Dr. Vasant Sukhatme Narrator

Polly Sonifer Minnesota Historical Society Interviewer

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PS: This is Polly Sonifer interviewing Vasant Sukhatme on October 11, 2004. Good evening. How are you tonight?

VS: Oh, I'm wonderful. Thank you for being here.

PS: Yes. Thanks for taking time to talk with me. I appreciate that. Tell us a little about yourself, Vasant, where you're from in India, what your family was like growing up there.

VS: I grew up in the state of Bihar, in the city of Jamshedpur. After I finished my undergraduate college in India . . . That was in Calcutta. Calcutta was the nearest big city to where I had grown up, so when I finished high school, in some sense, Calcutta was the logical place for me to go for college and then I went to Delhi to do a master's degree. My desire was to come to the United States to get a graduate degree, so that's what brought me to the U.S. I came to the U.S. in 1969, so thirty-four years ago, nearly thirty-five years ago. After finishing a Ph.D. in economics at the University of Chicago, my first job out of graduate school was in Washington, D.C. for the World Bank. I worked there for two years, and then came to Minnesota. So my family and I, we moved to Minnesota in 1978, and we have lived continuously in Minnesota for the last twenty-six years.

PS: What brought you to Minnesota?

VS: Ah! The opportunity to be at a good, solid liberal arts college. My objective was to be in academics, to be at a liberal arts school. I enjoy my interactions with students, and a school like this gives me that opportunity.

PS: Tell us about the school where you work now.

VS: Macalester College is a private liberal arts school here in St. Paul. It has about 1,800 students. I'm in the Economics Department. I'm a professor of economics and now also serve as the department chair. We are among the strongest academic departments on campus. So it's wonderful to be in a place like this. I've enjoyed my life immensely. Looking back, you know, it's been wonderful to see such a change in the school and the composition of the students and so forth.

PS: What do you see changing at Macalester recently?

VS: Well, I don't know about recently, but over the course of my career here, it has changed in the sense that it has become stronger academically. We have large numbers of international students, so the ability to interact with international students. To have them in one's classes, to get their perspective on various matters, that just is a wonderful experience. So that's sort of my academic background.

I grew up in the state of Bihar, though I'm not Hindi or Bihari speaking by background. My parents are Marathi speaking from the western state of Maharashtra and from the city of Pune. My father worked for a private sector company in Jamshedpur in the state of Bihar. Bihar, by the way, is no longer sort of one unified state, but has been broken up into two states. What used to be Bihar—Jamshedpur used to be in Bihar—now is part of the smaller state of Jharkhand. Jharkhand and the northern part of Bihar are now two separate states. I grew up in Jamshedpur, as I said. So my parents, after my father retired from the Tata Steel Company where he had worked, he and my mother went back to Pune where they built a small home, and they retired there. And I went to Calcutta, as I noted, to go to college, and then ultimately came to the United States.

PS: Were you the only child in your family growing up?

VS: No. I was one among five children. I'm the middle child.

PS: They're the best.

VS: Well . . . [Chuckles]

PS: I'm a middle child.

VS: I'm the only one among my siblings who is in the United States. All the others are in India. So, in that sense, I'm an outlier.

PS: How did your family respond when you told them you were planning to come to the United States?

VS: Oh! My family, my parents . . . My father had, himself, a graduate degree, and he had obtained his Ph.D. in mathematical statistics in England. So he knew what it meant to go abroad to get a graduate degree, so he encouraged me to pursue sort of the same career path that he did. He didn't go into academics. He worked for the private sector; whereas I chose to go into the world of academics.

When I first came to the U.S., I came to the state of California, and I did my master's degree at the University of Southern California. That's where I met my wife, who also is an Indian, but she is a Bengali. She is from the state of West Bengal, from Calcutta. Her mother tongue is Bengali. She also had come to the United States to the same university to pursue a graduate degree, also

in economics. So here were two of us both international students, both students from India, in a department where we both had research assistantships with the same research professor.

PS: Okay.

VS: So we came to know each other. So, that's how we met. We didn't know each other in India, because India is a large country and, you know, she's from an entirely different city. We have been married for thirty-three years.

PS: So yours was a love marriage rather than an arranged marriage?

VS: Yes.

PS: How did that sit with both of your families?

VS: Oh . . . Now, this is an era, a generation ago, in a sense, where such "inter-state" marriages were much less frequent than they are now. But in my own family, for whatever reason, I had . . . My older brother married a woman from Tamil Nadu, so he had married somebody from outside Maharashtra or outside Bihar. So, in that sense, when I and Monika decided to get married, this was not something which was surprising or shocking to my family. In the case of my wife, Monika, I don't think her family had any huge amount of difficulty. I think it might have helped her and from her family's point of view, the fact that I speak Bengali.

