Deep Shikha Gupta
Narrator

Polly Sonifer
Minnesota Historical Society
Interviewer

June 23, 2005

PS: This is Polly Sonifer interviewing Deep Shikha Gupta on June 23, 2005.

Good evening, Deep. How are you tonight?

DG: Oh, I'm doing fine, Polly. And how are you?

PS: I'm great. Thanks for taking time to meet with me. I appreciate it. I want to start out this oral history interview for the India Association of Minnesota by asking you to tell us a bit about yourself, like where you were born in India, your family, growing up, and things like that.

DG: I was born fifty years ago in India, in Old Delhi. Actually, I was born at home because my mother refused to go to the hospital for delivery. I grew up in Old Delhi. That is the historic part of Delhi that was settled before British came to India. The part of Delhi that I grew up in is rich in tradition and history. People who had lived in these neighborhoods lived for hundreds of years, and they all had a sense of belonging and long family histories and traditions to draw upon. So I think I grew up knowing my place in the society that way. I went to high school and college. Also, I do come from a very traditional family, so in the big scheme of things, I was going to finish my high school education and then hopefully get married because that's what girls from good families did.

PS: And would that have been an arranged marriage?

DG: That would have definitely been an arranged marriage, definitely. But I was good in studies. Academically, I think I was gifted. I was blessed. After high school, I decided to go to college, and since there were no suitable marriages for me at that time, my parents allowed me to do that. I did go to all girls college. I enjoyed it, finished my undergraduate and then started my Master's of Economics. I was interested in economics. That's what I studied. Actually, I was also interested in science, but I could not start a science track from ninth grade, as I wasn't allowed to go to a co-ed school because, again, girls from good families don't study with boys.

PS: So the only place they were offering science was in the co-ed school?

DG: It was only in co-ed schools, yes. That's why I studied economics. I finished my studies in economics and went to the graduate program when I did master's.

PS: How old were you by then?

DG: By that time, I was . . . I was twenty-one or twenty-two years old, and then I started a job right away. I did get a teaching position. The first time, I remember, I got the teaching position, my father allowed me to work, because it was all girls college that I was going to teach in. Again, that segregation of sexes was very important when I was growing up.

PS: So you were a college professor by the time you were twenty-two?

DG: Yes.

PS: In economics?

DG: Yes.

PS: At an all girls school in India?

DG: Right.

PS: Was that still in Delhi? Did you live at home with your parents?

DG: Oh, yes! Definitely. Yes, I lived at home, and I gave my paycheck to my parents. That did create problems soon because all this time, when I was an undergraduate or graduate student, my parents were asking me to get married.

PS: They were?

DG: They were. The problem was, by the time I finished my college and started my job, I didn't need to get married for economic security, because I knew that I could make enough money and I could live. The way we were brought up, I was not sexually very aware of a need to marry. So I didn't see any advantage in marriage.

PS: Okay.

DG: I didn't want to get married. I had a good life and I really didn't want to get married and I resisted the idea of getting married. And it did create some problems, some friction at home. But after I started working and my income started coming, I knew my parents faced more criticism where people in the neighborhood could say that their daughter isn't getting married because they don't want her to get married, because they are using her money. I remember my mother being very unhappy about it, saying that it's hard for her to go out in the society because of what people say, so I really should get married. I remember eventually, then—I say eventually . . . it was only two years later—I did say yes.

PS: How did they find a suitable match?

DG: Well, again, it was a long, drawn-out process. I do remember them going through our friends, going through the community and getting desperate and going through the newspaper ads. I think there were many times when we were close to my marriage being fixed and I would say no.

PS: Why did you keep saying no?

DG: I don't know . . . because maybe I just didn't like something about the boy or, basically, I was not in the mood to get married.

PS: Okay. [Chuckles]

DG: Or I wouldn't like the job or I wouldn't like the family, whatever. It really kept getting harder to say no. Eventually, I do remember that I said yes. I got married in 1978, and I was by that time twenty-four years old, which was really old age then to get married.

PS: I assume that's your husband [Vinod Gupta] now?

DG: Right.

PS: What was it about him that you said, "Okay, fine?"

DG: Well, you know, his family was fine. His job was good. He was also teaching at the university. My friends told me he is good looking. I didn't think he was that exceptionally smart or handsome, but my friends told me he was really handsome. So yes, I said yes.

PS: How many times did you get to meet him before you agreed to marry him?

DG: Oh, before I agreed to marry him, actually, we met once with our families. Then I met him one more time with my brother and with my friends. That's it. I mean, we both just did not get to meet before I said yes to marry him. After I said yes, I think we met a couple of times. But, again, I wasn't very comfortable with that, because I was teaching at a college, and I didn't want my students to see me with him, because they knew I was not married and I'm not supposed to be out with boys.

PS: Okay. So very, very strict rules about how things were done.

DG: Right.

PS: At the risk of . . . How has it been?

DG: Oh! Of course, please, ask away.

