

Interview with Ram Gada

Interviewed by Polly Sonifer

**Interviewed on December 7, 1994
at Mr. Gada's New Brighton home**

PS: Good evening, Ram. How are you?

RG: Good, thank you.

PS: First of all, can you tell me a little bit about the part of India you came from?

RG: I came from western part of India, Gujarat.

PS: What town were you from?

RG: I grew up in Kutch, which is a district of Gujarat, at a place named Bada, which is a small village of about 2,000 people.

PS: And tell me about your family there?

RG: Well, my mother and father and two brothers and two sisters.

PS: So, you are one of five? Are you the oldest?

RG: No, I am the middle.

PS: That's a good place to be. (laughter) And what did your father do?

RG: My father was a manager in Bombay.

PS: So, did he live with your family?

RG: No, he used to come and visit us once a year.

PS: How was that?

RG: In those days, a shortage of housing in Bombay, so the men used to go to work and the family would stay behind.

PS: And how did your mother manage with five kids by herself?

RG: She managed; she was a hard working woman. With our help as we grew up with pitching in everything.

PS: Did you have servants in your home?

RG: No.

PS: Did you have extended family around?

RG: Not really. I had a grandfather who lived with us and that's about it. We had a lot of neighbors and friends.

PS: So, your native language is Gujarati?

RG: Our speaking language at home was in Kutchhi, which is a dialect; it has no script. But, it most resembles the Sindi language, because Kutchhi is located pretty close to Sinda. When we went to school, we learned Gujarati, and that has a script.

PS: Tell me about your early schooling and things like that? Did you go to public schools or private?

RG: Yes, it was public schools up to the third grade. From third to seventh grade, I went to semi-private school, which was again free. In a way, private was a free education. I studied in my village where I grew up to seventh grade. Then, that was all there was; there was no high school at that time in our village.

PS: So, what did you do after that?

RG: After that, I went to Songadh in Saurashtra, which is a part of Gujarat to a dormitory school called Mahaver Jain Charitra Raynashram. Its a boarding house where you live on a minimum amount for fee, and I studied at Gurukul high school. In a way, I stayed in the dorm from 8th to 11th grade for four years.

PS: That's pretty young to be away from your family, wasn't it?

RG: Yes, at age 14. But, under the financial circumstances, I had to do that because these kind of hostels, or dormitories, are supported by the community. This is where the needy students can take advantage of it.

PS: So, your family was considered needy?

RG: Yes.

PS: What was that about? Was that due to your caste or your father's work or what?

RG: My father's work, plus my father's health. When I grew up, my father's health deteriorated, so he couldn't work. After my eighth grade, he was not able to work.

PS: And there was no safety net?

RG: There was no safety net in India.

PS: How did your family get along when they didn't have any income?

RG: The relatives helped, so that was the main thing. Plus, my mom worked in the fields. She raised a crop, farming in the fields. During monsoon season, we used to farm.

PS: What crop did she raise?

RG: She raised millet, staples like beans.

PS: When did you first start to think about leaving India?

RG: Not until the later part of 1963.

PS: And how old were you then?

RG: I was 23. I had finished my bachelor's of engineering degree at the School of Engineering. I was working at Premier Automobile in Bombay. I was there for about 3-4 months and I started thinking about going abroad. I couldn't really see much future. I thought if I could go abroad, I could expand my horizons with a better position.

PS: When you thought about going abroad, what would you do?

RG: Well, you had to get the college admission, and then you had to collect the money to support yourself.

PS: How did you do that?

RG: Again, a social network in a sense. There are some organizations who do provide loans and scholarships for proper, capable students. I applied for that help and got it, and some relatives also helped me. When I came in, I had only two quarters fees and two quarter's spending money.

So, I didn't have much money. But, I took a calculated risk. A friend of mine who had come over here to Michigan State University wrote to me and encouraged me to come. I had raised all those questions, "How do I support myself and how do I come?" He advised me to come during the spring quarter, go to school for one quarter, and then do a summer job. That way I could earn the money for the two remaining quarters.

PS: So, as a student, you were allowed to work?

RG: Yes, but only during the summer; not during the school year. So, I attended spring quarter at North Dakota State University, in Fargo in mechanical engineering. Actually, I had come for industrial engineering and I had admission at North Carolina University. But, I had a friend in Fargo, so my parents thought it would be a good idea to go someplace where I knew someone. So, that's why I came to Fargo. Also, I selected industrial engineering, but when I came to Fargo, the professor said that major would take two years to complete the master's degree. I did not have money for two years; only for six months. Then I would have to work, so I switched to mechanical engineering, which worked out pretty good.

PS: How long was that course?

RG: That was three quarters; nine months. So, I attended the first quarter, and second quarter, which was summer, I worked in Minneapolis. I did the engineering design at the Consulting Engineering Mche & Associates Company. At least, I knew how the business runs. Then, I went back to Fargo school again, and finished in nine months. So, the same company where I worked in the summer, offered me a job. I stayed with that company for 15 years!

PS: (laughter) That's easy! That's very easy! So, you arrived in the dead of winter in Fargo. I used to live in Moorhead; I know what that place is like in winter. What was that like?

RG: It was very cold, let me tell you. When I came it was

spring. It was not winter, but the temperatures were in high 40's and 50's. People were going in half sleeves and like that. But, I was trembling. (laughter) So, when I walked, people would say, "What a beautiful day" and in my mind, I was thinking, "Jeez, its so cold!" At 40-50 degree in India, that's so very cold. And, at the same time I came in the spring, there came a blizzard! And that told me what winter can be like in North Dakota. That blizzard dumped about 12 inches of snow even after I came. I arrived in February. That was quite a chore. But, I loved summer in Minneapolis. I came in 1964 summer and saw beautiful parks and lakes and they just impressed me. It was such a clean city. When they offered me a job, I decided, "I'm going to stay here."

PS: Was it your intention when you came as a student that you would stay permanently?

