Sunanda Iyengar

Interviewed by Diana Kenney
January 20, 1999
At United Healthcare, Golden Valley (her place of employment)

DK: This is an interview with Sunanda Iyengar. It's January 20, 1999. Okay. Can you tell me a little bit about yourself, where and when you were born?

SI: Yes. I was born in Hubli, in Karnataka state. Do you want the date?

DK: Yes.

SI: 1965, on November 9th.

DK: And can you tell me a little about Hubli?

SI: Yes. Actually, I haven't been there. I was born and I was there only for two years. I was a very small baby when my parents moved out of that town, so I don't know much about this little place. It's in Dharwad district, northern part of Karnataka. Since my father was a physician, he was working for the government of Karnataka. He was transferred from Hubli to another place in Hassan district, and, therefore, since then we never went back to Hubli, and, therefore, I don't know much about this place.

Interestingly, when I was in the equivalent of seventh grade, I had an opportunity to go there for a month or so, to visit my aunt, who still lives there. While I was visiting, I was — again, a kid of seventh grade is a very small kid, so my memories just, you know, are from that time.

There is one thing that struck me about the place was that the language itself, which is so much different from other parts of Karnataka, the music. There was a very fine vocalist in the vicinity who was a teacher who was teaching music, and I would go to his house every day and I would sit there and listen to the music. Otherwise, I remember — I associate with music to this place and nothing else, as such, and the language to this place. Other than that, it's like any other big towns of India, I think.

DK: What kind of music was this?

SI: It's Karnataka classical music. It's a Hindustani, I'm sorry, it's Hindustani classical music. This is the difference. In the rest of Karnataka, they sing the Karnataka classical music, but in this part of Karnataka, that is Hubli and Dharwad region, they are influenced by the northern people, and so this person was singing Hindustani music, and it was a little unfamiliar to me and it kind of appealed to me at that time. And that was the issue.

DK: So then you were, did you say, about two years old, when you moved to Hassan district?

SI: Yes, exactly. I was, I think, two years old, when my father moved to Hassan district, and that was another small — actually, it was a very small village in Hassan district, compared to Hubli. Hubli is a very big town, but we moved to a very small village in Hassan district.

DK: And then you stayed there throughout your childhood?

SI: No. I stayed there till I was like five years old. Then, because there weren't really good schools, my parents sent me to Bangalore, which is the capital of the state of Karnataka. My grandparents lived in Bangalore and my parents sent me to live with them and start my schooling there.

And so that was all I know about that little village, Yeslur, in Hassan district, because after that, I went to a couple of vacations, like month-long vacations, to that little village, but after that, my dad got transferred from there to Shimoga district, so that was — I don't have very many memories of that little village, either, as such.

DK: So then you were living with your grandparents starting from the age of five?

SI: Yes.

DK: And how far away were your parents?

SI: My parents were about 200 miles, 200 kilometers.

DK: So did you see them very often?

SI: No. Once a year, for a month or so.

DK: And how about sisters and brothers? Did you have sisters and brothers?

SI: Yes. I am the oldest in the family, and I have three brothers and one sister, all younger to me.

DK: And did they stay with your parents?

SI: Yes. When I was five, you know, my mom had her last baby, and so my parents sent me and my younger brother, my immediate younger brother, to Bangalore, and the other three kids stayed back with our parents.

DK: And your mother, was she a homemaker?

SI: Yes. She has a Bachelor's in arts. I think she did something in languages, but she didn't pursue a career at the time.

DK: And your father, what kind of physician is he?

SI: He is a government doctor. He is like the general practitioner equivalent here. He is something like that.

DK: And was this your father's parents that you went to?

SI: No, it was my mother's parents.

DK: How did that feel?

SI: It was very painful to me to be separated from my parents. To be honest with you, the effect lasted on me for a long, long time. I never really liked going and living with my grandparents, although my grandparents were very nice. They were really very nice to us. In retrospect, they were very concerned about our education. They met the expectations of our parents in terms of providing us with the education and a nice place to live, a very safe and secure place, because my grandfather was very strict in controlling of movements. He made sure that we were very well protected in that aspect, so in that aspect, that was good.

But we missed our parents a lot during that period, because a five-year-old kid, I think, really needs to be with the parents, I don't know, even probably to teenage or late teenage also, I think kids need their parents more than anybody else, till there is a certain level of mental maturity. That is my opinion. The separation from my parents in my very early childhood is probably the basis of my belief.

DK: Do you think it was hard for your mother, too?

SI: Perhaps it was hard for her, but she had three other kids to take care of. In terms of workload, perhaps that was less on her, and also, with a higher purpose in mind, our education in mind, she probably must have taken it with a lot more courage and strength.

DK: Were your parents living with your father's parents?

SI: No. My father's parents, actually — incidentally, they lived in Hassan district as well, a few miles away. I don't exactly know how far it was, but it was like a four- or five-hour journey from the little village that my dad lived. My grandparents lived there and my dad seemed to visit them every now and then.

DK: Did your younger siblings later also go to your grandparents'?

SI: No. They never left my parents. My younger siblings always lived with my parents, and when they were ready to go to school. My parents moved to another little town, and it was a colony built for power plant people, power plant employees. So they moved to a colony near Jog

Falls, which is kind of famous for its hydroelectric power plants, because this place supplies most of the power requirements of Karnataka. It's a very famous place on the map of Karnataka, so my parents moved to this colony. There was a little more cultural activity and the school, perhaps. Although there wasn't an English medium school, the school itself was good for its teaching, for its staff and things like that. It was quite well known in the local community. Perhaps they did not want the separation from the other three kids as well, and therefore they put the other three kids in school there.

DK: Was there a change in the language that you spoke at home when you moved?

SI: No, it was the same language. Kannada, the state language, is my mother tongue. But we speak, we actually speak a small dialect of Tamil, but I cannot claim myself to be a Tamilian, because it's very difficult because I cannot speak Tamil in its original form. The way it is spoken in Tamil, I cannot speak the language that way, nor can I read or write, so I don't claim this as my mother tongue, as such, although we do speak Tamil with our parents and grandparents, as such. There is a predominant Kannada influence on the family and, therefore, among the near and distant relatives there, there would be a chance that if we meet a cousin or somebody, we speak in Kannada. Therefore, we just put, when they ask us about our mother tongue, we normally tend to put Kannada as our mother tongue.

DK: And your religion is Hindu?

SI: Yes.

DK: And was that an important part of life?

SI: Yes. It was a very important part of life in the family, yes. Particularly the cultural aspects of Hinduism were very predominant in the family. Our grandparents were very traditional Hindu in their beliefs. Both sets of grandparents were like that, and my dad's dad was a very traditional Hindu Brahman kind of a person, who followed the Punjab pattern, that is a worshipping pattern of Brahmanism, where he would use lots of mythic type of worshipping in his daily rituals and routine. And so there was very much a kind of Hindu kind of a family.

DK: Did you participate, too?

SI: Yes. I took a lot of interest in the daily worship. Particularly when I went to visit my grandparents, I was extremely curious about the mantras and chanting and things like that, and all the *pujas* and Sanskar that my grandfather would do. Obviously, this is not my grandparent that I lived with. The other grandparent that I lived with also was a little bit of traditional, although he wouldn't follow exactly the pattern my father's father followed. This other grandpa took me to temples and there would be a lot of chanting of *schlokas* and things like that from Sanskrit scriptures. I had memorized quite a few of them, and even now I am capable of chanting them, and in my spare time, if I don't have anything to do, I find a lot of peace in chanting the *schlokas*.

DK: And your grandmother, was she also very religious?

SI: Yes. All my four grandparents are very religious people, whereas my dad is obviously influenced by that, but he isn't all that religious in terms of following the Brahmanic principles. Yes, he believes in Hinduism. Yes, he's a little bit Hindu in his beliefs, in the sense that he has this fanaticism of the religion, but he doesn't follow the principles the way the others did, like the grandparents did.

DK: Do you think that's because of his profession?

SI: Yes. Yes, exactly. The company that he kept when he was in medical school was like of those boys, maybe, who did not care very much for the religious practices. They were a lot more into enjoying life and kind of things like that, where they could just have parties and drinking and smoking.

There is this one thing about eating nonvegetarian stuff, and that is the thing in the family, but my father violated everything completely, so he is into all these things where he could get into parties, where they could drink, smoke, and eat all kinds of meat, and things like that. Interestingly enough, this was another stressing factor to the rest of the family, that is, his kids, my siblings and myself. Watching him do all these things was a negative factor. That is, nobody even thought, that is — they did not like it. Perhaps if he were to be a similar person as a grandparent, the kids might have gone in that direction. Watching him and seeing him being criticized by everybody else in the family made them adhere to the Hindu principles a little more in the behavior aspect of it and diet aspect of it. So they did not go his way.

