Ved Sharma

Interviewed by Polly Sonifer
December 16, 1998
In Mankato, Minnesota

PS: This is Polly Sonifer interviewing Ved Sharma on December 16, 1998.

Hello. How are you today?

VS: I'm pretty good, thanks.

PS: Good. We're here in Mankato, Minnesota, and we're going to talk about your life. So, first of all, tell me where in India you came from.

VS: I was born in the state of Punjab. At that time my village was in the state of Punjab. The name of the village is Palakwah.

PS: So, Palakwah. And what was your language when you were growing up?

VS: Punjabi.

PS: That was what your parents spoke in the home?

VS: That's what my parents spoke at home.

PS: When were you born? What was the date of your birth?

VS: I was born December 20, 1938.

PS: So your birthday is coming right up here, isn't it.

VS: A couple of days.

PS: Happy birthday!

VS: Thank you.

PS: Tell me about your family at the time you were born. Were you the youngest, oldest? What did your parents do for work?

VS: I have two elder brothers, and then I was right in the middle, one sister younger than I, and

another brother. He's the youngest. So I was right in the middle.

PS: Of five children.

VS: Five children.

PS: What were your parents' names?

VS: My father's name was — he passed away in 1989 — Bhisham Dev. My mother's name was Pritam Devi.

PS: What kind of work did your parents do?

VS: My father, he was in the Indian Army. That's where he spent a number of years, and then by the time I was growing up, in the high school time, he had come back from the Army on a pension at that time. So then he stayed in our village, tending to small things around the house, and things of that nature.

PS: So he was mostly retired?

VS: He was retired at that time.

PS: This was a small village that you lived in?

VS: Not very small.

PS: How many people?

VS: Probably 3,000 people there. In India, nothing is small population-wise. But it had a pretty large area, also, so sort of a hilly, submountainous area there, and a lot of wilderness around.

PS: Did your mother work outside the home at all?

VS: No, she did not.

PS: That was pretty traditional?

VS: That was very traditional.

PS: What age were you when your father retired?

VS: At that time I was, I would say, fourteen, fifteen.

PS: So before that time, you didn't see your dad very much?

VS: No, I did see him. He was home a couple of months a year, sometimes more often. So whenever he was on leave, I saw him.

PS: What was it like in your family growing up?

VS: In what way?

PS: Where did you go to school? What kinds of activities did your family do? What was important in your family?

VS: Well, it was traditional rural life in the sense — well, maybe not in that sense, but at least there the people living around us, they were all second cousins, third cousins, essentially a part of the family. So they were somewhat removed, but they were still our family.

Then the village life was not that easy compared with how things are right now. You had to get your water from the village well; there was no plumbing or anything like that. Even the so-called outhouses were not there. There was a lot of wilderness around where you went. That was an interesting part. There was no electricity. We depended on kerosene lamps and kerosene oil for our light and even for reading at night.

But other than that, all the memories are good memories of the childhood, fond memories, caring people all around you. So you'd go to anybody for anything and they would do it for you. That kind of thing. I don't recall any — not that we had a lot of things around the house, but that didn't seem to matter at the time.

PS: Was your household a nuclear household, or were you in a big extended household?

VS: Mine in particular can be called a nuclear. My grandfather had passed away before even my eldest brother was born. I have a very faint memory of my grandmother, who was in the house. I was probably three years old when she died. So after that, it was just my father, mother, and the siblings. There was nobody else.

PS: But you stayed in the traditional family home? Your grandparents' home?

VS: In the traditional family home, yes, except that there was one cousin of mine, my mother's sister's daughter, they did not have a school in their village, the girls' school, so she came over and stayed about five years in our household, going to school in our village. That was the only outsider who was there.

PS: Tell me about your schooling. Did you go to school right in your town?

VS: I went to school up to the eighth grade right in my own town, and then for the high school I went to a different place.

PS: And where was that?

VS: That place was about eight miles away from where we lived. We are in the submountainous area, and then to go to that school, you had to climb another sort of not very steep climb, but had to travel about five miles sort of uphill and then go about three miles downhill on the way to the school. The place was at Jaijon. That's the name of the place where the high school was.

PS: So did you live at Jaijon?

VS: No. My mother's family comes from a place which is about two miles away from Jaijon, and I lived there with her family, but came back home about twice a week or so, certainly once a week, occasionally twice a week, and only in the last three months of my high school I lived in the so-called hostel there at school. Other than that, I was commuting either from my mother's village or from my own village to go to school.

PS: How did you commute? Did you walk or ride an animal?

VS: Walk. Always walk.

PS: What was the religious tradition of your family?

VS: Of course, in a general sense you can say that we were Hindus. We were and we are. But my father had broken away from the very traditional religion, a little bit. In fact, he used to say that what he believes in is the real old religion of India, and that's known as Vedic religion. So he belonged to what is known as an Arya Samaj, a faction of Hinduism. It's a faith mostly in the north India, that is where it was prevalent, so Dad was known as Arya Samaji. So that's how we were brought up.

PS: Did that make you unusual from the people around you?

VS: Well, I think not particularly, although, you know, in fact, the rest of the people started doing what my father said we should be doing.

PS: So he became a leader.

VS: Well, they wouldn't say. That they would give up what they believed in, but, you know, in many, many ways, yes. This faith says it doesn't believe in any superstitions, doesn't believe in worshiping all the deities around, worships only one god, who is, you know, you can't see, you can't hear, you cannot do anything like that. Did not believe in the traditional caste system, at least, that that was the profession; they believed in the education of the girls as well as the boys,

believed in remarriage of the widows, which was at that time sort of prohibited, that widows should not remarry. So it was, in addition to a religious, a reformation movement, it was also a social reform movement. So that's what he believed in, and that's how we were brought up. We didn't do many of the traditional worships of this god and this god and so on and so forth. He didn't believe in that.

We had the horoscopes that are drawn in India. If you talk to a person from Indian origin, they'll all have horoscopes and they'll match the horoscopes before they get married. So my father believed in making, drawing the horoscope. That was sort of a record of birth and family and so on and so forth. But beyond that, he did not believe in astrology as such. That's how we were brought up. But you did not stand apart from others or anything like that.

PS: Your father and mother had a traditional arranged marriage?

VS: Traditional arranged marriage, right.

PS: And from your perspective as a child, how did that work for them? Did it work well or not so good?

VS: There was no other way. That was the only way. So nobody questioned that. My mother does not remember the time of her marriage. She never did. She was, she says, seven years old when she got married, and my father was fifteen, I think, at that time, so he remembers, but she did not. But then she did not come to my father's house until six or seven years later. So the marriage was done, and then after that, that was the traditional thing to do. Yes, it worked wonderfully well.

PS: And they were married a long, long time?

VS: Yes, they were married a long, long time. They were married — I can see that, in about 1916 or thereabout. My father passed away in 1989, so they were together for those seventy-three years.

PS: Is your mother still living?

VS: No, my mother also passed away two years ago, April 1996.

PS: That's really common with people who loved each other for so long. Once one dies, the other one hasn't got a lot of reason to stick around.

VS: Yes.

PS: So you graduated from the high school. How old were you then?

VS: When I graduated, I was seventeen years old at the time.

PS: What was your plan to do at that point in your life?

