Rajan Menon Narrator

Polly Sonifer Interviewer

October 28, 2001

PS: This is Polly Sonifer, interviewing Rajan Menon, on October 28, 2001

Good day. How are you today?

RM: Fine.

PS: Good. Thanks for taking the time to talk with me. Could you start out by just telling me a bit about your background, the family you grew up in, and where you grew up?

RM: Yes. I grew up in the southern part of India, in the state of Kerala. The town was called North Parur. Very interesting to have the name "north" attached to it because there was another town with a similar-sounding name, which is in the south.

When I was growing up—well, I have four brothers, but I grew up with my elder brother, who is only two years older. The other two brothers I had, there was a large gap between the first two brothers and the second two brothers. They were something like fifteen, sixteen years senior to us, so there was a big gap.

So, basically, my brother and I grew up together. All I remember about my parents is my father had retired, and he had spent all his life in Malaysia, and then he had moved back to India and settled down in India. So that's what I remember about where I grew up.

My father worked with the British for quite some time, so he acquired some habits from them. Like, being punctual was one of his big things, and speaking the language correctly was another which he emphasized. But one of the things, as I look back, is that he built our house, and I vaguely remember it. I was too little. And he built the house with four bedrooms, with each bedroom having an attached bath. The idea being that, when all of us get married, we can all come back to the house and stay with the family, which never happened. By the time we grew up, we ended up in four different parts of the world.

So this was—I think he did this in the early—or late 1940s or something, he must have done this. So it was kind of a unique thing he thought of when he built this house. So that's what I remember about growing up in the house. And the house was next to a temple. It was only two

doors away from a temple, but that didn't mean that we were very religious. We actually did not believe in a lot of the things. Going to the temple was not one of the things we practiced, in that sense.

So that's kind of, in a nutshell, how I grew up. I did all my grade school education in the same town. I went to the—well, there was no kindergarten or anything like that, so the first grade I went to was a school called the girls' school. I think that's what it was called.

PS: You went to the girls' school? How did you pull that one off?

RM: For some reason, I think it was called that. Maybe I'm wrong. That's what I remember about it. But that didn't mean anything. And then I went to the Government High School. It was called Government High School—Parur. And recently, out of curiosity, I looked up in the website, and I did find the school. Compared to the schools here, of course, it is very small and what I would call very inadequately equipped and things like that.

So I did all my elementary, grade school education, and high school education in the same town, and that's what I remember about this town. This town is a very small town, maybe 5,000 people. That's my memory of the place now, which may not be accurate from this timeframe, because I have different memories about different places. So that's, in a nutshell, what happened, and maybe I can give the details as we go through, like how I grew up, and things like that.

PS: So your parents had an extended family living in the house, or not?

RM: No. Just the four of us. That is, my mother, my father, and the two brothers. My eldest brother had already moved to Malaysia. He went back to Malaysia on an exchange program, on a teacher exchange program. He was a chemistry professor. So I kind of vaguely remember the day I think he moved. I'm not very sure I even remember that very well. He was married, and he moved to teach in Malaysia. This was through an exchange program, and so he was already away.

The brother just below him, he was a medical representative, so he visited us once in a while, but he was traveling most of the time. So, basically, just the two of us growing up, as I remember.

PS: And that was unusual, in those times, in India, right?

RM: Not very unusual, actually, because I think a lot of the people by then, the older system has basically disappeared, and it's kind of self-destructed because the fact that, you know, if a person is well-to-do, there are too many people to support. That is, a lot of relatives looked to him for financial support. And it also depended upon how conservative the family was, I think, in some sense.

But I think, more than anything else, if people are financially independent, this didn't happen, in

the sense of having an education and things like that. So I think that may be the reason why we didn't have this situation. The other thing maybe that my father spent all his life outside India, and so his outlook may be different, and things like that.

PS: And yet he still expected all his four boys to come home with their wives and settle in?

RM: I think he designed it in such way that if, when they came home, they'd have all the amenities. Not that he wanted them—he expected them to settle down somewhere.

PS: Oh, okay.

RM: No, that he didn't expect. So, yes, in that sense, it was a little different. I think of him (my father) as a retired person, basically. So we did not play catch or games or things like that. That is not a memory of my father, because of the age difference.

