Arranged, in the sense, like between friends, you know, people saying, "Okay, meet so and so, it might be good for you." Anoop's sister is my aunt. She married my dad's youngest brother. There's a big age disparity between the brothers. There are seven of them. And my uncle suggested, "You know, there's this guy you may want to—"

And at that time, I wasn't going out, and I wasn't arranged to be married to anybody. And so we started writing to each other, and so we had a very long courtship through the mail—almost two years, because his visa wasn't quite in place. You know, you've got to get your green card to be an immigrant, so Honeywell sponsored him and he came to India in January. We got married in January 1978, and tax return day, April 15, 1978, I arrived in the Twin Cities.

**PS:** So you did your whole courtship through the mail, and then you finally met in January and got married right away?

**PM:** Yes. Well, I shouldn't say I didn't know him at all. I kind of, as I said, because he used to come to visit his sister, my aunt. He would come and go but it was, yes, we didn't have much to do with each other, especially since I'm five years younger, and at that time, I didn't care. But apparently he had his eyes on me, he says. And so when he wrote to me he said that, you know, I'll tell you all about it later on, and he told me how he used to try to find excuses to come and visit. And even though I didn't live a very segregated life, still, there wasn't that much activity

between men and women, and he would have had to have a real good excuse to come to my house.

**PS:** Even though he never mixed around with you, he just wanted to look at you?

**PM:** Yes, he, I guess somehow he was attracted to me. He says that he always knew he was going to marry me. He was very sure. So that's why I don't call it totally arranged, because even though our courtship was through the mail, we got to know each other really well. And since my degree is in journalism, I wrote a lot. The arrangement was that my four letters to his one letter, though he wrote quite often, too. He's a very philosophical and well-read man, so we would discuss philosophy and we would discuss our approach to life and values, and, you know, I learned a lot from him, and we have a very mutual respect for each other.

**PS:** So you came here in April of which year was it?

**PM:** 1978.

**PS:** Okay, 1978. Now how old were you at that time?

**PM:** Twenty-one.

**PS:** All right. Very young. Just recently out of college.

**PM:** Recently out of college. I just finished my master's and had a short assignment, working as an editor for the Administrative Staff, College of India, and at that time I didn't know that that would become my vocation years later, because I was editing a technical paper, and now that's what I do. I do technical writing. I write software manuals and hardware manuals and write papers, those kinds of things.

**PS:** So there you are, twenty-one years old, moving to America, to be with this man that you've been writing to for two years. Did that sit well with your family? Was that okay with them?

**PM:** Well, I guess since it was something that was instigated by them, you know, that it was the family who kind of arranged this match, so to speak. So yes, it was not totally out of my coming, you know, that I was going to marry. It was my uncle telling my mom, and my mom saying—because initially, she said no. I'm my parents' only daughter. I have a brother, and she didn't want to send me away this far.

But then, I guess, you know, you can just believe in fate, and there were several proposals that had come earlier for me, from guys who had settled abroad, and she said no, no, no, no. But this one she said, "Oh, maybe." And then, I'm not quite sure if she knew or not that he had written to me, but then I did share that with her, and I think—because I was very opposed to a totally arranged marriage.

You know, I thought, nobody can arrange my emotions, so I'm not sure if I didn't like him, if I could have got out of—I'm not sure. I always question that. But I think that question never came up. We just clicked. We just clicked, and after we met there were several things that he did that made me respect him a lot. He didn't care for this disparity between rich and poor, like when we went off on our honeymoon. My father was the general manager of a bank, so he gave us a chauffeured car, and he invited the chauffeur to come and eat with us in the restaurant. It was kind of unheard of, and right there, he went up four notches in my esteem, because I just didn't like that disparity, too. I always thought that everybody should be equal and get a fair chance.

And several times, like what he wrote to me, because I was, I was really concerned about moving away, and at that time, I had a very socialistic approach, you know, especially, this is towards the tail end of the Cold War, and you see everywhere in the world, trouble spots instigated by either the Soviet Union or the U.S. You know, the two super powers are always involved, and what the military and armament and all that caused. So I wasn't sure.

You know, when you're young, you've got these very strong ideals. Did I want to come to this country? But then he told me, see, from here, your horizons will be much broader. You will meet people from all different parts of the world. You know, you talk about the American melting pot, part of a tossed salad or whatever you want to call it. And you'll find you'll have a better perspective, and from here if you want to make any changes you'll be in a much better position. And so these helped sort things out.

And he would quote me Gibran, Kahlil Gibran's, you know, the eagle and coming from the nest and philosophical things and all that, which helped me, but it was a long transition. I had never gone away from home, had always gone to college and school right there in my hometown. And leaving my parents at the same time, it was very, very traumatic. But I think, when I compare myself to some of the people that have come recently, who have been able to go back more frequently and talk more often to the parents. I think I did fine, considering that I didn't go back after I had Shruti, after four years.

So I didn't see my parents for four years after I came, because it was expensive to travel and telephoning wasn't cheap. In fact, some day I'm hoping—I think Shruti brought back some of the letters that I would write home, and I hope I can collect and get my memories, too, because I would write every little detail, especially to my brother and to my mom, of what life was like.

It was kind of exciting. I had always read a lot, and so I remember reading like Arthur Hailey's *Money Changers* and the first time I ever went to a motor bank or saw a credit card, because it was all—theoretically, I knew about it, but I experienced all of that. To actually experience that was pretty fun, actually.

My husband, of course, did a lot of handholding, but in a way, he also let me experience and be on my own, and I just loved that independence. I've always been quite independent, and I

remember the first time I hitchhiked here. Well, I wasn't being stupid, I wasn't being foolish. I mean, I knew that it was not that risky, because I was just going between the campuses, and the person I took a ride from had a woman with him, so it was not unsafe—but it did scare him.

And then once I walked by myself on Rice Street [in St. Paul], because I missed my connecting bus. But I would experiment. I would hop on and off the buses and take off and go to the libraries, because I'd been pretty active and was quite comfortable in the city that I grew up in, and was quite involved with a budding television station that was being formed.

I wrote quite a bit for the local paper, and to come here and find out, you know, you just know that you've got to start from scratch. Nobody knew me. All the telephone calls that came were for him, and the people that I met were all very different, and that was one of the biggest reasons why I joined SILC, because SILC seemed to draw people, like-minded people, people who all wanted to pursue knowledge, and teach it and disperse, and hang on to their heritage, not in a very cloying way, but you know, in a way to make you feel good, and to make the children feel good. At that time, the children were a mere twinkle in my eye, but just being with people who intellectually were stimulating and had similar values, was tremendous.

**PS:** So initially you came here and you didn't have a job, initially?

**PM:** No. I had my admission at the University of Minnesota, but you know, you want to be a resident, you don't want to pay the nonresident tuition, so I waited for a year, and about three months or four months down the road, I found a job as a clerk at an insurance company. And there I was with these women who had never been perhaps outside the Rice Street area, or you know, that University and Rice area, probably went to school there and married their high school sweethearts and that kind of thing.

So here I am in their midst, somebody totally different, and when I told them I had my master's at twenty-two, they wouldn't believe me and they would say things like, "Oh, you might have bribed somebody." The first time I heard the word "nigger" it really bothered me. They would use the word, you know, and to me it was so shocking, because I had read that it was, not the thing to say, or that you were colored. You know, that kind of thing. And I would come home in tears.

**PS:** So were they referring to you as a "nigger?" Or they were just talking about the word "nigger?"

**PM:** Yes, they were talking about other people, that's how they would refer to men. But I took this role of, I have to teach them things, so I would have them over in my house and show them things, and you know, make ethnic foods. Because somehow I felt that this is probably the only chance they'll ever get of learning different things, and I hope I've been, you know, I've touched some way, something, and hope they remember, you know, because I don't think they were exposed to anything different.

