

Manas Menon
Narrator

Polly Sonifer
Interviewer

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PS: This is Polly Sonifer, interviewing Manas Menon on December 28, 2001.
Good afternoon. How are you today?

MM: Good. How are you?

PS: Good. Thanks for taking time to come over here. Tell me a bit about yourself, like where and when you were born, and what your family was like that you were born into.

MM: Okay. I was born in St. Paul, Minnesota, 1981. My parents had both lived in America, or my mom had lived in America with my dad for two years. They're both originally from Kerala, which is a state in southern India. So I grew, I guess— [feedback noise].

PS: And you were their first child?

MM: Yes. I have one younger brother. He's two years younger than me.

PS: And what's his name?

MM: Arjun.

PS: What was it like when you were little, growing up in St. Paul?

MM: I had a pretty normal childhood. My parents might have stressed education a little bit more than most parents, like most of the other kids' parents. But other than that, it was a pretty normal childhood.

PS: Define normal for me. What was normal for you?

MM: My parents weren't overly restrictive or overly permissive, I guess. Like I was allowed to go out with friends. I'd go to sleepovers and stuff like that.

PS: And some Indian kids couldn't do that?

MM: I knew of a couple, yes.

PS: Okay. So you thought your parents were pretty ordinary?

MM: Yes. There were some things that they were different about. They wouldn't let me get my driver's license until I was about eighteen. But other than that, they were pretty normal about most things.

PS: And how did you feel about not getting a driver's license? That's usually pretty important to a young man.

MM: Yes. I mean, we argued about it a lot, but I guess—I mean, I was mad about it at the time, but now when you think about it, it's like, it was just one less year of driving. It doesn't make that much of a difference.

PS: Oh, okay. All right. Where did you go to high school?

MM: Mounds View High School, which is in Arden Hills [Minnesota].

PS: And what was that like for you?

MM: I think I had a pretty good high school experience. My parents always pushed me to, like, do well in school and everything like that, so school was like the most important thing for us. But they didn't ever discourage me from doing other stuff. Like, I played piano, and I played like soccer and tennis, and did all sorts of other stuff outside of school.

PS: What do you know about your parents' life in India, before they came here?

MM: I know my mom's from a big family. When we go back to India, which we do every three or four years, we usually go and stay at the house that she grew up in. She has five sisters and a brother, and they all grew up in sort of a complex where all their family members lived all around them. Like, her aunt lived next door, and her cousins lived down the street and everything like that, so she grew up like very much around her family.

I don't know as much about my dad's family because he only had three brothers, and they're all sort of in different places in the world now. Like one's in Australia, one's still in India. And when we went back to his house, it was sort of harder to tell how he grew up, because they had already spread out so much. Also, his older brothers, two of them were twenty years older than him, so it sort of seemed like they were almost like extra parents rather than like siblings.

PS: So how did they come to be here?

MM: My dad started going to school at Georgia Tech after he had graduated from IIT [Indian Institute of Technology], and went to school here for a couple years, and then came back, I guess, to marry my mom, and then they both moved over here and just started living over here.

PS: He came back, meaning, to India?

MM: Yes, he went back to India.

PS: Okay. And was this an arranged marriage?

MM: It was sort of like a setup. Like, I guess my mom met different guys, that like families that the family friends knew, or something like that. And she just sort of like decided who she liked. It was arranged. It wasn't like predetermined or anything like that, but she was sort of introduced to different guys, through the family.

PS: So when you think about getting married based on family members setting you up with people, how does that seem to you?

MM: It seems very strange to me.

PS: Yes?

MM: Yes. I don't think I would be inclined to do that at all.

PS: And yet when you look at your parents' life together, how do you think it's worked out for them?

MM: It's worked out very well for them. I don't really think I'm in any position to say whether arranged marriage is a good or a bad thing, because, I mean, on the one hand, your family might know you better than you know yourself and they might be able to look more objectively at a mate for you, and sort of be good at deciding like who would be suitable for you and that kind of thing. But then on the other hand, it seems sort of ridiculous that you shouldn't get to choose who you marry.

The only couples I know who have been in arranged marriages, there are so few that I can't even—I can't begin to say whether I think it's a good thing or a bad thing.

PS: Even though among people your parents' generation—there's so few?

MM: Well, I guess I don't ask about it that much. I usually assume that it's not arranged, I think. I guess the divorce rate for marriages here is like 50 percent or something like that, right? So it's a pretty high divorce rate.

PS: So arranged marriages can't be all bad?

MM: Yes. I mean, there's probably something to be said for them. My parents have a very good marriage, I think.

PS: When you were little, growing up, did you know other Indian kids when you were really tiny?

MM: Yes. My mom, her closest friends have always been Indian, for some reason. Or the ones she doesn't meet through work, anyway. I think she met a lot of people through the Indian community, through Christmas, Malayali get-togethers, and all that kind of thing. And so our closest family friends have always been other Indian families.

