

Interview with Guptan Nambudiripad

**Interviewed by Polly Sonifer
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PS: Hello, Guptan. Welcome.

GN: Hello.

PS: How are you doing today?

GN: I'm doing good, doing well.

PS: Good. Can you tell me some of the basic things about yourself, like where you were born?

GN: I was born in 1970 in Castlegar, British Columbia. I don't really remember anything about Canada. Then we moved, and I grew up, until I was about ten, in Lisle, Illinois, which is a suburb of Chicago. And then I had spent six months in the town of Le Sueur, Minnesota, after which I had moved to Burnsville, Minnesota. And from about 1981 to currently, I've been living most of my life in Burnsville or the Twin Cities.

PS: All this moving around when you were younger, what was that about?

GN: Well, it wasn't really--I mean, my father was in Canada, and he decided to move to Chicago. He just had a change of career. We were in Chicago for six, eight years, and then he changed his job to Minnesota. Originally, he got hired by Pillsbury, and he was going to work down in Le Sueur, Minnesota, which is the valley of the Green Giant, and that's where they were going to have engineering. But then within the six months that we lived there, they transferred all the engineering to Minneapolis. So the rest of the time I've been living here, since my father works for Pillsbury, in the city of Minneapolis. I've been living pretty much here. I went to school at the University of Minnesota. I did spend about a year, or nine months, last year in Phoenix.

PS: What were you doing in Phoenix?

GN: I'm working at my current job in consulting, and we had a project in Phoenix, Arizona, so I spent nine months there.

PS: Was that fun?

GN: Phoenix is really nice in the winter, especially when you consider how cold it is in

Minneapolis, and I think last year, '96, the winter was pretty bad. So as far as cold, it was pretty nice being there.

PS: Tell me about your family, when you were born, how many kids were in it, how many kids are there now.

SC: I'm the oldest. I've got two brothers, and they're five years and six years younger than me. I'm the oldest one, and that would probably make me--for everything we did, I was kind of like the first one to go through everything, and then I had two brothers. We still keep in touch pretty much. My two brothers are now in college, and one is finishing up.

PS: Were you a pretty good older brother?

SC: Usually I think, being about six years old or five or six and having two brothers, you really lose a lot of attention, so I'm sure the first couple years were really hard, especially at that age. You're not really quite ready to give up your attention, and you lose all of it when you have two brothers.

PS: Are they twins?

GN: No, they're about eighteen months apart. I mean, they're a year apart in school. They played together a lot more, and they're closer in age, and I'm a little bit older than them. So I think hopefully they would say that later on I was a good older brother. Like I said, I think my brothers and I, in many ways, are very similar. We grew up very similar, and I think there's a lot of things we had in common, very common interests. We all ran cross-country in high school and things like that. I think we're very similar.

PS: How old were you when you moved to Burnsville?

GN: Actually, I was eleven years old, I think. Yes, eleven years old. It was kind of strange, because I actually went to India, and my family had moved while I was in India to Burnsville. I was in India when they had moved.

PS: You came back and they weren't at that address anymore?

GN: All they told me is, "Oh, we've moved to a different part." I got a letter that we'd moved to Burnsville, and they described this house. They said it was next to a river, and I expected there was a river. Actually, they were about a mile away from the Minnesota River.

PS: Can you tell me what you know about your parents' background in India?

GN: My parents come from a rural village in Kerala, and I know quite a bit since I've gone back about ten times. I'm not really that fluent in the language, but I know most of the customs, I visited a lot of the relatives. I've gone through a lot of our traditions and seen a lot of the traditions and the old past. I mean, the world is kind of changing, even there, really rapidly, but as far as how they grew up and everything. I think because my grandparents live in the same house and I can go visit and talk to my uncles and aunts, who grew up later than them, but who grew up, probably had kind of some of the similarities that they did growing up, I had a lot of opportunity to kind of see the past, how they grew up. They are essentially, they grew up as high-caste Brahmins in the state of Kerala. The world they had lived in has changed. For centuries people lived in a certain way and had traditions there, and everything kind of unraveled within the last two generations.

PS: So you watched your family come from this very solid, stable tradition. How does that feel to go back and discover that?

GN: To some extent, I really love it, and I think growing up, I got a different perspective of India and maybe a much higher level of awareness. And so there's a certain point where it's really fascinating. You really get to flip yourself into another culture, and you can just really transform yourself. You can live in two cultures kind of intimately, even probably a little bit more than otherwise.

But on the other hand, you'll never be perfect in that culture. It's almost impossible. I don't speak the language fluently. Even if I did, I don't know all the traditions. Only going back for three months and two months at a time, there's no way to catch up on all the traditions, so I need a lot of help. For example, if you go visit a temple, there are certain things I know, but there are certain traditions and stuff I could never follow, or there are a lot of things around the house, a lot of traditions that you cannot follow and things you don't know and you don't pick up, and a lot of little things like that that are very hard to follow. And so in a way, that kind of turns you off, because you're a little bit apprehensive, and you can get the negative feedback. You feel like a little kid. Even as you get older, you feel like you're kind of trudging along.

But yet, like I said, there's a real love being able to flip into and go back to kind of an ancient culture and be able really to feel that, and you can say, when you hear about cultures in other parts of the world, you have something to relate it to, because you can say, "Well, you know, that's not really that odd." You go to, say, a Native American village—I was thinking of a Mayan village in Mexico. They'll say, oh, they did this. I thought that's not really that fascinating, because you can really see that it might have been a hundred years ago or fifty years ago. The traditions are still there.

PS: So you find it sort of a treat to struggle through cultures?

GN: Well, there's a treat to it and there's a difficulty. There's two sides. There's obviously a lot of things you get to experience that a lot of people just don't get to experience, and I think later--even now I realize that more. People talk about, "Oh, yeah, I go and travel. I go to different places, and I want to see a different culture." And I think for them, you can see another culture, but it's hard to become part of another culture. I think growing up with two cultures you have such an advantage of being able to actually live both cultures. As far as a treat, it's really one of those things where you're lucky to have that; but on the other hand, there's many disadvantages, too.

PS: Do you know all your relatives who are still in India?

GN: I mean, well--

PS: Well, not all of them, maybe.

GN: The definition of relatives is very different in a country like, especially in India, when you have super-extended families. Not only your cousin's cousin, maybe, your cousin's cousin's cousin can be related. As far as I know all my cousins, most of them, other than anybody who's been born in the last few years. And even then, I think I've gotten them. But I know most of my cousins and my uncles, and pretty well, pretty well. I stayed with all of them. I visited them and stayed at their houses. So as far as like first cousins and uncles and aunts, I know them. But then again, like I said, the extended family is very hard to keep track of.

Many times you go back and they'll say, "Do you remember me?" and it'll be your father's uncles. And you'll meet all these people, and in my mind, I don't remember everybody, and it's almost hard, because you know you might have met them, but you can't remember them. Like my grandfather's generation—each of my grandparents has four or five siblings, and each sibling has six or seven children, my uncles and aunts. Thankfully, each of them has only two or three kids. Otherwise, I think I'd really be lost. But still, that makes a large extended family, a lot of relatives to remember.

PS: Can you tell me about your early years, what language was spoken in your home when you were a child?

GN: Well, apparently--and I can still understand it, but not necessarily speak it. We speak the language Malayalam, which is from the state of Kerala, and our parents speak it pretty much in the house. Now, maybe myself growing up, I grew up with English-speaking friends and kids, and I probably spoke a lot more English, probably had a little more difficulty picking up the English when I went to school and probably was forced to speak a little more English and lost the other part of the language.

PS: When you started school, you didn't speak English?

GN: I probably didn't speak good English. The only recollection I know I remember, I did have to take some of the little speech classes for certain letters, but then again, I think I picked up--it would have happened in like kindergarten where I really switched over to English, and by the time I was in first or second grade, I was much more fluent in English than I am in Malayalam.

PS: Did you watch TV as a child?

GN: Yeah. I watched a lot of "Electric Company," whatever, "Zoom," and probably watched what my brothers did, too.

PS: But in terms of learning English.

GN: It's hard--I think I learned a lot more English playing with friends. The community that I grew up in Chicago, actually in Lisle, it's a very open--I look back at it, there was a lot of children on our block. We played. I think I probably played outside almost every single day, and I think you pick up a lot of English when you're out. Of course, I watched a lot of TV, but I think the fact that I was probably out more than--I think being outside of the house I learned a lot more.

PS: So you tended to learn your English from other children. Your parents didn't make an effort to teach you English?