PS: Okay. [Chuckles]

DG: Last year, when I was in India and my mother was talking to me, she asked from me, "Are you not happy that I did force you to marry him?" I said, "Yes, I am very happy. You were right. I was wrong." Of course, it has not always been smooth sailing. I remember the first year of our marriage being the hardest year. I always say that maybe if I lived in America that first year, I would have run so fast he wouldn't have seen the dust. I think, to some extent, when we get into an arranged marriage, we do know that there will be compromises to be made on both sides. We both, when we married, were younger and, I think to a large extent, spoiled children used to having our way. I went from, you know, being the only child who was living with my parents . . . I have an older brother, but he wasn't living with my parents. He always lived outside and went to school in hostels. So I went from being the only child living with my parents to the family of ten people where I was youngest on the power totem pole.

PS: So you moved into your husband's family?

DG: Oh, yes! Yes, and I was the youngest daughter-in-law, so I had virtually no power to speak of.

PS: And they could boss you around and you always had to do it?

DG: If my mother-in-law would tell me to do something, I had to do it. If my sister-in-law would . . .

PS: Maybe, maybe not?

DG: Yes. Yes.

PS: So that was a big change!

DG: That was a huge change.

PS: Did you know it would be like that? Did you suspect?

DG: Maybe I did. And I think that's why, maybe, I resisted the idea of marriage. But at the same time I would also say that it doesn't mean that I was really unhappy. I would say that our first year was rocky, because we would have to make adjustments. But at the same time I remember being very happy. I mean, there were ups and downs, and we had fights, and we had to learn that my word wouldn't be the last word. But I think I enjoyed living with my in-laws. I had a really great relationship with my mother-in-law and my father-in-law. I helped my sister-in-law get through her school. So, no, I really had great relationships and I enjoyed it. It's just the idea of getting into a big family and adjusting.

PS: Right. It's a big change.

DG: Definitely, yes.

PS: You're twenty-four years old, and you've married your husband. You're both working at colleges. How did you ever end up in the United States?

DG: Well, now we both had teaching jobs. We both had tenure. I thought we were settled for life, and that was one of the things that my mother was really particular about because I was the only daughter: she wanted to make sure I married within the same city. She didn't want me to move out of Delhi. So it means if there were any proposals of the boys from outside of Delhi, she'd say, "No, we are not going to send her outside Delhi." Since we both had a job, there was not going to be a chance for it. We thought, "That is it." But my husband wanted to pursue research in the United States. He was more interested in research than just in teaching. So he was seeking research opportunities in the United States. He got an offer from Germany and an offer from United States. Actually, he got [an offer] first from United States, said, "Yes," and then he got even a more prestigious fellowship from Germany, but we had already made the commitment, so he came, and I did not come with him. I chose to stay back, because at that time, of course, his plan was that he's going to come here [to the U.S.], work for a few years and then go back.

PS: How old were you at that time?

DG: When he came, he came in 1980, so I would be twenty-six years old.

PS: You'd been married for about two years.

DG: We had been married about, yes, two years, about two years when he came here. So he came here. Now remember, I'd done my master's and I'd done M. Phil, which is a pre Ph.D. program in India. So he got me admitted in the Ph.D. program here at Louisiana State University.

PS: So he came to Louisiana?

DG: He went to Louisiana, yes. He got me admitted to Louisiana State University in the Ph.D. program, and then he wanted me to come here and join him. I had one child by that time. When he came, Shruti was nine months old, and we didn't know it at that time, but I was pregnant. Within six months, I came here. When I came here I was over seven months pregnant.

PS: Wow.

DG: I had a little baby and I was also seven months pregnant. I don't know, how did they let me in the plane?

PS: How did your husband decide that you should be in this Ph.D. program? Did he ask you or did he just tell you?

DG: He just wanted me to come here, and that was the way I could get leave from my job, because I could get study leave for three years, and he wanted me to come here. I had not

planned on doing a Ph.D. Again, no one was happy. When Vinod came, it was okay, because his mother thought, "Well, he'll go and he would do some research and make some money and he'll come back." But no one thought that I would come. Then they were not happy. I know my mother-in-law wasn't happy. My mother wasn't happy. That was a huge shock for them. Anyway, I came.

You know, I will just talk about one incident here, and maybe we'll get into them later on. When I just even talk to my friends sometimes about this, that I was this girl from a big city who thought that she knew everything . . . but I think in some respects, because of the cultural differences, I was also very naïve. I remember, in New York when I was changing the flight, Shruti, she was over a year old, so she was around fourteen months old, and she was playing at the airport with someone and I was tired. I was sitting and next I saw she wasn't there. So I asked around and they said, "Oh, yes, your husband took her." I said, "No, he wasn't my husband. I'm here by myself." They said, "She was playing with him." I said, "Okay." It didn't even occur to me for single second that he would take her. I ran and I found them in the gift shop. He gave her to me. He was just buying a little toy. But now, when I look back, I'm shocked that I was that naïve, that I was that trusting. But that's how I grew up, and that's all we knew: that people don't take each other's children. People don't hurt children. That's how we acted.