So that was difficult. And I remember Anoop telling me that it'll be okay, once you start at the U, you'll be fine. And sure enough, it was. I found the coursework not that stimulating, because I was repeating my master's. I was hoping to go in for a Ph.D., and I didn't, eventually, but the coursework was not that stimulating, but I had to get used to different things.

In college in India, we did things as a group. Here, the moment you got done in class, everybody went their different ways. I was not used to eating lunch by myself. So it was hard to adjust to that, sitting by yourself. I was very self-conscious, sitting by myself. I would feel that people were staring at me. I remember going into the cafeteria at this place that I used to work—the insurance company—and being mortified. All the food was so different, and the people behind me, and I felt like, you know, I'm holding people up, I have to decide quickly. But in a way, it was good because I found out what I liked and what I didn't—through mistakes.

**PS:** Like all of us.

**PM:** So the University was—I mean, I met a lot of people, I made a lot of lasting friends, and I went on to work there as a—I got my assistantship in the college of liberal arts. I didn't get it in my own department, and that eventually became sort of an administrative semi-academic position, where I was advising students, so it's come in real handy because now as Shruti goes to college, I'm kind of familiar with what she needs to take and what would happen.

**PS:** What was the Indian community like in 1978?

**PM:** It was small. Very small, compared to now. But growing, I think, compared to 1973, when my husband came. And it was not as spread out. There were not that many different organizations. SILC was one and there was India Association, which was sort of defunct. It was not quite active. And then maybe a few regional groups, but everything was very small.

Indo-American Association, run by students. That was very active. And I think the activities were mostly, they would show a movie in the theater and the Diwali celebration on the West Bank of the campus, that was a big thing. In fact, that was where I met Professor Menon, Dr. Menon, who started the preceding school, you know, the former organization that led to SILC—Bharat School. And he found out that I had just come, and I was bouncing around, talking. He says, “Why don't you come on Sundays?” And in fact, Neena [Gada] still remembers and she keeps telling me, Neena said, “I remember you coming with your two braids.” I had very long hair, and was very shy, and was not quite sure what to expect.

I come from Hyderabad, a city that's kind of a blend of Muslims and Telegu-speaking people, because it was ruled by the Nizam of Hyderabad, so the dialect is more a hodge-podge of these languages, and so when I told them that I was teaching Hindi, I told my friends, or, you know, people I knew, they started laughing. “How could you be teaching Hindi? You're from

Hyderabad, you don't even speak Hindi properly." You know, this dialect. Because people from north think they speak the best Hindi.

**PS:** Just like Minnesotans. We think we speak the best English, and we're actually all speaking American. It's just an illusion.

**PM:** But you know what it did was, it kind of forced me to—it's come to the point now that when I'm with people from Hyderabad, I can speak the Hyderabadi dialect, and when I'm with people from north, I go back and speak the more—their way of speaking. But then I have to make a very conscious effort not to use certain words.

For example, the word "*hau*" in Hyderabad means "yes" and that, I think, has been borrowed from the Maranathi language, but it's been incorporated into the Hyderabadi dialect, and so I had to remember not to say "*hau*" but to say "*huh*" or "*acha*," that kind of thing. And same thing with—there are several other words—but also it forced me, I remember sitting on and learning—it had been years since I had learned the letters and the alphabet and all that, so it forced me to revise and go back to my roots, my first grade, second grade, and learn the Hindi alphabet, because I was teaching these kids. But it was nice that, you know, they didn't know anything, so I learned with them as well.

**PS:** So this was at Bharat School, you were teaching first?

**PM:** Yes.

**PS:** And then what happened? The Bharat School didn't continue?

**PM:** Well, what happened was—I mean, we did really well. In 1979, we participated in the Festival of Nations and I remember helping out with the exhibits. And we did the bazaar. I mean, we ran the show, Bharat School. Dr. Menon was very much the center and we made a lot of money on the food. And so what happened was, he made some choices on his own. He bought a copy machine and something else, and the rest of the board members felt he should have consulted everybody.

I was too young and too—I didn't know quite what was happening, so I don't know the exact details but I just remember that he took—he made certain decisions that were not agreeable to the others and the others felt that he should have consulted before he spent large amounts of money on things that they didn't think were that useful. So there was some kind of a falling-out, I remember, and there were five of us women, and I think maybe we were told, "Okay, fine, go ahead and do what you need to do."

So Neena Gada was one, and Shanti Shah, and Usha Kumar. I'm forgetting another person. Oh, Prabha [Nair], she's no longer here, she's in Arizona. And Ram [Gada] helped us a lot. We said we have to establish it as a nonprofit organization. We were all volunteers. We wanted it

nonprofit, and I think perhaps Dr. Menon had other ideas. He wanted to make it into a business venture.

So we wrote the bylaws and incorporated it and got started at the St. Paul Student Center, the community center there, [on the St. Paul Campus of University of Minnesota—Twin Cities] in 1979. I became the Hindi coordinator and I remember starting the newsletter, so that was another thing. It gave me an outlet for writing. I remember the first newsletter I did—it was even while it was Bharat School. It went with the India Association's mailer or Indo-American's mailer, just one sheet, and I remember writing, "Did you ever want to taste the mangoes or listen to Grandma's story?" You know, bring a little emotion, so my advertising, copywriting skills came in there—and doing the little brochure. All these creative things. Designs, Indian designs. I've always collected, I've always loved Indian art, and had this nice collection of designs and motifs, so I would painstakingly draw these things. This was before the days of desktop publishing.

**PS:** Right. And before children.

**PM:** Oh, the B.C. era, I call it. I remember, my husband had this—some kind of an early form of a modem, a teleprompter, that had these acoustic couplers to put your receiver on, so you could—and it was Mahesh Jeerage, would work in another branch of Honeywell, and there was this, some program, I can't even remember now, where you had to do the coding, and only Anoop [Mathur, my husband] knew how to do it, so I would dictate. I would say what I wanted, and he would code it. You know, sort of like HTML or SGML perhaps, I'm not sure. And then it would go there and it would print out, and he would send the printouts, and I would cut and paste it on my dining table.

And then I remember, once I was done with the University, my first job as a technical writer was at Control Data, and we had Wangs, dedicated word processors, so I started doing the newsletter on those Wangs. And then came the Macintoshes, and Anoop had the first portable Macintosh [computer from Apple Computer], which was this huge thing, and he would bring it to SILC. He started this program called SILC Achievement Program, SAP, for kids like Shruti [my daughter]—no, I mean, Shruti was little at that time, but there were these other kids, Vishant Shah and Sujana Kamran, who were getting to be in the tenth grade, eleventh grade, and had done enough learning, the languages or whatever, and needed to be occupied, so they would do these projects, like the cookbook and the yearbooks, and all were done on those Macintoshes.

**PS:** So they were learning life skills as well as about India and Indian culture, art and cooking. Wow, cool.

**PM:** Because now we have all this desktop publishing tools. And Shruti did a few of the newsletters, too.

**PS:** So she's a pro from way back. She was complaining earlier that she never got to take that class.

**PM:** Yes, she was very disappointed that her dad, you know—I guess, you know, over the years, because it's all a volunteer-run organization, certain things were recorded and certain things were not recorded, and then depending on who came, certain things were taught, and I guess when she came of age, that was something that fell out of place.

**PS:** What year was she born?

**PM:** Pardon me?

**PS:** What year was Shruti born?

**PM:** 1981.

**PS:** Okay, so you were involved for two years before she was born.

**PM:** Yes, two, three years actually. I remember being pregnant and helping with a show at the Festival of Nations, and then when she was born, I continued, I kept going, and so her earlier recollection is crawling around, you know, hanging around with us, and so I guess there was never a question that she would not go. She always came along with us, and I think, when she was very little, perhaps, Anoop stayed home with her, but then we started bringing her along, and she waited for the day when she could join as a student.