VS: I really did not know at the time as to what I would do, whether I would necessarily go to college or do something else. I don't think there was anybody from the village who had gone to college until at that time. But I was a good student, so when the results — you know, the examination system there was different, it is different now, it was different certainly at that time. Say 300,000-400,000 students were examined by one central body. The central body was the university. They held a common exam for all the students under their jurisdiction. When the result was declared, I was on the merit list. That means I won a scholarship. Since I won a scholarship, I had to make use of that. [Laughter] So I ended up going to college. Before that, you know, the thought crossed my mind. Education was important, but it was not a common thing to do, at least for the people around me at the time. But I went to college.

PS: Your father worked in the military. So were you of the warrior caste? Was that your family tradition?

VS: No, no.

PS: What caste — I know you don't believe in castes, but everybody knows what their caste was.

VS: Well, Brahmin caste.

PS: So was it unusual for your father, being of the Brahmin caste, to work in the military?

VS: Not really. Many people work like that. No, it was common. Nothing unusual.

PS: Were there lots of other Brahmin families in your village?

VS: There were about fifty, I think. About fifty.

PS: Out of 3,000?

VS: Well, the number of families probably was a little bit less, but fifty of them were Brahmins. This is the families. Maybe there were 200, 300 people, persons belonging to the Brahmin caste.

PS: People are very conscious of that, aren't they, of what caste they're in?

VS: Very. In the rural areas, in the villages, life goes around that, so they know this is the cluster of the houses belonging to the Brahmins, this is a cluster of houses belonging to the Rajputs, a cluster of houses belonging to some other people. So that's how the shoemaker caste, they lived in one place, and the sweeper caste and the cloth weaver caste, and so on. All castes were there,

more or less.

PS: And then there was your father saying that these didn't matter.

VS: Well, my father believed that these things don't matter. You are actually — caste is determined by what you do, not where you are born, that was his belief.

PS: Okay. So he still saw there being a distinction between people, but you weren't stuck in the caste you were born in.

VS: That's right.

PS: So tell me about going to university. Where did you go? What did you study?

VS: I went to college in the town Hoshiarpur. It was the district headquarters at the time, so there was a college, D.A.V. College. That's where I ended up. In fact, my whole education, right from the first year of college up to the master's, I stayed in that college to get my education.

PS: What did you study?

VS: Well, we had those university exams at the end of every two years, at least at that time. That's how it was. So until the end of the first two years, I had studied English, of course. That was a requirement for everybody. Then beyond English, mathematics, economics, Sanskrit, and Hindi. These are the things I studied. Then at the bachelor's level, I studied English, mathematics, economics. Those were the three things I studied. Then at the master's level, I studied economics.

PS: So economics was like your major, or you could have several majors?

VS: By the bachelor's degree that I got, you can say that economics was my major.

PS: Then in your master's work, it was purely economics?

VS: It was purely economics.

PS: And someplace along the line, you got married. Right?

VS: That's right. Immediately after I appeared for my master's exam, I got married.

PS: Tell me about how that came to be. How did you meet your wife? What's her name? What was it like meeting her?

VS: Well, you know, the traditional thing to do is to arrange the marriages, and as a result, a

number of people tried to arrange my marriage with someone or the other all through my college years. But I always wanted to study and go as far as I possibly could. That was my desire, ambition right from maybe the seventh, eighth grade, actually. I knew I was going to go as far as anybody can go in terms of studies.

My wife's family is related to my elder brother's wife's family, and they lived in the same town, as the college. So I saw her there and met my wife over there through my elder brother's wife, my sister-in-law, and that's where we saw each other, met each other. It looked like we liked each other, and since we liked each other, her parents went to my parents to have our marriage arranged. So you can still call it an arranged marriage, but they got a hint of this as well. So they went there and my father said, "Okay, I'll agree to that marriage," and that's how the marriage was done.

PS: Was that somewhat unusual to do it that way?

VS: I think at that time it was, yes. At that time, you know, the two people, they had not generally seen each other, but the marriage was still arranged, and they came to know each other after marriage. But we knew each other before marriage.

PS: You didn't date in the way that Americans think about dating?

VS: No.

PS: You just met each other at your brother's house?

VS: Well, since they were related, therefore they were also my relatives, too. I used to go to my wife's house there and visit there often. But, you know, the "date" in the sense that "Let's go out together," things of that nature, no.

PS: So tell me your wife's name.

VS: Her name is Santosh.

PS: How old was she at the time?

VS: I was twenty-two. She was twenty-two.

PS: Was she also a college student or studying?

VS: No, she finished high school, and then after that she studied some more Hindi, I believe, but she did not study beyond that.

PS: Was it common for young women who weren't married back then to work? What did they do

between the time they finished high school and the time they married?

VS: All kind of things. She actually taught in a school for a little while, maybe months rather than years, but didn't do anything else particularly.

PS: So she stayed at home with her family?

VS: Stayed at home with her parents.

PS: And you were twenty-two at the time. Had you been offered other people to marry?

VS: Yes.

PS: And what was it about them that you didn't marry them?

VS: Well, at the time, you know, before that, I said, "I simply don't want to get married until I'm done with my education." So there was no question. I said no.

PS: So you didn't even meet anybody else?

VS: No, I didn't.

PS: People would say, "I have somebody you'd like," you'd say, "I'm not interested"?

VS: They would not approach me; they would approach my parents. Nobody approaches you.

PS: But you had told your parents very clearly that you weren't interested.

VS: Yes. When there were a couple of proposals coming, I told my parents, "Don't you think about it."

PS: And was it understood by you as a young man that if you had said to your parents, "I'm willing to consider marriage now," and someone had proposed someone to you, could you have said, "No thanks, I'm not interested"?

VS: I could have. People do that.

PS: Is that unusual, though?

VS: No, no, not particularly. If my parents had said, "This is a proposal and we like it. What do you think?" I could have kept quiet, which means I agree to that, or I could have raised objections and then it's a matter of give and take, who wins out, openly or quietly, whatever is involved. So it's an outcome of all those interactions.

PS: So if you want to say yes to a marriage proposal, you just remain quiet?

VS: Or you can also say yes.

PS: So the two of you got married. What was that like, the wedding and all that? Was it a traditional wedding?

VS: Traditional wedding.

PS: How was that?

VS: What we do is we started in a — how did we start? From the village I sit on a horseback, at least that is the traditional thing to do, and ride up to this bus standing about half a mile away. So I go up to there. The rest of the wedding party, they take that bus and drive to my wife's town. It's only about thirty miles away, but at that time looked a long distance, up one mountain and then down another mountain.

So you go there and you stay overnight there, and the marriage typically takes place, depending on the type, but it's typically early morning, between two and three in the morning.

PS: Wow.

VS: And it lasts two or three hours, it's a religious ceremony. It's not social; it's a religious ceremony, a number of people sitting around. The previous night, of course, they give you a meal, and the next morning people in the wedding party, they have breakfast and they have lunch, and then everybody goes back. So that's the marriage. Santosh accompanied me back to the village.

PS: So she came back and moved into your parents' house?

VS: At that time I had just started teaching at the same college where I got my education, so I got my master's degree and I started teaching in that college. So, you know, for a few days she stays in my parents' house, then I have to go back and do the teaching. In fact, I stayed in her parents' house for a few weeks, and then we rented our own place and moved in there. So that's where we lived.

PS: And your two older brothers were already married by the time you got married?