PS: So were those nice connections for you, or didn't it matter much?

MM: Well, I remember my best friend in first or second grade, before he moved away, was an Indian kid, but I didn't really think of him as an Indian, as like my Indian friend. I don't think it really made that much of a difference. When you live in an area that's so like primarily white, you sort of like assimilate. I don't know if that's the right word.

PS: Yes.

MM: It doesn't really make much of a difference, whether you're from here.

PS: So you didn't ever have the feeling that you stuck out or you were different from the other blond-haired, blue-eyed kids?

MM: No, not at all.

PS: It never mattered to you?

MM: No.

PS: Did you ever get teased?

MM: I don't think so.

PS: No. All right, cool. So what we actually want to talk about today is SILC [School of India for Languages and Culture], and your experience with SILC. How old were you when you first went to SILC?

MM: I don't remember how old I was when I started going, but I think I was going, like unofficially, like with my dad or whatever, just sort of tagging along, as young as maybe like four or six years old. I don't know how old I was when I actually started taking classes.

PS: Oh, okay. But it's just something that you did for as long as you can remember, is go to SILC?

MM: Yes.

PS: And what was your dad's connection to SILC?

MM: I don't know what it was when I was younger, but when I was older he was just on the executive board.

PS: So when you started taking classes when you were six, or whatever age they would let you actually start taking classes, what are some of your early memories?

MM: I remember—well, there's three subjects. There's language, General Knowledge, and then the elective one. And I remember—I don't remember my General Knowledge classes all that well, but I do remember language, because it was, a lot of times I was in a class with my brother, or one of my good friends. And I remember my elective because I did music.

I guess one of the earlier memories I have about SILC is just being terrified to—on SILC Day to have to go and perform on stage. Because like the music class would have to go sing a song or something like that, and I was really young and I was really scared to go do it on stage.

PS: Okay. Well, that's an unusual memory. Total terror. How did you overcome that?

MM: You just kind of like—I mean, eventually, as one pushes you out onto the stage and then you just go sing and then run back down the stage.

PS: [Laughs] Any other memories?

MM: Yes, I remember thinking that Malayalam, the language, was really hard, and getting pretty easily frustrated with it.

PS: What form were you learning? Were you learning written or spoken?

MM: Mostly spoken. A little bit of written. Yes, it was mostly spoken. There was very little written, because even my mom, actually, doesn't know how to read or write very well, because it's such a—it's not a very important thing, even when you're growing up there. She went to an English medium school, so even though she spoke Malayalam at home, she learned all her reading and writing, all her education was in English. So, I mean, she can read a little bit, but if someone living in India can survive that long without reading and writing, they decided that it wasn't as important as learning to speak it.

PS: But that was her first language, was Malayalam?

MM: Yes.

PS: Did she speak Malayalam to you, when you were young?

MM: Yes. Well, when I was much littler, I think. Around the house my parents don't speak Malayalam all that much, actually. Even to each other.

PS: Really?

MM: Yes.

PS: Is Malayalam your father's first language as well?

MM: Yes.

PS: Why do you suppose they choose not to speak Malayalam?

MM: I don't know, actually. I wonder—I always thought it was maybe sort of a—when they first both moved here, maybe they told each other they should speak in English, to practice it and get better at it. They do a little bit. They speak a little bit, but mostly it's English.

PS: So they didn't make an effort to bring you up being bilingual?

MM: I think when I was younger, I was a little bit. Like much, much younger. But they didn't really—they didn't speak Malayalam much.

PS: So you were—there's the little kid now at SILC school, and thinking that Malayalam was really hard. Did it get any easier for you as time went on?

MM: Yes, a little bit. I would try to speak it around the house a little bit. Doing that kind of thing helps a lot. But the thing is, SILC is only once a week, and I guess the language section was like, what, one hour. So one hour once a week is not enough time to learn a language.

PS: Right.

MM: So, I mean, doing it at home helped a little, definitely.

PS: So now that you're twenty years old?

MM: Yes.

PS: How's your Malayalam now?

MM: Not very good.

PS: No?

MM: No. I guess I stopped going to SILC at the beginning of high school, or like taking classes, anyway. I didn't speak it much around the house. It's sort of—every time I go back to India, it comes back a little bit because a lot of my cousins—well, my parents encourage me to talk to my cousins and all that. It comes back a little bit every three or four years.

PS: But that's not much practice to keep it up, either, is it?

MM: I know very, like, basic stuff and I can read a little bit.

PS: So, given that SILC is the School of Indian Languages and Culture, obviously the language part didn't make a huge impact on you, right?