DK: So your brothers and sisters are similar to you?

SI: In that respect, they don't care much for the religious practices, as I do, but they do care for what they eat, whether they drink and smoke. They don't. None of them do. So they're just right opposite. Only my father is an extreme exception in the family. My mother did not like it at all. In the beginning of her married life, she was very much opposed to it, and that was probably another factor which made my dad hold onto it like something, you know, and there was constant disagreement between my parents, to say the least, on that.

My mother, she was a very culturally attuned person who practiced all the festivals, who participated in the festivals, who would cook the special dishes that needed to be cooked on a particular auspicious day, and do the right kind of *puja* and things like that. So my mother was very religious in that respect, in the sense that she — from what I see, she probably might not have the wisdom that the Vedic actually do, but she had completely attached herself to the cultural aspect of the Hinduism.

DK: How about political influences? Were those a factor in your family?

SI: Yes. The family there was — during, I think, grandparents were influenced by the Congress Party practices, because they were very much cognizant of what happened during the independence war time, when Mahatma Gandhi was fighting and he was doing the Satyagraha movement and things like that to gain independence for India. At that time, my grandparents were influenced by these things to some extent. They were not really, you know, they were not really participating in the independence movement, but they were influenced by it, and therefore they had certain, I'd like to say, certain beliefs that were common with the Congress Party beliefs.

Later on, in the rule of Indira Gandhi, there were some problems because of her dictatorial mode of ruling, so my father was totally against it. So again, here, there was a switch. So he was totally towards the political opposites of Congress, so there was a clear illusion. Many times I could see my grandparents supporting the Congress, and my father was supporting some kind of an opposite party during election time. Since there was a geographical split — you know, my dad lived in some remote village, and he was still working for the government of Karnataka, as a doctor, and therefore there weren't any arguments or anything like that, there weren't any active discussions at all. Probably perhaps they didn't care about each other's beliefs, either.

But since I was there, I was there in both places, I could see the shifting belief system, which was quite interesting, because I would sit at the dining table and talk to my grandpa. He would talk about everything that Mahatma Gandhi did, and his book — I think, *Truth of Life* or *My Experiences*. *Of Truth* or something, one of those books that Mahatma Gandhi wrote. I don't quite recall the title, because I myself did not read that book. He would read the book and he had certain — you know, he would give me some excerpts from that book. He would give me some translations, which was kind of interesting, but I didn't care for that all that much, because I was like an eleven-, ten-year-old kid when I really heard about these things. I didn't care much for that. So he was more influenced by that kind of a thing.

And here when I come back to my dad's place, there was a movement starting at that time, against Indira Gandhi and other people who were a little bit different in their ruling and my dad was more exposed to that. So I could see the political belief system, too.

DK: So when you went back to visit once a year, how long would you stay, to visit your parents?

SI: A month. That was the summer vacation-time duration.

DK: And could you see, as the years went by, your relationship changing with your parents?

SI: Oh, yes. When I was a kid, I had a lot of affection to them and I believed them to be really very caring and things like that. Obviously, I was upset with them when they sent me away, and I lost that affection from them. For a long, long time I was very, very depressed. I never knew about it in that sense. I had this hollow emptiness in myself, a dream that I would always go back and visit them. I would lie down in my bed in the night and think about them and all that stuff.

But as years went by, they became very strict.

A few years later, actually, when I was in — I didn't live with my grandparents for too long, actually. I lived with them till about like two, three years, and then I went back for a year. I insisted that I go stay with my parents, and therefore they sent me. When my dad moved to Kargal, this colony that I talked to you about, and a distance of about twenty miles, fifteen, twenty miles, I think, there's a school. There was a convent that was running an English medium school, so I secured an admission there, and I went there for a year.

After that, for some reason, my dad got transferred to some other little village and my hope of joining a school in close vicinity wasn't possible, so I moved back to Bangalore for another year, and that was during my sixth grade. Unfortunately, my grandfather died at that time, and so we could not actually stay with my grandmother. And this was like — there was three more months of my sixth grade left, and it was some time in January, and the school session ends in April — so my grandfather died, and that was a very tragic thing to the family.

And so there were two of us, and my grandma was alone. My mom didn't know what to do and didn't know how to finish this. So she actually brought the three kids with her, the other three kids with her, and she stayed with my grandma and put the three kids in the school in Bangalore. There was a [unclear] running a school and she gave them admission in that late time for them, three more months, and then they finished that part of the schooling there for only three months, and then we left back to this little town where my dad was living.

I went and did my one year of schooling in that little school, [unclear], and I changed my medium of instruction and I did that schooling in Kannada, which was really difficult, because I didn't know Kannada all that much. All of my schooling was done in English and here I am, suddenly jumping into a Kannada medium school. But for the spoken thing, I didn't know much of the language, and I had to learn the language right from the script level. But somehow I managed it, fortunately. I did have this fear that I might fail and things like that, and so I managed it.

In fact, I even secured a district-level rank at that time, being in that school. I secured some second or third in the district-level examination at that time, in my seventh grade, and then a couple of years of my high school, I did it, and again, I changed back to English medium. For high school, English medium schools are available, so I went to another town in Kadur, this is in Chikkamagalur district. I got admitted to an English medium high school. I did a couple of years of education there, and finally, at that time, my dad got a transfer to Bangalore, because he was quite senior at that time in his profession, so he was able to get a transfer to Bangalore, and then he put all the kids in English medium schools and his problem was solved.

DK: So then when you were in high school before Bangalore, were you living with your parents?

SI: Yes, I was living with my parents. The only problem I had, the emotional problem I had was

when I was in my first grade to my fourth grade. I did my four years of my school in Bangalore and I stayed for four years, was a long time. Particularly imagining, at that time, a kid imagining the rest of life being separated from the parents. I could never say anything that would happen that would make me go back to my parents. All I foresaw at that time was living away from my parents for the rest of my life, and that was a very horrible thing at that time to think of.

DK: Did you have a hard time at school?

SI: Yes, I had a hard time. I was a very introverted kid, and with my strict upbringing in the family, it was very difficult for me to have friends in school, too. There was a lot of restrictions on our movement. We just had to go to school, come back home, and we had to go with our grandparents. He would just put us in the back seat of the car and take us around the town and bring us back home. There was severe restriction on our movement, because Bangalore is a very big city. It's a huge city, highly populated. Even at that time, it was extremely overpopulated and there was a big fear in them, and so our movement was very restricted. If we had to go out for a walk to buy some vegetables and things like that, we would go with our grandparents. And there was this one family that lived in the neighborhood and they had a couple of kids and we'd play with them. We didn't have much of interaction beyond them.

There were some five or six kids in the neighborhood that we played with, and that was all, because all these four families live in the same big compound. There were three or four little houses in this big compound, and because of the fencing, it was like a concrete compound with an iron gate. We could not really get out of that compound without taking permission of our grandparents, so that assurance was there for them. Therefore we were allowed to play with these other kids. It was a really restricted upbringing.

DK: Obviously your family placed a very high value on education.

SI: Yes.

DK: And it was the same for the boys and the girls in the family?

SI: Yes, yes. Interestingly enough, the family was slightly unique in that respect, that education of the girls was placed very high, given a very high importance, even more than the marriage, as such. In India, marriage, of course, is placed as a very high priority, and they don't care much for education. I mean, they do, many families, they do. If the girls themselves push forward, they put them through engineering, medical, law, and various different types of degrees, but here in my family, they actually pushed us through a good education.

My dad was very upset that I did not do well in my high school. Whereas in my seventh standard, I got a rank, but in my high school, in my tenth grade, I did not do that well, and he was very angry with me. For a long time, he wouldn't talk to me properly. There was a rift. There was a power struggle between me and my dad for a long, long time because of that, and so they really took it very seriously.

DK: Are there other ways in which they measured success in their children? What other values did they have? What expectations?

SI: Their expectations were quite high in that respect, — that we need to be educated and they pushed us through good graduate programs, and they did not very much care for our sports or anything, but they did not discourage us. We didn't pursue it either because of the peer pressure. The company that we kept, the friends — the cousins, you know, they were all going through good schools and doing well in their schools. There were a couple of cousins who did well in cricket, which is a popular sport in India. We played with the kids on roads and things like that, but we didn't really go into any kind of professional kind of a thing.

You know, there is this one thing, now that you ask that question. I really wanted to pursue Karnataka music. My dad was very opposed to this. He thought it was going to hurt my schooling, and the power struggle began with that, between me and my dad. For some reason, I took this music thing so seriously that my education — my grades in my tenth standard went down. That was one of the factors, of course.