VS: They were already married. Right.

PS: Who received your family household? Did any of your brothers or siblings end up in the house that your parents had?

VS: You know, the interesting thing in our case, my eldest brother lives in New Delhi. He's not interested in moving back to the village, and he has three daughters and no son. Then the daughters get married off and they are wherever their husbands are. Next brother, he lives in another town, and he has only daughters. He's not interested in moving back to the village. My younger brother, he lives near here, because he has daughters also, but he has to educate them and he wants to educate them not in the village, but out someplace where they can go to the English medium schools. But he visits the old house back and forth. So, so far we have not divided that. The understanding is, whoever wants to go there can stay in the family household.

PS: So does anybody live there now?

VS: Only my younger brother, who visits there. He's only about fifteen miles away. Whenever he has a chance, he'll go and live there. In fact, whenever we go back, we still go back there and live there for at least a day or two or three, for good old time's sake. We still go there.

PS: So most of your family is still in India?

VS: All my family except me and my wife and children, they're all in India.

PS: So what got you to think about leaving India? What happened in your life?

VS: Well, I really didn't think about leaving India, actually, I was first teaching in this place, at the D.A.V. College in Hoshiarpur. It was essentially an undergraduate college. Then I taught at the Center for Postgraduate Studies in another town called Simla. Simla is a beautiful hill station. I got a job to teach there, and I taught there for a number of years. This was only at the graduate level. But I did not have a Ph.D. degree, and my fond wish was always that I'll get my Ph.D. degree.

So then I — I'm not very aggressive about things, so I started applying to different universities in this country (USA) one year, then the next year some responses come, but then I haven't taken the GRE exam, and then another year goes by and I take the GRE exam. Then I got admission here, took my leave of absence from the university when I was teaching there, and so came here.

PS: What school did you end up coming to?

VS: Well, I was accepted in a number of schools here, but I ended up going to Washington University in St. Louis, and by chance, that happened to be a good selection. It's a very, very good school.

PS: What was your area of study there?

VS: Economics again.

PS: Any particular part of economics? At the Ph.D. level, I think you make a lot of focus.

VS: In India I was a specialist in what you call macroeconomics and monetary theory. By the time I came here, that was still one of my fields, but then I got interested in some other areas like economic development, natural resources. That was a big field at that time in '72. There was a lot of concern around the world that we were running out of natural resources. So, natural resources, population growth, economic development. That's what I started to study.

Then ultimately my specialization was economic theory, microeconomic theory in particular, but within that I studied the determinants of human fertility behavior.

PS: Really.

VS: Using the economic framework there. That was my Ph.D. dissertation.

PS: What did you discover?

VS: What did I discover?

PS: In a nutshell. [Laughter]

VS: Very interesting things. The reproductive decisions many a times are economic decisions. This thing that people don't know how to control population, that is not correct. When people need to control reproduction, they find ways, including in India. As I went through, a lot of information came out that government can provide whatever they want, in terms of birth control facilities or family planning or contraceptive. But if people don't want to have fewer births, they will always find excuses not to use them. If they want fewer births, even if you do not provide anything, they know how to have fewer births. So it's an economic decision. And more important than anything else, it is the value of the female's time, no matter where you go, in India or elsewhere, that is the major determinant of the number of births that the families have.

PS: Value of the female?

VS: Value of females' time. If the females are working outside or they have the education, and they have the potential to work outside, it is very expensive for them to have a child. If, on the other hand, the household is pretty affluent and the husband has a lot of income, the wife doesn't have to do anything, then they end up having more children. It's not true in every single situation, but on the average that turns out to be the case. That problem was being studied elsewhere, so that's one of the things that I studied.

PS: I bet that made you very employable here in the United States.

VS: Well, it was okay. At the end of the first year of my Ph.D. studies, my wife had joined me. She was getting my salary in my absence from the University of India. My commitment was that I'll go back home in two and a half years, after completing the Ph.D. But she came a year later, accompanied by our two young sons; and then we decided to stay another year or so after the Ph.D. The year stretched into two, and here we are.

PS: And so this was 1972?

VS: No, this was 1976.

PS: So it's been twenty-two years.

VS: Yes. We came to Mankato in '76. I came to the U.S. in 1972.

PS: So you spent four years in Washington.

VS: Four years at Washington University, in St. Louis.

PS: I forgot to ask you about your children. You said you had two children.

VS: Two children, Arun and Bharat. Arun is married. He has two sons of his own. He lives in Minneapolis area. And Bharat is single. He also lives in Minneapolis area. They're both working there.

PS: How old were they when they came over to the United States with your wife?

VS: They were four and ten.

PS: What was that like for your wife and your two boys to come over and suddenly be in this new culture?

VS: I don't think they had any problems or I had any problems. I was very, very comfortable here. In fact, I'd never gone out of India before that time; I had taken an Air France flight, where most of the time for the next twenty-four hours the flight attendants and crew were speaking French. So when I landed in New York, and heard people speak English, I felt at home. I could understand what people were talking about, and they could understand me. So I was very comfortable once I reached here.

My wife did not speak that much English, but my older son did. He was going to English medium school in India. So he had no problem, and the younger one learned the language within six months. So I don't think they felt any culture shock or anything.

PS: Were there any things that struck you as unusual when you first arrived?

VS: Strangely, not at all. I look back, and even at this time I don't recall anything struck me as unusual. Before coming to this country, I had been reading a lot. I had read a lot of books. I read a lot of novels, all of those things about the U.S., and I can say that I felt at home. Yes, so nothing was unusual. The university there, you know, very friendly people, very friendly professors there, so no problem. In fact, I didn't spend any money of my own on my education here; they provided the full tuition plus the living expenses. The university there gave me extra money so that my wife and children could join me, so it was quite comfortable.

PS: Where were you staying when you first came, the year that you were by yourself?

VS: At that time, three of us were sharing an apartment. This was in St. Louis. I stayed in a three-bedroom apartment, we shared. Then when my wife came, we rented our own apartment.

PS: Were there any other Indian students at Washington University?

VS: Oh, yes. In fact, the first year I shared the apartment with two other Indian students. One was a civil engineering student, the other was electrical engineering student.

PS: Have you kept in touch with those gentlemen?

VS: I've kept in touch with both of them. One of them works for Cray Research in Chippewa Falls, Eau Claire, Wisconsin and the other is still in St. Louis.

PS: Did you cook Indian food? Was it like having a little India right there in St. Louis?

VS: I think the first year was. We cooked our own. In fact, the arrangement was that each of us would cook two days a week, but that was only dinner. Breakfast on your own, lunch on your own. Dinner was common. So the three of us cooked two days each. That is six days. And the seventh day everybody would be eating out, more or less. That was the arrangement. So that arrangement went on pretty good, and other people occasionally came along, they also ate. We cooked together like that.

PS: Were you all good cooks?

VS: Oh, Indian food is very easy to cook. [Laughter] Yes. If it's not good, put some more spices in there. It will be good.

PS: [Laughter] Just make it hotter. Okay. All right. So when your wife and your children came over, you moved to another apartment. Then how did your life change at that point? Was it harder to study, easier to study? Was it easier to be in the community? What changed when they joined you?

