Niru Misra Narrator

Polly Sonifer Minnesota Historical Society Interviewer

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PS: This is Polly Sonifer, and I'm interviewing Niru Misra on September 24, 2004. Good morning, Niru. How are you?

NM: Good morning. I'm fine, thank you.

PS: Thanks for taking time to interview with me. First, Niru, would you tell us a little bit about yourself and how you came to be here in the United States?

NM: Sure. I came here with my parents. I was two years old when we left India. Actually, my father [Sudhansu Misra] came here just before I was born to go to graduate school and got his graduate degree from the University of Michigan and then brought my mother and I over. I was two years old at the time. We moved first to New York, just for a few months, and then he started working with Honeywell here in the Twin Cities. So I have been here in the Twin Cities since I was about two and half, three years old. We spent about ten years in Florida. I went to college there and then came back here for graduate school and have been here ever since.

PS: So your parents lived in Florida as well for a while?

NM: Yes.

PS: You were growing up there?

NM: Right.

PS: How old are you right now?

NM: I am forty-seven.

PS: So you've been basically living in the United States for forty-five years?

NM: Yes.

PS: Have you been to India?

NM: I travel to India quite a bit, probably on average every three years or so, sometimes more often, sometimes less often. But it averages to about that and I feel pretty connected with my family in India.

PS: You have extended family still living in India?

NM: Yes.

PS: What part of India are your parents from?

NM: We're from the eastern part of India, from the state of Orissa, which is along the coast.

PS: At this point in your life, what do you do here in the United States?

NM: I have worked in the environmental field for a number of years, so I still do a little bit of consulting in that area to kind of keep my foot in the door. I've been raising my children, which has been a primary occupation. I am primarily the director of HATI, Inc, which is a company that does supportive living services.

PS: HATI, Inc. Okay. Who do they support?

NM: We work with people with a history of chemical dependency.

PS: This is a supportive living facility?

NM: Yes. Yes, it's a residential program. It's a company that my parents started and I have kind of continued for the past six, seven years or so.

PS: Great. So you didn't really make a choice to immigrate to the United States. You were just coming along because that's where your parents were going.

NM: That's right.

PS: And most two-year-olds follow their parents pretty readily.

[Chuckles]

PS: At a certain point in your life you got involved with the India Association or India Club, whatever it was called when you got involved. What year was that? Do you remember what year you first got involved in the India Association?

NM: Well, when I was coming back to the Twin Cities as a graduate student, that was, let's see, around 1980. At that time, my parents were living here in the Twin Cities, so I was kind of associated with the India Club at that time through them and involved with activities that were going on. But of course while I was in school, I wasn't as involved. My more direct involvement

with the leadership of that group came, probably, late 1980s. I think I started serving on the board of directors probably in 1990, is my guess.

PS: So for ten years, you were sort of a quasi member that helped out with this and that?

NM: Yes, and during that time I think my father served as president, so I remember helping him out quite a bit and being involved in some of the activities.

PS: You didn't seem to have a big time when you rebelled against things Indian, or did you?

NM: [Sighs] I don't think I rebelled against things Indian. I probably went through periods where, you know, that whole identity issue of how American and how Indian, and where is that balance? So I think there were times where that was kind of the question, and I probably was testing out those kinds of things. Also, when I was growing up, you know the late 1960s, early 1970s, this country was going through a lot of societal change and cultural change. So that, I think, was also part of my growing up years. You know, the Vietnam War, the Civil Rights Movement. All those things are very vivid to my memory of my youth.

PS: Did you join in with that protest movement kind of stuff?

NM: A little bit. I was kind of on the young end of the Vietnam War Era, but yes, I think I definitely was very aware of it and very sympathetic to some of that. I think that that was also a time when Indian culture was becoming very . . . I guess Americans were just becoming more aware of Indian culture. The Beatles brought in Maharishi Yogi and the whole meditation movement, yoga movement. Indian music suddenly had kind of hit the scenes, so it was kind of semi-glamorous, I would say, to have some Indian culture. That was a nice thing. I think we're kind of hitting a resurgence of that again where Indian culture is very hip. That's nice. I think it helps kids who are growing up here to feel that they can embrace it.

PS: Because the Beatles were into the Indian things, it was okay for you to be Indian at that point?

NM: Well, I don't think I related to the Beatles being involved in it, but I think it just kind of made it easier. People had heard of Hinduism or meditation or yoga. Otherwise, I don't think they would have, and I would have had to explain every little bit of that. [Chuckles]

PS: Right.

NM: It did make it easier, I think.

PS: In those early years, it sounds like you got primarily involved because of your parents' involvement, you dad's involvement.

NM: Yes, I would say that's true.

PS: All right. Tell me about your father a little bit, his name and what his role was in the India Association.