Anyway, I came here. I came here April 30. My younger daughter was born in June, so I was actually eight months pregnant when I came. No, she was born in July . . . What is Preeti's birthday? July 9. So she was born on July 9. Then in late August I joined the Ph.D. program, and I wasn't sure if I was going to do it or not, but I wanted to go and attend some classes. I went there for a week. In the beginning, we had an arrangement where I would go for classes and come back home and take care of the children. I found that studies were extremely easy for me here. After a semester I said, "It is so easy. I might as well do Ph.D." I really did like it. There came Ph.D. in four and a half years, actually. I finished my course work and I also got a full time job teaching in the Quantitative Methods Department and did my dissertation on the side part time. So I started my Ph.D. in 1981. I came in 1981 and started my Ph.D. August 1981 and I was done December 1985.

PS: And you had two little girls?

DG: And I had two little girls, and I worked full time. Now, I don't know how I did it.

PS: Right.

DG: I have no idea how I did it. Somehow, somehow, it happened.

PS: Good thing school was easy.

[Laughter]

DG: Yes, actually, that was not that challenging, and kids were good. I think there was some advantage to having two girls. I could tell them that I need some time by myself, "Please, go and play," and they'll go to their room and they'll play for hours.

PS: Oh, okay.

DG: I think that helped a lot.

PS: You were in Louisiana that whole time?

DG: We were in Louisiana, and we lived in married student housing. Everyone was like us, and we didn't know any different. Everyone was poor, and everyone had kids, so . . .

PS: That brings us to 1985. What happened after that that got you to—?

DG: In 1985, I finished my Ph.D., so the question was, now that Ph.D. is finished, "Should we go back?" But by that time, because my husband could take only so much vacation from his work, he had lost his job. My job was still secure because I was studying. But he was on unpaid leave, and he could take only so much, so he had lost his job.

PS: In India?

DG: In India. So he started applying for jobs here, and he had an offer from 3M.

PS: In St. Paul?

DG: In St. Paul. So then we decided to come to St. Paul, and we have been here ever since. I think we came in 1986. June 1986 we came here. We didn't want to come in the middle of winter.

PS: So why did you not go back to India at that time? Primarily because of his job?

DG: Because he didn't have a job to go back to, and in Delhi, university jobs are really hard to come by. He could have gotten another job, but . . . By that time, I knew . . . I would have gone back without a doubt. I would have gone back if at that time he had said that his job was there and he had said, "Let's go back." I knew for my family—and by my family, I don't mean my nuclear family; I mean my extended family—it's not good if I stay here. But for me, as a woman, it is better to stay here, because as a woman, I have more rights.

PS: And more opportunity?

DG: And more opportunities. As a member of extended family, I can do more for them there than I can do here.

PS: How hard was that choice for you?

DG: It has been a very hard choice, even now. I think that is what you'll find with most of the immigrants; we have that guilt always. Always we feel guilty, because I know I made a promise to my mother-in-law that I'll come back. Her plan always was that you people are going to come back after two, three years, and we'll stay together. She was going to live with me and my husband. Like I said, we had good relationship. When we both went to work, she took care of our kids, she and my father-in-law, and it was just great. So, to some extent, I know I hurt her feelings by not going back. My mother depended on me a whole lot emotionally. So that guilt is there, and that would stay there. I don't think we ever dissolved that.

PS: Have they passed away now?

DG: My mother-in-law and father-in-law have passed away. My mother and father are alive.

PS: Did you get to go back and see them or do they come here?

DG: Oh, definitely! Definitely. And they came here. When we bought the house, then they came within two days and they lived with us here just for two, three months. The first time, it took us some time to go back, so we went back in 1985, but after that, we go back every two, three years. We do keep in close touch with all our relatives, and all of my husband's sisters have come and visited us here. Actually, his sister is here from India.

PS: Right now?

DG: Today, yes. You'll meet here when we will have dinner. His youngest sister, who is a widow, is coming next week with her daughter. Her daughter has stayed with me, has gone to school here, so I have been able to do a lot, I think even then, for the extended family. My niece came and stayed with us for four years. She got educated at the college where I teach. She's married now. Vinod's niece is here. She's going to college, and we expect that she will get a job in December. Now her mother is coming with the younger sister, who would also be admitted and go to college, and the sister would stay with us because she has lost her husband.

PS: Which college do you teach at now?

DG: I teach now at the College of St. Catherine.

PS: And still economics?

DG: Still economics.

PS: And you still love it?

DG: I still love it.

PS: And it's still easy?

DG: I do. I really do.

PS: That's great.

DG: I think that was my mission. I mean, I'm just glad they pay me to do something that I love to do.

PS: Yes, not many people can say that.

DG: I know. [Chuckles] That has to be worth something. I can't bank it, but that satisfaction is worth a lot.

PS: Right. Now, tell me about how you got connected to the India Association of Minnesota [IAM]. When you first came here, how did you find the Indian community in the Minneapolis area?

DG: When we came first here we actually, of course, went to Hindu Temple. I think that was the first connection to Indian community that we made. Also, since Vinod took a job at 3M, there are a lot of Indians. So through them we met some Indians and started making some friendships. I do remember Neena early on, when we were new to the town, befriending me and asking me to get more involved in the community.

PS: That was Neena Gada?

DG: Yes, that was Neena Gada. I do consider her my mentor, because she had always encouraged me to work for the community, to be more involved in the community. It was through her encouragement that I put my kids first in SILC, which is School of India for Languages and Culture. When they enrolled in SILC, I was a volunteer teacher in SILC. We stayed there for several years.