DK: So you were studying music for a while?

SI: After coming to Bangalore, I started studying music along with my tenth grade schooling, and perhaps this really affected my grades in my tenth standard and that kind of made my father really angry with me. For almost a year or so, he treated me very coldly, and for some reason, gradually, this thing got dissolved, slowly.

DK: Did you stop studying music?

SI: Yes. I stopped studying music when I went through my pre-university final, second pre-university examinations. I took my studies very seriously, and I did quite well and I secured an admission into engineering. During that time, for some reason, I lost interest in music, due to lack of support from the family. Actually, the tuition for the music, the tuition fees were paid by my grandmother. My parents refused to pay tuition fees because of the expense. They had five children, they had to pay for our school tuition, and it was hard for them to support other things. I can understand that. They did not want to waste their money, hard-earned money, on music and things like that, because they had just enough for our upbringing and our education.

This is an extra thing, which they saw as an encumbrance. Number one, it was hurting my education. Number two, it did not have any return later, from their perspective. They did not foresee me as a great musician who would perform and make money out of it. They did never even think of such things.

DK: So they weren't interested in classical music or dance? Did they ever attend performances?

SI: They would have watched or heard on tapes and things like that. They might have a little

interest in that, but they never cared for it in that manner that they wanted to put the kids through that kind of a program. So that was the thing.

DK: Where did you go to university?

SI: This is an interesting thing. I got admission in Malnad College in Hassan. That's an engineering school. I went there, and this was in '83, 1983, but within a month or so, I also got admission in MS Ramiah College in Bangalore. It was the very first time that the private schools opened admissions, and so what I had to do was to, I had to leave Malnad College and go take admission in Bangalore, because it would save my parents my hostel expenses. I can understand that, again. But I was extremely angry.

In Hassan, being in Malnad College, I lived in a hostel, I had friends, I had a lot of freedom. A lot, lot more freedom than I ever had in my life, and there weren't my parents watching me all the time. And look at the change in the emotions. When I was a kid, five-year-old kid, I wanted to go back to my parents. I was desperate. They put me away from them. Then here I am, doing my engineering, and I want to be free, and very badly. They never gave me.

Within a month, the moment I got my admission letter, that was it. They brought me back to Bangalore, put me in Ramiah school, and they did not come themselves to get me from Hassan. They sent my grandma. This was a maneuver that my dad probably thought, "I could not send her back without going back with her." If it were to be one of my parents, the result would have been different. I would have stayed in Hassan, the story might have been different.

I went back to Bangalore, and I got admitted to MS Ramiah College, and Bangalore University was never famous for giving good grades to people. So, obviously, I was a good kid, I was a very sharp kid, but relatively, my friends who graduated at the same time from Hassan got really good transcripts, what they call "marks cards" in India. Their performance looked really great as compared to mine.

I was a good student. I was in one of the top few, top hundred or so, comparing the number of students, like, thousands of students there in the university. My performance was very — I knew if I were to be there in Hassan, I would have been one of the top few there, but when you pick the “marks cards,” two of them, put two of them together, I would be rated really low because of the way Bangalore University evaluated the students, and I was so very angry with my parents. This was one of the things that I —a grudge that I kept on for a long, long time against them. I was extremely mad at them. There was a control. They brought me under tight control. Financial, yes, I agree. That I agree with them. Financial reasons, there was a lot of control.

DK: You lived with them again?

SI: Yes. I lived with them again, went to the school. It was not a very easy life, in the sense that there were a lot of financial problems. Five children going through these programs, the various different educational programs. All the family income getting drained to that, and income is less

than expenditure. Family savings going off to the education. Everybody is going through this engineering program. You know, once I got into an engineering program, all my siblings followed me. And when I just got out of engineering, my last of my brothers, he got into the program, so it was a tremendous drain of resources, family savings.

And I can understand everything, you know. They had to be fair to all the kids. At that time, I was not. I could not see that point of view. I saw them as tremendous controllers. They controlled me in many ways. Number one, when I came back to Bangalore, they did not want me to associate with boys of the school. There was this religious thing, there was a fear, so my friends were very — I myself was very conservative in that respect, but they controlled me, too. I wanted their trust and they did not have it. More, there was fear, not trust. I mean, not lack of trust, but there was fear. They did not want me to go with the boys of the school, not make friends with them, bring them home. This was impossible.

Similarly, there was restriction in that respect and actually, compared to many other families in India, there was a lot of liberal — I mean, permission to move around, but then I didn't see it that way. I didn't compare myself to the less fortunate girls of the country, of even the city, for that matter. I could go around and make a lot of girls as friends and talk to them and talk to my brothers' friends, as such, and they weren't controlling or anything that way, but I could not have boyfriends that way. My marriage was a kind of arranged marriage.

DK: We'll get to that later. I just want to finish up with your education. Did you receive a good education?

SI: Yes. I received a very good education. I got my Bachelor's degree. Obviously, my marks card did not reflect a stellar performance, but I learned a lot. What I did was, later on, I took an examination called GATE, quite a prestigious examination. I think it's like a GRE. No, I'm sorry. GATE is a more technical thing. It's an examination conducted by the Indian Institute of Science and Indian Institute of Technology, IIT and IIS, and I got a really good score, a comparatively good score in GATE, that got me admission into a master's program.

After I finished my Bachelor's in electronics, I got admitted to a master's in industrial electronics, where I had a good chance to do programming in C and such kind of languages. The C language was gaining popularity just then in India, and I got admitted into a master's program in JCE, and that's an engineering school in Mysore. This school was very, you know — there was a lot of enthusiasm. A very good principal was heading the school, and he would always look out for opportunities to improve education in more practical ways, so he brought in good computers to the program. A very good image processing lab was there at that time, and things like that, so I had a very good master's program, and I was considered to be a very intelligent student in the class. I did a very good project, and so I got a good master's degree.

Even the way I performed in my GATE was reflecting my education, the four years of a bachelor's that I did. Obviously, the Bangalore University rater did not rate me very well, but very prestigious institutions like IIT and IIS, the examinations conducted by these institutions

rated me much better, relatively better, which is an irony of the situation. If U of M had seen my transcripts from GATE, if they were to evaluate me on that basis, certainly if they knew about it, they would have admitted me without a blink. They could not, because these are not the transcripts that they look at. These are GATE scores that are used only to admit people to local master's programs. So that way, I would say that I got a really tremendously good education in India.

DK: Under what circumstances did you decide to come to the United States?

SI: Okay. I married my husband, Badri, in 1991, and he was doing his Ph.D. program in the biomedical engineering department at the U of M. So after our marriage, I moved to the U.S. I moved to Twin Cities.

DK: So he was already living here when your marriage was arranged?

SI: Yes, yes. Initially, I think he lived in Saskatchewan, Canada, and he did some schooling there. Probably he didn't like it all that much, so he applied for the Ph.D. program here at the U of M and he moved to the U of M.

DK: So then you came here in '91.

SI: Yes.

DK: If you had not been marrying someone who was moving here, would you have ever considered coming to the United States, on your own?

SI: Yes, yes. In fact, I really wanted to a Ph.D. or something here in the U.S. I tried before. For some reason, because of lack of financial support, documentation which could show me financial support, they would not give me a visa at that time. So that was okay. Yes, I had ambition to get really good degrees from some foreign school, but that was okay at that time, I did not get it, but my husband was doing schooling here, so I came on a dependent visa.

In many ways, it was good for my family, because if I had come alone, my family had to bear the expenses, at least initially, and I don't think they would have done it. It would have been hard. If I had come here alone, I had to take jobs, very difficult jobs, I would be in a very tense situation. It was a blessing in disguise, let us say.

DK: What were your first thoughts about leaving India?

SI: I did not like it all that much, in the sense that — I mean, I wanted to come here. It was exciting doing my schooling and all that stuff, but I had my fears, a lot of fears. I had to leave my parents back there. At that time, the disagreement, let's say, that I had with my father, me and my father, that was slightly bearable at that time. It had reduced to bearable, but still, we really were clashing with each other on many issues, and it continued on. But still, I did not have — I had a

lot of affection for them, so when I came to the U.S., I was a little unhappy in that respect.

DK: Do you keep in touch with them?

SI: Oh, yes. They were here. My parents took care of my second child here. My mom was here when I delivered my first baby, and she took care of my first baby then. They came here. They visited the U.S. for a year. They spent some time in each one of our houses. Actually, three of my siblings are here in the U.S. now. Since I came, my sister came and my brothers came. My one brother is in Canada. We were a close family. When I was doing my education, my engineering school, we all would sit together and enjoy — you know, watch movies, make comments, tease each other, happily laugh. It was a very fun-filled family in that respect, and we are a very close-knit set of siblings. We conference every weekend. We conference for an hour or so, even now.