MM: Yes. But it's hard to at a school that only meets once a week. I mean, I definitely know much more than I would have. I have cousins in England, too, and we all go back to India together. They're always surprised at how much Malayalam I know, and that I can read at all. So it definitely helps me out, like much more than I would have normally, but I wouldn't say I'm fluent, by any means.

PS: What other parts of SILC were important to you?

MM: Well, I actually liked music while I was doing it, and then—I mean, besides the performances. And then after that I did cooking, which I liked, too, because I like to eat food. But I think probably the most important thing about SILC was sort of, maybe being around other Indian kids. I didn't feel out of place growing up, definitely, like in my high school or anything like that, but my whole life was probably a little different than other kids. And like, hanging around other kids like that, you sort of relate to them in a different way, maybe a better way than you do—

PS: Hanging around which kids?

MM: Hanging around kids at SILC.

PS: Okay.

MM: Maybe relate to them in like a little bit better way.

PS: Relate to those kids in a better way?

MM: Yes.

PS: Say more about that.

MM: Well, I think Indian parents are different, a lot of times different than like American parents. Like they have a different set of values, stuff like that. Being with kids that sort of grew

up in the same environment, you can talk about some stuff that you would—like you would have no basis of discussing with your friends from back in high school or something like that, or elementary school probably more than high school.

PS: Give me some examples.

MM: A lot of times we would make fun of our parents, that kind of thing. You know, like how strict they could be, just stuff like that.

PS: And here was another group of kids that could understand how silly your parents could be, being Indian? Specifically because they were Indian, or came from India?

MM: Yes. Like the way that they raised us and stuff like that.

PS: So it was a special little club where the kids knew what it was like to be raised by these weird parents?

MM: Yes, sort of.

PS: Okay. What kind of music did you study?

MM: It was just like Indian classical music. When I was much younger, it was singing, and then after that—my brother actually learned a little *tabla*, which is like an Indian drum. Actually, I think the only music I did was just singing, but that was until—that was when I was much younger.

PS: And how was the Indian music that you sang? What made it distinctly Indian to you, or what's unusual about it?

MM: Well, I mean, if you've ever heard it, it sounds completely different.

PS: Well, describe it for me. I know, but for on the tape here.

MM: It's much more melodic, I guess. I mean, it's different than all different types of music. I guess the thing that makes it stand out alone is it's sort of like more free of like a beat, or the kind that we learned, anyway. It's like much more melodic.

Well, the scale that you use in Indian music is completely different from other scales. Because I learned piano, too. I don't know if I'm getting too technical here, but the scale that you use in Indian music is completely different than like any major or minor scale that you would learn in like Western music. Compared to Western music, it has much less rhythmic restrictions, and there's like more improvisation and stuff like that. I don't think we learned any composition, because we were so young, but it's the same style of music.

PS: So what are the main instruments in Indian classical music?

MM: *Sitar, tabla*, I guess voice, if that counts as an instrument. There's a lot of violins, strangely enough, they've been used a lot. But I think they're the ones you hear most are *sitar* and drum.

PS: Is a harmonium part of it?

MM: Yes, but that's not really an instrument, as much as like, sort of like sets the key.

PS: It's a drone sound. But it's not an instrument, technically?

MM: I don't think I would consider it one. It sets the key for the song, and it is going during the background in most of the song, but I don't consider it an instrument. I'm not an expert so don't quote me.

PS: Okay. All right. And as you got a little older, did things change at SILC?

MM: Yes, I think. SILC was pretty much the same up until the beginning of the high school. I sort of stopped taking classes and started being like an assistant teacher for General Knowledge class or whatever. The reason, actually, I decided to—I wanted to be a General Knowledge teacher was less to do with SILC itself, and like Indian culture, but more because I like little kids. I like to do stuff that deals with little kids. Like even now in school, I'm doing this tutoring thing, where I tutor in Chinatown in Oakland, for one day a week.

So it was more like a—because the kids I was teaching General Knowledge to were so young, it was really, really basic stuff that I was teaching, the kind of thing that anyone might know. So it was more because I like being around little kids and like dealing with them.

PS: So these were the youngest kids, the four-, five-, and six-year-olds?

MM: Yes. Well, not four, five, and six. Maybe six, seven, and eight.

PS: So you just like being with that age kid?

MM: Yes.

PS: That's neat. And your family was okay with you not attending classes yourself, but instead working with these little ones?

MM: Yes, yes. By the time there was my age, there weren't many people that were in classes. It's more for like elementary, middle school, early high school. I was doing my teaching in like eleventh and twelfth grade, I think.

PS: Were there ever times when you felt a tug between, should I go do my high school thing and be on a sports team or the band or whatever in high school, or go to SILC? Were there conflicts, schedule-wise?

MM: No, not schedule-wise. SILC was always on Saturday afternoon, so there wasn't a problem there. Yes, so there was never any problem.

PS: So you never felt you had to give up anything from your regular life in order to be involved in SILC?

