Sarat Mohapatra Narrator

Polly Sonifer Minnesota Historical Society Interviewer

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PS: This is Polly Sonifer interviewing Sarat Mohapatra on June 25, 2005.

Good afternoon. Thanks for meeting with me.

SM: Good afternoon. Thanks for coming.

PS: How are you today?

SM: I'm fine, after a very hectic day today.

PS: Ready to sit a little bit and be quiet?

SM: No. Actually, after this I go to a graduation party, and then from there I go to friend's house. When I come back, it's going to be probably eleven, twelve o'clock. [Chuckles]

PS: Okay. Well, let's start out with a little bit of history about yourself. First of all, tell us what part of India you're from and what your family was like that you grew up in there.

SM: I came from the eastern part of India. The state I came from . . . the name of the state is Orissa. I was actually born in a city called Cuttack. Cuttack used to be, in the past, the capitol of Orissa, but is no more. The capitol of Orissa is Bhubaneswar.

PS: Tell me about your family that you grew up in.

SM: My parents, actually both of them, were born in Cuttack. My father was from a village called Banki. My mother actually was born in Cuttack. My father was working for the Department of Agriculture. He was an accountant, and my mother was a housewife. We were seven children: five sisters and two brothers.

PS: That's a lot of children.

SM: So it was actually a big family.

PS: And a lot of girls.

SM: That's true, yes. Therefore, I am sensitive to girls. [Chuckles] We grew up in Cuttack for some time. Not all seven were born in Cuttack. My father got transferred to Bhubaneswar, which is the current capitol of Orissa. But in Bhubaneswar, of course, all of us were there, the seven children. All my sisters . . . actually, four of them are married now. My brother is working and all my sisters are working. My mother was a housewife. She took care of us and took *great* care of us. She's a wonderful lady, although she didn't have a great education. But she is probably more educated than most moms I have seen, so I'm very proud of her. My father, actually, was the only earning member in the family. We were not very rich. We are mediocre families, but we had enough to eat and live. My father made sure that everybody gets a good education, so all my brothers and sisters are well educated. My sisters and my brother that married, they're working in different parts. All my sisters are close by to my house.

PS: Here in Minnesota?

SM: No, in Bhubaneswar, in India. So they live within a five-mile radius from my house. They also take good care of my mother now, because my father passed away last year. To give you a little background, my grandfather was a priest for the king, under the British rule. So therefore there was an inherited title called Rajguru. Guru being actually the teacher, and Raj means the king, so Rajguru means "the teacher of the king." But he was actually the king's priest and took care of a lot of things in the village, especially a lot of priestly duties. My father, although he was working for the government, he was also trying to do some of the duties that the Rajguru family does in the village. My father actually had a brother who is also retired now. He's staying in the village. My mom and one of my sisters stay in the house in Bhubaneswar and all my sisters are close by.

PS: So you're the only that left India?

SM: I'm the only one who left India, yes.

PS: Tell me about your own education.

SM: I did my high school in Bhubaneswar. Actually, I started my high school in Cuttack, but when my father moved I finished my high school in Bhubaneswar. I went to college for one year, and then I went to the engineering college after that. I spent five years in engineering college and got my bachelor's in metallurgical engineering. After that, I went to IIT-Kanpur for my Master's. By the way, IIT stands for Indian Institute of Technology. At that time, there used to be five IITs in India. These are all institutions sponsored by various countries. IIT-Kanpur, the school I went to do a Master's was sponsored by the United States, through the PL 480 Program, I believe. I finished my Master's in IIT-Kanpur. I was trying to come to the United States. I got, actually, several scholarships for my Ph.D. program. So I came to the University of Southern California [USC] to do my Ph.D.

PS: How old were you at that time?

SM: I came to USC in 1972, so I was twenty-three.

PS: Did you come by yourself?

SM: I came by myself.

PS: Were you married at the time?

SM: No, I wasn't married. I came to this country with forty bucks in my shoes.

PS: Wow!

SM: We are not allowed to carry more than eight bucks. Although I had my assistantship, I didn't have any money to support me in the beginning. My sister found, actually, forty bucks from a bank. I was kind of nervous at that time, so I came with forty bucks inside my shoes. When I came to this country, when I joined the school, I borrowed some money, at least to get going. Then I started getting my scholarships, so I lived with it.

PS: Wow! Why was this restriction? You could only bring in eight dollars?

SM: There is a saying, "Around the world in eight dollars." For some reason, there was a lot of restrictions in the currency, especially this currency, I believe. I don't know, but I have seen a movie called "Around the World in Eight Dollars." You can only get eight bucks to go around . . I cannot really give you . . . I don't really remember, but all that I know was there was a restriction. You have to do a special application or something like that to carry more foreign currency.

PS: That was American money? You could bring in American money?

SM: Yes

PS: Could you bring in Indian money?

SM: I believe you can, but, at that time, it was really not of much value.

PS: So there was no point to it. [Chuckles]

SM: In their money, I could have gotten probably. It just worked out. When I came to California, the host family picked me up from the airport, and then the next day, they put me in a hotel. The hotel was five bucks a night.

PS: Okay. [Chuckles]

SM: From then, after a couple of days, I joined the school. So, after that, things worked out. I was in USC until 1976. In the middle of 1976, I finished my Ph.D. program.

PS: By then, you were twenty-seven years old, twenty-eight years old?

SM: 1976. Twenty-seven, yes.

