

**Interview with M. J. Abhishaker**

**Interviewed by Polly Sonifer**

**Interviewed on January 4, 1995  
at Mr. Abhishaker's Minneapolis home**

**PS:** Where in India did you come from?

**MJA:** From the South, a city called Hyderabad, which is the middle of the peninsula, state of Andhra Pradesh, which is one of the southern states. I came on an exchange fellowship from the university there to this university.

**PS:** Which university?

**MJA:** The university is called Osmania, which is in the city of Hyderabad itself. At that time they had a program which they had an exchange of student go from here to there and then vice versa. I came in 1964, October, on that particular fellowship, and I was on the grant for about a year at the University of Minnesota.

**PS:** What made you decide you wanted to come here? What was it about that project that made you say; yes, this is for me?

**MJA:** Well, actually I had no choice in the matter in that I was just looking to go abroad to get a higher education degree in my field, which at that time was English literature. I had just abandoned a philosophy degree because I probably couldn't get a teaching position. They are not very big departments over there. And English seemed to be a growing field at that time and still is. So I was exploring a couple of different opportunities and I was able to get into the University of Leeds in London. That's where I really wanted to go, but then there was the University of Minnesota exchange which came up and I applied for it. I did not think I would get it, but it turned out that I did get it, and comparing the two, this one was a better arrangement mainly because I was really very much on my own. My parents had died and I was putting myself through school, so I would not have been able to afford life in England where the University didn't offer me anything at all, but here I had tuition, room and board both provided,

and all I had to do was raise some money to buy flight tickets. So that's what I did. In fact, the University helped me to raise the money when I expressed to them that I just didn't have any money. In fact, one of the local royal families funded part of it, so I was kind of lucky.

**PS:** Royal family here?

**MJA:** No there. Hyderabad used to be a Muslim state for at least 500 years from what I understand. In 1947, India became independent, and in 1950, the state of Hyderabad became integrated into the larger country, and from then it was really a separate country within a country. But once integration occurred, the kings and the queens were sort of out of jobs, so to speak. But the grandson of the king was a very generous man. He was the chancellor of the University and he was very willing to help, so that was how I was able to travel outside India. Most students who were here from India at the time were basically on government grants or were from wealthy families who could afford to send their children abroad. You know, it's very expensive to go to school here. With the exchange rate and all that, it's an enormous amount of money one has to bring with them to be able to go to school. So that's how I came.

**PS:** Do you remember much about your journey over here?

**MJA:** Well, it was a flight from Bombay to Frankfurt, except we went through Prague airport where we were detained, because I believe that day there was a coup in Russia -- October 16, if I am not mistaken, that was the day of the flight, and Krushchev had been deposed or something, and the entire airport was heavily guarded by military police, and I was so curious to see the outside world, I wandered around and then they arrested me in the airport because I was an unauthorized person, so I was detained for several hours.

A military policeman was in charge of keeping track of me until the next flight was to go out. It turned out to be kind of a pleasant experience. The man did not know any English and of course I didn't know any Czechoslovakian and we were trying to communicate after a couple of hours of sort of staring at each other. He communicated to me somehow whether I wanted to go see the city of Prague, and I said, "Sure." So I got on his motorcycle and went to Charles University and different places. They were very

beautiful. Came back and got the next flight and went to London for a short wait and then to the U.S., to New York, and then from New York to Minneapolis.

And when I came to Minneapolis, it turns out I found myself just in the airport without any way to decide how to go about or where to go, but I had one letter that was written to me by the foreign student advisory office here at the University here. The fellow who wrote to me was a Czech immigrant, and I remembered his name, so I looked up his phone number and I called him and he came and got me from the airport and took me to the dormitory. I was at Centennial Hall at the University. It was a very different kind of experience, exciting and frightening, very unusual.

I was very young, very adventurous and full of curiosity and had a tremendous amount of enthusiasm for the American way of life, and also academic life was important for me at that point.

**PS:** Were you pretty excited at that point?

**MJA:** Very much so. I just couldn't contain myself except I didn't want to show it -- a dumb foreigner walking around with his tongue hanging out, you know, and I tried to behave like everyone else, like the other graduate students, just taking everything calmly. But it was interesting because there was immediately a language barrier in the sense that of a cultural barrier, local idioms that were somewhat different, expressions I didn't know much about. At that time, I used to smoke, and I asked someone where to get some cigarettes and they said the drug store over there, and I couldn't make out a drug store and cigarettes. Little things like that -- expressions that threw me off completely that I had to think about and see what they meant in the local language. I knew language very well but it was all in the books and mostly from British publications, and we grew up with Britishers. When I was in high school, I had British teachers who were English teachers and so on.

**PS:** I imagine you had a pretty strong British accent.

**MJA:** Yes, at that time. It underwent some changes subsequently.

**PS:** When you were in school, did you work only at the University, or did you work elsewhere as well? How did you manage to have enough money to survive on?

**MJA:** Barely enough. It paid for our room and board and tuition. The idea was that I would take some courses, but not necessarily for credit. I would audit them and be available to speak to various organizations about Indian university life. I used to be a student leader back at the University. It was fellowship that really brought people with some leadership skills as well as academic achievement. But when I came it was so different because my idea of student life was quite different.

**PS:** In what way?

**MJA:** There are basically unions, there are associations, they went on strike, they were engaged constantly in negotiations with the administration about various grievances, often about tuition hikes and so on, firing of professors and instructors. People were very much politicized and I was part of a generation that was I think maybe one of the first generation to think about politics as a very important civic commitment, if you want to call it that. Most of us who were presidents of various college student unions formed a superunion.

The University had 25 colleges so there were 25 presidents that got together and formed a University union. The campuses were different from here in the sense that the central University was only the graduate school and that there were 25 constituent colleges all around the metro area so there were really different campuses but they were all the same university. Here they've got two Twin Cities campuses and one in Duluth and one in Morris. But something like St. Thomas University in our terms would constitute one college of the University; although it is private, it has to have the alignment to get the accreditation for the degrees and so on. So I was one of those people who was very involved politically and who had constant confrontations with the chief minister and people like that. In fact, four of my friends went into politics; one of them is a member of parliament right now and the other one has been briefly the minister of education in state government and I believe recently ran for parliament again. Perhaps he lost it because I haven't heard from him.