**PS:** Who was more excited about SILC, you or Anoop?

**PM:** I guess I was. Initially, he would just drop me off. It was something for me to do, because I was lonesome and I was waiting for school to start. That's how I started. And I didn't drive, so he would drop me and then come back and pick me up. That's how it started. And then gradually, we started pulling him into it, too, because it was the same thing, like, for Neena. Neena did it and then gradually Ram, her husband, got into it. It was the same thing with, I'm sure, other people, where the wife started it, the mothers, and then the husbands and fathers got involved, too.

**PS:** If you five women had met up in India somewhere, I don't know that you would have, because you were all from different parts of India as well, right?

**PM:** Yes.

**PS:** But if you had all somehow magically met up in India, in India, would you have been, would you, as women, have started a school? Is that something that was part of what was expected or normal for Indian women to do, especially young Indian women?

**PM:** I'm not sure about the others. I'm a little bit younger than them. When I was coming of age, Indira Gandhi was the prime minister, and I kind of grew up saying, "I can do anything I want."

**PS:** Okay. So for you, that wasn't a big deal.

**PM:** No, it wasn't. My mother didn't work, but my mother-in-law did. She was a teacher. My sisters-in-law are doctors and you know, principal of a school, and so yes, it was not that alien a thought. I mean, I didn't kind of grow up thinking, for my career I am just going to be a housewife. I knew I was going to be doing something. I didn't think I would be teaching although I've always loved teaching.

I remember, as a child—I mean, I'm the oldest on both sides of the family, my father's and mother's, and I have younger cousins, so I'm the oldest, right? And I would have school every summer holiday, and I would teach. In fact, my cousins told me that they learned things like vowels and all that from me, even before they were taught that in school. Because whatever I learned, I would teach them, and I loved it—we would use one of the doors as a chalkboard, because we didn't have chalkboards and things like that.

**PS:** So it didn't matter that you were ten and they were four? You were going to teach them.

**PM:** Yes, I was going to teach them, and they better listen to me. I was bossy. Ask my children and they'll tell you that. So this was really exciting. I remember, as a child teacher, I would make these little notebooks and correct things and all that, and so here I was doing it in real life.

**PS:** For real kids.

**PM:** For real kids. And learning something myself, so I would think about all these ingenious ways of—I mean, I don't have an education background, but how can I make it fun? Because earlier on, I realized that the way things were taught to us, you know, it was very different.

**PS:** In what way?

**PM:** It was very unidirectional, you know, it came with a teacher, you listened, there was a lot of rote learning. Even though I went to a school that was a little more broad and more liberal. It was taught by Roman Catholic nuns and certain things were pretty strict and straightforward, and the school curriculum was so rigid that, you know, there wasn't much room and my entire life I've had nightmares of just doing exams. Everything else was in between but those exams were very important.

The textbooks and all that were not that fun, you know, especially when I look at my children's textbooks. They're so much more fun with all the pictures, and they're allowed to do all these projects. We did a certain amount of it, but it was not as much as it is here. Here, there's a lot of audio-visual and different kind of things that you use—field trips, etc.

So I tried to incorporate some of it. I'm not quite sure how I learned about those things. You know, I was at the University, so I had access to a lot of the journals and so forth. I remember there was a magazine in the local library, too, about teaching art and all that, so I got a lot of ideas from there and they had these series of books called "Teach French" or "Learn French" or "Learn Spanish" with tapes in it, and I borrowed ideas from them, and I made up songs on how to teach, you know, like the song "Heads, Shoulders, Knees and Toes." I translated that into Hindi and I found it clicked, when you sing. I'm a terrible singer. I can't sing for the life of me, but you know, for the kids, it didn't matter. But they learned. They learned the language. In fact, we still use it today.

Some of the kids were maybe ten years younger than me. You know, I was pretty young and they'd come to the point where they were questioning things and asking, and I remember Lisa [Gada] asking me about God and philosophy, and I'm saying, "I don't know." Because I, myself, am grappling with these ideas. But in some ways, I think it brought us closer, too. I still have a very soft spot for the kids that I taught. Now they are all married.

**PS:** And Lisa's having a baby soon.

**PM:** She's had a baby.

**PS:** She did? What did she have?

**PM:** A boy.

**PS:** A boy. Oh, how wonderful. So you taught Hindi, and you taught other subjects as well.

**PM:** As well. I taught what we call Social Studies.

**PS:** Which was also General Knowledge.

**PM:** General Knowledge, right. At that time, we called it General Knowledge and then we changed it to Social Studies. And then I also taught art, added a newsletter. So I did a little bit of everything. Two years ago, for our twentieth anniversary, I was the president, and I wanted to make a real big thing, so I got everybody from the past and present involved, and we had a big event—and had to plan a series of meetings.

And so in some ways, you know, I feel like I learned a lot. I mean, I never thought I would be able to—I still remember lying down and saying, "Our twentieth anniversary is coming. We have to do something. I'm going to be the president. How can I get it all going?" And I remember that first meeting—typing the agenda. These are the kind of things that, you know, I'm not—I don't do this very often at work, so it was a great opportunity and a great learning process, just standing in front of people and speaking. It was not something that I did very often,

and especially in the audience when you have adults who are telling you that you don't speak the language well and how can you teach? It's very nerve-wracking. So it was great learning experience for me, too.

I remember Mukul Ganguli, another longtime SILC member. He said that, you know, I mean, like everybody talks about, "How wonderful it is you do this thing, it's just great of you, volunteers and things like that. And you realize you also get something out of it. Also you do it because you like it and I think that's so very true. If it wasn't I wouldn't be doing this for long. It's not just for the heck of it. I've gotten a lot from it.

And as I said, some of my—I mean, in fact, everybody in the Indian community, almost everybody that I know, has been through SILC. It's just like, it opened the doors for me to so many people. We've got such a diverse group of friends, you know, because we don't belong to any particular ethnic group, coming from Hyderabad. We associate with the Muslims, with the South Indians, with the North Indians, and this is a great place to meet everybody.

**PS:** So it's an equalizer.

**PM:** Very much so. And that's how I always liked it. When you get too homogenous, you start taking things for granted is what I've learned. I've learned so much. Like some of my—my best friend is from Kerala, she speaks Malayalam—a Malayalee, I learned so much about the Kerala culture, which I was not aware of, though I had lived in India.

And of course, at SILC, we've done these festivals like Onam or we've done Pongal, which is another Tamil festival, a South Indian festival. I don't know so much about the different things they do for these festivals, which otherwise, I wouldn't—I guess I would know it from television perhaps now, in India, or from reading, but it's very different when you experience it, or hear about it firsthand from what it was for them, growing up.

**PS:** Lots of people have talked about that, being involved in SILC helped them connect with other Indians, who they normally wouldn't associate with, which is what you were just talking about now. Did it change your feeling about whether—about your identity as either an American or about your identity as an Indian, to be involved in SILC?

**PM:** What I think I, it made me—I mean, I feel like my Indianness is something like a springboard from which I have to feel my sense, my place in this world, in this world. You can't deny your heritage, so SILC allowed me to embrace my Indian heritage. It kind of affirmed it, and it helped me with raising my kids. Like when I had my daughter's graduation, I had a big board with pictures of all the friends who helped me raise her. You know, I said, "It takes a village to raise a kid," and to me, SILC, in some ways, was a village, really. I feel it very strongly. Because as I said, all or most of my Indian friends have a connection to SILC.