PS: What topic did you teach in SILC?

DG: I taught Hindi. Sometimes I taught cooking and general knowledge, also crafts. So whatever was needed, I taught. My daughter was also interested in dance, and she was taking some Indian dancing lessons.

PS: From who?

DG: From Archna Ramaswamy.

PS: Okay.

DG: Shruti had organized a group of her own where she would choreograph the dances and then will go to different Indian cultural festivals.

PS: Wow!

DG: That also gave us an entry into the community, if you will. I know Neena, at different times, had asked me to get more involved in India Association. I resisted the idea in the beginning, because I felt I needed to spend more time with girls at home. But once they started going to college, that's when I decided to join India Association.

PS: So you waited till your girls were grown up?

DG: Yes.

PS: All right. Tell me about the first things that you did with the India Association.

DG: I have, actually, been [involved in] India Association for the longest time. I'm thinking I did some work even when girls were home, because I would have with the India Day . . . cultural cooking. I would help out with the picnic. When I joined the India Association, I know, first year, I just attended meetings as a new member. Then, next year, I was secretary. Then I think I worked as secretary and then I was asked to be the vice president, so I was vice president and president at different times. I know that this year I will be chairing the Nomination Committee. So I am more than glad to work in any way, shape, or form for the community.

PS: Is that pretty common, that people go through all of those different positions as they serve on the board?

DG: Generally, this is how it works, because we really want the president to have some experience about what the organization is about, to know its mission, to know how to organize and work with things, and then get in that position of responsibility.

PS: What's your guess about how many hours a week you would spend serving in any of the board positions?

DG: Well, I think as a president, probably I spent the most time. I would say I would spend twenty to thirty hours on an average per week.

PS: Per week?!
DG: Per week.

PS: And that's in addition to your job, your full time job?

DG: Right.

PS: That's a lot.

DG: That's okay. That's okay, because it was for the year, and it's not that every week is like this. Some weeks would be heavier than others, but yes, that's the time I spent working for the organization.

PS: Wow. That's a lot.

DG: I got a lot back from it, so I think that was time well spent.

PS: What were the primary rewards for you?

DG: For me? For me, actually, I think it helped me see the big picture as far as the community is concerned. It allowed me to see some of the challenges that we face as a community. It reinforced my own identity group, if you will, because we all do identify ourselves with a different group, and being a part of the Indian community is a part of my identity. I think it validated and reinforced that part of my identity.

PS: When you say you saw the bigger picture, tell me what that big picture was to you.

DG: You know, generally in our community one of the problems there is that it's fairly fragmented. It is fragmented based on the language, and languages are regional languages. So, generally, if I was not working for the India Association, I wouldn't be in close contact with people like Ram [Gada] because he speaks a different language, so we move in different social circles depending on language, which I just absolutely hate. That is one of the reasons why I do not subscribe to one particular language group. I'm more comfortable saying that I'm Indian, instead of saying, "I am Gujarati Indian," or, "I am Southern Indian," or, "I'm Eastern Indian," because I speak only Hindi, which is the national language. It allowed me to interact with people that otherwise I would not have been close to. It also allowed me to see that when people outside our own group see us, they don't see us as Gujarati Indian, as Bengali Indian. They see us as Indian Indian.

PS: Right, because most Americans don't know about all those states.

DG: Absolutely. Absolutely.

PS: Just like people in India wouldn't know if you said, "I'm from Minnesota." They'd say, "What's that?"
DG: You are from America.

PS: Right. Yes, from America.

DG: I think it did help me with that.

PS: But you had lived here, by that time, about ten years?

DG: We had lived here . . . Yes, yes. I knew . . . I mean, even before that, I knew that, no, we are a fragmented community. To some extent, I think that is one of our weaknesses, because it is a very influential community. It is a community that can get much more visibility in the broader community, and I think we don't because we fragment ourselves. We segment ourselves into different sub groups.

PS: How do you see the India Association pulling people together?

DG: I think that's why I do believe in India Association, because I think it does pull people together who are from different regions, speak different languages, eat different food. Since India Association is a non-religious organization that draws on people of every religion and every language group and every culture group, I think it is a stronger organization. It is an organization that can give us that visibility in the broader community that we should have.

PS: What would be the benefits of having that broader exposure in the community?

DG: I think our place in the community would be more secure, for once. People would then know and we would get rid of some of the stereotypes. There are a lot of stereotypes about Indians: that maybe in India, people are all poor, there are only snakes and monkeys, or somehow people think it's an underdeveloped country. But if they were to see the unified picture of India represented by many, many, many people who live here and who are highly accomplished professionals, they would be able to put some of those stereotypes behind them. By the same token, it would give us more clout if we were to make a statement and say that pursuing a particular race or people with particular facial characteristics is not fair as happened after 9-11 [September 11, 2001, terrorist attack], it would have more of an impact, because we would be speaking with one voice.

PS: And there's really not a forum for doing that right now, is there?

DG: Absolutely, and that's what we need. I think that's where an organization like India Association would be invaluable.

PS: Have you been aware of any of the backlash? Like, "Indian professionals are coming here and stealing all of our computer programming jobs," or, "We're outsourcing all of our good jobs to Indians so there's no jobs for Americans, because the Indians have taken them to India," do you hear a lot of that sort to thing?