And growing up, my mother used to tell me stories about the World War, because they were under the Japanese occupation. The memories were, to say the least, shocking. And bitter, in a sense. And I think that's one of the reasons he decided to come back and settle down. I mean, there were other reasons also, because he was getting old, and things like that.

PS: So where were they when they were being occupied?

RM: They were in Malaysia. They were in the northern part of Malaysia, near a place, the place which probably most people know as Penang, which is a coastal town, which is towards the Thailand border, because I have gone to see where my father was, maybe over ten years ago, in Malaysia. And all of Malaysia was under Japanese occupation at that time. At that time, you know, Malaysia and Singapore were combined. It's called Malaya.

So that's what I remember. I mean, that's the story I remember. And the main thing was, there was not enough to eat, because during war time, and you had to grow your own food. So my mother's biggest concern was, when we were growing up that we would have enough to eat. Because for the two of us, there was not enough rice, I think, and that's what I remember her saying, that there was only enough for one kid. I think, because I was the youngest and I was a baby, maybe less than a year old, I think, you know, I used to get a little bit more rice than my brother got. She always used to tell us this story.

And then, all her belongings that she wanted were kept in a little sack, tied, so that if there was a bombing, they can run into the back, into the woods. Those are the stories I remember. And then all the other things that happened along with it, and how the occupation changed the life of people because, regardless of the age, everybody had to work in the field, grow their own food, and things like that.

So, I mean, I have a lot of memories about, stories about Malaysia. But in general, I think they

had a very interesting life, until the war time, Second World War time.

PS: And that was when they moved back to India?

RM: Well, they moved back to India, I think, sometime in 1946 or something. I have no memories of it. I have no memories of Malaysia, or growing up there. My earliest memory I have is, I think, when or about the time my eldest brother is moving back to Malaysia.

I remember, I have this particular memory in mind of playing, my sister-in-law playing with me, as a little kid. For some reason it just stuck in my mind all my life, and that's the earliest memory I have. But that's in the house I grew up in India. Nothing about Malaysia. I have no memories.

PS: So you grew up in this little town, pretty peaceful, in India?

RM: Oh, extremely peaceful, yes. And this town was interesting in the sense that, when I went to high school, the headmaster of the high school was Jewish. And the reason I remember it so well—there are many reasons I remember it so well, because—but one of the reasons is that we had a good size Jewish community, and they had a place to worship, a synagogue, near or not too far from where my school was. There were, I would say, about four or five churches. There were two mosques. There were six or seven temples.

So every religion was practiced, and I kind of grew up among them, so I have friends in all groups. My English teacher and his brother—his brother was the headmaster. My English teacher's name was Meyer, and I always remembered him because he always gave two extra marks on exams for neatness.

PS: Did you always get those?

RM: I hope so. And then, of course, somewhere in the middle 1950s, I think, they all moved to Israel. I remember these things, they were selling things. You know, it's not very common. The concept of sale, like here, is not there. And I remember this news that they are selling a lot of their things, and they are leaving to migrate to Israel, which was kind of unusual news because in towns like that, nobody ever moves. It was more like a bedroom community, did not have much of an industry, and people went over ten miles away to work, because there were a lot of industries in that area.

So that's an interesting way to grow up. There were no problems of any form, at least that I can think of. I never remember anything about it. And being exposed to all these things was a very, very good thing, I feel, in that sense.

PS: So what happened to coax you out of that?

RM: Well, I was a reasonably good student. I think most people thought I was a very good

student, but I was okay. And we had a very healthy rivalry. There were three of us. One other person was also a Menon. His name was A. P. Menon. Interestingly enough, he's a commander in the U.S. Navy. He's a medical doctor. He lives in Virginia.

And then I had another friend by the name of Rajan Joseph, and he became one of the well-known cardiac surgeons, I think, in India now. So the three of us had a healthy competition in, you know, who will do well in school and things like that.

But anyway, I went to college after that, which is in a town called Alwaye. I went to a college called Union Christian College. It was run by the—I think it was—I'm not sure whether it was run by the Catholic church or the Protestant church, I'm not sure. But they had a strong affiliation with a Canadian church.

So I went to study. I did my first year of college. Then I did a three-year degree in physics, and I did very well in college. I got in a little bit of trouble in college, but studies, I was always very well-focused on them. Because what happened is that in 1957, when I was thirteen years old, my father passed away, and that was very traumatic because we were just two young kids. My brother was fifteen. He was in high school. Compared to here, I was a sophomore in high school, because at fifteen, you finish high school there.