RG: No! (laughter) That's the typical plan for Indians. When I came here, I had accounted for only three years, study for one year and then I could do so-called "training" for 18 months. As a matter of fact, I had planned to do a Ph.D.. The idea was that after 18 months of a job earning some money, I will go to Ph.D. program, which never materialized.

PS: How come?

RG: Well, I started liking my job more and more and I thought I had to get more experience in the type of work I was doing. Then, in 1967, I got a permanent visa. At that time, US immigration policy got liberalized under President Johnson and permanent visa were very easily available. So, as soon as I got a permanent visa, I went to India to visit parents, and of course, got married.

PS: Before you go on to tell me about how you got married, who are some of the people you remember from early on in your time in North Dakota?

RG: I remember my landlord and landlady. I stayed in their house. They were very helpful. Also, I remember some other Indian friends over there and the Dean of the Department. I remember very well how he was able to arrange for me a loan, which I paid up within two months after I got the job. I got a nice letter from him saying, "There are very few people like you who pay up the loan in two months." Also,

when I came to Minneapolis, I had a landlady who was a Russian immigrant doctor in southeast Minneapolis. She was a very kind lady. I knew her and her husband very well. Also, I knew a co-worker, and I used to go with him in his car to his farm home in Medicine, near Mankato. Early on, I got a good experience with a farm and farm machinery and horse riding. I just enjoyed the summer. It was so beautiful. We used to go out and visit most of the lakes. There are many good places in Minneapolis. So, those are the earlier years.

PS: How was it language-wise? Any problem?

RG: No problem. Well, I learned in English medium in India after high school. Of course, conversation language was a little problem in the beginning because pronunciation and understanding slang and everything. But, as the time went by, this improved.

PS: How did you keep in touch with your family back in India?

RG: Back in India most of the contact was air mail letter. In those days, the letter used to come in five days very regular. So, letter was the main medium, as phone conversation was very expensive and we couldn't afford it at that time. We very rarely talked on the phone.

PS: So, we've got you through college and you went back to India to visit and to get married. Tell me about getting married.

RG: Well, as you know, in India there is no dating system, so there was no one waiting for me; no high schools sweetheart. So, it is through parents and acquaintances that people know you have arrived in Bombay. Mainly now, after I had come over here, my parents had moved to Bombay. People knew about it, so people checked our cross-references about prospective girls, and they checked out us; our family and everything. So, it goes mostly by the community, religion, caste. We visited a few girls and talked about it.

PS: And your family's religion is what?

RG: Jain.

PS: So, all the women you met were Jain.

RG: Yes, they were all Jain.

PS: And how did you decide which one you liked? How many did you meet?

RG: What we have is kind of a resume. We had about 25 resumes, and from resumes you make a first cut by certain parameters; based on background checks on religion or make phone calls and find our about so and so girls. I'm sure the girls parents do the same way about the boys. Then, based on certain things, you decide to do a mutual interview at some neutral place. You go and talk to the girl.

PS: Do you go by yourself, without your parents?

RG: No, with parents. But when you meet the girl you are by yourself, but your parents are meeting the girls parents and their relatives. Its kind of a social affair. So, they talk out each other to break the ice. But, the boy and girl meet in a separate room and talk about it. Also, pictures are exchanged in the beginning before you decide to meet.

PS: So, how many girls did you interview?

RG: About five.

PS: And how did you decide that Neena was the one?

RG: I think our tastes probably matched each other in conversation. Also, the family backgrounds and everything matched. When they do that, the most important perception is that the girl should come from a family that is having good family values.

PS: Is it part of the tradition in Jain religion to use astrology charts to match?

RG: Not the religion, but socially it is a very accepted practice. Our parents did read those astrology charts to see if they matched.

PS: Did you think that was important?

RG: No, I don't think so. Well, we went along. Due to

that, I didn't reject anybody or anything like that. But as parents have done those thing for centuries, they have done those charts. I just looked and talked to the girl.

PS: Was dowry a consideration?

RG: No.

PS: That's not part of your tradition to do that?

RG: Not in our community; it's not demanded. Dowry is there; it's whatever the girls parents give to the daughter, but nothing is demanded.

PS: So, they actually give the dowry to the daughter to take into her marriage?

RG: Yes. But, its not a pre-condition. Even in our community right now, there is no system of demanded dowry.

PS: But, it is sometimes given freely?

RG: Yes. Like a gift.

PS: So, you decided after you met Neena that she was the one and she felt the same about you?

RG: Right.

PS: How long was your engagement?

RG: One month before we got married.

PS: And you stayed in India that whole time?

RG: Oh, yes! I had a four weeks vacation and then I took six weeks leave. So, I had 10 weeks. Before we got married we had four weeks where in the American terms, we dated. We saw each other every day.

PS: Was that unusual?

RG: That's unusual, yes. But both parents were pretty understanding, so we went out every day. Yes, those visits were the talk of the town.

PS: Were you chaperoned on all these visits?

RG: No, we were by ourselves.

PS: Hum, that's pretty radical.

RG: Yeah, in those days, yes. But the engagement was done, so this was after the engagement.

PS: So, all those formalities were done. What is that like in the Jain tradition?

RG: Thing is, religion and social aspects are different. Religion wise, we follow Jain philosophy, but the social aspect is general Hindu culture. The social aspect is the same as Hindu aspect.

PS: What was your wedding like?

RG: Our wedding was great; a traditional Indian wedding where the bridegroom goes to the bride's house. In this case in Bombay, there are no large houses, so they rent the community place. They call it wadi, for garden, which is a large place. It is decorated and everything. The bride party receives the groom's party. Then there is a Hindu style wedding around the fire. People come and have a feast. It is a typical Indian wedding.

PS: How many hours did yours take?

RG: It takes a long time! (laughter) It was almost six hours. By the time we left the house until we got back it was almost ten hours.

PS: Did you start early in the morning?

RG: We started around noon.

PS: Big day. Did you as a couple take a honeymoon or a trip or anything?