DG: Oh, absolutely. When I go to the conferences or if I'm presenting something, I'm always presented with these arguments, and I have to stop the person who's asking the question and say, "We should be really glad that we are outsourcing jobs to India, because that allows us to keep the rest of the jobs here." If we were not . . . if Microsoft were not outsourcing the jobs they are doing, they would take the entire company and put it in China or put it in India or put it somewhere else. Then *all* the jobs would be gone.

PS: Okay. So you think that's really what Microsoft would do, is completely move to another—?

DG: Absolutely! Absolutely, because there would be not a cost advantage of staying here at all! Absolutely.

PS: The people that are asking the questions, do they buy that, usually?

DG: Well, if I'm the panel speaker, they would buy that. [Laughter] Because I am an expert.

PS: Okay.

[Tape interruption]

PS: Was it your experience after 9-11 that you or anybody else that you know in the Indian community got prejudiced looks? People were assuming that you were terrorists or something like that? Was that happening to people in the Indian community here in Minnesota?

DG: Actually, I believe it was. It was happening to people who were Muslim. It was happening to people who wore a turban, Sikhs. I do know that after 9-11, during that time period, maybe a few months later, my husband's father had passed away and he was supposed to go to perform last rites for him in India. And it was in summer, March, which is really hot in India. We got a ticket for him, and we went to the airport, and he went there an hour before the flight. At that time, for international flights they asked that you come two hours in advance. They did not let him get on the flight. They did not let him get on the flight and I, we, strongly believe it was because he looked like he was from Middle East.

PS: Okay.

DG: My daughter, after that, I know was stopped several times at the airport and was body searched. Again, because—not this one; the other one—she is tall and fair, and she does look like she's from Middle East. We do know just from several kids in our community that they were subjected to intensive searches at the airports and were thought to be people who could be risky.

PS: Okay. So it was happening and people heard about it?

DG: Definitely. Yes.

PS: Did that discourage people from flying or anything like that or just an unpleasant side effect?

DG: That was just unpleasant side effect, because I don't think my husband could have gone to India without flying or my daughter could have come here without flying. It's just a mode of transportation that we depend on.

PS: Right. So did your husband get to India?

DG: Next day. All this time, the body had to be put on ice. We don't have morgues, and it was really hard, but they would not let him get on the plane.

PS: Yes. Yes, that's sad. [Sighs] Ah! Our modern times, hmmm? When you talk about the challenges facing the Indian community, do you see other challenges besides this fracturedness?

DG: Yes. I think the other challenge to the Indian community sometimes is also the generation gap between kids and parents. By generation gap, I mean that parents, to a large extent, know who they are, which identity group they belong to. Like I said, I come from India and I got all my values from there, and I came here and I sought the Indian community because I knew I was part of it. That doesn't mean I wouldn't interact with American community, but I have an identity group to hold on to that's the core of my being.

PS: Right.

DG: It's harder for kids, because their identity group is different. They don't have that same solid base that we have to hold on to, to grab onto, and say they are Indian because they are not. They are really Indian American. They grew up here. They speak . . . their mother tongue is English. They read American history. Sometimes, knowingly or unknowingly, we make our kids live in two different worlds. That is, when they go to school, we want them to excel in studies, to play in schools, to excel in everything and to be better than everyone else in the class. When they come home, we want them to forget about that, be the nice little Indian kid.

PS: [Chuckles] Who does whatever they're told?

DG: The girls are not allowed to date. The boys are not allowed to date. Or they are supposed to do what we did in India.

PS: Right.

DG: That confuses our children and sometimes creates an identity crisis where they don't know which identity group do they belong to. I think that is also a problem.

PS: So how does the India Association help with that, overcome that challenge?

DG: I think they do it, actually, through different ways, but I think two excellent programs they have. India Association does sponsor SILC. They are one of the sponsors of SILC, which is School of Indian Language and Culture. I think it helps kids. I know when my girls went to SILC for the first time, they saw that they are not the only two kids of color in this white community. Ours is predominantly Jewish community here. They saw that there are a lot of other kids just like them, who look like them, who speak like them, whose parents look like their parents and have the same problems that they have. So that helps. Then I think India Association from time to time also organizes youth programs, dances for the youth, so that they can socialize with kids of their own age. That also helps. I think in the past they have also tried to organize forums and panels, discussion panels and things like that.

PS: Those aren't happening anymore?

DG: It does not happen on a regular basis.

PS: It probably would take somebody to organize it. Right?

DG: Yes.

PS: Which is a lot of work.

[Brief tape interruption]

PS: Tell me in your time in leadership roles in the India Association, were there any controversial issues that the organization had to deal with?

DG: Yes. One stands out in mind, because it was very controversial, very divisive. One of the persons from the community had asked me, as the president, to sponsor an event that he was organizing. He was calling in a speaker from California, I think, who was going to speak about India and terrorism. We had given the responsibility to one of the association members to research that speaker, and recommendation was made, "It is okay. Not objectionable," and we decided to sponsor the event. But as soon as the event was announced, I was inundated by calls, because it seems that that speaker was generally speaking against Hindus and was talking about Hindu militants or how Hinduism is responsible for encouraging terrorism in South Asian region. I felt that this was an issue that was going to divide the community along religious lines.