PS: How is that you decided to stay in the United States?

SM: I was trying to decide what I need to do. The job opportunities in India was not really that great, especially at that time. Also, I wanted to support my family back home.

PS: This is your parents?

SM: My parents when they retire. Actually, I, more or less took care of myself through scholarships and all that. In India, in those days, you cannot really work outside to earn a living, just like here. I was deciding what I needed to do. I was really not planning to live in this country. In 1976, when I graduated, I was not looking for a job. I was looking for a postdoctoral fellowship. I got a number of postdoctoral fellowships at that time. I got a postdoctoral fellowship which I did apply for. "He's just [unclear]," somebody said. "Well, Professor [unclear] has a student. We're looking for a post doctorate fellowship." The boss, Sigurd Wagoner, he called my boss that he would like to take me as a postdoctoral fellow. Then he called me after that, and I joined Bell Labs in Homedale, New Jersey, to do my postdoc. Then, after that, my postdoc was ending in a year and a half, roughly. I was thinking [about] what I need to do. I said, "Well, I'm going to either go back or try to get some more experience in schools." So I was applying to various places. [unclear] I got, actually, a number of fellowships to either teach or do research. I got a Humbul Fellowship in Germany. I was asked to do another postdoc at the University of Berne in Switzerland.

PS: So you would get paid during these postdoctoral things?

SM: Yes. Then I had, actually, another post-doctoral opportunity at Oxford. I was kind of debating whether I need to do something or I need to look for a job. I was trying to look for both, in fact. Somehow or other, even though I have accepted a couple of fellowships, I got actually a job in Boston. I accepted the job in Boston.

PS: What company was that for?

SM: That was called Coulter Systems Corporation. That was actually my first job in a company. I was a postdoc in Bell Labs. So it was my first job. I stayed there 1977 till 1980. One of my colleagues at Coulter said, "Do you want to go to 3M?" The company I was in was not doing great. I said, "Sure. If there's a chance, I'd certainly like to apply." He came from 3M to Coulter because his father-in-law had a catering business in Boston. But he was a Ph.D. in physics. So he always used to boast, "I'm the only Ph.D. in physics who has a catering job part time. [Chuckles] He sent my résumé to the director at 3M. It just worked out, so I was called, and then I joined 3M. So starting from Coulter, my first job, then I went to 3M in 1980, and in 1996, the Medical Imaging Division and a couple of divisions . . . Actually, they have spun off to two companies: 3M and Imation. The Medical Imaging Division was a part of Imation. In 1998, Kodak bought

the Medical Imaging Division, and then I became part of Kodak. So, basically, I sat in the same chair and changed three companies.

PS: [Laughter]

SM: 3M, Imation, and Kodak.

PS: Not bad

SM: It has become, actually, a natural process until now. With 3M, Imation, and Kodak, it has been twenty-five years for me in Minnesota.

PS: Okay. Somewhere along the way you got married?

SM: Yes. In 1980, I went back to India in January. It was in January. I believe. I was trying to in the society of the get my green card. I had to go to India to get my green card at that time. At that time, I got married in India . . . February 10, 1980.

PS: Was this an arranged marriage?

SM: It was arranged marriage, yes.

PS: Tell me how that worked for you.

SM: How it worked . . . There was, actually, an intermediary person who knew both families, like a middle man. So he knew my parents and he knew my wife's parents. He proposed about the possibility of the marriage.

PS: And you were interested in having an arranged marriage at this time?

SM: Oh, yes.

PS: You wanted it?

SM: That's the way I grew up, actually, so I was okay with it. I didn't really look at a lot of girls. I just went to my wife's house. My parents asked me, "Do you want to marry?" I said, "That's fine." So that was great.

PS: How long did you know each other before you got married?

SM: It was seven days . . . ten days.

PS: How many times did you get together during those days? Once, twice?

SM: Nothing.

PS: You never saw each other at all before the marriage?

SM: No. That's not tradition. That never used to be tradition in India at that time. Now it is different. But in those days, you see the girl, and then until the marriage, you don't.

PS: So you met her one time?

SM: Just one time.

PS: What gave you the confidence that this was the right girl? She's the only one you met, right?

SM: The only one. You know, any marriage is sometimes a gamble. Even though you might see somebody for ten years, five years, no guarantee. The way it happens is you try to marry in a similar level and family background and all that. So I knew a little bit about her family background. If people actually are in a similar status and strata in society, community, that's the first thing you look at in the marriage. It's been twenty-five years. [Chuckles]

PS: It's working!

SM: It's working.

PS: Prior to that time, you just weren't quite ready to get married, and your family wasn't giving you any push?

SM: Actually, my family was not pushing me hard, but they knew that I should get married, but I was in this country. I spent four years, more or less close to four years, in school, and then did my postdoc and worked in a company. During that time when I left Bell Labs, I was trying to apply for my green card. I wanted to finish that process before I get married. It's a legal process, so I just wanted to finish it up. Yes, there was a push, but I didn't do it.

PS: And your parents were okay with your staying in the United States, or did they prefer that you came back to India?

SM: My parents, they would always like me to go back to India. You know, it's like any parent; they don't really like to see their kids stay 10,000 miles . . . [Chuckles]

PS: Right.

SM: Actually, it was my maternal grandfather, my mom's father, when I left India, when I got the assistantship to come to study here, he was opposed to it. He said, "Your father is getting old and you shouldn't really go at this time, because you're going to take care of him. Nobody is going to take care of him." Normally, you know, the son takes care of his parents.