NM: Yes. My dad is Sudhansu Misra. Wherever he's been, he's always been very involved in Indian organizations. He was actively involved when it was the Indo-American Association here back in the 1960s. We were in Florida, I think, when the India Club was formed. However, when he came back, he got involved and served as a president, served on the board of directors. He's been involved with a number of groups, including SILC [School of India for Language and Culture] or some of the newer kind of adjunct groups of India Association. When we were in Florida, we lived in the Tampa Bay area in Clearwater, and he formed the first India Club there. That was also, even though it was around 1970 . . . at that time, the population in the Tampa Bay area of Indians was tiny. Very, very tiny, smaller than it was here. Now that population is in the ation tens of thousands, I'm sure. It's huge.

PS: It's a nicer climate for most Indians than Minnesota.

NM: Yes!

[Laughter]

NM: Very true.

PS: Your father was the president of the India Association at that time?

NM: Yes, and I couldn't tell you the years, but it must have been late 1980s.

PS: That was here in Minnesota. What kinds of things did he pull you into?

NM: Oh, I remember getting ready for the Festival of India at the Landmark Center. I don't know if that maybe was one of the first years that the India Club did that. It had to have been one of the first years, if not the first year. I remember painting signs out in the garage. I remember organizing how that even would be structured, getting in touch with people to do entertainment, food, that sort of thing.

PS: What inspired you to help out with that?

NM: [Pauses] I think there's just a . . . I've always felt very connected to the Indian community wherever we've lived. There's just a sense of excitement, I think, about being involved in an event like that. For me, it's fun to be part of the organizing, part of the energy that goes with pulling people together.

PS: Were you married at that time?

NM: I think we were just married, so it must have been maybe around 1985, somewhere in there. I was married in 1984, so it was probably right around that time period.

PS: Okay. Was your husband interested in being involved?

NM: Yes, I think he definitely was. He's always stayed involved. Whatever I've been involved in, he's been very supportive. He enjoys that sort of thing, too.

PS: He's not Indian, right?

NM: No. No. His mother emigrated here from Sweden, and his father's parents immigrated here from Sweden and Ireland. So his background is Irish and Swedish.

PS: That's definitely a mixed heritage, isn't it?

NM: Yes. He grew up in a household where his parents often spoke in Swedish. Although not Indian, I think he has some sense of belonging to the immigrant family.

PS: Sure, being first generation or close to first generation.

NM: Yes.

PS: So the first project that you were involved with was that Festival of India at Landmark Center. You think maybe it was the first year that that was being done?

NM: Well, I'm not sure if it was the first year. It certainly had to be one of the first years, or maybe that was the year where it was being transformed to a larger event. I just remember it took some work that makes me think, in retrospect, that it probably was in some form of transition, either just being created or being transformed from something smaller.

PS: Okay. The vision of the India Association then, creating that Festival of India at Landmark, what was the purpose of that? What was the reasoning behind why we should have this day? It was, obviously, a lot of work to organize it.

NM: Yes. I couldn't tell you that firsthand, but I can tell you what I assume. I think, you know, Indians who settled here in the Twin Cities, probably Indians everywhere all over the U.S. who settled, have a tremendous pride and excitement about our culture and our heritage and a desire to continue it. So I think this was an effort to make this into an all-India sort of involvement, not just one cultural group or another, but all the states, all the religions, and to portray that to the community at large, to the greater Twin Cities in a way that would welcome them in.

PS: Do you think that it has succeeded in doing that?

NM: I think it has. I think there's probably been some ebb and flow. I think maybe depending on who's been involved in the leadership for that event, there's been more focus on keeping it as an internal process or an internal event, engaging largely the Indian community. I think some people have . . . When I was president, my desire was definitely to make sure that we involve the greater Twin Cities and [I] tried to welcome them in the door as much as possible.

PS: So the goal in welcoming non-Indian people into that event was to help them understand Indian culture and food and dance and song and all of that?

NM: Yes, and to give them an opportunity to appreciate it. I think back in the mid-to-late 1980s, there weren't Indian restaurants. There just wasn't the cultural exposure to Indian society that there is now. There was more need for that. It was also a very, very, very exotic foreign thing, I think, to the average Minnesotan.

PS: Yes.

NM: Probably less so now.

PS: Yes.

NM: Definitely then, it was a big deal.

PS: My guess is you've attended most of those Festival of India days over the years. When you look across the crowd, the bodies assembled there, does it seem to you that there's more Indians or more non-Indians in the crowd?

NM: Again, I think it just depends on how the event has been led for that year. People who have focused on publicity to the greater community, in those years, I think, the crowd has been more non-Indians. I wouldn't say majority of non-Indians, but a relative more, so more than in other years. In those other years, I think where we haven't focused on publicity, it just hasn't attracted as many people in the door outside the Indian community.