Again, as I said, we made very sure that we do not sponsor any things that are religious in nature. We want to stay away from that. There are four members in the executive committee. Three members agreed that this is not an event that we should be sponsoring. One member, however, felt very strongly that this is the event that we should be sponsoring. A meeting of the board was called, and in that meeting we discussed the issue and took the votes. Several members came as observers. Several interested people came to observe or to make the case or to speak against it. In the end, when vote was taken, it was decided that we are not going to sponsor the event. I think some people who wanted us to sponsor the event took it very hard.
PS: What ended up happening with them?

DG: Well, eventually, because it was a democratic process, they had to agree to that because it was the board's decision that we are not going to sponsor the event.

PS: Are they still active in the organization?

DG: Oh, definitely, yes.

PS: Okay. So people were able to get past the differences and still say, "Well, the whole group decided and that's that?"

DG: Absolutely.

PS: Wonderful. That's significant. Nobody had told me about that, previously. Any others that come to your mind?

DG: Nothing that we really couldn't resolve. Of course, when there are a lot of people involved in a project, there will always be some controversies and things like that. But I think for the most part we were able to work well together, and I really enjoyed working with many, many people I came to know through India Association.

PS: Have you formed some lasting friendships from that?

DG: Yes. I think I have formed some lasting friendships. I have come to know about a lot of people, people I respect in community, people I would not have known otherwise. Yes.

PS: Now if you could talk a little bit about how—do events in India impact the India Association of Minnesota? And if so, how?

DG: I do believe that events in India do impact what we do and how we do it here. For example, there was earthquake in Gujarat several years ago. I remember putting in a lot of resources for fundraising to make sure that we do respond to that calamity in India. This year, I know we had made tremendous efforts to help the victims of tsunami. So this is one way that events would affect. I think in other ways, the events of India would affect us is if there was a time period when a lot of people were emigrating from India to the United States on H1 visa, working in software industry, and that brought an influx of new people to the community, but also gave an opportunity to India Association to expand its work and somehow to include the new members to the community and its work. So I think as our community grows, that also affects how we work or what we do, because we need to respond to different things. We need to change course. We need to do things differently and not do what we have been doing traditionally.

PS: So an H1 visa, is that the one where you are short term?

DG: Work permit, yes.

PS: Permit. And how long can you stay on an H1 visa?

DG: I think people can stay for as long as six years.

PS: Six years. And how long were people generally staying on their H1 visas when they came to do software work?

DG: It depends. It depends. I mean, generally, they will go back in three, four years, five years. Some end up staying here, and some will leave after six years. So it's really varied.

PS: How successful has the India Association been in recruiting them to be actively involved with the India Association?

DG: We are, actually, always trying very hard to recruit them and to recruit students in India Association, and every year we do get one, two people to represent those groups.

PS: But that's harder, isn't it?

DG: It is much harder. It is much harder because, to some extent, their problems are different. They don't consider that this is their home, and they do feel it is more transitory for them in nature. They don't plan to settle down here. They don't know how long they are here for, so it's very hard to make them believe in the causes that we have. You know, I'm more worried about the politics here, and I'm more worried about the economy here, and they're more worried about short term job for the next four years.

PS: Right. Let's talk a little bit about where you, personally, envision the India Association going. Are you still involved? You're on the Nominating Committee right now, right?

DG: Right. Well, I think as our community is growing and establishing itself, opportunities for India Association are enormous, and I really do believe that this is one organization—there are a lot of regional organizations—that is capable of truly representing the Indian community as a whole, as a group, and not as divided sub groups. I definitely feel that there is need for India Association. What our role will be in the future will depend on how we invent and reinvent ourselves as time goes by, because we can't be what we were twenty years ago. Our community is dynamic. It's changing all the time, so it means that the identity of India Association will have to change. That even though the mission is same, the tools that we are going [to need] to reach that objective will be different. If we don't change, then I think eventually it might wither down and then become nonexistent. I hope that time would never come. I hope that it's going to flourish, and it's going to reinvent itself, and it's going to be this wider, dynamic organization that is going to be a forum for us that is going to represent our community to the broader community and is going to be a bridge to that.

PS: Right. What do you see as the specific things that it's changing to right now, as times change right now?

DG: Well, I think some of the things that it's doing is that instead of just being India Association, I think we are becoming more active in Asian Pacific community. We are sponsoring some of their activities and are participating in them very actively. I think we need to do more maybe with respect to different regional groups than we do right now, and I know we do a lot. We make an effort every year, but it seems, still . . . And this is the problem with a voluntary organization all the time, that there is more work that needs to be done, and no one seems to have time or resources to do it all.

PS: So what would be the activities that it would do with the regional groups?

DG: Somehow bring them all together, bring them all together so that they would be willing to work under the umbrella of India organization and say, "Yes, this is the organization that is going to represent us all." So even though we will meet individually for our prayer meetings or for our community festivals, India organization would be our public face.

PS: Okay. Those organizations at this point, the regional groups, aren't terribly interested in doing that, right?

DG: Right, right.