RG: We didn't take. Normally people nowadays do take, but we didn't take. Due to our schedule, we had to do the visa for her to get American visa. So, we had to stay in Bombay. Another reason was I thought when we came back we would fly through Europe and we thought we'd take the honeymoon there rather than in Bombay.

PS: Did that work out?

RG: That didn't work out because after getting married, now we had a two-sided family. Everybody wants to invite you to come to their house and visit and have a feast. It is very customary in India. So, we were busy visiting the friends and families on both sides now. So, time went into that. They were insisting, "You don't go to your vacation. You spend the time with us. That is most important." So, we stayed there and then we forgo the Europe vacation, which we haven't done yet! (laughter)

PS: So, you took your honeymoon to America!

RG: Honeymoon to America, that's right!

PS: What was it like settling back in here? Did you have a sense at that point that you were going to stay permanently?

RG: No, no, not at all. We had a plan that we'd come back to India after five to seven years. If we had some money left, we would go to settle down in India earlier. My wife did not settle down, because we thought we would go back. We almost went back in 1981. At that time in 1980, I decided I wanted to start my own consulting engineering practice. That was my dream that I will become an independent consulting engineer. I will have my company name and I will do my own thing. I moved up in the company where I was in 15 years to vice president, but our partners didn't agree. So, I decided to start my own. So, in 1980, I started my own company; a consulting engineering firm.

PS: Tell me the name of your company.

RG: Gada and Associates. We provide the mechanical design and engineering services to institutional, commercial, retail, and industrial clients. So, still we were thinking to go even after I started my own company. In fact, we went to Bombay and purchased our own flat over there.

PS: What year was that?

RG: That was in 1981.

PS: So, you started your business in 1980 and then in 1981 you went back and bought a flat in India.

RG: In fact, I went there and made the deal, but the deal fell off. So, the next year, Neena went and she was successful in purchasing a flat.

PS: What did you do with that flat?

RG: Well, the flat is still there! (laughter) As a matter of fact, that turned out to be a nice investment, because in that flat, my father and mother-in-law live. The values of real estate in Bombay have increased quite a bit, so it turned out to be a nice investment. So, whenever we go to India to visit, we stay with them.

PS: Its like going home, because you are going home. So, you bought the flat, and how was the business doing?

RG: My business was doing fine. I had no regrets leaving the other company. I'm very satisfied with the business I have. The biggest satisfaction I have is the direct contact with the client and the satisfaction of completing the job and being your own boss.

PS: What changed your mind about going back to India permanently?

RG: We were thinking about our children growing up, and they should have some education in Indian culture, language and history. We wanted them to take education over there for two or three years. Then, we always could come back. But, when we went there to inquire about education, we were very much disappointed. We went to the town of Baroda, where my younger brothers and sisters live now, and the children could be there growing up with their cousins and the extended family. But, we were very much disappointed with the educational system over there at that time. The good schools were so crowded that it was difficult to get admission into the good school. So, we thought it was best to stay where we are, where our children were born and where we had lived most of our lives. We consider Minneapolis/St. Paul one of the best, even within the United States. Life is very good for us here. So, we decided to stay.

PS: And how old were your kids at that point?

RG: It was 1982, so Ketan was 8 years old and Lisa was 13 years old.

PS: Had they been back to India?

RG: Oh, yes, several times. That is the one other thing we have done in that we try to take our kids to India. Either I go or Neena goes or we go together, every three four years and we take the children. So, the children are very much tuned. They know their grandparents and their cousins and the conditions in India and Indian life. When we go there, our children don't have any problem; they are well-versed with the general life.

PS: Did they pick up enough language?

RG: Yes, my daughter has picked up very well; she communicates very well. My son has a little problem yet. He can't speak fluently, but he understands well.

PS: What did you speak to them at home when they were small?

RG: That's part of the mistake we made. Neena and I speak to each other, we speak our dialect, Kutchhi, but when we talked in our American neighborhood, we talked mostly in English. That might be one of the reasons they never picked up our language. Even though we sent them to School for Indian Language and Culture for several years, so they would learn the language and alphabet. But, they never picked up very much of the writing of the language or fluently speaking the language. Most of the people speak in English here. So, if we had to do it over again, I think we would speak with our children in our native language right from their childhood.

PS: Then, how would they pick up English?

RG: They say that children pick up very well going to school and from TV and radio. Many people are doing that nowadays. Children are like a sponge; you throw at them anything and they will absorb it. (laughter)

PS: Your kids were born here. Tell me their names and when they were born.

RG: Lisa, my daughter was born in 1969 on February 24. Ketan, my son was born on July 17, 1974.

PS: Did Neena stay home with them?

RG: Neena stayed home from work during their early childhood.

PS: Had she been college educated?

RG: Yes, Neena had a BA and graduate degree in arts from Wilson College, Bombay University in India.

PS: Did she ever work in her field?

RG: No, she never did. After the children grew up, she started working now in my company with us.

PS: Is she doing artwork?

RG: Not artwork, but administrative work in the office.

PS: Did you see any differences in the childrearing practices and the roles that you and Neena took as parents that were different from how it would have been if you had stayed in India?

RG: Well, its a very demanding job for parents here to bring up the children here. For one thing, there is no extended family. Also, there is not much so-called community. Kids in India in a way grow up by themselves. Mothers don't have much problem because the grandparents are at home or there is aunt or uncle or neighbors. Grandparents are missed over here very much. Having a husband after work, is also a help for the mother because she gets tired looking after the children all day. Its different than if the children were brought up in India.

PS: Which system do you personally think is better?

RG: I think there should be some kind of a combination of both ways. If grandparents are there in a children's life, there is a very important role they can play. They have a different perspective on the child, whereas the mother is doing a lot of housework and childrenwork, and other work, she can be very much tired out. Grandparents can provide a good role for the family. I would prefer having grandparents in the family.

PS: So, you would like to mix the two systems together?