But going back—so it kind of reinforced my Indianness, but it also made me realize how global I've become, living here. At the core of it, I guess I'm Indian, but I see myself more as a global citizen. I see a citizen of the world, and that's why I think I enjoy events like Festival of Nations and traveling. I've started traveling a little bit to other parts of the world, and find that, you know, beneath all of this ethnic diversity or whatever, we tick to the same thing. And especially when I talk to other women, and especially when I talk to other mothers. I mean, it's such a bond. So it's like, you make these leaps, from I'm Indian, to, we're all in this, this is the same, it's one big universe—that kind of thing.

**PS:** So was being part of SILC, was that a way to stay connected with your Indian roots while living in this American culture?

**PM:** Definitely, definitely. Because as you start assimilating in the society and as I look back, at first you just cling on to your Indianness, and you become more Indian, and then you grow. I remember, you know, as a teenager, Indianness was around me, but I used to wear jeans, I loved the Beatles and Simon and Garfunkel, and all the music of those days. That's what I used to listen to. But again, I did like Indian music and classical music. I was not totally westernized. But then I went through a period where I wanted everything Indian in my house. I had all these Indian things.

**PS:** While you were here in America?

**PM:** Yes. So I'm talking about the progression, how I went through that, and now when I look back, I want a little bit of everything—my place has become more eclectic. I want a little bit of Japan, a little of country, a little bit of different cultures, you know. As I see around in my house and as I see in my reading, for example, I'm still drawn toward India. If I see a book on—like, yesterday I was at Barnes and Noble [a book store] and I found this book on Sanskrit plays, and it was just two bucks, so I said, okay. It's a good one for my collection. So I guess the core of it is Indianness, but then I think as my husband rightfully predicted, I've really expanded my horizons.

**PS:** So when you were in that phase where everything had to be Indian, how long did that one last, approximately? Years or months?

**PM:** Probably a few years. It's hard to tell because it kind of evolved gradually and perhaps maybe even was ten years, twelve years. And then I think what happens is that the children change a lot for you, I was a working mother, and so I would leave them at daycare. When they were first born, I would just speak to them only in Hindi, but then when they got into daycare, that's where I slipped. I would start speaking to them in English. But then you know, you start associating with other—like I would take them to the early education classes, my Lamaze classes, or the schools. And I remember making my first set of brownies and saying, “Oh, I'm such a good American mom.”

**PS:** Because an Indian mom would never make brownies, would she?

**PM:** No, she wouldn't. Or I remember, I knew how to make pancakes, but I just served plain pancakes to my kids, and I remember Max, my daycare provider, she said, "You just give them plain pancakes? You don't put syrup on them?" I didn't know there was anything like syrup that goes with the pancakes. Those poor kids have been denied syrup! I still don't eat syrup. To me, I can't mix sweet and savory—I have to eat them separate.

But you know, I learned those things. And so I guess it worked, and I started feeling more comfortable. I wouldn't cry each time I talked to my mom, especially after my first visit. I was just so excited, telling my mom about what life was for me. I think now I've spent equal amount of time here as there, I feel fairly comfortable. Perhaps now I'm beginning to feel more comfortable here than there, because there, I'm more like a visitor.

And the neat thing I always find, and in fact, some day I'm going to write about it, is that, just as the plane is approaching Bombay—because that's usually where I visit now—I go into the airline toilet, change into my sari, and then I slip into this mode of being an Indian, you know, totally. I put on my wedding beads and my *bindi* and my toe rings and my bangles, and I slip into that role. And then I do the same thing in reverse. When I'm back to America, I change into my Western clothes, and so, in a way, it's sort of, physical, but I think mentally also I get prepared, and I find it's the same thing.

I'm very defensive about America. When they talk about teenage pregnancies or black people committing crimes, I'm saying, you know, you can't generalize like that. Or when they get facts from shows like *I Love Lucy* or *Dallas* or whatever. Because, you know, now with Star TV [cable channels] and television, they're exposed to American movies, and they get the same things there.

I remember getting really upset with people when they would talk using these stereotypical images. Like this last July, I had the opportunity to talk to technical writers, a group that's just forming in India, and I still remember the look of disbelief on their face when I walked in. I was very Indian looking, right? I mean, they sort of expected me to go in a Western dress or something, but when I'm in India, I dress Indian. When in Rome, do as Romans do.

**PS:** It's your family that's come here now for this graduation party?

**PM:** No, it's my husband's.

**PS:** Your husband's family, okay. Are they surprised to see you here, looking American?

**PM:** Perhaps, perhaps. We haven't talked about it, but when my father-in-law and mother-in-law visited me in 1979, I was still kind of new here, and I said, "Oh, they can't see me in Western clothing," so I wore my Indian clothes and felt pretty self-conscious, you know. I went to

Chicago and all these places, in saris. And as you get older and mature, too, you stand your own ground, and I think that's what I'm doing now. I love it. All throughout this trip, I just wore what I normally wear.

**PS:** Now going back to SILC. Your stories are so fascinating, I get off the subject. What was the most challenging thing for you about teaching the students at SILC?

**PM:** I guess, as I said, first of all, not being, you know, totally familiar with Hindi, the way to start, not having the teaching background, and trying to find interesting ways to reach—and we didn't have a whole lot of resources either, so a lot of things we made up. Flash cards, and, as I said, textbooks and later on, of course, I started going to Kinko's [Copy Center]. Every Saturday morning, you would see me in Kinko's making worksheets. I'm a big worksheet kind of person. I always feel like they need to have something to keep them occupied, so I would make these worksheets and all that.

But that was the challenge. And now I think as I see some newer blood coming in with more teaching background, I think things have maybe changed for the better. Also I think one of the challenges—I remember the first few students that I had, they didn't want to be there. The parents forced them and I had no idea how to handle it. I think one of them was like a teenager and she was sullen and upset and just didn't want to be there, and I just didn't know how to deal with that.

**PS:** So what did you do?

**PM:** I think, initially, I perhaps ignored it. And if I can remember correctly, she stopped coming. And I think maybe I even talked to her a little bit. I said, you know, you probably don't realize it now, but it's probably a good thing. And interestingly enough, years later—she doesn't remember, but I remember, because I remember her name. She called me to enroll her daughter. Of course, I didn't tell her that I remembered her attitude then, but I thought it was all very interesting.

**PS:** And you're not going to share her name, are you?

**PM:** Perhaps not.

**PS:** Okay. So it came full circle there.

**PM:** Yes, it really did. Really. But most of the kids were—I remember another boy who—in fact, he's brilliant, he's very good student. Everybody thought he was a big troublemaker, but I really, really enjoyed him, and I found that—see, again, in India, it was very disciplinarian type of environment. If you are the teacher, you'd better be that way—you know, if you are the student, you listen. And I found early on that I had to change. So once I became a friend, I found

that they liked me. I wish I could have done this more often with my kids. It didn't seem to work. But with other people's kids, it seemed to work.

**PS:** So you had your children in class sometimes, right? Were they ever in your class?

**PM:** Well, Shruti was and for a few years now, Sujan has been in my class, too.

**PS:** And how has that been?

**PM:** Shruti, see, has always been very fond of reading and writing and things like that, so I think it was, you know, she would listen to me. Now Sujan, I wasn't sure all the time. He just was another one of those reluctant kids. He'd rather be outside doing things. It was funny. He would come back and tell me, "You know, your voice changes when you talk. You don't talk like that to me at home." And I suppose, you know, I have this way of talking when I'm in the teacher role. So he made these observations about me.

**PS:** That were way too honest, right?

**PM:** Yes.

**PS:** So you've been teaching, essentially, for twenty years for SILC?

**PM:** Yes.

**PS:** Never took a year off?

**PM:** Actually, I took a year off the year my son was born and my parents were visiting, and I was finishing my thesis, and finishing a 500-page manual. So I figured I needed a break. So perhaps that year, for a few months, I didn't teach.