GN: I don't think my parents ever really made--and I can't remember. I was like four and five. But I don't think they really pushed me to English. Now, I have my brothers who are five and six years younger than me, so by the time my brothers were born, and I was probably picking up a lot of English outside. I was probably outside of the house more than--you know, once you get to that certain age where you can go out and play. I'm sure by seven or eight I was almost always--every afternoon I'm sure I went out a lot, and, you know, watched TV. Because I probably didn't have that much contact with my parents a lot of that time, I probably didn't pick up the Malayalam language that way.

PS: Who did your family socialize with when you were in Chicago growing up?

GN: My family's associations tend to be mostly a lot of Indian friends. Interestingly enough, I think, that they had all gone, my dad, I think, and some of his schoolmates had all gone to this small school in Kerala and somehow they all, a couple of them, had gone in and worked in a different part of India in the same place, and they all applied to the U.S. and they all came across. So in Chicago they had that core of people. In fact, I still have a good friend who's a son of one of my dad's friends. In Chicago, there's a lot more Indians, so their social circle tends to be a lot of Indians, and even different from what we have in Minnesota.

Other than that, there was our neighborhood, also. I remember we had a good non-Indian neighbor who we did a lot of things with as a family. For example, sometimes we'd go out. I remember like even after we moved to Minnesota, we'd go to their cabin in Wisconsin, things like that.

PS: Were they a Caucasian family?

GN: Yes.

PS: But then the other people who lived around in your neighborhood, were they?

GN: Almost entirely. I mean, entirely, I guess, Caucasian or white or however you want to say that.

PS: So the Indian families that you associated with didn't live right in your neighborhood?

GN: No. There was virtually, I think--actually none. I don't remember any Indians ever. Actually, growing up, I don't think I've ever had, really, Indians in my classes, so not there. I think probably even the demographics have probably changed now, but at that time, no.

PS: How did you see your family maintain its ties to India?

GN: I think the biggest thing is really the trips back. I remember I went--it'll always be the first time I went back. For them it's travel, but the one time I went back when I was eight years old, I got sick a lot. It was miserable, and I don't think--from that one experience, it would have been very hard for me to say I'd want to ever go back.

But I think I went back when I was about ten, and then I went back when I was eleven, and by that time, I had really learned a lot more, and I think the constantly going back really taught me a lot more about, I think, our ties to India rather than--because I think, to some extent, I feel like my parents have kind of an obscure background.

I think one thing, and I still feel a little bit, is that as Indians, as far as our real cultural ties to India, if you really talk about your specific community, traditional ties were so different and varying that only by going back to India could I ever have gotten that. Even with people from the same part of India, you might have never had that, the same intimate tie to your past or your relatives and their culture.

So I think even staying within, for example, the Chicago area or even Minnesota, even when you associate with Indians, you really would never get that in-depth cultural

background, and I think only by traveling back did I ever feel a sense of comfort with that background, which kind of makes me uncomfortable. Even when you talk about other Indians as a culture sometimes, you know your traditions are one thing, and it's already confusing enough to know, hey, this is my family background. But then you try to meld everybody and say it's one big, you know, there's one culture. India is not one culture.

PS: It's not, is it?

GN: Definitely, I mean, I have to say it's definitely not one culture, although there are ties and links, you know. No matter where you go in the world, there's always those ties that exist. If you look for the commonality, you'll probably find some, but it is a very diverse country.

PS: Speaking of values, what values did you see your family stressing to you and your brothers as you were growing up?

GN: Gosh, I think, I mean, they never really forced us to do anything particular. I think the only thing they demonstrated as value of being good, try to work hard and do something good in life, I suppose as more by example than actual--I don't think I was ever told to do anything in particular. So as far as cultural values, I think it's more like relatives I was around and my parents.

I guess the biggest thing you learn--and maybe it's because most of the Indians who come here from my father's generation, they were all brought over as engineers or doctors, and maybe a little more hard work, I think, a lot of pride of who you are, which is probably really important when you come. You grow up and you're like really culturally different, but you need to have a lot of pride. So I think maybe that. Pride of who you are is probably the most important. I guess it's a value that you really need to survive.

PS: And you felt that your parents communicated that kind of pride to you?

GN: Yes. I think I felt, more by demonstrated action than anything else to say, "I'm capable of doing something." You just have to have the confidence you can do it. And there was also kind of they expected you to do pretty well. They never said, "Okay, you're not perfect." Just because you missed a few scores here and there, they never got on my case. But they expected me to do well.

PS: How did they communicate that expectation?

GN: I think it was mostly demonstrated than anything else. My father did really well in his schoolwork. People respected him for what he did. Sometimes, you know, they never said it, but you can kind of feel it. Okay, if I did really bad, you can kind of feel they're

not really as happy as when you go, "Okay, I did really well." That's more than anything else. But I think compared to other, sometimes maybe other families, I didn't have much pressure at all. So as far as doing well, it was more just doing it for your own sake.

PS: And that desire to do well just was there naturally in you?

GN: I don't know if it's natural, but, you know, sometimes people get kind of competitive. I mean, I think it's in anybody trying to do well. Maybe what you do in school, you try to do as good as you can, and I think that's kind of--if it's stressed and you get support. They supported me all along, and I think that that's enough, and the rest is what you make out of it. And I think that was kind of what they--even now, I think, they don't really care exactly what you do, as long as you try to do what good's for you and try to be successful at what you do.

PS: And again, did they communicate that in words?

GN: I don't think I can ever say they communicated that in words. I mean, there might have been episodes or something where they thought, "Okay, you should be doing better than that." But I think, for my own sake, I think I did relatively well since most of high school. Probably like the four grades, ninth, tenth, eleventh, and twelfth, my grades and everything were pretty well. So I don't think I ever had that much pressure. Maybe I didn't really need it that much.

PS: So you had some internal--

GN: Yeah, probably more internally motivated anyway.

PS: You were talking a little bit about your experience in the school system, and that's the next thing I'd like to talk about. When you went to the school system, you said you didn't speak English very well at the beginning of kindergarten, but by first and second grade you--

GN: Had that down. Apparently, I didn't, because I asked my parents about that, and they said one of the things that they were told is to speak more English at home because--I mean, I was the first son and I was going out. I guess in retrospect I probably would have said, "No, teach me the other language," because the English you'll pick up pretty easily, you'll speak pretty fluently anyway.

From my memory, maybe at a young age it was a little difficult, but I think I pretty much adjusted to school as far as learning and everything fairly rapidly, because I remember doing pretty well even in the early grades.

PS: Did you have a sense of being distinct or different from your peers? You said you

never had another Indian child in your classroom.

GN: You know, I don't think I felt it so much actually in elementary school, and it's kind of strange. In Lisle, I grew up without Indians. I never felt it growing up as a child, and maybe somewhere I missed it, because we moved at probably that age where you get to sixth and seventh and you feel a little more different than others then. And I know growing up in Minnesota is much different, because there's really no other Indians. I graduated in my high school class of like 700, and I think there was one other Indian person in the class.

I think that would have been much different growing up on the coasts, and I think probably felt a little more distinct in those years I was growing up in Minnesota than I did ever as a child. I mean, then you don't really think about things like that. You really worry about what toys you're playing with, what's the neatest toy out there, and in Chicago, who are the Cubs that were hitting and what was the team, and you don't really worry about all the other things until, you know, here, when I grew up in Minnesota, those things started playing a little more role. I even felt every single year it became a little more and more distinct that way.

PS: What were the distinctions that you saw? How did you experience them in your life?

GN: I think it's--well, I have to think about it. [Pause.]

I think distinctions, sometimes I kind of mix it. I don't know if that's cultural or just my pursuits of what I thought were interesting. I would probably think like more, for example, cultural things are more interesting than maybe my peers would, or things like that kind of fascinated me a little bit more. Maybe it was a little harder for me to adjust in a lot of social spheres and things like that, because, you know, sometimes you do have value clashes and things like that and you're not really--there are things that were hard for me to do, because I thought my parents might object to it more. We grew up as a close family, and maybe breaking some values is not an Indian thing to do.

But I think more or less it's just that it's hard for someone--the real distinction, it's easy for me to empathize with everybody else. It's easy for me to fit into any group--even now, it seems very easy for me to fit in anybody else's shoes, because I know the "American" U.S. background. You're really good at it, because you know how people grew up and you know, for example, what type foods they like, all the little cultural things. You can step in their shoes, but it's harder for somebody else to step in your shoes. I think that's where the distinction kind of goes, because it's hard for you to get somebody to empathize with how you feel, but it's really easy for you to empathize with the others.