PS: Right.

SM: He was strongly opposed to it. My mom actually wanted me to go. I told my grandfather that I'll come back in three years. He said, "Okay. You come back in three years." I finished four years, but before I finished my Ph.D. program, my grandfather passed away.

PS: So then you didn't have to keep your promise?

SM: I didn't keep my promise.

PS: [Laughter]

SM: Then, of course, I tried. [Chuckles] I wanted to go back, but somehow, something told me that I should stay in this country.

PS: When you first came to California, was there a large Indian community there?

SM: Actually, the Indian community was not really that big, especially when you are a student. You are very busy. I knew people from my state, from Orissa. You get called upon and all that. Then I had, also, my student community. There are actually quite a number of Indians with families. You really don't have a lot of time when you're going to school. My time was, more or less, eight o'clock in the morning to one, two, three, four o'clock, five o'clock in the morning.

PS: Studying?

SM: Studying and doing my lab work and all that. I used to be called "Midnight Cowboy." I am, basically, in the lab taking care of stuff. [Chuckles] You really don't have a lot of time. The weekends and all of that, but then, weekends, also, we worked. I didn't really socialize a lot with the Indian community. But there was a core group of people from my state. From time to time we'd go to picnic or something like that. Otherwise, it was the student community.

PS: So it didn't really matter where the students were from?

SM: No, it didn't matter, actually.

PS: Then you went to Boston. What was that like in Boston?

SM: Boston? Tell me a little bit more.

PS: Oh, was there an Indian community in Boston? How did you connect up with people in Boston? Or did you just work again all the time?

SM: No. I mean,I worked, but in Boston it was a little different in that sense . . . it was a smaller company I joined. I can stay [until] six o'clock, seven o'clock, but I can't really stay long enough. When I was in New Jersey, I used to stay pretty late, also. In Boston, I knew a few people, so sometimes on weekends I did a little tennis or something like that. Boston is close to New

Hampshire. I loved New Hampshire, so I'll go down there for hiking or something like that. It was okay.

PS: Once you came to Minnesota, what did you find in Minnesota? This was 1980?

SM: 1980, I came to Minnesota.

PS: What was the Indian community like in Minnesota in 1980?

SM: Hmmm . . . Indian community in Minnesota was very small. When I came in, there were probably eight, ten people that I knew. Of course, realize that when I came to Minnesota, I was married. I got married towards the end of my life in Boston. Then, after I got married, my wife joined me after a couple of months. She came the end of May, and in July we moved to Minnesota. We met a number of folks. I can't really say where exactly we started meeting. We love people, so I think we probably . . . Our tendency is to try to find people who speak the same language first. We found, actually, six, seven people at that time. Then my sphere kind of grew, knowing a lot more people. Minnesota, except the cold . . . My wife didn't see, actually, snow before, so it was the first time when she came to Minnesota. She found snow for the first time.

PS: Did that give her a little concern?

SM: Well, she didn't know. She just called me when I'm doing work. [Laughter] She said, "It's snowing." I said, "Yes, of course." [Laughter] I was familiar with it. When I came to New Jersey, I saw snow for the first time. The degree of winter became more and more when we leave New Jersey to Boston to Minnesota.

It has slowly evolved, my acquaintances, and of course I was involved in a lot of things, so I tend to know more people.

PS: You have two children?

SM: Yes.

PS: They were born probably shortly after you got married, the first one?

SM: Yes. My first one was born in 1981, May. My second one was born after four years, 1985, February. They kept us busy for a while. My wife didn't work, because the kids were small. She stayed home. She stayed until they were actually, more or less, ten, twelve years old before she started going to school. Then, of course, the kids grew up, so it just worked out fine.

PS: Yes. Sometimes, after ten years old, you don't have much influence on them at all.

[Laughter]

SM: That's true.

PS: Now tell me about how you got involved with the India Association [of Minnesota – IAM].

SM: I was actually in SILC. I was teaching in the School of India for Languages and Culture. I don't know whether you're familiar with SILC?

PS: Yes.

SM: SILC is a school where they teach a lot of different Indian languages, and also they teach social studies and art and cooking and yoga. A lot of things they do. I got into SILC because a friend of mine started a class in Oriya, my state language, and said, "Why don't you teach?" This friend of mine, he starts and then gives it to me to go ahead. [Chuckles] That is how, actually, I got involved in a lot of things. I started teaching Oriya in SILC. Then, I think it was the next year or so, my kids joined, and I was teaching social studies. I was fairly involved in SILC.

Neena Gada once told me, "Sarat, you become the General Chair for the Festival of Nations from India Association." I said, "Well, I haven't done it. It's a big job." She said, "No, you can do it." I said, "Okay, that's fine." I took that responsibility as general chair for the Festival of Nations from the IAM. General chair takes care of all the five different activities. I was not really part of the IAM at that time.

PS: Do you remember what year that was?

SM: That was, I don't know, 1992, 1993, something like that, I believe . . . maybe 1993. Then, in 1994, I was asked to be treasurer for the India Association. Guptan Nambudiripad was the president, became the president. He said, "Why don't you become the treasurer?" I said, "Okay." That's how I became involved, started my IAM activities. Then, of course, after treasurer I was asked to be vice president of the IAM. Then the following year I became the president of IAM. I stayed fairly active until 1998, being part of the board. I'm still a part of the India Association in a different capacity. So that's how I stayed in the IAM. I'm actually still a part of the IAM in a different role.