MM: Just time, I guess. Because you had to prepare a little bit every week, other than that I didn't do much.

PS: The other teachers at SILC. How did you feel toward the teachers?

MM: When I was taking classes?

PS: Yes.

MM: Sometimes they would be my dad, at times, like especially in Malayalam class. So I just felt the same way I would towards a dad. Otherwise, they were all sort of like uncles or aunties to us, you know, I mean, like they were usually—we'd see them a lot at like Indian functions and stuff like that, so I already knew who they were. So it was never like a feeling of a teacher. It was more like a feeling of like an uncle.

PS: And in Indian culture, everybody that's friendly with your parents become your aunt or uncle, right?

MM: Yes.

PS: What are the terms that you would call them?

MM: Auntie, uncle, momma, amah sometimes. Stuff like that. Like if someone's named Jadesh, you call them Jadesh Amah or if there's like a woman, you just say like Jadesh auntie.

PS: And "auntie" is the word?

MM: Yes.

PS: Even in Malayalam?

MM: In Malayalam, I don't think so. I'm not sure. I don't know what the word is in Malayalam, actually.

PS: Oh, okay. You would call them in English?

MM: Yes.

PS: What did the kids call you when you were their teacher?

MM: Manas.

PS: Manas? Just Manas?

MM: Yes.

PS: Because you were—

MM: Because I was only like eighteen at the time, seventeen or eighteen, and the kids were like six or seven. Six, seven, or eight, so they're still able to call me Manas. It's not so much like an age thing as it is sort of a generational thing. For example, if you have like an older brother, and he gets married, you always call the wife with a name of an older sister, even if she's younger than you, because she's like sort of linked to your brother.

So you'd have an uncle—let me see how I can explain this. Like my dad, his older brothers are much, much older than him, right? One of them has a son that's almost as old as my dad himself, but he still calls my dad uncle, because he's in the same generation as his dad was.

PS: Oh, okay.

MM: So it's not an age thing as much as it's like a generation thing.

PS: Okay. So with all these aunts and uncles, do they all feel like extended family?

MM: Oh, yes, yes, they actually do. Because I think it's sort of because a lot of people coming here don't have a lot of family around them, so the Indian community sort of becomes your family.

PS: Were they aunts and uncles in the sense that you would confide in them about personal concerns, or just people that you're friendly with?

MM: More just people that I'm friendly with, although I don't know if I actually confide like personal concerns with family either. That's just me.

PS: That's just you? Okay.

MM: Yes, that's just me.

PS: You're kind of private and keep to yourself.

MM: Yes.

PS: So tell me more about some of the special things that you remember at SILC. Were there festivals or particular performances or events that you remember?

MM: I remember we'd have just sort of like special days, like sometimes we'd have puppet shows, put on by the kids. Or we'd have a day where we'd sort of do like this traditional, like Indian dance, or on Diwali sometimes do something different. I sort of remember the ones that I'm older more, maybe just because they're more recent.

Those just were always like a lot of fun because you didn't have to like go to class or anything like that. You just kind of got to be with your friends, and hang out.

PS: So describe Festival of Nations. Were you involved in that at all?

MM: Yes. I mean, I would go every year. I think there was two years that my parents were sort of in charge of making the booth. One year was the weddings year. The other one was—actually, I don't know what the other one was. But I remember the weddings one pretty well because we had a—we had built sort of the stage, kind of, that the married couple sits on, and it was sitting in our garage, and they were all spray-painting it and everything like that. It was made of wood and everything.

I always liked the Festival of Nations because like we would spend a whole day there, and I would just spend the whole day eating, like the different foods from the different things.

PS: Did you pay for all of them?

MM: Oh, I think my parents paid for that.

PS: Oh, okay.

MM: Oh, yes. I mean, like I didn't get free food or anything like that.

PS: So it was the food that you remember the most?

MM: Yes. A lot of times, actually, we would help. We would sit in the booth itself. People go around and ask for stamps [from each booth on passports provided] and stuff like that. Like we would help out by being the people stamping. I think it was like the food or the dances that I remember most. Have you ever been? Seen like the Japanese drum dance and stuff like that?

PS: Yes. The Taiko drumming?

MM: Yes.

PS: Yes. That's cool, isn't it? So when you went to sit at the booth, and people asked about Indian weddings, for example, how did you know what to tell them?

MM: I just told them what little I knew. I was much younger at that one. I was maybe ten or something when my parents did the Indian wedding. Otherwise, I used to be able to write much better than I do now, and sometimes I would write people's names. Like if they would ask if I could write their name on a piece of paper, I would write their name for them.

PS: In English?

MM: In Malayalam.

PS: In Malayalam, okay.

MM: Although that might have been kind of misrepresentative, because there's only one state in India that they speak Malayalam in, and I was just sort of representing all of India.

PS: Oh, okay. But you didn't tell them that?