When I went to college in Calcutta, I went to an institution called Presidency College. By the way, that's the same college where the first president of India, Independent India, Rajendra Prasad, was a student, so this was a well known academic institution in Calcutta. I happened to be the only non-Bengali student at that school; I used to stay in the dorm or what we would call the men's hostel. In U.S. terminology, it would be called the dormitory. I happened to be the only non-Bengali student there, so you know, all my roommates and other people at the college, we would sit around and talk and play poker and cards and so forth. So I came to learn Bengali. And in fact, I speak Bengali quite well, if I might say so myself. [Chuckles]

PS: You may.

VS: Many of my Bengalis friends tell me that I speak reasonably well. I can't read or I can't write, but I can speak Bengali.

PS: How many languages do you speak?

VS: Well, I speak, as I said, Bengali, and since I grew up in Bihar, I speak Hindi, which is the national language of India, reasonably well, not very well. And I speak Marathi. As one would think, one's knowledge of languages depreciates from non use.

PS: Right.

VS: Since my wife does not speak Marathi, whereas I speak Bengali, our conversations are in Bengali. So my Marathi, because of disuse or non use, is not as fluent as it might have been. The same goes with Hindi. So I speak, in that sense, Hindi, Marathi, and Bengali, in addition to speaking English.

PS: When you came to here to get your degrees and you ended up marrying, was the plan to stay here and work here or was the plan to go back to India?

VS: No, not at all. The plan was to return to India after finishing one's graduate degree. At the time that I was close to finishing my Ph.D., since I wanted to be in an academic environment, I applied at several academic institutions in India while I was applying to positions here. I just happened to find a job here in Washington, which seemed very promising and which I liked, so I took that up.

PS: Was that an academic position as well? Oh, that was the World Bank.

VS: Yes, it was the World Bank, but I was in the Research Department, so I was not sort of doing the operational kind of work that is done at the bank. I was more in the research group. After that, I wanted to be in an academic environment, so I started applying to various colleges and universities. And it so happened that I got a good offer from Macalester, so that's what brought me here.

PS: Okay. By this time, you were a U.S. citizen already?

VS: No, not yet. I'd become a "green card holder." That was more not because of me applying for a green card, but because I sort of rode on the coattails of my wife. She's the one who got the green card, and I was her dependent or somebody who sort of tagged along for green card purposes.

PS: All right.

VS: That was because my wife worked on a big research project for the U.S. Department of Labor, and she had a certain set of skills that the government needed at that time. So the research institution is what sponsored her for a green card, and so she was the primary applicant, and I was the "dependent" in the application. That's the story on the immigration thing.

PS: All right. Then you and your wife have one son?

VS: Yes, we have one son. He's all grown up now. His name is Mayukh, M-a-y-u-k-h. He did his undergraduate work, and, then, he got a degree in medicine, though he does not practice medicine. He works more in the biotech sort of investments area. He works in New York City. He's married and he and his wife have a child, so we are now grandparents.

PS: Well, congratulations.

VS: Thank you. This is a wonderful phase in our lives. My daughter-in-law is a U.S. . . . not of Indian parentage. She's of Jewish, Russian parentage, but she's an American of that background. Our grandson, you know, is just a wonderful little fellow, so we enjoy him immensely. They live in New York, so we don't get to see them as often as if they were living close by, but the wonders of new technology and the fact that something called the web cam exists. It's hooked up to the computer, so we can see him when we are online instant messaging and so forth. So it's just wonderful.

PS: How old is he now?

VS: He's one year old.

PS: Okay, so he's not typing his own messages yet.

VS: No, he's not. [Chuckles] But he's now walking. So because he's walking . . . The web camera is fixed to the computer to the camera doesn't work as well. He can't sit still. He is running around.

PS: Right. That's what you should be doing when you're one.

VS: That's right.

PS: So you came to Minneapolis—St. Paul, actually—in 1978, you said.

VS: Yes.

PS: You started working at Macalester. What did you find in terms of an Indian community when you arrived in 1978? What was around here in the Twin Cities?

VS: There were no Indian restaurants. There were no Indian grocery stores, to my knowledge. In fact, the first couple of times, we would mail order groceries from stores on Devon Avenue in Chicago. The Indian community was rather quite small. As I said earlier, since my wife is Bengali and we speak Bengali at home, my wife and I both knew a couple of Bengali couples who used to be in the Twin Cities. At that time, there were just a small handful of Bengali couples here, so we became close friends, and sort of spent . . . They have been important parts of our social network. We are not as well connected with the Marathi community as we have been with the Bengali community. Of course, the India Association was already in existence at that time, and we knew a couple of people there, and we became members a long, long time ago and have been members for many years.

PS: What was it about the India Association? Well, it was called India Club back then, right?

VS: Yes.

PS: What was it about the India Club that you said, "This is an organization I want to belong to," what drew you in?

VS: It seemed that the people who were involved in the association looked more or looked to a greater extent to things beyond regional linguistic groups. So since we ourselves, and in my case, since my parents were from Maharashtra but I'd grown up in Bihar and I went to college in Calcutta, rightly or wrongly, I sort of . . . The national part of the Indian outlook in the India Association or the India Club, that appealed to me, and it appealed to us, and so that's how we became involved. We remained members for many years. I did not participate in the board or take any active leadership role for a number of years. Because of family issues, because of the young child and trying to establish my own professional credentials, I didn't spend much time doing that. But we would religiously participate in the spring Festival of Nations by volunteering to work in the food café.

