

## Interview with Aparna Ganguli

Interviewed by Polly Sonifer

Interviewed on December 6, 1994  
at Mrs. Ganguli's Shoreview home

**PS:** Thank you for inviting me tonight. This is really nice. First of all, can you tell me what part of India you came from?

**AG:** I'm from West Bengal. We speak Bengali, and its eastern part. If you know Bangladesh, its the eastern part of Bangladesh. I was born and brought up in Calcutta.

**PS:** Tell me a little bit about your family there in Calcutta.

**AG:** I come from a family of five children: two brothers and two sisters. My next sister lives in England and the other three live: one in Calcutta, one in Bihar, and one in West Bengal, in Haldia. He's a chemical engineer. My brother, a medical doctor, is in Calcutta. My father passed away in 1991, January. I was in India in December 1990 and I came back and within 10 days he passed away. He was sick and I got to see him, but when I came back he was all right. But then, I got the news. I didn't go back. My mother is living and we have a house in Durgapur. That's an industrial town. My mother is now living with my other brothers and sisters because she can't live by herself.

**PS:** What kind of work did your father do?

**AG:** He was a mining engineer. He was really very much British influenced. He went to mining school at the time when the British were very much dominating the country. If you could see him, you would know that he had a lot of British influence. We were a little bit western in our family that way because he loved British culture. My mother's family was very academically oriented. My grandfather on Mother's side was a professor of English at a college there. In that era, there was a lot of political uprising. My uncles were inclined toward Indian patriotism. So, I saw two different cultures.

**PS:** Clashing within your own family?

**AG:** Not clashing, but the idealism from my uncles from my mother's side were more like revolt. One maternal uncle became education minister at one time. Now, he is really in that Marxist political thing.

**PS:** And, there was your father being very British?

**AG:** He was not pro-British, but he liked the culture of going to restaurants, having friends who were English people. When my father was mining engineer, he was posted where he had only British friends.

**PS:** How was his work affected when the British left?

**AG:** It went better because he got promoted and became Chief Engineer. So, it didn't affect him that much. But, he was not visibly against the British. My mother's side is really very academic; not very rich. Professors at that time didn't earn that much. I could see the difference when my father came, he was going to the movies and restaurants and here and there. But, my aunts were modestly living when my father visited my mother's parents' house, they enjoyed the outings.

**PS:** Did your mother work outside the home?

**AG:** Never.

**PS:** Did you have servants in your home?

**AG:** Oh, yes. Lots and lots. Why not? When we were growing up I remember that my mother never had to do anything; someone was cooking, another cleaning the house, one doing the groceries. Since I am the oldest, my youngest sister is ten years younger than me. So, I remember from when I was five or six, I remember there was always a maid-servant who would take care of the littlest one. Always, my mother would feed and dress that child, but the maid-servant would take care of the child. My mother didn't have very much formal education. That's again at that time she was a very good student. My uncle and my mother were one and a half years apart. My uncle became first class, first in English and went to Leeds, England. He was a very good student; a gold medalist. My mother had the same capability, but she didn't go to school. She couldn't because everyone from my

grandfather's side said, "Marry her off. Give her something else otherwise she'll be a professor like you!" My mother says all those stories that her father wanted her to go to school, but British school, "No. You cannot go there." That's when they negotiated an arranged marriage for her to my father. It was a very good match at the time; he had a job as a mining engineer. But my mother also had an academic orientation. When I was a very young child, she always read books to us. She didn't do that much housework, but the other things she did. I remember learning my first math from my mom. She introduced me to Tagore; I still memorized so many of Tagore's poems. These things my mom gave to me.

**PS:** Tell me about your education?

**AG:** I did all I could do there; getting a Master's in mathematics.

**PS:** Did you go to public or private schools?

**AG:** Private. At that time, public school was not where anybody went unless you were very poor. Indian public school system is not like anything here. Everybody goes to private school. When I was growing up, going to English school was not that fashionable, because still the British has just left. It was a pride not to go to English school. We wanted to learn in our own language. But now, it is the reverse. Now, all my brothers' and sisters' children prefer to go to English medium school. After the British left, English is more important now. Just right after they left, I think it was important to come back to our own language system and there was all the translation of the books. But, I don't think it worked. So, I didn't go to English school, but private school for sure.

But, my father was a mining engineer and posted in some remote places with no good private schools available. So, when I was 10 years old, I came to Calcutta where I was born. I used to travel with my family, and off and on we were in Calcutta. But, since I was 10 years old, I went to school in Calcutta and stayed with my grandparents.

**PS:** So, your father moved a lot from city to city with his work?

**AG:** Generally, mining is not in cities. You have to

commute. There is little social interaction. Still a lot of British people were there. But, I remember I never had many friends when we lived in those places; I just stayed home and spent time. It was bungalow living and I was not allowed to go that far. There are a lot of status problems and all kinds of things.

**PS:** Status problems in what sense?

**AG:** For example, if you are chief mining engineer, you cannot associate with the miners.

**PS:** So, they were a different caste? Too low of a caste?

**AG:** Right. Not everybody was very educated. Maybe there were other problems I realize now. Some drinking problem or something. Since they didn't have money, what other things could they do? I remember when my mother's friend's husband was drinking a lot, so my father said, "Don't go to their house." It was very much an industrial area, not much social interaction.

**PS:** Did you go to college immediately after you finished high school?

**AG:** Yes, at that time, it was tenth grade, and I stayed five years with my grandparents. Then, I went to college. Here you call it a dorm; there we called it hostel. It was the girls' hostel at Lady Brabourne College in Calcutta. It was an all girls college. Sometimes when I talk with my daughter, its unbelievable the way we stayed there. Its a big house with a big wall. Inside we stayed and there was a visitor's list. Only the few people who had the signature could see us. (laughter) Only visiting hours were Saturday and Sunday for my relatives. My aunts were designated visitors, so they came and signed. There was a custodian who looked at the signature and called me, "Aparna, your visitors." So, you'd come and there were some small compartments in which we could visit. They weren't allowed to come inside the dorm rooms.

**PS:** So, you were sequestered?

**AG:** Yes! That was the hostel. When you crossed the road, there was the college. Its still there, and sometimes I feel I want to go back and see if they still have those regulations.

**PS:** How did they feel at the time? Did they feel restrictive at the time?

**AG:** I felt restricted. Yeah!

**PS:** So, you didn't like it even when you were 16 years old?

**AG:** I didn't like it. No. It was really strange. Now I think back, and we were used to that. When you crossed the road and went to the college, you could not go outside the college if you were a hostel student. But, there were some commuters also.

**PS:** Was it your parents wish that you live like that?

**AG:** At that time, getting admission into Lady Brabourne was a big pride. Government helped. At that time, all of West Bengal students take the same test and evaluated on the same standard. There was first and second division. It was a big test for ten years of studying. Having first division and getting into Lady Brabourne was a big deal. Not all girls get the chance. It was an honor.

**PS:** What were you studying at that college?

**AG:** Science, physics, chemistry, mathematics, biology.

**PS:** Those were all your majors?

**AG:** Major means equal emphasis on all four subjects. We had English and Bengali and Vernaculas (which is called the mother tongue.) We had those also, but the concentration of study was on the four sciences.

**PS:** So, you finished the bachelor's level there?

**AG:** That was actually two years college. Here you do four years in one college. At that time, we finished 10th grade at 16, then a two years degree by 18, then from there we actually had two years less education than here. Now, its been changed (in India.) So it is called intermediate science. From there I had freedom at the college I went to. I stayed at a hostel where I could leave from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. anywhere.