MM: I don't think I actually thought about it at the time.

PS: You were just being a cute ten-year-old. [Laughs] Any other memories from the Festival?

MM: There's three different sections, right. There's like the dancing section, there's the food. The booths, like the main booth, sort of, that I liked, and the bazaar area. And I remember, I think SILC was usually the ones that were asked about, maybe the dance or the main booth area. But not the bazaar or the other one. So most of the time we would go back and forth between like the dancing area, the food and like the main booth area.

PS: So did you look forward to the Festival of Nations?

MM: Yes, I did.

PS: What was the best thing that you looked forward to?

MM: The food.

PS: The food. An honest boy. Okay. Did you ever do any of the dancing at the Festival of Nations?

MM: No.

PS: Because?

MM: I didn't want to. My parents tried to get me to a couple of years, but I didn't want to.

PS: Because?

MM: Partly because I'm sort of stage-shy, partly just because I don't like dancing that much.

PS: But did you study the dance?

MM: No.

PS: No. You never took the dance classes at SILC? Oh. Was that kind of a "girl thing," or just you, personally?

MM: It was kind of "girl thing," actually.

PS: So in Indian culture, it's mostly the girls who dance as well, and not the boys?

MM: Well, I guess it sort of depends on what dance you're talking about. Like, there are some traditional dances where there's both and men and women, about equally. I don't really know the answer to that question, actually.

PS: Were there any other special festivals that SILC was involved in, that you were part of?

MM: Not that I was part of, but [unclear] we'd often do stuff at India Day.

PS: Tell me about what happens at India Day.

MM: I wasn't really involved in it.

PS: You never went?

MM: I remember, I went one time when I was younger, but the only memory I have of that is, my brother cut his chin open and needed some stitches.

PS: Not exactly a culturally-enriching experience. Okay.

MM: So I don't really remember what SILC's involvement was there. I was much younger.

PS: All right. So now tell me about, when you got to be a teacher at SILC. Instead of an assistant teacher, you were a teacher part of the time? In what subject?

MM: First level of General Knowledge.

PS: And what was it like having your own classroom?

MM: It was kind of nerve-racking at first. I took a pretty small class, like five to ten kids. But five to ten six-year-olds can be quite a handful. It was also sort of frustrating at times, because some of the kids would know a lot, and some of kids wouldn't know nearly as much. So it was sort of hard to figure out what I wanted to do. But usually I solved that by sort of asking if the kids could be moved up to higher General Knowledge levels. Like the ones that already seemed to know a lot of the basic stuff.

PS: So then you kept the ones that were a little bit slower?

MM: Well, not necessarily slower. Just sort of knew less. They were usually younger kids. Because sometimes they would—sometimes if a kid was just in his first year at SILC, but he was like ten years old or something, they would put him in first-level General Knowledge, which was sort of a mistake.

PS: Which was a mistake?

MM: Yes.

PS: Usually they need to be in a higher level?

MM: Because like, a lot of times—like, I did pretty basic stuff in my class because most of the kids were so young. I think the youngest you can take class is six years old, so there's a huge difference between a six-year-old and a ten-year-old.

PS: When did you stop teaching at SILC?

MM: It was the end of my senior year in high school.

PS: Because you graduated?

MM: Yes.

PS: And then where did you go?

MM: To University of California, Berkeley. College the next year.

PS: And what's it like being at Berkeley?

MM: It's definitely a really unique experience. It's sort of like—I think I might be having a different experience than a lot of people. Berkeley is such a huge school that you can't really pin

down what it's like. I'm in engineering, so school to me is just like work. It's like a lot of work. For a lot of other people it's—it's such a different experience for some people.

Berkeley is a really strange town, too. It has the whole history of the protest movement, back in the sixties. There's a lot of like, a lot of sort of like leftover hippies, kind of, like still in that area. If you count Indians and like Asian people together, it's over 50 percent Asian. So it's totally different than where I'm from. Like white people are sort of the minority there.

PS: How is that for you?

MM: It doesn't make me feel any more comfortable, I would say. It's not like if I see a lot of Indian people in the class, I feel more comfortable. I wouldn't say that's true at all. It's sort of weird for me, more than anything else, just because I grew up in an area that was like 90 percent white.

PS: So, weird in what way?

MM: It's just very unusual. Usually, when you see—like, some of my classes, you look across the room and it's like 95 percent Asian people, especially like my engineering classes. And it's just, I've never been in classes like that before, before coming to Berkeley.

PS: Have you gotten to be friends with some of those people?

MM: Oh, yes. One of my closest friends, or a couple of my closest friends, are actually Indian people. It's probably more different than here. Most of my closest friends here are white, just because that's what most of the people are here.

PS: Did being in SILC help you feel comfortable in an environment that's largely Indian, even though that's not what you mostly grew up with here?