PS: Tell me what that was like for you. Do you remember what year you did that first?

VS: Probably sometime in the early 1980s. 1983, 1984 may have been the first. That was a group of people who would sort of do the volunteer work serving food at the food café. So making the milk shakes and heating the food and preparing the food was sort of an enjoyable activity. That was a lot of fun.

PS: And very different from what you did during the rest of the week.

VS: Yes. Yes. So that was part of what motivated me to—us, my wife, too—become part of this Indian community. Over the years, we have met wonderful people through the India Association and have become good friends, and we know them well. I value my association with people that I've met as part of the India Club, India Association.

PS: So the first thing you got involved with was the Festival of Nations?

VS: Yes.

PS: Did you also participate in the India Festival that happens in the fall, in September?

VS: Yes, yes, yes.

PS: What was your role in that?

VS: Oh, mainly it was sort of attendee. I did not really play any leadership or organizational role in that. It was only in the 1980s, well into the 1980s, and the early part of the 1990s that I became much more closely involved with the India Association: served on the board for several years, served as secretary, then as vice-president, and then as president of the India Association. I currently am on what is called the Trustee Advisory Council. That's a new body created last year, composed of "the elders" of the Indian community here. That has been a wonderful

experience for me, too, to work with wonderful people like Neena Gada and Franklin Gummadi and others. So it's been wonderful to be part of that group.

PS: As you were getting more involved, what was inspiring you to join the board, for example, rather than just keep on being a super volunteer?

VS: [Pauses] In some sense, you know, sort of a sense of obligation. A sense of obligation in that since you're a part of the Indian community, and since the India Association had certain objectives, one felt that—that is, I felt I owed it to my fellow people of Indian background to be part of an association which would seek to bring a greater of sense of cohesion to the Indian community here in the Twin Cities. In those years, the Indian community was much smaller than the 20,000 to 25,000 people of Indian background who now live in the Twin Cities. So one could then think more that one could sort of make some kind of a contribution. So that's what drew me to that, and since we had met some wonderful people over the years, we became more closely involved with the Indian community.

PS: First, were you on the board just as a general board member before you became secretary?

VS: Yes. I was on the board, I think . . . Here my middle age affects my memory. Yes, I served on the board for a couple of years and then became the secretary. I served as the secretary for one year before moving to become vice president and then president. When I was vice president, the president was a person by the name of Gupthan Nambudiripad, Godan's young brother.

PS: Okay.

VS: It was a lot of fun for me to work with Gupthan on the board. Then, I became the president the following year, and a man named Sarat Mohapatra served as vice president under me or with me. He and I undertook a big project—I don't know whether you are familiar with it—the directory of the India Association. For the first time, we built a phone directory of individuals and businesses in the Twin Cities of the Asian-Indian community. That was a wonderful undertaking. It was wonderful to come up with some tangible document: a phone directory.

PS: Was that circulated to the members?

VS: Oh! That went all over the place, members and non-members. The Indian grocery stores, like Patel brothers [Patel Groceries and Video] and Asia Imports [Asia Import Food and Video] and many other places. That directory now is six, seven years old, so it's already out of date.

PS: Sure. Things change.

VS: There has been no update of that. So one hopes that the India Association will take that up and update it, because I think that has served the India Association and the Indian community in a very important and useful manner.

PS: So that was one project that you undertook under your leadership. Was there any others that stand out in your mind during the years that you were vice president and president? And you were probably past president for a year, as well, right?

VS: Yes. 1997 was the fiftieth anniversary of the achievement of India's own independence. India achieved independence in 1947. So to mark the fiftieth anniversary of that event, the Indian community here organized a big function, big event, to celebrate that occasion. At that time, we published a small booklet. That also is something that I'm very happy to have been a part of.

PS: What was in that booklet?

VS: Oh, that booklet sort of looked at some . . . The intent of the booklet was to give to our children and grandchildren a sense of what it was . . . rather than from history books to learn about India's independence. So what we did in that book was we invited several people to contribute articles. We went back to the newspapers of fifty years ago in India and extracted certain speeches by, you know, the important people who played a role in India's independence, like Gandhi [Mohandas K. Gandhi] and Nehru [Jawaharlal Nehru] and Patel [Sardar Patel] and others. So we extracted some articles and pieces from their writings. That we published in a pamphlet, in a booklet. In my view, those booklets ought be part of the Historical Society. Maybe they might find it interesting to be part of the Historical Society.

PS: Oh, I think they would like to have them. If you have copies of them, it would be great if you would contribute them or make photo copies of what you've got.

VS: Also, the first . . . a copy of the directory also might be useful for the Historical Society.

PS: Oh! Definitely. Definitely.

VS: I'll get you a copy of both to be put . . .

PS: Excellent. So those were the two big things: this directory and then the Independence Day celebration during 1997.

VS: Yes.

PS: So 1997 was the year that you were president?