VS: Things did change. The first year, the only thing I was doing was studying, because the first year I had it in my head that I'll finish my Ph.D. in two and a half years. Unheard of, but that was my goal. And I had done a lot of work that first year. In fact, when I needed a couple of shirts that first year and an extra pair of shoes, I did not go out and buy them. I wrote to my wife to send those, so she sent two shirts and a pair of shoes by airmail from India. That was the first year.

But, you know, at the end of the first year, all the difficulties of the Ph.D., the comprehensive exams that people take years and years to pass, I was done with that. So that made life much simpler for me, because essentially after that, whatever I needed in terms of money or something else from the department, they were eager to give it to me because I had shown that I could do things.

But then, you know, when my wife came, I had to socialize around a little bit, I agreed with her that maybe one day a week we should be going out and socializing. So things changed a little bit. Not as much time available as when you're on your own.

PS: And who did you socialize with?

VS: They were all kinds of people. There was a good bunch of Indian community there. My previous two roommates, they were still around. One of them got married at the time that my wife came here, so his wife used to come around often. And the other roommate, he also got married, but then he moved away. He finished his Ph.D. and moved away soon afterwards. Then there were a number of other people.

The first year after my wife came, I did not have a car, didn't have an automobile. But there were a number of people who were very willing to give rides around for shopping or whatever. My wife was part of this International Wives' group at the University, and there were a number of gatherings of that group. One university professor's wife, was the leader of that group, and they had good times among themselves and among the families. It was quite pleasant for four years, and after my wife came, three years of quite pleasant living there in St. Louis.

PS: So you raised your sons and did your thesis, primarily, the second year and third year?

VS: No, the thesis was done actually the last year of the stay there, and then when I came to Mankato, the thesis was not quite done. So then after I moved here, I tried to finish the rest of it up and went back the next summer and spent another five, six weeks, to finish it up.

PS: Tell me how it came to be that you came to Mankato.

VS: Well, it was beginning of 1976, when I knew I was going to be done with studies fairly soon, that the decision was going to be made, do we go back to India right away or do we stay? Okay. The job in India was there. I was on leave still from the university there. But then as a

student, you do not accumulate a lot of money. Right? So there were four of us in the family, and money was needed even in our flight back. Then if you return empty-handed there, it doesn't look all that good. So we said, well, let's try to find a job.

So spring of 1976, I started looking around. I interviewed a number of places. Then of two, three places that I visited, I liked the Minnesota climate, if you can believe that.

PS: Did you come in the winter or the summer?

VS: I came in the summer. Summer was very, very pleasant.

PS: That explains it.

VS: Then, you know, where we were in India, the climate was cool, I still liked cold weather. I don't like hot weather. I know I went to someplace in Virginia for an interview that summer. It was so hot there, I would not have gone there. So when I came here, this town was very pleasant at the time. I believe it was the month of July that I came here for the interview, everything was green and pleasant. So we ended up coming here that year.

PS: What was your title?

VS: I came as assistant professor at that time.

PS: Was that a tenure track?

VS: That was tenure track.

PS: And your topic was economics, of course.

VS: Economics.

PS: So you were thirty-five, thirty-six?

VS: No, by that time I was close to thirty-eight.

PS: So you brought your family up here. What was it like settling in, being a professor here?

VS: Well, you talk of the culture shock, you know, there in St. Louis, I was on fellowships. The last year there I was on a different fellowship, which was awarded by an organization in Washington, D.C., and they provided not only my research expenses, they provided the family expenses and all that. And it was all tax-free.

And then we came to Minnesota and got the first paycheck. That was a culture shock. Most of it

was gone in taxes. Most of it was taken out. And then, after a while you realize Mankato is pleasant, but it's small. It's a small town, you know. Compared with St. Louis, it is a much smaller town. So that took some effort to get used to. Mankato, in '76, gave more the impression of very, very rural town. It's much more pleasant now. Things have changed, even in Mankato, since that time. So it was somewhat different.

Another shock at that time was that I asked somebody here to send me the local newspaper to St. Louis, so that I could find a place to live. There was an ad for a very nice apartment at very reasonable rates. I thought Mankato being a smaller place, we'd find a good place to live in. Somebody had advertised a duplex. When I called, he said, "I'm living downstairs, and the upstairs is available for rent." On the telephone, I talked to him, sent him a month's rent, and was very pleased that I had a place to live when I came here. So that afternoon, I believe it was September seventh or eighth, 1976, we landed there at his place, and what do we find? We go in there, and it is an attic. The duplex is an attic, and the bathroom is a metal shed in the middle of the living room, right in the center. And I asked him, "You expect me to live here?"

"Oh, yes, yes, people have lived here before."

I said, "Not I." So just left that place. I called the department chairman here, and he suggested a number of other apartment buildings around here. But it was already late, five or six in the evening, and then I tried to go into one of the hotels, motels around here. That day was the Blue Earth [County] Fair day. Nothing was available that day. So we ended up sleeping in that shack there in the attic that night. But next morning, we found an apartment in one of the local apartment houses. So that's where we lived.

PS: So because you had slept there one night, he made you pay for the whole month?

VS: I asked him, and he was not very willing to pay me back. I said, "Forget about it." But I did sleep there one night.

PS: [Laughter] It sounds a little bit like your village, with no running water and no electricity.

VS: Yes, it was almost. You go to one of the bedrooms and the roof was coming slanting down, and you could not stand upright there. It was barely four feet from the floor. So that kind of a thing. So that was the most unpleasant experience.

PS: So by then your children were fourteen and —

VS: Yes, they were both — '76, so my younger son was seven at the time, he was going to grade one at the time. The oldest son was twelve and sixth grade. They started going to Mankato schools.

PS: So they attended the public schools.

VS: Attended the public schools, yes.

PS: And I would imagine Mankato had very few people of color, is that correct?

VS: That's right. Very few.

PS: How was that for you and your children? Because it sounds like there was an Indian community in St. Louis that you associated with.

VS: Personally, I was not bothered by that, you know. I look at all the people and I don't see them as white or not white or black. To me, personally, it doesn't matter. The person is either good or not good, or smart or not smart. Color of skin doesn't matter. There were very nice people around here.

PS: So your children never experienced prejudice in the school? They weren't teased or anything like that?

VS: I haven't heard from my children that they were teased or there was any prejudice. They never told me. Personally, I don't know. There may have been prejudice. But my experience is, I didn't feel it. I didn't feel it in St. Louis. If anything, I think they went out of their way to do a lot of favors, the department. They were spending at that time 15-16,000 dollars per year on me, a little bit more when my wife came. My advisors, I remember, came to our apartment, and checked if my wife was doing all right or not doing all right, things like that.

PS: That was very kind.

VS: That was very kind. Even to this day when we visit St. Louis — there are not very many people left there — but those who are there still take us out for dinner. Yes, I'm very grateful.

PS: So as you settled in here into Mankato, you said there were some adjustments to be made, like getting used to having taxes taken out of your paycheck. Were there any other things that you noticed about being now on the faculty of the university, rather than being a student? Were there any big changes for you there?

VS: Well, no, because I had taught in India. I taught at the master's level in India, and here it was undergraduate teaching, so there was nothing unusual about that. But, you know, you are the junior — most at that time, and gradually you have to stay and be friendly and be adjusting, and the usual things. And I had good experience with my colleagues here. The department chair at that time, Dr. Dale Peterson, a very, very nice man, would go out of his way to help out in whatever way he could.