**PS:** For just a few months?

**PM:** Yes, I think so. That's about all. And I remember Godan Nambudiripad doing the newsletter. Another time was when I broke my arm, my right arm, and I'm right-handed. I couldn't do the newsletter, so Godan did it for me.

**PS:** Otherwise, you've been there?

**PM:** Yes.

**PS:** On average, over all those years, how many hours a week would you say you put in?

**PM:** Well, for sure, a couple of hours every week, and at least a couple of hours, or maybe an hour, of preparation, so maybe three to four hours.

**PS:** Every week?

**PM:** Yes.

**PS:** And then you were on the board as well?

**PM:** Yes. Well, I didn't get a position until, well—the first year, the very first year, 1979, I was the treasurer, and then I never got on the board, for years, until three years ago, four years ago, I became the principal, for two years I was the principal, and then I became the president. So that was my stint as a board member.

**PS:** And now you've retired from the board?

**PM:** Yes. This year I'm no longer on the board, because, you know, you're what they call, what do they call it, a member-at-large, on the board. So after two years then, the president who steps down is a member-at-large. So this year I'm out—this coming year.

**PS:** I understand that you won't be teaching, even next year? Will you be teaching next year?

**PM:** I'm not sure. Maybe, I don't know. I've not decided. Once September comes, I know the phone calls will come and August, we'll start meeting. I feel like it's come to the point where we've got some really good people. We've got the Punjabi group that joined and they've got great enthusiasm. I think, demographically, we're changing. There were not enough students, and perhaps we hadn't publicized SILC enough. But after the twentieth anniversary, our enrollment went up and we're doing well.

So I feel like we've got—you know, you sometimes feel that you need to step down to get some new blood in. Like this past year, actually, my high school friend, I mean, she started bringing her daughter, and she suggested different modes of teaching, because she's a professor herself. So I think new ideas are coming in, which is good, and I think—I don't want to be one of those who will just hang on, just because I've been there for twenty years.

And there have been times where, like, a very good friend of mine called and said, "Look, I can't be bringing my son this year. I'm just swamped and he's got too many activities." And I said, "It's perfectly okay." It's like, your friendship with me is not going to matter. I don't own SILC. But a lot of people think that. That if they didn't come I would be offended or whatever, that was interesting. I said, "No, no, no, it's okay."

**PS:** So you've seen the enrollment go up and down. And what do you think those were due to, those fluctuations?

**PM:** I think it was a combination of things. One, as I said, is the demographics itself. And I think when you've been around for awhile, you just start assuming, too, that everybody knows you, and that I think was not true. I think people who were just coming in, and as I said, the Indian population in the Twin Cities was just growing, and unless you were involved with certain things, you didn't know about SILC.

But we had been around for so long, we just assumed that everybody knew. So I think it was a combination of those things. And for a while, we thought, "Oh, we can't handle any more people." We've got very few volunteers. What should we do if suddenly we get too many students—so we didn't go overtly publicizing it. And then when the enrollment started decreasing, people started saying, "Oh, SILC needs to close." And I remember being so upset about that. I said, "No, we have to do something about it."

And again, we don't know. We haven't done any scientific studies or anything like that, but that's just a gut feeling. Because I remember calling people who stopped coming, asking, was it something we didn't do? Because another school had come into being, and they wanted to join hands with us, but they had religion at the core of it, and we, when we formed, we had said we would be secular and we would be nonprofit, and so it was not possible. And again, we were not that big enough to probably have two schools. But then again we find that it hasn't affected us, and as I say, you know, they have a different curriculum.

So there were all these different things being thought about that, and the fact that maybe they are doing better. So you start wondering, is that so? But then, as I said, they have a different curriculum, so people who are interested in religion, perhaps want to bring their kids there. And again, it's in the southern part of the Twin Cities, where there's a big, large group of Indians. So it's definitely convenient.

**PS:** The other school is?

**PM:** Yes. But again, you know, it's hard to tell. It's hard to tell.

**PS:** What's your enrollment right now?

**PM:** About maybe eighty.

**PS:** Okay. And then your highest ever, what was it?

**PM:** It was a little over a hundred, 120 maybe, but that was way more than we could handle. I mean, it was just crazy.

**PS:** What was crazy about it?

**PM:** I guess, they all came to the Hindi group, and there were not enough of us teachers. We were not geared towards handling large crowds especially since we were in an elementary school at that time. And you know, because we rent the facility, we're using it on weekends—and the kids would touch things. You know how elementary classrooms are, filled up with knick-knacks and artwork and all that, and it was a nightmare trying to say, "Don't touch this," you know, and putting things back into place. Like it's much easier here in the high school, there's not too much we disrupt. But that was hard. But it was just one year, and then it seemed like there was one social group that all decided to join at the same time.

**PS:** So you had a big kind of clique come in?

**PM:** Clique, yes.

**PS:** How did that play out?

**PM:** Then they left the next year. So it was like, what happened?

**PS:** How old were that group of kids?

**PM:** I think they were ten- to twelve-year-olds, perhaps.

**PS:** Kind of a squirrely age, isn't it?

**PM:** Yes, yes. And I remember Rajan [Menon], I think he was the principal, or he was on the board. You should sometimes talk to him about it.

**PS:** He's on my list.

**PM:** Yes, he'll tell you about it.

**PS:** So they were challenging?

**PM:** Yes, well, that was it. So, you know, again, we're run by volunteers. And that's the hard thing—if you want certain things to be done a certain way. There have been in the past disagreements about how a particular teacher is teaching. You can't go and tell that person, "Don't teach this way." You know, as I said, I changed my teaching style, knowing that this is how the kids learn here, but you know, a lot of, perhaps other teachers, didn't know or didn't want to because they felt if you're teaching Indian, you should teach it the Indian way, and that sometimes didn't sit well, but we couldn't do anything about it. We couldn't go and say—

**PS:** Well, you can't fire a volunteer.

**PM:** Although we have done it once.

**PS:** Really?

**PM:** Involuntarily, though. You can talk about this play on words. But a friend, Anju Relan, she was teaching yoga, and I think she was going to continue to teach yoga, but meanwhile, Punjabhai Patel, who has been teaching yoga since then, decided he would come in and help, and so there was this miscommunication, and so next year we said, “Oh, Punjabhai Patel is going to be the new yoga teacher,” and Anju says, “Oh, I’m probably the only volunteer that got fired.” You know, we didn’t realize that she was still going to continue—you know, we just crossed our signals. But in any case, she was a student, Ph.D. student, she was very busy, but she did the parent handbook as part of her dissertation—she was in curriculum design, that’s what her Ph.D. is in—education, and she did good work, putting together this parent and teacher handbook. So there were other opportunities for her, but she did get fired as the yoga teacher!!

**PS:** And Punjabhai Patel is still there.

**PM:** Oh, he still is. He’s a wonderful teacher. He doesn’t have children there but he’s been teaching. Yes, he keeps going. And each year, he says, “Oh, please let me go,” and I say, “No, please, there’s nobody else to teach but you.” And the kids like it. It’s good for them, especially when he makes them lie down and do nothing. Calms them down a little bit.

**PS:** So having your children both attend was just a given, right? There was no discussion about it?

**PM:** Exactly.

**PS:** Did they ever balk or say, “I don’t want to go.”

**PM:** Yes, I think we did go through that phase, but not so much. I think, again, because I was going to go anyways. I think we found that a lot more with my younger one, Sujan—he had other involvement with Scouts and sports and things like that, and plus, his buddies were not coming, so that had some impact.

**PS:** His Indian buddies or his American buddies?

**PM:** His Indian buddies. With Shruti, I think it was, you know, she had a group of friends that she hung around with, and her best friend, Meera, used to go, too. And so I think when she stopped coming, perhaps I can be incorrect; maybe she decided she didn’t want to go or something, but I don’t quite remember.