VS: 1998.

PS: Okay, so you were vice president?

VS: Yes—no, sorry. 1996, I was president, I think. Now I can't remember the years. 1997 is when Sarat was the president, so it was the year after I had become the president.

PS: So you were past president.

VS: And 1998 was when the directory was published.

PS: But you kept working on it?

VS: Yes.

PS: Did you stay on the board after you were the past president?

VS: Yes, I stayed on for a year and, then, got off the board. I'm not on the board, but as I said, I serve on the Trustee Advisory Council. The Trustee Advisory Council, just to give you a little background on that . . . The Board of the India Association, the time of that board is taken up by sort of the regular events on the calendar of the India Association. For example, early in the year, there is an annual dinner. Then in the spring there is the Festival of Nations. Then in the summer they organize a picnic. Then in the fall there is this Festival of India in the Landmark Center. So the board is very full with these kinds of day-to-day activities, and cannot and does not have the time to undertake some longer term strategic thinking. So part of the motivation of creating this Trustee Advisory Council was that the Trustee Council, which was composed of people who had some familiarity with the India Association, would more think long term or in strategic ways. So currently the Trustee Advisory Council is working on trying to draft a long-range plan, a long-range vision and plan for the India Association.

PS: What are you coming up with?

VS: Oh! There are lots of ideas, ranging from what are the kinds of things that we ought to be doing to raising our visibility in the Indian community here, how to represent the Indian community to the community at large, how to establish connections with the University of Minnesota, how to underscore the contributions that the Indian community makes to life in Minnesota. These are all things that people here are not as exposed to or not as knowledgeable about, so part of the thinking on the long-range plan has been, "What are ways in which we can represent what the Indian community contributes to society at large?" So that's the kind of stuff that we have been thinking about. You know, there are all kinds of big ideas. The success of any organization, fundamentally, depends on people.

PS: Sure.

VS: So if we have the right kinds of people, people who are motivated to work towards creating a sense of community, a sense of cohesion, these will be the kinds of people who can write newspaper articles or say something about the contributions of the Indian community and so forth. Then more ambitious ideas about raising money to build an India Center, a place where members of the community can gather, where resources are available, things of that sort. So there are lots of ideas floating around. But all of that is sort of way into the future. I don't know how much of that is going to come to fruition, but at least the trustees and the board is thinking, I think quite ambitiously, about ways in which the India Association can become an even more successful organization than it is.

PS: What's your personal vision for the India Association?

VS: My personal vision: that the people here of Indian background, Indian Americans, my generation, our children, that they have a greater sense of their own community, they have a greater sense of cohesion among their own community, but not, obviously, be insular, but convey the sense of this cohesion to the community at large. So represent themselves and represent the country of their origin to the community at large.

PS: What kind of vehicles would do that? Things like the Festival of Nations and the Festival of India are one way to do that. What other additional ways would you see that happening?

VS: Oh . . . on certain current policy matters. For example, in this election year there has been a great deal of talk about "the problem of outsourcing," particularly outsourcing of jobs—computer professionals, computer jobs, back-office jobs—to companies in India.

PS: Right.

VS: There is a great deal of misunderstanding, in my view, within the broader community about what are the gains to be had of outsourcing, what are the costs, and so forth. So if the Indian community is able to articulate, you know, some point of view, both pro and con, and able to convey that in the form of an op-ed piece or a radio interview or a television interview, these are all ways in which the thinking on important policy issues can be conveyed to the broader community. So that's another way.

PS: I imagine, as a professor of economics, this is something that you have a high level of interest in, as well as the academic background to understand what's happening economically both in India and here in the U.S.

VS: Yes. Yes.

PS: Can you tell me more about your personal opinion about that outsourcing of jobs to India?

VS: Oh, I'm all in favor of it in numerous ways. The fact that there is outsourcing has enabled U.S. companies to economize on their costs, and they are now able to do things other than what they would have done if outsourcing had not been available. This outsourcing is a further indication that we do live in an inter-connected and, as they say, globalized world. Further, we here in the U.S. outsource people in Bangalore or in Hyderabad to do things for us. But people there are buying equipment and stuff from us, from U.S. companies, in order to fulfill their own requirements [for the] kinds of things that they are doing for meeting these job demands. So just to talk about outsourcing without understanding that there are flows of money, skill, capital, labor in both directions and goods is an incomplete view of this phenomenon of outsourcing.

PS: So India doesn't have its own resources for creating technical equipment?

VS: Correct. So the computer programmers are in Bangalore, but they are using computers which are made in the U.S. So machines go there and services flow in this direction.

PS: Okay.

VS: So just to look at one part of that equation without looking at the other is an incomplete story. These are all ways in which, I think, the Indian community is going to be able to represent itself to the broader community. The Indian community in Minnesota, or in the U.S. for that matter, is a very privileged community in many ways. Many of them are very highly educated in terms of formal education. They earn good incomes, significantly higher than median U.S. incomes. So they are a privileged group, and with privilege comes, in some sense, obligations and duties. So this is part of the way that I see it.