PS: That's wonderful. How was it, getting connected to the rest of the community here in

Mankato? How did you find your social place? I imagine there wasn't any religious community?

VS: No, there was no religious community, and that is something that I felt the need of, personally. You need that. I never thought myself as belonging to a religious group. Again, you can put things in different boxes. I didn't — I still don't believe that one should be in those different boxes as such, that you are only this and you're only that. But, still, you know, you need to be comfortable. There is that basic urge, need, for the religious experience or knowing, going beyond what you do during those eight hours. But that was not there in Mankato.

In fact, we spent about a year, after we came here, spent a year at the University of Michigan on a research assignment, so when we returned from Michigan, then we started looking around as to what is it that we could do. Minneapolis is not too far from here, and there was at least one group that was meeting on a once-a-month basis, probably, in different people's homes. That was a religious gathering. So we started going there. Once we started going, we continued to go and met people and made friends and got closer. So we ended up going a lot to Minneapolis.

PS: Was that mostly on the weekend?

VS: Mostly on the weekends.

PS: Were those other Indians speaking Punjabi?

VS: Yes, Indians speaking Punjabi and Hindi and other languages. It doesn't make much difference.

PS: So you felt connected to Indian culture in that way, because there weren't any other Indians in Mankato at all?

VS: Right. Culture. More than that, this religious urge somehow, we meet and we share and we exchange our ideas and experiences.

PS: How did your family back in India accept your choices as they went along to stay here, or did they not figure out that you were really going to stay? You hadn't figured that out either.

VS: Maybe the first generation of immigrants, they never figure it out. [Laughter] As I said, I'm comfortable wherever I am, and I was comfortable here. And when I go back, I'm comfortable in India, too, though increasingly I become restless after three weeks or so.

PS: In India?

VS: In India. Because there aren't that many things to do, and, you know, to answer — not to answer your question, but going in a somewhat different direction there, I've been here for twenty-six years, and everything is very familiar, very comfortable all along, so increasingly this

country seems like the home more and more. And when you go from here, it looks like when you have those fancy ideas in your head that this is how India would be, that has changed. The villages are no longer the same. The people are not the same. Most of the people are gone. So when you go there, you feel kind of strange. So that feeling is there.

But so far as the family is concerned, they were not happy about our staying in this country and they missed us, particularly the parents. With my father, there was a constant correspondence, letter writing, so at least once every two weeks a letter would be exchanged. Similarly my wife's parents, they also missed all of us very, very much, but we kept our contacts. My wife and children actually have gone back at least once every three years, and more recently more frequently, almost once a year.

So when was the first time that you went back to India?

VS: In fact, I went back in '79, seven years after I came here first. That was a long absence, a real long absence. But since that time, I've been going every two to three years, but mostly every other year. So we've been keeping those contacts, but increasingly I find that — well, as I said, I'm comfortable everywhere, for some reason. Some people don't like that idea, that you don't express strong preferences about the places you want to be. I say I'm okay.

PS: You just fit in where you need to, right?

VS: Yes. I'm comfortable there. When we go back there, my wife, in particular. There is this idea of people coming back from America, so you must be talking like this, walking like this, or dressed like that. But she's going around there like any other native, and they say, "We don't believe you have lived in the USA for twenty-five years."

PS: Because they think she should act differently?

VS: They have the expectation that she should be dressed in a peculiar manner, or, you know, she should be — all of those things, she should be talking different, she should be behaving differently. And so do my sons, they mingle very, very well there.

PS: Are your sons fluent in Punjabi?

VS: They are both fluent in Punjabi.

PS: Is that the language you spoke in your home while the children were growing up?

VS: That's right. We still do.

PS: Did you teach them to read and write in Punjabi as well?

VS: I don't know how to read and write in Punjabi myself. [Laughter]

PS: You don't?

VS: We only speak. I know other languages. I know reading and writing Hindi very, very well. I know reading and writing Udu very, very well. I know quite a bit of Sanskrit, though I cannot speak. I can read it. But even there, the tradition was in our families that we speak Punjabi, but our formal language was Hindi. The formal language of writing letters, the formal language of religion, that was Hindi. If you want to become formal, start speaking Hindi. If you are informal, you speak Punjabi. So that is it.

PS: So when your sons went back and you went back with your wife and family, how long a time would you stay?

VS: My wife stays quite a bit.

PS: Like?

VS: Three months, four months. My children, when they were in school, they would spend a whole summer there. But now, of course, they cannot spend a whole summer, but my wife is there now. She'll spend about three months, and my younger son is going in January and he's going to spend five weeks. So, you know, they have the contacts with the relatives. They know everybody and everybody knows them.

PS: You said your one son has children, right?

VS: He has two children.

PS: Does he take his children to India when he goes as well?

VS: Well, my son, when he graduated from college here, he said he wants to go back to India and start his business there, and I was telling him it's not easy. It's very difficult. You cannot succeed there easily. But he had this notion in his head that he can do that, so I was telling him, "All right, if you want to go, it's all right, but don't take more than two or three years. If you settle down, fine. If you don't, you need to make up your mind rather quickly and return." Instead of three years, he spent four; he did succeed somewhat, not to the extent that he wanted to. He had married in the meantime. Our first grandson was born there. That's about the time he decided to come back, so he's here now.

PS: What was it about having a child that he decided to come back to America? Was it the birth of his child that —

VS: No. It was because he wanted to do certain things, but because of the business climate and

so on and so forth, he was not accomplishing what he really would have liked, so he said he'd return to the USA. He thought that would be better for him and his wife and child.

PS: Is his wife someone that he met in India?

VS: Someone that he met in India, that's right.

PS: So she came back with him to America?

VS: Right.

PS: How did that work out? Was theirs an arranged-type marriage or was theirs a love marriage?

VS: He had seen her. Again, she is from distant relatives family there, he had seen her and she had seen him, so it was not an arranged marriage. But once we knew that they liked each other and wanted to get married, then it was conducted like any other arranged marriage, you know. The married party goes to the bride's home, the whole thing. But they had decided on each other.

PS: So the tradition of arranged marriage, is that still strong in India? When you go back there, are your nieces and nephews and so on, are they —

VS: It's getting weaker and weaker now. Actually, the dilution is accelerating right now. As time goes on, previously there may have been a small number of marriages which were not arranged, but now that percentage is growing rather rapidly.

PS: What's your guess about what it is now, that are not arranged?

VS: I can't put any number on that, but there are more and more who say to their parents, "Well, I've seen that girl. We like each other, so you'd better have us married." Not that they'll go to the church or the temple and say, "Let's get married," and then go home. No, not like that. The marriage is still the same. No difference there. But the choice is made more in the past by the young man and the young woman.

PS: And are parents adjusting to that and letting it happen, or are parents fighting against it?

VS: If the choice is good, the parents are happy. Their task and responsibility is reduced.

PS: So it's actually easier on the parents.

VS: It's much easier on the parents. Then they're not responsible if something unpleasant happens. "Oh, you made that decision," they can say.

PS: [Laughter] Okay. And your younger son, he's still single. How old is he now?

VS: He's twenty-nine now.

PS: And what do you see happening for him? What's he doing?

VS: In terms of marriage?

PS: Or his life. Is he working? Is he likely to get married?

VS: Yes, he's going to get married. In fact, when he goes there next month, that's one of the things that we are looking at.