RG: Mix the two systems together in bringing up the children. Then, again, I'm talking from the Indian perspective of extended family where the grandparents live together. Whereas in the system over here, most of the time, grandparents live independently. Its quite a bit about individual freedom over here. Mothers here may not prefer the role of grandparents in bringing up their children. I think its a condition or culture of where you live that's also talks about that thing. Somewhere along the line if grandparents are around, I think that's very important for children.

PS: Did living here in the United States affect the division of labor within the family?

RG: Yes. Definitely. Here, everything you had to do in the house, there are no servants or anything like that. Even though machines and automation is available, still someone needs to take care of them. Each one has to pitch into the daily routines.

PS: How did that feel for you?

RG: It was an adjustment. Initially, it was very difficult, because it was a role that had not been played. Slowly, you get adjusted because there isn't anybody else but you two in the family. Now, we are well-adjusted into the role of sharing.

PS: Can you talk to me about any Indian associations that you were part of forming?

RG: Early on, we formed the Gujarati Samaj, which includes those who come from Gujarat and speak the Gujarati language. We have our own culture and heritage. To maintain that, we used to get together at Navratri and at Diwali functions. In earlier years there were not too many Gujaratis, so the time went by. When the need arose, people were meeting on an informal basis. So, in 1976, we formed by-laws committee and made a formal organization. Since we made the by-laws, constitution, and since then, that organization is working. It is one of the best organized groups in the Twin Cities. Even before Hindu Mandir and Geeta Ashram were formed, there was this samaj.

PS: So, was that primarily a social and cultural, not

religious?

RG: Yes, social and cultural.

PS: I know that being Jain is a very small sub-set of Indian religious groups. Can you say more about Jain?

RG: Jain is a very old religion in India, but numbers in the population is very small. Less than 1% of Indian population is Jain. Jains are only found in very few states in India. Parasnath Jyostoreal as early as 927 BC, which was the 23rd Thirthankar. The last Thirthankar was Mahavir. Most of the people know of Mahavir as the founder of religion, which is not true. Now, Mahavir was the same time as Buddha, who started the Buddhist religion. But, Mahavir was just a follower of Jain. What he did was to reform the Jain religion at that time. Jain religion puts large emphasis on non-violence towards any living being. As such, Jains are vegetarians and they practice non-violence very much in their day to day life. So, here, the same reflection applies here in the Twin Cities; there are very few Jain families. So, in earlier years, we used to meet together at friends houses to observe the Jain rituals and festivals. Also, I helped to start a Jain Center of Minnesota, a religious organization, in 1987. Prior to that, we used to do the functions and festivals on an occasion basis.

PS: How many people are in that Jain organization right now?

RG: Right now there are 20 families. Actually, Jains are 40 families in the Twin Cities area, but only 20 are members of the organization.

PS: And how often do you meet?

RG: Once a month; the second Sunday of the month we meet at Hindu Mandir. We try to talk about philosophical discourse and celebrate festivals. We try to teach and instruct the youth about Jain religion. It is very difficult to instill the values and philosophy of Jainism when surrounded by the mass culture here. We have books and talk in simple language about the principals and values of Jainism.

PS: Is it distinctly different from Hinduism?

RG: In some form, it's different. In outer form, it's not very much different. The social aspects are Hindu. But the philosophical aspect is a little bit different.

PS: But, most Hindus are also vegetarians, right?

RG: Not all Hindus are vegetarian.

PS: That's not even a requirement of Hinduism or a suggested practice?

RG: Let's put it this way, Jainism has a tremendous impact on Hinduism as far as vegetarianism goes. Jains were very strict followers of non-violence, so over time, Jainism is the one who spread vegetarianism among Hindus. As a matter of fact, statistically, I don't think even 50% of Hindus are vegetarian.

PS: Oh, really?

RG: The influence of Jainism on Hinduism is on the strict non-meat eating.

PS: You follow Jainism very closely?

RG: Right.

PS: Has it been challenging to be in the business community?

RG: No, you can find. You have to be very disciplined about it, and you have to get by with what you can get. But, if you want to follow, you can follow. It is difficult sometimes, but it can be followed. The dietary rules are very difficult, you know.

PS: Are there rules in addition to not eating meat in any form?

RG: Yes, there are. We don't follow here, but back home, my parents and other relatives don't eat potatoes, beets, garlic or onions or anything that grows in the ground. Also, they finish eating before sunset and won't eat anything at night. Many of them will drink hot water all the time. Some of the things, we don't follow here because there is no need for it. The hot water custom started in India a long

time back when there was no water purification system. When the sadhus or monks used to travel from village to village by foot, they used to get sick, so they started the practice of boiling the water. Since that practice has remained of drinking only boiled water.

PS: Since you don't get sick that way. So, you started the Gujarati Samaj and the Jain Association. Are there any others that you were involved with?

RG: I was very instrumental in reforming India Club which started in 1973. It was dormant until 1980 when a group of people who were very active said, "Somebody else needs to take charge of India Club, otherwise we are going to fold the group." So a group of people came, my wife and myself joined some other families. We really revived India Club. Then, we re-wrote the by-laws to their current form. Since then, I have been active to promote its growth. So, since 1980, India Club has progressed very well. That's the one organization which is secular and goes beyond religious, cultural and language lines. Its main purpose is to assimilate Indians with the culture at large, while at the same time people from the major community can know the Indian community and culture. So, India Club has been very active at Festival of Nations and provides the Festival of India and provides speakers in schools. It publishes a newsletter. So, India Club has made very much progress. And this has not been one individual effort; there are so many people helping with progress since it was revived. It runs democratically; every year elections are held and nominations are done and people are brought in from the different walks of life who are interested in Indian culture. That's a very nice thing about India Club. Also, I was instrumental in the School of Indian Language and Culture (SILC). I served there as a teacher. My wife is one of the founding members. I work with her to support that organization so SILC has done good for the community. Lots of young children come there and learn Indian languages, history, arts, applied sciences, music and dance and other things. Again, we are part of all these organizations to support and enlarge and make them progressive so they can survive.