So when I came here my tour was often places like fraternities and sororities and I said to myself these are just social organizations, they just want to have fun. This

isn't really a politically conscious kind of a thing, and Vietnam was just getting to heat up. Immediately I kind of got involved in that, and I found that student organizations were not. Minnesota Student Association was very much on the sidelines. It was only a few graduate students as I recall that got together. There were maybe 15 or 20 of us that got together at the old Scholar Cafe on 14th Avenue that used to be around, where there is a Burger King now. That was reputed to be the place where Bob Dylan got his start as a singer and a poet and all that. When I came in 1964, that was still the case, people brought their poetry and brought their guitars and drank hot cider at night and exchanged this and that. But there were some of us who were politically aware of what was going on in Vietnam and became concerned about that and from that eventually it grew into a fairly large movement. And I wasn't really very involved in the organization part because I was a visiting student and I didn't want to be associated with that. So part of what I did was take courses in English which was what I liked to do and of course did some community speaking in churches, YMCAs and so on.

**PS:** How long were you at the University?

**MJA:** Actually, at the end of the one-year fellowship, I decided to stay on to pursue a degree and to do that I had to have funds. Quite fortunately, at the very end of the summer, I got a teaching assistantship in the humanities department, and I was able to support myself for a couple more years. And I actually took courses until 1970 and taught in the humanities department until 1972.

**PS:** What degree did you end up with?

**MJA:** With a master's in English and American Studies. I had a master's in English already, and I took a master's here and after that the graduate school refused to let me pursue anything beyond that, saying that I had an obligation to go back to the University and that was one of prerequisites of the contract. Although, when our vice chancellor of the University came here and I asked him permission to stay on, he said, "Fine, go ahead." You see, I had a teaching position back at the University of Osmania and they were glad to let me go and would have had me back if I had gone back. But when I told them I wanted to get a Ph.D., they said fine, just let us know when you can come back. But the University here became very tough on that and

they were unwilling to let me take any further courses.

**PS:** So you were unable to pursue a Ph.D. then?

**MJA:** No, I couldn't get a Ph.D..

**PS:** What made you decide to stay?

**MJA:** I think mainly because of the kind of interests I developed in teaching and some new methods of putting material together. I was really not very happy with the traditional pursuit of studies in a particular discipline such as English. The department was very narrow and at that time very prejudiced against non-native speakers, and I had a lot of difficulty getting jobs. I had very specific instances where I was told I shouldn't expect to get anything there. In fact, the chairman of the department said that I will never get a teaching position in this country.

**PS:** Because you were not a native?

**MJA:** I think that was very clearly the message. He did not put it that way. When I interviewed with him for the teaching assistant position, he said to me, "I can follow what you are saying, your speech seems to be all right, but it's not the same thing as teaching the way one of our local boys might be teaching." And I said, "I understood that, nevertheless I try to be very clear, my diction is very clear." And he said, "Well, we will let you know." And my advisor was a very well known American poet, Professor Allen Tate. He's a Southerner, he was from Tennessee. He said Professor Clark will never give you a job, so don't even look here. That kind of drove me away to the humanities department and the theater department. I tried all different places. So there was some difficulty already in the department of English. I was the only one, the only non-white student. The other foreign student I remember was a fellow from Norway who was studying English, but he committed suicide after the first quarter in the dormitory and there was nobody else. Oh, there was one from Pakistan who was very successful, partly because he was brought here by one of the professors in the department and he was shepherding him through. I think he is now teaching at the Morris campus.

**PS:** With those barriers, why did you want to stay?

**MJA:** Because I did want to pursue some kind of degree. I didn't really care about English because of the faculty situation. I had two master's degrees, and I figured if I could get a teaching position, I would work towards a degree somewhere else. But that was a very bad time to look for academic jobs and I was pretty much unemployed for five or six years. I applied everywhere and got nowhere with positions. In the meantime, I had developed a very strong interest in one of my undergraduate fields which is philosophy and began to do a lot more work in that area. Because I had taught interdisciplinary materials, that area interested me a whole lot more. Oftentimes those studies took me to me to what you might call the social situation. Because of the Vietnam War, we became very aware that the social situation has a lot to do with the shape of ideas, with what people think. What you call the history of ideas cannot be independent of the social context. There was a whole school of the history of ideas that the humanities department represented at that time that was apolitical. For the young Turks in the department, people like myself, we felt that was wrong. As a matter of fact, there was so much of conflict between the younger ones and the older ones in that department that in 1972 they fired a whole bunch of people. That was the first great purge of the humanities; the most recent one occurred I believe in 1992. I don't know if you read about it, but there was a big controversy about that. There were these newer professors that came on much later -- I knew some of them -- but they basically said we cannot teach humanities the way we used to. We have to re-think the curriculum and look at some connections with other people's histories and so on. But the dean and some other people got very upset about that, and Lynn Cheney who was the director of the National Endowment for the Humanities I believe, Defense Secretary Dick Cheney's wife, she made a rather big pitch on political correctness on university campuses, you may recall, and she cited the University of Minnesota as an example of how not to do history. It was just a remarkable cave-in by the administration. There were some top scholars in that department who had Guggenheims and Fullbrights and several publications and they were told they had to go to their home departments away from humanities, and that was a real purge, a purge of ideas. That again has to do with history, which you are trying to record here.

**PS:** All this makes me very curious about the educational framework you grew up in. Can you describe a little bit

about your family's values about education when you were growing up and how you viewed education and how it began to shape your life?

**MJA:** I don't think I had any real ideas about that when I was younger. All I knew was that I really liked English literature a great deal. When I was twelve years old, I began to learn the language in a systematic way, twelve or thirteen, and then when I was in high school, I took all these English courses, and that's how I got hooked on English literature. But then to go to the University you had to go to a university that teaches in English, so I went to Osmania University that has English instruction.