PS: When he goes to India?

VS: Yes.

PS: So he's going to India to find a bride?

VS: Yes.

PS: And who will help him with that?

VS: His mother is there right now. She'll still be there, and the rest of the relatives.

PS: So they'll be finding some women for him to meet and choose from?

VS: To meet and choose from, yes.

PS: So his will be more like a traditional arranged marriage?

VS: Traditional, arranged, but both of them have to agree to that before anything is finalized. He has to say yes and she has to say yes.

PS: Wasn't it always that way, though?

VS: Not in real traditional ones. They would ask a little bit, but generally they would keep quiet.

PS: So even if you met somebody and your parents really wanted you to marry them, even if you didn't like them, you would just be quiet and then you'd get married?

VS: Oh, no, if you didn't like them, then you would shout. But if you did like them, you would keep quiet.

PS: And in totally traditional marriages, arranged marriages, people would meet each other one time and agree to be married, and then five days later they'd be married? Or six weeks.

VS: That's right. Sometimes not even meet one time.

PS: Not even meet one time?

VS: No.

PS: See each other the first time at your wedding.

VS: Yes, or after the wedding.

PS: [Laughter] Wow. That's amazing to me.

VS: But, you know, if you think of it, it's not a bad arrangement. You know why?

PS: Why?

VS: Here the young man has a certain pool out of which he can choose, his classmates or his co-workers or, you know, the people that he meets around. That's the pool. But in the arranged marriage set, the pool is much, much bigger. He is a young man and he has twenty relatives, and they know he is an eligible young man, and their eyes are open all along. And similarly, there is a young woman, she has all her relatives around, and they are looking. So in that process, the pool is much, much bigger, and when they make the suggestion, sometimes they say, "Oh, no, he's taller and she's shorter, and therefore this is not going to work," so they don't even suggest it. Or, you know, he's much fairer and she's darker, and therefore not even that, therefore things will not work out. So they are looking for compatibility, but the pool is much bigger.

This thing, you know, even in this society 200 years ago, marriage was arranged in European society, also.

PS: Really?

VS: Yes, 200 years ago.

PS: Tell me about that. I don't know about that.

VS: [Laughter] No, you wouldn't believe it in this day and age, but the families were keeping meetings of young men and women. There was no dating like that. But as I said, that is getting weaker by the day in India. I think the only places in the world where the marriages are arranged are the Indian subcontinent, which is India and Pakistan, and probably among the Jews a bit still. I think in the rest of the world, they find their own mates, more or less.

PS: And the divorce rates in India, how do they compare?

VS: Still low, but catching up. Not as much, but it's fairly high. Well, I can't say fairly high, but it was unheard of at one time. Now it is not unheard of.

PS: One of the arguments that I've heard for arranged marriages and why they work so well, especially in a country like India, is that the culture that India has, is that the family, both families really want the marriage to work, and so if there's any difficulty between a young bride and a young groom, the family will really work and support them to get through it and help each other.

VS: That's right.

PS: And also that the things that you look to your marriage to provide are very different from what people in America, who marry for love, look to marriage to provide.

VS: Yes.

PS: It's an economic arrangement, it's a way to have children, but you don't necessarily — it's not your best friend.

VS: Well, there is the economic, the social, there's the family considerations, and then, you know, you have a support group. All the families are the support groups there, and they'll do whatever they can do to keep them together. There's the arrangement or custom by which, particularly in the first few years of her marriage, it's common for the bride to go back to her parents' house several weeks a year, and maybe that's a good thing, you know, if there is any misunderstanding. Around here sometimes I think maybe that's an oversimplification that you fight one day and next week people go and file for a divorce. There they'll fight, but the bride will go to her parents' house, live there for a week, and then both parties have time to cool down a bit and think about it, and then they say, "Oh, no, that was not it. Living separately is not a good idea after all." Or the relatives will tell them that it's not a good idea. What's the big thing about? Fights are on trivial things, by and large.

PS: Oh, yes. [Laughter]

VS: So it helps. It helps to have that bigger support system. Then the stigma of divorce, I don't know how important that is there now. There was a time when, you know, it was really a bad thing to be divorced. So there was a cost associated with divorce. That's not the case here. But, you know, as the society is more and more westernized, divorce becomes more and more acceptable. In any case, rather than leading a miserable whole life when you don't like each other, you hate each other, so on and so forth, if that's the state of affairs, it's better to separate and get divorced. If the fight is about trivial things, then, of course, a cooling period is good, and

social support, family support is good. But if there's nothing in common there, a hate for each other, it doesn't make sense to stay together.

PS: Yes. I've heard people say that your understanding in arranged marriage is that love follows marriage. My guess is, you've known a lot of people over the years who've had arranged marriages. Would you say that that's usually true?

VS: They really fall in love, no question about that.

PS: That after a time, you do?

VS: Fairly soon. Fairly soon, yes. But, you know, again the expectation is that the girl is not supposed to — the husband is the only person that she's supposed to be loving, and vice versa, too. And then it develops. Then they have their common problems and adventures, achievements, failures, and they live it all together, and with time the relationship only gets stronger and stronger. And they do fall in love, no question about that.

PS: When you were raising your children here, you raised them part of the time in India and part of the time here. What differences did you see between the way people raise their children here, compared to India?

VS: You mean my children or children in general?

PS: Your children specifically, the children in general.

VS: I think, by and large, that is also true in our case, but many other Indians, also, children get much more support from their parents in the Indian families, so if they are fifteen or sixteen or eighteen or twenty-two or twenty-four, parents continue to support them. This is coming from the old country, that no matter how old they are, parents don't tell them, "Now you're eighteen and you should be on your own." They encourage them to be independent and all that, but still the support continues.

PS: Financial support or emotional support?

VS: Financial, emotional, whatever. That continues. And we talk about that among some friends, also, and we think that the human needs — it's not that they're eighteen and suddenly they can be on their own. No. They can be whatever age. I tell my sons, and I'm sure others have told their children also, that, "This house is open to you anytime of the day or night. Come here anytime, you will always be welcome. I may not be able to provide you a whole lot, but whatever, so long as I'm eating and living and clothing myself, you always will have at least that much. And if you live here, you will be fed and clothed. Beyond that, the luxuries I don't, and maybe I won't, provide, but the basic support is always there. So you come here any time of the day or night, and you will always be welcome. Besides, though I'm not rich, whatever you see around the

house, if you like, you are free to take whatever you want to take. No questions asked. All you have to do is pick it up and let us know."

PS: So have your children ever done that?

VS: They do that. Yes, they do that. It's up to them, but they do that. But once they get that response, it automatically means that they also have to be responsible then. So when they are given that sort of confidence, they'll not want a whole lot of things just like that. But that they know.

PS: Were there any things that concerned you about raising your children in America, any things you wanted to guard them against or protect them from?

VS: I think maybe I have been lucky. My children, they never — they have gone out with their friends and they have done that, but they have not been into drinking or drugs or smoking. So I really didn't have any concern about them that much. I did tell them that, "If you want to drink an occasional beer, that will be okay with me." But for some reason I told them that smoking is not okay, not even once. So, smoking is out. But other than that, you do what you want.

PS: Was there a certain age when you told them these things?

VS: I think it was understood from very early on, that it is something that you don't do.