**PS:** So when your daughter balked at going, how did you make her go?

**PM:** I guess I just basically said, you know, you've got to complete this. I'm not sure if it was very easy, nevertheless, I persuaded her. I think it was just, we didn't give her a choice. In fact, it's been true with me, too. I mean, I'll go every week. But every Friday or Saturday, I'll start dreading, you know, my God, tomorrow is SILC—I have to prepare, I have to get these worksheets done. SILC was early, it was Sunday mornings. Now, for a few years it's been Saturday mornings.

It's wild. Of course, you get all your long-distance phone calls on Saturdays. You know, my cousins are calling. I'll say, "I have to go, I have to go, I have to go." And so in between I running to Kinko's to make copies—because I never do anything beforehand. It's difficult, even if you want to, working full-time and all that, so you would just say, "Oh, my God. I have to get ready." But once you're there, then everything changes.

So I think it was the same thing for the kids. And several kids, several students, wrote in the twentieth anniversary issue—if you get a chance do look at it about how they just didn't want to go and they would fight, and they'd rather be sleeping, but once they got there, it would be fun—the whole camaraderie and just being with your friends. And I think that's what SILC is all about. It's not so much just learning the language or the culture, but it's also that it helps with the self-esteem and that camaraderie. You know, just having somebody be and look like you, have the same concerns, have the same parents, perhaps. The same old things that you thought that were just happening to you?

**PS:** Is your mom as silly as my mom?

**PM:** Yes, yes, that kind of thing.

**PS:** So when you think about where SILC has been and where it's headed in the future, do you see things shifting? You mentioned the Punjabi students have changed things a lot, and there are different people coming in now who are actually experienced teachers, who do the teaching. What else do you see changing or shifting at SILC right now?

**PM:** You know, we might change like enrollment-wise. You know, okay, there might be a dip, it might come up again. I see a role of computers coming in, and we're already talking about how—because there's so much software available now. There's the "Teach Hindi" and somehow we'll probably be getting, incorporating that, and that might make it easier, and then we might be more like outside resources.

I'm sure it will evolve in a way, but really using computers and media, and Internet, perhaps. That, I'm sure will have a big impact. In fact, on our tenth anniversary, I think Rajiv Iyengar wrote something like that, about the future of SILC, and I also remember Anoop writing—he had this pet thing, idea of how we should buy a postal van and keep that as a circulating library, because we still lack storage space.

We just rented a storage space now, but we've got things in everybody's basements. I had to finally move things from here because we were getting this place built. But in that article, he talked about being able to communicate with people in India, and so maybe we will be incorporating different pedagogical styles in teaching. So that's what I think would happen.

**PS:** Are the immigrants from Punjabi, is that a new group of people? Are they like younger parents or something?

**PM:** No, no. It's just that they used to do things separately with their temple, the *Gurdwara*, it's called. But now they are, they decided, like at the twentieth anniversary, when I went on the radio to talk about SILC, one of the prominent members was there, and he said, "You know, maybe we should just piggyback with you because at the *Gurdwara*, the children are by themselves, and here they would interact with different—you know, other children." And sure enough, that's what's happening.

But the neat thing is, we are also learning a lot about, again, as I said, the Punjabi culture, and they are really an enthusiastic bunch. See, in the past, we've had Maranthi and we've had Telugu, but you know, for some reason, nobody from that community is coming in. Gujarati, which is the largest, I mean, it's a big group here, but we don't have a single student in Gujarati. For the longest time, we had just South Indian languages, and Hindi. Bengali, too, we've lost. So we're not quite sure, and I think perhaps, you know, as it changes, as years go on, maybe these groups will get more involved.

**PS:** So the people that are sending their young children now, are they tending to be people who are recent immigrants from India, or people who grew up here and have married now or who came here as students, or are they—who are the parents of the kids that are students right now?

**PM:** I think it's a mix. The ones who are recent—we've got a few who've just recently come, and their children, of course, speak the language very well. But I think it's, again, being with the other Indians, so that's the factor they are seeking. We also have a lot of children who are adopted by parents here, and who want them to be exposed to their Indian roots. And again, because we don't have any religious affiliations, it's kind of nice for them.

And also then there are people like me who have been around for a while, although we are getting fewer, perhaps. And then again, I foresee people like Lisa Gada bringing her children. So when you talk about the future, that could be another change, where it'll be a resource for kids who really benefited from SILC, who believe in it and would like to expose their children to the same. In fact, we do have a few, maybe the mother is Indian or the father is Indian.

**PS:** Mixed marriages.

**PM:** So it's a pretty diverse group, but again, you know, as I said, it seems to draw people of the same land—people by and large, everybody is like, very enthusiastic. It's like, "How can I help? You guys do so—"

In fact, there was this one lady, who was a Korean lady, who was married to an Indian, and she said, "No, I can't do anything." So she was willing to teach me about stocks—you know, she does a lot of day trading, and one day she sat me down and said, "I'm going to tell you all about it, so you could be doing that—I want to do something for you." It's so sweet.

**PS:** But she didn't think she could help? Couldn't she even serve the cookies?

**PM:** She did that, she did that. And she helped whenever she could.

**PS:** Now I've heard from a couple of the students that I've interviewed, that the best thing was the cookies.

**PM:** Yes. See, that is a time when they're not sitting in the classroom and having to listen to a certain thing. There, they could run around, they could talk with their friends. Milk and cookies—it was milk, initially. Now we've moved to, we have some drinks and juice, or whatever. But that's where they could really interact, so that was the most fun part, definitely.

**PS:** A wise thing to have. If you had it to do all over again, if you could go back twenty years, and do something different so that you'd get a different result than you've ended up with, is there anything that you would change? Knowing what you know now, obviously. You can keep all your knowledge and experience, and just go back and do something. Is there anything you might change?

**PM:** I'm not sure. Perhaps, as I said, maybe we would do a little bit more publicity, you know, that way. But no, I can't think of anything different. I think we've all done a great job there and as I said, I've really enjoyed being there.

**PS:** I think you've just covered all my questions without me having to ask them. The board. What was the most interesting thing about being on the board?

**PM:** I don't know if I would say "interesting," but you know, the sense of responsibility. I think I take everything quite seriously, so to me, it was important that everything was in place, and Rama [Padmanabham], who was the president, is very laid back and easygoing. And of course, she had a very challenging job, so it was—there would be days like when I'd wonder, would she come or not, would this happen or not? Things always fell into place, because things do. And she was very good at bringing things together, she was very artistic, and very articulate and all that. And again, at that time, also it was to make sure that there were enough volunteers, because sometimes teachers may not call to say that they were not coming, and you would have kids walking around the hallway.

**PS:** With no teacher?

**PM:** No teacher. So little things like that. And then, come Festival of Nations, SILC is always responsible for doing the exhibits and the children's dance, the children's matinee—and we had to make sure we have an exhibit chairperson. That was—that's pretty—you know, I mean, hard to find. Once you find somebody, then it's easy, but trying to find somebody and convincing that person is a lot of work.

**PS:** Were you ever the chairperson?

**PM:** Oh, yes. Early years.

**PS:** How many times?

**PM:** Three years.

**PS:** Three?

**PM:** Yes. So I know. I know what it is like.

**PS:** And how many hours would you spend on that?

**PM:** I realize that I take things quite seriously, so I must have spent, I don't know, quite a few hours in those days, I was, I think, a student. I was still at the U.

**PS:** No little children underfoot yet?

**PM:** Well, I did have Shruti. In fact, Lisa was babysitting her when I was, I think, at the cuisine booth at the Festival of Nations, and there was a tornado, and Shruti still has a phobia about tornadoes, because it went right past their house, the Gadas' home. I had children, but I think I've always included my children in things that I did, and didn't make too many special provisions for them. And whenever we traveled—we didn't go to too many places that were without them, and SILC was just like another thing, so they kind of grew up with it.