And then a lot of things you kind of hide, I think even less as a kid, but even when I was growing up and playing with toys and stuff, it was hard for me to bring kids to eat for

dinner, because, you know, we ate rice dishes. Maybe I was embarrassed about my parents. I think that's probably the biggest fear. It was kind of scary that, okay, I'm going to bring friends over and my parents are there and they might think my parents are a little weird.

That's where you really lose it, because then you're really afraid to bring people into your life, and it's still hard to say, "Okay, come to my house," because like you're so used to avoiding that. Being a host is very hard, because you're not really comfortable bringing people into your life. I think it's because, one thing, you're afraid that they won't empathize with you, so you kind of reject that. That is probably the hardest. That's where you're really distinct. You really are scared to bring people and show them your side, because you really need to have somebody who can empathize with that, and I think it's very hard for people to do it. I have met people who can do that to a certain degree, but even then I have a hard time saying, you know, "We do all these things."

Like I was saying earlier, it's so easy for me to jump to India, go there and I just get accustomed to it. But it would be hard to take any friend and say, "You want to come along and do that?" I'd just be too afraid for somebody to--I would think that it would be such a culture shock. I think, to a certain extent, going to my house would be the same type of culture shock, some of the things. Even speaking a different language is very daunting to some people who have never heard a foreign language before.

PS: Right. So you didn't quite trust that your friends could handle the culture shock of coming into your home.

GN: Yeah. For the most part, a lot of people I couldn't trust. Growing up, I wouldn't trust a lot of people. It was easy for me to go over their places and I'd get along with them, but I would never, it would be hard for me to bring them over. People are a little different at different levels, but I think it would have been very hard to say, "Okay, this is me." It's harder to say, "Okay, this is who I am. These are my beliefs. These are some of the things I've seen." And it's not necessarily true. If I go to India, this is what's there, this is what I feel, these are things I've seen. I'm too uncomfortable for anybody else to empathize with that.

PS: There's a dilemma. Were there any difficulties when you went to other people's homes with being able to eat the food that they served?

GN: I was a non-vegetarian till I was about in high school, so for the most part, it wasn't too difficult, because my mother cooked only vegetarian food. So far as eating at home, we ate vegetarian food, but I grew up eating non-vegetarian food, which made it, I guess, growing up pretty simple to eat out. But I did change to being a vegetarian. I guess it was like my junior year of high school. That got--no, that wasn't too bad. By then, people were at a age where it's like being a vegetarian wasn't too radical, I think. So it really

wasn't too bad with the food. The only thing is, certain foods did scare me. I was always afraid of fish.

PS: Afraid of it?

GN: I couldn't see--seeing fish on a plate. Maybe I just had a bad experience somehow when I was a kid.

I do want to make one comment about the food. I went back to India, and I really became a vegetarian. I came back, and I thought it would be so hard. It wasn't too bad, finishing up high school and going to college and being a vegetarian. The biggest surprise to me is that once I started working, I never realized how many vegetarians there were who didn't grow up with an Indian background. In fact, I ran into--a lot of the Indians who actually came from India became non-vegetarian, but an ironic twist is, a lot of people who grew up here--and people I thought would never be vegetarians--I see at my age group so many more.

In a way, you thought it was kind of strange when you did it, but an ironic twist is, it's actually kind of in fashion for many people these days. I mean, it's really strange. I was saying I was in Phoenix last year. We ordered food, and not everybody was vegetarian, but sometimes we'd order food for our team of workers, and half the food would end up vegetarian, or much of it. And if it's not vegetarian, people like the low fat, you know, all that kind of thing.

PS: Were there any times when you felt religiously different from your peers growing up?

GN: The big thing is, I mean, I'm not a religious person now. It was kind of nice. When I grew up, I got to see a lot of the traditions. I kind of went through it because I loved, I still love to go to religious places. As far as, you know, I think there was so much ignorance about Hindu religion that I would really never have to worry about explaining anything because nobody would know much about it.

Even if today if somebody goes, "What are you?"

"I grew up as a Hindu."

There's no further question, because that's about as far as most people can take it, is breaking it up.

Actually, I think sometimes one disadvantage is not really meant--there's just plenty of people who aren't really practicing a religion, so you have plenty of people out there who are kind of in the same boat, so I'm not really that--I think one of the harder things,

though, if you ever read a lot of literature and stuff, one of the hardest things, I felt, was, there's a lot of references to religion, in older literature especially, and that was sometimes harder to get. I mean, as far as academic things.

PS: References to which kind of religion?

GN: Like Christianity. There are certain references that way, and that might be a little--I mean, there are certain things that have some of those references, as far as schoolwork. But as far as people, for the most part I felt pretty comfortable. I think the U.S. is kind of nice that way in that, I mean, I never had too much religious pressure put on me from any other sides. It's been pretty free that way, and, really, it has. There have been cases maybe of people kind of being ignorant about it. There are people who know, who say, "Hindus do this," or something. But I think for the most part, people just would really have never run into the Hindu religion. I think it would have been harder for people, maybe like Islamic, where there's a little bit more, "Are all Muslims terrorists?" that kind of question that people would ask. But I think Hinduism is so remote.

PS: At least to American people.

GN: To this, yeah. To American people, and maybe even to other places, too, somewhat. It is somewhat of a remote--it only happens mostly on the Indian subcontinent, which makes it kind of remote from the rest of the world, where Islam and Christianity are kind of spread throughout the world. If you come from the Indian subcontinent, you know it. And I think, even from what I've seen, like the Hindus and Muslims who kind of grew up, came from the subcontinent, I guess there are people who hate each other on both sides, but I've seen a lot of like, you know, there's more cultural ties than there are religious again, and I think that way religion is usually put on the back burner. In other words, even among the Hindus and Muslims from India, there are cultural ties that sometimes outweigh religions.

PS: Did your parents practice their religion here in the United States?

GN: Yes, they--I think, also, this goes back to the question of, what are your roots. I think, you know, they did. I think more in Chicago there were temples and there were a little more activities. I remember going on weekends. They kind of practiced it. But even here, I think they don't really practice it, because Hinduism is pretty fluid. You don't need to go anyplace on every weekend, so we never really went anywhere on the weekends for religious purposes. The Hinduism of Minnesota is different from what it was for us in India. When they grew up with Hinduism it was really the Hinduism of like, say, Minnesota, which brings together all Hindus, which is much more of a kind of unified Hinduism. It really isn't similar to, I think, even what I'm used to going to back to India, where you go to a particular temple, you do certain rituals or you do something in the morning. It's much more ritualistic in India.

Here, I think, the temple is much more like a church; they read from the books. It's a much different feeling than it is from what they grew up with, and I think there's a lot of differences. You know, maybe they read, and I don't know if they do, but using probably some North Indian language or whatever and my parents are from the south. I don't think they're that religious, per se. All of it combined would kind of say, no, they never really practice too much, although they do a little bit here and there. I'd rate them pretty low on the scale. Occasionally they do it. I think the good thing they did, though, is train us, in a way, and at least show us the religion.

PS: And how did they do that?

GN: We went back to India a lot, and there we got to go to the temple. We got to go through some of the ceremonies and get explanations from here and there. Hinduism also has a lot to do with Indian mythology, which again you can read a lot of stories and learn it. So once you start reading the mythology, I think that itself gives you at least a reference to the background of the religion, when you see the story of Krishna or whatever. It's part of the religion, but it's still a good story.

PS: How did you get access to those stories in a written form?

GN: Oh, yes. I guess every kid who grows up with an Indian background in the U.S. has probably seen the *Amar Chitra Katha*. They're called *Amar Chitra Katha*, and they have these cartoon books and they're all over India. They're almost like comic books, really, and you can read them and they're fun for kids to read. I guess they're action stories.

PS: Would they be in English or Malayalam?

GN: They do it in every language, but there are a lot of them in English. I mean, there's just hundreds of these stories. There's tons of them. You collect them and read them.

PS: So the Indian culture in India takes the historical mythical stories and characters and makes them comic books, and that's okay and the kids think that's cool.

GN: Actually, I think, I'm sure every religion--in India they do that. They're picture stories in comic books, and you read English, especially. It's kind of hard, it's kind of like Hinduism is a religion, but it also is kind of like the Greek mythology. It has all the mythological background. So you don't really have to be too religious to be able to get into the stories of, say, the Mahabharata or the Ramayana, which are just, in essence, they're very good stories. They could be epic stories rather than religious text. So I think the boundaries are kind of blurred there.

PS: Did the stories also teach some moral lesson?

GN: You know, if you really look at the stories, sometimes you wonder about them. Usually somebody loses a dice game and they're out killing each other. But, I mean, there are truths in it. The whole Bhagavad Gita takes part in part of the Mahabharata. There's the big discussion between Krishna, the god, and Arjuna and why are we fighting.