PS: In terms of having — I'm assuming that you don't smoke.

VS: No, I don't smoke.

PS: Do you ever have alcohol in your house?

VS: Yes.

PS: Did they see you ever drink alcohol or something more than a beer?

VS: Yes.

PS: But you made it clear that they could only have beer?

VS: No, they can have alcohol, but if I drink, I drink maybe once — I used to have a drink once in one month and now I do about once in three months, so it's not drinking, really. So if they want to do something like that, but you don't smoke once in a while. Once you start smoking, you start smoking. So, you know, the recent stories about all the damage that smoking does, it was there early also, and I have told them that.

PS: It sounds like you gave them a lot of traditional Indian values.

VS: More than I, my wife has done that.

PS: How did you transmit those to them? How did that get communicated, what was important or what was valuable?

VS: I don't know if we followed any explicit things. My two sons, they have not dated in the traditional American sense. Particularly my older son, he had a number of girls whom he called his friends, so he visited them, they visited him. But it's not that he ever said, "She's my date." That never happened. A couple of them visited him in India, actually, one from Germany and one from this country. But they were his friends, not girlfriends.

So I think I didn't tell them. In fact, I'm more open in that respect. My wife must have done something or the other, put that thing in their head. So, no, maybe the example was there or maybe they had seen things, somehow they knew. I didn't explicitly ever tell that, "You're not supposed to," other than the smoking thing.

Even there my condition to my elder son, he was friends with a couple of people who were smokers, and when he kept their company, his clothes would smell of smoke, and I used to ask him about it. He said, "No, I don't. I just was in their company." And so my thing was that "for as many days as you smoke, I'll be fasting, not eating anything. I'm not going to get mad at you. If I find any day that you have smoked, I'll not get mad at you. I'll fast that day." So I said, "You can try it. Let's see who wins out."

PS: So did he ever?

VS: I think once I found there was smoke on his breath, and I told him, "This is not in your clothes." He said, "Yes." I said, "That's all right. So that means today I'm on fast." Which I did. "I'm not angry or mad at you. That's the condition I told you about." You know, since that time I haven't seen him [smoke].

PS: That's an interesting way to do it.

VS: He hasn't smoked since that time. There may have been other times before that, but not since that.

PS: And your younger son never was interested?

VS: No, no.

PS: Both your sons have gone to college, right?

VS: Yes.

PS: What did they study?

VS: My elder son, he studied international business. He was always interested in business propositions. The other one, he studied electrical engineering at the University of Minnesota, and then he didn't want to be an electrical engineer. He felt that I pushed him in that direction. He's interested more in computer science, so he's a computer network engineer, I believe. He hasn't finished his master's. Taking courses, but not finished yet.

PS: But he'll be going to India to find a bride, so that's what he's focused on right now?

VS: That's what he's focused on.

PS: Do you think that wedding will be in India as well, or will that be here?

VS: Probably in India.

PS: I understand that in the traditional system, the day for the wedding is picked by the arranger or some astrologer person.

VS: Astrologer.

PS: Will you be using that kind of system to discover the right day?

VS: You know, if you asked my father, he would say find a convenient date, but the other party may not agree with that. They may believe in astrology. So usually you have to go with the astrologer, and they will find the date. There are months where there are no marriages at all because those are not auspicious times. So then there are only certain days that marriages are there. So, yes, probably it will have to be done that way. If it is here, marriages take place usually on Saturdays and Sundays.

PS: But in India, it could be on a Tuesday or a Thursday?

VS: Yes.

PS: And do all the guests just take off from their work for the wedding?

VS: You know, if they have their own company, for the wedding, they do that. But increasingly the old things are gone. In old times, you spent two days at the wedding, later on one day, but now it's not even one full day.

PS: How long is it now?

VS: Well, if it's in the same town, you go in the afternoon and you come back, the guests come back the same night after dinner, and the bride and the bridegroom and family people, will come back early next morning.

PS: So the ceremony doesn't take place at two o'clock on the morning anymore, either?

VS: It could, only you go there in the evening, have dinner, do the other simple social formalities, and then the solemn marriage takes place maybe two o'clock in the morning.

PS: What's the reasoning behind that particular hour?

VS: They look at the auspicious constellation of the stars, and that constellation can come at two o'clock in the morning or three in the morning or four in the morning.

PS: But that's just a nightly occurrence that always comes? It never would happen at twelve noon or three-thirty?

VS: There are marriages that have that.

PS: So it just depends on what the astrology chart shows would be the best hour.

VS: That's right.

PS: But a lot of times it's in the middle of the night?

VS: Yes. My marriage was in the middle of the night. My son's was. My brother's was. They were all in the middle of the night.

PS: Interesting. Very interesting. Okay. Do you have the sense that your sons religiously consider themselves Hindus, just like you? How does religion play a role in their life or their religious values?

VS: I think my elder son was brought up more in India and then he later on stayed there for four years. I don't think he's particularly concerned about religion or religious philosophy, but the ethics that are derived from religion, that does guide him. The younger one is more interested in the religious philosophy as such, so he's much more interested in that. So what part religion plays in their lives, I cannot say.

For example, we have this religious group in Minneapolis area that's known as Gita Ashram. I have been the president of that since 1989 — 1987, actually. But then I ask myself, how much of a Hindu am I? It does not have a whole lot of meaning to me, because when you do try to seek out that higher being, whatever that higher being is, we always say that there are many, many

different ways of seeking the higher being, and every way is fine, whichever path I adopt is the one that suits me. What suits me may depend on my upbringing or my culture or my history, my background, my environment, but it doesn't make my way any better or superior than your way.

So when you think about yourself as a Hindu, but you're not sure that you're a Hindu —

VS: No. Hindu is a name given to our religious philosophy by outsiders. So if you look at our old books, there's no mention of Hindu or Hinduism. But, yes, that's how we were brought up. But how much of a role it plays in our everyday lives, well, I guess it does play a role, you know, because it probably influences — I don't know whether that's culture or religion — our diet. It influences how we are going to treat other people, how we are going to treat other beings, even, not just the other people. Even the animals and the bugs, you know, the dogs and the cats, how we do that. It does.

And then, you know, the outlook towards life. Do I consider that my big goal should be making a lot of money? My religious philosophy says that a lot of money doesn't matter. If you have it, that's fine. If you don't have it, that's fine, too. So it's neutral in that respect. Does that influence me every now and then in saying, "Oh, you should not really strive to earn all that money"? Maybe it does. I can't say that it doesn't.

Somewhere deep down, you know, those are the values that I'm carrying with me, which say that, the material things are important, but that's not all that there is to it. So you need some things, no question about that, but how much do you need? But they say that the real happiness doesn't come out of those things. You may have a lot and be unhappy, and you may have nothing and still be happy. So that is a neutral aspect. So maybe religion does play a part, the religious philosophy plays a part.

PS: So you're still very active at Gita Ashram?

VS: Yes.

PS: And you're the president of that group?

VS: Yes.

PS: Do you still go up there every weekend, almost?

VS: At least twice a month. At least twice a month.

PS: Have you seen that group of people grow and change over the years that you've been involved?