PS: Are they all thriving?

RG: Yeah! I think they are all thriving. These are the institutions where our youth in the future can sustain those

organizations because they get the tangible benefit out of it.

PS: When you were a teacher at SILC, what did you teach?

RG: I taught Gujarati and history of India. It was a very rewarding experience to talk to these young people. It was helpful to talk about how India was in the past, because now days in the media you see a very bad publicity about India.

When you talk about how India was during the Golden Period, and how India got where it was prior to the British era or time, you want to tell them what happened. They need to know the reasons. You want them to feel proud of the culture where they parents came from. One thing SILC has done is taught the children self-respect and self-esteem about who they are and where they have come from. They are not what they see in the news media about the Indian culture at this point.

PS: Have you seen any times when there were conflicts between different parts of the Indian community?

RG: Yes, I have seen conflicts here. Earlier conflict developed between the religious community. Originally, there was a group who believed in the Geeta Ashram, and then Hindu Mandir developed. Friction developed between these two groups.

PS: What was the issue there?

RG: Issue was Geeta Ashram follower's interests was Geeta as preached by their founder, Hari Harji Maharaj. Other religious followers wanted to do a temple where all Deities of Hindu religion can be worshipped. There were some philosophical disagreements between the two groups. Then, they departed, so some community members stayed at Geeta Ashram and some came to Hindu Mandir/Society. Since then, even though the different paths of both groups have expanded and they are doing a very important work in the community to provide religious aspect.

PS: So they resolved that conflict by just splitting?

RG: Yes. I think that was the right solution because there were some major philosophical differences. That was the right course at that time to separate.

PS: Are there any conflicts that arise between the different language groups? Aren't there several samajs?

RG: There are several samajs. As you know, India has so many states and so many have different languages and customs and so forth. The people who have grown up over there find it nice to talk their own language. They have distinct culture. So, all cultural groups are there; the Marathi, Tamil, Telegu, Malay, Bengali, Orriya. So, these are the linguistic groups. I don't see anything wrong with those groups, because India is a very strongly diverse. And in that diversity is a unity. There is an Indian culture, but at the same time, every state has its own culture. People do enjoy going to these linguistic cultural groups. At the same time, there is a time for the national activities. All these linguistic groups are part of India Club and part of SILC school and part of a religious groups. These all cross the boundary lines of the states.

PS: So, there are times when they are separate and times when they are together.

RG: Because, there are separate distinct cultural things with every samaj. For example, Gujarat Samaj celebrates Navratri festivals with Garba and Dandra Raas folk dances. While the Malay group have their own cultural activities which are very distinct like Onam.

PS: Are you still active in all three of these?

RG: Yes. I am active in all three.

PS: Are you still teaching at SILC as well?

RG: No, the last two years I have not been teaching. The advantage is to turn-over and get the other people involved, which is the main idea of the whole thing. But, when there is an urgent need, I go there.

PS: What do you see as the main benefits and disadvantages of belonging to the various Indian associations?

RG: I don't see any disadvantages. The advantages are you as an individual provide whatever you can do for the community, either to the group or the whole community you give your support. One thing, by joining and second, you do whatever voluntarily you can do to strengthen those

organizations. Always there is a need to provide some help and volunteer time to these organizations. Time is a very essential commodity and very rare to come by. One thing we notice is that in Twin Cities, there will be 100 families going from one organization to another and supporting those causes.

PS: Are there any other professional or community groups in which you were active, which were not specifically Indian groups?

RG: Oh, yes. I was in my professional society which is called, American Society of Heating Refrigeration and Air Conditioning Engineers with the acronym ASHRAE. I joined ASHRAE in 1969 and have been active since then. First I was the energy committee chairman, then I was treasurer, then secretary, vice president and then also president of the chapter. I also helped the Board of Directors over the years. ASHRAE is a national society which is involved in furthering the arts and sciences in heating, ventilating and air conditioning. It has 50,000 members all around the country and Minnesota chapter, whose president I was in 1981-82, has about 700 members. So, I am involved with a professional society. Also, I have served in many energy committees in vocational technical schools. There was the Red Wing Energy School where I used to be on the advisory council. Also, I was involved with Anoka Vo-Tech.

PS: Those were volunteer work?

RG: Yes, those were all volunteer work.

PS: Wow. That's a lot of time.

RG: One thing, we Indians are not involved in politics. Some of us thought there is a need for Indian to get involved because in this country, so far we have done all the cultural and inward development activities. We thought we need to get politically involved in this country because that's where our concerns can be addressed really well. So, this year, we formed Indian Democratic association, and called it MAIDA (Minnesota Asian Indian Democratic Association.) We made the by-laws and constitution and affiliated with the DFL party of Minnesota. The charter was approved in June, and this year we took a very active in the campaign and in sponsoring candidate forums; getting people involved in the Democratic party.

PS: So, these were people from the Indian community.

RG: Yes, people from the Indian community. Also, we worked for the candidates.

PS: Would you say that most of the Indian community leans towards being Democrats or not?

RG: Not necessarily true. We also have a Republican chapter for Indians too.

PS: Which one is bigger?! Not a fair question!
(laughter)

RG: Its hard to say because we just started this year, and its hard to say which one is bigger. It doesn't matter which one is bigger, as long as Indians as a group take part in the political process. In this country, it is a two party system, and people should join on their individual convictions.

PS: So, your goal is just to have people be politically active?

RG: Politically active is one goal. Personally, we like the Democratic party, so we chose to start MAIDA.

PS: Makes sense to me. The next section is about work history. You said you worked in India for a few years before emigrating?

RG: No, I just worked there for six months at Premier Automobile. That company assembles the Fiat car in India.

PS: And you were doing design work there?

RG: Development work for six months.

PS: That isn't very long to work in India.

RG: No, its not in India. So, my adult life I have worked here. I know more about working here than in India.

PS: So, if I asked you to compare and contrast them, can you?