[Telephone interruption.]

I was trying to say that, the thing is that it gives you help, since you know the historical background of what it was. If somebody says, "Okay, this is from the Bhagavad Gita, this passage," you know at least the story behind it, where it fits in the story. And it is important to know. I guess the culture and the religion are blurred. You need to know some of the stories to be able to know--it gives you something to refer to. As a kid, you can't really get into the abstract qualities of, okay, these are the things in the religion that are important or whatever, because usually the religion becomes very abstract, but at a base level, it gives you a very good historical background.

PS: That's neat. I didn't know about that, the story books, the cartoons. That's cool.

The kids that you were friends with during school, you said mostly that there weren't other Indian kids in your classes. In Burnsville and in Chicago, were they mostly white kids or were there children of other ethnic groups, as well?

GN: Mostly white kids in both, especially, I think, in Minnesota. Chicago I don't really remember so much, but, yeah, I think mostly my friends typically--although I've had friends who weren't, outside of the community I grew up, who were of a different ethnic group. I'm talking up to high school, because it all changes in college. But up to high school, essentially yes. Most of my classmates were white and most of my friends were. There were a few people of other races, but I think it was probably not a very high percentage that were of a different background.

PS: When you noticed kids of other races, other than white, in your school, what was your reaction to them?

GN: Well, you know, I think a lot of times you block that out in a way. Sometimes it is, "Well, so what? They're different." You try to teach yourself that we're all the same and you tell yourself. So in a way, I would say that you kind of ignore it, actually, and I think maybe I do a little bit even now. Even if you see somebody different, you don't want to treat them any different than you would want to treat anybody else. You try to say, "Well, how would you want to be treated?" It's essentially the same argument, how you want to be thought of. I want everybody to treat me for who I am. So if you see somebody, you really have like that urge to say, "Okay, I really don't want to treat them that special just because they're different," because you want to be treated just the same. I think anybody

who is different, I didn't really care about that so much. I didn't really think it was that special. Maybe I kind of blocked that out that they must be going through some of the same things. But I think when we met--I was saying that there were other Indians. We had other ways in the community that we met Indians, and I think that became much more of a sounding board for anything like that.

PS: So you would seek out the friendship of an Indian peer rather than perhaps an African-American student at your school?

GN: I don't know. I was probably a little more open to that, although I did--which is to say another thing about my high school. Our class president was African-American. Actually, our homecoming king was also a different African-American. The class president, he was in a lot of my classes. I liked the guy, and I think to some extent we got along. But you still, I think even in high school, you never try to go beyond somebody's background. The same fear you have of having people know about your background, you really don't try to probe anybody else's background at times. You don't really, "Okay, this guy's Iranian, and I want to know everything about Iran," which I probably would have done when I got to college.

And I think it's a lot harder with people who actually grew up here, because I think people who grew up here don't like to be probed by those questions. So they have the same problem. You have the fear that they have the same problem that you have, is that you don't want to relate--they're probably afraid. You really don't want to probe into somebody else, and only when you start knowing people further do you do that. I guess I should say that I really didn't have, in my experience I never had anybody who lived close by at my age who I could classify as being that different.

PS: You said there was one other Indian in your class.

GN: Yes. There was one other person.

PS: Did you have any kind of special connection with that person?

GN: No, I don't think so. We had classes, I guess we might have had a class or two together. Like I said, I never really sought it out. It was a big high school. In Burnsville, unless you really have a lot of classes with somebody, you won't ever get to know them.

In some ways it was kind of interesting, because I worked with somebody who was Indian, too, in a job when I was in high school, and I don't think I talked to her at all really that much or anything. We would have never talked about our backgrounds when we working in the job, but we had gone to college together and once in a while I ran into her. I think it's a lot different after going to college how you would have talked. That affinity would have been there a little bit more, and you would have been a lot more

open. That part of it, you would have been a lot more open.

PS: So is it a fair summary to say that you were sort of pretending to be color-blind in high school and going overboard to not notice distinctions or differences?

GN: Well, in Minnesota it doesn't really matter--like I said, at my high school, to be color-blind, there aren't very many different people. Of 700 people, if one person's Indian, you might not see that person all day. I would say it's kind of a fair assumption to say that. You do look at the world with the idea of being pretty color-blind about it.

PS: At least from your perspective as a--

GN: As a perspective, and you're not really used to too much. The other thing is that you really don't get into history or backgrounds, and it's really hard to get into that until you're at a little older. Even during the later parts of high school you might think of it more than, you know, say, in sixth or eighth or ninth grades, when you're just starting to learn about these vastly different worlds and everything like that. You've never traveled to another country. Most people would have never traveled to another country. I probably would have already traveled to India a lot, and I might have had a little different, at least that perspective. But how do you explain--like I said, you really shut that out. You don't even know yourself about other cultures that much.

PS: When you would flip through the yearbook or pictures of things from school, would the brown faces jump out at you?

GN: Gosh. I really didn't go back to any yearbooks.

PS: But even when you were a student, you didn't?

GN: You know, yes, it does sometimes. I was probably more interested in what they're doing or something like that. I'm really saying that there were so few Indians. It would be interesting if you say this guy's--later on if I go back and say there's an Indian from my high school. I was like, wow. That's actually pretty amazing. You know, doing this or something like that. That's an Indian name or something. Maybe later, after I graduated, it was like, wow, there are other things. But as far as going through the school, I guess I should say it probably did interest me to a certain point, because I do like cultures and different people, names and things. But I didn't really see anything special.

PS: Did you find that having a first name that was very distinctly ethnic, was that an advantage or a disadvantage? Did you see it one way or another? Did people mispronounce it or did you have to explain things about it?

GN: Everybody mispronounced it. Actually, I think you could especially tell when you'd

get a new teacher. You get to the point where they look at your name and they just die, freeze, just die. They're dead on their tracks. You know, okay, that's my name. To a certain extent, yeah, you get tired of pronouncing it. I still get tired of pronouncing it. I honestly don't try to correct people with it so much, and I almost changed it to make it easy enough.

PS: You almost changed your name?

GN: Well, I mean, I know it should sound more like Gupthan, but I probably changed to more Guptan, because that's how it's kind of spelled, and, you know, you don't always have the letters in English. You don't really worry about the pronunciation. But on the other hand, I find it's great to have a name that's very distinct, because there are times where--even now. Even a couple of months ago, I ran into somebody I had not seen since high school, which is quite a while ago, and they'll remember my name.

PS: Oh, sure.

GN: There's no doubt. And I'll never remember their names. It kind of works to an advantage that way. I've had that happen to me a couple of times, where people will just remember your name without you remembering theirs. So maybe there is an advantage to a distinct name.

PS: Let's talk a little bit about SILC, the School of Indian Language and Culture. Was that a part of your experience growing up?

GN: Yes, to an extent. I mean, my father was very involved in it, and so, yes, I guess to an extent it was. I don't know how much I learned, now that I think about it, but it definitely gave me a springboard to meet other Indians from other parts of the country. I think that really helped because, you know, it was kind of like you grow up in Burnsville, and you're color-blind or whatever. You don't really think about it. But this is a forum where you can actually meet with people your age, and I think that itself probably, it builds up to recognizing that there's other people like you out there, and it was kind of nice that way. At least, I think about it is, it interested me later on in life about a lot of those things. I guess it kind of added to my interest in anything that was Indian.

PS: Tell me what the SILC school was like when you were a student there, how many kids were going, who were the teachers, what subjects were being taught, how many hours a week did you go?

GN: I think it was about three or four. I'd have to say about three hours, but I'm not really sure. And it was about 100, I should say 100 students, somewhere around that. We had a language class. We had kind of a social studies class. What else? We might have had something. I mean, I think I was a little older when I started, so I didn't know how many

of those classes I took. I'm trying to remember. I might have taken something else.

But the teachers were people like my father who did a lot, I think. Ram Gada and, gosh, Shapi Shi [phonetic]. I'm probably missing people here. But, you know, a lot of people were really involved in the community, and I think those were the type, their kids were there, and I think that was kind of nice, because they were all active people. And I think later on in life the kids were pretty active people.

As far as course material, we did get to see things. In the language we got some practice in my mother tongue of Malayalam, and maybe once a week we got at least some of that language. I mean, it's kind of hard with once a week to get all that in. You've really got to work on it. But I do get some credit. I mean, it did at least keep it much more going than I am probably now, so that was kind of nice.