The brother who was in India, because my eldest brother was already in Malaysia, teaching, he became kind of the guardian for the family. So he was staying with us, and he kind of, basically, took care of the family. He was more like a dad to me at that time.

But, basically, I was kind of independent—the problem is, is nobody ever looked at what I was doing or anything like that, except when my eldest brother came from Malaysia. I remember my first exam in chemistry in college, I didn't do well in. My eldest brother was a chemistry prof, and I remember having this interesting conversation. I used to like physics and math, and I told him chemistry is really not a science, much to his dislike. He actually, he gave me a little test, and I created new compounds, according to what he said. He congratulated me for inventing these chemical compounds that never existed. That's when I told him it didn't look like a science.

My mother had a very good influence on me, because she always told us that, you know, you should not make others feel that the absence of a father has affected you in some way, in your character. And I think that is the way she kept us in line, beyond anything else.

So we had enough to survive. We were, I would call it lower middle class, because we had some property—land. We had a rice field, we had coconuts—land where they had coconut trees. And what we did was we leased it to people. Like the paddy fields, what they do is that they will grow enough and they gave something like 50 percent to us. I remember, as a kid, going to these places you have to go in a little boat. Not a boat, but it's like a canoe, where there's a person with a big stick. That's how they pushed the canoe.

PS: [unclear]

RM: Yes, and they were. And then where I was going, the top edge of the canoe would be way up. It's like—some people, call it a houseboat, but they were very small. And then by the time you fill it up with the rice and everything, the top edge of the canoe is almost the same level as water level. But in those days, you never worried about these things, about the risk of capsizing, or a lifejacket. But I knew how to swim quite well, so it was never an issue.

And that's how we got rice, which is the staple diet. We hardly ever ate meat. I don't remember ever—maybe once or twice or year, maybe we would have some chicken, which is considered very unusual. We more often had fish because we lived in the coastal area. So we all grew up on the idea of fish being the delicacy or whatever, that sort of thing. I still have that habit.

And then we got coconuts from our land, which we had for some time. So you sell these things and you get enough money from them, and that's how we survived.

So I went to college, as I said, and then I finished my first year of college, and that's when you decide what degree you want. I took a degree in physics and mathematics, just like my elder brother. He was two years older than me, so he was doing his master's [degree] by the time I was doing my bachelor's degree. He was a good student and a nice guy. I was a good student, but not in the good books of a lot of teachers because I used to create trouble, I think.

We both played cricket for the university, which was one of our pastimes. We were reasonably good players, and this combination was unusual—being a good student and good player kind of stuff. Every day, in the evening, we used to play cricket, in the town we grew up in. Most of the people who played in there became—some of them became very famous players. They played for the Kerala state and things like that.

One of the things, as a kid growing up, one of the things we did was, every day, you know, I'd get up around six-thirty or something, and then we had to brush our teeth. And then we'd get what could be called bed coffee, and then we had to take a bath. And I rarely missed. I don't think ever in my life I—the only times I didn't take a bath was if I was sick, like when I had a fever or something.

In order to take a bath, although I could do that in the house, what we used to do is we used to go to the temple pond, which is a huge pond, and depending on the season, it can be very deep—you know, the rainy season. It had steps built on different sides, and people come down and take a bath. And then after we'd take a bath, I'd walk through the temple. This kind of began a routine.

And then I'd come home. And so, actually, what happens is that you wear shorts, and you jump into the water, and you come out, and you are dripping wet, or you're wet, and then you walk

with that. And then you come home and change, and then you eat breakfast. As I said, I can't think of a single day I missed, and that habit became part of my life, in a sense. I still do the same thing. I don't think I have missed a—I cannot eat without taking a bath. I never do that.

PS: So the temple bath, the temple pond, do people use soap?

RM: Yes.

PS: Is soap supplied by the temple, or do you bring your own?

RM: No, you bring your own. You bring it. And then the temple has, basically, concrete steps. It's not concrete. Basically, big rocks. I don't know how you describe it. Some are like—some gardens use it. They are big rocks which are cut, and then they're cemented and make steps, and the steps go all the way down. In the rainy season, the water really fills up. It may be something like twenty-five feet deep.