The India Association has been existence for thirty years, for over thirty years, but we remain a very small group, a very small association, with only a small number of members. Our strength, I think, lies in the fact that we are a well-educated group. But the fact that we are very small in terms of membership is one of the challenges that the India Association faces. The challenge is: how do we capitalize one's strength, build cohesion, build a sense of community, participate fully in the life of this country and this nation and this society here in Minnesota? Those are the kinds of things that excite me, that I'm pleased to be part of. [I'm] pleased to be working with my colleagues on the Trustee Advisory Council, and I enjoy doing all these things.

PS: What is the membership of the India Association of Minnesota right now, as you understand it? What's the quantity of members?

VS: To my knowledge, the paid membership, in the sense of those who pay the annual dues or who are the "life" members, numbers just about 300 or so. So out of a total community, the strength of 25,000 individuals, that really is a small number.

PS: Right.

VS: Of course, many of these members are family memberships, so that number, 200 or 250, is a small number.

PS: But even probably still wouldn't create more than a thousand people if they were all families.

VS: Correct. Yes.

PS: What do you think the major deterrent is for people to join as a member? What stands in the way of saying, "I want to be a member?"

VS: [Sighs] I think many people of Indian background when asked, they are really not very knowledgeable about the existence of the India Association or what the India Association does. Many people of Indian background identify much more closely with people from their own

linguistic backgrounds or their own state provincial backgrounds. There's a great deal of comfort element to it. There's a great deal of sort of, you know, the same kinds of social events, the same kind of language, the same kind of food, the same religious and other observances, so there is a natural affinity with that. So they don't sense the need to "join" the India Association. If they want to come to the Festival of India in October or want to come to the Festival of Nations, they can easily do so without becoming a dues-paying member.

PS: Right.

VS: So, in that sense, the India Association does not provide any tangible sort of outcome or service for the twenty-five dollars that somebody might pay for an annual membership fee. That has, I think, served as the main deterrent for raising the membership.

PS: For that generation of young people who were born here in the United States or grew up primarily in the United States of Indian-born parents, are they a group that has an interest in being in the India Association . . . people like your son, for example?

VS: I think increasingly so. When my son was growing up, neither he nor many of his contemporaries had, at least to my recollection, any huge interest in knowing about India.

I should, of course, say the following: along with the India Association, there's another organization here called SILC, which is the School for Indian Languages and Culture. My wife, for many years, and I have been involved in that. Our son took Sunday classes or Saturday classes held at SILC, classes in languages. There are classes in Hindi, in Bengali, in Marathi. There are numerous language classes. There are classes in Indian history and sort of general Indian civics information. There are classes in yoga now.

So our son, when he was growing up, took classes at SILC, so he had some Indian connection. And then our visits to India every couple of years, our son would certainly enjoy those visits. But my sense is that increasingly young people feel a greater need for some form of ethnic identification. I think that has created a need for many young people to join the India Association, and we are certainly trying to encourage more young people to join the India Association. There are several younger second generation people who are now members of the board of the India Association. So these are all ways in which I think the India Association is going to be a thriving organization. This young blood, young minds, young enthusiastic people, this is all wonderful. My sense is also that there are many in the second generation who are studying, going to school, writing master's theses, writing doctoral theses, on aspects having to do with Indian society or Indian culture, and that is another part of this ongoing interest in trying to understand this phenomenon of Indian migrants to the U.S. and the extent to which they have become part of mainstream society.

PS: From your point of view, do you see that your second generation, the young Indian American people who were raised here primarily of Indian immigrant parents . . . have they gotten more Americanized or more Indianized or is it a mix?

VS: I think it's a mix, but there are some sort of interesting aspects to this. Many young people in their teenage years often don't particularly share their parents' preference for food or for music or for movies.

PS: Right. That's not teenage behavior alone! [Chuckles]

VS: But when these people go to college, for example, in many major universities and colleges in the United States, there are many student groups, and the Indian student groups have been quite active in many universities. My son, for example, when he was in medical school, participated in a musical performance at his medical school, which was all of the students were students of medicine, and they undertook a huge production, musical production. I think it was wonderful for them because it brought them closer to each other.

PS: Were they doing Indian music?

VS: Yes.

PS: Oh, okay.

VS: There was Bhangra music and things of that sort. That's when many of them more seriously listened to Indian music as opposed to when they were growing up. If their parents were watching Indian movies on the VCR [video cassette recorder] or DVD [digital video disc], these kids would immediately leave the living room and go up to their own rooms.

PS: Right.

[Laughter]

VS: So I think in the second generation, the younger generation, there's a greater sense of this ethnic Indian identity. This is true at many, many schools and many colleges and universities. The Asian student, the Indian student group, is very active. Indian music societies are very active on many campuses. So there is a much greater sense of that identity. It seems, at least to us parents, the older generation, that when these kids were growing up, they wanted to shy away from the Indian identity, but when they are now young adults, they seem more eager to embrace it. And it's wonderful! I enjoy that immensely.

