

## **Interview with Aparna Ramaswamy**

**Interviewed by Polly Sonifer**

**July 20, 1997**

**PS:** Today is July 20, 1997. This is Polly Sonifer and I'm interviewing Aparna Ramaswamy. Tell me a little bit about yourself, Aparna, where you were born, what day you were born, things like that.

**AR:** I was born June 17, 1975, in Chandanagore, India. It's a suburb near Calcutta. We lived--it was the compound where my father worked, and so everyone who worked there lived there also. I lived there until I was three. Until then I spoke fluent Bengali, even though my family is South Indian from Madras. We moved to Minneapolis in 1978, and I have lived here ever since.

**PS:** Tell me about your parents. Their names?

**AR:** My father, Raj Ramaswamy, is an engineer. He lives here in Minnesota in Burnsville, and my mom, Raneer Ramaswamy, is a dancer. She's artistic director of Ragamala Music and Dance Theater and performs and teaches. They are divorced, which is pretty uncommon for an Indian family. I think they were married twenty-two years before they were divorced.

**PS:** Do you have siblings?

**AR:** I do. I have a sister, a younger sister. She's going to be sixteen this month. Her name is Ashwini and she's going to be in the eleventh grade. That's all, just one sister.

**PS:** Can you describe for me what you know about your parents' background in India briefly?

**AR:** My mom grew up in Madras. Her father is an entomologist and her mother stayed at home. She grew up in a joint family system where she lived with her grandmother, who was a widow, and her uncles and aunts, and she has a brother. Our family is originally from Kerala south of Tamil Nadu. Her grandparents lived there and she used to spend the summers there. So it was a very different type of situation, one that we're not so used to here - growing up with all that family around. I think it was very interesting hearing stories about who really held the power in the house, and it was usually her grandmother. She definitely didn't have very much to say, and her mother also, didn't have very much to say. So the power dynamic, I think, was really interesting.

My father grew up in different places in Tamil Nadu, and his family now lives in Madras.

His parents are still alive and he has a sister and two brothers and they kind of live all over the place. He lived in Calcutta for a while before he was married, and that's why I was born there.

**PS:** Did your parents have an arranged marriage?

**AR:** They did. They had an arranged marriage. They got engaged when Amma was seventeen. My father is eight years older than she is. They only saw each other that one time when they got engaged, and then they didn't see or write to each other for three years after that, and then they got married right after she finished college, when she was twenty, and then moved away. So it was like they didn't know anything about each other.

**PS:** And as a young person who was raised in America, what do you think of that kind of courtship?

**AR:** Well, for years I thought that that's the way it should be done, because that's the way my parents were married and that's just the way I think the Indian community expected it to be done. So I just assumed that that was the only way. I think for a long time I didn't hear anything else from my mom. I mean, that's just what was going to happen. But definitely not, you know, I would pick the time and I would pick who it was and if I wanted to marry them or whatever. Not pick who it was, but I could consent, you know.

Even before my parents' divorce, I learned that that was something I didn't want for myself. I just didn't really believe in it at all. Because I've always listened to what my parents wanted me to do and really done what my family has expected me to do and I didn't want to let them down. So I thought that was the way to do it. But I started realizing, I think, late in high school that just wasn't going to be work for me. I'm a very strong-minded person, a very independent person, and I just couldn't accept that. But I wasn't dating or anything like that, because I knew that was wrong, that I wasn't supposed to do that here. Even though I lived here, my family wouldn't agree to that.

But since then I have been dating and I have a boyfriend. I assume that I'm going to choose who I marry and when I'm going to get married and all that. My parents are both very, very supportive of that and they've really done like a 180 degree change. They both think it's fine for me to marry anybody, regardless of if he's Indian or Hindu. It doesn't matter what he's doing, and whenever I choose to do it. My grandparents are still very set that I'm going to marry someone who's not only South Indian but South Indian Brahman, within the caste that I am, speaking the same language, and I think they think they should start looking now that I've graduated from college. It's a good time. I feel like I'm really going to disappoint them when I tell them I'm not going to. So that's going to be something really I'm not looking forward to. I mean, it's a really hard thing to do, because I've always done exactly what they wanted me to do and they're very proud of me, and this is something that's really going to hurt them.

**PS:** You lived in India until you were three?

**AR:** Yes.

**PS:** Do you have any memories of India?

**AR:** Not from then. But I went back to where I was born when I was five, and I think I have vague memories of walking around where we lived and everything, but those might have also come from photographs. I'm not sure. But since I go back to India every year, I just know it so well. I'm from Madras and so I can get around Madras and do whatever I need to do and I'm very comfortable there. So I just feel like it's another home because I used to spend four months a year there.

**PS:** How many languages do you speak right now?

**AR:** Besides English, I speak French and Tamil.

**PS:** Do you remember Bengali at all?

**AR:** I can understand it, and because it's so close to Hindi I can understand parts of Hindi, too. But I can't speak it. Another reason why I can understand Bengali is because we had a lot of Bengali friends when we moved here. For a long time my parents used to speak it, and I heard it a lot but nothing from when I lived there.

**PS:** Tell me about your early childhood years. You came here when you were three. What language did your parents speak in the home when you were a child?

**AR:** Well, when I lived in India, we definitely spoke--I mean, I spoke English because I went to an English school. We spoke Tamil at home and Bengali. So I spoke all three when I came here and then stopped speaking Bengali. At home we only spoke Tamil because my mom was very insistent that I was fluent in it. My father and I usually spoke English or Tamil or whatever. My mom, pretty much until I was maybe twelve or thirteen, fourteen, only spoke to me at home in Tamil, and when I was younger wouldn't respond to me if I didn't speak in Tamil. And that's why I'm fluent now. She didn't do that with my sister, and so she really isn't fluent. When I was younger my aunt lived with us for three years and my grandmother lived here for a year and my grandparents visited every year. So there were always people speaking Tamil, and that's why I've kept it up. And then going to India, I try to speak it there, too. I'm still not completely comfortable with it, but enough to definitely have conversations and get around.

**PS:** In 1978 is when you came here?

**AR:** Yes.

**PS:** What was it like in your family? Who did your family socialize with? What was it like at home? What kinds of food did you eat?

**AR:** Well, we came to Minnesota because my father's friend from college lived here, and he was married to an American woman and they had lived here for, I don't know, maybe ten years or something. So that's why we came to Minnesota. We'd never heard of it before. So we would spend time with them. Then immediately--I'm not even sure exactly how--we became very close friends with a group of Indian families, and so we would always socialize with them, South Indian and North Indian. For years they were our very good friends. In the home, even back then we would have--I mean, we still do eat Indian food, we did then, traditional South Indian food like we do in India. It hasn't changed much since then, since we moved here.

**PS:** Did you always like eating that?

**AR:** Yes, I love it. It's hard for me because I haven't lived at home for the last four years, and so when I get a chance I cook it. But it's so nice to be home and have people making Indian food all the time.

**PS:** You said your grandparents came and lived with you for a time?

**AR:** When my mother was pregnant with my sister, my grandmother came and lived with us for a year to help her out. She had a difficult pregnancy. So she was here. My grandfather, he's a scientist and so he travels all the time to give lectures and all that, so he travels around the world, but always they make a detour into Minnesota anywhere they go. They've come here like seventeen times.

**PS:** You've seen them a lot.

**AR:** Yes. And then we go there. So we do see them a lot. I'm very close to my mother's parents.

**PS:** How about your father's parents?

**AR:** I'm not that close to them. I just haven't been that close to them or spent that much time with them and don't know how close--I've never felt like they have felt very close to us. I know that my mother and them don't get along very well. We just haven't spent that much time because of that.

**PS:** What values did your family stress when you were a little kid? When you were really small, do you remember certain phrases that you heard over and over again or ways that

they communicated to you what was important in life?