**PS:** So, you had more freedom?

**AG:** Lots of freedom. But you have to sign when you are going out and where you are going. At 6 p.m. there was a bell. The book where you sign in is taken away at 6 p.m., so if you don't come back and sign in, you have to give some explanation. (laughter) So, then I had my Bachelor's degree in physics, chemistry, and mathematics. From there, it was still in Calcutta, I went for three years for a master's degree. That's in Burdwan at a hostel also. When I finished, I got a job in a school right away before my result was out. Every time there was a big exam. Then, I taught in a high school.

**PS:** What subject?

**AG:** Math. Also, I included physics and chemistry.

**PS:** Was that school in Calcutta?

**AG:** No, it was in Asansol. I was the oldest child, so I stayed in Calcutta with my grandparents. Then, my second sister also did that. By the time, I finished school, she went to hostel. I didn't go to hostel when I was in school.

At the same time I went to college, my second sister went to school. My first brother was there at the hostel. The last two of the five children were too much for my grandparents. So, my mother decided to have a 2 bedroom flat in a city called Asansol so the other two children could go to school from there. So, that happened.

**PS:** So, your parents lived apart? Your father kept traveling.

**AG:** If it was possible, he came home, but he had his bungalow during the week, but the weekend for sure he came. So, my last brother and sister went to school from Asansol. By that time, I finished my master's, my mother was living in the flat. I finished my final in November, so I came in early December home to Asansol. One of my friends said, "There is a school that needs a math teacher very badly. Would you like to join?" I said, "Why not?" So, I went there the second week and started to work. It was kind of exciting. I never earned any money in school. None of my brothers or sisters worked. Here, as a student it is kind of common practice to work, but never there. I never worked. So, I never earned a single penny. It was really exciting getting a real job.

**PS:** And you were about 23 by then?

**AG:** I was 23. So, I stayed with my mother at home. It was awkward after that many years. At the time, my parents were trying to negotiate for my marriage. That took almost four or five years.

**PS:** It took four or five years to arrange a marriage for you? Why was it so hard?

**AG:** I don't know. When I look back, I don't know why it was so hard. Maybe I was too comfortable teaching and earning enough money. Many times, I knew that people blamed my dad, that he was not really trying hard.

**PS:** Did they offer you a bunch of men that you turned down?

**AG:** No, actually. I was in Asansol and most of the things are in Calcutta. You had to go to Calcutta and see that, and we didn't do it. I was busy working so somehow it got delayed and delayed. Another thing, I knew we had the dowry system. I told my dad, if someone wants a dowry, I'm not going to marry him. I had that kind of things in my mind. So, it really seems like my dad was not looking hard enough. I'm not sure.

**PS:** Please tell me how it was when you did get to meet the man you ended up marrying? What was that like?

**AG:** I knew by then that my dad was trying; he was going to this place and that place. Everybody says that my dad needed to have a son-in-law who was not from India; maybe from England or America. Actually, that's what happened. My husband and my second sister's husband were both working out of country. Maybe that's what, because I said that western attitudes were important to my dad. So, I heard other people saying, "Unless your son-in-law comes from another country, you won't accept."

**PS:** But, its harder to find someone from another country, because they are farther away.

**AG:** Exactly, farther away. So, my husband's dad, my father-in-law, and my father really didn't know each other. But, they had a common friend. Mukul was here studying. Actually, I got my master's degree in 1964, and Mukul came

here in 1964. He went back to India in 1970 after six years, finishing his Ph.D. program. Then, that common friend who was also a medical doctor (my father-in-law is also a medical doctor) said, "I know a boy who is coming from America and I know you want somebody from out of the country. You may want to look at this." My dad became interested. So, Mukul's family were in Calcutta and they were looking for right mates in Calcutta. Finally, ten days before Mukul left, my father-in-law came to our house. I was very unprepared. He came to see my dad, who wasn't there. I greeted him and talked with him. He went back, and then the whole family wanted to come.

**PS:** He must have liked you!

**AG:** He liked very much. My mother-in-law said, "You are the one he saw and liked very much! What he decides is best for Mukul because he liked you directly!" Mukul was here in United States for six years and it was my mother-in-law's pride that he didn't get married here. (laughter) So, that's the custom. I have to tell you the story of my youngest brother-in-law (Mukul's brother.) He got married with an English lady in India. (laughter) Things are so different. He lived here for six years, he went back and met and married and all those things. It doesn't have to be that way.

**PS:** Did you get to meet Mukul before you agreed to marry him?

**AG:** Yes. The next day whole family came; Mukul, his mom, his aunt, his sister, and we saw each other.

**PS:** Saw each other means what?

**AG:** We sat in the living room and I came and served sweets. I was there and they asked me questions. Mukul asked me a few questions. All of them were talking.

**PS:** How long did they stay?

**AG:** Two or three hours. Then they went back and right away the proposal came. Because within 10 days Mukul was going to leave. We got married on Friday, May 28 and he left the next Wednesday, June 3.

**PS:** So, you were engaged for about three days, right?



**AG:** Exactly! (laughter) Yeah, at that time it was hot in Durgapur. We left our apartment and went to our house in Durgapur. It was so hot- 99 or 100 every day! It was uncomfortable. When the proposal came, it said that within seven days we had to arrange the marriage. Having a daughter getting married is really a big thing for the brides' side. My parents both liked him and I did also.

**PS:** You liked him?

**AG:** What can you say? At the time, you looked at the degree, the education, the family background and all of those things. Sometimes, if he comes from a complicated family, means if its too big a family or too many problems, sometimes you think twice. We knew that you don't marry just the boy; you marry the family. Those things are really true that what kind of family you are going into is important. Because you don't know the boy. But, I really didn't think at that time, although I was 28, it was kind of just the look.

**PS:** Like something that you just knew? This was the right one?

**AG:** That's what it is maybe.

**PS:** What was your wedding like?

**AG:** It was a big wedding; a lot of people were invited in a short time. Everything was done. Mukul and I were both not the type to cut things short, so we followed all the rituals. Everybody didn't like that.

**PS:** So, you had a long ceremony?

**AG:** Long ceremony.

**PS:** How long?

**AG:** We did fasting from the morning, get up early and eat before the sun rises. Then, from there, you take a shower and rub turmeric on your skin around 10 o'clock. Then gifts came from their house to our house. Then, they came in a big procession. It was an advantage they were only 10 miles away. In the evening we started having all these rituals. It was a big elaborate wedding. It went until 2 in the

morning. Then, we got to sleep, but again, that's not the time when we sleep together. We just saw each other. The rituals were extending garlands, sharing the chalice, and the mantras. My father took my hand and put it on his hand and said, "This is my daughter. I'm giving her away to you, my beloved and my most precious thing. From now on, you will take care of her." From the boys side he has to say a lot of things. From the girls side, not too many things to say. Again, sometimes you feel like a commodity that is being given away. Don't I have anything to say here? There are some other sides also; its not just giving away. They also say, "The two of you will live happily together." These things get said. Sanskrit is another thing they sometimes don't explain; if you don't know Sanskrit, you really don't know what's going on. (laughter)

**PS:** So, you may be promising to do all sorts of things that you don't know you are promising? That's scary? (laughter)

**AG:** All mantras are in Sanskrit. Its hard to understand, but some priests explain them in Bengali so you know.

**PS:** So, the wedding happened and he left the next?

**AG:** Well, the following day, we had the red dot thing where Bengalis put the red powder (its called varmillion or something) on your forehead in your hair. Husband is supposed to put that on the wife's forehead; that happened in the morning. Also that morning we had registration when the marriage register came to our house and we got registered. That was necessary because I was going to come over here and the marriage license had to be done. Otherwise, people don't do it. Then, I went to their house. There was a big ceremony the next day, and that evening we slept together. Then we came to Calcutta because he was going to fly from Calcutta. We stayed in Calcutta for two or three days, and then he left on Wednesday. I went back and stayed mostly with my in-laws because they wanted to know me. So, off and on, I stayed with them. I came here in Minneapolis on 25th December 1970 at 12 o'clock midnight.