DK: On the phone?

SI: On the phone. Five of us, we get together, if possible. It doesn't happen every weekend because of availability, but we try every weekend, though. At least two or three of us get together every weekend.

DK: So there are four here in the United States and Canada, and one's still in India?

SI: No, no. One is in Canada, four of us in the United States.

DK: Oh, so you're all here?

SI: We're all here. But for my parents, you know, all of us are here. My parents still live in Bangalore.

DK: And have you gone back there since you moved here?

SI: Oh, yes. I have been there a couple of times.

DK: Describe your journey here, your first journey to Minnesota.

SI: Oh, yes. I came alone. I had to make this trip alone because my husband was already here. I had to wait for my dependent visa, so I had to take the flight alone, and that was my first flight on a commercial plane. In between, I did a pilot's training — I mean, I enrolled in a private pilot's training in Bangalore, actually. I was flying a two-seater for some time, and it was a lot of fun, but I had to drop out of the flying school because I was in the engineering program. Again, that was interfering, like my music. I always chose education as the most important thing. I dropped my flying school. I dropped out of it and got back into engineering. And so I used to fly and all that stuff, but I had never sat in a huge plane like this, you know, a 747 and things like that.

So it was exciting that way, but the food was bad on the flight, and so I literally starved the thirty-two hours. I came to the U.S. and then I had — again, my husband, having been living over here in the U.S. for a while, he did not cook the food that I wanted. Again, so it took me a little while to get over the jet lag and things like that and get adjusted to the unfamiliar.

DK: Do you have any memories of Minnesota, the first day you arrived, things you noticed?

SI: Yes. We took a cab from the airport and then my husband's friend was there with us, that I didn't really like, honestly. My husband came to the airport and along with him came his friend, his roommate. I really didn't like that. I wanted my husband to come alone. And even till today, I have that bad thing in my mind. "What was the need for you to bring that man with you? You have to come alone when you're receiving your new wife." That was a thing I had against him and I was so mad at him because this is a new person, a different way of speaking English, a new English. It's hard for one to speak English suddenly to an American person, where — oh my God. I mean, he had that feeling, you know.

DK: He was American?

SI: He was American, white American. He did come to India for our marriage. He could not make it to the marriage. He was a close friend at that time. He's a close friend, even now, of my husband, but he could not make it to our wedding because he had some other plans. I had seen him in India. He had come to India. We had spoken, but still I had this distance with him. There wasn't — I'm not very close to him, actually, honestly speaking, so it was hard for me. I never really talked to him much at that time because of the problem in understanding the American accent. I mean, I shouldn't call it an accent because — I call everything an accent. I have an accent. This American accent is a little different, so we cannot understand. That was there. That fear was there, number one.

Number two, there was a complex, a little bit of a complex, talking to Americans at that time, let's say. I had to work on that complex over a period of time. I had to, "Oh, okay, all humans are equal." What is there, kind of a thing. But at that time, being a little bit younger at that time, having this problem with the language and things like that, I didn't quite like his presence in the airport.

DK: Did he live with you when you arrived here?

SI: No, he was Badri's roommate just before that, and then the day I started from India, Badri moved to a new apartment, a different apartment, by himself.

DK: And that’s where you lived?

SI: Yes. We lived in Erie Estates Apartments, near the university, like a five- to ten-minute walk from U of M.

DK: Did you attend the university?

SI: Yes.

DK: Oh, you did?

SI: Yes. After I came here, after a year or so, I did GRE, and advanced GRE in computer science, because I wanted a change of program, and also my transcripts did not show good scores from India, so I had to prove it to them that I'm good, and I took a couple of courses, got some good grades, and then applied to the master's program in computer science and they gave me admission, and I got my master's, a second master's in computer science.

They wouldn't give me admission to a Ph.D. program. In a way, it's good I did not get my Ph.D. I could have converted it to a Ph.D. thing. I tried to, but we married, I had my first kid, and it was a C-section, and without taking care of myself at that time, without proper knowledge about diet, I did not know cooking very well. My mother cooked all the time, so here I was in an alien country, did not have a proper understanding of the things that I need to buy to cook. I did not cook the same thing, did not like what I cooked, did not buy proper food, did not cook very well, and I lost strength. I went through a C-section and I lost more strength. It was a very hard pregnancy, very difficult. I gained a lot of weight. It was a difficult time at that time.

DK: And so you were in school at that time?

SI: Yes, I was doing a master's program. I had my first child. I considered myself — at that time, I was thinking that I'm really old, so I should really have a child, have a kid real quick. '91. '93, I had my first child, and I rushed the process because I was scared that something would happen and I couldn't have kids. I put having kids as a high priority, too. That's the primary reason why I couldn't get into the Ph.D. program.

DK: Yes, children are a big responsibility. I have found that out, too. So you were here for then a year before you entered the program.

SI: Yes.

DK: And at that time, you were just getting adjusted and trying to get into the program.

SI: Right. Studying, taking classes. Various different activities.

DK: And then after your master's, did you start to look for a job?

SI: Yes. I hadn't completed my master's yet, but I wanted a job. I wanted some kind of an income, steady income, so I applied, and by that time, my husband also had applied for a job because we had this kid and we were scared. We had this financial insecurity in our minds and so

—

DK: He was still in school at the time?

SI: He was still in school. He had not completed his Ph.D., but he applied for a job at United Health Care, and he got a job here. I met his boss at one of the parties that he went to, and I told him about my education, and his boss actually pushed me to get a job here. He looked at my credentials and he was very impressed, so he wanted me to take a job here. He sent my resume to one of his peers, and I got a job with UHC as well.

DK: When was that? What year was that?

SI: '95.

DK: Just stepping back a bit to your doing your master's at the university, did you feel accepted by your colleagues there? Did you feel comfortable at the university?

SI: Oh, yes. In some ways, yes, I felt comfortable. I did not make too many friends. That was one phase that I did not have friends. Very cold region. We did not have a car because we lived so close to school, we did not need a car at the time. And no social contacts. Very difficult phase. Socially, it was horrible.

DK: And your husband had few friends?

SI: Very few friends. You know, the kind of friends that he had were school — you know, Ph.D. friends, people in Ph.D. programs, kind of scholarly type of people. A little bit snobbish, too. A little bit scary for a person who has just come from India and who has a wife, you know. I had the complex that, without being a student, I wouldn't be accepted and things like that. For one year, stayed at home, no siblings, parents and things like that to talk to, and did not know how to get books from the library, for entertainment, and a lot of other things. Difficult time.

DK: You had to learn.

SI: Very difficult time for me. I mean, financially, it was okay. It was getting his assistance check. We could buy whatever we needed, but socially, it was a very difficult time.

DK: And then when you got into school, things got a little bit easier?

SI: A little bit better, yes, but I couldn't make too many friends. I had a fear. For a long, long time I had an inferiority complex which would not let me push and get friends.

DK: Maybe just feeling shy to be in this country?

SI: Yes. Being in a different country. And, you know, there was a very difficult emotional

problem that I had to overcome in social circles. I know it was because of the strict upbringing, back from my childhood, early childhood.

DK: How about your work here? Do you feel comfortable at United Health Care?

SI: Yes. This, the past year or two, has been a time of extreme growth in terms of understanding of people, public contact, of my own self-esteem, and my own career goals and ambitions. This has been a tremendously satisfying time for me.

DK: What kind of work do you do here?

SI: I am a software engineer. I'm a technical person, so last year — the first two years, after the first two years of the beginning of my job, I got an award, a performance incentive kind of a thing, an award, a cash award, for my performance. And the next year, I got an award called a Superstar Award, which is given to the teams, or individuals, who perform very well. I was one of the team members which received the award, and based on that, I got into a different job of a higher grade.

My current boss actually was so impressed by my credentials that he hired me and he is happy with me in that respect. Obviously, he is pushing me for better performance, but he likes my performance, yes. And in the company, as such, I think I have a lot of respect for what I am doing. I have started one unique program here that people have, in the past, attempted, but they haven't — in similar programs, but not in the way I have done. I have started — there was a group for JAVA developers, a programming language — and right now, I — there was one person who started this, a meeting session every week, and for a couple of hours, all the developers, or people who are interested in the language and the platforms and things like that, meet together and discuss the various issues. Very technical, but there's a lot of people in the company and things like that. He started it due to lack of support in the management. At that time, the department that he worked for closed, and he had to seek a job in a different department.