**AR:** I feel like I don't have very many memories from when I was very young, but I think something that's been really strongly emphasized throughout my childhood is just remembering where I came from and remembering how important it is to speak the language and know the culture and know the religion and not to forget it, not to be ashamed of it. I think it's so easy when you go to school here to forget or just to put it in the back of your mind and not acknowledge it. But how wonderful it is to be part of two cultures and have both rather than having to choose one. And that's something that's been so clear in the way that they've raised me, I think more than my sister, because I just feel so in tune to Indian culture. When I go back, I feel really comfortable.

It's hard when you live here. You know, it's really hard to know things about Indian culture - just common jokes that people talk about or being able to converse with people or knowing just how to sit in front of people, how to stand, how to act, because everything is different, every little thing. My mom was like, "Don't sit like that. Don't do that. Don't talk like that." You know, and you kind of wonder why people say that. It soaks in and you realize that it's a completely different way of doing things, and it's really nice to be aware of both. So that's something that was very important when I was growing up.

**PS:** Do you find you prefer one way of being over the other?

**AR:** There are some things that I think are better in either cultures but I wouldn't choose one over the other. I mean, things that just I feel like in India are such a strong tradition. The arts are emphasized and everything is so old. I mean, the culture is such a beautiful thing, and it's a very strong knowledge of the history and the language and the religion. But when I go to India, I realize that people who are my age don't really appreciate that. They love going to rock concerts and they love driving around in their cars and wearing jeans. When I go to India, I always wear Indian clothes, I like to go to like traditional Indian concerts, music or dance. But also when I go back to India, I realize that I don't like the way that women are treated. You know, when I want to do things in India, when I go to the airport, I just will walk up in the line and talk to the person. I realize he won't take me seriously. Or men will push me out of line before they get on the plane or whatever. And I hate that. I'm just not used to being treated like that.

Something my mom and I were talking about the other day is when you interact with people here, it's anybody, it doesn't matter if they're a man or a woman. If you're in a store, you just interact with them because they're people. In India it's not like that, because you're not suppose to interact with men, at least this is the way I'm told it is or whatever. But it's just that you just don't feel like it's such an honest interaction, that it's just not what it is.

**PS:** So if you started talking to a man who was a stranger to you, would he just turn away?

**AR:** No, he wouldn't turn away. It's just not done. You just don't talk to men.

**PS:** So what would happen if you did?

**AR:** If somebody came to my house or something, that would be fine. I wouldn't just talk to somebody on the street.

**PS:** But if you were in a restaurant and you spoke to a man?

**AR:** I could talk to the waiter. That's fine. That's okay. But I just don't feel like if I'm in a store or there are men on the street, there are always these men that are kind of leering on the street, but that's just the way they are. They just don't stand there just to talk amongst themselves. They stand there to ogle women. That's what I mean. It's like I feel like their intentions are not good because society is so segregated between men and women. Like if you go to a shopping mall, it's like the cool place to hang out or something, they'll be women on one side and men on the other, and they'll just be standing there looking at each other. It's ridiculous. You know, it's not good to interact. When you go from here, you just don't understand what's going on. And that's it and they're happy and then they leave.

**PS:** So they just look at each other for a while and then go home?

**AR:** Yes. I have a friend in India, she has male friends or whatever, and I think now it's more accepted in the very modern families, in very wealthy modern families. But still, I mean, she had an arranged marriage. She liked somebody who was North Indian and it didn't happen. They wanted to get married and it didn't happen because he wasn't South Indian - so it's like families are progressive but only to a certain extent, because they still have to fear society.

So those kind of things are very hard to accept when you go from here, and you just have to kind of go with the flow for a while and put your foot down. You know, you can't do everything the people want you to do. And that's why I realize I don't think I could live in India. I really wanted to live in India for a long time until just a few years ago. But I don't think so.

**PS:** Good thing to know, where you want to live.

**AR:** Yes.

**PS:** Talk to me about going to school here in the United States and especially first let's

concentrate on what grade school was like for you. Were you living in Burnsville at the time?

**AR:** I was living in Bloomington until second grade, and then I started second grade in Burnsville. It was fine. I don't remember anything that different. I was very, very quiet and shy, and I think that the value that you learn in Indian families is be extremely respectful of your teacher and be really quiet, because being loud is maybe equal to being abrasive and disrespectful. And also doing well in school. I did very well in school. That wasn't something that my parents made me do, but it's something I expected of myself. I remember maybe later on fourth, fifth grade as being teased every once in a while for being Indian.

**PS:** What was the taunt like? What aspect of being Indian did they tease?

**AR:** It was just being Indian. The word being Indian. There were a couple of boys who would run around and pretend they had feathers in their hair and doing "woo-woo-woo," that kind of thing, to just be completely ignorant and not understanding where I was from just because I was different. Or thinking they could push me around. I remember sitting in the back of the bus and being pushed out of a seat because some mean boy wanted to sit there because I wouldn't fight back. But that was just one or two people that I could remember.

**PS:** And how did you respond when that happened?

**AR:** It would upset me. I'm a very, very sensitive person. But even something as stupid as that and I would just be upset and there's really nothing you can do.

**PS:** Like cry and come home and talk to your parents?

**AR:** I think I would tell my parents. I don't think I would cry, but I would just be upset. I think maybe sometimes I would tell the teacher or something. But that's about it.

**PS:** Did you say anything to the boy?

**AR:** Yes. I might say like, "Stop it," or, "Don't do that," or whatever. But I was not an aggressive person, or I didn't want to be an antagonistic person at all.

I used to go to India four months a year, and so I used to just disappear for like half the year. Some people were really interested in that, and I remember being in the library and people bringing me things and say, "You're going to Indiana. I have a book for you on Indiana." You know, but just some people being interested in the idea. Because I'd been going every year. Where was I going? What was I doing?

I think the thing I remember most through high school, all the way through high school, is just that I was such a shy person, and I think maybe if I ever felt uncomfortable that's why, not really because I felt--I never really felt out of place because I was Indian. I think there are some families here that maybe don't let their kids drive or expect their kids to dress a certain way or come home right after school. I never had those restrictions at all. I mean, my mom was very understanding that I wanted these kinds of clothes and these jeans, and I needed to do this, this, and this. And so I really fit in. Anyway, that's just how I felt.

In junior high and high school, I realized I had such a different life because of my dancing, and I was always mingling with adults, and I'd always go to these performances with my mom and all these things. I didn't have very much in common, I didn't really understand people at my school. I kind of felt they were kind of immature. I had a group of very good friends and I was always friendly with everybody, but I didn't really get into the high school scene too much at all because I kind of thought it was immature. I definitely had my own things to do. I don't think a lot of people could understand me, but I didn't really care, if I was dancing or they didn't know what I was doing. So I didn't really feel a part of high school at all. I think some people have these very grand memories of high school and all that. I didn't feel that way. I was ready to get out of there, to do my own thing. I did well in school. I had some friends, you know. That's it.

That's why college was so different for me. I went to Carleton. I had a great group of friends who were very interested in where I was from and what kind of life--because I led a very different life with my dancing. I have been able to continue to dance because I was at Carleton, and I just feel like I can be myself. I don't feel like I'm as shy. I mean, now I'm a very, very outgoing person, which I used to be outside of school. This is something I didn't understand. I felt like two completely different people. But I've really been happy with the way people have really taken an interest in another culture, in another art form. You know, it's something they wouldn't come across.

My freshman-year roommate and I have lived together for four years, lived together all four years. I took her to India last year, and it's such an amazing experience because she was saying things like, "I never imagined that I'd get a chance to go to India." We make Indian food at home. She makes it when I'm gone and it's great and I just love it. So it's a very, very big transition between high school and college for me.

**PS:** Tell me more about the dance, what kind of dance you do and how you learned it. What did you do during those four months in India?

**AR:** I do Bharata Natyam, which is a South Indian dance style from Tamil Nadu. It's like ballet in that it's very technically precise and it just takes years and years and years to--I wouldn't even say master it--to learn at all. So I started when I was five, because my mother had danced when she was younger and then started again when she moved here.