Probably the history stuff was probably more fascinating for me. I really liked the history of it—and, I think now, you know, I look back, I know we went through different types of material. Probably I wish that I could do something like that now. I mean, it's more interesting now than it probably was at that age, which is almost the truth. But like I said, at least it was kind of good that way.

I think socially it was really nice. When I look back to it, you got to see some people of an Indian background, which is also probably--like I was saying earlier, you try to build a little bit of pride, and I think that kind of helps.

PS: At SILC, did you hang around with the other kids from Kerala or did you hang around with just--

GN: Oh, see, I think that was the best part is that I got used to people of a different background. If I go through my parents' social circle, oftentimes it ends up being very Kerala oriented. I think this is at least good in that I did get to meet people who were of different background, and, you know, you kind of build a kind of an Indian thing, which was kind of nice. Later on when you're at school, you're, "Hey, I know something about this culture." And you run into people who actually may be from India, and you have some relation to it. Yeah, actually, I think a lot of the people then were from north India, and I think that was kind of nice introduction that way, and I think probably more in school, in college, I got much more use from those connections.

PS: Where was your closest group of friends from when you were in high school?

GN: My closest group of friends were from my high school. They were probably more Caucasian white American, who grew up here. That was my core of friends who I did probably the most with. Probably I'd kind of break it down into like just social friends, and probably friends from sports. I did cross-country running, so there were people from

cross-country running. So it was kind of a mixture between those people that I kind of hung out with.

PS: So you didn't actually have close friendships with the other students from the SILC school?

GN: Yeah, some of them I kind of had good friendships with. I had a couple of friends. I mean, I've gone over to their houses. Sometimes I run into them. Some of them, they're still in the community and you kind of run into them quite a bit. Maybe not as close, because you don't see them, you never got to see them as often because it was once a week. Only when you get probably to the older ages, when you're not going to the school because it's for younger kids, you have the mobility to actually go to a different part of the city. So probably not as much, probably not as close as what I had in high school.

PS: And which kind of friendships have endured over the years? Are you still in touch with the high school friends?

GN: No, not really. Not at all. I think most of the friends are at college or even work. I think it probably is--I kind of discovered it. We were talking about earlier how at first you only care about playing with toys, and then you actually become more and more different as you grow because your interests change, and I think more and more, probably the people you were with in high school weren't necessarily good matches for your interests later on.

One of my friends from high school, when I was in college, was actually a roommate of mine. We had rented a house. So I did keep touch for a while, but I think you kind of drift further apart from that culture, from what you had similarities in high school. What happens, I think, is a lot of people probably go to college, and they've changed, too, but you only remember them from high school. So I think you lose--I mean, I lost a lot of touch with anybody there. I can't see anything in high school that would have been what I'm interested in doing now.

PS: Did you date when you were in high school?

GN: No, I actually did not date, really, when I was in high school. I think that's kind of the harder part, because you really--for me, in a culture where you as a male are supposed to ask a female, for me it was difficult. I was a pretty shy--I'm still a pretty shy person, and that is a lot scarier when you feel really different, because you have to ask somebody and you feel, "Wow, I'm really a strange person." Not only that, I was very shy. I'm a super shy person. So for me, it was very difficult to do that. It would have killed me to do it.

It's just a scary proposition, because you're so--maybe the hardest part about growing up

is, you feel like there's so many things to deal with. There's so many positive benefits that the hard part about it is, you're always who you--you kind of have this kind of superiority/inferiority complex or something like that, and you're petrified of certain things like that, really petrified. I still think I get over a lot of it now, but still I have, I can see myself slipping sometimes and saying, "You're just too different to do that. They wouldn't understand." You're afraid that nobody would empathize with you. So again, it's hard, because like how would you bring a date back to home or something like that? How would you explain?

People at the high school level especially start thinking about those things. Maybe at college you go through a little bit more. People become a lot more empathetic about certain issues like that.

PS: Was dating something that your parents ever talked to you about?

GN: They didn't know anything about it, so they really couldn't help me out and talk to me about it in any way. They never said no, they never said yes.

PS: So it was just not discussed?

GN: They just didn't really know. I mean, they couldn't. They had an arranged marriage. I don't even know if--they probably didn't even see each other. So for them, dating was as foreign a concept as anything else, which was kind of hard because you really don't, you really don't get any support in that way. They can't tell you anything.

I think that's true with a lot more than just dating. I think it's true with everything. The hardest part you have is you don't really have any trailblazers for yourself. Nobody can say, "Okay, this is true about this and this is true about this." I can do it now so much easier. I've probably been a good student of this culture all my life. But that way, there's no support at all. They can't tell you anything about it.

PS: Did your family have any ways that they communicated to you about who might or might not be acceptable friends for you?

GN: No. For the most part, my parents gave me free reign on almost anything; I know they were a little more cautious on my brother, but I think for the most part, I hung around in semi-decent crowds, I hope.

PS: So you never got any over-censure from them?

GN: No, no. I don't think I, I don't really remember too many things. When I look back at the friends I had and stuff, I don't think I had too many friends who were ever in kind of bad company for them, although I know for my brother they have a little more--I have

two brothers, and I know one of my brothers gets a little bit more flack about it than us. But I think that's more, I mean, it's more about they're just worried. He's a good kid, but I think he hangs out, they're worried that he sometimes hangs out with some wrong people.

PS: What are your thoughts about how you're going to choose a mate? You're twenty-six at this time?

GN: Yes. You know, it's really, I still think it's pretty complicated. The way I look at myself at my age, I kind of think I always have a four-year or a couple year delay, because like in high school, I was a couple years behind, probably, and that was true even through college. It's like you're still learning things that--it takes you a little longer to adjust to certain things.

But as far as that, I think the biggest question is who you are and what you want to do, and for me, it boils down to finding somebody who has very similar interests, and who can empathize. Somebody who can really empathize with who you are. I tell my parents, if they really, if they want to arrange a marriage, I'd still look for the same. I'm not really opposed to it. I'd still look for the same quality of person. I mean, I don't really care if the person's Indian. They can be from any background, and it would never bother me. I'm really much more worried about who a person is as an individual.

Maybe kind of going back to that belief of the color-blind. I think it's more of a, it's much more important to get somebody who's similar to you. Somebody who can empathize with you as an individual, because there's no perfect thing. Somebody who grew up here or somebody who grew up in India, either way they might have something--they're never going to be perfectly who you want them to be as far as they don't have the same life experience. I can't expect somebody to have the exact same life experience. So it's more, you know, if you find a special individual.

PS: So did you learn how to date, finally? In college, did you learn how to date?

GN: Not really that well.

PS: It's still kind of hard for you?

GN: No. Well, yes, it's still complicated. I think I'm better off now than I was in college, because I work--I mean, I did engineering in college, which isn't really the major to choose if you want to date anybody.

PS: Yes.

GN: Engineering is really even worse, probably, than high school when you think about it, because you run into people. I've gone on dates and stuff, but it's still harder to meet

people because our classes were 90 percent male, and you really run into that.

I think it's easier now than it was even in college. College it's so much work, and you're still learning who you are in the sense that you're building the confidence. You go out, get a job, and work, and then you really have the confidence to do a lot of things. In college, now that I think about it, it was still difficult. I still think it's difficult, because it's still hard to get people to empathize with who you are. Maybe it's a confidence level. Once you get to that confidence level, it's a little easier.

PS: The people that you date now, how do you meet those folks?

GN: Now, I mean, I don't really go on that many dates, either. And I shouldn't even say date, but much more of a, like, hang out with and do stuff. Work or just those types of circles are much more probably similar to who you are. I still see sometimes the same difficulties.

I have a much more easier time working with women. Like I said, engineering was really outside the realm of maybe even--I think sometimes you have to get used to people, and in engineering, your social circle becomes very restricted. You know, the engineers are very male oriented. And for me, dating is a lot easier going toward being in a company--when I was working in Phoenix, I worked with all women, and I think even now I work with a lot more women than--I mean, that's why it's easier. Essentially, your social circle has changed. Well, it changed a lot more. It gives you--it's just dealing with it is a lot easier for me.

I think that's probably--I'm still a very shy person, but as far as that goes, it's just meeting people who were kind of more interested in things, try to get people who are more, looking for people who are more interested in what I'm doing. Sometimes that's even hard, because sometimes you're not really that interested in work stuff, and you still end up talking about work and doing stuff like that. So, oh, well.

PS: If your parents did arrange a marriage for you, how would they go about doing that? Have you talked to them specifically about doing it?

GN: Yes. You know, they're kind of worried, I guess, more than I would be. You know, twenty-six isn't a big deal for me. I mean, for a lot of people it might be. I said, "Hey, if you can find somebody, go ahead." I mean, I'd meet anybody. I'm not going to say, "No, don't do it." Yes, I've said, "Go ahead and do it, and if you can find somebody, that's fine." I'm not opposed to saying that that person's any worse.