PS: During those years that you were actively on the board, how many hours per week or per month did you devote to those activities?

SM: I'll tell you that 1997 was a very critical year for me, because we had a lot of activities that year. How many hours I worked per week? At least, I would say, probably three, four, five hours a week, something like that. In 1997, I spent a tremendous amount of time, since we organized the 50th Independence Day of India. I'll tell you, I must have spent, in 1997, maybe something like at least twenty, thirty hours a week.

PS: Wow!

SM: It was a great event. I think probably there are two important events that I have spearheaded in IAM. One was the 50th Independence Day celebration. We included all the Indian and Muslim

communities. It was a big event, a very successful event. I did a lot of stuff for this. We created a souvenir for the event. If it's not there in the History Center [of the Minnesota Historical Society], this will probably go to that.

PS: So you want to donate that?

SM: Yes.

PS: All right. Excellent.

SM: This was, in the 1997, a very busy year for me, in addition to all the other activities of the IAM. Vasant Sukhatme was the president prior to me, and I was vice president under him. In 1998, Vasant was out of the IAM Board and he said, "Sarat, wouldn't it be nice to have an Asian Indian community directory?" I said, "That is a good idea." He managed to get \$1,500 from [I think it was] the Asia Foundation. I forget. I spent a tremendous amount of time for the Asian Indian Community Directory. Then I generated, through fundraising, another at least, \$4,500 from advertising. We created the very first Asian Indian Community Directory. It has the names of various sponsor organizations and a brief history of the IAM and all that. I don't think it is a history, but it has different organizations. We probably have about 2,800 names or something like that in the directory. This is 1998-1999. It was one of the bigger, or significant amount of time that I put in in bringing this together. Vasant and myself, we took some help from another person who put that in the software and all that. This is the other one that was done. It also took a significant amount of my time.

[Tape interruption]

SM: So we spent quite some time. I collected a lot of directory information from various communities and then did a lot of fundraising. Then the first Asian Indian Community Directory was published in October 1998. This also took a significant amount of my time. There were a number of other people Vasant and then there was another person, a software person, who took all the data and put in the format. I did a lot of publicity and all that. So this is another bigger event out of all the things that you do. These are probably two bigger events that I have been involved in and spent a lot of time at.

PS: Those would be the two things that you feel are the biggest achievements of the time that you were—?

SM: My achievements in India Association, I would say, probably. I mean, I've been involved in a lot of other community activities. Another much bigger event was a National Convention I arranged for the Oriya group; Orissa is the place I come from. Every year there is a convention of all the people throughout the U.S. That happened in 1995. I spent probably twenty, thirty percent of my time in trying to organize, because I was a convenor for the convention. Beyond that, I've been a treasurer for MAIDA, Minnesota Asian Indian Democratic Association. I just resigned from this job this year. I've been active, actually, in other community activities.

PS: As you think about your work in the India Association of Minnesota, the projects that caught your attention were primarily these two publications and celebrating the anniversary of Indian Independence? Fifty years is a pretty significant amount of time.

SM: Yes.

PS: Was it your idea to have the Freedom Celebration, the fifty years?

SM: This was my idea. My idea was to have this, and, also, the title Freedom Fifty and all that's my idea. I was immensely involved in this project. It was a successful event. Therefore, I started with the publication to all the events. I took a lot of help from a lot of community people. We had a display of all the various organizations at the event.

PS: Where was it held?

SM: It was held in Park Center High School, I believe. I forget the name.

PS: How many people attended?

SM: Seven or eight hundred people.

PS: Seven or eight hundred?

SM: Yes. It was a pretty huge crowd. Hubert Humphrey came. He was the keynote speaker.

PS: Hubert Humphrey, Jr?

SM: Junior. Then I invited Vineeta Sawkar, who is the Channel 5 weekend anchor, I believe, now. She was the MC [master of ceremonies] for the event. Paul Wellstone couldn't make it, but he sent somebody on his behalf. If I'm not wrong, I think probably, maybe that is the year that they declared August 15 as the India Day in Minnesota or something like that—at least on a political basis.

PS: That was a pretty big deal.

SM: Oh yes, it was a significant amount of effort. I think it took a lot of my time.

PS: Did it get coverage in local news?

SM: It got coverage. It had some TV coverage. It had some newspaper coverage. So it got, actually, coverage on a couple different fronts.

PS: I bet it helped that you had a news anchor.

SM: News anchor, yes. [Chuckles]

PS: In the years that you've been involved in the India Association, what are the sorts of changes that you've seen either in the community or in the way that the India Association of Minnesota responds to the community?

SM: Through the years, I think since my time, the Association actually has become bigger in the sense that they do more things now. In fact, India Association . . . although it cannot say itself is an umbrella organization, but if you look at all the events that take place [within] India Association, it is actually going beyond normal regional groups of India. There are more people. More people actually participate. There are a lot of different things happening in the India Association now. I just read an article recently, I saw it on the Internet. At the end it says that India Association has become a more central organization trying to look at a lot of different things. What the India Association does beyond . . . how does it take care of the . . . You know, in 1972 or something, when the Association was formed, it had a few people, a few Indians at that time, so it was actually more of a social event. Over the years and now, [there are] about 20,000, 25,000 Indians are in the community.