She didn't want to teach me at first. She started teaching me because she noticed that I would watch her classes with other people and noticed that I had learned the dances, and my grandmother kind of made her teach me. So I started with her.

When I was nine, I met my teacher, Alarmel Valli, who lives in Madras, when she came here. So she taught a workshop here, and it was a workshop of nineteen adults and me, who was nine. We had a great time. She's supposed to be the best dancer of the style. So she invited us back to India to study with her, which is really an honor. And so every year since then, we've gone back to study with her. So basically for four months every year what I would do is I'd pack up all my school books and all my lesson plans and go there. In the morning, I would have a tutor and I'd study, and then maybe from one o'clock to eight we would dance.

**PS:** You and your mother?

**AR:** Yes. We'd go to Valli's class. We'd have our private class first, then we'd have group class, then have private class again, every day. And that's all we would do. We wouldn't travel. We wouldn't do anything. And I loved it, you know. I was like ten and I loved it. I never really thought of doing anything else. When I was twelve, I had my debut recital in Madras under Valli and just worked very, very, very, very hard. In the eight months that we were here, I had to practice two hours a day to keep it up so she wouldn't kick me out the next time I went, because she had to see that it was worth her time to teach someone who wasn't there all the time.

I've done that ever since I was eight or whatever. I still dance with my mom. Because we study from the same teacher, the same time, we've always worked together, which is really great. We're learning the same things. We're able to correct each other. And it's just so wonderful for me because she watches me when I practice and can tell me this isn't right or that's not right or whatever. She has just been so supportive about the performances and kind of helped me do everything. Because she's so well established here, I perform with her in the Ragamala performances and continue to do that. I teach young students here. I teach for her when she's not able to.

So is there anything else about the dance that you want?

**PS:** Do you feel in your heart of hearts that you're a dancer?

**AR:** Yes.

**PS:** That's your primary identity?

**AR:** Right. If someone asked me what I did, I would say I was a dancer. That's the thing I feel most attached to in my life.

**PS:** Is there a way to have a profession being a dancer?

**AR:** Yes. It's very difficult. I mean, for years my mom was able to do it because my father was an engineer. You don't make money dancing. But the last few years, ten years, maybe more than that, she's been applying for grants and has gotten all these grants that have really allowed her to support herself and teaching and choreographing. She works all the time, and she does make a living doing it. It's really hard because there are different ways I could approach it. I could stay here and do what she does, and I could work with her. But I don't know how easy it would be for me right now to make a living--college loans and everything like that--because we couldn't be applying for the same grants. So I think it would be hard.

Something that I've been real interested in doing is doing like my teacher does, which is performing solo concerts, traveling all over. She travels all over the world, performs in India but mostly in Europe and in the United States, and that's all she does. But she is independently wealthy.

**PS:** Valli, your teacher, is?

**AR:** Yes. And she has been able to do that ever since she was young and she didn't marry. But now she makes quite a bit of money dancing. Right now there's just so much competition in the dance world. In Madras they say there are 6,000 dancers who don't perform in one city. You pay to perform and it's such a corrupt situation. So I've been told not to expect that, that it's too hard to be in Madras. So I'm hoping that I can spend the next couple of years working with Ragamala, performing here, but also working on my own solo performances and trying to get some performances in Europe and India next year when I go, and try and do that also. Because I think what would make me really happy is performing the traditional work.

**PS:** Ragamala does some things that are traditional, but other things that are not. How do you feel about the nontraditional things?

**AR:** Well, we do some innovative work, which really has a traditional foundation and either has very different themes or music. Also we've been working on taking the dance and really stretching it. I'm such a traditionalist that usually I don't like things like that very much. I really like the classical work. But I love what Ragamala has been doing, and I think innovative work can be really healthy and great if it's done tastefully. I think that's something that it really has been doing. I think that the music has been wonderful, the ideas have been great, and the movements that we have been doing that are different are still very difficult. They haven't been simplified, and they're very challenging and beautiful. So I don't see anything wrong with that. I think that that's something I would like to do in the future, but I don't feel ready to do that now. I think you really have to

establish a good base before you can go on and do that.

**PS:** So do you still go back to India and study with Valli?

**AR:** The last couple of years it's been difficult because I've been in school and she's been so busy. I can't go for the four months I used to. A couple of years ago, she invited my mom and I to do a tour of Japan with her, and so I went the summer before that. I performed there. I studied with her and then went back in November and we did the tour. That was maybe four years ago. Then two years later I went back and I didn't study that time. So now it's time for me to go. Now that I have this McKnight grant, I want to go study in India for a longer period of time and I asked her. She doesn't teach anymore. She doesn't have time. I asked her if she would allow me to come, and she wrote me a letter saying she would love to have me for nine months there to study with her. So that's incredible. I really want to take advantage of that.

**PS:** How old is she now?

**AR:** Forty. Forty-one, maybe. She looks like she's eighteen. So she's been dancing for a long time.

**PS:** Did you ever attend SILC, the School of Indian Language and Culture?

**AR:** Yes, I went for years. I went from second grade to seventh grade or something like that, and I loved it. It was such a great social situation to meet all your friends and everything. I studied Tamil. Because I left every year, with Tamil I always start--because I can't read and write it. I can speak and I understand. I can't read and write. So I'd always had to start over from the beginning. I'd come back and I wouldn't remember anything and so it would end and I'd come back and start over again. Something I didn't get very far with. But I loved the general knowledge class. I loved Indian history and politics and some of the discussions that we had there.

I was part of--I don't know if other people told you about SAP, the SILC Achievement Project. We put out the yearbook every year. So it was great to be ten and have all these responsibilities with the yearbook. I'd call different Indian stores and get advertisements for it. So I thought it was a really great thing where we had a lot of independence, and then we had friends of all different ages that we were seeing that we wouldn't see otherwise. I really liked SILC a lot.

**PS:** So if you have kids someday, will you send them to a school like SILC?

**AR:** Yes. I would definitely send them to SILC. I think it's a great way to learn about very important aspects of our culture. I think something else that I didn't say before was it's really hard, I think, to teach kids language and history or whatever it is at home. So if

they had to learn it from someone else's parents or somebody else, I think it's a really nice way to do it.

**PS:** And who were the other teachers that taught?

**AR:** The one that really sticks out in my mind is Shanti Shah, because she taught General Knowledge for two years, and I was so scared of her. She was just very strict, and we learned a lot and we had tests. I remember thinking they were very difficult. But she was a great teacher. Ulaas Kamath taught and Anoop Mathur taught. So just different people from the community. My mom taught dance there. Rita Mustaphi taught dance there. So it was really fun because you met people from all over.

**PS:** So that was a weekly class?

**AR:** Yes. It was every Sunday.

**PS:** And you said you made a lot of friendships there. Have those lasted through the years? Do you stay in touch?

**AR:** The only person I stay in touch with is Vishant Shah, and that's because we went to the same schools from elementary school through college.

**PS:** So he went to Carleton as well?

**AR:** Yes.

**PS:** Is he the same age?

**AR:** No, he's a few years older than me. Three years, I think. We were friends maybe through elementary school because of SILC. Because there was such a big age difference, we weren't friends in school. And then kind of lost touch and I would see him periodically at Indian functions. Also, with the India Club when they had India Day for a couple of years I was one of the emcees for the performers, and then one year, a couple of years, maybe, I organized all the emcees and organized the whole entertainment for the day. So we would work together on that. So I'd see him once every three years or something.

So when I went out to Carleton, I was a freshman and he was a senior and we met kind of at the end of the year and then we stayed friends ever since then, because we've had very similar experiences. Everyone else we were friends with for years--Raka Mustaphi, because we danced together. But we lost touch, you know, when you don't go to SILC anymore and there's really no reason to see each other anymore. We used to go to a lot of Indian functions and see people there, and my family stopped doing that after a while.

Part of it was because we were so busy dancing that we kind of stopped doing that.