My father was educated, but he was educated by the church. He was a Methodist minister and had studied Greek as part of his training to be a minister. My mother was a nurse by profession. But they were not really interested in education the same way I was at that point. When I first started at the University and began to have some difficulty in terms of money and so on, I also flunked out of the University.

**PS:** You flunked out?

**MJA:** Yes, first time around.

**PS:** Why was that?

**MJA:** I just was not interested in what was going on in my classes. My interest was in French existentialism, Jean Paul Sartre, and the political dimension of everything. I mean something like the French intelligentsia, there was something like a coffeehouse culture there also, we even got together and talked about politics. And I was very active in the theater and I did some plays with the University group. And I just gave up on academia, and I didn't have money to pay for it anyway. And I was failing because I was not going to classes.

**PS:** It doesn't sound like your family had education as a real strong value and then even though you were interested in education, you were more interested in pursuing your own intellectual pursuits as opposed to formal education?

**MJA:** Well, my mother had died before I came to the University, and my dad had retired, he had no money, and he

was also going down in health, so I was very much on my own. So I was basically free as well as foolish. I was doing everything wrong, and everyone thought I was wasting my life, which was probably true.

**PS:** What do you think began to change that?

**MJA:** Well, I got a job with the Indian railroads. It didn't pay very well. I did a lot of things that were meaningless to me. I was often on the road traveling miles and miles to the far side of the state.

**PS:** Doing what?

**MJA:** Basically, I was working as an accountant for the engineering equipment of the railroad company. They were expanding railroads quite a bit so I had to go and check on how the material was being used on the sites, and I would bring back figures and put that together. Then I decided to go back to school so I went to night school and although I still had to leave town and therefore miss quite a bit of classes, I was very successful the first year. I was elected president of the student union. I was editor of the local paper. I begin to write. I was on the debating team and in the theater. So that kind of got me hooked on it. When I came to the end of my degree, an English professor decided she was going to help me go to graduate school.

**PS:** Was your first degree in English?

**MJA:** My undergraduate degree was in three different subjects -- philosophy, political science, and English. It was a triple major. But she was the one who befriended me and said she would help me go to graduate school. At that time I thought in terms of teaching because I felt confident in talking with groups of people and felt I had something to offer. Turns out her husband was the chairman of the department at the University so I interviewed with him and he set me up with a fellowship. And then I worked part-time while I was in day school as an editor, an associate editor for an English language newspaper, doing the front page at night or at 3:00 o'clock in the morning. That was fun. It became a meeting place for radicals to come in the middle of the night and have coffee with us while we worked on the paper.

**PS:** So throughout your education in India, you were very

politically active?

**MJA:** Very much so. I was something of a romantic I think - a strong desire to see if we could do something better than what the older generation had done, that kind of start that young idealists have.

**PS:** It doesn't seem like your family was a big influence. You didn't seem to have the big ties with family which are fairly predominant in a lot of Indian culture as I understand.

**MJA:** Well, we were very different in that way. We were a Christian family. We were not traditional people. We did not have a lot of extended family. My sisters and brothers were all independent at this time with jobs and careers, and I was really the last one to find something to do.

The one big influence was my father's library. He had a very good library of stuff that I had never heard about, which was basically European literature, English literature, and they began to add to that. They brought in some Russian literature and I began to read some of that.

**PS:** When you were growing up, were there a lot of non-Indian influences?

**MJA:** Just the teachers. A couple of teachers were very influential. One was an Englishman who helped me with a lot of things. I mean I was doing things that were kind of unusual for a high school kid -- writing poetry, writing plays, and then he saw my stuff and he said this doesn't make any sense, your idiom is wrong, let's sit down and talk about this. It was probably true (laugh) because I didn't use the language at that time at all, basically kind of learning. We did *Tales from Shakespeare* by Charles and Mary Lamb. I did not know there was a guy called Shakespeare that wrote plays, to start with. And I was so impressed by *Midsummer Night's Dream* that I actually reconstructed the story into iambic pentameter poetry, not realizing this was done by Shakespeare.

**PS:** It sounds like you were very independent from very early on. You were setting your own agenda.

**MJA:** I was afraid I had done something wrong when this guy who was the principal of the school called me and he said to

me in class, "I'd like to talk to you. Come to my office."

I was afraid. I was kind of trembling and then he began to talk to me in a very friendly way. He was very encouraging ultimately. Turns out he was a friend of my father's from another time and so he took some extra interest. Turns out the way I left high school was that we were on a big hunger strike and we destroyed everything in site. We were kicked out of school and all that.

**PS:** Over what?

**MJA:** It was all about the food being served in the dormitories. This was a boarding school. So very early on I was very involved politically and a whole bunch of us were arrested the night before the final exams. Very troubled history at that time. The police came and surrounded. They said they were going to open fire if we didn't come out, and of course we thought that was just a bluff. So a whole bunch of us removed our shirts and walked out and said, "Go ahead, take aim and shoot." And they didn't, of course. They were laughing at us.

There were a bunch of people at that time after Gandhi's death and all that were very idealistic and motivated to do something to improve the country. We thought it was a kind of thing we could do, which of course was nonsense, but at that time nobody told us that. We went about saying we've got to reform politics now that we were independent. On the other hand, I had this tremendous desire to be a scholar and to become a teacher and subsequently I ran in politics when I was in graduate school. In fact, we set up a shadow cabinet, if you can believe it, at the University. We wanted to take over power, through elections of course.

**PS:** Of the country?

**MJA:** Right.

**PS:** And you were one of the members of the cabinet?

**MJA:** I would be the minority member because I was not part of the mainstream Hindu tradition. Therefore, they were going to give me a very non-political position. They were going to make me minister of education or something. This was just kid stuff really, we were just talking and laughing, but actually four of them went into politics. They became national leaders. That was kind of a dilemma,

being involved in two different worlds simultaneously. But I really needed to leave that behind because I ultimately wanted to become a teacher.

**PS:** So your intention was to come back there and teach?

**MJA:** Yes, there was no question about that. I was going to go back there and do that, but coming here, with Vietnam and everything else, a lot of things changed, and my marriage fell apart about at that time.

