Shanti Shah Narrator

Polly Sonifer Minnesota Historical Society Interviewer

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PS: This is Polly Sonifer interviewing Shanti Shah on October 29, 2004. Good afternoon, Shanti. How are you today?

SS: I'm doing well, thank you. You?

PS: Fine, thanks. Thank you for taking the time to meet with me and talk about the India Association of Minnesota [IAM] and your remembrances about it. To get us started, could you tell us a little bit about yourself? What part of India you're from, how you came to be here, and those kinds of things?

SS: Yes. My family originally came from Kutch, which is now part of the state of Gujarat, the northern part of Gujarat, but I grew up in Mumbai [Bombay], so most of my life was spent in Mumbai

PS: How old were you when you left India?

SS: I was twenty-one.

PS: What brought you to the United States?

SS: I fell in love with someone, and actually, I went to Canada first. I was in Canada before coming to the United States.

PS: So this was an Indian person that you fell in love with?

SS: Yes.

PS: Tell me a little bit more about that.

SS: We grew up together. We knew each other, and I just couldn't make up my mind if I wanted to marry him. But when I did, we got married in Canada at the end of 1967. We lived there for about a year and a half, I want to say a year and a half or two years, in Nova Scotia in Halifax. Then we came to Syracuse, New York.

PS: What brought you to Syracuse?

SS: He found a job, and we both had a desire to move to the United States. Actually, we had [a] desire to keep moving. Both of us loved traveling. It didn't really matter to us where we ended up living; although hindsight tells me that Nova Scotia is an incredible, beautiful place. We could have stayed there and lived all our lives. But our desire was to move around and look at different parts of the world and settle back in India after a few years.

PS: Okay. That didn't work out, did it?

SS: I think all immigrants, at least the more modern immigrants, seem to have that desire to go back and settle down, and some people are more successful at it than others.

PS: When you were in Nova Scotia was there an Indian community there?

SS: There was a small Indian community. Actually, amazingly, in the late 1960s, Nova Scotia had a high need of teachers, so there were a number of teachers who came to teach, mostly from Punjab, the northern region. So there was a significant Indian community from that area. There was also, of course, a student community, because there were a number of students who came to get their graduate degrees, mostly in engineering-type areas. So there was a small community, mostly in those two areas, that was small but a fun community.

PS: Then how about Syracuse, New York?

SS: Syracuse, New York, also had [a] small community, folks that were more in engineering, either students or professionals.

PS: And you're an engineer?

SS: No. Actually, I am not. I have an undergraduate in economics and graduate in software engineering.

PS: Okay, you're a software engineer.

SS: A software engineer. Not the same as traditional engineering disciplines. [Chuckles]

PS: Then what brought you from Syracuse, New York, to someplace else?

SS: Minnesota. I've actually been in Minnesota for about thirty years now, since 1974. My husband at that time got a job offer from Ellerbe Architects in Bloomington, so we moved here with the mindset that we're headed toward California, something warmer, felt more like home, closer to ocean, but never got to that point.

PS: What stopped you?

SS: Just a number of different things. But, you know, I really like Minnesota. I even left for a short time, but came back for a number of different reasons. This is [a] small enough place, wonderful place in terms of quality of life, ability to raise family, values that are very similar to the values I have grown up with. The Indian community is fantastic in terms of their engagement in the local community, small enough but large enough in a way. Two layers, also, they not only serve the Indian community, but also the community at large.

PS: So in 1970 you said you came?

SS: 1974.

PS: That would make it thirty years. What was the Indian community like when you arrived here, and how did you get connected to them?

SS: It was fairly small, and I can't give you exact numbers. I would say less than three thousand to four thousand people, if that. My community linkage here was that I come from a region of Gujarat, or India, where the community is fairly small, so we tend to know each other. So I had known Neena Gada and her family in India, and we knew that they lived here, so that was our first point of contact to get connected and established. Subsequently, Neena and Ram and I and my husband have become extremely good friends.