**PS:** Now at this point, your son is saying he's not very interested in going anymore?

**PM:** No.

**PS:** And you're going to let him just stop?

**PM:** Well, the agreement that I'm sort of having with him, and again, I think it's because he's my second one and I've got a little lax, is that he—reading and writing is not something he really

enjoys, unlike Shruti, and obviously she's going into a career like that. He's got more of the technical mind and he loves fixing and all that.

He has a wonderful teacher, Sunil Menon, who brought these different topics and has discussions and all that, and I feel like he might learn a lot more from that, and you know, it's okay if he doesn't learn to read or write Hindi, because he's doing pretty well now with the relatives visiting us. He might not speak it, but he understands everything, so perhaps it's time to accept that.

At this point, I guess I'm kind of vocalizing something that I've not given much thought to, but I mean, that's what my inclination is. And perhaps he can just come for that one class, the social studies class. That would have more interesting discussions on India and the U.S. that might benefit him with his regular school as well. And then also he has opportunities to participate in the Festival of Nations, and if he's so inclined, he could do that.

**PS:** But he won't be forced?

**PM:** He won't be forced, not like Shruti, I think. You know, you always do that with your first one.

**PS:** To what do you attribute the long-term success of SILC? What is it that keeps a group of volunteers for twenty years, working on something?

**PM:** As I said, I think having that goal, a similar goal, and value system, and the feelings. Everyone seems alike that way. We've had different personalities, but they didn't last in SILC very long. But also I find that—and again, another reason why I've stayed this long with it is that it's the most apolitical organization. We don't have power struggles, we don't have politics, and again, because we don't involve religion—we don't have different camps.

So there's no major fallouts of any kind or disagreements, bickering, or that kind of thing. It's all about volunteering. Everybody wants to be there because they want to be there, at least with the parents, and parents feel that it's important. And I think the attitude it's also changing with children also, maybe because there are so many people now, as opposed to very few initially, where there's this renewed sense of having that Indian identity. You know, I mean, Indian pop music and *Bhangra* music and film music that we have now. We have these regular screenings of movies in theaters for profit, and all these young kids go to it and are exposed to it, and they're really into it. Then they find that they don't understand enough Hindi or whatever and they say, "Okay, we want to learn Hindi."

**PS:** Ah, so they're motivated for another reason, another purpose?

**PM:** Yes. And again, as I said, I think typically, I mean I know Shruti went through that stage, too, where she didn't want to be different and she asked me why can't I be called Sarah or whatever, I mean, you know, a typical American name.

**PS:** Susan?

**PM:** Yes, Susan, yes. And I said, you know, it's because both of us are Indian, we wanted to give you an Indian name. And I've always felt, no matter where you are you have to have that core sense and be comfortable with that before you can sense your place and move on to other things. If you're not comfortable with who you are and what you've inherited, then you're forever fighting that and you're uncomfortable with it and you just, you know, you drift.

So I think the kids are realizing that, the youth, because again, they have this big, massive exposure, which, when you talk about, you know, like even before Lisa and all of them, there were so few Indians that they didn't want to be different. They just wanted to blend in. Now you have this sense of this strength in numbers, and so there's that bringing that about, too. And I think all these factors no doubt will help, and has helped SILC grow.

But I think seeing the most thing is that it's a very healthy organization, that's what I would say, very healthy, and you get what you give to it, so there's a real sense of satisfaction of being involved with it. And you know, as I said, all these different opportunities. The Festival of Nations, and going in the Asia parade, it's great for the parents too.

One of the things that I still grapple with is this being a mother without having that benefit of that structure, the family support, and SILC fills in there, and you have that network there, that you can talk to others. Because we all have similar backgrounds. Just as you would talk to your neighbor about schools and what's happening with your first grade teacher, this is like, you know, if you're going to back to India and what are you packing for the kids, and that's where it begins. Because you can have your social structure, too. I was not so big on the parties and socializing every weekend. This was my socializing, and that's what it gave to me.

**PS:** I have a note here that says to ask you about the feature in *Femina* magazine.

**PM:** Oh, yes.

**PS:** Can you tell me about that?

**PM:** I got this call from this woman, and she said she was a journalist as well, and just graduated from Florida, and she wanted to hook up with me. We had similar backgrounds, and she had some connections in India, and she did an article for—actually, there were two articles. One was on SILC and the other one, we collaborated and wrote together, where we interviewed women. It was called “Brown Mem Sahib,” you know, Mem Sahib being like “Mrs.” whatever, the British style, I guess. But how it is for working women raising their children here.

That was my involvement with it, but Sudha Balagopal, she's the other writer, she also wrote an article in *Femina* on SILC. That was kind of fun because I think Vishant's aunt or somebody saw it there, and a friend of mine saw it there, and everybody got clippings of it. I also wrote—there was a magazine called *Indian Overseas*, and I wrote an article for SILC there as well.

**PS:** So that was published as well?

**PM:** Yes. So we got a little bit of publicity. And also, I think Neena [Gada], who had traveled quite a bit, found that SILC was very unique—there was like a Gujarati school or a Bengali school or a Hindi school, but one school that incorporated all the languages and really represented India, there were not too many. I think there's one in Boston that's doing pretty well. So it had a unique organization, too, and brought everybody from India together.

**PS:** A wonderful accomplishment. You must feel really proud.

**PM:** Well, as I said, you know, I have got a lot from it, too.

**PS:** Are there any things that I haven't asked you about yet that you think are important to share?

**PM:** The thing that I didn't talk about is one year—or maybe more than one year, I taught adults, and that was—you know, when we talked about challenges, that was pretty challenging.

**PS:** In what way?

**PM:** I had to really prepare my lessons, and you know, I couldn't just go up there and do what I had to do. There's more structure. I had to lead them from point A to point B. My lessons had to flow. And so again, I don't know anything about teaching, but as I said, I consulted books and I had this one particular book that I used for photocopies or whatever, but they were adults and students, college-bound.

**PS:** They were all studying Hindi?

**PM:** Yes.

**PS:** And how was it that they—what kind of folks were these? Like the adoptive parents or were they people who had married Indian people?

**PM:** Yes. One married an Indian. One was of Indian descent but from Trinidad or something. And one was an adopted kid, named Jonathan Remund, and the others were older Indian children. But that was the highest level Hindi, and for somebody who had never—who was always teased about, how can you be teaching Hindi, here I am teaching adults.

**PS:** So they were people who had been studying at SILC for a while?

**PM:** Yes.

**PS:** You were just teaching the advanced class?

**PM:** Yes. And then we had the adults in that class as well. This past year, too, we had an adult, Diana [Kenney], Neena's friend, but she kind of dropped out at the end. And occasionally, we have had—and we always put them in the advanced group.

**PS:** Even if they don't have any background in Hindi at all?

**PM:** Yes, because, you know, they're able to pick it up faster. And that sometimes is challenging, because you have new kids—every year, trying to organize students into different groups. You have somebody who's very much younger but who has been involved with SILC for a few years. Like Sujan's class, it's just a mish-mash of kids of all different age levels, and he hasn't necessarily gone through every class, so he didn't have the benefit of progressing through different levels, as Shruti did.

Because in those days, we were a lot more organized. So in a class, you will get somebody and realize, "Oh, you didn't do your *matras*," or "You didn't do these letters." So you've got to take them aside and then work with them. It's like being in a one-room school, right? And that's why I think it's really nice to have helpers.

**PS:** So do you have helpers right now?

**PM:** Yes, like with Hindi, we had four teachers, and some parents will hang around. And that's again, a neat thing about SILC. You don't have to ask, people will just come and sit around, and pretty soon they'll be helping. Like milk and cookies. Typically, it falls upon the principal to be serving it out before the crowds come in and grab at it, but we always find somebody, a dad or a mom, sitting there, waiting, will lay it out, and by the time you came in—and when I was the principal, I always found somebody to help. I mean, I didn't have to tell anybody, or if I didn't, if they saw me doing it, they'd come and say, "Let me help out." That would free me up to do something else.