**PS:** Tell me about your marriage. Were you married in India? Was it an arranged marriage?

**MJA:** No, it was a marriage by choice, someone I met who was actually a very distant relative that I began to date and in 1964, that summer after I graduated, the girl's side was very keen on getting us married. I really didn't want to get married at that time, but there was this pressure by my family as well, because I was thinking of going abroad.

**PS:** Was she Christian also?

**MJA:** She is also Christian.

**PS:** What year were you married?

**MJA:** In 1964 June, and in October I left. We tried to bring her over here; that was difficult because none of us really had enough money, and I was still on a student visa, visitor's visa. That didn't work very well. I had hoped that I would have some kind of job that I could afford to bring my family and that didn't happen. By 1967, she began to get unhappy about the whole situation.

**PS:** She still had not been able to come over then?

**MJA:** She didn't want to come at a certain point, and then she came in 1979 and we tried to get back together, and it just did not work. In the meantime, I had my first daughter come, and then we all lived together for a couple of years -- my wife and my older daughter -- and that just didn't work at all. So she left.

**PS:** Your older daughter was a child of your wife?

**MJA:** Right. Actually my wife was pregnant when I left, so

my daughter was born in 1965.

**PS:** What was her name?

**MJA:** Monica. Monica was able to come to the U.S. in 1984. There were some immigration problems and so on but she came to the University of Minnesota. She got a degree from Normandale and then started at the University in the college of biological sciences. She just graduated from the School of Dentistry.

**PS:** Obviously it was difficult to bring them over initially and it didn't create a very good opportunity for a family relationship, that's for sure.

**MJA:** And we had grown apart quite a bit. So it just didn't work out.

**PS:** Were you married again later?

**MJA:** No I was not. I met another woman later and we had gone together for a number of years, actually two years, but I had known her for ten years before that. She was a student at the University and I was teaching there. I just knew her casually. Subsequently she got married and went away, and then I met her after she got her divorce and we got back together then, and then we had this unplanned child. Mary got very ill a couple years after the birth of my daughter.

**PS:** Mary is her name?

**MJA:** Mary is her name. She lost the use of her kidneys. Apparently she was a diabetic. Nobody caught that and at that age of 35, 36, she really had a struggle; she died. That's the second family.

**PS:** When was your daughter born?

**MJA:** 1982.

**PS:** What is her name?

**MJA:** Sarojin. I was inspired by a woman of that name who was in the freedom movement in the early part of the century.

**PS:** In India?

**MJA:** In India in the 1920's. She was a poet and also a political leader.

**PS:** So you have been raising her since she was how old?

**MJA:** Since she was five years old.

**PS:** Have you been involved in the Indian community in such a way that she has had the opportunity to share in Indian culture to any great extent?

**MJA:** Not really. Mary and I had our own circle of friends so we were very much with those people, colleagues or whatever. She was working for the state and she had some friends there so I wasn't very involved.

When I first came, the second year I was elected the president of the Indian Association here. At that time, it was only a student organization. There were no other organizations, and the second year I was re-elected, and then I joined the International Student Organization, the larger body at the University and eventually left that also because I had to do some serious work.

**PS:** Have you tried in some ways to involve your daughter in Indian activities to help get her acquainted in the culture?

**MJA:** She doesn't really seem to have any interest. She's kind of curious, but not interested.

**PS:** In terms of your child-raising, have you used mostly an American style or do you think you brought with you any values, any traditions from your Indian upbringing?

**MJA:** I don't think that I have anything that I brought with me as such. It's very much imitating other single parents, learning from them. Mary was very influential in the way I think about child-raising.

**PS:** In terms of your relationship with Mary, do you think there were any values you grew up with that were perhaps different in terms of how men and women were valued, division of labor in the family, any of those influences that came with you? Or were you such an independent person?

**MJA:** We were really part of that hippie generation. She was a real gone case as a hippie. On the University of Wisconsin-Madison campus, she did all the crazy things that people did over there in the 60's and when we first met, there was this great attraction toward the kinds of free thinking that young people did. I was slightly older than Mary was obviously, but it was all in the air, it was everywhere. As a teacher, I was still quite indistinguishable from the students, the way I dressed, smoked pot, things like that. It was like trying to be like one of them. The idea of egalitarian living was very much a part of it then. Women had not really gotten together yet, but it was there. So we had no difficulty with that in terms of sharing chores or doing things. There were some traditional things, for instance, she would be interested in helping with the very young child. I was basically like the baby-sitter or the gopher running around for diapers and things like that, but there was a lot of sharing in terms of working around the house.

**PS:** Have you lived in Minneapolis the entire time you have been here?

**MJA:** Yes.

**PS:** And did you continue your political interests beyond the Vietnam era?

**MJA:** No, I have not. I have basically turned those interests into academic work. Most of my writing is political, or at least has an edge which usually throws off my colleagues. They don't like it.

**PS:** For example, what kind of things?

**MJA:** I went to a conference this fall, I was responding to a paper by a guy from Budapest, and the paper was about objectivity, subjectivity, and ethics, and ethics is my main field, and I began to question the concept of rationality as he defines it, and I challenged the notions of the Western philosophical tradition and brought in some other things that relate to it. It was interesting to see the faculty who were gathered there respond very enthusiastically, but they just did not know what to make of it. The basic idea that our idea of rationality is very narrow and we can't use that to analyze world events. And they agreed with that, but they just did not know where to go because they were so

trained in their tradition, that they just did not know how to deal with that. I edit a journal for the 18 colleges in Minnesota and I do quite a bit of writing for that.