At that time, there was so much negative impression in the company about such activities that nobody ever cared for it, and I came and bridged this gap, and I know that at this time it's going very well. There is a lot of participation, there is a 100-member group that has subscribed to the mailing list, so we send out e-mails to these people, and I am the organizer of these meetings. Every Tuesday we run this meeting. It's a very unique venture and I am very happy with that. I wouldn't say proud, because I am doing something lots of people have done, many have done and succeeded, but it's more of a humanitarian venture because there is a very big gap in the technology. Outside the industry, there is like this [unclear]

Yes, this is one unique thing, and this has been going on for the past six months, the meetings, and right now there's a lot of interest. People show up, and the speakers themselves are very high-tech people. They know a lot, very in-depth technical knowledge, and they come and prepare some notes and handouts and they give it to all those attendees. They're in this unique

program where no training schools are right now doing this, because they get this information from the website. They use implement red code, find various different things, the benefits of the language, and they pass it out to the developer community, which is a very nice thing, that everybody is learning something.

If this program succeeds, lots of people will be learning many things about the language, which they won't get in training school, number one, and it saves a lot in terms of training, too. The benefit is so great. It has a very big business, let's say, justification, in terms of money, and also in terms of knowledge. They learn a lot and the investment is just enormous in that respect.

DK: So are you trying to build certain platforms for United Health Care, or is this just basic research that you're doing for them?

SI: No, it's not research. It's actually — UHC is currently a three-tier company, in the technical part of it. We currently use C, and then we have some databases on mainframe, and we use COBOL and we have Sybase on UNIX, and we use a window-ware tool called Entera. So because we use all these things and the entire company is trained in this area, and also we use Power Window, graphic user interface tool, for the front end.

So since we have this and we have to move to a totally different technology, all the developers have been trained and set. They have set themselves in a group. They know either C programming or they can do Power Builder. Now, there's a big problem, because if we have to use JAVA, a totally different platform, for programming, we have to use all JAVA-based tools for doing the same thing, for three-tiered projects. We have to move to an interior project and it has to be JAVA-based because of its many, many advantages.

Now we have to get people motivated to train in this new area. Just going and taking a five-day class is not enough. It has to be an ongoing training process, because the five-day classes don't teach as much. What we need is a lot more than that for us to do a really good job, and we have to customize it to the company's needs, and the five-day classes don't help that much. I mean, it's like taking, let's say you need to stitch a suit for a bridegroom, a wedding suit, and then you're enrolling in a training class, a tailoring class, for the first time. So you have to get the suit out by the end of two weeks for a bridegroom, and here you are, taking a tailoring class. How does that sound?

So it's exactly like that. The problem that we are facing right now is that if the programmers start programming now, learning the language now, when will they really be ready for the company? And they have to do all the work themselves, because they go take the training class, that's it, nothing else. How much should they know? How much of the information should they learn to customize their skills to the company requirements?

We give this kind of very specific knowledge. There are a few people who have that skill in the company, and I am motivating the people to come and speak on this forum, and help them learn, give their handouts in this manner, in a very unique manner, and I am motivating people to go

and attend this. Although they don't have immediate need for it, they have to be trained. In the next six months, they have to change this platform. The sooner they do, the better it is, the higher the returns for the company. So the more popular the program is, the bigger the return on the very small investment that we are doing.

DK: It's a big challenge.

SI: It's a big challenge, but it's very exciting. I think I have overcome the initial inertia, the initial fear of the people, the initial disbelief in the program, and lots of people — there was a very high amount of rejection, very high amount of resistance. People would come and show up to one seminar if I went and begged them, they would come and show up to one of the meetings, and drop out, and I wouldn't hear from them. It was very depressing in the beginning, and the speakers themselves once even ridiculed me for that. It was a very difficult — it's the humiliating thing, you know, and one has to overcome that. We need to have courage.

We have to face that, that we have to put our pride down and ask people to come and participate, and send out encouraging e-mails, and tell them the benefits of it. Then there are a few people who are looking at you and laughing at you, because, "I know it. What are you telling? I know all these things." Yes, but really, who should know? Those who do not know, who gain from this by attending, they should know. And there was a big gap in understanding, and I know that, to some extent, at this point in time, I've been successful to some extent, in communication. And in months to come, it's going to be a program which will be a lot more rigorous, and there's going to be a very big benefit for the company.

DK: This is your first job in your life?

SI: Right. This is my second job, as such, as a technical person. I took a job after my master's program and before my marriage. It was a very short time, a three-month job. It was a software engineer's job. I did some 3-D graphics for a small company. My people skills were very poor. I did not get along with my co-workers very well, in the sense there was jealousy of me and things like that. I did not know how to handle these issues. I learned it at UHC. There was quite a few of such incidents over a period of time. Gradually I improved on that, and now I know how to handle that.

DK: But you never worked in India?

SI: That's where the three-month job was, and it was a job with a very high political thing, because of the interaction with the co-workers. There was a lot of politics in there. Power struggles.

DK: So how would you compare the work environment in India and then here? Can you say, just from your experience with these two jobs, are there differences in how Americans work?

SI: Yes. I would like to be very honest here. The work environment here is very much relaxed.

In India, it's very competitive. The vision, of course, is narrow. They don't have big visions, but they work hard in many ways, in the sense that they work longer hours, and they work much harder. Here, it's not that competitive. The vision is very broad. People are friendly, very friendly. Back in India, I did not see.

The gender bias was there. That's one big problem in India. Here, the gender bias is a lot less. People respect — men respect women here, I'll tell you that. Gosh, that's awesome here. That's one thing I never liked in India. The putting-down of women is done. Here, it might be there, but they don't really — it's kind of called discrimination, and they cannot do that. I see a lot of women in power here. A lot of directors and managers that I see here at UHC are women, and men and women interact quite well. I think what is called a lateral education or whatever. I don't know what it's — there's a term for it. So they go out and make friends with opposite-sex people, in the sense that they make an outgoing effort for that, just so that they know to communicate with the other gender.

DK: That's a positive thing.

SI: That's a very big positive thing. The only difference I saw was the working thing. In India, they work much harder than what they do here, and work hours are longer in India. But here, there's the big vision. They have big visions because of the toys they have, communicating tools. Things get accomplished here. Bigger things get accomplished.

DK: So do you think in general that it will have a good effect on your career that you are working here?

SI: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. That's for sure. I have big plans, very big ambitions, not just a career as a software engineer, or somebody in the industry. I have business ambitions. I want to set up my own business, maybe a technical one, because my expertise is technical. I'm looking for a partner for that, and I think I've found one. I'll leave it at that, but sooner or later, there is going to be a venture.

DK: A consulting business, do you think it will be?

SI: Maybe. Something. You know, the motive, the goal is not just to make money. Yes, it is to make money, but there's a humanitarian part of it. The success of this business, you know, the income, part of the income I hope I earn, but I would like to put it out for some humanitarian program in India. I know for sure that I will succeed, because I have been very successful in my career, both education and career. I mean, I only see success and nothing else. It cannot fail. Hundred percent sure. If I put my hands and my mind to do it, it is going to be a hundred percent success.

So there will be a part of my business income that's going to go to a humanitarian project, and this itself is my driving force. To be in a humanitarian project is my driving force, because I don't need money that way. I don't need to make money. If I really have to do it for myself, for

my children, I can earn enough for their college, for their growth and development and for whatever they need, I can earn, going through this regular thing in my career as a senior software engineer, that I am now, and whatever promotions that I might get as a manager, director, whatever I might get, that will be far more than what I need for the family.

This is not just for the family. I am looking as a success for something that I need to do for India because of the need in India back there. I have to do something. And my business contribution will be benefiting the country that I lived in, wherever I live. So the monetary contribution should be there for the country that I've been born and brought up in, and the country that spent so much on me, the government programs that have spent on my education and things like that.

Each program, each school, gets so much funding from the government, for education in India. All the schools that I went, the free schools, the public schools, all these things they spent on me, and I am here working for a country like the us. I'm contributing to this country. Yes, the country has given me a good family, a good thing, a good standing and everything. I would like to pour more into this country, my skills, yes, but part of it should also go back to India. Even ten percent.

DK: Are there areas you want to help in, health care or literacy?

SI: Literacy, yes. A little bit on literacy, more fundamental. I want to help in the areas of protecting children, very small infants and primary-school-going children. A food program, something like that.

DK: Children who are poor?

SI: Poor children. Extremely poor children who have problems obtaining food and probably medical and things like that. This is my ambition, driving ambition. If I put my mind to it, I will succeed. It's not going to be a failure, but I have to make sure that I have solid grounds for starting the business. I cannot start it tomorrow.

DK: You're exploring the idea.