Also, another thing that was happening: there are more regional groups. Like I am from Orissa, some from Gujarat, some from Bengal. So there are more regional groups now. Those groups have fairly bigger groups. For example, Kerala community might be three hundred people or something. Gujarat community is pretty big. Bengali community is pretty big. Orissa community is not that big, but still, we are looking at a hundred people. They have their own get-togethers, gatherings, social/cultural activities. So India Association has to think beyond, because people's needs are met, so they are to see how to bring the Indian community together.

India Association also has been effective in trying to do a lot of fundraising for the special calamities that happen in India. For example, Orissa had a devastating cyclone. So I go to India Association. You actually become the ... people are going to donate to this cyclone through IAM, [unclear] IAM cyclone, this Orissa cyclone fund. When I was there, actually, we had a person who died on the thin ice. At that time, people came to me and said, "Open a fund so that people can donate. It's tax deductible." India Association has managed charitable money. Although the cyclone fund was not great, but if you look at the Gujarat earthquake, that's a half a million dollars.

PS: A half million?

SM: From Minnesota.

PS: That's a lot.

SM: That is the amount of cash going through India Association. IAM has managed more things. It's continuously struggling how to bring all the communities together. The people . . . a lot of things happening in their lives. So India Association is trying to say, "Okay, what else [is there that] we can do to bring the community together?" That has become a centerpiece. In fact, right now I'm part of the Trustee Advisory Council of India Association. We have started looking at

what the India Association Board members cannot do because they have some specific tasks they have to do. Trustee Advisory Council will be looking at long-range planning, looking at auditing, looking at various other tasks that the board cannot do.

The Indian community is much bigger. India Association has to also find ways to meet the demands of the community, whether it's immigration or trying to bring them together or trying to cater the needs or first call for help. I was actually the contact person, first call for help—my name must be still there—for the last seven years. I get calls that they need some translator or something like that. If I cannot translate the language, I have to find somebody. Or somebody needs, actually, a presentation in the school about India. So they come to India Association. So India Association has a lot of roles, but not that many volunteers. Everybody is so busy, so it's a struggle. It's going to be a struggle for them to bring people together . . . more [than] they can actually leverage than they can actually do.

PS: With regard to the natural disasters that happen, it makes sense, it's logical that you would attend to natural disasters in India only, not to something that happened in another country?

SM: No, we do look at tsunami relief. Tsunami also is there . . . India Association has a fund for tsunami relief. Anything that happens around, for example, the September 11, [2001, U.S. terrorist attacks] stuff, India Association gets involved. They become part of the bigger local group, how to bring different communities together. At least, they are part of the bigger group themselves.

PS: What role did the India Association play after September 11?

SM: September 11, they actually became part of the—I forget the exact name—mass gathering, trying to participate in the mass gathering event, trying to raise some funds to help out the victims. That's the kind of thing that they do.

PS: Who did you contribute those raised funds to for the 9-11?

SM: I don't really know, because I was not involved directly. But that's the kind of thing they do.

PS: You mentioned earlier that someone had fallen through the thin ice. Was that an Indian person that fell through?

SM: It was an Indian person.

PS: Here in Minnesota?

SM: In Minnesota.

PS: Okay.

SM: That was probably sometime in 1997, I think, when I was the president, most likely. This person was on a lake and the ice was thin, and so he slipped and then he died, of course.

PS: Oh, he died?

SM: Yes, so we had to raise . . . India Association [was] approached by the community to raise some money. So India Association got involved. We created a separate account, and raised money. We raised \$5,000, \$6,000, I believe.

PS: And that was for the family of this person?

SM: This person, actually, was a bachelor. He was with his girlfriend. We had to raise some money to send his body to India. I think they tried to create a little chair and a tree at some park or something like that.

PS: A memorial?

SM: A memorial.

PS: All right. How does the India Association always hear about these things? Someone needs to approach the India Association?

SM: That's right.

PS: So somebody who knew of this person—?

SM: This guy belongs to the local community, the state he comes from in India. Let's say he was a Kerala person; then he's part of that community. So when something happens, then people of that community take the initiative up with India Association, and the India Association follows through and carries out the task. The same thing when Orissa cyclone happened. There actually were 100,000 people died. Then I went to India Association [and] said that we'd like to open a fund for people to donate. When I started, I said, "I'm going to build a couple of schools for people who are under low economic status in some parts of India." I go to India Association, I said, "We'll just open a fund. I'll let people actually donate to the fund. Then we'll donate." We raised \$25,000 that way. I am the party involved in trying to approach India Association, and they try to take care of those things.

PS: How does the India Association decide which things they decide to support or back and which ones they say, "No, thanks. That's really not our job to make sure that that happens or to open an account for that?"

SM: India Association has to see, first of all, the legitimacy. If it's a political thing, it is, "No, I won't do it." If it's social/cultural . . . If you say, "I want to have a dance program," or something like that, India Association won't respond to that. There are other organizations who actually would be better suited to take care of that. So anything social/cultural stuff, India Association

normally responds, and depending on what they can handle. There is only one treasurer who will take care of it. So we are pushing for another co-treasurer. It's something that they can only handle certain things. They will look at legitimacy. They ought to have a trust that this is going to go to the right place. They try to look at some of these things to decide what they want to take on.

PS: Have there been some projects that they've said, "No, this just doesn't fit with what we're up to?" Can you think of any examples of that?