**PS:** What journal is that?

**MJA:** Oh, it's a faculty journal called **Communitas**. It is funded by the Faculty Association. It used to come out twice a year, now they have cut down the funds where it comes out once a year, and I've got a big article on Bosnia in the upcoming issue and the UN and the role of the permanent members of the Security Council and a whole analysis and not very sympathetically looking at the Security Council or the role of the Big Five. So that sort of thing is what I want to do. I teach differently. My values are different. I teach in the philosophy department mostly, and I teach English Lit once a year, maybe twice a year. I'm teaching a Lit course now that is really about contemporary non-Western writing either in English or in translation. And I've got contemporary works reflecting the political situation, the social conditions of the writers because that is their preoccupation. In the country, we don't have very much of that unless you're a black writer or a woman writer -- the question of oppression and all those things really don't hit people like John Updike and folks like that. They can make a lot of money writing wonderful stories but they don't really deal with this other side of American life. But a third world writer like Pablo Neruda or Isabel Allende, and Bharati Mukherji who is now writing on the East Coast, these folks talk about their background, their immigrant status, their travels. Isabel's uncle, the President of Chile was assassinated. Part of that shows up as a background which is what I like to explore, to bring their reality to the classroom, so that is how my lectures are politicized.

**PS:** Do you ever bring in Indian writers at all?

**MJA:** A couple of courses that I teach do that. One is a course on world religion. I teach eight religions. That's offered once a year also. The other one is something called non-Western classical literature. I had some education in the Sanskrit language, which is something I read as an undergraduate and graduate school as well. And I teach texts from classical literature, but then I introduce Arabic Lit, Persian Lit, and Indian Lit, Chinese and Japanese, and Mesopotamian, very, very old stuff. That's the only reason

for me to bring India into it.

**PS:** You said you haven't been very involved in Indian organization, but could you talk about the radio show you mentioned briefly before. Could you explain what you were doing and what it was all about?

**MJA:** There is a friend of mine in town, his name is Chaundhary. Chaundhary has just come as a graduate student to the U and graduated and got a degree and he was interested in supporting a radio show. I don't know how he got in touch with me. I don't remember, but someone gave him my name or something happened, and we got together, and we decided to have a half hour show every Sunday on KUXL. It was called the Sound of India. His wife was the reader, and she would introduce the music, and we would play the music, which was kind of a new thing, nobody did that stuff. Now, in Chicago, they have all kinds of radio stations. I think they have one here too, I'm not sure. But in the early 70's, nobody did that. WE were the first ones in this. Then 1976, the bi-centennial year, came around and then we were trying to do something special because the country was doing a lot of special things, and I volunteered to do something about the Indian immigration patterns. I tried to gather as much as I could, but not very systematically, unfortunately. I just didn't have the time. This would have meant going through library acquisitions and this was the pre-computer age when you can't call up stuff. All that I could gather was this one guy who jumped off the ship, got arrested, and stayed in the country, in the Boston harbor, came off a merchant ship. From what I could gather that was the first immigrant Indian who decided to stay in this country. Other people came too, but they returned.

**PS:** This was when?

**MJA:** This was in the 1820's, 1830's, when Britain still had all kinds of links. Most of the British Navy was manned by Indian men, well not at that point, a little later on, but they still had a lot of Indians who were taken all over -- South Africa to build the railroads and so on. I remember that one as a very big event only from the historical standpoint, it was the first recorded case that I could come across. Now, with access to Internet and so on, maybe you can find more.

The next major phase was at the end of the nineteenth century, between 1890's to 1910, a vast flood of people from the Punjab, most of them Sikhs, those bearded guys with turbans and so on, they were in the armed forces and Britain was still controlling, or had some relations with Canada. For some reason they had demobilized many of these people and gave them land on the West Coast of Canada. There are actually a number of Sikh temples even today from that time. A whole bunch of people came from there to the Sacramento Valley in California and they began to build a political movement, and that's what caught my eye, and there were others that came as students. A very famous Indian leader named Ram Mohan Roy who subsequently became a very famous leader, at that time was just a student who came to the University of Chicago. There were some people from the Unitarian Church who hooked up with them, and they were planning some kind of insurrection against the British in India. So there was this movement that was formed by these folks in California. Among them was a professor of Sanskrit from Stanford University who must have come as a scholar, and they were planning to overthrow the British from India, and they had an underground newspaper they ran in their native languages, and there was a secret connection between them and the Germans who were of course traditional enemies of the British. Some literature was published in the German language, in the underground presses, and when I had a chance, I went down to California, to Oakland, to be specific, to see what was going on, because I knew about a plan by these people to actually buy a ship from Standard Oil and fill it with guns and take it to the Bay of Bengal and launch an attack on the British empire from there because they thought they would really get some good local support from the Bengalis, which is right in the Gulf area, a very highly politicized, highly enlightened area in India at that time. They talk about the Bengali Renaissance as we talk about, say, the Harlem Renaissance -- a literary, political, and scientific movement.

But they were betrayed by a fellow Indian who was bribed by the British Secret Intelligence Service that was functioning in this country illegally. Actually not illegally because they were really working with the Wilson government at that time, and the Wilson folks said fine, go ahead, we're helping the British. They knew about the route of the ship, and they intercepted them in the Johnson Islands, captured everyone, brought them back here.

**PS:** What year was this?

**MJA:** 1910. In 1912, there was a big trial. The whole movement was called the Gadar movement. At the trial, this man, instead of responding to the judge's questions, began to make political speeches. You may have some familiarity with that with the Black Panther movement. They didn't care what was going on in court. They were basically making speeches. That's what this guy was doing. He was directly addressing the president saying, "You know, your country fought for its independence, surely you understand what we are trying to do." The judge would simply raise objections, rule him out. They tried to control him and he just would not listen. And, it turns out, in the middle of the trial, one of the Indian movement fellows, who was supposed to be a part of it, brought a gun, and he shot him while he was making the speech. And the U.S. Marshall who was there in turn shot this Indian guy who shot this witness. It was very much like Jack Ruby, Oswald, that situation. We don't know exactly why this man shot this fellow who was in the witness chair.