PS: So it's sort of like a swimming pool, but it doesn't have anything circulating the water?

RM: Absolutely.

PS: Doesn't it get scummy after lots of people—

RM: Yes. They clean it maybe once in five years, six years, something like that.

PS: Really?

RM: Yes. I think there was some drainage, during the rainy season, when the water level went up. And so, yes, it was kind of a self-cleaning kind of situation. In those days, you never thought about these things.

And most of the people in the area will come there to take a bath, and then after that, you know, you go—some of the people go home straight, some of the people. So the men took bathes on one side and the women took bathes on the other side. That's how it usually was. You never mixed

PS: And was there a curtain between or something?

RM: Nothing. It was just was an open swimming pool, so it's like an open area and then the steps kind of went down like that. It's somewhat like looking at stadium seating, exactly how the steps came down. But that became, for many of us, a routine in life, and in summertime, sometimes you took a bath again in the evening.

Nowadays, I'm like, now when we go there, it is so humid that we take a bath three or four times

and still never feel like we're not sweaty. So when we used to play cricket, I think, in the evening, I used to go home, take a bath, then eat dinner, and then you study. And by ten, tenthirty, you're in bed already. So it was a true bedroom community, in that sense, from that standpoint.

And so when I finished my bachelor's degree in physics, between—we have what is called as written exams, and then we have lab exams, which are done separately. There is usually a gap between the two, of maybe, sometimes a month, because you'll have external examiners from other towns or other colleges to come, to bring neutrality to your exams, I think.

And so, during that time, I saw this little notice in my college, which said that there is an entrance exam for what is known as the Indian Institute of Technology, which is prestigious. I did not have a very good idea of what it was. And so my brother, who was also studying there, he said, "Why don't you—did you see that notice?"

I said, "Yes."

He said, "Why don't you try for it?"

So I decided to apply for it, and in order to write the exam, I had to go to a town which is about fifty miles away. It's the first time I am traveling that far by myself, and I remember going there, and writing the exam. The problem was that, since I knew physics and mathematics very well, my chemistry, I knew very little. I had hardly studied chemistry. The degree program was in Physics with Mathematics as a second subject. But the exam required all three, plus English and general knowledge.

I basically wrote very little in chemistry and I submitted the exam, but I did very well in all the other things, I think. And so I was called for an interview, and I went for the interview and I got selected to the IIT [Indian Institute of Technology]. And I found out that from, I don't know how many thousands who applied, there were, I think, fifteen that were selected.

PS: Wow.

RM: And there were two from the state I came from, Kerala. And both of had the same problem. We did not know (study) chemistry. And I was offered chemical engineering and I said, "I don't want it." Because chemistry was not my favorite. The other person was offered chemical engineering. He took it, surprisingly. He's somewhere in Texas, by the way.

So I took civil engineering as my option instead. The Indian Institute of Technology at that time had five campuses, but they limited their admission only to two, so only a very few were selected. And we skipped the first year. We could go straight into the second year because we already knew the sciences.

So I went into the second year, and I think there must have been about, I don't know, maybe a hundred students in this whole batch. I went into civil engineering, and I had a tough time with the chemistry, but I got all of the prerequisites done in two months. I went and talked to the teachers, and did quite well, I think.

And then I was given a scholarship at this Institute, because about 10 percent get scholarships. Then I was getting bored with civil engineering, so I switched to aerospace engineering, which was starting, and they were looking for students. And in order to do that you had to write a test, and if you got above 70 percent in math, they will admit you.

So I switched into aerospace engineering, and I graduated with that. So I graduated in aerospace engineering. What happened is that I was going to go and work in the Space Science Center in the southern part of India, which is in the same part of Kerala, the same state of Kerala.

And I went for an interview, and they kind of offered me, pretty much, the job. Something went wrong though, somebody said I didn't get it. So I decided to go for my master's in engineering, and I got admission to another IIT to do my master's in engineering.

PS: But how old are you by then?

RM: I got my bachelor's degree by the time I was—bachelor's degree in engineering by the time I was twenty-two. So I did my—so I already had a bachelor's degree in physics and a bachelor's degree in engineering. And then I went and did my master's, and I thought of doing my Ph.D. right there, and I switched to chemical engineering, interestingly enough.