**PS:** What year did you get married?

**AG:** 1970. May 29th we got married, so it was seven months. Because he was an immigrant so visa and all those things. We were lucky. Now, it takes years. (laughter) At the time, it could have been within three or four months, but my in-

laws were kind of delaying because they wanted me to stay with them.

**PS:** How did it feel to be separated for seven months from your new husband?

**AG:** It was hard; real hard.

**PS:** Did you write to each other?

**AG:** Oh, yes. We wrote.

**PS:** Did you keep working at your job at the school?

**AG:** No, no, I quit.

**PS:** What was it like when you came here. It was December?

**AG:** It was December 25 at 12 midnight when I landed at the Minneapolis airport. The first thing was I didn't know my husband very well. All the while in the plane I was thinking about my family which I left. It was really a strange feeling; where am I coming? what is ahead of me? I wasn't sure.

**PS:** Had you flown before?

**AG:** No. That was the first time.

**PS:** What was that like for you?

**AG:** The first time when the plane took off, suddenly all that motion sickness. I was wondering what would happen because I knew some people get really sick. But, just for a while, then I got used to it. Then I found a friend who was also coming to her husband in New York.

**PS:** Was she another Indian woman?

**AG:** Yes. We were all dressed up with jewelry and saris and all those things. When I think back, why did we do all those things? I should have worn something comfortable!  
(laughter)

**PS:** That's a long flight!

**AG:** Long flight! Yeah! (laughter) Finally I landed in

the Twin Cities airport and it was pretty cold. Mukul told me it was cold and my parents were so worried. My father bought a thermal for me to wear under the sari. It was an all woolen thermal. I was so hot all the time in the plane.

But, my father said, "No, it will be below zero there when you land, so you have to wear all those things." It was very uncomfortable.

**PS:** So, Christmas time, 1970, you land in Minneapolis and move in with your husband who you hardly know. (laughter) What was it like getting used to living here?

**AG:** Actually, in the airport, Mukul took two or three Bengali couples with him to receive me. One of the ladies was my friend in the university when I was doing my master's. But, she couldn't go, I remember now, because she had a little boy. Others were there. I still didn't feel like I came here to stay. Just to visit, I thought.

**PS:** But, Mukul had a job, right?

**AG:** Yes. He had a job; the same job he still has been doing. He works at the university.

**PS:** In your mind, you felt like you were just coming to visit? Did it seem like you were really going to live here?

**AG:** It took me one or two months to realize that actually, that's it! I kept thinking I had just come for a short visit and then I'll go back.

**PS:** So, it didn't sink in?

**AG:** When we got married, Mukul said, "Maybe two years and then we'll go back to India." Maybe that's what we had in our mind, but it didn't work. This is my 24th year. And he came in 1964, so he's been here for 30 years.

**PS:** When do you think you realized that you were really not ever going to go back to India?

**AG:** Oh, I think in 1973 when my first child was born. In the meantime, we went back in 1972, May. At that time, Mukul started to look around for jobs in India, but it didn't materialize. He realized it was not that easy after spending so many years outside the country. He kind of changed his field and what he'd been working on. By 1973

when our first son was born, he kept on saying it would be hard to go back once a child was born for education and all that. By 1973 or '74, he started to look around here rather than in India. So, I realized, "That's it."

**PS:** Were you comfortable by that time?

**AG:** I had lots of friends here by that time. We have a good comfortable community; many close friends. It was better at that time than now. Many were having young children. We had common things. Right now we are the older generation. The newer ones who are coming, we cannot communicate with them that much because our values are different now. We really don't think we will go back. When the new people come, they come and look at it. They say, "Oh, so many years here. How come?" Really we don't have a real answer why we are here.

**PS:** But, when the new generation comes, they think they will go back to India?

**AG:** Yes Everybody thinks that way; very few come and right away say, "I'm going to stay here." Everybody has in the back of their mind that they will go back. But, by three or four years when you finish your degree, then you don't want to go back. (laughter)

**PS:** Do you sort of look at them and say, "I think they'll end up staying after while?"

**AG:** Oh yeah. They just don't know it yet. Although I think people are getting a little bit smarter than we were because they realize that maybe that's what will happen. When we came, everybody said, "we'll go back." But I don't see it now that it happens so much. One of our friends first bought a house, and we were so scared. "Why are you going to buy a house? Does that mean you are going to stay?" We thought "Oh, no. We're not going to do that. We are never going to buy a house." I remember friends said that, but everybody has bought a house now.

**PS:** How long did it take you to buy a house?

**AG:** We bought our first house in 1975. First in 1973 a few friends bought houses, and then others bought. Then, we kept on thinking, "Why not? Let's buy a house."

**PS:** Is this the house you bought, the one you live in now?"

**AG:** No. This is our second house. We moved here in 1988.

**PS:** Tell me about how your kids came along, when they were born and their names.

**AG:** In 1973, Suman was born. In Bengali it is pronounced "Shu-man" because we don't have the "s" sound in Bengali. That's a Sanskrit word. Our second child, another boy, was born in 1976. He was born on Thanksgiving Day, so we gave him a very fancy name: Suvaranu which means "white little particle." It was snowing that day. (laughter) Actually, my sister sent that name; it is also a Sanskrit name. That's a big name.

**PS:** Does he know he's named after a snowflake?

**AG:** Yes. He has a kind of pride about that. There is a good meaning of that and he is so much associated with his birth time. Actually, he wrote a biography once where he really nicely stated how he was born and how we named him (laughter). Then we learned our lesson; his was a big name. When Ina, our daughter was born in March 1979, we gave her a short name. She's 15 now. All the names came from relatives.

**PS:** What do you mean, they came from relatives? The relatives suggested the names?

**AG:** Right.

**PS:** Is that tradition; that you don't name your own children? That your relatives suggest names?

**AG:** No. We just asked a few names when I was expecting Suman. I wrote letters to my mom and my sisters and other relatives to send some names so we can choose. So many names came. But, Mukul, he decided Suman. He decided only one name. But Suvaranu came from the families; we didn't do the list every time -- only once.

**PS:** You got enough names the first time!

**AG:** So, Suvaranu came from my sister's list. Ina we picked from Mukul's aunt. She is very educated with a Ph.D. in philosophy and followed her direction in those things.

**PS:** Were you working outside the home when your children were small?

**AG:** I started to work when Suman was not born; I got a job on the St. Paul campus in the genetics and cell biology lab. I worked there till Suman was born. Then I took a leave of absence for three months. Then my mother-in-law came in July. He was born in April 1973 and my mother-in-law came in July from India. I went back to work. When my mother-in-law went back in November, I started to work part-time in the afternoons. Then, I quit. When he was two years old, it was very hard to leave him home. Actually, if you use full time daycare and work, sometimes, moneywise it's not worth it. So, I quit and I went to India to visit. I think that was October.