If I found an arranged marriage and I met somebody and that person wasn't a perfect person, I wouldn't object. I mean, I'm not so confident on an arranged marriage. I'm probably much better off looking for who I'd rather live with--you know. It might be a

harder search, I think. When it comes down to it, it's a very narrow circle, it's a narrow field who can really choose, because you've got to have somebody who's--I mean, I would need somebody who's comfortable enough about my Indian background, which would be, I would say, a very small percentage of people in itself who can deal with that. So sometimes it's harder to find somebody like that. But, I've met people who are. I know there's people who have very similar backgrounds and who aren't necessarily Indian or anything like that. It's just a matter of finding the person. And I'd rather not get married just out of a rush and say I need to get married at twenty-six, right now I need to get married at twenty-six and then get married to the wrong person. That would be a lot harder than waiting a couple years and finding the right person. So that's probably be the answer.

PS: Okay. So you would have a little more faith in finding your own mate rather than an arranged marriage, but you're open to an arranged marriage?

GN: Yes, that's what I would say. To some extent, I have more faith in--I think because if you start doing things, you get more involved in what you like to do and you can kind of move down things you do, I think you're more likely to run into a person with similar likes and dislikes. I guess that would be probably a better match. If they do an arranged marriage, I think it would be difficult, because they don't know anything about who that person is, whereas you get to meet people--

PS: Well, that's not what I understand about them. I think they do a lot of research, but it's not--

GN: Yes, they do. They know the person's background as far as, for instance, they did an M.S. in this and all that, but how can you get a personality trait?

PS: Oh, okay. So for you, the personality is more important than the background information?

GN: I could care less if the person's a Ph.D. or even has a degree than who--you know, maybe more of the interest. I don't care about career building. That's the harder part. For me, I don't really care. I don't need a doctor. I don't need an engineer. I don't need anybody who's really a professional in any sense of the word. I mean, that's not really where my interests are. But, you know, not to say that somebody with that background wouldn't be interested in the same things. I'm not closing the door and saying just because she's a Ph.D. in particle physics or whatever, she's not the right person. I'm just saying that it's those kind of tangible things that I'm really looking for. That, I don't think, you could ever find--it's harder to find in an arranged marriage.

And I'm not that against it, because I've seen some good matches and some bad matches. One thing that's good about getting an arranged marriage, and this is the one thing that I

see, is that they know the Indian background and they would know that background, and they wouldn't feel uncomfortable with their background, as far as being Indian. A lot of times it's a lot easier to bring an Indian and get him assimilated in this culture than it is to take somebody from here and, I think, throw them back to like, you know, show them an Indian background. I think in the U.S. it is more of a melting pot and it is easier to pick up the culture. I guess for Indians it might not be so hard to say, "Okay, I'm coming over here. This is a different culture, and I can jump in." But I think it's a lot harder to go the other way and say--you have all these connotations. People just don't go to India to live.

PS: Not many. Would that be something that you would ever consider doing?

GN: No, I don't think so. I can live there for quite a while, but I don't think I could ever permanently be Indian in that sense of the word. I've traveled a lot. I've lived there quite enough times. I can live there for a year. I could do that. But I think I'd have a hard time--I would never consider myself Indian enough. It would be an actual permanent move that I'd have to change my whole background to do, and I don't think I'd ever, I don't think I'd ever go back to India in that sense. I'm way too Americanized, I would say. And the more you look at it, the belief system, what you believe in and what you are, you're very much more in tune with the culture here than you are there. It would be the same move that my parents made to come here for me to go back, which was a very similar move. I would really have to change. I mean, it would be easy for me to adjust to the culture. It would be harder for me to adjust to some of the values.

PS: Tell me more about your college experience. You said a couple times that that was a lot different for you than high school was and that there were mostly men in your college classes. But what was college like? Did you live in the dorms or did you live at home?

GN: I lived in the dorm one year and I lived in an apartment and had a house with four other people. It was all kind of different experiences. And I did live at home while I was in college, so I got the full range. I got the dorm, the apartment, the house, and the home, so I got four of them.

What was really a big difference is, it was so much more diverse. The biggest thing, half of my class in engineering was Asian, even though it was mostly male. So as far as that, it really switches the ethnic things, because what happens, especially like in the U [University of Minnesota], I think, is that, especially students who grew up from Asia or whatever, they tend to work together a lot, do a lot of things in groups. They actually hang out around there and stayed around campus, and in a way you have so many more people. You're not really used to that, that you can work with groups a lot. Yes, you have an advantage more than a disadvantage, because you get kind of, I guess, a cultural network of people. And I think even in a class, a huge class, the difference is, I was in a program with maybe 100 to 150 people, and six were Indian, compared to two out of 700-something in high school.

PS: From India?

GN: Well, a couple of them grew up here. Some were from India. But six out 100 is a much bigger percent than two out of 700.

PS: That's right.

GN: And not only that, there was a lot of other different people. So it was a much more diverse group of people than I went to high school with.

PS: What was that like for you?

GN: Oh, it was fascinating. In some ways, it was really fascinating. I mean, it is the reason why I would choose a state school over a small school. I felt like, not that I wouldn't want to go to a small private school, but one of the big things is, I wanted to get out of that. By the time you finish high school, you kind of want to get out of, you really want to get out of that mold, and a lot of people from Burnsville would have gone on to Carleton, to Gustavus or St. Olaf. They'd go to these schools, and you'd just automatically go up to the U of M.

One of the great reasons to go to the U, because it's so much bigger and it's much more diverse. I mean, it was fine. I had a background--I mean, I knew enough about India that I had no problem adjusting to any Indian, or any people from different cultures. So that way, it was really nice, I guess. You really enjoy it. You really pick up a lot. You learn a lot of different things. I think I liked it. For that much, I kind of liked it. I mean, there were things I have missed going to a big school, but I guess for the diversity part it was kind of fascinating.

PS: When you finished college, what happened after that?

GN: When I finished college, I started working.

PS: What was your first job?

GN: I've been working with a consulting company for almost three years, so basically from college I've worked in consulting.

PS: What kind of consulting do you do?

GN: It's kind of information technologies. I should just say it's information technology consulting. We do a lot of programming, we build business systems for our clients.

PS: And your engineering background prepared you for that?

GN: Well, I did engineering and then I did computer science and I did some business classes, so I have some other varied backgrounds. The work was an easy transition, because it's a lot easier than actually going to school. So it was relative fun compared to that.

The first thing they did out of school is, we have an eight-week training program that the company had in Chicago. I went down. People who graduated, we all went to this long eight-week, sixty-hour weeks, eight days of sixty hours or something like that. It was just incredible hours. And then we were trained and then basically started working, doing some programming and building some systems ever since.

PS: Do you like your work?

GN: Um, yes and no. I liked it really a lot when I started. I think, again, you kind of grow out of it. I got to see a lot of things and I think I learned a lot. But I think as far as, again, I think, now I think about the actual reversal of what my college experience was. I kind of slip back to where my high school was, and it's less diverse than even my high school almost.

PS: Your workplace?

GN: Yes. And to an extent, those kind of things are really gone. I mean, it's a little more fun as far as people go, because my company is very young. Consulting, most of the people are about my age or younger, which is a lot of fun for me. When you work with that age group, you get to do a lot of things. I mean, it's incredible. I'd say at least socially it was great, but I think as far as challenge goes, I'd have to rate it pretty, somewhat--at the beginning it was high, and I think it's starting to lower down.

As you move up, you've got to start playing more of the political games, and that's where it gets much more difficult. I'm not saying race is always a factor, but it definitely, there are definitely people you need to know and get to know. And sometimes it's hard, because you always believe in equality. It's a conflict of interest, because consulting is about connecting with people politically. You should get only as far as, you should move up the ladder based on how good you are, because if it comes down to a lot of other traits, you're kind of out of luck. If they start kicking up intangible traits, it's kind of difficult on you.

I think to a certain extent it's easy for me to do the work part. I can excel at the work and I have no problem. But I have a much more uncomfortable feeling about the nuances of playing around. And some people really enjoy it, but I think that part of it, I don't think I'd enjoy so much.

PS: But you're so skilled at studying cultures.

GN: And I know my work culture very well. I mean, I have a good feeling for everything. The culture part is easy to deal with, but sometimes you wonder. You do certain things for what you want, but I don't think--in fact, that's probably one of the reasons why I don't enjoy my work, because I probably don't get that opportunity so much. I get to do a lot of more technical envisioning, but the enjoyment of actually studying the culture isn't there.