PS: Excellent. So Neena Gada was the door opener and probably part of the reason you stayed here, right?

SS: One of the reasons, yes.

PS: All right. Was the India Association active when you came here in 1974?

SS: It was, although I didn't know about it at the time. The way I got connected with [the] India Association was that—I can't remember the exact year—in, I want to say, 1977, around that time, we started working . . . I was part of a group of parents who were interested in doing something for our children in terms of getting them educated in more Indian languages and other cultural aspects of it, because we knew that in the suburbs where we lived, they were not getting that same exposure. They also didn't have friends who were Indian, so the kids were somewhat isolated. So our focus was to organize something that allowed us to get the kids together, even once a month. Now, we had a lot of social activities, but they were social, not necessarily had the educational purpose.

You probably know about SILC, how we arrived at SILC. So earlier generation of SILC was Bharat School, organized by Dr. Shankaran Menon, which subsequently resulted in the School of India for Languages and Culture, SILC. At some point, SILC was contacted by the board members of India Association, formerly known as India Club, at the time. The India Club had [a] dwindling membership amongst its board membership and a limited reason to continue what they were doing, because I'm sure it was founded as an organization to serve Indian community when there were no other organizations. In the meantime, we had a whole profusion of other

organizations serving our needs, whether they were religious or regional. The India Association itself couldn't figure out what their purpose was at the time. They played quite an important role. They had a pretty good relationship with International Institute at the time and were participating in the International Festival at some level. They probably had some other things going on, but not things that will keep it going. So they were questioning what to do going forward. The year? I'll have to get back to you. I can't remember what year it was. You probably have heard about this already.

So the SILC parents who were just up and coming, like a core group of ten or twelve, fifteen parents, a set of parents, decided that it was good for us to get connected with India Association and see what they do, so that we can get that linkage established. One thing we needed was funding. We had some nominal fee for children to come and then cover our fundamental expenses. But ongoing we had a lot of good plans which needed funding at the time. We thought leveraging India Association would have been a good thing to do. So it was a good partnership from the two organizations.

PS: So did you get funding from them?

SS: Actually, there were two things that happened. One, the SILC parents, once we got there, decided that really it was an organization that needed propping up. Second, after we looked at it saying, "Okay," it required the participation in Festival of Nations (I think, in the spring) and the fact that SILC can actually quite actively participate in all venues that the Festival of Nations had going. So that was a good thing, because we were not only able to energize SILC students and parents to be engaged in something that we could deliver for India Association, but also allowed us to identify our venue for funding for that participation. So that's how that partnership was founded.

PS: So you got funds for participating in the Festival of Nations?

SS: Yes.

PS: How did that work?

SS: We had four of our different things we did, but the funding came from having a kitchen, a restaurant, selling food. That was for a three-day . . . at least at that time it was a three-day event. We were able to sell food. That funded not only all the other things that India Association itself needed to do, self-funding for this event itself but some additional money that they could have for remaining other events they had. In addition, a certain percentage of that money went to SILC.

PS: Oh, okay.

SS: So that was a good thing, because there were times where we had a quite heavy participation from SILC parents. That was a tradition, I think, that continues even now. Children's

participation for the afternoon entertainment. Adult participation. The exhibition and the food booth.

PS: I'm guessing that you were heavily involved with some of those first exhibits and activities at the Festival of Nations, right?

SS: Yes, exhibit, definitely. The first year, I organized the exhibition. For the food, Stephen and I had made almost four hundred *gulab jamans* to sell. [Chuckles]

PS: Wow.

SS: Yes, I don't think either of us could look at gulab jamans for a while afterwards.

[Laughter]

PS: Tell me what it was like making all of those. What kind of system did you set up? Did you make them in your home or right at the festival? How did you do that?