So I guess we talked about teaching adults. We talked about the festival, we talked about—oh there was a time when we also had Professor Staneslow do a workshop on how to teach, and I think perhaps I picked up some tips from there, too. As I said, we took this all seriously. We would go and try to find out how we can teach better, because none of us had any teaching background. We went to a Spanish immersion school and saw how they taught there, took tips from them.

And also, any time we had guests, visiting artists. Like I remember this very famous Orissa dancer, Sanjukta Panigrahi, she came and demonstrated in the school. This was a world-famous Indian dancer, and there she is lecturing, or you know, demonstrating. We also had a magician come in and do things. Anybody who had a special skill. Sometimes we would have visiting grandmas and grandpas come in and talk to the class. We had Chris Garlough, who is doing her Ph.D. on folk art and that kind of thing, talk about the role of folk art and how important it is in passing of traditions.

So we gave the kids not only exposure through just classroom, but we incorporated guests and we'd have field trips. Those have been fun, the kids just love it. We brought them to the Oral History Project [completion] celebration both times—the entire school, you know, we just pack them up and all the families—

**PS:** And they sang one time.

**PM:** Yes, the second time.

**PS:** The second time they sang.

**PM:** Yes, they did. They got a chance to be on the stage.

**PS:** I'll bet they'll be at the next one, too.

**PM:** Oh, yes.

**PS:** Were there other programs they attended or performed at?

**PM:** Yes, yes. We took them to see “The Return of the Rain Seed,” a dance program of Raneer Ramaswamy's, [a dancer and dance teacher] because it had to do with children. So they've had other activities—and then, of course, every year we help open up the India Festival, Festival of India, at the Landmark Center.

**PS:** You open by—

**PM:** Singing *Vande Mataram*. And then always we perform—a few years ago we used to put up the entire Festival of Nations booth there again. Then it got to be a logistic nightmare because it takes so long to set up and that festival is only five hours, and the place is not open before 9 a.m.—so we stopped doing that, but you know, but we've got our exposure as well.

And I think we've also become a resource to other schools and all that. I mean, it's amazing how many phone calls Neena still gets and Rajan [Menon] still gets and I still get, from other organizations, saying, we need—like, I guess it was through SILC somebody contacted me and

now I interview candidates for United Airlines, for proficiency in Hindi. I do that on a pretty regular basis.

**PS:** So you evaluate whether their Hindi is adequate to be an airline attendant?

**PM:** Yes. And whether they can speak it enough to qualify as a Hindi speaker, because they get some extra bonus.

**PS:** If they're bilingual.

**PM:** If they're bilingual. So we are viewed sort of as a resource, too. We've gone to churches, we've gone to other schools, and we've gone to this Asian parade. And that's what we tell our students in our brochures and all that type of thing.

The Festival of Nations, they like performing there, and when we have our award ceremonies and SILC Day, which is normally in January, whatever they learn in their language classes, they perform on stage and they just love it, love being on stage, and of course, we have the auditorium right now, and it's a huge auditorium, we hardly fill it up, but just being on stage, they like it. In fact, when I was putting the twentieth anniversary souvenir [book] together, it was hard to tell because you see these kids on the stage, and can never tell which year is it from, because it's the same shots.

What I was remarking on is that everybody is standing in a line, singing or dancing. But you know, very creative things that they've done, doing with some bilingual, because not everybody understands the language that they're learning, so somehow you have to keep the audience involved, too. So the teachers have come up with these skits. Like one year I did this skit on Bollywood, which is the Bombay film, and then another time, Vaman Pai, another teacher, he did the Red Riding Hood skit, translated into Hindi. So fun things like that.

**PS:** And then the people who don't necessarily speak Malayalam or Gujarati or whatever language it's being told in, can still follow it.

**PM:** Yes, they will translate it in English, or they'll incorporate it in such a way that there's somebody doing something in English, so that people can follow.

**PS:** Okay. Well, that's neat.

**PM:** And the twentieth anniversary, we had that play. I don't know if other people have mentioned it. It was very funny. It was written by an ex-teacher, Mani Subrahmanian, about the confusion of languages, and what would happen when, if everybody spoke different languages and there was nothing common. It is about this couple, their car has crashed in the middle of the street and everybody is saying things in their own languages and the confusion that ensues. Very funny. We did it again for our twentieth anniversary celebration. It was a hit.

**PS:** Any other things that you want to tell me about that I haven't asked about? You're just full of wonderful stories.

**PM:** I'm trying to remember. There are so many stories and so much to say. I think I've told you about the newsletters and how that evolved and I've told you about—yes, the Festival of Nations incident. This one time that I was the exhibit chairperson, Ranjan Patel and Vinu Patel, they have also been with the school—we finished putting together the booth and at the end, it was just the four of us, my husband and I and the other two. We finally got done and we left, and our cars were parked by the Dorothy Day Care Center in St. Paul, downtown. And we were tired and we just wanted to go home and so we took off. The next day we found out that the two yelled at us to stop because their car wouldn't start. They were stranded for, I don't know, two to three hours, and it was dead in downtown St. Paul. And in those days, it was even dead then. It was more dead, rather.

So ever since then, I've learned that anytime you're with somebody else, you make sure they start or they're in the door or whatever. And also, again, another story I remember from the Festival of Nations is, especially when my friend, Vatsala, was the chairperson. We would have a lot of fun with her husband Rajan Menon, too. He's very funny. And the setting up of the booth is an event in itself, because we're all having so much fun, and we will joke—and we have tons of funny accounts and memories from setting up the booths.

This one year, Vatsala put everything in a SILC bag, because one year we gave away SILC bags as awards for the students, so to this day, when someone asks, "Where is something?" We reply, "Oh, it's in the SILC bag." So like the stapler is in the SILC bag, the hammer is in the SILC bag, the tape is in the SILC bag. SILC bag is our little joke!

And sometimes I feel a little sad. Now this year I have had even less involvement with setting up the booth. I did go, but you know, again, you have to have newer people come in, and they did a great job. I went there just for the moral support. They really didn't need me. But that was always so much fun, and then getting the children ready for the matinee and all the excitement behind it. And of course, all the Indian parents would come with their video cameras and they'll be smiling, as they'd be clapping.

And one year, as adults, too, we danced, we women, and we totally bombed. Oh, my. No, what happened was, we were practicing in a small, confined place, and when we got out there, on the stage. This was like, you dance with your partners and we got spread out. We made a bigger circle than we could sustain, and you really have to get on your beats, and at the end, we were running, chasing each other, trying to catch up to that beat. But of course, all our husbands and families were there with their video cameras, and we got a big ovation. But we used to do that, too. We used to do the adult dance as well, but over the years, I think we've stopped doing it. You know, we need to distribute the work a little bit.

**PS:** Sure. You don't have to do it all.

**PM:** Yes, that's right, that's what we're realizing. Like PIC [Parents of Indian Children] workshops, too. We used to do those, for parents of Indian children, where somebody would have a workshop. Now I think it's another group doing it. I'm not sure who's doing it. The Net IP used to do it, the Network of Indian Professionals. I don't know who's doing it this year.

**PS:** It's good to share.

**PM:** It's good to share, and get new ideas and new blood. So you know, it's all part of evolving and growing.

**PS:** Anything else?

**PM:** I'm sure I can think of lots of things to say, probably.

**PS:** Well, you'll have a chance when you get to edit it. Thank you so much.

**PM:** Well, thank you.

**PS:** For taking the time tonight. I appreciate it.

**PM:** Thank you.