Then with the whole divorce, the separation and divorce thing, I think my mom just didn't feel like she'd be accepted. Even before that, I think, also she felt a drift between who she kind of wanted to hang out with. I mean, people who are maybe more artistic or whatever, just being in a community where they're all engineers and doctors or housewives or something. I don't know if she felt very comfortable around them and maybe thought she was sticking to them because she wanted a part of India, but then they didn't really gel with who she was as a person. So her friends changed; therefore, my friends changed, and so I rarely see anybody anymore. That's why at this performance that happened yesterday, I saw people who I haven't seen in like ten years and it was just so interesting to see people again.

**PS:** Yes, and you've changed a lot in ten years.

**AR:** Yes. [Laughter]

**PS:** And they probably.

**AR:** Yes.

**PS:** Was your family involved in the religious community here in town, in Minneapolis?

**AR:** Not really. We definitely did things at home.

**PS:** What sort of things?

**AR:** My mom taught us a set of prayers that we would say every morning together or whatever, and told us that it was important to do a little offering. We have a little room upstairs kind of like the altar up there. So we would do those things together. So I wasn't really aware of a very large or active religious community. I knew that they would do things at the Hindu Mandir or the Gita Ashram. But that was really nothing that we did really.

**PS:** If someone asks you what your religion is now, what will you say?

**AR:** I would say I'm Hindu.

**PS:** How did you get a sense of what that means to be a Hindu?

**AR:** Well, because for years you're told your family is Hindu and you learn all the prayers and you learn the mythology that goes with it and all that. But a couple of years ago, I really thought about it and said, "Well, why am I Hindu? What do I really believe

in?" Because so much of this is just so arbitrary and probably this doesn't exist anyway. I kind of worked through it and thought I definitely believe in God. That's something that I know that I believe in. And then I thought about really what Hinduism has to offer and at its core kind of how it treats people, how it accepts other religions, and what it's about. And I realize I really do agree with those things. It's just its openness to other religions. There are a lot of things that I don't believe in also that weren't a part of Hinduism in its inception, like the caste system. It's just its openness to other religions. Buddhism and Jainism have all come from Hinduism, and I really believe in all that. So that's why I can now call myself a Hindu and feel good about that. It's very important to me in that I would like to teach my children the same prayers that I know or the stories that I know.

Some things that I've always felt like I don't know about are celebrations, especially south Indian celebrations. We've never really done that at home. That's something we could have done more of. I don't really know what they are, what we do, what they're about, and why we do them. I've talked to my mom about that, and she said she grew up doing all these things for ceremonies, whatever, but not knowing why, because in India they just don't explain why. You just do it. I want to learn about that, because I don't want to teach my children just do this, because I want to know what it's about. I'm kind of wondering. I'm trying to figure that out, too. It's like how do I do that? How do I learn about what's really important to celebrate, or what ceremonies are really important?

**PS:** Do you find yourself going to the Hindu community like at Hindu Mandir or Gita Ashram?

**AR:** No.

**PS:** That just doesn't feel like a fit for you?

**AR:** No. I think Hinduism is a very individual experience, and so even in temples in India, the temples are there and there are prayers going on at certain times and people go through and they pray, but there aren't services. And that's what I kind of haven't understood about the Gita Ashram and Hindu Mandir. But they read from the Gita and they do things like that. I think that's good, but I don't really have a desire to be a part of that. I mean, I think myself I need to work on being more consistent about praying or thinking about God or just doing something for myself that feels good and that I feel comfortable with, but I haven't gotten into that habit. I find myself going for months or years without doing anything or thinking about anything, and I don't want to be like that.

**PS:** So how do you think you'll get out of that way of being?

**AR:** Oh, it's just it's like ten minutes every day. If I can just make myself just sit very quietly and think about some things or just do what we do in India, just light some incense or just do something very small. I mean, if I ever do do that, it makes me feel

really good, and I think that I should continue doing that.

**PS:** But what keeps you from doing it, though?

**AR:** I just don't think about it. [Laughter]

**PS:** Forgetfulness. Talk to me again about what high school was like for you. You've said something already. Did you date at all when you were in high school?

**AR:** No.

**PS:** No?

**AR:** No, not really.

**PS:** And that was because?

**AR:** Because I knew that my family didn't approve of it.

**PS:** How did they communicate that to you? How did you know they didn't approve?

**AR:** Maybe it was the way they talked about other people, "Oh, So-and-so has a girlfriend. So-and-so has a boyfriend." And just knowing that this wasn't said in a great tone of voice. I think once when I was sixteen and somebody asked me out and I asked my mom and she said, "Well, of course you said no. We don't do that." It was all right. I mean, none of my close friends were dating that much or had boyfriends, and so that was okay. You know, it was all right. But then my parents became very liberal after that, after I went to college, and anything I wanted to do was fine.

**PS:** What do you think shifted that they got more liberal?

**AR:** Their separation and their divorce, and I think realizing that the arranged marriage system wasn't ideal. I think they could have said that years ago, but they were just in denial about it - maybe assuming that everyone should live like that. Also I think the friends that my mom had, just not being friends with the very conservative members of the Indian community and always expecting it, that it's okay. Because everything went together. Like suddenly if you were dating, you were a terrible person. You know, it was just like the hard and fast rule, but they kind of learned to be flexible. You can live in this society and you can still have Indian friends, or you can be Indian or you can date and you can still be a good person. It's like realizing that those things aren't cut and dried.

**PS:** So do you think that more and more people in the Indian community are getting that, or not?

**AR:** You know, I think more and more are, because there are people who are my age that are dating and they're dating Americans or getting married and all those things. But I think the people still don't want to admit it. I mean, people still hide those facts from people. "I don't want these people to know that I am dating. I don't want these people to know that I have a boyfriend." And I think it might just be me, but I kind of feel like that would be looked down upon. Or families who have kids who are dating, whatever, just not talking about it. So I mean, you never know. I don't think it's a very open community in that way, because everyone's worried about being judged.

**PS:** Are there any kids your age, your peers, who are--not kids, you're not a kid anymore--any of your age peers who are having arranged marriages that you know of?

**AR:** Here?

**PS:** Here.

**AR:** I can't think of any right now. Not right now. I know people who are older than me, maybe twenty-seven, twenty-eight, who have had arranged marriages when they were my age or a little older. I remember going to showers or whatever. But I don't know anybody right now.

**PS:** So you know of some people who are just a few years older than you who did have arranged marriages?

**AR:** Yes.

**PS:** Did they have arranged marriages with people from India or other--

**AR:** Both.

**PS:** --American-born Indians?

**AR:** Both situations, but also people who grew up in India but came here to go to school, so have lived here five, six years and gone to college and gone to graduate school here. And they all seem very happy, as far as I know.

**PS:** So as far as you can tell, it's working?

**AR:** As far as we hear, everyone's happy.

**PS:** Do you think they really are personally?



**AR:** I think that there's a good chance that they are, because they had more freedom in that situation, I think. They met each other and I'm sure they spent some time together, and the people who I'm thinking of are very independent and very intelligent women who wouldn't get themselves into a situation they wouldn't be happy with.

**PS:** So they're pretty liberal.

**AR:** Yes. I mean, there are still people who ask. People ask my parents, "Well, don't you think it's time? Don't you think you should look? Are you looking?" or that kind of thing. My grandparents asked my mom a couple of weeks ago. Like, "Does Aparna have--does she even want to get married or whatever?" She said some girls feel bad to talk about it, to tell their parents that they want to. They want us to look for them kind of thing. My mom, she said, "No, Aparna and I talk about everything. She would tell me. I know she doesn't want to get married." I have no desire to get married for years.

**PS:** Are there certain groups of people that you got the message it was real clear they were off limits as friends or dates?

**AR:** No, nobody that I really wanted to be friends with. It wasn't anything like that. Like people I wanted to be friends with that I couldn't see or people I wanted to date that I couldn't, no.