SM: You know, honestly, I haven't, to my knowledge, heard of anything they have said, "No." But then, of course, I haven't really been in the inner working of the board all the time. I attend some meetings, but I'm not there in all meetings, so I don't really know.

PS: Even when you were the president, there wasn't anything that came along that you said, "No, this just doesn't—?"

SM: No. There was actually nothing that they said, "No."

PS: Okay.

SM: In fact, there is this PIC group, Parents of Indian Children. They wanted IAM to give some money for certain events, I believe. They came to the India Association, and, in essence, took care of a small amount. There was a discussion, "Should we support or not?" But it went to the board. I haven't really seen anything that has been rejected, but there might have been some. I don't know.

PS: What did you get out of being involved in the India Association?

SM: This is one of the organizations I love, and that is why I have been active in this organization for so long, whether active on the board or part of the Trustee Advisory Committee or something. I consider it an umbrella organization, because it's not just focused on one group of people. It actually focuses on a large group of people. It actually supports a lot of things that I personally like. It supports a 55-Plus Club. That's a group that was formed by Sudhansu Misra. It's one of the organizations under India Association. It supports PIC. It supports many different organizations. It actually gets members from all different organizations. There is a twenty-one member board. So India Association likes to have at least, as much as possible, a member of each different group, whether it's the regional group or it can be other associations.

It also supports a lot of activities that Indians do. It caters the needs. It is to support organizations like Asian Women's Association. I talked about PIC, Parents of Indian Children. There used to be a member from the PIC in India Association. Also, it focuses more on social/cultural aspects. So far, we have rejected the India Association to be a political organization, because we have a political organization called MAIDA, Minnesota Asian Indian Democratic Association. I was a treasurer, I said before, for that group. It's a social/cultural group. It has the charter to bring all

the communities together. It does a lot of things that . . . I've been involved personally in a lot of different activities. I think it's a broader cause. So that's what I like.

PS: That's the draw for you.

What challenges do you see coming in the future for the India Association?

SM: Coming in the future, it is . . . Indian community is bigger. As the community is bigger, there is bound to be a lot of difference in opinion. How to really handle this thing is going to be the challenge. It's not going to be as easy. When the committee in the IAM started in 1972, they were much smaller organization. There was really not too many regional groups. It was a small community. Now, when you look at it, actually the community is growing over the years. Now it's 25,000 people probably, I think, and it's still growing. So there's bound to be some differences of opinion in certain matters that the IAM does. India Association has to kind of play a slightly different role trying to make sure that . . . It has to be a bit more diplomatic in how it handles things.

PS: Okay. Do you see that the Indian community itself, in addition to getting bigger in numbers, is it getting diverse in different ways?

SM: The Indian community is diverse in different ways.

PS: What are some of the ways you see?

SM: Well, if you look at Indian community, the Indian community is an affluent community in the Twin Cities, no doubt. You find, actually, there are a lot of arts and culturally oriented organizations. There's Ragamala, the Katha Dance Theater, and of course these are actually looking at the . . . Then, of course, you have Indian Music Society. On top of that, you find there is the Sangam Radio Program through KFAI, I believe. Then, now, there is something called Fahrenheit [Nightclub], which is actually a youth dance club. Now, of course, you find there is a TV program that comes every week, once, about an hour or something like that. So if you look at the community, it actually has a lot of different activities.

And from an Indian community standpoint, there is also more diversity because the regional communities, are getting bigger and bigger. From an activity standpoint, there are people who are not just actually working here for a company. There are independent business groups and all of that. Plus, of course, as you know, we have at least one person in the Senate [Satveer Choudhary]. The Indian community is gaining momentum. It's diverse because there have been a lot of different things, more spread out. It can be good and bad, the bad in the sense that everybody has, actually, a certain amount of time. So if you want to organize an event and want everybody to participate, you may be disappointed, because everybody cannot really come and you cannot see a bigger crowd. So there is more diversity in the community.

PS: Let's talk a little bit about the person in the Senate, Satveer Choudhary. He's a Democrat, right?

SM: That's right.

PS: I'm guessing that MAIDA, the Democratic Association, had a good deal to do with him being elected?

SM: MAIDA got started probably supporting Satveer Choudhary in the platform.

PS: Right.

SM: The MAIDA origin is, more or less, around that time. Again, of course, you know that was started by Ram Gada and a few others.

PS: Within the diversity of the Indian community, there are probably a fair number of people who are Republicans as well as Democrats?

SM: There are a lot of people Republicans also.

PS: Do those Republican Indians see Satveer as a prize, even though he's a Democrat? I mean, are they just as proud of him being elected, even though he's a Democrat, or would they rather have seen a person who is a Republican but not an Indian win the seat? Do you understand the question?

SM: I understand the question. I think the community is proud of Satveer Choudhary being, actually, part of the political process. There is a Republican Association also, Indian Republican. It got started probably by people like Gotal Khanna. I haven't seen a lot of activity coming. Making the answer short, I think people feel very happy that there is a person in the Senate from the Indian community. Although there are Republicans, I haven't seen that they would like to put somebody in the Republican contest or something. I haven't seen that. But it's a fair thing to ask. I haven't heard.

PS: Yes. I was just wondering if somebody was in the area that had the opportunity to vote for or against Satveer, if they were a Republican, would they vote against Satveer because he was a Democrat?