**PS:** Did you take him with you?

**AG:** Yeah. The whole family went, even Mukul. We came back in April after Suman was two years old. We could stay only three-four months. After I came back, I started to feel kind of restless. By that time, Suman was two years old and I always went to school or worked. I was kind of unhappy. One morning it was snowing, in February, and Suman wanted to play with me. He said, "Mommy, let's play." and I said, "No I don't want to play." I started to look in the newspaper at employment opportunities. (laughter!) Suman cried, "Why not, Mommy, why not? I feel so bad. Why don't you like to play with me?" I decided I would put him in some nursery or summer school and go back to work. I didn't like the way I was. Everything was fine, but I felt really restless. (laughter) So, Mukul said, "Why don't you go to school? That way you will be active in your field, but still have free time." I thought maybe it was a good idea. So, what would I study? So, I started to do some courses in computer science as soon as I came in 1971. I still have all those grade reports from 1971. I took another courses, maybe 12 credits, in computer science. I was thinking I might do my master's in computer science. Then, in the meantime, I got the job and Suman was born, and I kind of dropped that idea. By then, I didn't feel like computer science. I feel like so much time is wasted at the computer center with all those cards. When it was just Mukul and I, then I could stay there hour after hour in the computer center, wait for the run, and look at the program. Since I had taught in India, I really loved teaching. When I worked in the laboratory at

the St. Paul campus, I realized that teaching was what I loved most. So, I wanted to do something with the education field. I was told that I didn't have enough courses in psychology because in India my training is all in science. I had no humanities. So, I had to do those things before I could get a degree here in education. I thought maybe teaching in school was a possibility. If I do a Master's in Education, I would never be able to teach in school. I needed a BS. So, I started again, taking all the humanities courses. I sometimes went in the evening; sometimes during the day. Sometimes I took only one course per quarter. So, in 1975 I started when Suman was 2 and a half years old. Then Suvranu was born in 1976. So, I stayed home, but I always took courses. Then Ina was born in 1979. It was a joke with my advisor in Math Education that Aparna calls once in a while from the hospital and says, "I can't come because I have a baby." (laughter) It happened two times; when Suvranu was born Nov. 23, 1976 and my test was on December 6. He came two weeks early. All my children were born by C-section. So, my doctor said, Dec. 9, he would do the surgery. So, my test was on December 6. Everything was all planned. But, then Nov. 22, I had to go to hospital and he was born the 23rd. So, I was two weeks early. I called my advisor and said I might miss the test. But, I think I actually took it on time.

**PS:** You actually took it on Dec. 6th?

**AG:** Yes, I think so. I took it with the whole class, and everybody was saying, "Where is the baby?" I said, "Well, I couldn't bring him." So, I think I took it on time. I had called and said I didn't think I could take it, but then I did anyway. After almost 2 weeks, it wasn't so bad just to take the final.

And the same thing happened when Ina was born. She was born in March 20. I think my final was March 30. But, again, my advisor was kind of worried because Ina was my third child and by that time, I was really big. (laughter) They were all very big children; all at least eight pounds! (laughter)

**PS:** That is big! And you are not very big!

**AG:** That's why I had a C-section. Suman was 8 pounds, 13 ounces. That's a lot.



So, by 1980, I finished my BS in math and physical science education. Then, I took admission to graduate school and I got an assistantship. So, it was a good time. Still there were three children, but Suman started second grade already.

So, who took care of the children? I was not too much for daycare or baby-sitters. Many times it happened that Mukul and I shared. Sometimes he took Suman. When Suvaranu was born, it happened that I was in class and Mukul would take Suman and wait outside the class. Then I would take Suman and come home. We didn't need baby-sitters in between times. I'm not sure if money was the problem, or the culture. None of us thought about baby-sitters; it was always how we will do it. Because the concept of baby-sitter is not in India at all. People do it but not for money. There is no such service as someone who will take care of the children for an hour or two. Like a servant, they will stay the whole day at home and take care of a child, that is a different story. But, you ask somebody to stay in your house for two hours, this concept is still not there. I've seen that neighbor lady's girls will help, but that's a help.

**PS:** So, you don't pay them.

**AG:** Maybe you do some other way give them something, but not on an hourly basis. The girls here do so much baby-sitting. In India, people wouldn't like it that you take money and baby-sit.

**PS:** Do extended family members take care of children?

**AG:** Yes. They do. This is common. But you don't pay. I think its a good system that at least you have some option. But, we are not used to it. Even when Mukul was here for six years, he never thought in those terms. I was very much culture shocked when I found out that the mother does the baby-sitting for money.

**PS:** Did you have household help to assist with cleaning and all those things?

**AG:** No.

**PS:** So, you did all of that too?

**AG:** Right, yeah.

**PS:** That must have been a big shock; very different from how you grew up.

**AG:** Yeah! Very much. When I go back to India to visit with three children, and my maid servant was watching. And she said, "How many servants do you have there?" She thinks this is a rich country and everybody has a lot of money. I said, "Nobody." She was so surprised! She said, "Really?"

Then, my mother tells me not to say that because the servant will misunderstand that and wonder what kind of family I was married to. Because that's the way to have status. Then, the servants will blame my mother because she married me into a bad family where she doesn't have any help. This is a different way of thinking that they are not used to.

Another story is that in India, we never wash our dishes; always it is the servants. So, one day, I was watching the same maid-servant and how she was cleaning a big iron pot in which we cook. Sometimes when there are too many people in the family, we still cook over charcoal oven and a big iron pot. The rest of the time, we use gas to cook. If you cook with iron pots, it gets really charred. So, it takes a long time to wash the dishes. So, she has some tricks to clean that iron pot. She makes it shine like silver. So, I was watching her. She asked me, "What are you watching?" I said, "How you clean the pots." And she replied, "Oh, you don't have to do this. You should not do those things at all." But, its the kind of work I have to do here every day; cleaning the pots. (laughter) But, that's a different culture.

**PS:** But, you didn't tell her that you do the cleaning here? (laughter)

**AG:** No, I didn't tell her. NO NO NO! (laughter) It would be really hard for her to realize what kind of a system it is here. But, they think here that everything is done by machine. You don't wash your clothes; a machine does it. Yes, that's what it is.

**PS:** But, you have to put them in the machine.

**AG:** We have a dishwasher that cleans all the dishes. (laughter)

**PS:** So, those were big changes.

**AG:** The culture, its not that much now when I look back on why we didn't have a baby-sitter to take care of the children, and cleaning the house.

**PS:** So, when you started working again, who took care of the children?

**AG:** That's another thing. When I started my Ph.D. program, I had to go out in the daytime. So, fall quarter, 1980, my sister from England came. Mukul and I decided that if we had to send the children to daycare, why not spend that money as a ticket to my sister for her to come and visit us for three months. I was earning money, but all I earned as an assistantship, I spent on the airplane ticket for relatives to come from India or England. Then, winter quarter, my sister from India came. Then, spring quarter, my in-laws came and stayed with us. So, by September 1981, Ina started Montessorri School. Suvranu and Ina went to Montessorri School and Suman went to third grade for a whole day. Then, I went full time, taking courses and doing work. Since September 1981, I was going regularly outside. In 1985, I got the job at the University. In 1986, I finished my Ph.D. because I had one year to finish dissertation.

**PS:** Tell me about your position at University of Minnesota, what you are teaching and so on.

**AG:** Okay. Until 1984, I had an assistantship with curriculum and instruction in the College of Education. In 1985, I got an assistantship in General College where I was teaching math full time. Then a tenure track, assistant professorship was open. It was advertised as a national search. I applied and got the job.

**PS:** When you were teaching in India, that was at a high school level?

**AG:** Yes.

**PS:** What kinds of differences do you see between teaching students in the Indian system and students in the college system here.

**AG:** Not much difference. Only thing, I did some student teaching. Part of my BS program, I did student teaching at Highland Park Jr. High School and Marshall High School. So,

I have experience both school age and college age students here. I don't see too much difference there. Before I started teaching there was some concern in the public school about whether I would be able to handle the students. They are not like India; more discipline problems. But that's not true. I never had any difficulty. I saw that when I am a teacher in front of the students, I feel the same way.