I switched from aero to chemical engineering—I found an interesting project to work with, using lasers. After a year, I realized that this was an experimental project, that this laser will never be built. My advisor, who—I wrote a thesis for master's degree in aerospace, and he was very nice. He kind of told me that, "Maybe you should leave. You know, you should go elsewhere. Otherwise your career will not be very good. You know, you'll be waiting here forever."

So I applied to come to the U.S. Till then, I had never applied to come to the U.S. to study. Just all of my friends had come here. So I applied to about four or five U.S. universities, and I got a couple of offers, one from University of Cincinnati. And the place I wanted to go was to Toronto, in the Institute of Aerospace Studies. That was a famous place.

But I got the most money (largest scholarship) from Georgia Tech, in Atlanta, so I ended up there. Because they gave me enough money to study, and a scholarship to survive, basically. Rather than the other places, the money was borderline, you have to understand. Otherwise, I would never have come here. The only reason I came here to study was because my expenses could be covered here.

I arrived in the U.S. in 1970, as a graduate student in aerospace engineering, and I was at

Georgia Tech. Then I finished my Ph.D., and I went to Houston, and I got a job at the University of Houston, as postdoctoral fellow, plus teaching. And so I was there for about three and a half, four years. And I used to be a customer of this company I work for, but I had been using these same instruments for research.

I got an offer from them, and that's how I ended up in Minnesota. So I moved to Minnesota in 1979, February. A good time to move.

PS: February. Oh, wow.

RM: So that's kind of, in a nutshell, what happened. In between, there were a lot of interesting things that happened. My brother getting married, and my father passing away, and so on and so forth.

PS: And how did you come to get married? When did you get married?

RM: I was in the U.S. from 1970, and until after I finished my Ph.D., I literally, I did not go to India at all. Because I spent most of life, and growing up, you know—when I was in engineering, I stayed in a dorm, so I was used to the dorm life. After I graduated, I got a job in Houston. Actually, I could not go to India, because I had to start the job.

And then when I got a job in Minnesota, I was offered the job in 1978, June. I was told—then I came here for an interview, and they already offered me the job. But then I had to get my paperwork done and I had to resign from the job. I was teaching at the University of Houston at that time.

So that was the best time to go to India, so I decided to go to India, and went to see—I hadn't seen my mother for eight years, and that was a long time. I have a very close friend by the name of R. V. G. Menon, and we grew up in the same town. He came to Purdue to do his Ph.D. in nuclear engineering, and he went back.

And we have been close friends for many, many years. He and I always kept corresponding, and he knew I was coming home, too. And it was kind of obvious that I would like to get married at that time. And I met, through his sister—his sister arranged for me to meet with somebody, and that's how I met my wife, in that person's house. So there were no parents involved. I got to see her, and she had come with her friend, and we sat and chatted for some time.

PS: And her name is?

RM: Her name is Vatsala. And so I met her, and then—I was very particular that parents should not be involved, so I wanted to find out what her impression was, you know, sitting down and chatting with her and talking to her and things like that. And so I kind of wanted to find out through my friend that she had no objections. I did not want her parents to force the situation.

That was one of the things I was dead against.

So then I went home, and this happened—she lived in Trivandrum, which is in the southern tip of Kerala, and I lived in the central portion of Kerala, near Cochin. Parur is near Cochin. So I went home and told my mom about somebody I'd met. My mother always surprised me with her ability to understand things because, you know, she comes from a two generations before me, and she said, "That's fine." And she said, "You are the person who is going to live with her, so it doesn't matter what the rest of the world tells you. As long as you like her and you want to marry her, that's fine with me."

And strangely enough, it turns out that her uncle was married to my neighbor. We know this family very, very well, and I'm fond of them. So it was very quickly, we knew who they were and they knew who we were. We knew them very, very well because there was something that happened in that family, which was kind of traumatic, in a sense.

They had a son. But he was living in Bombay. He came home and told them that he would get married. But he already had a girlfriend, and he did not tell this to the parents. The parents went through the whole process of arranging the marriage and finally he kind of chickened out, which created a lot of trauma.

So we knew these people as kids, and this was the same family. The woman going to be married in that case happens to be Vatsala's aunt. So, you know, things like this in a small town. Especially, since they were very close friends of ours. My mother and their grandmother were very close friends. Every day, in the evening, they go to the temple. So that's how it happened. Interestingly enough, their granddaughter now lives in Florida. And so, you know, it's a small world, in that sense.