PS: So do you think the India Association will play a role for these young people as they get a little older, settled in and have families of their own and all that?

VS: Yes. Yes. Yes, I'm confident of that.

PS: Do you think SILC had something to do with that?

VS: Oh! I think SILC played a very important role in that. The attention, the care, and the dedication that SILC, over the years, especially those people who taught Indian languages at

SILC . . . I think the attempt to foster a sense of history, a sense of culture, a sense of heritage, a sense of language has been very important to young people.

PS: As you said already, one of the goals of the India Association was to be Pan-Indian, all of India in one organization.

VS: Yes.

PS: Have there ever been times when there has been a controversial issue that came up within the organization and people tended to separate along lines of their region in India or their language group or their religion of choice or any other of the differences? Is that a good question? [Chuckles]

VS: Oh, I think it's a good question. [Pauses] Two, three years ago, right after 9-11 [September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in New York City and Washington, D.C.], there was this inter-faith gathering which took place here in the State Capitol where people of different backgrounds, people from India, people from several countries in the Middle East, people from other parts of Asia . . . These are all immigrant Americans, people who love the country which they have now adopted, but people who share a love and affection for the country of their own birth . . . the sense that one can do both without there being any conflict. That, I think, might have had the potential of creating some tension, but I'm happy to say that I don't think any of that tension came. So I don't have an answer to your question.

PS: Okay. But within the India Association itself, at board meetings or anything like that, was there ever some group saying, "I think we should send money for flood relief to Bihar," and everybody else says, "Oh, no, no, no. We should sent it to Bangalore instead," do things like that ever come up?

VS: Well, what has come up are discussions of whether this India Association should participate, get involved, in political matters. But, that has not been a major discussion. The India Association was created as, primarily, a cultural, social, educational organization. There are people on the board or in the membership, you know, who have allegiances or loyalties to one political party and to the other, so the politics of it has remained quite apart.

PS: Okay.

VS: On matters such as the earthquake in Gujarat or the Hindu Muslim riots in Gujarat a couple years ago or the cyclone damage in Orissa a few years ago . . . No, I don't think there has been any sort of disagreement among members of the board when some such natural calamity has arisen or has taken place in India. I think people in the community have joined to offer as much assistance as they can.

PS: In terms of financial assistance?

VS: Yes. On the other hand, this is what one would expect. So, for example, in the Gujarat earthquake a few years ago, the major financial contributions to the relief from the Gujarat earthquake damage came from people here whose background is Gujarati, who are from Gujarat. The same was true when the cyclone damage took place in the state of Orissa or the earthquake damage in Maharashtra a few years before that. That's to be expected and is, in some sense, natural. But I think the board of the India Association has seen this as calamities or events which have required it to play some role in an Indian sense.

[Tape interruption]

PS: It's been a common occurrence within the India Association when there's a natural disaster in India that there's a rallying around to help raise money for that.

VS: Yes.

PS: And that's seen as an appropriate role for the India Association?

VS: Yes.

PS: How about other things like building a school for poverty-stricken children in India or a hospital or a society for the blind or for prosthetic devices for people. There's like a thousand charitable things that could be done in India—or a million probably. How has the India Association defined itself as, "We help with natural disasters but not with the other stuff?"

VS: No, I don't think the India Association has, at least to my knowledge, sort of thought through this in as systematic a manner as your question suggests. What has happened, it's important to note, is that there has been a large number of non-governmental organizations, and many of these NGOs, as they are called, are sort of one issue or one problem oriented NGOs. There have been NGOs which have addressed the problem of literacy in India, NGOs which have addressed the problem of providing safer water for a group of villages. So many people here identify with some issue or problem in India and have sought to work with some NGO to address that problem.

So the India Association, as an organization here in Minnesota, has not gotten itself involved with any specific charity or project or activity in India. Which is not to say that they ought not to be or they shouldn't be or they may not be in the future. They might well go that way. But members that I know personally, for example, who go to India fairly regularly and some of those who are now sort of recently retired individuals that go to India for a couple of months, three months in the winter months, they work with some agency or charitable organization helping on women's education or family planning or some children's group. There is enormous need in India, as it is in many other countries, for these kinds of individuals and work.

PS: Right. Well, there's enormous need here.

VS: But the India Association has not itself gotten involved in that. When there's natural calamities, like there was an earthquake or cyclone damage and so forth, there is an emergency nature to it, so there is a relief nature to it, and it's [unclear]. It's one event, so the India Association has found it easier to garner support within the community and within the broader community to raise funds, money, for such relief activity.

PS: Let's say the cyclone in Orissa . . . How does the India Association decide what entity in India to give the money to? You don't just give it to individuals, right?

VS: No. No. We have sought to work with official relief agencies. In India, the main agency which does this is called the Prime Minister's Relief Fund. They set up something called the Prime Minister's Relief for Cyclone Victims. We have sought to provide money to such organizations. The India Association has also provided money and support to the Indian Red Cross, which then works with victims there. Now, in the post 9-11, post Patriot Act legislation, I think this matter can be quite tricky, as one would think, because there is no guarantee that some organization in some part of the world is not a front for some terrorist organization.