PS: So then it's primarily the Indian community?

NM: Yes.

PS: That was one of the first projects that you got involved with. It sounds like you got more connected and involved with the India Association as time went on. What led to you being more involved?

NM: Probably the fact that I had reached that stage in my life where I was married and settling down and more a permanent member of the area. When you're in college, I think you're in a different world, in your own world. I think that was it. I think it was the fact that I was married, owned a home, and started to have children.

PS: You were one of the few people in your age range that had grown up here. You were like one of two or three small children when you first were coming here. There weren't any other people with little kids, right?

NM: That's right, there were very few. There were a few who came and went, but those who stayed in the Twin Cities, I could count them on one hand.

PS: Okay. As you began to take on your role as a grownup who was participating in the India Association, were there other people your age range, or did they tend to be much older than you?

NM: You're talking about when I got into a leadership position?

PS: Right.

NM: There were people probably close to my age range. They were largely older. Those who were close to my age range though were coming here as immigrants. They weren't people who had grown up here.

PS: Did you bring a different perspective having grown up here, do you think, to your involvement?

NM: I think so.

PS: How would you see it being different? What was different?

NM: There were probably three things I felt really strongly about. One was engaging the youth of our community in a way that gave them more authority. That was one thing. Another was I really felt it was necessary that we do outreach to the community at large, give them some exposure to who we are, where we came from, what we're about, just so we would become more familiar as a community. Then the third was probably related to that, but something I think my father started and that I felt very strongly about; that we needed to contribute to the community in a meaningful way, not just professionally, but also in ways that showed we were able to be of service to the community. So service projects, getting volunteer opportunities available, particularly for the kids to get involved in.

PS: Did India Association do that in conjunction with SILC or did it have projects on its own that were independent of SILC?

NM: I think when I was involved in leadership they were connected, but activities were largely conducted separately.

PS: Okay. Tell me about how it came to be that you were elected onto the board and the sequence of events around that.

NM: India Association has a nominating committee, and somehow my name came up, I suppose, one year with the nominating committee. It probably was just a logical thing because I was around and involved. And I'm sure they were looking for more of the youth to get involved and I was seen that way at the time.

[Laughter]

NM: So I was nominated onto the board, served on the board for, I think, three years before I became president.

PS: Was it three-year terms or were they one-year terms?

NM: The terms were one year.

PS: Okay.

NM: That's what I recall. Yes.

PS: Then you were at every board meeting, right?

NM: Pretty much.

PS: What was the shift like going from being this member who helped out with festivals and organized events and stuff to being on the board and in the governing capacity?

NM: It was very smooth. I don't think there was anything surprising about it, particularly. We used to meet at the International Institute of Minnesota, around a large set up of tables. There were about twenty or so of us at each meeting. Certainly I was, I think, the youngest person there—at least that first year, probably the second year. When you're into a new organization, there's always a culture you adapt to, so there was kind of a sense of keeping my eyes and ears open. You start to see the behind-the-scenes working of the organization. But I don't think there was anything unexpected about it.

PS: Was it mostly men on the board or was there a mix?

NM: There was a mix. I actually think that the Indian community here and internationally is open, is very open to women. I think women have always been in leadership positions. However, it still is largely male. I remember when I was president, even when I served on the board, I used to laugh about the fact that when you're taking on that much extra work, what you really need is a wife.

[Laughter]

NM: That's what supports you and the rest of your family while you're doing all the work. So I think part of it is just this tradition of women kind of being the support system for the family, and the person who's available to go out and do all the extra things is usually the man. I, fortunately, have had a very supportive husband, so it's worked out well.

PS: As the roles unfolded in the board, did it ever seem that the men would cook up the idea and say, "We ought to do this," and then the women would actually make it happen? Or did you not see that?

NM: I sure didn't see that.

PS: So it was a pretty equal sharing?

NM: Yes. I do think the board was probably more men than women, so if you just looked at sheer numbers of ideas, that's true that more of the ideas maybe came from men, but there were lots of women who were doing very good work and very much in the leadership of those structures that they were involved in.

PS: In your experience of going to India, do you think that's different from how it would have been if an organization like this was existing in India? Are the gender roles more rigid in India in your experience?

NM: I think it depends on what part of society you look at and in what time period you look. I know that even in American society, it's largely been a very male dominated culture. I don't think, from what I know of Indian society, that it's more male dominated. I actually think there's more freedom for women in a lot of ways in India, and I think Indian women actually do take on more authority and leadership than I often see American women doing, historically. I think it's evened out a lot more, but if you look at a lot of the activist movements in India, they're led by women. I have friends and family in India who are female who have done tremendous work in social projects and political projects. They've been leaders in fields of science, industry. I think it's a very complex question, but I do think that if a woman chooses to take on a leadership position, the doors aren't closed, and I don't think it's a battle to get there. I think sometimes that battle is harder in this country, actually.