So that's how I met my wife, and we got married. I used to have a beard at that time, and a lot of people at that time say that—you know, a beard, people usually grow when they have—either they grow up, or grow up in the age, or they have some—they become less worldly, let me put it this way, or they have some unhappiness. People usually associate with that, in those days.

PS: Having a beard?

RM: Having a beard. If you're a young person, unless you definitely want it. And so they will ask—somebody was asking, "Why is he keeping this beard?" So my mother came to me and said, interestingly—that is the time she told me that, you shouldn't worry about what others have to say. She asked me, "What does your going-to-be wife think about your beard?"

I said, "I don't think she has any objections."

And she said, "Keep it. Don't worry about my sisters and all that." She surprised the heck out of me.

So we got married, and it was in July of 1978 that we got married. It was in the rainy season of the year. There are some months you don't have weddings. They give you a lot of reasons, but I think the practical reason is, it's the rainy season. And it rains nonstop. It's not like here. Nonstop means for five, ten days, there will be no break.

And so that is the season you don't get married, because you cannot have an outside—you know, the weddings are all usually outside. You build a tent kind of thing, and then you have weddings. So there is a loophole in it, and the loophole is you can get married in a temple.

So we got married in the beach temple. This is right on the beach in Kerala, that we got married. So it was a small wedding. There were only 600 people who came for it, I think.

PS: Only 600?

RM: Yes.

PS: Wow. And this is after you've been gone for eight years?

RM: Yes. And from our side, you know, because we had to—people from my side, they had to travel a fair distance (to the wedding location), so we had to arrange for a couple of busses, for people to come. But from her side, you know, the local people, a lot of them came.

So we got married, and then you go back to my house for a reception, and we had the reception in town. This is like, getting to know everybody. And then I left for the U.S. within two weeks. I had to come back to Houston and start my work. So I was teaching at that time, and then she joined about a month later.

I came to Houston, and then we actually were staying with friends of ours, because we already were going to move. And there was this friend of ours who kind of said, "Don't get an apartment," and so we had a bedroom in their house, and then we were guests of their house for two months. Two, three months, actually. And then in February we moved here, in 1979.

PS: So it was 1978, in the wintertime.

RM: 1979, wintertime.

PS: 1979, in the winter, when you came here. What was the Indian community like here in the Twin Cities, at that time?

RM: I think extremely small. The majority of the people you know were not here. In fact, all the veterans like Godan [Nambudiripad], had not moved to Minnesota at that time. When I came here, my boss who hired me, he's also from India, but he comes from, I think, Madras state. He

was the vice-president of the company, and his family—his wife actually helped us a lot in settling down here. We stayed in an apartment in New Brighton.

I don't remember meeting many Indians at that time. The Indian community, we met—well, you know, the first—we went for a social function, like somebody's graduation, I think. And that's how we met a lot of people, at that time.

I would say the community, you know, serving maybe a few hundred, in that sense. It's quite small, and so I don't think that would allow you to have individual groups at that time. So that's what I remember about it.

PS: You mean individual groups based on language or geography in India?

RM: Right. I think that may have been somewhat transparent, I would think, at that time.

PS: So what was it like adjusting? You'd already been living in the United States.

RM: Yes. I'd already been living here for eighteen years by that—I'm sorry, not eighteen. Eight years. The first eight years, in the South, I lived on Atlanta and Houston, and coming to Minnesota was like coming to a different country. I don't think I can explain it, even as a person who did not grow up in this country. But one of the things I did do was, when I was a student, I kind of immersed myself fully in the American life—to understand America.

I remember, I spent a month reading American history, and becoming fully conversant with the civil rights revolution and things like that. I used to go to the church where Martin Luther King [Jr.] used to preach. I mean, for his anniversary we used to go there, to that place.

So I was quite familiar with the South and how life was and how things are. Houston is a huge town, but it was not cosmopolitan the way we think of now. It was kind of a true Texan range. They had no zoning laws. They did whatever they felt like. People could drink and drive. You just did whatever you felt like.

It was funny that they—I felt more at home there than a Yankee might. I think if a Yankee came and I was there, they would pick on him rather than me. That's the way life was.

PS: Was there any issue about you being brown-skinned?