SI: I am exploring the idea. I have to start it sometime in the future. How soon will depend on many factors — my family stability. And I have very young kids, I have to first take care of them before I take care of others, because your fifteen-month-old baby is too small for me to gain and accept such a big responsibility of running a business. Big ambitions.

DK: My, yes. Let's talk about your family a little bit. You mentioned your marriage was arranged.

SI: Yes.

DK: By your father?

SI: Yes.

DK: How did you meet your husband?

SI: Yes, he came to India just for that purpose, to find a bride. His brother, older brother, had already contacted my parents, and there was this negotiation that they had done before, like meeting. They had written letters. Actually, they had not met. My husband, his family did not live in Bangalore, but his cousin lived in Bangalore at the time. I think he still lives there. And so my husband came there, and we went and met them there, in their house. And so I got to talk to him at that time, for an hour or so, and we exchanged our ideas and things like that, and it was a quickie thing. He decided right then and there, and we got a call from somebody from his family. From thereon, they arranged everything.

DK: So did your family have to check out his family?

SI: They had already done it, by mutual contact. They don't do – well, somewhat, some sense, because they are a very old family, and where they live, and you know, they have a reputation, in the sense that they are very well known for their, let us say, for their traditions, that kind of a thing. The family is very well known. For generations they have lived there in that little village called Sandur — actually, it's a small town called Sandur. It's in Bellary district in Karnataka, and they live there. They have been priests, his family. They have been priests for the royal family, Maharaja Sandur. This is one little province that the king ruled for a longer period.

You know, in Karnataka, I think I see only two royal families. One was the Masur family, and the other is the Sandur family, who had palaces, and Sandur still has that palace, which is still owned by the queen. I think she still lives there, I think, or Queen Mother or whoever. I'm not very sure because the palace has imposed restrictions on visitors now and we cannot go and visit the palace. So we can only see the palace from outside, but the royal family still lives there. And my husband's family, they were priests and they own a lot of lands in that little town, and they also run a temple.

DK: So was this the first potential husband that was presented to you?

SI: No, there were quite a few. For some reason, we didn't click.

DK: So did you have an opportunity to say yes or no for each one?

SI: To some extent, yes. To some extent. It was not a good procedure. I did not like it at all.

DK: You felt uncomfortable?

SI: Very uncomfortable. Miserable. I used to hate that thing. It was so embarrassing for me to just wear a sari, dress up and go meet a person, thinking, you know, would I get married to this

man or not. Extremely uncomfortable thing. I hate the entire procedure. Even to today, I cannot. Yes, I've done very well since then, but —

DK: Was there any possibility that you could choose your husband yourself?

SI: Yes, there was. My father would have accepted it, provided the person was from our own subsect. There is a caste system, if you know. If this person was of our own subsect. The sect that I come from is called the Iyengar. It's there in my name itself. If I had found an Iyengar person, man, to get married, he would have accepted that. For some reason, that did not happen.

It was very hard for me, in that sense, because of the complex that I had because of the strict upbringing. There was this complex. One was, it was impossible for me to find anyone, to move around with a man, number one. Number two, it was not easy to find an Iyengar person who would agree to marry me just out of the blue, without doing such a thing. So even though my dad would have agreed if that had happened, the process itself was controlled, so it could not, it did not happen.

DK: But with your husband, something clicked?

SI: Yes.

DK: So you and your husband were from the same subsect?

SI: In a sense, yes. We are both Iyengar. They're slightly different, though, but that's okay, in the sense that — it's very complex, you know, and there is a very small sect. They were living in a different state, I mean, places, areas in Karnataka, and therefore it was hard for them to go to one another's place and arrange marriages back then, and therefore there was a genetic segregation of little sects in this Iyengar community. And now they are intermarrying between those little things, so it's possible at this point in time.

DK: Were you from similar economic backgrounds, you and your husband?

SI: Not really. They are kind of different in the sense that they have lands and things like that, and they are a more traditional kind of a people, and I am the daughter of a government employee, and we did not have any lands.

DK: Did that cause any problems, in terms of the match?

SI: In the sense maybe cash-wise, maybe we had the same kind of a thing, who knows, same problems or same things. But the way their families are, you know, they are a lot more traditional, so there is quite a few problems because of that, with my in-laws. There is a lot of communication problem with me and my in-laws because of my very futuristic ideas in terms of living.

I don't practice any of those religious things that they do. They are horrified with my behavior. Although I am very religious in my mind and in my upbringing and things like that, my way of behavior is not. I don't conform to those rules. I don't perform those *pujas* anymore and I don't even know when those different festivals come on. I don't keep track of the dates, nor do I prepare anything special on those days, nor do I worship those gods. I don't have pictures of gods, nor is there a special place in my home to worship. I don't do any worship.

DK: And your husband?

SI: He doesn't care either. It was him. He was totally against all that before, and now he has regretted it since then. When I came, at least I wanted one little thing, you know, a place at my home, to have that special place. He didn't let me do it. He didn't not want any god or anything at home. So it's a god-free environment. [Laughter]

DK: Well, that's kind of another adjustment for you, too.

SI: I didn't really care very much. For a few days, I was — I was very — you know, there is this complex thing in India, after one's religion comes, there is the gender bias. I hated it, the suppression of women. I am a person who believes in equality, and I am a person who rates my intelligence on top of most men that I meet. And I think I'm extremely intelligent, highly intuitive, perceptive of things, and things like that, and here I am, meeting all these men, who — I think they're okay and they are accomplished, but they don't have — there are certain areas of their skills that are very underdeveloped, and I consider them as my equals at best. So why would I even want to take that kind of suppression? See, and that's why I want to separate myself from some areas of that religion.

DK: Describe your wedding. Did you have a traditional wedding?

SI: Yes. It was a couple of days. It went on for two days. They used all the wedding mantras, normal to a regular Brahman wedding in South India. Very exciting time. Lots of jewelry and saris were bought. You know, expensive saris, silk saris, were bought, and in a sense, it was quite a bit of excitement to me.

DK: Were you happy?

SI: Yes, I was happy at that time.

DK: Were you the first child in your family to get married?

SI: Yes, yes. It was a big expense, and they were all very thrilled, you know, because it was hard for them to find a man to marry me, with my educational qualifications. They had to find a highly educated person and all that stuff. It was not easy for them to find the right person for me and all that, so they were very happy that I got engaged and got married. And I had good prospects also, coming over here and pursuing my education and all that stuff.

DK: So then both of your children, were they born in the United States?

SI: Yes. They were both — well, one of them, the first one was born in UMHC, University of Minnesota Hospitals and Clinics, so he was born there. The second one was born in Abbott Northwestern. She was born premature, three months premature. She was born in the beginning of my seventh month of pregnancy, so it was very hard.

DK: Was she in the hospital then for a while?

SI: She was in the hospital for a month and a half, or almost two months, and then they sent her home.

DK: Do you see a difference in how children are raised in the United States, as opposed to how they are raised in India?

SI: Yes. Here, the children are given a lot of opportunities to play and things like that. In India, in middle-class families, they do play, they have a lot of fun, but also they look for their education. And here, the education, yes, it is there in the parents' mind, but they look for their overall development, which is very important. They take care of their — you know, if they have any special needs to play sports and things like that. I see that they have one or two kids here. I mean, it's a very highly urban area, so who knows, but maybe if you go to some kind of a very religious Christian family, which does not believe in birth control and things like that, and have more kids, they might bring them up in similar circumstances. But early upbringing of kids is quite different.

DK: So are your children in daycare then?

SI: Yes. The one is in daycare. The other is — actually, my grandmother is here with me, the one with whom I lived in India during my early education time. She is here.

DK: Is she living with you?

SI: Just for some time, for taking care of the kid. She's baby-sitting the younger one.

DK: That's wonderful.

SI: Yes.

DK: How long has she been here?

SI: Almost one year. Over a year, actually.

DK: Since the baby was born?

SI: Yes, and she was here before. I mean, she was doing other things. She did not take care of her till she was about seven or eight months old, because she was with my younger sister in Boston, and she visited a few places. She loves to travel. She wanted to visit a few places in the U.S.

DK: Oh, wonderful. After your grandfather died, your grandma started her life?

SI: No. She had to come to the village where we were living, my parents were living. She had to live with them. And finally, she moved to Bangalore after three or four years. Still, she did not have a very big social life, as such, but enough for a widow in India, an older one, like fifty-plus. I think that's enough. What she has is enough, but she has a zest to enjoy life. I appreciate that in her.

DK: What values would you like to pass on to your children? What values are important to you?