MM: Yes, a little bit, I'd say. I feel—it's sort of like the combination of SILC and interacting with people that have grown up in Indian families and that kind of thing. It's just sort of, I'm more used to it than maybe I would be, I guess.

PS: And the people that are at Berkeley, are they people like yourself who grew up here, of Indian parents, or are they people who came directly from India?

MM: They're mostly people who grew up here, of Indian parents.

PS: MIT [Massachusetts Institute of Technology] is the place to go, huh? Or, I mean, Berkeley is the place to go if you're Indian, raised in America?

MM: Yes, I guess so.

PS: [Laughs] MIT's the other place that lots of Indian kids go, too, right?

MM: Oh really, yes, I think so, yes. I know a couple of Indian kids at MIT.

PS: So do you have that sense of having that in common with them as well, sort of like you did with the kids at SILC?

MM: Yes. Like you talk about—growing up is sort of the same idea, you know. Like their parents are always talking about school and stuff like that. It's sort of like a running joke, to make fun of your parents for being overly into academics.

PS: Were there certain values that you think you got from being involved in SILC, that you wouldn't have got in some other way?

MM: I don't know if values is the right word, but I think like—because most of my values came from my parents, I would say, and SILC really didn't change anything that way. But sort of, maybe how I look at—the way I look at things. Having other people that have sort of grown up in the same environment maybe have like a slightly different view of things. It sort of helped me—it sort of maybe changed the way I look at some things, you know what I mean?

Like, there were times where I maybe would have felt like—I'm not sure how to say this. There were times where I might have felt like I was the only person in school, you know, growing up in the circumstances and stuff like that. And you see that there are so many other people doing it to, so it's not a big deal.

PS: SILC is an unusual organization, right?

MM: Yes.

PS: What would you say is unusual about it?

MM: It's sort of—it's strange to me because it seemed sort of like everybody at SILC kind of knows each other, and you had sort of like one organization at the same time. Everybody is somebody's auntie or somebody's uncle, and yet they're sort of like teaching other people's kids at the same time. That always kind of struck me as kind of strange.

PS: And what else is unusual about SILC?

MM: I'm not sure if this is unusual or not, but I don't know how many organizations there are that are run entirely by volunteers. Like everybody on the executive board, the principal, all the teachers and everything like that, they're all volunteers. And besides myself, I guess, almost like every single person there grew up in India, and so they're teaching you about India, which is like the place they grew up in, so they're like experts on the topic. So it's sort of strange to have an

organization with so many people that are just volunteering their time, and yet still so qualified to teach what they're teaching.

PS: I've interviewed a lot of people for this project, and you're like the last person, I think, because I had trouble catching up to your schedule. But what I heard over and over again from the people who started SILC is that they knew about India, but when it came time to teach about India, they didn't know how to teach about it. Just like it would probably be hard for you and I if somebody said, "Teach a class about American culture," you know, what would we use? How would we teach that? So your perception as a student was that these people were experts, just by virtue of the fact that they grew up in India or that they spoke Malayalam?

MM: Yes.

PS: Even though they didn't know how to teach that?

MM: Well, yes, maybe they didn't have like the, sort of, most well-honed techniques, but I think knowledge of the subject matter is more important. Or at least, in the case of, like, language and stuff like that.

PS: And then they had this passion for passing it on, and that was probably what made it exciting, or worthwhile for kids.

MM: Although a lot of kids didn't appreciate it. I remember a lot of us were just sort of annoyed that we had to go to SILC. Because it used to be on Sunday mornings, I think, for a while. It was in the mornings, either Saturday or Sunday. I think Saturday mornings, to sort of avoid the conflict with church. Kids would just get annoyed that they had to get up in the morning and go to SILC. They'd rather be watching cartoons or playing with their friends or something.

PS: And yet why did you go?

MM: When I was younger, because my parents made me. And when I was older, a little bit older, I think it was more to like see my friends there. And then, finally, I was a teacher because I liked being with the little kids.

PS: And how did you discover this passion for being with the little kids?

MM: I don't know. I've just always like, sort of gravitated towards like my youngest cousins. I've just always liked little kids. At the time, actually, I was thinking about being a pediatrician. So I thought it would sort of be useful, this experience.

PS: Have you decided not to be a pediatrician?

MM: Yes. I'm doing engineering now.

PS: Oh, okay. That's awfully grown up. How did you decide not to be a pediatrician?

MM: I don't think I could handle the whole, like, needles and stuff like that. I don't have the stomach for blood, and diagnosing kids and things like that. It's just like a personal thing. I mean, I was volunteering at a hospital, and I sort of realized I didn't really like the environment. I don't have the stomach for that type of thing.

PS: So you want to be with healthy kids?

MM: Yes, exactly.

PS: Well, when you get done at Berkeley—what, you've got two years left? You're a sophomore now?