RM: You know, because I grew up in campus towns, or within campus, hardly anytime. Except in Atlanta, you knew everyone, so Atlanta was quite clear. One of the reason was because—I think, if you live in Georgia in those days, this is like being in downtown. You had a sense of where you should be and where you should not be.

PS: So you were considered colored?

RM: I am pretty sure I am. For the blacks, they were kind of confused as to who I was, but I felt very comfortable and I had lots of friends in that community. And so I used to know how the black community lived in Atlanta very well. In fact, they used to live in the southwest, and they were very affluent people. If you go diagonally across, you see the other side of it, which is the affluent people on the northeast side.

PS: Who were white.

RM: Who were white. And at six o'clock in the evening, the city emptied in those two directions. And this was before Atlanta became—you know, Atlanta had a high murder rate, and it became notorious, actually, Atlanta. That's because the downtown had just disintegrated. Everybody just ran away from the downtown, and then they brought people back.

The reason I say this is because I had a host family when I moved here, and this was a pretty well-to-do host family. She was a tennis player and a model, I think, the lady. And he was a real estate broker. I think he's a graduate of Annapolis.

PS: Were they white or black?

RM: They were white. They were very nice, and I used to go to their house a couple of times, and I kind of realized that, you know, I felt like this—I did not fit in in these parties, because these were all, naturally, well-to-do people, and I was a student. Because my last name was Menon—Menon was a very notorious name in those days, because V. K. Krishna Menon, who was the foreign minister of India, he had the record of making the longest speech in the United Nations, basically berating the United States.

So at that time, you know, India had this neutrality thing, when Nehru was the prime minister. Yugoslavia, when General Marshal Tito was there, and from Egypt, I forget his name. Not Anwar Sadat. Before him.

PS: [Gamal Abdel] Nasser.

RM: Nasser. So they were all building up this independent coalition of neutral nations, and there was a visibility then, and Krishna Menon was wild. He was an outstanding speaker, but I think a poor politician. So I remember introducing myself and saying—and they will ask, "Are you related to Krishna Menon?"

In the beginning, I said, "It could be. You know, Menons could be related to each other." But quickly, I realized it was better to say, "No way." [Sonifer laughs] "No relation" Anyway, the reason I mention all this, is because after some time, after about the first year, I decided that—you know, I used to go to their house for Thanksgiving and things like that, and I said, "Why don't you come to the dorm for one day."

And I think I kind of realized that they did not want to do that, and I kind of realized there is a problem here. I am going to their house for some other reason, not because they like my company. Which is fine, because maybe their social circle is different.

But the funniest thing was that I had close friends at that time, students, and family from among the blacks, so I used to go to their house, too. And one day I invited both of them to a concert, some function—I don't remember. I have not forgotten this till today. And I am sitting in the middle, and one side is this group and one side is this group. And I literally became the interpreter.

PS: They couldn't speak to each other?

RM: They had difficulty, Difficulty in the sense that they were always speaking to me, and I kind of—and then finally, I started noticing it, and it was very obvious. So that was Atlanta in those days. Can you call it a problem? No. I don't know that it's a problem, because I never suffered from it. But on the other side, the discomfort was extremely obvious.

The KKK [Ku Klux Klan] was very strong, active. Every month, you would see the picture of cross burning at the Stone Mountain in Georgia. So, at that time, it was not so personally known. I remember, my only letter before coming to Atlanta was exactly on this issue, "how will you be treated?" To my friends, I wrote. Not my friends, but somebody who was already studying there.

So, in all honesty, I never felt there were any problems, but there were secondary incidents where I could very clearly see where I belonged.

PS: But they didn't have strict segregation, like different restrooms or restaurants anywhere?

RM: No, no. But I have seen signs, which are the old ones on the wall, or things like that. When you go to Alabama, there are places like that. But other than that, there was nothing. I remember in a bus once, I got up and offered my seat, and my friend was—there were two of us sitting there. This was an older lady, and she didn't take the seat. I have no objection to that, because, you know, she grew up in a different generation. That's her level of comfort.

PS: So she didn't want to sit in that seat because you had sat in it before her?

RM: Well, and my friend would have been sitting next to her.

PS: Oh, I see, okay. And he was also brown-skinned?

RM: Right. But to me, that is—I'm sure every group has comfort and discomfort levels, and I don't consider that to be a major issue. But I knew from the community—I mean, the black community—the issues very, very well, and clear.

PS: Were there other Indians in Atlanta?