PS: Oh, okay.

GN: So maybe actually in that sense. But, I mean, I have no problem. It's really easy for me to see the work environment, but it isn't always exciting to do that, you know. There's a certain part of it that becomes kind of competitive, yet you've got to do it. Sometimes you're in big--there are people I don't know. For me, like in a technical background, we have somebody who's kind of the lead, who is the big technical guy.

In this firm, there was an individual who promoted only his people. Other people have complained that this guy's got certain--not only me, not only for my background, but he's got certain people he likes, and if you don't fit one of the people he likes, sometimes--you know, those things are just too hard to deal with all the time. You can always move around, but maybe there are other things you can do, too, with your life. I see that, and I can see, if you want to really go up, move up in this particular company, you'd have to sit there and fight it for ten, fifteen years, and you might get the rewards of it. But maybe that's not really where my interests will eventually lie.

Certainly, like I said, the technology side of it, learning the technology and business side, there's a lot of advantages to use in other industries and other places, or even non-industry jobs, too.

PS: I'm thinking back to what you said earlier about having friends over when you were in high school, that there was this kind of, "I don't trust that they're going to have empathy for me. I'm not quite sure that I really want to let them know who I am." Does some of that still play out in the work setting now?

GN: Yeah, to some extent, I would say. I mean, kind of not. The strange part is, I actually live at home. Well, I was in Phoenix for nine months. I had an apartment. I think my first year of work, I never really--it was kind of weird, because the first year of work, I worked with all males. Not that gender really plays much of it, but we really didn't do too many things socially. So I wasn't really socially in my company. I don't even know where I was. I just kind of like, "Hey, I've got some money. I can do this thing."

Then I went to Phoenix, and I spent nine months. We had nothing to do but stick together. We had free plane tickets every weekend, so we got to travel a lot, and we'd go to different cities, like San Francisco for a weekend or something. So you get to know those people pretty well.

PS: Your co-workers.

GN: Your co-workers pretty well. And in Phoenix, I'd, "Okay, come over to my apartment," because we all had the same apartment complex. But now that I live at home, I don't invite people over, but I have an easy time to go over other people's places. Maybe that's probably why I don't really have a place sometimes, because I really don't care to bring people over. Plus, all my friends all live in the city and not way out in the suburbs. You're not really going to invite people out to the suburbs.

But I myself don't really like to host a lot, you know. I don't really cook. I don't even have the skills to be a great host. I can organize things to go out, but even then--I think to a certain extent I guess, to be blunt, to be right to the point, I probably have still the same feeling about that. Maybe it's more because, as far as inviting people over, I probably need to build my own place and kind of do whatever I want with it. I'd be more comfortable with that. But I mean, I'm not as uncomfortable with doing something like that as I would be.

PS: Some of these we've already covered, so I'm going to skip over some of the questions. Some of them aren't relevant, because you don't have a wedding to describe yet.

Oh, here's one. As you contemplate your own future, which of the values that your parents held really closely do you continue to embrace?

GN: Wow. I think maybe the only thing that I would say is maybe a hard work ethic, and maybe to a certain extent kind of a moral, be a good person kind of ethic. It's kind of what they taught me to be. I think those are probably, well, the two most important. I think maybe just working, just keep moving, working--perseverance. I think about my father. He persevered. He came here. He had six months. When he got to the country, he lost his job or whatever, and he made it through all that. I mean, I have a relative cake walk compared to that. So I guess as far as, whatever you do, just persevere at doing whatever you want to do. I think that'll lead me to wherever I want to go. I have no fear about that.

PS: So work hard, work hard and you'll be rewarded.

GN: Persevere.

PS: Persevere and work hard.

GN: Yes.

PS: What future do you envision for yourself personally? What's your vision where you're going to be ten years from now or fifteen years from now?

GN: I don't really have a vision for ten years. I would say that I want to do a lot of radically different things between now and then.

PS: Such as?

GN: Such as probably like, you know, escape a job out of pure corporate America and go to something that might be a little more international type development. I would say in ten years I'll probably be the same person who I am. I don't see much of a difference. I just kind of leave my future really--I'd love to leave my future kind of wide open so that I can actually try to do different things rather than tie myself down and say, "I've got to be here exactly in one or two years." Because a lot of times I find a year or two you start, okay, and something else is better.

It's not like what I've done till now has been all of a waste. I'm sure I've lost a year or two doing things I probably didn't need time spending. I don't use much of my engineering degree, but some of those were good experiences and they've gotten me further along later on. So kind of leave the ten years really wide open so that I can actually try to do things. I don't have to be anywhere particular in ten years. I just want to take actually in a couple years, take some chances, do some things. If the opportunity came, jump at it and say, "Okay, I tried this," so that forty or fifty years from now I'd say I got the chance to do it. You know, it's small things. Maybe I'll travel for a year, just stop my job and travel for a year, you know, things like that that I can only do now that I probably wouldn't want to do later on.

PS: Do you have a bachelor's level degree or do you have a master's at this point?

GN: I've just got bachelor's degrees.

PS: Do you have any vision of yourself going on to get a master's at some point?

GN: Yeah, I've looked into certain things. I'd like to do something that's, again, probably a lot different from my technical background. I have looked into something more like in the line of public administration, work maybe more towards that. Those are the type more probably at the social sciences level than at an engineering or science level is the only possibility. But a lot of times I don't see school as such a big thing anymore. I mean, it's easy for me to self-train myself a lot, and I'd only go back to school if I saw something

that--I mean, I needed to get somewhere and they only required that particular degree. But other than that, I have no real desire to go back to school.

PS: When you imagine yourself being thirty-six years old, is there a picture of a wife and kids in that or owning a house or any of those kind of things?

GN: Yes, maybe a wife and kids. I don't really worry. Yeah, probably a wife and kids and maybe a house or something, maybe an apartment. I'll live in the city or something. I don't need to have a specific target, but that would be nice. Probably by thirty-six I would envision myself having that.

PS: So what kind of future do you envision yourself socially? What kind of friendships do you see yourself having? You talked about wanting more diversity.

GN: Well, I kind of see myself going towards more--you know, it's kind of funny, because I thought, you know, I work with people. I have some good friends at work, and they're okay. But, you know, more and more I sit there and think, I know certain people fall in your category of who you're comfortable with. Maybe that's why I'd probably change my job. I don't see, in people I work with--I don't see that a lot of them have same goals or aspirations, or probably intellectual pursuits. And so I'd like to see people with more similar pursuits in what I'm interested in.

It's kind of different, because when I went through engineering school, I did mostly engineering stuff, which isn't really my interests. Sciences, they are interests in life. I like computers. I can play with technology, and they're all things that I still kind of like to use, and I think to go further on, they'll still be part of my life. But I think as far as my interests, my own personal intellectual interests are much more into maybe--I like everything. Like I can go to pretty hard-core concerts, from First Ave. to cultural, more like sit-down classical kind of things. But I see myself, probably as I get older I'll mellow out.

PS: Most of us do, yeah.

GN: It's hard to find people interested in literature in the computer industry. It's hard to find people interested in engineering computers from other circles. But I think it's more people who are more interested in, I would say more international types of cultural things. Most are interested in how much money you make or what is the latest company gossip. And I know you can meet people from certain social circles. I know, for example, I do some nonprofit work and stuff, and I know that they're much more prone to be that type of people than, say, engineers might be, or probably consultants, computer consultants would be. It's just different, depending on where you go. Maybe the coasts are better. Maybe a move to either of the coasts or New York or something like that definitely give you a little more of that flavor than they would probably give.

The point is, I think my social circle will probably evolve. I still have friends who fit kind of my mold. But then as you go along meeting new people, you start changing your life and you end up running into different people because you start going to different places.

PS: What kind of vision do you have for yourself in the future in terms of your spiritual life?

GN: Oh, I'm pretty non-religious.

PS: So that's just not a factor for you at all?

GN: I mean, I love--actually, the only spiritual thing that I can really say is, I'm really pretty fascinated by cultures. I have no problem going to temples or mosques or churches. So most of my spiritual life will be probably trudging through the different--there are always great architectural pieces. There are focal points to many communities. Maybe as far as--the most I can say is, that would be it. I'm pretty resistant to having religion part of my life--I'm kind of opposed to it. I mean, really I don't care about it as part of my own life.

PS: So on a daily basis, it's not important?

GN: I'm not going to put it as part of my--at all. I'd be more likely to go and sit staring up at the skies with a telescope and saying, "Wow, it's an incredible universe." It's so big that I would worry--how could God have created all these things? I'm probably much more interested in how science would answer the question of cosmology. If there's a spiritual side to it, maybe there's the cosmology side. I'd be more prone to go and say cosmology of the universe is much more interesting. For me, religions are, they're different, ancient religions.