PS: Okay. That's a very interesting perspective. Thank you. You were in your late twenties when you were on the board?

NM: Late twenties, early thirties. I think maybe around thirty.

PS: You were three years as just a general board member?

NM: I think so.

PS: Then you were elected to be the president of the board?

NM: Yes.

PS: That was also a one-year term?

NM: Yes.

PS: Tell me what it was like being president of the board.

NM: It was fun. It was a lot of fun. By then, I knew the people I was working with quite well. One of the great things about India Association is that it brings together the entire Indian community, and I think it's the only organization still that does that. So there's been a very, very clear effort to bring in all the different regional groups, all the different religions, all the different subcultures, as well as bringing in different professions. Because when you have a board of directors, you need to have all those different components that can make an organization function. I think it was an incredibly diverse group.

In fact, looking back on it, one of the things that has occurred to me is that it may be the most diverse group—even though it was all surrounding the idea of Indian community—I've ever worked with because within the Indian community, there is such enormous diversity. People came from different language backgrounds, different religions, different belief systems about everything, and this one common desire to do something for the Indian community. Although people's definition of what that would be might be different. It was an incredibly diverse group. It was a lot of fun, and I think there was a lot of energy to move a lot of things forward. The biggest problem I ever had was that there were more ideas than there were people to make them actually happen.

PS: All right. The structure, as I have heard it described, is that there's this board, and the board sort of generates ideas for projects. Then somebody on the board will take a leadership role for a certain project and then dip into the other members who probably don't come to board meetings to make these various projects happen. Right?

NM: That's largely true. Yes.

PS: When an idea was generated, how did the group decide which one to act on and which one to say, "Well, that's an nice idea. Maybe someday we'll do that?"

NM: Those decisions were probably largely made based on who had the energy to carry an idea forward

PS: So if you had the idea, you had to make it happen in a leadership sort of way?

NM: Yes. It had to probably meet certain parameters which we understood, that it had to be something for the entire community. It couldn't be for one religious group, let's say, or one regional group. It had to serve the entire community. We had our hands full—I think to this day, it's the same situation—between the Festival of Nations and the Festival of India and a few other projects, which India Association takes on. It pretty much absorbs the resources that are available. So it is really difficult to start anything new, not because the desire isn't there but because there's so much energy that goes into those standing projects that to add anymore becomes difficult.

PS: This oral history project is one of the projects that kind of grew out of the India Association?

NM: Yes.

PS: Then, there's the Fifty-Five-Plus Group that grew out of—?

NM: Yes.

PS: And your father was instrumental in starting that one, right?

NM: Yes.

PS: If you've got the energy to make it go, you can pretty much make any project go as long as it's pan-Indian?

NM: Yes. You have to present it to the board, develop your arguments, present it in a way that shows the benefits and how you're going to support it. Generally, the board, I think, has been very, very supportive of whatever people are able to get going.

PS: The board's role in helping a project along is providing financial resources if needed or helping find volunteers? In what way does the board support a particular project?

NM: It could be in a number of different ways. Sometimes there are financial resources. The history project is an example. The Fifty-Five-Plus Group, I think, gets a small contribution from the board. Most of those, however, I should add, also have to come up with some other resources, so they will have to solicit other areas for resources, as well. There's access to the membership, which is a big thing. The mailing list is a big benefit to be able to reach everybody, to be able to publicize things through the newsletter, for example. Also, I think, one of the benefits of working through the India Association is it's seen as something that serves the whole community. It's not seen as something that goes through one religious channel or one regional channel. People who work through the India Association realize that they have to be in that sort of a realm.

PS: What year were you the president again?

NM: 1994.

PS: And it was for one year?

NM: One year.

PS: Then you were a past president for a year?

NM: Yes, and I think I was the vice-president the prior year.

PS: Okay. So you're president in training, then you're president, then you're past president?

NM: Right. Right.

PS: Are you still on the board?

NM: I'm not.

PS: In the year that you were the president, how many projects were undertaken that year?

NM: Oh, boy. Let me just run through them. We did the Festival of Nations, the Festival of India. Those are kind of the standing projects. We had just, I think, the previous year started the annual dinner, so we continued that. We did a number of youth projects. We continued the Fifty-Five-Plus project, the history project. I think the previous year there was an earthquake in western India, which we had been instrumental in raising some funds for, so we continued some of that. There was a literacy project we were involved in. The Independence Day picnic. So quite a few different things.

PS: Yes, that is a lot! Some of them were sort of ongoing projects that take a life of their own and don't need a lot of guidance other than a brief report maybe at each board meeting?

NM: That's true, yes.

PS: Then others where the board had to do a lot to make it happen?

NM: Yes. Yes. I would say the majority of them were pretty much board motivated and board run.