RG: In my short experience there for six months, at that time, Indian working conditions had lots of bureaucracy, lots of hierarchies. That's all I can say; you can't have a judgment after six months.

PS: You obviously didn't care for it or you would have settled in.

RG: That's right. Its a funny thing, you know, where I was an engineer my immediate boss said when he hired me, "I hope, Mr. Gada, that you will be here for a while with us." I said, "How come?" He said, "All three people before you in this chair have left the place in six months or less and gone abroad." (laughter) So, I don't know if he was having a premonition at that time. I had not yet thought about going abroad. So, when I told him four months later that I was planning to go abroad, he was just flabbergasted. (laughter)

PS: You already told me a bit about your first job in the summer while you were a student. And that company was called?

RG: That company is a private consulting engineering firm called Michaud, Cooley, Hallberg, Erickson and Associates.

PS: That's a mouthful.

RG: That's correct; there are four partners.

PS: Any vivid memories about working for them? You must have liked it to stay for so many years.

RG: Oh, definitely. The company was great; lots of freedom. I grew with the company and the company's growth was tremendous. I was hired as a design engineer and became a project manager. Then I was vice president. I started the energy management department over there after the oil embargo in 1973. When the energy crisis came, energy conservation was the buzz word. I and this company were very progressive in this area; doing a lot of energy conservation work in many buildings, especially schools, colleges, hospitals, and shopping centers. Based on the company, I have traveled all around the country visiting these various places and we had come up with a retrofit design how to save energy from the existing operations.

PS: Did you compete with companies like Honeywell then?

RG: No, Honeywell was our helper. We specified their products, so we as a design engineer specify the product or system and then a contractor installs that. So, Honeywell could be one of the control contractors.

PS: Is the company you started, Gada and Associates, similar in terms of what it does for clients?

RG: Right.

PS: Are you now competing with your old company?

RG: In a sense yes, in another sense no. The old company is one of the largest in the state of Minnesota, and I have stayed small, so the clients are different.

PS: How many people work for Gada and Associates?

RG: When I started we had about ten people. Right now we have four people. I like it small. We have stayed small the last seven years.

PS: When you were working for other companies, did you have a sense of being accepted by your peers and supervisors?

RG: Yes. Definitely. I don't see any discrimination or anything like that; we were treated very well.

PS: You never experienced racism or any kind of prejudice at all.

RG: As a matter of fact, it is surprising how after I was hired there, there were another four Indians hired later. In a small company at that time, there were five Indians working. Broadness and responsibility, all of those Indians have gone out to start their own businesses.

PS: I'm going to ask you speculate here for a minute. How do you think your life would have turned out differently if you hadn't come to the United States?

RG: It's hard to imagine because I always have faith in the individual spirit. It definitely wouldn't be the same as what I have here. But looking at the background over there, it would have been a hard life over there, but I

think it would have worked out fine. I know people whom we know in India who are my age, they have all succeeded in whatever they are doing. For example, my brothers and nephews, they have done very well for whatever efforts they are doing. It would be a different life than here, of course. It's hard to say what the future holds. At the same time, I don't have any regret from coming over here. I think I have enjoyed and prospered and grown as time has gone by. This is one of the best countries in the world I know, particularly in Minnesota. Minneapolis/St. Paul offer one of the best lives; it is very peaceful, not very large or too crowded. Yes, it is cold, but I think you can cope with it. (laughter) Sometimes, I think it is a mental condition. I like the cleanliness and society at large and close to the natural areas. I think we enjoy the life here. In earlier years, we were thinking to move East where many of my friends live. So we went on a sightseeing vacation tour of Niagara Falls, Chicago, Cleveland, Rochester, New York City, Washington D.C., Philadelphia, and Pittsburgh. After firsthand experience of their city life compared to the Twin Cities, we decided against moving East.

PS: So, you decided to stay in Minnesota. How many years has it been?

RG: Thirty.

PS: The next section I'd like to talk about is retaining and passing on your cultural values. What do you think are the most important values that you wanted your kids to get?

RG: One thing would be that even though we have our individual freedom, have consideration for others. To me, it is important to have consideration, tolerance for others. That's the most important philosophical aspect of Jainism or Indian philosophy. Also, family values I'll pass on to them. One other thing I'd say to them, and this applies to anybody, would be "do the best with what you've got." Don't complain about what you don't have. If we can do that, I think our children will be most happy people. Those are the philosophical aspects I want to pass on.

PS: And how do you teach them that?

RG: I think it is continuous by our own example. I think we set example to them by giving public service. Neena and myself have given to the community because we have obtained

some reward from the community, whether in India or here. Whatever we are today, our efforts are there. Also, there are efforts by others, whether in the past or current, we owe them that. At the same time, in return, we want to pass it on to others. That's the same kind of feeling we want to pass to our children. Our growth or enjoyment or whatever we are getting here today, our efforts are there and necessary, but there were always other people who helped create these conditions. Our duty is to give back and give those to our children. That's worthwhile.

PS: Do you see ways that your children have mixed Eastern and Western cultural values?

RG: I'm think our children have done both. We are proud of our children. They feel that they are part of this new culture and I think they have done very well. They participate in American events and themes, while still being part of Indian activities too. I'm proud to say that the children have a nice instinct to join the two together. They cut through the tangles of the dogmas and everything and get to the right point. In that aspect, they have done very well.

PS: Do they practice vegetarianism?

RG: Yes. They are now. So far, they did not, but they went to a seminar last July at the Jainism Youth Center for three days. There they heard very powerful lectures. They had studied Jain philosophy and they believe in everything, but they did not practice too fully. But, now they are converted to vegetarianism.

PS: So, where would they eat meat and other things? Not in your home, right?

RG: No, never.

PS: At their friends houses or at school?

RG: School, mostly or at friends houses.

PS: Are they both finished with high school now?

RG: My daughter has already a bachelor's of arts degree from Marquette University in Wisconsin. And my son, is in his second year of college in business school at St. Thomas

University.

PS: Does he live on campus?