**PS:** Who had those concerns?

**AG:** My advisor. When I was student teaching, she said "Maybe you should teach in a private school because at the junior high level here, students are very disruptive. You may have difficulty handling them. So, she sent me to a parochial school. I went there and talked with the principal and he said, "No, I think our parents feel they won't like any foreigner with a different accent." I thought, "Oh?" So, I went back and talked to my advisor. It was my first exposure about speaking. Before I was taking courses. Actually, if you teach, your accent will really come out more than when you are just talking. I really didn't mind at the time. But, I was really worried that I might not get a job in the system. When I started my BS in education, I was told very clearly, we don't welcome foreigners in our education system. At college, it is fine, but not in school. So, in the back of my mind, I realized that the primary reason for doing a BS was to teach in school. Now, I realized it was not very easy to get a job in high school. Private school didn't work out. So, she sent me to public school and I had no problem. I'm sure in 1979, when I did my first student teaching, I'm sure I had a heavier accent at the time. I picked up a few, but accents are different. But, I never had any problem. I always had very good rapport with my students and good evaluation and good comments. I never, never had any problem. So, different, yeah. A teacher is a lot more respected there (in India.) I kept a distance from my students when I taught. Here, I'm completely different. I have learned to be a friend with the students. Here, you don't keep a distance. Students also see the teacher as a friend. Still, I have difficulty to call my advisor Peggy House by her first name. I always called her, "Dr. House." All my friends called her Peggy. I had a difficult time; even today, I cannot say Peggy. This kind of thing.

**PS:** Did you let the students in high school call you by your first name?

**AG:** They asked me what I preferred to be called. I told them they could call me by my first name, so they called me Aparna.

**PS:** Did that feel okay?

**AG:** I was a student teacher, even though I was older than traditional students. Still, I maintained that as a student, they can say my first name. I was acting very easy. I don't feel bad if they say my name, but I have a hard time to say my teacher's name. (laughter)

**PS:** Going back to your children, were you working full time, 40 hours a week, when they were in gradeschool?

**AG:** When Ina started first grade, I was full time. When she left, I left. Many times in the 1980's when I started my half-time assistantship, I stayed home in the morning. Then, in the afternoon, Mukul came home and I stayed at work until 6 or 7 in the evening at work, so Mukul could take care of the kids. We really shared the responsibility very much.

**PS:** That's very different from a traditional Indian family, isn't it?

**AG:** Yes, in this way, my husband is very much willing to share; not that much of cooking and cleaning, but taking care of the children, he always offered help. Without his willingness, it was impossible. He felt that my education and my career was an important as his.

**PS:** And he had a lot of flexibility in the times that he worked as well?

**AG:** That's another thing that really helped because his university job was to conduct scientific experiment. He can sometimes go to work for seven days or work from home. Working like that really helped whereas in corporate world, that is not possible.

**PS:** Do you think that some of your child-rearing practices are different because of raising your children here? How have your kids turned out differently being raised here in America with the system that you and Mukul worked out compared to if you had raised them in India?

**AG:** I think my dad was very distant from us. He really never did anything that closely the way Mukul does. Many times, especially giving rides and all that, I sometimes don't even know which times the kids need rides. Mukul does so much. He is very much involved in that child-rearing process. I would say it is 50/50 completely. It's complicated, especially when we were born, my mother used to go to the grandparents house. Then, by the time my dad sees us, sometimes we were two or three months old.

**PS:** So, he didn't see you at all?

**AG:** Well, he came to see us in the hospital. Actually, we all four were born in the house. My youngest sister was born in hospital. But, I know my mom also said that when she was six or seven months pregnant, she would go to her parents house and stayed another 2-3 months after we were born. My dad came and visited but he was not that involved.

**PS:** Was that fairly typical of other families too?

**AG:** Not now. But at that time, generally ladies went to her parents house when a child was born. It's very different the way my children were born.

**PS:** Which way do you think is better for the children?

**AG:** I think involvement. They are very close with their dad. When I was little we saw our dad an authority figure: Dad is going to come so we'd better keep quiet. My kids don't see Mukul that way at all. Sometimes I would say, "Why do you let them fight?" That would never happen with my dad. (laughter)

**PS:** Your dad wouldn't tolerate it?

**AG:** No. It was so different.

**PS:** In your generation of Indian women, did very many of them work outside the home?

**AG:** I think most of my friends worked, those with whom I went to college. Most of them.

**PS:** So, they were all earning wages. And that kind of economic partnership, was that pretty well accepted?

**AG:** Actually, it is now needed.

**PS:** Even in India?

**AG:** Because the lifestyle you want to live. Those of my friends who went to master's, the standard of life they want to maintain takes two earners. It is kind of a luxury not to go to work. Also, having a degree, it is kind of wasted. Like my sister-in-law who is two years younger than me, she doesn't work. She stays home. She has a master's in philosophy; it is wasted to go to school that many years and never use it at all. After many years of doing housework and this and that, I think you need some stimulation. Even if I was given the chance to stay home, I would not.

**PS:** Well, you had the chance, and you got bored, right?

**AG:** Right. (laughter) Once you start working, you never stop. Mukul's sister-in-law, she was a school teacher before she got married. And my brother-in-law, Mukul's next brother, they chose each other. In India they call it a love marriage because the love came first. She doesn't work. She is doing fine and doesn't mind. (laughter)

**PS:** Everybody has their own thing, huh?

**AG:** Right, so, I shouldn't say all of my generation, but among my friends, we worked. But, my two sister-in-laws from Mukul's side don't work.

**PS:** Tell me about the Indian associations that were here in 1970 and the community that existed when you came and that you became part of.

**AG:** Actually, when I came, I stayed very much in the Bengali community. I was not exposed to India Association or Indian community that much. We have very few, but close friends, who all spoke Bengali. We used to see each other every weekend, since none of us had any children. Sometimes it was Friday, Saturday and Sundays we saw each other. We went shopping together, ate together, went out together and all those things. But, when my children were born, and hardly we were exposed to outside community that much. We did not have Hindu Mandir and Geeta Ashram, all those religious organizations. India Club was there but it was

not that active. There was the Indo-American Association at the University. We used to go there for Diwali function and that was the only Diwali in the town at that time. So, that was the only place to see other Indians. But that was a big function and we were not introduced to each other. We just saw people. They used to bring Hindi movies to Wiley Hall because there were no videos at that time. That was kind of a get-together for Indian families.

**PS:** Do you speak Hindi as well as Bengali?

**AG:** No. That's another barrier to know other people. By 1983, Mukul had friends and I was interested, but it was not that much.

**PS:** Were his friends mostly Bengali's too?

**AG:** Yes, but he also had other Indian friends besides Bengalis, so he knows a lot of other Indians. So, I was introduced to a few of them, but again it was just an introduction; not that much that we saw each other. I enjoyed school because I started to teach my children Bengali. We spoke at home, but teaching reading and writing was important. There was no time really to sit down with them. I was going to school full-time and had an assistantship and the housework. I also like to do housework, not that I stayed dirty all the time. It was always kind of a tension and stress. We were planning to go to India in 1983 and I realized they didn't even know their alphabet or any of that. When they go back and they cannot read or speak, it will be kind of hard for them and hard for my relatives to see them. So, I went to SILC and offered to teach Bengali.