**PS:** Was there an openness to be involved with people from other cultures other than white Americans and Indians, like if you were friends with Korean people or black people or whatever, that was fine?

**AR:** Yes. It's really interesting. My high school was very white, my district here. All my friends were white. I didn't have any friends who were African-American. We had a couple of Indians. I went to school with Godan's kids, Godan Nambudiripad's kids. So they were Indian and we were friends. I had one Korean friend, not a very good friend, but an acquaintance. So it was very white. But one thing I realized, I never felt like I was left out. I mean, because I've heard that from other Indians, other colored people, like "They're white and I'm not and I feel left out." I just kind of felt like a part of the group, which I think was healthy, and I was happy about that. Carleton is also very white. All my friends were white. But, I mean, if I were to be friends with anybody, it doesn't matter. But I think there would be an objection to me dating someone who is African-American.

**PS:** And what would that be based on?

**AR:** I think a general Indian prejudice.

**PS:** Against Africans?

**AR:** Yes. I don't think it would be from my parents. I think it's definitely for India, I think it's better to date someone who's white than to date another minority. Someone might just say something, but I don't think it's like a deep-seated prejudice --I don't know. Does that make sense?

**PS:** Yes. So if you were to date somebody who was Korean or Japanese or Italian, that would be all right?

**AR:** That would be okay.

**PS:** Hispanic?

**AR:** Yes. Do you mean from my parents or do you mean from--

**PS:** In the Indian community in general or your parents.

**AR:** I don't think I would get anything from my parents about dating anybody, but I think the Indian community--I mean, I feel like I shouldn't be telling them that I'm dating at all.

**PS:** Okay. That's still the big secret.

**AR:** Yes.

**PS:** That you're dating anybody. Okay. Did your family have any rules when you were in high school about doing homework or having a job or being involved in athletics, or were you just dancing all the time?

**AR:** I was dancing all the time. Well, I'd do my homework and dance. They never had to tell me anything about doing my homework. I really wanted to be like a high achiever, so I would just do it and my parents didn't really know what I was doing in school. They didn't really know what I was doing in college either. They never really had to tell me to do that. And I would dance. I would come home and I would dance for a couple of hours every day. Sometimes my mom would remind me to do that, but I was really interested in doing it anyway. So, no, there weren't really any rules.

**PS:** And you didn't need any?

**AR:** No. I always kind of did what I was told, what I thought I was supposed to do.

**PS:** Was there ever any temptation to experiment with alcohol or drugs or any of that stuff?

**AR:** I was never in a situation like that in high school at all.

**PS:** So you didn't go to parties with your friends?

**AR:** Yes, there were parties, but they were like football parties and they were outside and there were always parents around, and so that was never--and I think there was just a very small group of people in my school who were really involved in that and we didn't spend time with them. So, no, that really wasn't a problem either. I just knew if I was ever faced with that, I did what was I was supposed to do and that just wasn't something I was interested in doing.

**PS:** And how did you get the message that it wasn't okay to--

**AR:** Well, the way my mom was brought up is anybody who drinks any alcohol or smokes or eats meat, they are bad. They are bad people. And that's the way I think she felt for years. And so if I ever saw my dad drinking a beer, I thought that was a terrible thing to do. I hated seeing that. So I always thought that way, too. I thought it was a terrible thing. When I heard a friend of mine had gotten drunk or something at sixteen or smoked, I couldn't believe it. I was just so naive and just thought it was a terrible thing. And then it just didn't appeal to me either. I'm not supposed to be doing it and that's fine. I really have no desire to do it. And you get to college and there's opportunities available to you, and then you decide if you want to or not. I felt much more ready to handle it and that was fine.

**PS:** So did you experiment in college?

**AR:** Yes. I would go to parties and I would drink a little bit. I'm really not into like excessive anything, because it's not a very healthy thing. But, yes, I've had my experiences, good and bad. But not really with drugs. The stuff never appealed to me. I've never been curious.

**PS:** Tell me about your trips to India, going to India, when you would dance. Tell me more about what other things you did while you were there. Did you go to the movies? What was it like culturally being there? Were you around your cousins or aunts and uncles?

**AR:** I have very few relatives in India. We'd stay with my grandparents, and there weren't any relatives on that side that I could spend time with, because my mother only has one brother and he lives here in New Jersey, and he has two very small children.

My father's parents live there. We'd go there once a week. Didn't really spend much time with them. We would do things with my grandparents. We would go out. We would go out to eat or to a movie. We'd go to a lot of dance concerts, a lot of dance performances. I

love doing that.

**PS:** Were they all Bharata Natyam?

**AR:** Yes. They were all Bharata Natyam, yes. A mouthful.

**PS:** Were there other dance forms there that you could have taken in?

**AR:** Not much in Madras.

**PS:** Oh, just all that.

**AR:** But it was really fun for me to go see the different styles of Bharata Natyam or the qualities of different range, from good to bad, and listen to the music. I just love the atmosphere of going to a concert and seeing all the dancers there in the audience, kind of being able to recognize people. It was great fun for me. I had a lot of friends in my dance class, a lot of people that I was friendly with. So we would do stuff every once in a while, or I would just hang out with them, dance class or whatever.

**PS:** Were they other young people or adults?

**AR:** Young people. We would study privately, and in the level that I was there were older students. Like if I was eleven or twelve, they were all like seventeen, or maybe between sixteen and seventeen. And there were also people my age who were on lower levels. But we were all in class at the same time. So we got to be friends. I started earlier and had kind of learned more, so I just studied at different times. There were maybe ten, fifteen girls that I was really good friends with. So that was really nice for me. I mean, we're just very different. They were all very wealthy, and a couple of them had grown up here, in Washington, D.C., and then moved to India. So it was really fun. They were living there, so it was fun hanging out with them. There were people who had very different experiences than I had had there, because their parents were very liberal or whatever.

**PS:** Did your sister, Ashwini, go along?

**AR:** Yes, she would go.

**PS:** Would she take dance as well?

**AR:** She started to. She started to take beginner classes, and I think she just wasn't really into the discipline that was required there, so she just kind of stopped. But she would watch videos and play with her friends. There was like a servant girl, a young girl, who would like to play cards with her and hang out with her and stuff. So she didn't have that

much to do there, but I still think it was a good idea for her to come and just to be in India and have that experience. So we have very different opinions of what we've gotten out of those trips, I think.

**PS:** When you envision the rest of your life, how many times or how often do you see yourself going back to India? You said you didn't want to ever live there permanently.

**AR:** I would like to spend a good amount of time there. I think it's really important for the dance, at least right now, for me to learn more and learn the language better and more about the music and everything. So ideally what I would do is live here, and in December or January, when they have the music dance season, we'd go back and perform and see other performances and learn, and then come back here and work. Maybe during the year--I mean, this is an ideal situation, if I could be just dancing all the time, and then hopefully I would do a lot more touring and traveling, dancing. That's what I would like to do and maybe get back to India a couple of times a year.

**PS:** So where would you imagine yourself actually living? Where would be your home country?

**AR:** Here, probably here in Minnesota. I think just with what my mom has set up here, my family is here. It's really hard for me to leave them. And we work solo, my mom and I. I think we could do really great things with Ragamala. We could work together.

**PS:** Do you go to Indian movies now?

**AR:** No.

**PS:** Because?

**AR:** I don't like them. [Laughter] No, they're entertaining. Well, I would only watch Tamil movies, because I don't understand Hindi. I know some people like to see Hindi movies even if they don't understand it, but I really like to know what's going on, so I don't go to see anything else, because Indian movies are so ridiculous the plots are ridiculous, the acting is pretty ridiculous and oftentimes they are very degrading towards women. They're just silly.