RG: Yes, he does.

PS: When it comes time for your children to marry, what do you expect will happen for them?

RG: That's a very typical question in an Indian family. My daughter right now is looking for a partner. She has complete freedom. We try to help her, if we can find someone, but the final would be in her hand. That's why she's still looking and trying.

PS: But, you feel like it is her responsibility.

RG: It is her responsibility. Our responsibility is to provide the facility; to facilitate if we know somebody, because connections or networking is very important. It is the same in India; the parents did the same thing. They found out about this person and see if a connection can be made. There was no open dating system, but this kind of cross-connections were made. But here, our duty is the same kind of a thing, but here our daughters do date and they want to find appropriate partner if they can. So, again, its completely up to them.

PS: In your mind, what would be an appropriate partner for your daughter? Would it need to be someone who was Jain?

RG: That would be better, but I don't think that's a condition. Anybody which can fit with her ideals can go.

PS: Would they need to be Indian?

RG: Not necessarily.

PS: So, it would be okay with you if she married a non-Indian?

RG: Yes, it would be okay. I think the most important part is that they can live and co-exist together accepting the values of each other at the same time they live married life. They would be always distinct. Our daughter is Jain and she had some values. At the same time, her partner will have some values. As long as they have respect, I think we

are encouraged by many Indian boys or girls who have married American partners. I think they are living very good. They are doing very well. We don't have any doubt in our mind that our children can find a partner who is compatible with their values.

PS: So, you just trust them that they'll do that?

RG: That's all. Life is an experience you have to go through. Nobody else can do it for you. You give some warnings and some instructions and tell-tale signs. But they are the ones who have to go through and accept the responsibility.

PS: What if she decided she was going to marry somebody that you really thought was a bad match?

RG: Then, we would definitely warn her and advise her. That's why the parents are here, to show them the pitfalls, based on our perception and experience. Sometimes, getting married is an emotional thing. We get carried away and things can happen. That's our duty. Even though the truth is sometimes very bitter; sometimes people don't like the truth. Our responsibility as parents is to tell the children the truth, if we find it.

PS: And if she still insisted she wanted to marry this person, would you let her anyway?

RG: Yes. We can't control them. They are adult. And as we say in the Indian term, karma, you have to suffer the consequences once you take the action. Before you take the action, you study and contemplate it and take advice. Still, if you want to go for it, there will be consequences. What can you do from a practical viewpoint as a parent. Even if you say "NO", so what?

PS: Yet, when you were a child in India, if your parents had said, "No, you can't marry that girl; she's not good for you," you wouldn't have married her, right?

RG: That's true.

PS: So things have changed, right?

RG: Things have definitely changed! (laughter) That's again, when you look at Eastern society at that time, not to

displease your parents was very important. Individual freedom was sacrificed for the sake of the family, while here, the individual freedom is utmost, regardless of what the family thinks. Those are basic cultural differences.

PS: It sounds like you have adapted to the American way.

RG: Yes, the American way because we live here, we are part of the culture here. There is a compromise here a little bit. Your parental authority works in certain areas, but not in others. That's a part of the culture.

PS: I bet that was a big change for you to make.

RG: Well, no, because you are conditioned because all my adult life, since age of 23, I am in this country. So, slowly, slowly you are going through that aspect. But again, I also think my mother's insight when I was leaving the country, I was amazed when my mother told me, "If you find a suitable partner over there, go ahead and marry." So, my mother was so broad minded even at that time when I look at that point. But, I would not do anything to hurt her. Its kind of mutual. Even though she gave me all the freedom, I wouldn't do anything to hurt her.

PS: But, there weren't very many young women over here, were there?

RG: Yes. That's true.

PS: Do you see any ways that the Indian community has changed over the years, in terms of gender. I know that in the early years, it was mostly young men and very few women. Or, the religious or economic groups that have made up the Indian community. How has that changed over the years?

RG: The Indian communities have changed for good. It has grown quite a bit. For one thing, the number has jumped quite a lot.

PS: What's the number right now?

RG: Well, in the Twin Cities according to the 1990 census was 8,000 people of Indian origin. But, when we came as a student at that time, most were bachelors on the campus. There were very few married families here. After 1967, after immigration liberalized and things like that, the

family numbers increased. Also, in earlier years, Indian were settling down, there were earlier in their professional jobs; they were just getting started. In the past years, they have grown very nicely in their businesses and jobs. Some have started new industries and grown professionally.

Now, their children are growing up and going to the schools. They are doing very well also. Indian, by and large, have grown economically, educationally, professionally. So, Indians are considered one of the most affluent classes, nationally as well as in Minnesota. Minnesota is not the exception. Their children are doing very well; they are going to very famous universities and progressing educationally very well.

PS: Who are the oldest members of the Indian community now? Are they your generation?

RG: No, they are one layer above us.

PS: And how did they get here?

RG: They came as students. They are even older than us, but they also came as students. Nowadays, some people do come on immigrant visa without studying. In earlier years, they all came as students. I came in 1964. The earlier ones came maybe in 1958; six years earlier. Many of them are retiring now.

PS: Have many of those in your generation brought their extended family over; like their parents?

RG: Not really. They don't want to come because those people are mostly settled very well in India. At this point, they don't to enter in the later period of life; they want to stay where they are.

PS: Has it been your experience in knowing people that when one member of the family comes, a lot of other siblings come?

RG: Siblings are another aspect; that's true. Siblings do come. They see that this is one of the greatest opportunities to grow in this country and that has happened here. Many siblings have come.

PS: Have your siblings come?

RG: No. They are all in India yet.

PS: That takes us nicely up to the last section about maintaining family ties in India. You said you go to India every 3-4 years.

RG: Every 2-3 years; at least, my wife goes very regularly. (laughter) She's there right now. We went last year, and were there in 1988. We do maintain good relations with our relatives. My brothers and sisters and her brothers and sisters, parents are all there.

PS: Are your parents still living?

RG: My mother is. My father passed away in 1976.