Those trial records were available at Alameda County Court, and I went down there to look. I found all the publications, but not the trial transcript. That transcript magically ended up in the British Museum in England. How could that happen? Well, they were already hand in glove -- the U.S. government and the British working together on this to squelch this little movement. When I went to the Berkeley library to look for this, I found the reference, the curator said to me, "Well, the manuscript is available but it can't be opened until 75 years," or some such thing. And I said, "Why is it over there?" Well, he did not know, but he said they would let me know when it becomes available. So I left my address, came back to Minnesota, wrote my series to tell the whole story, and that was broadcast on the radio on the Sound of India on KUXL. But it was seven years ago I got a card from the Berkeley library saying that that is now available.

**PS:** The transcript?

**MJA:** Hmmmm. I asked for a microfiche version of it, which was sent to Wilson Library here so I could go and view, and I just don't have time, because my work is so different now. If someone had a grant and they wanted to go through that, they could do a terrific job of it. I told the whole thing

to a friend of mine who is an author and he told his publisher, and his publisher called and said, "Would you write a novel instead of a political tract?" No, I didn't do that. Well, that was the whole thing about the history of immigration.

**PS:** So you did a ten-part series?

**MJA:** A ten-part series as I recall. And then we had some light things too, for example, there was this rather well-known Indian intellectual religious teacher named Vivekananda, who came to the first parliament of world religions that met in Chicago in 1895. I have one segment on him, on what he did. In fact, he came to Minneapolis to the Unitarian Church on Mount Curve. I had read some of his stuff which is available in anthologies. So there were those things as well. I had the connections with Mahatma Gandhi and the early American intellectuals. The American government was very unsympathetic. They just did not want to complicate the issue for Britain, but the American intellectuals were very interested in Mahatma Gandhi, and there was a fellow named Louis Fisher who subsequently wrote a rather substantive biography of him. Many American sympathizers saw Gandhi's view, and they talk about the extraordinary friendship between Nehru and John Kennedy, brief though it was. Anyway, we did some segments on each one of those.

**PS:** Do you still pursue studying some of this just for your own interest?

**MJA:** I have other writing projects now. Teaching is just too heavy. If I had a grant, I would do it. I have an outline for that hypothetical novel with a Sanskrit professor as a central character, but I just don't think I will be able to do that. I've got a contract to do a textbook in the next two years and a couple of other things so I probably will do that. If I ever get back to this other material, it will be at a different time.

**PS:** Let's shift gears to the development of your career. You said you left the University and you were out of work for four or five years?

**MJA:** For five years or so. Actually I did some part-time jobs here and there. Worked on a dock, unloading stuff, semis. I taught some extension classes at the University in

Northside and in Minnetonka Center for the Arts. That went rather well, and I worked for the Star Tribune as an ad taker, writing ads. And I started doing some reviews also for the Star Tribune for a few years.

**PS:** Book reviews?

**MJA:** Yes. Then I got my first teaching opportunity in 1976, just one quarter of teaching at Normandale. That went away and I had other part-time teaching jobs at Anoka-Ramsey Community College, back at the University a couple of quarters, Minneapolis Community College, until I was hired full-time at Normandale in the middle 80's.

**PS:** And you have been there since then?

**MJA:** I have been there on and off since '76, but really full-time since 1982. I didn't get tenure until 1987, and I still kept the adjunct position at the University in the English department.

**PS:** At Normandale, you teach literature and philosophy?

**MJA:** I teach mostly philosophy. There again, there are some difficulties with the English department. They are very strange folks, they are very cliquish. It's a very large department. They have not had any non-native speaker on the faculty. It doesn't mean they should have one, but if there is someone there who is qualified who can bring a new dimension to it, they ought to use that person. But they became very protective. They simply would not hire me. I was allowed to teach as a part-time faculty member, and then I began to develop courses in the philosophy department which has kind of given me more opportunities. And I like working in that department. There are only three of us, for one thing.

**PS:** What do you enjoy about your work?

**MJA:** It's bringing relevance to everything we do in philosophy. Ethics is my main focus. I think my old instincts toward things that have to do with justice have come back.

**PS:** Where do you think that came from? Where was the seed for that?

**MJA:** I think my father. He was very much a fighter.

**PS:** In what way?

**MJA:** When he was working as a minister, he was one of the only two native ministers to be ordained of a group of some 120 ministers. All of them were British. These were the first two Indians to be received into that group, and my father was, to some extent, was involved in some of these issues a little later on in his life. He was asked to work in an area that was a tribal region, and the people there had nothing but their bare existence out there in the jungle and so on. And he became more involved with their children, building the school, and things like that. When I was arrested and released after my big confrontation in the high school -- the boarding school was actually run by these missionaries -- so there were these meetings about what to do with these boys. And my dad was the only one who spoke in favor of speaking to us and getting our side of the story. No one supported that idea, he was the only one who did that, and I think he was disillusioned at that point in what he was doing. He was a very religious man, a devout, practicing Christian, but he became very disillusioned by all this. I probably realized a little bit of this a lot later on, but maybe this kind of runs with us in the family or something.

**PS:** What was disillusioning for him? What was he fighting for or fighting against?

**MJA:** Well, he wanted the board of the school to also listen to the story of the side of the students, and they just wouldn't do that. They listened to the principal, they listened to the superintendent, but not to the students.

**PS:** Were there other instances where he was clearly seeking to help . . . ?

**MJA:** I'm not sure.

**PS:** But that one instance stands out in your mind as the case where he stood up for the underdog, so to speak?

**MJA:** Yes, it was really a very dramatic scene. We don't want to recount all the details, but I was kicked out of school, I was simply put on a bus to go back to the village and I did. A telegram was sent to my parents saying your

son has done this, a, b, c, d, and so on, so he's out. And as soon as I came to my house, my dad was sitting outside on the verandah. I put my bags down and he said, "You're not going into the house until you give me an explanation of what happened." And my mother said, "No, don't do that, let him come in, let him wash, let him have food." He said, "No, I want to listen to this -- what's happened to this guy." We had a three-hour conversation. At the end of it, he agreed with me on a lot of things. That really stands out in my mind as being a very moving event in my life in thinking about exactly how he felt. So he began to actually speak up after that.