SI: What I look for is happiness for them. That is the utmost thing. They have to be really happy in whatever they do — education, career, potential partners. You know, boyfriends, girlfriends, husband, wife, whatever it is. They have to be happy, first thing. I don't want them to go through any periods of depression, hurtful relationships and things like that. They need to get — I'd like to give them good education, obviously, the kind of education that I received. I would like to support them to get that. I would like them to be extremely independent, very self-dependent. They have to be able to take care of themselves. All that is needed, of course. But I want them to know that life is not something that one has to take it in a —

They have to understand that life is a lot more bearable. It's not a gloomy thing, you know. One has to know that life can be really happy. One can live very happy if they make certain compromises, and they have to learn to be shrewd enough to understand what they are, given the circumstances. Once they can do that much, there is nothing bad in life. I want to pass on this positive approach to them. I have this positive approach today, and I want to cultivate on this and be able to pass on this kind of an attitude for them.

DK: Do you feel that you and your husband have similar ideas about the values that you want to instill in your children?

SI: No, not at all. At this point in time, I don't know, he's going through some kind of a crisis. This is, that he is trying to think in a different way that I have helped him through. Let's say I don't want to pursue saying this more, but he has a drastically different approach.

DK: And your grandmother, does she bring something of Indian values?

SI: Yes. The language. My son, the older one, he cannot speak Kannada. He speaks only English. He does understand some Kannada, but it's very little and my grandmother does not want to speak in English. She understands English, but she refuses to talk to him in English. She

talks to him in Kannada, which annoys him quite a bit, but she is adamant. She forces him to at least hear what she says in Kannada. That's one thing that she's trying to do. She's not imposing the religion. She's not imposing it on me, either.

The other day it was the Sankaranthi, on the fourteenth of January, it's the Sankaranthi, that's the festival in Karnataka. In the morning she said, "Do you know today is the festival?" I said, "What festival?" "You don't even know that? Do you know it's the fourteenth of January and it's Sankaranthi?" "Oh, is that? Okay," I said. Because on the seventeenth, we went to the Hindu Mandir and I contributed for the food and we celebrated the same festival there.

Yes, I do have people contacts. Because of the people contacts that I get, I do keep in touch with them, so I did prepare a dish and take it for the celebration, so I said, "That's enough for us." So two or three of the festivals of our culture, I get to participate, although I don't do anything much at home. I go because of the social contact that I have. I take it as an opportunity. I'm not opposed to it, opposed to these religious and cultural practices. It's only I don't want to spend time thinking about them or feeling guilty of not doing that. I really don't think worship is of that nature.

DK: Do you speak just English to your children?

SI: Yes. Unfortunately, I speak English to my son, but to my daughter, I try to speak in Kannada and a little bit of Tamil. But it's hard.

DK: Do you see that living in the United States changes the division of labor in the family in terms of who's responsible for what, as opposed to in India, where the role for the man and the wife might be different?

SI: In our family, it's not like that much. Because I have seen my cousins in India, husband and wife, you know, both working, both sharing the domestic chores, and things like that. It's pretty much the same here.

DK: So then it's not so unusual to have the woman working, as well as the —

SI: No, not in urban areas of India. The gender gap is narrowing. But whereas my in-laws' family, they do, women do work, a few of them, but still, the gender gap is enormous. My mother-in-law is upset that I am not submissive to my husband. That is one big issue of conflict which has given a lot of mental trauma to both me and my husband's family.

DK: They're much more traditional.

SI: I don't believe in those values.

DK: Well, but they're in India, right?

SI: They're in India, so there isn't much problem, as such, but it is affecting my husband a little bit. There are bigger issues, so I don't think of them all that much.

DK: Have you joined any Indian associations?

SI: Yes. I belong to the Sangeetha Kannada Koota, the Kannada Association of Minnesota.

DK: And how did you get involved with them?

SI: Some time ago, I got a call from somebody who said the Kannada Koota is having a Diwali party, and so I went, and I put my address in their address book and from thereon I got regular newsletters, and so for six years, I've been participating in their activities.

DK: And is your husband a member, too?

SI: I am the member and he comes, and he is a passing member.

DK: He comes to some of the things?

SI: Some of them, yes.

DK: What is the purpose or the goal of this association?

SI: Just to meet once in a few months, couple of months or so, celebrate some of the major festivals, to keep the children updated about that. The children know about it because they participate. The Indians who had come here like twenty, thirty years ago, their kids are totally Americanized. They don't want to participate in all these things. There is a drastic difference from those kids to these kids now.

DK: So they've had exposure.

SI: They like the culture, they like the food. Those kids — I know a family whose kids are in their early twenties, who just hate these things. They don't come and participate in these activities. They are in mixed schools now, but they eat the food at home when their mom cooks, but they don't come for the food here. They don't want to participate, they don't associate with us. When we visited them, they just shut themselves in their room. They did not want to talk to us.

DK: They just want to be known as Americans?

SI: Yes. They hate that. They don't want to be known as Indians at all. They hate that. There is a change in the kids now. In the past few years, kids know a lot more about Indian values, Indian culture, and things like that, and they are comfortable with that. Although they are not completely like us, we don't want that to happen anyway, in the sense that we don't want to

impose that. There is no resistance. I mean, we like to encourage them to learn more about it, but we don't want to push them and add more pressure to what already the life has to offer. One has to be human first, and then in the end American, South African, who cares.

DK: So you want your children to know about it and to be able to choose if they want to continue to practice?

SI: Yes. I mean, the communication these days is so fast, so easy, and the gap, international gaps are reducing, they can go for a vacation in India and spend a month or two, talk to people, all of our family. All of them speak English. They are all in urban areas, people are very highly educated, with jobs. They have kids who are on par with these kids, in terms of education, knowledge, and things like that, and these guys can learn a lot from them.

But for a few things, you know, the language and they are a little more — they know the Indian language is a little more in the exposure, continental exposure and things like that. They are just like these kids, they don't have problems. If they go there, they can very well communicate, learn a lot, be friends with them, enjoy life there, too, and so the thing is they can go in twenty-four hours — the speeds are raising, airline connections and connectivity, it's much better. So in a day, they can go to India and spend some with them and all that stuff. And it's not so hard.

DK: And then you won't feel like foreigners when you touch down.

SI: Yes. Whereas other kids feel like foreigners, the kids who had come here, much before. They are American citizens and things like that, and they don't want to associate. Whereas these kids, because we take them to these associations, we go out and make friends with Indians and they talk to other Indian kids. Particularly my son. He has had a lot of exposure to Indian community. I bet he will not have any problems interacting with them. He will have a lot of affection for the Indians, I know that.

DK: About how many people belong to this association?

SI: Oh, I think about fifty families, at most.

DK: Do you attend other kinds of cultural events, like music and dance kinds of things?

SI: I don't have time. I would love to. There's a mailing list called India Town. I'm a part of that. I suppose you know that. Yes, that's where exactly we contacted you.

DK: Yes.

SI: So there's a lot of things out there on the India Town, but I go to Hindi movies, just so that I can keep in touch with other Indians, you know. I don't want to restrict myself to just Kannada people. I go to IAM [India Association of Minnesota] activities very rarely. I have young kids, you know. Whereas with movies, I can just take a couple of hours off, go with a friend or so and

just go watch this movie, enjoy, have some good time and come back.

DK: Where are the movies?

SI: Some of the movies are in the Oak Street Theater, and some movies are screened in Columbia Heights Theater. In fact, this Friday, in the computer science department they have, they're putting on one movie.

DK: Oh, really? At the U?

SI: Yes, at the U. It's a very rare occasion. It's just like a — I mean, it's almost free, like it's a buck, entrance fee is a buck, just for fun, maybe. I don't know what they make out of it. Maybe it covers the screening, the expenditure for them, or whatever. But it's fun.

DK: So you have friends now, other couples that you can —

SI: A little bit. I'm gradually making friends. It was very hard, you know, to gain acceptance in this society, as such, because of the difficulties we went through in a sense, and both of U.S. through school, with kids. We could not invite people over, we could not go to their places, we did not have a car, starting [unclear]. Other families here, they're well established rich people couples, you know, and unlike us, the husband works and the wife does not go to school. No such expenses and things like that.

So, with us, it was an exceptional circumstance. Both of us were in school and we had a child right away, and economically we were slightly behind other couples, other Indians who had come here at the time. They were quite successful as such, and we did not have the right kind of attitude also to be outgoing and making friends with a lot of people. My husband is a very introverted person. He does not actively pursue friendships. It's me who has started that in the past few months, and now I am contacting a lot of people and talking to them, and sometimes, you know, going to their places and things like that.

DK: Are you satisfied with what you see as the efforts of the Indian community to help children here learn about Indian values and culture?