SS: Because it was supposed to be sold, we had to rent a kitchen. There was a kitchen in one of the Minneapolis park district locations that we were able get, like on a Saturday, all day Saturday or something. There were two teams: ourselves and Mrs. Dixit. They were making *jalebis* on one side, and we were making *gulab jamans* on the other. I'm sure both were making large quantities of each that we were able to sell at the festival. We had to definitely have a board-certified kitchen, as opposed to doing it in our own home.

PS: Because of health regulations?

SS: Yes.

PS: And nobody died as far as you know?

SS: Nobody died, and a good thing about *gulab jaman*, this stuff is so fried. It is fried food, and there is no opportunity to kill yourself, except from fat.

[Laughter]

PS: It takes a long time to die from that one!

SS: Yes. The amount of fat will keep you floating!

PS: So that was a part of it. Then you talked about the exhibit. Tell me about the exhibit that year. What do you remember about it or getting ready for it? Any bumps along the way or any happy surprises?

SS: You know, the good news about the exhibition was that it was our first year participating, so we were all excited about showcasing India in that venue. I had done similar work in Syracuse where we had participated both in entertainment and exhibition, so I had a little bit of experience in that. People were extremely gracious in loaning us things. Festival of Nations has some theme every year, so we were able to tap into that theme of temples and the whole notion of identifying a temple theme across. It was kind of nice, very simple, but [an] attractive exhibition. The second part of that, of course, is getting everyone engaged in terms of being able to stand there, present India, and be able to answer people's questions. I know a lot of people really enjoyed that part of it.

PS: Was it all adults that were staffing the exhibit booth?

SS: Yes.

PS: Excellent. Then I know that the dancing is a big part. That first year, did the kids or anybody else dance?

SS: Yes. The kids danced the first year, and that was quite exciting. We had a limited number of children at the time participating, but again, boys and girls who participated with what would be mostly parents who helped choreograph, as opposed to more recent years [when] we have had much more professional choreographers. I'm trying to remember what they danced. It probably was either some Gujarati . . . or whoever the parents were, I suppose, would be . . . We danced, most likely, *dandia raas* or something. The kids probably performed that. The kids were already getting quite acquainted in doing performances even before that.

PS: So they had already been dancing in public?

SS: Actually, that may have been the biggest venue that they had done, this being one of the early years when India groups were beginning to get more actively engaged. The International Institute actually took a very active interest in us and getting us [to] do pre-Festival of Nations' events. So the children actually went to other venues to perform as a result of it (at community centers and stuff) to kind of drum up interest in Festival of Nations.

PS: Oh, cool!

SS: So that was pretty good . . . and on behalf of India Association.

PS: So the kids also got to practice being watched while they danced so they wouldn't be quite so nervous when it came to the festival.

SS: Right. Yes.

PS: How many times did they do their dance during the three days of the festival?

SS: During the three days, there is only one opportunity for the children to do that. Yes, I think that's the only time during the three-day event. But, they performed outside of it also over the years, several times.

PS: All right. You have a child, right?

SS: Yes.

PS: Tell me, was your child involved with the dancing?

SS: Yes. Again, going back to SILC, most of the parents had children who were participating in the dance, so yes, our son was performing and doing other event-related work.

PS: Do you remember how old he was at the time?

SS: [Pauses] Eight, I want to say. Seven or eight, I think.

PS: How did he feel about doing that? Was he eager and happy or was it like, "Ah, Ma, I want to sleep!"?

[Laughter]

SS: Going to school was definitely [when] he wanted to sleep, on Sundays. Right. But the performance—I want to say the children who were participating in Festival of Nations through India Club in all those years actually were quite enthused about doing that. Partly, for one thing, it happens in early May and the school is coming to end, so it had a double meaning to them. They're getting excited about the year end.

What I also found quite interesting is after a lot of these children grew up and left SILC or stopped participating in Festival of Nations . . . one of the events . . . For a number of years, a lot of these young adult children kept coming back to town. Whether they were away for college and came back, they came back specifically for Festival of Nations.

PS: Really?