PS: Right.

VS: So I think we have to be much more careful as time goes on in choosing the right kinds of organizations, in choosing organizations which have a good track record where there is a long history, so we are sure that the money is going to the purpose for which it is intended and none of the sort of "bad guys" get any of the money. It's a valid concern.

PS: Yes. What quantity of money are being raised for these relief efforts in American dollars? Do you remember the dollar amounts raised for some of these?

VS: Oh, I think, for the Gujarat, well over \$100,000 was raised.

PS: Okay. We're talking a major amount of money.

VS: Yes, I think that's a significant amount of money.

PS: Even though it's raised primarily by Gujaratis, the check, if you will, comes from India Association of Minnesota, from the bank account of the India Association?

VS: Well, yes and no, in the sense that the India Association in its own internal accounting sort of creates these sub accounts, so the money is channeled through that. So people make their checks out to India Association, but write in the memo line that this is for the Gujarat Relief or this is for some purpose.

PS: Okay.

VS: I think the India Association's financial record keeping has been very, very good. I, myself, have never been treasurer, so I don't know about the exact details. But my own sense is that the

India Association keeps its accounts in excellent order. There has never been any question raised.

PS: India Association has been an all volunteer organization all of its life, never had a paid staff person at all.

VS: Correct.

PS: The longevity of this organization is really quite astonishing. It's nearly forty years now?

VS: Just over thirty years.

PS: Okay. What keeps it going? What's the spark that keeps this thing juicy over that many years of volunteer effort?

VS: Well, it's interesting that you raise this question, because we have been talking about the exact same issue in the Trustee Advisory Council. Since the Indian community is quite large, in order to keep this association going, in order to take care of things like mailing, in order to get announcements out, in order to collect dues, send the newsletter out, all of this kind of stuff, it is now becoming much harder, much more difficult for members of the board to be doing this. So we have, in fact, suggested as part of this long-range plan that the board should think about some part time person that we hire to do much of the sort of regular, day-to-day, "tedious" parts of this. For instance, I mentioned to you earlier the India Association phone directory.

PS: Yes.

VS: That took an enormous amount of time to build this directory. Now, to update it with a much larger community living in the Cities, we need some professional help to do this. I remember during the work of creating this directory, my friends and colleagues in the India Association and I who worked on this, we worked every Saturday for an entire year on this directory. Let's say it was an enormous undertaking. So, now, the job of updating it, it's not possible for volunteer, non-paid people to do this.

PS: You could do it but you wouldn't have a life.

VS: Yes, that's right. This is not an association with a great deal of cash at hand, so I don't think we have the money to hire a full time person. But some paid help would certainly go a long way towards taking care of some of the mechanics and the day-to-day and the month-to-month aspects of the work of the India Association. So that's one of the challenges facing the India Association. I don't have a solution to that.

PS: That's a big one.

VS: It is a big one, yes.

PS: That's something that the trustees are looking at, envisioning some solutions for that possibly?

VS: Well, we have talked about it. I'm not sure we have any solution to it, but we certainly have talked about it.

PS: In terms of India Association continuing to be an all volunteer organization, that might not be the vision for the future because the new leadership coming up doesn't have the hours or the time or the will to manage so much volunteer time?

VS: Correct. But the board of the India Association, I think this year, has been very efficient in its allocation. What the board has done is that primary responsibility for a specific event on the calendar of the India Association is given to one or two members of the board. Then they can recruit other people to help them organize and get this event going. Those other people that they recruit need not be on the board.

PS: Oh, sure.

VS: So a couple of board members can sort of focus on one main event, and it is then not taxing on everybody to do this. I think that has been a wonderful sort of organizational innovation of the Board of the India Association.

PS: So specializing and then delegating to certain individuals certain events?

VS: Correct. Correct. The calendar, you know, is becoming more and more full. There are increasing demands on the India Association. We have talked about these various big events: the annual dinner, the Festival of Nations and so forth. A big demand on the work of the India Association comes from schools, from high schools, from elementary schools, who want speakers to come and talk to students as part of raising diversity awareness and cultural sensitivity, who want speakers to come talk about India or about Indian Americans, and that is also something which the India Association has been doing much more frequently. And it's not just schools, both elementary and secondary schools, but even workplaces. I remember, for example, when I was president, I went and gave a talk at Control Data to talk about diversity issues. So there are increasing demands for these kinds of things, and the board which is composed of, you know, twenty-one wonderful people, they simply don't have the time to do this.

PS: They can't do it all, yes. Is there an effort to recruit the other members who might pay their dues but not come to board meetings because they're not on the board, recruit them into doing these tasks? How does that happen?

VS: Specific board members, people who are on the board, and people who get on the board or who run for election to the board . . . The India Association has a Nominating Committee, so this Nominating Committee comes to the annual, general meeting with a slate of candidates to be on the board. The Nominating Committee tries to pick people from all parts of India, picks younger

people, more middle-aged people, men people, women people, so it seeks to represent the Indian community as best as it can. But it turns out, as is true in many organizations I'm afraid, not all members of the board work equally hard for the success of the organization.