PS: Why would you say that is?

DG: Because I think that different . . . if you look at different ethnic groups, most of the groups are very prosperous, and we are all very comfortable and happy with ourselves and very happy being where we are. Of course, it's more comfortable to be with your own language group, to be with people who have common ties. We can talk about same cities. We can talk about same movies. We can talk about same programs. I mean, that's part of their identity group. Then, sometimes when we are in that place, we are economically secure. We are socially moving with the people who are speaking the same language as we are. We forget about our role in the bigger community, and we forget to see that in the bigger community, we are still a minority people, when we think we have all the rights and we don't.

PS: Yes, it's a big fish in a small pond or a small fish in a big pond.

DG: Absolutely. Yes.

PS: How do you think that the India Association could address that particular issue?

DG: Well, actually, I do believe that India Association makes an effort every few years. We call the meetings, but some of this realization would have to come from those communities. Maybe it would be a crisis that would be needed in order for those communities to come in the fold of India Association or maybe . . .

PS: Crisis such as what?

DG: Crisis such as when we had Gujarati earthquake. Then the Gujarati community came and they participated in our program, and they were very, very active. Or we had Orissa earthquake. I think that was earthquake, cyclone.

PS: But once that crisis passed, do they still stay involved?

DG: I'm hoping some of them will stay involved, but I think, you are right: a lot of them do go back. But, as long as some of the community leaders from those communities know the importance and know that this is the bridge that's going to give public face to the American community, it will work.

PS: You've used this phrase a number of times, "being a face to the American community." Through what method do you think that you interface the most with the American community?

DG: Now?

PS: Yes, right now.

DG: Right now, India Association does organize some functions. We do participate in Festival of Nations. We do organize India Day in October that the community is invited to. Many times I know after 9-11, we have done an interfaith service at the Capitol that was organized by India Association. Through that interfaith service we just wanted to show that all the faiths are represented by Indian community, and we are all members of the society, and we feel just like everybody else does. So as a minority group, we should not be . . . somehow isolated or be made responsible for whatever happened. Then some other events happen, like when [Dr. Kalpana C.] Chawla, the woman who was an astronaut, died in the shuttle accident. I was the one who interviewed with the local reporter. So I think in that way we could be spokespeople for the Indian community. So if the governor needs to know something about Indian community, he would call India Association. So that when the ambassador comes here, he would contact India Association. So that when the counselor general comes here, India Association would be the one that would be contacted and that would take the responsibility.

PS: There's not a lot of times when the American media wants to interact with any of the minority associations at all, right?

DG: Right.

PS: Unless there's something very specifically, like the death of an astronaut.

DG: Absolutely. Absolutely.

PS: Television and radio are the same?

DG: Yes. Yes, they are.

PS: Does the India Association put out press releases to that major media?

DG: We actually do put out press releases when we organize our functions. Sometimes they come, sometimes when we do the….

[Brief tape interruption]

PS: So you put out press releases?

DG: We do. We do put out press releases, but the response or the interest is not always very great in what we are doing.

PS: Do you see any particular challenges looming in the future for India Association?

DG: I think I've touched on those before, that India Association will have to keep inventing and reinventing itself to answer the needs of the migrant community, the new immigrants, welcoming; and also to answer the need of the children who are growing up here. We want to make sure that second generation Indian Americans are part of the organization, that they don't feel estranged from the organization or feel that it does not represent them. I have already touched on the identity confusion there. Again, I think for that, we are making effort now to see that second generation people are coming and joining the Board of the India Association and are working for India Association so that their interest can be represented and responded to.

PS: I'm just speculating here—tell me if I'm right—that there's sort of an age stratification that's gone on? The people who came here when they were in their twenties are now in their fifties and sixties, and there's not a lot of people who are in their forties or late thirties, but there's a lot of twenty-somethings. Is that correct?

DG: Oh, definitely! You have hit it right on. So we have a lot of people who are older, you know, like I am, in this age group. Then we have, like I said, students and recent immigrants who have just come. Of course, in between, there was not a lot of immigration that was taking place. Yes. True.

PS: So there's a bit of a void in those that are being . . . There's not a lot of forty-somethings that are coming into the place where they're ready to be leaders in the community?

DG: Right. Right.

PS: Are the twenties, the people in their twenties, stepping up to do that?

DG: Twenties and thirties are stepping in to do that. Yes, definitely. And then it is up to us, as a member of the community, to groom those people for these leadership positions, because the potential is there, definitely.

PS: Of those people that are growing into leadership, what percentage would you say are Indo-Americans who were born here and raised in Indian families versus Indians who've emigrated here from India?

DG: I would say still the proportion of people who grew up here is smaller compared to the more recent immigrants who have come from India and are planning to stay here.

PS: Okay. So it's those immigrants who are willing to step into leadership more so than the young generation that was raised here?

DG: Right.

PS: And to what do you attribute that?

DG: I think I attribute that to maybe the generation that grew up here sees its identity as much broader than just being Indian American. That is not the only claim that they have when there are different parts of their identity, and maybe they are more at ease moving into the other community and don't feel that they need to grab onto this part of their identity.

PS: Oh, okay. How do you feel about that, personally?