MM: A year and a half. I'm a junior this year.

PS: A junior, okay. So a year and a half left. What do you see happening for you in your life?

MM: I might, depending on how my circumstances are, I might take a year off. I'm not sure. Work somewhere. Other than that, or even if I do that, I'll definitely go to graduate school of some kind. I have no idea where right now.

PS: And your graduate school would be in engineering again?

MM: Yes.

PS: And what kind of engineering are you studying?

MM: I'm studying bioengineering right now. But that's so broad that I'm probably going to have to specialize, more specifically, when I go to graduate school.

PS: What is bioengineering, exactly?

MM: It's any engineering that has some relation to bio, so it could be like robotics, sort of like engineering, something that's similar to like an animal or something like that. Or it could be like engineering like tissues, or it could be like genetic engineering. It's way too broad.

PS: And what are you inclined towards? What are you into?

MM: Well, I'm working in a lab right now that's a robotics lab, and I find that pretty interesting. But that's right now. I still have another year and a half to change my mind.

PS: Oh, okay. All right. So you see yourself definitely doing graduate school?

MM: Yes.

PS: Okay. And then by the time you finish that you'll be, what, twenty-five?

MM: Yes, I guess so.

PS: And then what?

MM: I have no idea. I haven't gone that far yet.

PS: Oh, okay. One thing at a time. If you settle back in the Twin Cities, do you imagine that you'd get involved with SILC again?

MM: Yes, I think I would, actually.

PS: Yes? And what?

MM: Especially if I had kids, I think I would definitely encourage them to enroll in it. I don't know if I would be a teacher again, because I don't think I have like the expertise to teach like a language or anything like that. But I would kind of get involved it.

PS: You could teach General Knowledge again to the little kids.

MM: Yes.

PS: You've got experience in that. Could you imagine yourself being on the board?

MM: I actually don't know what they do on the board, but I'm not sure.

PS: They handle the administrative things, you know, like deciding which classes to teach, and making sure that there's enough volunteer teachers, and making sure there's funding for whatever costs there are, and a place to meet, and insurance, and things like that. It's more administrative. Yes?

MM: Yes. I think it's a good cause to sort of invest your time into.

PS: And if you had kids, what would be important to you about having them attend SILC?

MM: They sort of want to know, sort of see where I came from, I guess. Well, maybe not so much where I came from, but where my parents came from. Because I grew up sort of the same as most—a lot of how I grew up was the same as a lot of kids around here. So maybe more just to see where my parents came from.

PS: And would you take your kids back to India?

MM: Yes.

PS: For visits?

MM: Yes.

PS: To where?

MM: Wherever my cousins are. I think my mom—my mom's house, that she grew up in, I don't know how much of it is still—that our family still owns. Because every time we go back there's like more and more—like less and less area that we stay in. But I would want to go visit my cousins that are all living there.

PS: Do you keep in touch with them?

MM: I keep in touch with some of them, others it's hard. Through e-mail, mostly, I guess.

PS: Okay. That's handy. The wave of future—or the present I guess. And they all have e-mail?

MM: Yes, strangely enough. They have like Internet cafes or something. You can go to places and log on and use the Internet. It's kind of strange.

PS: So they don't actually own computers?

MM: Not all of them. Some of them do.

PS: What are your cousins doing now? Are they your age?

MM: Yes, a lot of them are my age. Actually, I'm the oldest boy cousin. There's the girls that are older than me, they all live in England, and they're either in college or working. All the other boys are all younger than me, so they're all either in high school or in school somewhere else, just finishing school, trying to get into college somewhere.

PS: And everybody's got that academic focus, huh? It's like an epidemic in your family.
[Laughs]

MM: Yes.

PS: When you have kids, how important will it be to you that they learn to speak Malayalam or other Indian languages?

MM: I guess not that important, just because I can't. I mean, I'd really, really like them to be able to, but I probably wouldn't be able to understand it myself, most of the time. Not terribly important.

PS: And do you imagine yourself marrying another Indian woman, who grew up like you, here in the United States? Or somebody from India?

MM: I don't actually imagine that right now. I have no idea. My parents really want me to marry an Indian girl, but I don't see myself having any bias towards an Indian girl or a non-Indian girl.

PS: So how will decide who you marry?

MM: Just a girl that I like, I guess.

PS: Nobody's come along yet?

MM: No. I don't have a girlfriend or anything. I mean, at Berkeley, I sort of imagine myself with an Asian girl, but maybe that's just because so many of the girls at Berkeley are Asian.

PS: Asian meaning—

MM: Like Chinese, Japanese.

PS: So that's who you find more interesting?

MM: It might just be because more—that's just the majority of who I see. I don't think I have any, like, preference or anything.

PS: That was a general question. So tell me what you think is the most important thing that you got from being involved with SILC.