**PS:** So, SILC was already existing?

**AG:** SILC started in 1979, and I went there in 1983.

**PS:** And SILC is School of Indian Language and Culture.

**AG:** At that time, we started the Bharat school and there was some transformation and change and all of those things. But, by 1980, it was kind of established. There was no Bengali language, so I went there and said I would teach Bengali and here are my three children. They said, "That's all we have now." (laughter) Other teachers also said to me, "That's the only way we started; we brought our own



children and then others started to join." So, it was a very good experience for me. When I told Mukul, he didn't want me to go because he thought it was too much already for me to take care of. "Do you really want to take up another project?" I said, "Anytime I can quit. It does not hurt to try." So, I started and my children liked it. There were a lot of other people who were not Bengali. We were seeing the second generation; that's what is most important. Our children needed to see that there are others in the same situation where they speak English but at home they speak a different language. They don't know their own parents language; and that's why they are there. So, it was a good experience. In the Bengali community, we didn't have that many children of their age at that time. In a way, our community became bigger. When I went, I got very much involved. Mukul also liked it. This year, after 10 years, I am not volunteering, but Mukul is.

**PS:** So, you've been teaching Bengali for 10 years at SILC?

**AG:** I taught Bengali, then I became assistant principal, then principal, then president. And I took very active role. When I became principal, the enrollment was 110 or 120. In the years that I was assistant principal, principal and president, in those few years it suddenly flourished. There are other factors in the past, it wasn't only me that made that happen. That's why people remember my name very well. But, it was also the influence of those who started earlier. At that time, it was really at a peak. Now, its down to 60 students again.

**PS:** Really. Why do you suppose that is?

**AG:** I think that demography is changing. Suddenly those last Indians when we came, their children were born, so at that time there were a lot of Indian children. Now they are all grown up in high school and college. Maybe since we have so many Indians here and so many other organizations, maybe the need is different now. At that time, the need was different because we felt our children needed to learn the language. Now, lots of grandparents are coming from India, so at home they are getting that flavor. Also, maybe the younger parents who are coming now don't feel that much of a need. Or maybe too many Indians are already giving that flavor. But, it looks like ups and downs.

**PS:** So, you were very much involved with SILC? Did you get

involved with any other Indian associations?

**AG:** Bengali Association I've always been very active.

**PS:** And how big is that group now?

**AG:** We have maybe 40 families and a lot of students. So, maybe 100.

**PS:** And how often do you get together?

**AG:** We as an organization, have four or five times a year. But every weekend somewhere we are going to meet. Those are not like an association; they are personal visits. But, I'm very much active about taking a position or doing something.

**PS:** What's the thing that is most delightful about getting together with other Bengalis?

**AG:** We have known some of the families for the last 20 or 23 years. So, its kind of like family when you talk with each other so much. And, I think speaking the same language. You feel like suddenly you've opened out. Maybe that's most exciting when you can speak in your own language. Sometimes I feel like my husband, who came here in 1964 and has been here 30 years now, he lived here more than he lived in India. Still, the food and the language are really mysterious. He still speaks Bengali much better than English.

**PS:** When the two of you are alone, you speak Bengali to each other and that's all? You never speak English to each other?

**AG:** No, never. Not only with each other, to the children also.

**PS:** You always speak Bengali to the children?

**AG:** That's another thing with the children. What language do you speak at home? They say, "What should we say?" They don't speak to us in Bengali. But, we always speak to them in Bengali. Sometimes I worry about the vocabulary and all those things you learn at home. They have that disadvantage; we don't speak English at home. But, fortunately, that really didn't hamper their development of

English. They write it good. Their vocabulary is good.

**PS:** Do they speak English without an accent?

**AG:** Yeah! No accents! (laughter)

**PS:** Just checking. Have you seen any times when there was conflict between the different parts of the Indian community?

**AG:** We don't mix that close that the conflict is there. But, the Bengalis are kind of isolated. Very few Bengalis really mix with other Indians. Our of 40 families, I would say that only 3-4 families (including us) mix with other Indians. They want to mix with Bengalis mostly.

**PS:** And, are most of the Bengalis Hindu?

**AG:** Yes. All of them. We have some Bengali friends from Bangladesh, but we don't have any Bengali friends from India who are not Hindu.

**PS:** Do the Bengalis tend to go to Hindu Mandir or Geeta Ashram or not at all?

**AG:** Hindu Mandir, no they do not go. We sometimes go on Sunday. But, none of them go just for Hindu Mandir. We have Puja, our own get-together. There is Durga-Puja, that's in October and Saraswati Puja, that's in February. Those two we perform at Hindu Mandir. Then, all Bengalis come. But, on Sundays, Bengalis don't come just for the sake of Hindu Mandir. Again, very few families are active. We sponsor a puja one Sunday. Then I call my friends and say, "I'm sponsoring the puja" and then they come. Bengalis are not active.

**PS:** They just don't mix, huh?

**AG:** Even when we had an India Association picnic. We used to have our own Bengali picnic separately. But, since some of us are very active, so we felt there were too many things going on. So, let's all combine in one picnic. We started last year with one picnic from the India Association and SILC also participated. Last year I went to Chicago to take my son there and I missed the picnic. But, nobody from the Bengali group attended. This year, I made sure that everybody would attend. So, I made the flyer and had one

student to call other students and families, so India Association would see that Bengalis would attend. Only three or four families and some students came. Other families didn't come. Why? They said, "We didn't know the other. You knew them, so you went." I said, "Even if you don't know, we can start knowing each other. We can have our own group in that one place." I will try again next year and I will take extra effort to make sure they come for India Association picnic.

**PS:** But, if it was just a Bengali picnic they would all be there?

**AG:** Yes! (laughter) They would all be there!

**PS:** Tell me about any other community activities that you were part of? Any professional associations or anything?

**AG:** I am part of the Mathematical Association of America (MAA), Minnesota Council of Teachers of Mathematics (MCTM) and the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM).

I do present papers at a lot of conferences that I attend.

I am also part of Psychology and Mathematics Education group (PME). But, I am not active in any of these organizations. I thought after I got tenure, I would get into all those things because I really love those things. One time, I thought about having a conference on our campus, but then I didn't get tenure and all our plans were messed up. Professionally, I'm really suffering a lot. Because I had planned and worked for one goal. Once this was achieved, I would go for another. Suddenly, my goal was just whipped away from me, and I'm not sure what I'm going to do.

**PS:** Do you want to say more about that?

**AG:** Um, yeah. Actually, I was really working hard to get tenure at the University. I was supposed to get that in 1992. But, instead of getting tenure, I got a termination letter. Its kind of an unusual case, because for tenure there are five or six levels of recommendation, and at the end, the senior vice president of the university says, "Yes." He gets all those advisory recommendation, and he is the one who decides. In my case, I got the recommendation at every level, but at the very end, he is the only person who was not convinced about my research and teaching. There is a lot of violation of tenure code. When I was hired, I was given the tenure regulations and the university has to

follow these regulations. So, there was violation and I went to the court of appeals. They gave the opinion for my favor.

**PS:** What do you think that's based on?

**AG:** Well, its a long story. I feel there is discrimination. Money is short, so if you have to choose, it is against the University's policy. There was no reason to deny me tenure.

**PS:** So, you've spent your whole working career here in the United States at the University of Minnesota.

**AG:** Yes. That's another thing; I was a high school teacher in India for five years. When vice president denied me tenure, one of the reasons is "I view Aparna Ganguli as a mature high school teacher." Then I had my Master's in 1964 and he mentioned that. What he meant by mature was that I was too mature to get tenure! (laughter) Actually, maybe those who want tenure are young.

**PS:** Ah, so this might be age discrimination?

**AG:** Who knows? But I am close to retirement, and I'm asking for tenure now after 16 years. If you look at 16 years, I was active all the time. Either I went to school taking courses, or having my children or raising my family.

**PS:** The last section here is about passing on your cultural values to your children. Which are the values that you have that you think are most important for you to give your kids?