DG: I think they are in different stages of development in their life. I'm hoping that, eventually, they would realize that this is an important part of who they are. The reason I say it's an important part of who they are is my daughters were just in Europe, and when they were in Europe, they were not considered American, because they always look different. So then they say, "Oh, you speak such good English!" They have to respond, "Oh yes, because it is my mother tongue." Or here, they could be working somewhere or they could be teaching or they could be working in a professional capacity, and people would say, "Oh, where are you from?"

PS: And they say, "St. Paul," and people don't understand.

DG: Exactly. Exactly. "Oh, you speak such good English," or, "You don't have an accent."

PS: Right.

DG: I think it would still be an important part of their identity, and I think some people would come to . . . but it is a process of self discovery for them.

PS: Many of them, I would guess, in their twenties, are still busy trying to establish themselves as Americans with their career and house.

DG: Yes! Before they come back . . . before they come back to this part of their identity. Yes.

PS: One of the amazing things about the India Association of Minnesota is that it's totally volunteer, and it's been going strong for twenty-five, thirty years now. Many volunteer organizations fizzle at some point.

DG: Right.

PS: What do you think is the secret to the longevity of—?

DG: You know, I think, again, I would attribute it to the vision that Ram and Neena [Gada] have. Their vision was that let's keep on bringing new members. Let's not just keep recycling the old people over and over and over again so that they get tired and burned out. They make an effort, so it means we all make an effort to make sure that new people are coming and joining the association. Maybe if we had checked five people, two of them would stay. That way, we keep scouting for new talent, for new people to come and join the organization to keep it . . . First of all, the new ideas are coming. New energy is coming. After five, seven years, you feel kind of burned out, and you want to take a break.

PS: Yes.

DG: If you want to contribute, you can do some things on as-needed basis.

PS: But you don't want to be in charge anymore?

DG: No.

PS: Yes, it's a lot of work.

DG: Yes.

PS: Twenty hours a week would be a lot of work for a volunteer position.

DG: Yes.

PS: Are there other organizations like India Association in other states that you're aware of that are Pan-Indian?

DG: Actually, I think there are in a lot of states; there are Indian organizations. Some of them are very active; some of them are not. I know that there are some maybe in Texas that have been . . . or in Chicago or New York, where there is a really dense Indian population, where they have been able to raise a lot of funds and have been able to raise their profile. Yes.

PS: How do they compare to the one here? Is this one bigger or smaller?

DG: Ours is still a bit smaller than the ones I am talking about, but I think maybe it is more dynamic and does more compared to the Indian organization that are located in the city of the same size with the same population base. When I talk about New York and Chicago, they have a huge population base.

PS: Right. There's an India Town in [North] Chicago. I've been to it.

DG: See, and we really can't compete with them in terms of resources or the . . .

PS: Well, we've covered every question that I have on my list, except for the very last one, which I always like to . . . Is there anything else that you think is important to tell about? If you want to pause for a minute, that's fine, or you can just speak.

DG: Okay. [Pauses] A few things come to mind. I do remember and this I talked . . . because I do want to talk to you about culture shock when I came in the United States. I have talked about that incident at New York airport. But also I remember when I came, as I said, I was seven months pregnant, so I went to see the doctor with my husband. The first question the nurse asked, "Are you married?" I was highly offended, because, to my mind, I didn't know if someone could get pregnant without being married.

PS: Oh! Okay.

DG: [Chuckles] So that was a huge culture shock. I think I left the office and came out and told my husband, "Let's move from here, because she is asking all those questions that don't make any sense." He said, "No, that's okay. Here, it does happen." I thought that was interesting.

PS: [Chuckles]

DG: Another interesting thing that happened is that when I came to the United States, the picture in my mind of women in America was that . . . I mean, I knew that I was living with a lot of restrictions. As a woman, there were a lot of things I couldn't do that I wanted to do. But I thought that somehow, women in American would be better off. They would be better off in terms of right. Maybe they would be able to do more things. They would have more right, or they would have a better life. When I came here, I remember my best friend in graduate school coming and telling me that her husband hit her or he beat her. I could not believe, because I thought that it does not happen here or that happens only when there is a lot of stress related to money or related to something else." I was really surprised as I started realizing that women were not as free as I thought they were. Mostly the problems that are faced by women in India and America are, basically, the same. We are more same than we are different.
PS: That's significant.

DG: Right. Right. I . . . I . . . I felt the same way, that we all face the same problems, and women in America are just as oppressed, in different ways, as women in India. [Pauses]

And I do want to say that America has been good to me. As a woman, it has been good to me, and I said that before, that I feel as a woman I have more voice. I'm doing much better. I had more opportunities, and I had [more] opportunity to raise my girls to be strong women than I would have had in India.

I really do feel, though I was very sad when I left India, that this is my adopted country now, and it has its bumps and bruises, and I know it's not a perfect country, and I really dislike the present administration, and I'm upset with their policy on the Social Security system and the medical system, but I still believe that this is my home.

I'm also thankful to India Association for giving me the opportunity to be working with them, because I met a lot of wonderful people there. Again, I saw that people who are from different language groups, from different regions are all, basically, the same.

PS: All right. Thank you for meeting with me today. I appreciate it.

DG: Yes.