SM: That is a possibility because, you know, people have party preferences. So if there was a Republican candidate, the Republicans probably going to vote for [George W.] Bush, but they are not going to vote for a Democratic candidate.

PS: Right.

SM: There is reason for me to believe that if there is a candidate who is taking the Republican platform, they're probably going to vote for him.

PS: And vote against someone who is Indian. It's a question of loyalty at some level.

SM: Yes, it's a question of loyalty.

PS: Am I more Indian or am I more Republican?

SM: That's right, yes.

PS: It's an interesting thought.

SM: It hasn't happened yet, but we'll see. [Chuckles]

PS: We don't know how people vote, because the voting process here is silent. The Indian community is getting more diverse here. To what do you attribute the long-term life of this organization? It's completely volunteer. It takes, as you've noticed, a lot of time for people to be involved. Why does it sustain itself? What's the secret to it living a long time?

SM: You know, it's such a good cause. If I look at my time to now, I find much better participation. In fact, a lot of people now . . . I didn't really particularly care whether I became the president of the India Association. I just wanted to work. But now, actually, there are people who would like to become president of the IAM.

PS: So there's some competition for the leadership role?

SM: Believe it. There is going to be. That is silently happening. In the beginning, there is people who like to just volunteer and try to look at the bigger and broader cause and not really anything to be gained out of it, but it is just something that we feel that we like to do it. Now, I think people feel that India Association is an important organization. They like to be a significant part of it.

I'm sure it's going to sustain itself because one thing the India Association is pushing hard is to recruit a lot of younger people, although they don't have that many at this point. If I look, there might be one or two people who are second generation. Can it sustain for a longer time? I really don't know. Some of us, actually, always think, "How long is it going to go?" The Trustee Advisory Committee completed a mission statement of the IAM. On of the mission statements is to talk about how it will really be much more inclusive, not only for Indian community but also for the local community. We always have some people from the local community. In my time, I've seen, I think, people from PIC. There was a lawyer, actually, at one time, who was of significant help to us. India Association is going to thrive for quite some time. How long that process is going to be, I don't know. I'm thinking maybe another fifteen years, twenty years. Beyond that I'm not sure, because the second generation, they're going to make it survive or won't worry about it and IAM might disappear. It's a good question. A lot of us think about it, but we don't really get too concerned. We'll see how, as it goes, maybe it's going to take a different shape and it will have a different mission or something like that. I think it probably will last at least another fifteen, twenty years.

PS: Right. So there's two kinds of changes to the Indian community. There would be those young people who were born here of your generation who are in their twenties now, late twenties in some cases. Then there's also the people who are immigrating from India still, who could be in their twenties, coming to have their first job or go to school, or the relatives of those who are already here, who could be any age. They could be seventy-five. That's a lot of difference to bring together.

SM: That's right.

PS: I would imagine that the needs of a twenty-two-year old who's going to the university are very different from a twenty-two-year old who was raised here and grew up being very American.

SM: That's right.

PS: Which group do you see is going to sustain the India Association?

SM: My feeling is, in the beginning—although we need to really try to think and organize ourselves differently—the people who are the younger generation who are coming from India. They, probably, might have a stronger role in sustaining the organization.

PS: Because they feel more connected to India?

SM: More connected to India. But, you know, there are actually a lot of kids who are growing up, second generation kids, they also have a lot of understanding about India. So it's going to be a mix sort of the two, I'm thinking. For example, my kids were born here, and they know Indian language. They know Indian customs, and, also, they know a certain part of Indian history, and they know Indian culture. They try to balance, actually, the bi-cultural issue. But they can also be equal contributors, and sometimes I find, actually, some of these kids have much better Indian values than many of kids I see coming now. As you go on, I have a feeling that because of the connectedness with India, the younger generation coming from India will have a bigger role to play in the beginning, in the first phase. Then there is going to be also the kids who are second generation kids who have stronger ties with India. They probably will try to play an equal role. The only problem is some of the kids, second generation kids, they go out of Minnesota. So they need to really linger on in Minnesota to make a contribution to the IAM. It's going to be some of the two, but I somehow feel that the generation that's coming, younger generation from India, might have a bit of a bigger role.

PS: Okay. Now there might be some second generation Indian kids born in the U.S. who grew up in Chicago or Boston or Los Angeles who take a job in Minnesota.

SM: Yes.

PS: How would you capture those kids and get them? They wouldn't be kids at that point, but collage graduates doing their first or second job, career, professional job. How would you find those young people or would you wait for them to come to you?

SM: It's a very tough job. I don't really know. There is no best way to do this. It's going to be through an activity. Let's say we having India Association picnic for the Independence Day. We have the Festival of Nations. We have an annual day that happens every October, near the Gandhi Jayanti [birth anniversary]. We have more formal occasions, like annual dinner, which happens at the Republic Day of India on January 26. These are some of the events they are probably going to come down. They do come down. Once they come down, they want to see what IAM does. I think that's how you try to see their interest level, whether they like to be connected.

PS: But then are there people standing by at those events that would say, "Oh, come and join the India Association. We would like you on the board?"

SM: Yes.

PS: There would be people that would go to some—?

SM: Well, we don't have in all. Of course, in picnic, which is down by an open air, the flag [unclear] Independence Day. There is also a booth to get members if people like to join. We do have annual dinner, which is held in the Landmark Center every year. There is one IAM booth, which actually enrolls people. Then the rest of it is actually word of mouth. People like to come and join and see if they like to continue. No, there's no single solution to this problem, in fact. There's no single way to really get people, the younger generation, into the IAM. It's going to be multiple ways to publicize and get their attention.