VS: I don't know what to think about that. The people who come to this country, on the one hand

we say, "Well, material things are not important." Then why are people coming here? Why did they leave the old country? They came here for one reason, and that is for their material advancement. So I should not question that judgment on their part. But still, despite that, even though they came here for material advancement, there's still this basic thing to hold onto, the old values and the culture and a number of things. So that may be the reason why they come there to Gita Ashram or they come to any other congregation of the people from India. So have I seen them grow and change? I really could not be definitive about that, if they have or have not.

PS: Is there a larger number of people or a different kind of people coming now than there was in 1989 or even earlier?

VS: Even earlier. Well, they're not always the same people who come. They go on changing. Maybe some are disillusioned, this sort of thing, you know, over the years, the last ten, twelve, fifteen years, people from India in Twin Cities I know, many of them are much, much better off than they used to be. So there is this, that everybody has a big house and their children have done very, very well. So there are gatherings, there are other entertainment kind of activities. People participate in that. The religious gathering, it's kind of a sparse thing there, where you sit and do something or other for an hour and a half. So there are all kinds of people there, you know. In a big function, many people will show up. In weekly worship meetings, there are not that many. So that's there. What do you make out of that? It remains to be seen. Maybe the Gita Ashram doesn't provide people with the kind of services that will attract them. People, they have to find their own different ways. I still respect them for whatever they do.

PS: Does Gita Ashram encourage people to have a daily private practice of some kind, meditation or rituals or worship or blessing or something that they do individually?

VS: That is always the essential part of it, that you get together, but that the real worship that you do is on your own. That's personal — between you and your god, whoever that god is. So that's always there. People do that, I think, in most of the Hindu families. You will always find within the Hindu home a little nook or corner which is their temple. Those who can afford it, they can have a regular room which is sort of their temple, where they go and sit, and meditate, go in the morning and the evening and do their prayers, whether it's for five minutes or an hour. So that's there. Many people do that.

PS: Do you have that in your home?

VS: I also have — my wife has, so she will do that, the daily thing in the morning and evening, every single day. She does that.

PS: Is that a practice that your children have taken on and do regularly as well?

VS: My daughter-in-law does that. She does that on a daily basis.

PS: I see some reluctance on the part of men.

VS: Yes. There is some, you know. The women are the real carriers of the culture, I think, a strong role to play. They're the ones who mold things along in their own ways.

PS: And the men are willing to let the women have that role?

VS: Men are willing, yes. It may be different, but I see in very many houses, women sort of lead that.

PS: That's common here, too. How old are you right now?

VS: I'm fifty-nine, going to be sixty in a few days.

PS: That's right. So when you think about retirement, what do you think of?

VS: One thing I'm going to do, you know, over all these years I have still not become a citizen of the United States. Now I have decided that I will become a citizen of the United States, because, you know, there's always this hesitation. Every two years I get the forms, but I don't sign them. There is this thing, that breaking with your old thing. But then, you know, I think about those things quite a bit. It may not provide me with any advantage in becoming a citizen one way or the other.

Then I think about that, and in my philosophical moods I think of India as an ideal, and I think of the USA also as an ideal. So if I become a U.S. citizen, I'm not giving up anything I have now, I'm convinced of that. I can keep whatever I want to, and this society lets me keep whatever I want to keep. That's a good thing about this society. So I'm not giving up anything. On the other hand, I have been here now for twenty-six years, and I'll be here for a few more years, so in many, many ways I feel I'm more comfortable here and I should formalize that.

But in terms of retirement, my wife wants that we should spend retirement mostly in India. But one can keep one's eyes closed about our health in the future. We could get sick, but medical help is not that good there. What is one going to do? So her thinking at this time is that we should probably spend a few months of the year in India and a few months here after retirement. Maybe we could do that. So, no definite arrangements. She reminds me of the old folks' homes here. What do you call it?

PS: The nursing homes.

VS: The nursing homes. That is absolutely someplace where nobody wants to go. In fact, she has built a house there in India, which is a very comfortable house, and it's in her family's compound. It's a big piece of land, and two brothers are there and a sister is there, and my wife has her house there. So whether we will live there or not, as I said, I get restless after three weeks or so, besides

health concerns.

PS: And your family's house is still there.

VS: My family. That is in a village. That is a rural area, and that's still there.

PS: And you wouldn't want to retire to that place?

VS: Probably not. No. Live there for a few days, but not retire in the real retirement sense. What do we do here, you know? Sometimes I think that maybe in professional life you can always cut down your activities a little bit more and go on working. I think I'm still healthy, so I'll go on working for a few more years. There's no retirement age for us. So go on working right into the sunset there? Probably not. When something happens, you change your mind quickly. So, I'm not certain yet. This is an issue we have to answer yet. The first-generation immigrants, they have to answer that question. It's a very dear question, but no answer yet.

People have ended up both ways. Many people stay on here, despite all their fond wishes that, you know, they'll retire back home, but then in terms of many things, particularly the medical facilities, that becomes increasingly important as you go into that age. Then you are better off here. We'll see.

PS: Would you stay in the Mankato area, if you stay in the United States, in Minnesota? Might you be tempted to move to Minneapolis since that's where your sons are?

VS: Probably, that's what I think at this time. Although this is not a big house or a fancy house, but for the two of us it's a comfortable house, a nice walk around the block, half a mile exactly. So this is all right. But after retirement, then you have to be busy doing something or the other. So being there in the Minneapolis area would probably help. So, no decisions about that.

On the other hand, there is always this possibility, you know, again of our tradition that at some stage you give up this worldliness, you move on, become a Sanyasi or renunciate. That thought occurs every now and then. So whether I'll follow upon that or not, I don't know yet. Those are things that develop as you go there. One day it might occur to me that renouncing is the best way to take, and go in that direction. Then where do you live doesn't matter much. You give up all your possessions and walk away from it all.

PS: With your wife?

VS: Hopefully. That's an attachment I haven't given up yet.

PS: [Laughter] Some things are worth hanging onto. Well, we've got a little bit of time left, and I wanted to just open it up to you, if there are any things that you feel would be important for future generations to hear or to know about your life or your journey, how you've experienced

things, that I haven't asked you about yet. Anything that you want to say or share? Any stories that are important to you? This is your chance to grandstand.

VS: [Laughter] Well, despite being the president of Gita Ashram, I'm not used to sermonizing. I don't tell my students that, also. I don't sermonize. But then about this society, what I've found, if you excel, you are rewarded. It's a good society, despite individual examples of biases or prejudices or discrimination, or whatever, by and large, this society is a fair society. So rather than blaming other people for whatever, do the best that you can do, and you are rewarded. So in that sense it's a good country to be in. That's what I think.

Personally I have never experienced prejudice or bias or discrimination as such. And I think other people also, when the people know that you are good at what you do, I think they forget where you come from that country or you are from that race or your color is like that. Then they will open up to you. That's what I found. Whatever I wanted to do in the Mankato area, I have done that. I have done good work for the industry. I have done good work for the local community. I've been involved in a number of projects in the local community here. So I find people are open and willing to listen and willing to share. So, you know, we are no worse than anybody and no better than anybody. So that has always been my thinking, that human beings are human beings, no matter where you go. Good people are here, as good people are back there. Bad people are there, as bad people are here. And the Lord, when it started to give intelligence, it gave about the same intelligence to all people. How you make use of it, that's what matters. That's all I'll say.

PS: Thank you very much for your time today. I've enjoyed talking with you.

VS: Well, thanks for coming by.

PS: You're welcome.