SS: So that, it tells me that it was a good memory for them, and it was also kind of a regrouping of the clan, in a way, that was associated during those years of late 1970s through the mid-to-late 1980s.

PS: Excellent. So that was one big thing that you got involved with right away, probably?

SS: Yes. Our first few years were definitely quite a learning experience. [Chuckles]

PS: Right. Was the Festival of India in September already happening at that point?

SS: No. That happened several years later. Again, I'll have to look up the year that we started that. It started out with an excellent idea with a group of folks who were involved in the early years, the board of directors. There was a musician. His name was Ramki. I'm trying to remember what his last name was. It started out as a notion of celebrating Mahatma Gandhi's birthday on October 2. So the first one was held, the first several of these, in October, as [a] celebration of his birthday. The first ones were in some community centers. The first couple of years, we definitely held them at community centers thinking that we wanted to introduce this whole notion of India as a greater democracy, greater diversity, greater historical context, as opposed to just the very European view of what India is all about through this. There were some very idealistic views of what we wanted to do in community outreach. Festival of Nations, of course, is there, but India is just one of many cultures being represented. This was our ability to showcase India through this venue in the fall. What was really cool after [the] first few years is working with the mayor's office in St. Paul and, you know, identifying the current venue (which is the Landmark Center), being able to utilize, having that relationship with the governor's office and declaring India Day as the day . . . engaging lot of local politicians to help us celebrate and bring in their messages, also.

PS: I want to go back to something you just said a few minutes ago. You said, "To counteract the European view of India." What was the perception about what that European view of India was at that time? What was it that you wanted to correct or change?

SS: India being the usual. India being poor. India being uneducated. India being, you know, fill in the blank. Also, recognizing India only in relationship to the British in India, which is only 150 or 200 years of history that was taught in the west, especially in American schools at the time. I don't know if it's changed or not. But [a] very limited view and, again, a very European way of looking at things, because a lot of books were written by the Europeans. India being exotic, which is cool in one way, but also limiting in another. So what we wanted to showcase is our dance, our music, our food, diversity of food. There were hardly any . . . [chuckles] I don't think there were any Indian restaurants anywhere to be had. Food was extremely boring. I mean, none of us could really go out and eat except when we went to eat at each other's places. So Indian food selling was a big deal at the time. So the music, dancing, food. I'm trying to remember if the religious organizations also had their booths. I'm sure [the] early years also included Geeta Ashram and Hindu Mandir also presenting themselves. Indian Christians had booths, I'm sure, in early years. So it was all those aspects of India that we wanted to present in its totality, as opposed to just a small snippet of it during Festival of Nations.

PS: Do you think that the early days' events realized those lofty goals?

SS: The initial very idealistic approach, meaning Mahatma Gandhi's birthday celebration and using his philosophies of non-violence and those, we may have introduced it, but I'm pretty sure pretty soon we decided that what we really wanted to do is talk about India in a broader sense: India being the democracy. So it emerged into more a total picture of India, as opposed to just, you know, idealistically or what we thought it was meant to be.

PS: Given the events that happened during that day, how was it your intent to convey the democracy aspect of India through the events that happened during the day?

SS: [Pauses] I'm trying to remember the early years, what we did specifically. There were slide show presentations on the life of Mahatma Gandhi, I believe, [which] was one example. We had speakers specifically coming to the topics. So in the basement of [the] Landmark Center there is an auditorium, which was also utilized. At least during a couple of events, they utilized that to present a debate and a dialogue, I think was also used in the earlier years. So those were some of the ways. I can't remember exactly what years, but we soon, after that, started getting people who were serving certain communities in India also beginning to present themselves. Right now, I can't remember the names of those.