**AG:** I think family values. I feel like my children somehow got those values.

**PS:** What exactly does family values mean to you?

**AG:** Caring for each other; not criticizing too much; trying to be positive. Some are kind of silly things. One time, my second son said, "I'm sure you will never divorce. Indians don't do that, right?" I don't know how he picked that up; he was very young. It is true; very few Indians do divorce. But, why he said that thing, I don't know. But somehow he is picking up from our friends and those when we talk. Adjusting each other; one time I said that when they go out, if they are late, they should call just to let me

know where they are. I never had to do something like calling other parents to find where they are. Those kind of things they maintain.

**PS:** So, is it acting respectful toward you as parents?

**AG:** Yes. My second son is very vocal, so sometimes I get some feedback. The oldest and youngest are not that expressive. Many times when I try to refer something, it comes from the second son's mouth. (laughter) Because he expresses those things. Going out with friends in the night, if I say, "No you cannot go." He will say, "You know, the way you are raising us, you always respect our wish." He has seen so much fight at his friends at home, at least some of his friends. He says, "I really like the way you trust me if I say I'm going somewhere, you never really question me. So, I never tell you a lie, because I know you will accept what I say." That kind of thing. So, its true that I trust him. If they do anything behind me, I will not be able to catch them. Though sometimes I feel that maybe I trust too much. But, I still believe that they will not hide from me. If I restrict too much, then they have to hide. Sometimes, I feel that I am too lenient. My daughter says "Whatever my brothers want, you always say yes." I tell her, that if I do say no, they will not listen to me. I feel that if they really want to go somewhere, I sometimes give up, even though sometimes I want them not to go. I kind of compromise. I don't know if that is right or wrong, but so far, I am very fortunate. It is going very well. I don't have that much conflict. At one time, I had three teenagers.

**PS:** That's a lot of teenagers! (laughter)

**AG:** Nineteen, seventeen and thirteen all in one year. Then, the oldest turned 20, so now I have two. But so far, its been really well. I think that is how our system is. One time, our daughter said, "Sometimes you have to say no, because you are not there to protect. So, you know what is good or bad better than I know. So, I will respect if you say no." So, I think still, Mukul doesn't like too much discipline. He's not that far.

**PS:** Is that different than it would have been if you had stayed in India? If you had raised your children in India, do you think you would have been more authoritarian with them?

**AG:** Sometimes, I don't know. Mukul is more lenient with them than I am. Mukul's family, his sister and brother's wife, they are very strict. I sometimes tell my children, "Have you seen how your cousins are so restricted? Don't do this! Don't do that! You can't do this!" I was raised a little more authoritarian than Mukul's family. I'm sure if we were in India, they would have been raised different from here. We don't really have that much restriction. I change every time, you know. (laughter)

**PS:** When it comes time to marry, do you think you will arrange marriages?

**AG:** No. I don't think so.

**PS:** Why?

**AG:** It's silly now. You see, it's a very old way of doing, although I still believe in that because it's working. But, here is so much freedom. The best thing is when Ina said to me, "If by the age of 30 I don't get married, then, find me someone." (laughter!)

**PS:** But, give her 15 years to look by herself first? (laughter)

**AG:** Right, yeah! I said, "You have the choice." When we were little girls in India, we never thought that we had to find our own mate. We knew always that parents would help. If we really loved somebody, not for the sake of finding somebody, we must marry. But, in the back of my mind, we also had some security that the parents would look for somebody. But, here, sometimes, maybe I'm wrong, but the girls are under pressure also. If you are getting older and not getting married, what would happen. We never thought that way. So, in a way, there is some advantage. We could concentrate on our studies and never thought, "Unless I find somebody, I'll have to stay unmarried." I never thought that. So, I told my children, you are free to find your partner, but then, we are here too if you need help.

**PS:** If one of your children came to you and said, "We want your help in finding a mate," where would you look for a mate? Would you look for somebody back in India? Or a Bengali who is living here? Or anybody in the Indian community? How and where would you look?

**AG:** We have some experience that it is not better to look in India. It is very hard to have the difference in culture. They are second generation and already they have family here. So, if you have to arrange, it is better to find somebody who was raised here. They will have an easier time to understand each other.

**PS:** Would you look first in the Bengali community?

**AG:** I have not thought yet. Although my son is 21, I'm telling him just assume it will happen. He's seeing a girl from India at the University of Chicago. She is from South India. Its kind of a coincidence that she is from India. I didn't say anything; he is free to see anybody. But, he is a very quiet type. He studies a lot and is more towards the books than other things. Somehow it happened. If that becomes serious, then something will be. I want them to go out with somebody and find somebody rather than I have to find somebody for them.

**PS:** How would it feel to you if they chose to date and marry somebody who was not Indian?

**AG:** That's why I said, my youngest brother-in-law, Mukul's brother, was in India and married the British woman. They are living in England now. After that happens in a family, I don't think I have any reservations. Anyway, sometimes its better, if they want to be assimilated in this society, in a few generations, it won't be that different. If they are confined in the Indian community for generation after generation, they will always be kind of separate. Still, people have asked a second generation girl, "When are you going back?" She came here when she was four years old and now she is 27. Still, someone at the university asked her, "You are a student, when are you going back to India?" She said, "No, this is my home. I'm not going back." So, this will happen if they stay all the time in the Indian community. If they find somebody from the Indian community, it is fine because it will be easier to understand each other because of their cultural similarity. At the same time, they are raised here and they are also exposed to American culture. So, I don't think that would be any problem.

**PS:** What would it be like if they chose to marry someone who was not white? Like a Japanese or Korean or a black



person? Would that feel different than if they married a white American?

**AG:** Well, unless that happens, its really very hard to say.

I would say having mainstream would be better than again going to another ethnic. Right now I'm thinking that way, but I have not given it any thought. If you have to marry somebody from a different culture, why not go to the mainstream rather than going to another minority group? Obviously, as long as you are minority, you have to face some barrier, but that might be too liberal! Many of my friends don't like their children to marry somebody from here because they don't have the cultural understanding. But, my children are exposed to this culture as much as my culture.

**PS:** But, it's the mainstream of American culture to which they are exposed?

**AG:** Right.

**PS:** Do you think the Indian community has done enough to pass on its values to the children in the community?

**AG:** I think sometimes it is too strict. They have done good, but sometimes they are too protective, really.

**PS:** How so?

**AG:** Again, I may be too liberal. I have some friends who have a constant worry about passing along their Indian values. That gives a lot of burden for the second generation. If you are lenient and let them go and choose, not make them think it is something they have to do. Some of my friends from South India, they have so much stress and worry all the time. These are not Bengalis. I have one friend whose son went to school, but never thought of going to prom or anything like that. All of this was against their culture. My friend never knew that those things happened in school.

**PS:** That prom happened?

**AG:** No, because the boy never said any of those things. They were too much conservative and I feel pity for them. I don't think that's good for the children.

**PS:** Did you encourage your children to go to the prom?

**AG:** Yes. The two boys went. They didn't have a girlfriend, but that is getting popular too. A team of four or five girls and four or five boys going together. In high school I didn't want them to get too serious. I would have been worried if they went just two of them to prom together.

That didn't happen to me, so I like the way it happened to me. Prom night everybody is going out and having fun. My boy will not stay home. I went and took lots of pictures. They rented tuxedos and everything they did. But, I have seen many of my friends who will not allow their children to do all of this. The other day, a friend of mine said, "Aparna, can you believe your daughter is going with a boy and staying one or two nights outside?" I said, "I would be worried if it was only the boy and the girl, but the way my boys did, both of them did five boys and five girls who went out. One of the girls parents chaperoned and they went to a cabin. All five girls and five boys stayed in that cabin, but the parents also stayed." The parents are of one of the girls. If it was my daughter, I don't know what I would do.