PS: Can you tell me about any issues that came up that were controversial, where there was a lot of debate or lively discussion about which way to go with a certain thing?

NM: [Pauses] I don't remember a lot of controversy. I remember that there's always a little bit of tension when a new project is proposed, because there has to be this evaluation of....

[Tape interruption]

NM: Yes, and with that constant sort of theme that this has to serve the entire Indian community, and does it have a focus on the community beyond us, and if so, how does it affect that community? So if we sense that somebody's trying to do something really for the betterment of . . maybe more of a self-interested project, those are very difficult to deal with because sometimes you may be friends with that person. You may have personal contacts, and yet you still have to kind of say, "Well, you know, there maybe is another way of going about doing this." That said, the India Association, I think, has been involved and instrumental in getting a lot of things off the ground that maybe originally not everybody was in agreement about their benefit to the community at large. Yet I think other people prevailed who saw, were able to see ahead, and say, "If this grows to the extent it's possible to grow, it will be a benefit to the whole community." Arts organizations, for example.

PS: Which kind of arts? Can you be more specific about that?

NM: The ones that come to mind are the performing arts, the dance groups, the theater groups.

PS: Music performance.

NM: Music. I think it's been very much a part of the wisdom of India Association to support those groups and to get them launched and off the ground. Sometimes that has been one of the roles of India Association is we have been the non-profit entity within the community, which can be used to support a growing arts organization, for example, so that it has that connection to a non-profit so it can apply for grants or whatever and get going. We've seen some really successful groups now formed.

PS: Tell me about those.

NM: I think we're seeing them on the front pages sometimes now in the *Star Tribune* . . . the dance groups, and Nritya Jyoti and Ragamala. They both do very, very well-attended performances throughout the Twin Cities, even nationally. Even internationally, I think. The theater group that comes to mind is Pangea [Pangea World Theater]. They've been kind of tangentially involved with India Association. I think, again, access to the membership has been important for them, and their connections with India Association have benefited both organizations. Those are the ones that come to mind right now that have been very successful.

PS: And the controversy around those might be that a certain form of dance or a certain kind of music is too specific to one part of India? Or what would be the controversy?

NM: Again, I wouldn't call it a controversy. I don't recall that there was ever a controversy or any sort of rigorous debate over this. I think when the board has evaluated the support of projects, these were some of the questions that came up in looking at these organizations. I think there has always been very full-bodied support for the arts, which has been terrific. I think it's been one of the real things that's helped the Indian community become part of the greater community and be received in a way that people on the street start to know what you're talking about.

PS: Okay. Can you give me an example of a project that somebody brought up and said, "Oh, let's do this," and the board looked at it and said, "Well, it's a nice project, but it doesn't meet our criteria of being pan-India?"

NM: I don't recall that we ever shot down a project. I recall that we brought up those questions, and that we asked people to make sure that they were keeping that focus in mind as they were approaching their work. Sometimes, people look to the India Association for raising funds for a particular charitable organization. While we would support that in certain ways, we were careful, I think, not to invest too much of the organizational energy in raising funds very specifically for a specific project. So an example might be: a children's hospital in India, which is definitely a cause everybody gets behind and wants to support. To put India Association energy into that would mean that there would be other things then that we would be having to say, "No," to, because our energies would be tied up in one direction. What we decided to do was, at the

Festival of India we would bring those organizations forward to have booths there so that they could do outreach to the community and solicit support through that event, but we would not specifically endorse one group over another.

PS: So it was one-step-removed support. Rather than giving them a grant of money, you would say, "We'll let you have a space here at the festival to solicit your own funds."

NM: Right. And at least while I served on the board, there was never an issue of a grant of money, because the money wasn't there. [Chuckles]

PS: Oh, okay.

NM: We were not a very wealthy organization where we gave out grants. Our role was mainly to serve as an organization that would provide support in other ways, through human resources or through using the name of the organization.

PS: The India Association's membership is not huge, but it contains a lot of people who are actually fairly well-to-do. Correct?

NM: Yes, I think that's true.

PS: But it's never seen itself as an organization that raised funds for the purpose of the organization directing them?

NM: No. I would say that's true. We have raised funds. Like the earthquake I mentioned, that was an example of fundraising for a very specific cause. But that is rare. I don't think that's something India Association undertakes. It's always, I think, been a little bit of a difficulty to raise funds for India Association. Even just to get the membership in the door has been difficult, because in looking at the Indian community in the Twin Cities, it's a relatively small community with an enormous number of commitments. You have all the retail groups. You have several religious organizations. All of those have to be supported. Then you have the arts organizations and then you have organizations that might be involved in a specific charity. So there's a lot of effort to raise money within this community. And there's also some political groups, by the way. You look at all these different demands for raising money, and the fact that a lot of members of this community are interested in supporting organizations in India itself to give back to the country of birth. And so people are stretched pretty thin given the relatively small size of the community. There's almost, I think, a sense of taking it for granted that the India Association will continue to do what it does. It may be one of those things that we could focus on a little more, trying to publicize the value of this organization.