But recently, this last one when went to the Festival of India, I was amazed to see the number of NPOs—is that what they're called?—non-profit organizations that are serving Indian communities and local communities. Like Literacy in the United States is one example. So it kind of felt like we've come full circle at that serving aspect of what this day was originally meant to be. Actually, Godan Nambudiripad simply sent an e-mail saying, "Where does India Association need to go?" One of the aspects we were looking to see: what are some things we can change about it? Can we make India Day—? Just throwing out brain-storming ideas. Can you make this more closer to the original notion of celebrating Gandhi's ideals, which is to serve?

PS: Did you have some wonderful ideas for Godan?

SS: No. We are still talking through it.

PS: Still talking. Okay. [Chuckles]

SS: But, as I said, when I looked at it, I couldn't count on my one hand, I'm sure . . . There were at least ten different organizations serving all kinds of organizations in India and locally. These are non-profits, you know, whether they're serving children, women's organizations, healthrelated, any number of different aspects of it. So that was pretty cool.

PS: And they're all organizations that are functioning in India?

SS: Right

PS: Not here in Minnesota?

SS: There were at least a couple of them that are functioning in Minnesota. The literacy organizations are actually for a broader community. Vibha, I believe, also has the children's literacy goals that are across multiple cities within the United States that is serving both here and in India.

PS: But their focus is still on people of Indian decent?

SS: No.

PS: The broader community?

SS: The broader community. Also, the two organizations I mentioned were serving Indian communities. There were others definitely focusing on, say, women's health issues in the United States as well as in India. Many of us Indian women are now reaching our fifties and sixties, and there are different challenges.

PS: So you have a sense that, maybe, the India Association might go back to some of its earlier roots and revisit them in a new way?

SS: Yes, we're asking. Godan and I among seven other individuals who are now part of the Trustee Advisory Council (TAC), so we are now looking to say from strategic planning, "Where do we want this organization to be?" It has been wonderful the last twenty-plus years, because they have engaged themselves through a number of event-driven things that have put India Association in the forefront. You know, you've got standard things that people look to India Association to lead: the Festival of Nations, Festival of India and the usual. So now we're saying, "Okay, if, at the end of the day, does anybody recognize, do they associate this event to India Association? Are you at the front and center in this community? Is that the first place people look at when anything related to India happens?" That's where we're looking to see what we can do differently.

PS: You were on the board of the India Association of Minnesota?

SS: I was for a number of years, in the 1980s and 1990s, yes.

PS: Then how did you become willing to serve on the board? What was the process for becoming a board member?

SS: When we first started as part of linking India Club and SILC, there were, like, three or four of us who decided that we need to be part of the board to help drive the change that we're looking to drive. So that is how the initial linkage was established.

PS: So you went right on to being on the board?

SS: Right, to help drive the change.

PS: What was the board like, at that time? How many members? The ages? The genders? Who did you join?

SS: I'll have to look at my notes in terms of the number. I think the current board size is twenty-one, and I want to say it was about fifteen or less at that time . . . mostly male. I may have been one of the earlier women. There were not as many women members at the time. A wonderful thing about India Association from day one had been that they always were looking for a good

distribution of representation across India. So there was always the look and saying, "Okay, do we have good representation across different parts of India, different religious groups, different—?" To some extent, they tried to get women on board also. So there was a very conscious decision to ensure that we are engaging, recruiting people to be on the board who represent that diversity of views.

PS: My understanding—correct me if I'm wrong—is that in India, there's a fairly distinct separation of the genders in public life, at least at the time that you were growing up.

SS: Right.

PS: When you came here, did that have any impact on you serving on this board that was primarily men?

SS: No, not really, because I've always been very outgoing and outspoken. On one hand, I do have some limitations, but never where I was not able to assert myself. So for me, that was not difficult being able to be on the board and be able to speak to what I was thinking or wanted to help drive. You know, the people respected that. Coming from SILC also, where the parents had that equal male/female ratio, I think helped also. Establishing myself through that channel and getting into this channel was not difficult. I had a built-in support system in a way, because two or three other parents were also there. We all had one goal in mind: to insure that we were successful in representing SILC's thoughts, not that that was the only thing we were looking at.