PS: How about the group of people who are coming as temporary workers mostly doing IT [information technology] work? Have there been efforts to reach out to them, and has that been successful?

SM: Hmmm . . . There is no real effort in trying to just get those people or something. This effort, actually getting members and making IAM known, is a general approach, not a selecting a specific [group] coming from India. They probably would fall in the same category. Can IAM do something differently? IAM actually says, "Okay," to the immigration process? That's of interest to them, so they can come and join.

PS: Has IAM hosted such things like that?

SM: Yes, definitely. You know, in everything it's, "What is in [it] for me?" So we cater to the needs of those people. We have Chicago Indian consulate that comes down here to process passports and visas. We probably get about a couple of hundred people just for that. That includes everyone. It includes, actually, Indians who have lived here for long, like me, or the

younger generation who come from India. It's all kinds of people. These are events which cater the needs of people. Once they come, they know the IAM. That's the way the news spreads.

PS: The very last question would be: is there anything else that you want to tell me about?

SM: Well, Indian community is something that I have already told you, but Indian community is getting much bigger, much more diverse, so India Association has to have multiple roles. In fact, how to bring all the communities together, how to create unity in diversity. That's most important. The second thing: it also has to get more connected to the Asian community that's there, which is happening right now, by the way. And the third most important thing is it tries to play a much bigger role in the broader community that we live in. It used to do soup kitchen activities. It used to take care of painting, sending people to paint people's houses and all that. I think it has to find more volunteers to do some of that. So it has three roles. It has to take care of, try to bring the unity amongst the diverse group of Indian people who are coming in. It has to take a much bigger role in the broader Asian community. And most importantly, it has to take a much bigger role, also, in the broader local community, trying to be much more involved. I think that's probably going to be very important.

PS: And the local community would be the local Indian community or the local American community?

SM: Local American community.

PS: What role would you see the India Association having there?

SM: Try to be much more involved in the community services, community activities.

PS: Such as?

SM: For example, I just gave you an example: soup kitchen activity. Or actually trying to take care of the elderly in some way and helping out, trying to take care of the lawn or something like that, painting their houses or something like that.

PS: So human services, volunteering?

SM: Human services. That's right.

PS: Okay.

SM: I think that's probably what India Association should do more and more.

PS: That's a very different role than what it's done in the past.

SM: That's right.

PS: Why would that be within the scope and the mission of the India Association?

SM: Because India Association is not just for Indians. India Association is an organization inside Minnesota and in the U.S. Therefore, it has to also cater the needs of all individuals, first here. That is part of our mission statement. Our first goal is to take care of everything that's local, and then second thing, actually trying to take care of things in India. That's in the current mission statement.

PS: That's what your current mission statement is?

SM: Yes.

PS: To take care of things local first?

SM: Local first, and then . . . Local means, actually, all the three I told you. And the next is actually what's happening in India and wherever it can help, whether it is sponsoring a school, taking care of education, taking care of calamities, like a cyclone and all that. That's the second role.

PS: All right.

SM: First local. First American. Then Indian.

PS: Okay. The local outreach would be to everybody in Minnesota, not just to Indians in Minnesota?

SM: Everybody That's right.

PS: Most of the mutual assistance associations pretty much take care of their own.

SM: Yes, but community services actually requires a lot more assistance than some of the other groups that can actually support . . . Just like United Way.

PS: Why would you want to duplicate what United Way does?

SM: No, I'm not saying that we duplicate United Way. But I'm saying that it is actually pretty much volunteering services that doesn't really go to some people.

PS: Okay.

SM: There is always a need to do more volunteering services than actually what is currently happening. There is no end to it.

PS: Right. That's what I'm thinking is that that's such a broad mission that there will be a neverending supply of projects that people could volunteer to do.

SM: That is true. I think kids probably won't have to select. India Association has to select what it needs to do, because we are not really a youth group. We need to really say, "Okay, what are the very specific tasks we want to do?" and not really being engulfed with things that United Way does or what some other groups do. It has to find a niche area that it can support and be recognized. That's what India Association should do.

PS: Do you see it continuing to take care of disasters or contribute to disasters?

SM: It's going to be there all the time. That's probably one way India Association can support some of these things much better, being actually a central organization.

PS: And you see it serving in broad, general ways rather than specifically creating, for example, maybe a scholarship program for second generation Indian kids to go to college or something like that? Right?

SM: This is actually happening, since you brought it up. This is happening by individuals. A friend of mine who just passed away created a scholarship fund for second generation.

PS: Oh, he did?

SM: In Minnesota. **PS:** All right.

SM: So things like that are going to happen. We don't want to take part in the religious, because that's not the goal of the India Association. It has the social/cultural, non-political, non-religious . . . So whatever activity fits into that category, it has to do.

PS: So education fits nicely in that?

SM: Education fits nicely, yes. In fact, there have been proposals to see whether we can do some of those things. It requires capital. A lot of volunteers and volunteerism. It's not an easy job.

PS: Right. It's a lot of work. Is there anything else that you want to tell about?

SM: No, I think that's probably . . .

PS: Okay. Well, thank you very much for your time this afternoon. I appreciate it.

SM: Thank you.