SI: Yes. There's a program called SILC, I heard. I'm not part of it, but there's good, what I hear about it is good. And the Hindu Mandir has regular programs every Sunday. They have like a few hours, like the Sunday school, you know. And this Sunday that I went there, it was so nice to see Mahabharata being played on tape. There's a story time for kids, every Sunday for two hours. I mean, I would go and sit there to watch that, but with the two kids, it's hard.

Maybe what I will do the next Sunday, I will take — it was the first time I saw that — what I will do is I'll take my daughter and go and sit there, so my son can have some time with his dad. Maybe I will start doing that. I can watch Mahabharata. I would love that. It's like a magic which I lost back there in India, you know, given back to me. Because just before I came here, on TV,

there were really fantastic programs, Mahabharata. There was one coming on, Chanakya, a very intelligent man, a politician and an economist of the time, of some 300, 400 BC, I'm not sure of the date, but there was a TV series on him, and I was watching that and it was very interesting and I came at that time, and it was very hard for me, in the sense that here I am, watching some program, seeing politics on TV, and we did not have cable also, and not very interesting things. My husband did not want to watch movies, and I was a movie fan. Very hard. So I'm getting everything back now.

DK: You're catching up.

SI: Catching up on all that, in some other ways. Not the same ways, but I have to pay a lot of money. I pay some seven, eight dollars per ticket for these movies. I don't mind it. Now my income is good enough that I can afford it, so I can go to movies. And I have juggled my schedule in various different ways so that I can accommodate everything, you know. The social things, movies, and go to these functions of Kannada Association, go to the Mandir, and also see what are the potential opportunities for our kids to be in such programs. I'm very much in touch with the Indian community, a lot more than I was in the past, before two years from now.

DK: Has your son entered school yet?

SI: Not yet. He is five-plus, and he missed the cutoff date. He was born in October, end of October.

DK: Six next year.

SI: He's in daycare, so he's getting some education. No problem.

DK: And daycare is very good, in many cases.

SI: Yes.

DK: Let's talk a little bit about the future. Do you expect you will stay permanently in the United States?

SI: Don't know. I'd like to live here for quite a while, but I don't know if it's going to be permanent. I have certain ambitions of this business venture and things like that, which will keep me mentally occupied. I have to be — whatever I do, I have to be mentally occupied. I like to use my whatever intellect that I think I have, has to be used, number one. Number two, I need to make some kind of venture, and income has to be generated out of this venture for my humanitarian goal. Whichever country that will provide me an opportunity for this, for the contribution that I am looking for, for the Indian society, I will be there.

DK: So it would be possible, in your mind, that you would return to India to work?

SI: Yes, maybe. It depends on my husband. He likes to go back to India, but I don't like to go back to India in the near future, though, because I am enjoying it here so much. You see, I have my siblings here, and I have a good profession and opportunity, a wonderful opportunity. I have made my friends. What I lost in India, in an indirect manner, I have regained. I should be very careful in the company that I keep, though, because there's an opportunity to be with men and things like that, and I don't want to — because of the — because there are more men here, and I don't want to get into that crowd, you know, spending a lot of money, wasting money, time and things like that, but I can only make them more as friends because of the professional interests, but that's okay. I know how to draw the lines.

DK: But your husband would rather live in India?

SI: Yes. He would rather live in Sandur with his mom, live a peaceful life. I think that's what he thinks he wants, but he does not really want that. He does not really need that. He needs the same intellectual stimulation that he's getting here, but he needs some emotional support, which he thinks he can get from his mom. He has grown way past that need. I know that.

DK: Is he done with school?

SI: Yes. He got his Ph.D. in '96, I think.

DK: Now he's still at United Health Care?

SI: Yes, he's still at United Health Care. He works over at the Edina building.

DK: Is he happy in his work?

SI: Maybe, maybe not. He has to decide. He doesn't come across as a really very happy person at this point in time. It might be professional, it might be some tensions that we have, some misunderstandings that we have, that needs to be cleared up.

DK: What factors might make you want to return to India? Are there reasons that pull you there?

SI: My parents. At least I want to visit them. If they get too old, I cannot help support them, and if I cannot bring them here and look after them. I like to visit my relatives, but won't like to go there and live there for the rest of my life just to be with them. My parents, if I can bring them here and help them and support them, I'm happy just visiting once in a while, my relatives, and doing whatever I want to do in terms of accomplishments. But other than that, you know, it's a great country, there's a lot of things, a lot of comfortable things in India that I miss. But for what I want to do for the country, I'm better off being here or some other country. My contribution to the society, both for the U.S. and for India. I think I will contribute to the U.S., too. I know that.

DK: Have your children been to India?

SI: Yes. Sankarshan has, my older son. He has been to India. I was pregnant when I went there last time, and I delivered my second baby thirty-eight hours after coming back to the U.S.

DK: Oh, my gosh. Maybe that's why she was early.

SI: Yes, it was a horrifying experience. Oh, gosh, gosh. I don't even want to think of what would have happened if I delivered her on the flight. She needed oxygen support right away, in minutes, that they gave her. I was lucky, extremely lucky. I would consider myself as like blessed by some star, whatever.

DK: I know childbirth can be very frightening. How do think your life would have been different if you had not come here?

SI: Oh, I cannot even just imagine the situation. If I had married a person there, I would have settled there in India. I would have had a job like this, maybe, similar kind, yes, because I had the qualifications there as well. Perhaps I would have had an income. Maybe I would have married a person who had a better — I mean, at least, socially I would have a better standing. Maybe I would have had a couple of kids there, too.

But I don't know if my driving ambition, if there was an opportunity to grow with the ambition, towards the ambition. Here there's an opportunity. You see, there is this discontentment that people have, that I see people who have ambition. They're always thinking of doing something that they're not able to do or something, like grow and things like that. The burning drive is there in them, and they're trying to get somewhere. They're not able to do it. The frustration is there. I am not in that part. I probably would have been in that part. I have this ambition I'm growing, yes. That frustration associated with that is not there.

DK: So you feel there are less obstacles in your path?

SI: Yes, there are less obstacles, yes, and I'm growing at the pace at which I am happy and comfortable, and I know how not to reach for too much. If one reaches for too much, one is sure to fail in some manner, and be much less happy in the process. I know that I have to balance it with happiness. The ambition has to balance to happiness. It has to be happy with what they have right now, and then reach for more.

DK: What are the things that make you happy? What activities?

SI: Yes, activities being in touch with people. Seeing, you know — doing things that make others happy, too, in some ways. My family, my friends. I want to generally see people around me happy and get what they need in life. There are things that everybody needs in life. I want to help them in the process, because I consider myself as very successful, and I've gotten what I want in life. I think I can help people see their paths, see their goals and clearly define the goals. Just a best friend. I don't want to boast too much about myself in that respect, because, I mean, I'm not God or anything. [Laughter] I'm just a real modern human being, so the way I talk, it

might look like I have the answer to their life's problems.

DK: Sometimes listening is enough.

SI: Yes. Perhaps I might help, I might be of help to people in some ways, and that makes me very happy.

DK: Is there anything else that you'd like to talk about?

SI: No.

DK: Anything about your past or your dreams or anything we haven't brought up?

SI: No. At this point in time, I'm quite contented with the connections that I have, with the things that I am doing, and with many things that are there in life. So I have a clear-cut goal, as I said, about my future. I think I'm quite contented in many ways.

DK: Thank you for taking the time to be interviewed.

SI: Thanks a lot, and I'm really glad for the opportunity. This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, maybe, yes? Who knows. Maybe I might be on TV for something. [Laughter]

DK: Who knows? You never know. You could become famous because of this.

SI: Yes, who knows. I mean, because of this or because of whatever I do, but this is one of those first opportunities, let us say.

DK: Yes. Well, I think it's fun just to reflect on your life.

SI: Yes, yes.

DK: Most people enjoy talking about themselves.

SI: Right. And that's one thing, you know. I don't think anybody else would be really listening to somebody's else life history, and it's boring, you know.

DK: No, it's not.

SI: Is it not? Okay. I talked a lot. I really think why would anybody really want to hear about me? An average person, you know.

DK: Oh, people are very interested.

SI: Yes, okay. Because, I mean, unless you are interviewing some president. You know, I started

my life sort of. Okay, I did something, I did my schooling, got good grades, took a job. What's so great about it?

DK: Oh, but there's something that inspires everyone. It could be their work or their children or their music, whatever it is. Once people start talking about that, then they could be the president or they could be a world-class opera singer.

SI: Yes, whatever, so, anyway, that's the thing, is you have interviewed somebody like me who is just mainstream, so I am glad of that.

DK: I appreciate you taking the time.

SI: You are quite welcome.