PS: Right.

VS: Some get on the board, but then after a couple of months sort of don't do as much as they had said they would do or they thought they would do. There are numerous reasons for this. It may be because of family considerations. It may be because of travel or work and so forth. So these things happen.

But when a specific board member, let's say, is given the primary responsibility to organize all the booths as part of the Festival of India . . . That one or two board members can then approach their friends who are not members of the board but maybe members of the Bengali community or the Gujarati community who can assist them, people that they have known, have been friends with so they can work efficiently together. The board is a twenty-one member board, but effectively it turns out to be a larger number of members working. That has been a wonderful thing that the board has been doing.

PS: If you could recruit more members to active volunteering, it would probably help the organization have a bigger reach, right?

VS: Yes, absolutely. Absolutely.

PS: So the trick is to find some reason why they need to contribute to a membership in order to be a volunteer, because they could volunteer without being a member.

VS: That's right.

PS: How about the more recent immigrants, the folks that are coming here on short term work contracts and things like that? Has there been any efforts to involve them in India Association and have they worked?

VS: Yes, I think there have been attempts to involve them. I'm not sure I can say to what extent or how strongly. But my sense is that, yes, people in the Nominating Committee or others who come to know of such kinds of individuals who are here on short term assignments, two, three years on these so-called H-Visas . . . We see many of them come to festivals, Festival of India and so forth, and many of them are younger people with younger children, so the younger children might, for a year or two, take classes, Sunday School or Saturday School classes at SILC. So they have every opportunity to connect with the India Association. But since they can go to the Festival of Nations or the Festival of India without becoming a dues-paying member, they're not part of the membership roster.

PS: Right.

VS: But they are certainly connected with the Indian community. On the other hand, my own sense is that many of these younger "temporary" people, oftentimes, they form a subgroup of their own. Their interests and their outlook, oftentimes, is more transient as opposed to those among us who have a much longer term stake in the Indian community here in the Twin Cities. So our interests are different. And in my own personal sense, my wife and I, as we have gotten older and we meet many young people, new people, we don't have the energy to make friends in a social sense with many of the younger people who come to Minnesota. So our core group of friends remains, you know, people that we have known for many years. And I suspect the same thing is true for many other people. The downside, of course, is that the younger people who are here on temporary visas sort of find themselves within their own cohort groups. And they might feel a sense of alienation because they are not able to connect with the older generation of Indian Americans who have been long time residents of the Twin Cities. So I guess that feeling might go both ways.

PS: Right. I don't have a lot more questions of things that you haven't covered already, but is there anything else that you'd like to tell me about?

VS: Hmmm . . .

PS: Do you want to pause?

VS: Yes.

PS: All right.

[Brief tape interruption]

nere are ? VS: In response to your question, there are a couple things which come to mind. In several major cities in the United States, the Indian communities residing in those cities, for example in Indianapolis or in New York City, many local Indian people have raised money to endow professorships at local universities. So, for example, the Indian community in New York City raised money to endow a professorship in honor of an Indian American professor at Columbia. The same thing has been done at several other schools. So the India Association here in Minnesota, as part of long-term thinking, might be able to raise money or might want to think about raising money to endow a professorship at the University of Minnesota or at any of the local colleges, somebody who might be involved in Asian studies or having to do with Asian Indian affairs or with Indian American relationships, whether it's in history or in political science or in linguistics. It doesn't matter really the academic area.

The second area where I think we can do better would be in more charitable work. I think the India Association has not been as involved in helping the less fortunate members of society here.

PS: When you say, "less fortunate," you mean Indian people here or anybody in America?

VS: Anybody here in the Twin Cities. So that's another area where I think that the India Association might play a role. And, finally, there are many of us who came to this country, you know, twenty, thirty years ago, and as we have aged and as we become older, in our retirement years, are there things that the India Association might be involved in which might better serve the older generation? There are lots of opportunities, lots of things that the India Association can see itself doing. But what it can do is constrained by number of people who are actively involved, number of members, the amount of money that it has, and the time that . . . And the fundamental determinate of the success of any organization is, after all, the people in that organization. So if the people want to do things, then I'm sure they will be able to do all kinds of wonderful things. Does that answer your question?

PS: It was an open-ended question. [Chuckles]

VS: It's been wonderful for me, personally, for my wife and I, to be Indian residents here in Minnesota, to be of Indian background. We have felt at home here. It has been a wonderful life for us. We have made wonderful friends, both in the Indian community, in the Bengali community, in the broader Indian community, and in the broader community as a whole. I've been an enormously fortunate man. I consider myself very, very lucky and very, very privileged. Whatever I've been able to do in terms of membership or contributions to the Indian community. it's been my privilege to have been able to do so. And it's been a privilege to meet you as part of this project!

PS: Yes, I've enjoyed it myself. Anything else that you want to say in closing?

VS: No.

.ch for your i **PS:** Well, thank you very much for your time. I appreciate it.