MM: I would say it's the interaction with other kids coming from the same background, growing up in the same environment. I've forgotten a lot of stuff that I've learned, and I obviously didn't learn my language very well. But like the friends I made there, like even today, some of them are still some of my best friends.

PS: So you get together with them when you're back in Minnesota?

MM: Actually, yes, I'm going to one of their houses tonight.

PS: So that was the main value?

MM: Yes.

PS: And what was important about that to you?

MM: I mean, we, as I said before, like sort of talking about our parents, making fun of our parents, that kind of thing. He sort of is from the same type of family. He's going to Harvard now, so he obviously was very much into academics when he was in high school. One of my other friends is going to Stanford, another one's going to MIT.

PS: So just having that shared understanding with other kids, that your parents were all weird, was the biggest value for you?

MM: I think value is the wrong word. Maybe—

PS: Benefit.

MM: Yes, maybe that's the right word. The friendships that I have with them is like a little bit different than I have with other people.

PS: And what's the difference about?

MM: You kind of relate to them better. Like one of my best friends, that I went to high school with, like we're really good friends and everything, but we don't like the same things. Like for me, school is really important. Whereas, my other friends, it's not like the most important thing. And for them it's sort of like being around someone who sort of thinks the same things are important. Like, some of my friends at Berkeley are the same way. They sort of understand why it is that school is important to me and stuff like that.

PS: More so than your other friends?

MM: Right.

PS: Okay. And this high value on academic education, do you see that being pervasive in the Indian community?

MM: Yes. I think it might be partly because a lot of the Indian families that are here now are here because someone in the family was smart enough to get into graduate school here, and so, obviously, academics are important for them. They pass it on to their kids. But then when you go to India, you actually see that everywhere.

PS: Really?

MM: Academics are sort of like your ticket, sort of like your meal ticket. It's your chance to make good money for yourself. So all parents push their kids to do well in school.

PS: Even the lower-educated parents?

MM: Yes. Or mostly. There are some cases where like if the kid needs to help out with—like, to get a job to help support the family, then maybe education isn't as important. But that's sort of an exception to the rule.

PS: When you would go to India, you hung out mostly with your extended family there? Did you mix with other people in the culture a lot?

MM: Not really. It's just usually my extended family, and sometimes like some of my cousins' friends, and that kind of thing. But mostly just family.

PS: So it wasn't like you went all over India and saw lots of different places and mixed with lots of different Indian people?

MM: Well, we would. We'd go all over. We'd sort of go like around the cities that we were staying at, but we wouldn't really socialize with just random people, I guess. I mean, I definitely didn't, because I sort of, I felt a little bit out of place in India when I was in India, because I think it was sort of obvious that I was a foreigner.

But my parents, even my parents, like, if we're taking a cab somewhere or something like that, the cab driver can tell that my parents are from America, and so they'll try to like overcharge them or something like that.

PS: And what was the tip-off?

MM: Maybe just that they dressed differently. I'm not sure.

PS: So they didn't ever wear Indian clothes when they were in India? They wore western clothes?

MM: Well, a lot of people wear—a lot of people don't wear Indian clothes, or at least that we were aware. Like, my cousins never wore Indian clothes. They'd wear like a teeshirt and pants, just like I would. But maybe just like the style of it or something.

PS: But there was something that always made you stand out as non-Indians?

MM: Yes.

PS: Even your parents, even though they'd grown up there?

MM: Yes, definitely.

PS: There was something that had westernized or changed them.

MM: Yes, I think so, yes.

PS: Can you put your finger on what that is?

MM: I can't. It might just be money, possibly, because a person with like an average income here can live like a king in India, just because of the economy. So maybe just the fact that like they just sort of seemed like they were—I mean, maybe my dad had a nice watch or something, that you wouldn't have unless you're well-off. Or maybe he had nice shoes, or something I just didn't pick up on. But there was something there.

PS: Could your parents, when they went back, were they instantly fluent with everybody?

MM: Oh, yes. They're fluent now, but they just don't speak Malayalam to each other at home.

PS: So finishing up, are there any thoughts that you'd like to share with us today, Manas?

MM: Yes. I guess, even though SILC has been a good experience and everything like that, I think that the best way to learn, sort of, about Indian culture, or the way that I've learned the most about it anyway, has been by going to India. Like our trips, when we go, and I'm with my cousins, sort of living the way that they do and interacting with other Indians, and everything like that has been one of the most valuable cultural experiences I've had.

PS: And you intend to keep going back to India, regularly?

MM: Yes.

PS: How often?

MM: We go about every three or four years. I think we would go more often, but it's just too expensive. And when we go, we usually go for about a month, sometimes two months. So you need to save up vacation time, also.

PS: Well, thank you for taking time to meet with me today. I appreciate it.

MM: Thank you very much. No problem.

PS: All right. Bye.

MM: Bye.