PS: He had been sick for a long time then.

RG: But, I'm glad to say that he did visit us in 1972 and we took him all around. It was an interesting thing; he was here for two months, and he was healthy like anybody here in this country. That was a very nice thing.

PS: What illness was he suffering with?

RG: Emphysema.

PS: Here the air didn't bother his lungs?

RG: He came in summertime. This is a tragedy of life, but when he was young, he was a chain smoker.

PS: It catches up to you doesn't it. Is that something that the Jain religion forbids?

RG: As a matter of fact, as a religion, any bad habits are forbidden. Jain religion emphasizes not to become a slave of any habit. Bad habits are all these kind of things. When we were children, we used to go to Sunday School to the monks and one thing they try to teach the children is to "take a vow" not to do certain things. The vow thing was so popular. It was accepted practice. That vow thing was an act of self-discipline. It makes your will power stronger. Once you make a vow, you are more likely to stick with it.

PS: What kind of things did children vow not to do?

RG: Not to drink tea, or chew the beetle leaf or smoke. Smoking is not normal in children, but as they grow up it becomes a problem.

PS: What is the beetle leaf?

RG: That Pan that people chew that makes a red lips. It is a leaf that people put in beetle nut and cardamom and it makes their lips red.

PS: Does it make you high?

RG: A little bit, I think. Nothing is a drug, but it is not good for your mouth. People do like it, its a very popular thing in India. Its not good for your teeth.

PS: Do people just suck on the leaf?

RG: Chew it.

PS: So, its sort of like chewing tobacco, but not really.

RG: Not like a chewing tobacco because you add other things into it.

PS: Do people make it themselves or do you buy it at a store?

RG: You buy it at the store. There are lots of corner stores that sell beetle leaf. Its very popular, but the Jain sadhus said right in the beginning that the desire for the masses is so much. The vow thing would work. We tried not to use pan in the younger ages.

PS: You, yourself, tried not to use pan?

RG: Yes. Still I don't care too much. Once in a while I will join in with somebody, but other than that, I don't do it.

PS: Your lips don't look very red tonight. (laughter) You must be on the vow again. You were talking about the vows. What other kinds of things did children vow not to do?

RG: Not to speak a lie, not to make fun of anybody. Anything which you would like to do, but you don't do it for

a certain time. We would also vow to do a little fast, like only eat once a day for a few days. When we went to bed, we would chant God's name three or four times before going to sleep. These kind of vows are there. You may have heard about Mahatma Gandhi's vow when he left for London for higher study. His mother was Jain follower, she said "I don't feel very comfortable about letting you go to England because you will learn a lot of dreadful things." She made him take a vow from Jain sadhu not to drink alcohol, not to eat meat, and not to touch women. Those were his three vows. Mahatma Gandhi tried very hard to keep those three vows.

PS: Did he succeed?

RG: Yes, he did succeed. He had to suffer for that, but in those days in 1880, there were not too many vegetarian places in London, so he had to walk miles and miles to get vegetarian food. While doing those things, he found there were some vegetarian people in that country. There was a vegetarian society at that time, and the great, famous people were members of that society. He also joined that. He was very high on vegetarianism in those days. He didn't touch liquor. He had a lot of temptation. He was with friends, but always he remembered the vows he had taken for his mother. That vow, and the willpower, helped him become a very strong person. In South Africa, when he was thrown out of the railway compartment, he thought "I have no hatred for the man, but the hatred created by the color discrimination had to be fought." And he did fight. That's why he was very civil, and very much a gentleman with the British people. He said, "I don't have anything against the British people; I want to change the system." So, he fought against the system; he always loved the people. So, the vow thing is a self-discipline and I think that is very important in ones life.

PS: I agree with you. So, we were talking about keeping in touch with your family in India. Do you still write to them?

RG: Yes, we write regularly. I think that honor goes to my wife. She writes first and then she makes me write. We talk nowadays on the phone, which is very handy; at least our relatives all have phones now. So, we talk, but at the same time, we still do write.

PS: Do you feel like you are connected enough with your family in India?

RG: Yes!

PS: You don't feel like you are missing out on something by being so far away?

RG: Well, yes, in a way you always miss out. As you know in India, the family ties are very strong. There were several occasions when the whole family gets together. Only we do that whenever we go there. During the year, we do miss out on those aspects. We also miss out on people growing up.

PS: Retirement plans; you are 53 now. Have you thought about retiring yet?

RG: Yes, I'm 53. But, I don't think I'll ever retire. I will slow down, but I don't think I'll ever retire. I may retire from the earning life; but I don't think I'll retire from the activities. What I'd like to do, and I've talked to Neena about this, is join the Peace Corps for a couple of years of that. Our plans are just to do some work for others; that's our retirement plan. I don't think we want to go golfing or anything like that. A good active retirement is what I want.

PS: Do you ever think about going back to India permanently?

RG: No, I don't think we would ever go permanently. The reason being that I have now lived more years in this country than in that one. Our children are grown up here and they will stay here. This is our home, just like another home. We might do part here and part there. Maybe in the winter we will go down there where there is warm weather, and come back here in the summer and fall. We may do that.

PS: Is there anything else that you want to talk about that I haven't asked you yet?

RG: Not really, you have covered it pretty well. One thing I do appreciate your effort that you are doing for the Indian community with this oral history. It has been a tremendous project which you are helping with to India Club.

We have all worked for this over the years, and I think this is coming along very well. I think we always learn the lessons from history. We are always curious about how things were. Hopefully, future generations of Indians can learn, or at least look at it how it was when we started the Indian community in the Twin Cities. All the history interests me very much. History is a part of ones life, even though we live right now. We always can learn from the history. So, this whole project that you have done, I thank you for that. I think the Indian community as a whole is thankful to you. Your enthusiastic effort has propelled this thing very much.

PS: Thank you. It's been fun for me, I enjoy it a lot. Thanks!

India Association of Minnesota Oral History Project (Phase 1)
Minnesota Historical Society