PS: Did you find that the men on the board of India Association of Minnesota were more open than the men that you remember back in India when you were growing up as a child?

SS: Oh, definitely! Yes, very much so.

PS: To what do you attribute that?

SS: Education probably was one factor, because, you know, you already have a very self-selected group just by being immigrant from the 1970s, right? It is the first group of people who came because of education, so that's probably one reason. The other reason, probably, is that when people joined or decided to serve on India Association's Board, they were there because they recognized the fact that this is a group of people who are already coming from different parts of the life and world. So going in it was, to some extent, I'm sure, [a] self selecting process, because people who joined were already open to more diversity, if you know what I mean?

PS: Yes. Yes. One of the unique things about the India Association is that it goes across all these different religious and language backgrounds and so on. Did you ever see times in your experience where people tended to gather into their own camp, you know, like go off in the corner and talk their mother tongue with other people on the board who spoke their language or advocate for certain projects because they were going to be better for their religious organization or some other way that people would divide themselves up? Did you ever see that happening?

SS: It probably did, but I can't remember a specific example during those years that I could give a very specific example. [Pauses] No, I can't think of one that stands out. There's definitely people, when they have their friends, they're definitely speaking their local language, and that's, of course, expected.

PS: Okay. So that's not a problem? Everybody expects that to happen?

SS: That whole mindset of . . . because we all grew up listening to multiple languages.

PS: Okay.

SS: So that's not a barrier, as opposed to being an American where the only language you have heard most of the time is English.

PS: Right, and that's American English besides.

SS: Right. [Chuckles]

PS: Are you still on the board?

SS: I'm now on the Trustee Advisory Council (TAC). This is the other group that was established starting [in] 2004 to help define the strategic direction.

PS: How often does that group meet?

SS: We've been meeting once a month.

PS: How's it going so far?

SS: It's been very energizing and interesting. This is a bunch of old timers that are, on one hand, very much interested in moving this organization forward, but also have to open up their eyes and see where India Association is today, here and now, and what the current board is thinking to make sure that we're not missing anything.

PS: Was there a period of time when you weren't on the board and you weren't on the new Trustee Board?

SS: Yes, oh, yes. For a number of years I've been active, continued to be active through whatever I can in terms of events and stuff or attend events mostly. I've been an attendee most of the time, but not [an] active board member for almost a decade, I want to say, until this year.

PS: What led you to invest your time places other than the India Association Board?

SS: There were other organizations that needed attention. [laughter]

PS: Okay. So which ones did you get involved with next?

SS: We formed an organization called Asian Indian Women's Association, AIWA, and I was pretty active for about five, six years in the 1990s. It has been dormant since, I think, 2001. It was also supported through India Association, so it got very minor funding to help support [it]. MAIDA, Minnesota Asian Indian Democratic Association, which is a politically active organization supported through the Minnesota Democratic organization.

PS: So MAIDA is M-A-I-D-A?

SS: Right.

PS: So you've been active in that. Any others? That's probably a lot. [Laughter]

SS: I'm sure there are others. I can't think of what they are.

PS: You're an empty-nester at this point, right?

SS: Yes.

PS: So you have time on your hands, and you can go be involved in anything you want.

SS: You know, fortunately, I have always been . . . I was probably more engaged when our son was here and growing up.

PS: Oh, really?

SS: Now I'm being a little more selfish with my time. [Chuckles]

PS: Okay. You were president?

SS: Yes

PS: Tell me about the events and the things that you remember during the year that you served as president of India Association.

SS: The year I was the president—I'll have to get back to you what year—I want to say in 1992 or 1993, it was a very vibrant organization at the time. We had just established and firmed up the Festival of Nations, Festival of India . . . a lot of good hard-working team members on both the board as well as the executive team. We had also helped establish some other non-profit organizations, or at least supported [them], like Ragamala, the earlier versions of Ragamala and Katha Dance Theatre.