PS: How do you see involvement in the future with the Indian community that's here in the Twin Cities area?

GN: I'm still kind of--you know, for me, the Indian community, it's the same kind of thing as growing up. Sometimes you want to get into it and sometimes you don't. Maybe I'm color-blind. I'm not so interested in a lot of Indian community things. I would be much happier if I was, say, working with needy people than I would working with particularly the Indian community. I'd probably go to Indian functions, and I still do. I have Indian friends who I still hang out with and I still do the things that are very Indian. We have a network of young Indian professionals. And I did go to college with quite a few Indians. So as far as that, I still stay in touch with them and they're still good friends of mine.

But as far as being too active, I could see myself maybe like if I was ten years older or maybe a little more settled down I'd be more interested in some of the, organizing some of those things. But now I think, I think the Indian community, as far as needing things--the Indians that come here have a pretty good social/economic background. For the most part, the community can absorb them. I probably feel more sorry about some of the other communities that are out there who don't probably have quite as much. For me, it's more interesting, because I know a lot about India.

PS: So which communities do you do your volunteer work in? Are there particular organizations you do work for?

GN: The only thing I do right now, I do ESL [English as a Second Language] training. I actually work with a Chinese woman. Right now, I've only started. We're trying to teach her English. That's interesting for me, because I learned a lot about China. But I can see that I don't think there'll be many Indians who need that type of training. I'm sure like maybe later on they would, but as far as the community, Indians in Minnesota--I'm not talking about all of them. There are other parts of the country. If I were to live there, I probably would get more involved in like New York or San Francisco. But not in Minnesota. I know there's, for example, Russians and maybe more Hmong, and the Latin Americans are much more prominent there and probably need more help than, say, a particular Indian group. Indian immigrants tend to speak English.

PS: What is it about teaching English that's so satisfying for you?

GN: Teaching itself is kind of satisfying. I think sometimes it's satisfying. Like I said, I haven't really worked it too long. The biggest satisfaction is that, for me it's easy to switch between cultures. I think the one advantage I have teaching English is that--especially to ESL-type things--I find that my background is pretty useful. It's easy for me to relate to China, because the student I have, I don't think she has many difficulties relating to me and saying, "China's poor." I was like, "Yeah." You can break down that type of barrier. Those type of things kind of are easy.

I feel comfortable with the people, the backgrounds. I can empathize with where they're coming from. So maybe that's the same thing. It's easy for me to empathize with the struggles and the difficulties of being a little disadvantaged. Maybe it's kind of rooting for the underdog definitely has to be there.

PS: Are there any aspects of being a first-generation born in the U.S. that you find particularly difficult?

GN: Oh, everything.

PS: Everything?

GN: Oh, yes. I mean, especially because I'm the oldest son. There's so many things that you take for granted that people teach you for your parents that you don't get that same training. From probably even eating at a dinner table, even the comfort level of eating at a dinner table is very hard, because when you eat with Indian food, a lot of times they don't have the same table manners. In fact, when my parents grew up, I don't know even if they had a table. The traditional things, you sit on the floor with the little wooden things.

So even little things like that, you sit there and you go--even now. You sit there at some fancy dinner and I've got to make sure I'm grabbing things in the right order. And you don't eat the same food all the time. Little things like that are very difficult, to order up how you do things, figure out how things work. They might have, really, how a lot of things worked, they learned from you more than you learned from them.

PS: So you end up being your parents' teacher in some of these cultural things?

GN: Yes. Some of the things, it's hard because you're really the teacher. They don't know anything about how school works. They don't really have much of an idea about what are people like in school. That part of it is very difficult. So I guess as far as that, I mean, it's a big disadvantage as far as that goes. I shouldn't say it's all a disadvantage.

PS: Well, the next question is, are there any things that are especially pleasant about being the first-generation U.S. born?

GN: Yes, because you probably get the best of both. You get to see the best of both worlds. Maybe we're in a different time in history, because we can travel back and forth. But I think you probably have the best shot at looking at both India and the U.S. and being able to know a lot about both cultures pretty easily. I think that has to be the biggest advantage. It's like, wow, you get to do that, because if I had children right now, I couldn't. There would be so much more that they'd have, I think, even less of the Indian part of it. So that would be different.

PS: When you have kids, will you take them to India?

GN: Oh, yes.

PS: How often would you take them?

GN: Probably pretty often. I'd probably take them on big trips. I mean, I'd probably have a different emphasis than my parents would. I'd probably take them all over India. I'd probably take them all over anywhere in the world, though. I'd probably take them and say, "This is your grandparents' place," and probably spend a little more time there, but

probably would at least emphasize the fact, the travel factor, show them, because I think it's a great way to learn a lot of things about the world itself.

PS: Are there other things that you would like to make observation about for this oral history that I haven't asked you about yet?

GN: I guess not. I think the only thing I'd say is, I think it's very difficult to grow up in two cultures, but I think there's always a benefit. It's hard to say--well, you can't say either way. There are things you're so disadvantaged with, but then there are things that I see that nobody else can experience.

Maybe the biggest example is, last night I went to the Peace Corps meeting, and one of the interesting things is, you know, they're talking about Peace Corps and you sit there and you realize that for all these people, it's a very foreign thing for them to go to a developing world country. It's like, "Wow, we've never seen it." It's like almost exotic.

I sat there and thought to myself, you will never have to think that that's so exotic. That's just a treat, because you really can feel comfortable with anywhere. I can go anywhere, and I don't feel it's that exotic. I think that's kind of nice to have that growing up with that, because you don't really have to wait till later on in life. I think it does give you an insight on the world. You get to see the world in a different light.

PS: Have you been to countries other than India?

GN: Yes. I've traveled, I've done quite a bit, I guess, in Mexico. I've gone there. I've actually been across Mexico about seven times. I've traveled Europe. Once I did two weeks in Europe, and last summer I did Spain and Morocco and Portugal, a little bit of that. I guess Mexico is where I did a lot, because when I was in Phoenix I'd gone to Mexico City a couple times. I've traveled to Mexico, which is kind of fun for me, because I look probably pretty Mexican to the Mexicans.

PS: Yes.

GN: That's a very different experience. I should say, that's a very different experience to travel as an Indian around the world. And I've traveled all over India, I should say, too. I guess there's some stops. I've been to Singapore, which I don't really count.

But I guess the big difference, as far as travelers, first of all, you're never picked out as American, which is really a weird experience, because everybody else gets mobbed. And you can walk through, even most of the world, to a lot of the world you can actually do that, especially Latin America is perfect, because very few people can recognize the difference between--they'd have to be pretty knowledgeable to pick out the differences. I can walk around Mexico City at the middle of the night and feel pretty safe.

PS: And nobody's trying to sell you things every time you turn around.

GN: Nobody's trying to sell me anything. And not only that, I can walk down streets that probably other people of the same situation could never do.

PS: Because they'd get robbed?

GN: They'll just feel so uncomfortable. It would be so uncomfortable to walk down a street, say just a regular street in the middle of who knows when, because people would recognize you and you get kind of uncomfortable, and people will start pointing and talking. It's kind of like a safety factor. Maybe you'd get robbed or something. But I would never have that same feeling.

PS: You'd blend in.

GN: I'd blend in, so it wouldn't even cross my mind. I think even Europe--it's kind of strange to say. Even though I'm not European, they'd never pick me out as being an American tourist.

PS: Americans have a bad reputation abroad as tourists.

GN: Oh, yes. Oh, definitely. So you can pretty much escape that part of it. Though the place where people actually recognize me the most is Morocco, though. They really recognize Indians in Morocco, because they've seen all the Hindi films. I guess the Middle East would probably be a pretty hard place to get by. They've seen enough Indian movies.

PS: As a final question I want to ask you, if somebody says to you, "Describe yourself, Guptan. Who are you?" what do you answer them?

GN: Oh, gosh. Well, I'm an Indian and I'm American, and probably closer to America, with a good blend of Indian things. I think if you'd go further on, I love cultures. I love going back to India. I'll eat it up. That part of me is there. And as far as other things, I love a variety of things and I have interests in nearly anything from art to music. There are a wide variety of things I like to do, from sports to everything else.

So kind of defining myself, I think the fact that, maybe the fact that I like the broad cultures and everything, I like everything within those cultures. So maybe if you ask me who I am, that's kind of my interest and that's who I really am. Kind of an observer of all that.

PS: Thank you so much. It was wonderful.

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