**PS:** You'd be the chaperone, I'll bet. (laughter) Does it feel different raising a girl in this culture than boys?

**AG:** (laughter) Yes, it does.

**PS:** What's different about it?

**AG:** Sometimes with girls it's a tricky situation. I don't want to, but I think the girls have to be more protected. The two are different; boys and girls. Unless the boys want, the girl cannot force, right? (laughter) That's the way I see it in terms of physical strength. Girls have to be reserved more. Boys have strength. If the girl is not willing, the boy can physically take over. That worries me.

That's why I feel there has to be some different standard.

I wouldn't allow my girl to go that night and stay that long. Not that I don't trust her.

**PS:** But, she is smaller?

**AG:** She is smaller and she doesn't have that much strength. Again, the sickness is more prevalent in the boys than the girls. A lot of rapists are still around and they are a sick person. That's the way I see it. A man who is a

family friend, he gets really mad when he sees that I will have some different standard for Ina than for my boys. He says, "Oh, Aparna, how can you feel like that?" But, I feel that way.

**PS:** So, your two boys are in college now. What are they studying?

**AG:** Suman is doing a double major in mathematical logic and history and philology of science at the University of Chicago. It is very theoretical. Suvaranu is taking physics, chemistry and mathematics. He'll probably do engineering or maybe some medical oriented. We'll see what kind of courses he likes.

**PS:** So, you have science in your genes all the way through the family?

**AG:** Yeah, my husband is completely science.

**PS:** No philosophy majors here!

**AG:** But, Suman, he likes philosophy. (laughter)

**PS:** But, he's not majoring in it.

**AG:** Actually, mathematical philosophy, but he is very much interested in Bertrand Russell and all those things. It's kind of unusual. He likes history and philosophy. I thought he would go in arts because he likes to read history, social studies, and black history, where they migrated. All those things he could tell you. He is very much aware of minority problems. If he sees some racism somewhere, he gets mad. He's that type, so he is interested in philosophy too; but mathematical philosophy is how the number originated. That's what he's working now on modern number theory and how that 1900's number theory fits in the age of the computer. As an undergraduate, he's doing a lot of research also. For two summers, he's worked on research project.

**PS:** Great! Let's finish off talking about family ties. How do you maintain your family ties? Do you go back to India regularly?

**AG:** Yes, I went to India in December 1990 just before my Dad passed away. After that I didn't go back. But we

correspond by letters and talk over the phone.

**PS:** How many times have you been back to India in the 24 years that you've been here?

**AG:** I went back in `72, then `74, and `77, and then Ina was born. After two children were born, it was really hard to travel because of money and problems and children get sick.

So, from `77 to `84, Mukul's parents in `81 and my dad came in `83. We waited seven years. From 1977, we didn't go back until 1984. Then in `88, then `90, so, every three or four years.

**PS:** Do you talk on the phone?

**AG:** We talk on the phone. Mukul's sister has a phone, but his family doesn't have a phone. We call my brother who has a phone.

**PS:** Are both of Mukul's parents still living?

**AG:** His mom died in 1992, January.

**PS:** Do you feel like those ties with the family members back in India are still strong enough? Do you ever feel like you are missing something because you're not closer to them?

**AG:** Actually, right after my marriage, I felt like sadness, but right now I don't feel that much because its kind of constant now. After I left, my second sister married. When I went back for her marriage, there was so much difference and I didn't know things. I was the oldest child in my family and I knew everything and was consulted for decisions. So, when my second sister was married, I felt I was a really distant person; I was not in the decision-making process and I was kind of an outsider. That was really hard. Now, when I go back, I go as a visitor. Everybody has so much to say. One night my mom talked the whole night. (laughter) We slept in one bed and she didn't stop; constantly she was talking. So, it is one way of support. They still feel they get it from me. I don't feel that I get that. My lifestyle is so different. I don't have anything to talk about when I go back because they will not be able to relate. I think my children are completely foreigners to them. They know by name and write a lot of letters, but I know that doesn't mean anything to them.

They feel like them know them, but they really don't know.

They still send a lot of things; letters and birthday cards. But they don't give that much value really, because the tie is not there. So, when I go back, they still feel they have so much to share with me. My brothers and sisters are all married, so when I go there, they all talk about themselves. But I don't talk that much. I listen.

**PS:** Does that feel okay?

**AG:** It's okay, but sometimes I feel we have some friends here who were our next door neighbor. They are retired now and moved to Texas, but they come every summer and stay with us. Before, they used to stay one or two months, but now they stay one or two weeks. We call them a lot and they call us. Sometimes I feel I am very much more close to them because they understand my problems more than my parents or my brothers and sisters. For example, this legal problem at the university, my mom and brothers know about it. Maybe its hard to communicate also, because you cannot write everything in a letter or you cannot say everything on the phone. Anyway, sharing your recent events, such as these legal problems, is not that spontaneous with my brothers and sisters and mom back home. Its easier with Bonnie and Glen.

**PS:** And Bonnie and Glen are Americans?

**AG:** Right. Like, when I was pregnant they saw me; they were my next door neighbors. My parents and brothers and sisters don't know all those thing. When I had my surgery (my C-section) and how I came back and how I raised my children. They didn't see all these things. So, its kind of hard to communicate.

**PS:** Its kind of like you created a new extended family here out of the Bengali community and your neighbors?

**AG:** Exactly. Right. Twenty-four years is too long.

**PS:** The last section is about retirement plans. From what you've said so far, I'm assuming you won't go back to India when you retire.

**AG:** Well, that's a different story. Many times, especially after this difficulty at the university, I'm really disappointed. Suddenly, I feel like my American dream is lost.

**PS:** So, you might go back to India when you retire?

**AG:** I don't know. What I keep on thinking nowadays, after so long and so many years here, somehow I lost my goal. When I was raising my children, that was the goal; I have to raise them. Now, they are in college and after Ina graduates, what would I do? If Ina goes to school somewhere else, then Mukul and I will be alone. Mukul never really bothered about snow or winter, but nowadays, he also thinks this is not good for a retirement state. So, if we want to go like Bonnie and Glen to Texas, then why not India? If we have to go to Texas, who do we know there? Recently, after these things at the university, I am feeling very much alienated. Before, I never thought about discrimination. I always had something to look forward to. Retirement was there, but right now, my future is really uncertain. I don't want to move from here because Ina is going to school and Mukul works here, and especially this is our home for 24 years in one place. It's really hard to leave. So, I don't have a plan to move and find a job somewhere else. I'm kind of at that age where I don't want to start at another place. So, if it doesn't settle at the University, something black is in front of me. Professionally, I want to be active. Although I'm not teaching this quarter, I'm very busy writing my papers everyday and working as usual. So, lately, I've been thinking maybe going back to India is the best alternative.

**PS:** You have a few years before your daughter is done with high school?

**AG:** Yes. She is in 10th grade now. I'm not sure what my plan is.

**PS:** What about your husband? What is his idea about retiring?

**AG:** He likes the idea of our friends' parents; they are going to India in winter and coming back here in summer. So, he thinks that is ideal.

**PS:** Sounds good to me! Are there any other things that you want to talk about that I haven't asked you about yet?

**AG:** What is your project and how will you use this story?

**PS:** Why don't I explain that after the tape is off.  
Anything else that you wanted to talk about?

**AG:** No, I don't think so.

**PS:** Thank you very much for taking your time to talk with  
me.

India Association of Minnesota Oral History Project (Phase 1)  
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