The one biggest event that I remember having is having hosted a wonderful event. We were beginning to start thinking about: how can we influence politically? The Indian ambassador

came to town, so we helped organize the Indian ambassador's visit here in Minnesota. We also engaged different organizations and communities within the Twin Cities. We wanted them to not only listen to what the ambassador is talking about, but also understand where India is going and what parts of the Indian economy were opening up. You know, the opening of the markets and a lot of things were happening in India, also. Also, what do Indians in the U.S. need? So that was one of the earlier beginnings of the dialogues between us and them.

PS: Do you remember that ambassador's name?

SS: I probably have it somewhere.

PS: We can fill it in later.

SS: That was probably one of the best events, because that subsequently opened up the relationship. I'm pretty sure about that time we started having more active dialogues with them to have the Indian consulate come that year. I think that was one of the early years where the Indian consulate started coming to the Twin Cities to provide visa and passport services during the India Day.

[Brief tape interruption]

PS: Tell me more about Ragamala. Tell me what Ragamala is and how the India Association decided this was something worth their support.

SS: Oh, that's the board I'm on. I'm on the board of Ragamala, too, now. Both Ranee Ramaswamy (who is the chief choreographer and founder of Ragamala) and Rita Mustaphi (who now leads and, again, chief choreographer and founder of Katha [Dance Theatre]) were quite active in SILC, because their children also came to SILC. The earlier presentations that children did were under their leadership. They were the choreographers. As they were establishing themselves, they also were looking to either look for sponsorship from India Association as they were performing or . . . because we were all fairly new and didn't fully know how much public funding was available for these types of organizations . . . looked for some help in putting together funding requests for non-profit organizations for both of those. India Association as an organization probably was not quite ready for providing that kind of service, because that's a skill by itself.

PS: The grant writing?

SS: Grant writing was not part of (and I'm sure still is not) our core competency. [Chuckles]

PS: Okay. Did the India Association give Ragamala and Rita's group outright funding?

SS: At times, they gave them some seed money. Or other times became sponsors to provide the name recognition from sponsorship [unclear].

PS: It was name sponsorship, not a financial sponsorship some of the time?

SS: Sometimes, yes. Sometimes money. Other times, identifying other resources that would help them get the grant funding and request. That relationship, I believe, still exists somewhat; although the both of them are so vibrant now that they don't probably need any support from anyone. They're both very gracious including India Association as needed and when needed.

PS: India Association of Minnesota has been a volunteer organization since it's beginning?

SS: Yes

PS: That's not an easy thing to sustain over many years, that energy of volunteers and board members and all the diversity that this organization includes. To what do you attribute the success that this organization has enjoyed over many, many years?

SS: You know, I would think it's the diversity. The kind of people it attracts are very open, definitely very much willing to serve the community both local and the Indian community. I see that consistent common theme every time I see any board member, whether they are from the old country or Indian Americans born here in this country.

PS: There's been an effort over the years to keep drawing in new leadership?

SS: Yes, and much younger leadership now.

PS: Tell me about that younger leadership that's coming up in the organization.

SS: Oh! It is amazing. We may not be there yet, but this year's board, for example, when you look at it, you see a significant number of younger folks who are actively engaged on the board. I want to say they may have as much as forty percent of the current board membership that are fairly young, if not all Indian Americans or native born.

PS: So they would be the offspring of the generation that started the organization?

SS: Right, right.

PS: And they tend to be people who were born here and raised here of Indian families?

SS: Right, right.

PS: And they're in their twenties and thirties now?

SS: Yes, definitely.

PS: What is it that's pulled them into this organization? Why do they have an interest in being part of India Association?

SS: They probably are looking at it in a similar manner as we saw: leaving a legacy for their children, to have that active engagement. I'll have to ask those questions of the people, because I don't think I have had any active conversations with any of them to say, "Tell me what made you come and be so active?"