PS: You say right now you're not on the board anymore?

NM: No.

PS: When did you stop being on the board?

NM: Hmmm . . . I think I was stopping on the board a couple years after I was president. I've stayed involved. I was one of the founding members of the Asian Indian Women's Association, which has been around for a while and has dissolved in the last couple of years and I think is StoryPraseA looking at, hopefully, some form of rebirth in the near future. I went from the India Association to that and worked on that largely.

PS: That took your energy in terms of meetings and things like that?

NM: That was kind of my ongoing commitment to the India Association.

PS: Are you still involved with certain projects of the India Association?

NM: I have been more involved, I would say, in some of the other projects in the community. I attend the India Association events, but I haven't been involved in keeping them going. One of the things that I believed very strongly when I was on the board is that this is an organization that's designed to bring in fresh blood, and it's really important to keep doing that.

PS: Right.

NM: So I felt it was very important not to have a core group that dominated this institution but a solid system that would allow for transition. So I think it's important that people serve their time and then know when it's time to walk out the door and be supportive and then let other people take the reins

PS: Move on. [Chuckles] Are there any challenges that you see looming in the future for the India Association?

NM: Oh, I think some of the challenges are the challenges that have been there for a long time, the ongoing support. I think this community has . . . like I spoke about the diversity of this community. We are so large now. We've grown so much over the past ten years in sheer population, and we support a lot of different organizations now, and I'm concerned that we will lose track of this one organization that is so central to holding us all together. I hope that people will see the need for this and that it will stay vital. That message, I think, keeps on being an issue for the organization. There is in my mind a sense that we . . . very connected to that, that we need to have a cohesion. There was a time when I was little where if you saw someone from India on the street, you ended up inviting them to your house and having dinner with them. Now you hardly even glance at them. It's become such a difference. It's sad, in a way. I think we've lost something through that.

But some way for people who are new to the community, who have problems . . . I still get calls because my name is listed on the website for the Asian Indian Women's Association. I get probably a couple calls a month, and they're usually very sad calls about women who are in the Indian community who are having serious problems. Domestic abuse. That's the biggest one, which isn't to say that it's a common problem, but it is a problem that there isn't a resource for these women to go to. That's one of those things that I think if we were able to pull together a

stronger core community, we would be able to do some of those things that really need to be done. We need to start taking care of ourselves in a more politically organized way, I think.

PS: When a domestic abuse happens to an Asian Indian woman—there are a number of shelters and other systems in Minnesota set up, but they're not culturally specific—is there a reason why those women wouldn't go to any other shelters?

NM: They probably would.

PS: Oh, okay.

NM: They probably would if somebody was able to connect them there. The couple calls I've gotten in the last couple months, these are women who are fairly new here. They don't have much of a connection to the community. They're probably terrified, and they don't know the system that's available to them.

PS: All right. So are you a doorway to help them find their way into the system? How do you respond to those calls?

NM: It's very hard. It's very hard. The calls I get are not from that person, but from a friend of that person who's looking for support. They're often not very aware of what resources are available. Having some connection to the social services field through my work, I usually try to connect them through that, try to find some organization that they can go to. There's a growing number of people in the Allied Health Services who we can connect them to. But, again, the "we" isn't there; that's the point. There needs to be more of a support for that, and it's a difficult thing, because it's not the first thing we want to put our efforts into. You know, we think about promoting our community to the culture at large in ways that we're proud of. That's what we enjoy doing. That's the fun part of the work.

PS: And it's very public.

NM: It's very public, and it's something we can feel good about. This is the kind of work that everybody wants to say, "We don't have problems," or, "These are not the things that we have to focus too much on."

PS: So they're a little darker and a little more private.

NM: Yes. Yes, and therefore more difficult to serve.

PS: It would be pretty unlikely that you'd see an article in the India Association newsletter saying, "We helped out fifteen battered women this year?"

NM: [Sighs] Yes. Yes. You know, even as you say that, it gives me pause to think, are there fifteen battered women out there? I don't know. I would guess there probably are, given just the

sheer size of our population. I have no way . . . I don't know if anyone has any way of knowing what [unclear] issue is.

PS: It's a very private issue.

NM: Yes. I think one of our bigger issues right now in terms of something that the whole community faces is . . . Back when I was serving on the board, we were kind of seeing this backlash against immigrants, and that was something I really felt strongly [about], that we needed to just become more familiar to the community at large so that we wouldn't be seen as such an alien, foreign, odd entity. I am concerned that we might be on the verge of some more of that with the post 9-11 world we live in, that immigrant communities are going to be looked on in a different way more and more and more. We just need to continue to stay visible to the greater community that represents who we are. I don't think we have to change who we are, but we just need to be more involved in the community around us so that people see us as just another aspect of Minnesota.