**PS:** Until that time, you maybe had not seen him as a person who might do that.

**MJA:** No, not at all. He was very much a team player. He admired the British. He had British friends. He played tennis with them. Although he was always a second-class citizen, so to speak, in their society. He was literally plucked out of a village and sent to a boarding school himself to get an education, so he was indebted, he appreciated them, for whatever reason. As I said, we had some friends who were English, and you couldn't have any English friends when you were in India -- not real friends, no. They can be your acquaintances, they can have you in for party, but you couldn't really be friends to them. That was a whole different story. The Raj versus the native people, some of that was true even then.

**PS:** How old were you when this incident occurred?

**MJA:** I was fifteen.

**PS:** Was that the first time you had really stood up and taken a stand of a high-risk like that?

**MJA:** Yes, that was the first time I did anything by way of a collective action. Actually, I wrote a representation, a sheet of demands, and we went on strike. We were not going to eat. We didn't eat for eleven days -- a hunger strike.

**PS:** And that was because of the food being served?

**MJA:** The food was basically -- it had worms in it, it was bad food, everyone was hungry, and then we heard that they were getting nice wheat from Canada for the boarding school,

but they were giving it to us. Someone was sending it to the black market, making money, and our food was going down the drain. We used to get meat twice a week. The weight was counted. Every boy in the school would get two pieces of meat and a bone. When they served dinner, that's the way it was. You take your plate, you go up to the server, they give you that, and you go sit down and eat. If you're hungry, it's too bad. It was a pretty bad situation.

**PS:** Why was it like that? Why were they doing it that way?'

**MJA:** I think probably corruption -- local people taking money out, doing other things, I have no idea. I never quite understood that. We were so hungry. I remember being hungry every time and asking our parents to send us money so we could buy something somewhere.

**PS:** This was a Christian school?

**MJA:** Christian school.

**PS:** Was it just for native people, or was there a mixture of Britons as well?

**MJA:** No, no, I mean, my God, that would never happen. Most of these people were from the villages. They were from the so-called untouchable category of classes. I think because of economic conditions they became converts to Christianity. In all the British customs of breakfast, dinner, and prayers and uniforms and ties and things like that with chapel at different times. So it was sort of a version of a British boarding school, but without all those privileges that kids have in England. They inspected our nails every other day, and your shirt should be tucked in, and all that kind of stuff.

**PS:** What kind of influence do you think that training had on you?

**MJA:** I think subsequently I began to appreciate the discipline part of it, the order and the discipline. What I did not like was the relationship with the administration. We were very much nonentities. That stands out very clearly. I was punished, for example, for writing a silly note to a girl. I was barely fifteen, you know, and I liked someone in the girls' school, so I sent her a little letter,

and then I never heard from her, and that was the end of that. That was our idea of starting a romance, you see. For one reason, one of this girl's friend had a fight with her and decided to tell on her to girls' boarding school, so she ran and said so-and-so got a letter from a boy. That was, of course, contrary to all the rules. That was sent to the boys' school, and the boys' school principal came to a study hall and then made this long speech about how we should behave himself. I was sitting at my desk and I said to myself, "Some poor kid is in trouble." (Laugh) Not realizing it was going to be me. Then he talked about how people write about mating and relationships without having any idea. You have to grow up and do other things before you get to that. He gave some advice and quoted something from the Bible and all that stuff, and he said, "Abhishaker, is this your handwriting?" And suddenly I came out of my private world and I looked at it, and immediately I became a rebel. I was scared to death, but my reaction was to say, "Yeah, and what the hell are you going to do about it?" I mean, this is crazy stuff. So I said, "Yes, sir." "Well, will you step forward here?" I said, "Yes, I will." "Stretch out your hand." So I did. They had this cane, and I got six cuts, as they are called, on each hand. This is before the entire boarding school, because everyone was witnessing it. I went back to my desk, sat down, and put my hands together, very painful, put my head down and began to sob. That was the kind of discipline I did not care for, but I really felt when I was leaving, I felt very sad, because there was so much camaraderie among the kids, good friends.

**PS:** And some of them stayed your friends?

**MJA:** Two of them are very close friends who are in this country right now. One is in Chicago, the other one is in Baltimore.

**PS:** That you went to boarding school with?

**MJA:** Yes, all three of us were the rotten kids. (Laugh)

**PS:** Do you maintain contact with anyone in India at all?

**MJA:** I have my political friends who really became my really good friends. I have some other friends as well with whom I correspond. My teachers have just been great to me. They are still around -- my philosophy teacher is still

around. We write to each other, and we visit with each other when I go there. And I have written a couple of articles for some anthologies he put together, and he and I seem to share the same kind of vision about ethics, and that's kind of nice. I'm mostly in touch with my sisters and my brother's family. My sister came to visit last summer for a couple of months, so we are pretty close.

**PS:** Do you go there to visit there periodically?

**MJA:** I have gone there maybe three times in the last ten years. I plan on going again sometime next year, except my daughter doesn't want to go. She doesn't want to leave her friends and her music and her cheeseburgers and so on. I did persuade her in 1992 to go with me. The incentive was, "I'll take you to see Taj Mahal." That's what we did. It was a shock to her, a culture shock. It was a shock to me to see India change so much, because it has really changed quite a bit.

**PS:** What were the changes you noticed the most?

**MJA:** Well, the enormous number of people for one thing. The city where I grew up did not have that kind of population pressure. Now it is everywhere. There are people, there are animals, there are cars, rickshaws, and bikes, and every type of moving vehicles, and very difficult to get from one place to another. There are no freeways. There are just roads, always cluttered and jammed. There are some cultural changes since I left India. There are some new things I am not familiar with. There's been a change in the idiom. They listen to me and they say, "That's sounds funny." The language I speak is about 20 years old, 25 years old.

**PS:** Do you wish your daughter was a little more interested?

**MJA:** Not really. I don't think we have anything really back in India, except our relatives. We love them all. We don't plan on going back anyway. My daughter has two grandparents here, and they live in South Minneapolis. She has a half-brother here, and her connections are very much here and not much with India. Because she's so young, I can't really leave and just take off. I'd rather see her get a good education and see what she'll do for herself. I would like to go back and maybe spend six months doing some writing or something, and that will be a nice thing for me

to do on a sabbatical. When Sarojin is in college, I can take a sabbatical and go and do some writing.