PS: Are there people on the board now, at this point, who have recently emigrated from India?

SS: I believe so. I can't think of the names, but I believe so. Even the more recent presidents of India Association, Ashoke Mandal . . . a little more recent immigrants.

PS: Then the temporary workers, the IT [Information Technology] professionals and those others who come here on a temporary work assignment, have they been coaxed to be active in the India Association?

SS: There is some engagement. I think we see them at India Association's events, some of them. I think there is enough of that. On the fifteenth of August, the Independence Day celebration, I see them there. Also at the Festival of India, we see them there, so they do participate. I don't know how actively. They are probably volunteering. They may volunteer as a helper to someone else, but many times the duration of their stay is so limited that it may make it impossible for them to get connected in a timely manner, to be able to even serve anything for any extended time.

PS: How long are most of them staying when they come here?

SS: Oh, it's very different, you know, anywhere from [a] few days on to [a] couple of years.

PS: Oh, okay.

SS: The stability is not there, so they themselves say, "I don't know if I'll be here next month, so I can't make any commitment."

PS: Sure.

SS: Their jobs are so dependent on what their current contract might be.

PS: Tell me more about the Trustee Board that you're a part of. What's the process that that group is using to create a new vision or revisit the vision of India Association?

SS: It's been quite good, because we have a couple of folks: Vasant Sukhatme, who is a faculty member at Macalester [College], and Anoop Mathur, who has a strategic position with Honeywell. Both of them have processes which allowed us to walk through a very customercentered thought process to say, "As an organization, what is our customer wanting, and what are we doing?" and then mapping out what's important as it is matched back to what are our guiding principles. "If we wanted to serve in a broader community, does this event then satisfy that need or not? If we're doing this, does that . . . and, by the way, what does the customer

want?" So, it's a three-dimensional view of developing this strategic framework that we are trying to develop.

PS: Who have you defined as your customer?

SS: There were, I think, three major customers: the Indian community, local Indian community, local extended community and, then, the Indian community in India. So that serving aspect, we are connecting.

PS: That's a pretty big customer base.

SS: Right, but I think we kind of blended it all together. What we did was take a look at that, and there was a very good metric-driven assessment that we did among the five or six members that were in this meeting, and then now we're extending that to the India Board, the Association Board itself to say, "Can you tell us if we are on the right path?" That will be our next step, to come up saying, "Are we still doing the right thing?" Some things will definitely remain, things that we are good at, and things we continue to do well. What we have found is that we are a very event-driven organization, so event-driven organization requires a lot of work from the board members. What becomes of board members is that very operational focus, so it's always hard to step back, especially if you don't have little committees to help you with that.

PS: Right.

SS: Some of them are very time consuming. Also, we need to rethink and say, "Have we done special things as needed?" For example, when Mrs. [Indira] Gandhi got assassinated, we quickly raised the awareness in Minnesota. It was televised and in the newspaper. So we are good at that, but it's only more in response as opposed to having a very good infrastructure in place that allows us to respond at a faster pace. We're not good at advertising ourselves and identifying the value of this organization. For people who know it, it's almost the best kept secret.

PS: Okay.

SS: So those are the kinds of things we are looking at and trying to muddle our way through.

PS: Is the vision that this Trustee Board will go on existing or has it got a certain designated lifespan and then it will stop?

SS: As of right now, I think it was designed to have an ongoing role. You know, this year is our first year, so we are just defining, and the definition is to strictly focus.

PS: I think we've covered everything that is on my list. Are there any other things that you would like to tell me about or that you think are important to share as part of this oral history?

SS: The only thing I can say is IAM is such a best kept secret. Any ideas people have about how to get the word out in terms of what this organization does and what it gives . . . allowing people

to think through and say, "What do I want to get out of IAM and what can I give to the broader ndia Association of Minnesota Historical Society Notes and Association of Minnesota Notes and Association of Minnesota Notes and Association of Minnesota Notes and No community?" It's an excellent venue.