I used to like to see them when I was young, but there were so few that were good. So I think actually I would enjoy seeing a couple. I just never think about it. I never think about going into the Intercontinental Video and renting a Tamil movie. But I think now you reminded me. Maybe I should just try to do that. I think as you have more and more things to do, it's hard to find three hours to watch something that you know is probably going to be really bad. [Laughter]

**PS:** Yes, I've watched a couple myself. The subtitles are bad.

**AR:** You don't really need the dialogue. You can still figure out what's going on, but they're so bad.

**PS:** They're pretty sappy.

**AR:** Yes.

**PS:** Tell me more about going to college, what that was like for you. Did you perceive that your experiences there were different from the other kids'?

**AR:** Yes. When I went to Carleton,--everyone knew this was something I did. I danced. My first term there I left early and went to Japan. I missed finals. I left. And so very early on, everyone knew. And I left every Saturday to go teach, and very often I'd miss a lot of weekends my first two years there because I was performing or practicing or whatever. So I had a very different experience, because Carleton requires you to live on campus for two years and then around town, at least. So there were no commuter students. But I would do a lot of commuting. I didn't spend half the time that everyone else did there.

So my first year I missed a lot of parties. I didn't know as many people. But I was still doing what I wanted to do. I still had great friends, and I still was socializing with them because I lived with them, and I could still dance and I was doing what I wanted in school. It was a lot of work. I mean, for four years to be a full-time student at Carleton and to be a professional dancer here and to teach and work at school is a lot.

**PS:** You worked at school in a job?

**AR:** Yes. I was a research assistant in the history department for a South Asian history professor. But it was a great experience for me because I just think I just fit really well with what was going on. I really loved the professors and the academic level there, and I really liked the people that I met, because the students are from all over the world, really, and all over the country. That was really interesting, but all of a sudden I was meeting people who have a really big interest in things just more than sports. People loved the arts and they loved to learn, which was so different from my high school, and just really enjoyed things that I liked, you know. We had very similar senses of humor.

Very soon a lot of people came to know that I was a dancer. I started performing there. Carleton would have maybe one big performance a year and they'd invite Ragamala to come down every year or something. Articles about Ragamala used to come in the papers. People used to see it. So it got to the point where professors I didn't really know were clipping my reviews and putting them in my P.O. box and say, "This is a great review. Congratulations." I would just meet someone who'd go, "Oh, yeah, you're the

dancer." After a while it became kind of obnoxious because people just knew me as "the dancer." I'd feel like I'm a student here, a political science major. But it was great because the campus was small enough that I became very involved in what was going on in my department. Also I was on various committees and I was a representative for various things in political science and history also. So I was doing all these things I love to do, and I had an apartment with my friend. So it was just a great time that I could do everything that I was interested in doing. You know, it's not like I had to walk around and say I cannot talk to these people about my dance life, or these people will not understand about my school, or whatever it is. They were just a very understanding group of people.

**PS:** So you got to be your whole self.

**AR:** Yes. Exactly. And that's why I think I felt so comfortable there, feeling like--and then sort of like these are the way most people are. You can really be yourself and tell them who you're about - students and professors and everything. So it was great.

**PS:** So when did you finish at Carleton?

**AR:** I graduated in June, just a month ago.

**PS:** Did you have a big bash to celebrate?

**AR:** Actually, as great as Carleton was, I was ready to go. I was definitely ready. And then being with them for four years and doing what I said, as much commuting or as much work as it was, I was ready to go. So, yes, I mean, it was fun, graduation was fun, we had our parties and all that. I have some really great friends from there, so I'll definitely still see them and be in touch with them.

**PS:** Vishant Shah went to Carleton as well?

**AR:** Vishant went to Carleton and graduated in '94. So I was in my freshman year. He lives here in Minneapolis and all. I think we're both talking--I'm moving to the West Coast now, this week, and then he's moving next month, too. So it'll be fun to have him out there.

**PS:** You said you didn't date much in high school but you did in college. What was that like? What was it like to be dating in college?

**AR:** Well, it's very different at Carleton because people don't really date. That's kind of the common reputation that it has from around here. You're very good friends with men or it's more in a relationship. That's kind of how it is, because it's so small that it's very hard to date. So I dated a few people. I wasn't a big dater. I had a lot of friends that were men, and that was a really neat experience for me because I was so shy. So I had very

few male friends in the past. And that was a really great thing for me. I mean, now we have a very strong group of friends, ten, fifteen people, both men and women, and that feels very good and really comfortable.

But, yes, I dated a little bit and it was nice to get to know different people or whatever. But I've been dating the same person now for almost two years. He graduated last year. So he's a year older than me. We've known each other since freshman year, kind of been friends.

**PS:** What ethnicity is he?

**AR:** He's white. He's from Los Angeles.

**PS:** Is that why you're going to San Francisco?

**AR:** Yes. [Laughter] That is one of the reasons. He's working out there. And so we decided. He lived here for six months after he graduated, for me, and so I said that I would go out there. And it's not a bad place to go. So we said we'd try that.

**PS:** And he's working in San Francisco already?

**AR:** Yes.

**PS:** You've got a job now.

**AR:** I've got a job.

**PS:** Tell me about your job that you'll be doing.

**AR:** I'm going to be a case assistant or a legal assistant at a law firm that's one of the largest law firms in San Francisco. So I'll be working in the Environmental Law Department. I'll be working with six or eight lawyers to prepare cases for trial and things like that basically.

**PS:** How did you get that job?

**AR:** Well, I knew when I wanted to work out there and go out there. One of the things I wanted to do was work as a legal assistant. I thought that would be very interesting because law has always been very interesting to me. So what I did is I contacted a few Carleton alumni and talked to them. They gave me some references of people they knew, and I also just sent out some resumes. I had interviews with three firms when I went out to interview a couple of months ago, and this was the one that I just randomly sent a letter to and they got back to me. So that's kind of the way it worked. Then I went and I



had six interviews there and got the job.

**PS:** So you start?

**AR:** I start August fourth. In two weeks.

**PS:** You're moving out now?

**AR:** Yes. I move out this week, and I start next week.

**PS:** Exciting.

**AR:** Yes, it is exciting. It's very different. I mean, my mom was convinced that I'm not going to be happy because I'm not dancing out there. She's not convinced I'm not going to be happy, but she doesn't think I'll be very happy. And I think that's true to a certain extent, but I've always been very interested in academics and in the legal profession and politics and things like that. I love to learn. It's exciting for me to have a "real job" that I've never had before and I get to be an adult and I get to have my own apartment and things like that. So that will be exciting. And I definitely see myself--you know, I'll keep practicing at some pieces that I'm working on. So I'll be working and also be coming back here to perform. I don't think this move to California will be permanent. I see myself coming back here in a year to two.

**PS:** What do you imagine happening with this relationship that you're in in the future? Do you see that being a long-term kind of thing, or just something you'll do for a while?

**AR:** Well, I think that we're both pretty serious about it. I think one of the issues that has come up is me going to India for a while. We've talked about that, and I think we both see that this is a long-term thing rather than just kind of filling time. My mom is always asking me if we're going to get married or whatever it is, and all I say is in five years if we're getting along how we're getting along now, then yes. But that's all I can say. You know, I definitely don't want to get married in the next year or two. I definitely want to wait and kind of see what happens with my career and my dancing and everything like that.

Another thing is my grandparents. I know my mom thinks I should tell them. They don't know that I'm in this relationship, and she thinks I should tell them. I don't really think that's going to accomplish anything, because that's just hurting them. I think if I were getting married, I could say, "I'm in this relationship. I am planning on getting married. I have a career. This is what I'm going to do." But I don't feel ready to do that right now. So I really feel like I'm stuck in a very difficult place. But we'll see. You know, there's graduate school to think about for both of us, and there is me going to India and dancing and traveling and all those things. But I think it's really too early to tell.

**PS:** What do you think you'd study in graduate school?

**AR:** I'd probably go to law school. That's what I would do. But I would only do that after I definitely try to do all the dancing I want to do to see how that goes. Plus, there are hundreds of thousands of lawyers out there. But I want to be dancing right now. So I'm going to see. I mean, some people are convinced I can work and do both, but I don't know.