PS: When you're out and about just in your personal life, do you have a sense that people who don't know anything about India would look at you, personally, and say, "Oh, there goes some Muslim woman?" or, "You're from the Middle East," or, "You're a terrorist," or whatever? Do you have that sense of being looked at with suspicion by people who can't sort you and say, "Oh, that's an Indian person," as opposed to an Iraqi or whatever?

NM: I have more of a sense of that. I think when I was little, I don't remember ever seeing another person who we would now call a minority, ever. There were none in my school. There were none in my neighborhood. Now I think the numbers have grown to the point—not just of Indians but of Hispanics, of Hmong, of Somali, all these different groups—where what used to be, or maybe still is, mainstream Minnesota, all those [are] lumped into one category. These are all the outsiders who are here. So I do have a sense now of suddenly being seen that way, even though I never have been that type of entity here. It's one of the things that troubles me a lot, that we've got a society now that's so divided in kind of an illogical way. You know, it doesn't make sense to lump Hispanics with Somalis or Indians with . . . whatever. Yet that's what I think most of Minnesota does now. That's part of why we need to do something about this. We need to be visible, vocal. We need to be responding to that in a positive way so that people aren't seeing us as so much the outsider and see what the contributions of Indians to Minnesota has been, because it's been tremendous.

PS: One of the things that I hear a lot when I'm out and about is, "We're outsourcing all of our IT [information technology] stuff to India, and then they bring in all these IT professionals from India. They work here for peanuts and then they go back and then they bring in another batch. They're stealing our jobs, and India is taking away all of our computer jobs." Do you have a sense of—? Is there a backlash coming about that?

NM: Well, we certainly are hearing a lot about that. I'm sure there's some validity to that. You know, I have friends here in the states who are Indian, and their kids who are first generation American are losing jobs. They're not getting jobs for that same reason, too, so it isn't as though

our community is immune from that. It's part of that complexity that's starting to emerge because of this global economic structure we live in. How that's going to be resolved, I don't know. I think there's no stopping that. I think there's a lot of good reason not to stop that. On the other hand, I think there's a huge confusion in America right now about what are national borders about? What is patriotism? Boy, those questions are so difficult right now. I think there's a reason for Americans to say, "Well, we need to take care of our jobs and our society. That's part of what it means to be patriotic." I think that's legitimate. But I'm not sure that we're always evaluating that question well, that we're not clear on what the evolution of jobs is going to be.

PS: Yes.

NM: It's complicated.

PS: It is complicated. [Chuckles] I have your name written down here as somebody who was part of the board when that organization was changing its name to India Association rather than India Club. Is that correct?

NM: That's right. I was very much involved in that.

PS: Tell me about that process. What happened? What motivated the name change? How did it go?

NM: Well, I always felt that India Club had a sense of kind of "who's in, who's out," you know, a sense that it wasn't open to everybody, that maybe you needed to be invited to attend a meeting, or maybe you needed to be invited to become a member. It seemed a little old language to me. I was very vocal about, you know, "Let's, [we] must change the name." I think it was the year I was vice president we started working on that. Yes, I remember the meeting where we threw around some different names. It immediately became clear; everybody was supportive of the idea of the India Association of Minnesota, which made a lot of sense. So we just kind of took a vote and went with it.

PS: All right. What were some of the other possibilities that came up?

NM: You know, I don't even remember. I remember that we toyed with trying to develop some others, and they were just clumsy or they didn't have that ring. We're really fond of acronyms.

[Laughter]

PS: Right.

NM: Indian organizations, for some reason, love acronyms. So Indian Association of Minnesota, IAM, was a nice acronym. That was helpful. I remember there were a few options, and I just don't remember what the others were. But this one was clearly the hands down favorite.

PS: So it was not difficult to make that change?

NM: No, I don't think there was any opposition, that I recall. I expected some. I expected people to be kind of attached to India Club. But I didn't sense that people weren't ready to let go of it.

PS: Was it pretty readily accepted by the larger membership and others in the Indian community, that this was the right thing to do?

NM: I think so. I mean I'm sure there were people who didn't want to see it happen, but I never really heard about it. I did hear people say, "Yes, it's time to change," somewhat maybe kind of resigned to it. But I don't recall that anyone said, "No, we can't change it."

PS: When you hear the word "club," it sounds kind of chummy, like pals, like an insider organization?

NM: Yes.

PS: Then, "association" had this more formal, "It's an institution," sort of sound to you?

NM: Yes, I guess it just sounded more an association of Indians, something formal and informal at the same time, so that it represented, I thought, more the sound of all the different Indian groups coming together.