There are a lot of stories to tell from India that are in my head. I'd like to do some of that from the village where I grew up and the tribal people and those early days and the days when were politically active as students and so on.

**PS:** You mentioned a couple of times that you had some obvious prejudice in your work environment, that potentially you couldn't get work. Have you experienced prejudice in other ways that have been apparent to you?

**MJA:** Mostly in the area of employment, that's where I found it most often. One clear case is the University of Minnesota and the other is at Normandale in the English department. Besides that, I must say that in the social realm, I've been very happy. It's never an issue.

**PS:** How about for your daughter?

**MJA:** She has many concerns about that. She talks about that. She seems to be the only colored kid in the class, and she's seen somewhat differently and she sees herself being a little different, although it never occurred to her that she was different. Her friends, the only friends she has are a black kid from another grade and an Indian kid from a lower grade. And I try to encourage her to make friends with the others, and she does, and she's got some friends, but they're really not that close. I'm sure it will be okay when she grows. I think they'll all mature. They're kids, and they have their own interests. She goes to Breck, and that I think is a real mess.

**PS:** Really?

**MJA:** All those rich people, you know, and all that stuff. All the kids have all these things we can't afford, and she's aware of that. "Daddy, are we rich or are we poor?" (Laugh)

**PS:** Do you have concerns about what she will face as she gets older?

**MJA:** I have some concerns, but I'm hoping that things will be much better off ten years down the road, we'll be more tolerant of each other, more accepting. Maybe it won't be

an issue at some point. I think it's possible to look forward to look forward to that kind of time. I think it's a matter of learning how to negotiate your life. So I am somewhat apprehensive, but at the same time, I think she will be all right.

**PS:** What are your personal goals at this point? What are you looking forward to doing over the next ten or twenty years?

**MJA:** I basically want to help my child go through college. That's the basic thing that I need to do. When we had Sarojin, I was 45 years old, and that was much too late. Neither of us had really thought about a child, although Mary was thinking about it, and one of the arguments we had was can we afford the kid, and who is going to be around to take care of the kid. And Mary said, don't worry, I'll be around. I'm ten years younger than you are and then here she is, she's gone, and it's been a very difficult time teaching at the U and at Normandale, two night classes, and then getting a child care person to be here to give her the support she needs and be here to understand her while she's come to puberty and all that, which is a very, very different kind of thing. So that's been tough, but I think that's the main goal for me. And the other is to do some important work in the area of ethics, and to do some writing, maybe a little bit more writing now than I have been able to do. But, as I said, there's just too much with teaching, four classes, too many papers. I need to be able to cut down. When she becomes a little bit independent, I can cut down my teaching, and basically do some writing-- some family stuff, some professional stuff is what I have in mind.

**PS:** We have covered a lot of ground. This has been fascinating.

**MJA:** More than what you wanted.

**PS:** Not at all, not at all. You gave me a wonderful picture of what your experience has been like. Is there anything we've maybe talked just a little bit about that you'd like to say more about as a way of sharing your experience with people, or is there anything we haven't touched on?

**MJA:** I've touched on just about everything in a brief

fashion in terms of my experiences here.

**PS:** You did mention that there is a lot you'd like to share about your growing up experiences, and if you'd care to say a little about what that was like growing up in the villages, that might be quite interesting.

**MJA:** Well, we were kind of in the rural areas, and there were literally villages of the Indian kind. They were just a clump of thatched roof houses, maybe a little bit of brick, mud walls, etcetera. My dad's work was among these people who were not literate, who did not have any economic activity. So we were the only educated family, so that was quite different living among the tribal people, learning their language and surviving there. My dad ran a school as part of the small mission that he had, and my mother helped with the school.

**PS:** What was the local language?

**MJA:** The language we spoke was spoken by most people. It is called [unclear] language. But the tribal language was the Gond language. So we picked up their language and their children came to school. That was very interesting kind of thing, and then by the time I was nine years old, I was put in the boarding school in the big city, so we would come back only at the time of holidays and so on. And my mother fell ill from tuberculosis several times and then by the time I was fifteen, she was gone. And then we moved from there to another place that was a little bit more industrialized. But the early years we had a lot of experiences with the wild animals coming down from the mountains. Usually they come and carry away your chickens or your dog or something. Some weird stuff going on I didn't know very much about. My father had a gun at that time to protect himself, and there was an accident when he went hunting, and consequently a man died. He left the gun outside someone's house, and he went inside to have tea, and one of the helpers came out of curiosity was looking at it. It went off and it killed someone. Then he stopped using guns period. That was the end of that for him.

There was also an area which apparently was fortified by a previous king. There were 12 or 14 fortresses all around that area that I used to go and explore. It was kind of fun to do that.

**PS:** What kind of fortresses?

**MJA:** Well, they were basically meant to fight against attackers.

**PS:** Were they very old?

**MJA:** They were very old. They were from about the 17th century or so. The story goes on to show that one of the kings from Delhi, who was a Muslim king, a Muslim dynasty king from Afghanistan, actually tried to conquer the southern part of India, so he went all the way down to the city of Hyderabad, which of course is named after a Muslim, and left a viceroy of his over there, and that, in fact, became the ruling family there. On his way back, he tried to go through this small town which was defended by a local king, and there was a major battle between this big emperor and this local king. Of course, the local king fell, the city fell, and he just ran right through and on to Delhi. There are relics of that destroyed stuff still there. In the center of this city next to our village there's a little mountain, and on top of the mountain there is a palace and a big fortress and so on. Everything has fallen into ruins today, or at least when I was there.

**PS:** So you did go back and visit?

**MJA:** Not recently. In fact, people tell me I would be shocked if I would see it today because it is a big city now and none of that other stuff. They even have a college, so that was surprising to me.

**PS:** Very interesting story.

**MJA:** Thank you. I hope this can be of some help to somebody.

**PS:** I think it will be of much interest. I certainly found it fascinating. I appreciate it, and I thank you.