**PS:** You're not sure?

**AR:** It's a huge time commitment, you know. Law school isn't a joke. It's going to take a lot of time, a lot of energy. Being a lawyer, it's like you work eighty hours a week, and when I would dance? So I'm not ready to make that kind of commitment yet, even with graduate school. If I go to graduate school, it might be--I'm not sure. My degree is international relations, so it will be either that or history. That, again, is like a six-year commitment. So I'm not ready to do that right now.

**PS:** So right now your heart is in dance?

**AR:** Yes, even though I'm leaving and I'm going to go to work. [Laughter]

**PS:** These are more future-tense questions, the rest of them.

**AR:** Okay.

**PS:** When you think about your own future, which of the values that your parents held really dear do you intend to continue to embrace personally, and which ones would you make sure your kids got?

**AR:** You know, what I had said before about how important being Indian is, including all that means and really what that encompasses in terms of all the aspects, I think that's something I really want to pass on to my children. It's very important to me that the future generations here don't forget that they are Indian, rather than saying, "Yes, I'm half this and half that," but not knowing what that means, because there's so much history there. Also something I've learned just from my parents in the last few years is how they've changed and how, if you're Indian and you're living here, you don't have to live by your old rules. If you do change something within your life, you make personal choices and it doesn't involve the community and you can still be a good person. I think really being open-minded about bringing aspects of two cultures together in your personal life is fine to do and you shouldn't be judged or judge people on that. I think those are very, very important values that I've learned.

**PS:** Would you teach your children Tamil?

**AR:** Yes.

**PS:** And how would you do that?

**AR:** I hope I could. And that's something I've been thinking about, too. I'm not sure, because--I mean, if I don't marry somebody Indian, and I think the way the kids learn Tamil is by hearing people speak and then having it spoken to them. So people always say and my friends say, "Oh, you can just teach your husband Tamil, too." I don't think it's that easy to teach adults another language that's so foreign. I don't really know yet. I think just trying to speak to the child is really important. I'd hate to have everything kind of stop with me. I already feel like I'm going to be letting the family down, because nobody in my whole entire family ever has married anyone who's not a South Indian Brahman.

**PS:** And you're pretty sure that you won't marry a South Indian Brahman?

**AR:** At this point it doesn't look like it. I mean, I don't meet hardly anybody who's Indian and very, very rarely do I meet anybody who's south Indian that I can actually get to know. I don't really foresee that happening. And that's the only way I can see myself marrying somebody Indian is if I meet them and I like them, you know. There have been a couple--my aunt last year said, "You know, I know this guy and he's in grad school in MIT and he's this, this, this, this, and this. He likes the arts and is from a really wealthy family. Why don't you just come out here and meet him." And it's tempting in a way. I'm like, "Oh, that sounds good. He's got a good family. It would make the family really happy, and he'd understand my culture and he's Indian and has got a good future ahead of him." But then I think is that what I really want? Do I really want somebody just telling me these are his qualifications and that you should meet him? And maybe someday that would work if you meet somebody and then you get to know them and it works out. But right now I'm not in that situation, you know. Yes, I don't know. Maybe I'll change my mind.

**PS:** So what I'm hearing you describe is that you've come to believe that the American value of marrying for love is more important than marrying somebody if the situation is right?

**AR:** Yes, definitely. Yes.

**PS:** And you couldn't imagine yourself falling in love with somebody who had the right situation?

**AR:** I couldn't, is that what you said?

**PS:** Yes. Right now, it sounds like, at this time.

**AR:** Oh, I just don't want to meet anybody like that.

**PS:** But the fellow at MIT. You have the right situation but you didn't even choose to meet him.

**AR:** Yes. It's very strange for me to like fly out there to meet him. I don't feel right about that. If I happen to meet him somewhere and I think that he's a cool guy, maybe. But I wouldn't just say, "Okay, I'll fly out and see if this is someone I could potentially fall in love with, I guess." But, yes, that's how I feel right now. Just for someone to tell me this guy sounds pretty good for you and she hasn't even met him, we don't know anything about him except for this list of qualities. So it's really hard to tell.

**PS:** That's what it was, the parents were going on when they met each other, the qualities.

**AR:** Right. And I think this way - if you meet someone yourself and decide to marry them or have a relationship with them or whatever, you're the only person who is responsible for this. I think it's so easy when you have an arranged marriage to blame everybody else, to blame the family or community or whatever if it doesn't work out. That's so unhealthy. It's like you're an adult and you make one of the most important decisions in your life, and you should be responsible for that. You shouldn't let other people take care of it and handle it for you. Something I just learned from my parents.

**PS:** When you reflect on why your parents' marriage ended, do you think it ended because it was arranged, or what would you see the factors being?

**AR:** I don't think they were ever, ever compatible. They are such different people, and if they had some time to spend with each other, they would have found that out, I think. Very, very different people, and they're both wonderful people. They're just very different and, I think, need a different kind of person for them or somehow needed to change or become somebody else. I think it's really unrealistic. So I think if they had more time to spend with each other, they would have figured that out.

**PS:** So you think if they had dated in the way Americans date, that they might not have gotten married?

**AR:** Kind of. I mean, in India now what they do is they do go out a couple of times, and I don't know if that really means dating or whatever, but they spend some time together, have some conversations. And even that would help just telling how they feel about certain things when they never had an opportunity.

**PS:** But then if they hadn't married, you wouldn't be here.

**AR:** That's true. That's true.

**PS:** When you think about your own personal future five or ten years from now, what do you imagine for yourself? What would be the perfect vision of your future? What would you be doing for work? What would your personal life be like? Where would you live? Would you have kids or not? What would it be like?

**AR:** There's a big difference between five and ten years.

**PS:** Okay. Well, give me both. We've got time.

**AR:** But ideally, like I said before, I would be dancing in the way that I had described, really doing work here but also with the company and having other dancers to work with, but primarily doing a lot of touring, a lot of traveling, really dancing at a different level.

**PS:** That's five years from now?

**AR:** Yes. Yes. And that could still go on ten years from now. I mean, like my teacher, she's forty-one and she's still the best, is kind of unbeatable. She keeps herself in good shape. My mom is forty-five and looks great. So it's not like ballet where you have very limited time to dance. That's what I see myself doing, and that doesn't fit very well with having a family.

I mean, I haven't really thought about it. I'm not really one to think about--a lot of my friends think about getting married in the next couple of years or a few years or whatever. I have a friend who really has planned out exactly what year she's going to go to law school, when she's going to have her children, when she's going to be married or whatever. I'm not like that at all. I mean, when it's right, it will happen and I'll decide to do it. But I would definitely like to have children and like to be married someday.

I don't feel like an adult. I don't feel like I'm ready to do it. That sounds so weird hearing it come out of my mouth. I feel like I'm ten. So I'm sure it will happen. I just don't know when, and I don't know how it's going to work with the rest of my career. I mean, who knows? Maybe I'll go to law school and I'll be a lawyer and then I'll live here or something and just work with Ragamala and that's it. I'm pretty torn about those areas of my life.

My teacher, she dances all the time, she's not married, doesn't have children, and she never will. I mean, she's very happy with that, but I don't think I would be happy like that.

**PS:** So sometimes you see your visions at cross purposes with each other.

**AR:** Yes. Yes. And it's hard to say what's going to happen. I have no idea.

**PS:** Are you okay with that being ambiguous?

**AR:** Yes. Yes, I think that's okay. I've always done what's really felt right, like the decision to go to Carleton and now to leave for a little while. Actually, I do feel really torn about even the next couple of years of my life, moving out there. I want to go out there for certain reasons. I want to stay here for certain reasons. I don't know what to do. I thought that I've lived here for twenty-two years, and I might as well try it. And if I don't move now, I'm never going to move, so I might as well go and see what that's like and then I can cross that off my list.

I'm going to India next year for six months. I want to see what that's like and then see if I really want to be dancing that intensely in India. I'll see how that goes. Then I'll come back here and see if I can make a living as a dancer, and if I can't, I'll go to law school. You know, that's kind of how things go. It's like you just start eliminating. You end up with something.