PS: Are there any other organizations like the India Association in other states in the United States that you're aware of, that are going? Like the one that your father started in Florida, is that one still carrying on?

NM: That has also evolved, and it's huge now. It's absolutely huge. I'm sure there are other associations, and I'm sure they exist all over the U.S. I'm not connected with any of them. What really seems to be the more predominant sort of social group are the regional groups. Like we have the Orissa Society of the Americas and then there are state groups. Minnesota has a state branch of that. The Bengalis have theirs. The Gujaratis have theirs. The Maharastriyans have theirs. So people seem to have their linkages with those regional groups or linguistic groups, however you see them. Those, you know, seem to have tremendous organization across the country, where this is, like we spoke of, these layers of organizations that Indians are involved in. This, I think, is the only one in Minnesota that represents *all* Indians in Minnesota. I'm sure there must be parallel groups in other areas.

PS: You just aren't aware of them. So there's no national conference of India Associations? [Chuckles]

NM: I don't think so. I don't think so.

PS: All right. Have you been able to attract—well, you're not as involved anymore—recent immigrants, people who are coming here on short term work assignments? Are they getting involved with the India Association? Or more recent immigrants who've maybe been here for a couple years, has the organization been able to attract them into membership?

NM: You know, the end of my term with India Association, on the board we were starting to grapple with that issue, because that's when this wave of IT people, the technology people, were coming in. They're here temporarily. They're not as committed to the community. It's a different population, and I'm not really sure how we've connected with those people. I can't say. I know it was an issue that was arising in the mid-1990s, and I'm sure it's continuing to be an issue, because it's a big part of the population now.

PS: Right. Do most of them go back, after a certain point, to India?

NM: It varies quite a bit. They move around a lot. I think a lot of them go back. A lot of them end up staying. It just varies. One of the things I've seen is there's almost more of a desire now to go back to India, because middle class life in India has grown tremendously.

PS: Ah.

NM: Why not go back?

PS: Now you've got this chunk of money that you earned in America.

NM: Well, and actually, people in India are making very similar salaries.

PS: Okay.

NM: So the quality of life for people in India with an education is much improved. The infrastructure around them is much improved, so why not be near your family and in a climate you like?

PS: Right. Why live in Minnesota? I ask myself that frequently, "Why do I live here?"

[Laughter]

PS: Do those regional groups, the Orissa Samaj and the Bengali Samaj, are they attracting these temporary workers into their meetings and gatherings?

NM: Yes. Samaj, I think, is the Gujarat group. The Oriya Group is the Orissa Society of the Americas. Then there's a Minnesota branch. So just the names vary. Yes, at least speaking for the Oriya group, I think we are very welcoming to anybody who comes in. When we have our social gatherings, which are frequent, people come and attend those. There's a lot of, a *lot* of young families here now.

PS: When whoever the worker person is gets the job here, they bring their family with them?

NM: Sometimes, yes.

PS: Is it typically the men who have the job and then the wife and kids follow or is it sometimes the other, that the wife has the job and the men and kids follow?

NM: It's typically been the men who have the job and the wife and kids follow. But, in almost every case, the wife is a professional also, so they may both be in the field. It just varies quite a bit.

PS: We're almost at the end of the tape. I want to give you a chance to just tell me about anything that you want to tell me about, anything that I've not asked you about that you think is important to share with history.

NM: With history. You know, I love the principle of this organization. I think it's so important for us to have almost this union of all the different Indian interests. I think the principles that we had before are just so extremely valuable now, that we include all the different aspects of people connected to Indian society here, and that we do a lot of outreach. That's just got to be at the core of what we do.

I was looking through some old newsletters before you came, and I found that at our first annual dinner, I think we had Senator Steve Morris speak. He had just come back from a trip to India, where a handful of state senators from around the country had gone to visit India. This was just at the emergence of that technology boom, and he came and spoke at our annual dinner. It was very interesting to hear how his perspective of India had changed. Our second annual dinner, which was the year that I was president, we had a professor from Macalester, James Lane, speak. He's written a number of books on India, and he just recently has kind of had a huge controversy around some of his writing. In India there was kind of small riot, actually, surrounding the publication of his most recent book [Shivaji: Hindu king in Islamic India]. It's been kind of a sad situation. Also, at that same dinner, Senator Paul Wellstone was there. He has an enormous spot in Minnesota history and has always been really supportive of immigrants in Minnesota in general, but certainly very connected to the Indian community. He was a great supporter.

I just think keeping those connections, those ties, that openness with people around us and continually bringing the youth into this organization is going to be a challenge for us. I don't think it's going to be easy, but enormously important.

PS: Okay. We're right at the end of the tape, so just perfect timing. Thank you very much for your time today.

NM: Well, thank you, Polly.