**PS:** So you've got some alternate plans, no matter what happens.

**AR:** Yes, definitely. I think my problem is I have too many plans.

**PS:** Sounds like it. Very ambitious. Are there any aspects of being the first U.S.-raised generation of an immigrant family that you find especially difficult? On the other side of that, anything that you find especially pleasant or helpful or useful or that you really like? Just give me both sides of that question.

**AR:** Things that have been kind of difficult, being first generation, have been some small things. My life really is different from other people like me and other peers of mine who have grown up here, just because of their family situation. Some families are very strict, and they live here like they would have lived in India. I think that is really a hard thing to do. I feel like I'm able to fit into kind of these two worlds and it all works pretty well.

Little things I know that make it hard for me is I feel like I still don't know a lot of things about American "culture" as in holidays, celebrations, family traditions or things that happen here, like religion. I don't know anything about Christianity. I really don't. I think it's really important to know something, you know. You live in society, even though we're a pretty secular society, I mean, there are a lot of things that happen that are related to religion that I don't know anything about. I don't know what people do for Easter. I don't know what people do for Christmas or Thanksgiving or whatever. Even though we have our own versions of Christmas, we have presents, but that's about it.

And you learn. I didn't even know any of that stuff until I lived with roommates. I didn't know that people did those kinds of things. Figuring out how to work on this dilemma between the bigger issues like marriage, whether it's accepted, because no one else has done that. You know, we're the first generation to come here and have that dilemma. Do you marry someone who's Indian? Do you marry someone who's American? Is that wrong? Whatever it is. Or how to keep up culture. You know that it's very important because you're the first generation that had to keep it up, because I think later generations, it's more easy to forget and just adapt to what's happening here and what their friends are doing.

But I think there are wonderful things about being first generation. I've said this so many times through this interview. You're really aware of these two cultures, and you can make choices about how to put it together. You're not just handed something and say, "Do this. Do that. This is the way you're suppose to do it, you know." It's a lot more to work through, and a lot more people to try to please, but as long as you figure out you're doing something for yourself, you can be an American with these choices in your life about your career or about your personal life or whatever. You can have this knowledge that you come from this beautiful place, and you have someplace to go back to, and you have relatives there who have had a completely different life than you've had.

It's harder, like I said, as you get older, and things pass to future generations. Americans are like that, too, here. You know, they have relatives somewhere far away in Europe or something like that. But it's just harder to keep in touch with people and harder to really know, harder for generations to teach the next generation where you're from. So I feel really lucky to be in that position right now, because it's something I care so much about. Different people feel different ways, and some people don't care about it at all. They think it's okay that you've come to a new country and you should start a new life. And there are a lot of, like I said, some tensions between the two that you have to resolve for yourself. But it makes a really interesting life.

**PS:** Do you feel like you've resolved those tensions yet?

**AR:** A few.

**PS:** A few?

**AR:** But, I mean, I think there are things that are going to come up throughout your life. There's tons of things, with where to go to school. It's really important in the Indian community to go someplace with a really good name. It's good to do something that is very science oriented--engineering or something like that. It's good to marry this person. And you're going to face those hurdles all through your life. And then how are you going to raise your kids? So I've resolved some of them. A lot of things I'm going to have to

work through. And also figuring out how honest are you going to be with the community. How much of a tie do you want to the community? And then what are you going to tell them? And are you just going to be happy with your life and be proud of it, or are you just going, "These are the things I'm going to share and these are the things I'm not going to share, because they're two different worlds"? Those conflicts are always going to come up.

**PS:** Do you feel like you have to act a certain way when you're with the Indian community and a different way when you're with general society?

**AR:** Yes.

**PS:** How comfortable are you moving back and forth between those two ways of acting?

**AR:** I feel okay about it, because I know how to do it, but I wouldn't want to do that all the time. I don't spend very much time with the Indian community. I know some very nice, some great people, but I just don't see them very often. There definitely is a huge range in the Indian community between very liberal and very conservative, and there's some people I get along with and there's some people I just don't agree with anymore. I know what they think about certain things, and I just don't agree with that. So I can talk to them for a little while, but I wouldn't want to spend a lot of time in that situation.

**PS:** You were telling me that in San Francisco where you're moving tomorrow--

**AR:** Well, Wednesday.

**PS:** Wednesday. That there's a large community of Indians. What kind of connection do you think you might make with them?

**AR:** Honestly, I don't really have very much of a desire to make a very strong connection with them. When I'm here or I go to San Francisco to live, for some reason I get scared when I see other Indians.

**PS:** Scared?

**AR:** Kind of. I don't know why. Just uncomfortable. For some reason, when I've gone to other cities and met Indians there, they're not the most friendly people and they're kind of mildly hostile.

**PS:** Mildly hostile?

**AR:** Yes.



**PS:** How so?

**AR:** I mean, they're just not friendly. They won't smile. They won't say hello. Especially if I'm there with somebody, with my boyfriend or something. Then it's me and I feel like I'm doing something wrong because I'm there with a white person, you know. So that doesn't make me very comfortable.

**PS:** Would you imagine yourself going to festivals?

**AR:** I imagine myself going to more concerts. There's so much music out there. Zakir Hussein lives there, and Ali Akbar Khan. Just really the very best in music live in San Francisco and, ironically enough, they're all married to American women. But I will definitely go see them and go see concerts and go see dance concerts and things like that. The art is really what I'm most interested in. I'm sure I'll meet wonderful people, too, and that will be great, but I don't see myself seeking it out. I think I've spent a lot of my childhood with the Indian community at these things, and so it's not something that I really crave right now. It's like I feel okay about the friends that I have out there and the people that I meet, but I don't feel like I will be completely accepted, I guess.

**PS:** By the Indian community.

**AR:** Yes.

**PS:** Because you're involved with a white person?

**AR:** Right. And then I'm not interested in being with a group of people who would think of me like that, I guess. And, see, like I said, I'm not very resolved about if that really exists or if that's my opinion on how people see me. So it's something I'll have to figure out.

**PS:** Yes. Good thing you've got some time. [Laughter] Are there any other observations you wish to make about being a person of minority status in a white majority culture or anything like that? Any ways that you ever felt discriminated against or different from or treated differently because you were Indian or female or anything?

**AR:** I actually don't feel like that very often at all. I really don't. I think there are a lot of people that do. I've never really encouraged or really thought. I don't know. I just don't think it's a great way to think. I feel like it puts you in a victim's role, and I don't like that at all. I think it's so much easier to say--I think some people use it as an excuse and sometimes it's tempting. This didn't happen because--like that person was more qualified or whatever it is. And it's so easy to just use that sometimes as an excuse. I think sometimes it's legitimate. It is. It happens. But I haven't really experienced that in my life. I don't like to approach things that way. I don't like to notice how many people of color

there are, how many white people there are, and suddenly think they're the oppressive people. I feel like that's kind of a popular thing to do nowadays and I don't really approve of that.

**PS:** Are there any other things that I haven't asked you about that you think are important to share as part of this oral history, things that you might want generations a hundred years from now to know about, the specifics of your experience?

**AR:** I think we've covered a lot of things. I don't think there's anything more that I have to say.

**PS:** Okay. This is the last question now.

**AR:** Okay.

**PS:** If somebody asks you to describe yourself, what do you say? Who are you?

**AR:** There's a few different ways I could approach it. I think even after I've spent most of my life here, I would say I'm Indian. I wouldn't say I was Indian-American or Indo-American. I think I'd say I was Indian. I think you touched on this earlier. I'm a dancer. I've grown up in America, and my life really incorporates two very strong cultures. But that's who I primarily am. That's who I am. The answer. That's all.

**PS:** Okay. Thank you very much for your time.

**AR:** You're welcome. Thank you for having me talk about all this. I really enjoyed it.

**PS:** Good. Thanks.