RM: Yes. The Indian community in Atlanta at that time was a reasonably good size. There were, I think, about a hundred. There was an Indian Student Association, and I was the president of that for one year, a couple of years. And the reason I became president is, basically, to clean up. There were some problems with the association and I kept on complaining about it, and saying, "You know—"

Basically, I think I was suspicious. They used to show movies. This was before the days of video, and they used to have sold-out performances for three, four shows, for the same movie. At the end of the year, they're losing money. Barely making money. And this became very suspicious, and I kept saying, "This is nonsense. How can you sit and take it?"

And finally, somebody took me to task, and said, "You're making so much noise. Why don't you do something about it? Why do you stand for it?" And of course, in that moment of weakness, you say, "Okay, I'll do it." [Laughter]

And I did it, and it went through a crisis. Basically, I put down certain rules that movies will start exactly on time. If you don't come—food will not be allowed, and so on and so forth. We went through a difficult time for one month, and then it survived and got cleaned up. It became profitable. We had a bank balance, and after a year, I left. I said, "I don't want to be involved in it anymore."

So there was a community, which was reasonably large. I mean, a hundred was considered quite large at that time.

PS: In Houston, was there an Indian community?

RM: Yes. Houston had a far bigger community, but I never participated in it because they had all kinds of problems. I never went to any of those things—get-togethers and functions. As a student, I used to go to Rice University a lot, because that was next door. I had a lot of friends in the graduate school there, and faculty, and so on.

PS: So who did you seek out for friends in Houston?

RM: All kinds of people. You know, whoever was available. I had some friends from the Latino community. I had some Indian friends, a lot of Indian friends—graduate students, faculty members, whoever was there. We used to go to this pub in Rice University. It was called Valhalla, for obvious reasons. It was a graduate pub, and the rest of the people come from all over, on Fridays, to have a drink.

So I was a bachelor living there. Oh, and I had a very close friend. We did our master's degree in

India together, and I ran into him in a concert. He was married, so they were kind of looking out for me kind of stuff. They always used to— His wife is still a very, very good friend of ours. It was in their house that, after we got married, we stayed with them. They graduated from the University of Minnesota, interestingly.

PS: So when you came to Minnesota, you said the community here was small, and it was a strange time for you, in some way. Can you say more about that?

RM: It was not—no, it was okay.

PS: But it was different adjustment. Even though you'd been here, it was not—

RM: Oh, okay. It was nothing to do with the community. It was to do with the general society. I'm moving from the South and I come to the North, and now I understood the difference between the two, for the first time.

PS: Say more about what you saw as different.

RM: In the South, janitorial work was always done by blacks, always. And I come to Minnesota, and the first thing I notice is that the person who was doing the janitorial work in our company was not. He was a young guy, and he was reading a book, a novel. This absolutely shook me, because this is something I would never, ever have seen in the South. I don't know what the skill level in the South was, but I can say, the majority of them would have a tough time reading a book, from the way they spoke. I don't mean they're illiterate, but I don't think that will ever be one of the priorities.

So this—I first thought he was somebody else, and I found out that he was a part-time student from Bethel College, later, and he was willing to do janitorial work. This was twenty-one years ago. I still remember the name and the face. He drove a car, on top of that, too. It's just something you hardly see in Atlanta, for example. They all took a bus to come to work.

And so this was probably my biggest surprise. And the second thing is that, when you come to Minnesota—I remember this very well, even when I used to call from Houston, to the company here. The people, when they spoke English, they sounded like they're—how should I say it?—better educated, because they sounded like the people on TV. And the fact that the Midwestern accent, close to it, has been picked up as the official accent.

So you always have this feeling that you are talking to somebody who is, whatever you want to call it—educated, polished, refined kind of stuff. So, that, again, that was there for some time. You'd talk to somebody and you'd hear no accent, so to speak, which is a secondary thing in my mind.

So those are the things I remember, moving to Minnesota, as very important in general society. I

think it stayed with me for a long, long time. I mean, like this situation with this person. I still can see that person, because it was—I couldn't believe it at that time, because living in the South for ten years, I have never seen it.

PS: In the South, a white college student would never, ever take a job as a janitor?

RM: No janitor will be white.

PS: Okay.

RM: I have never seen it. And it was kind of an automatic thing. It is almost as if the people who did the job, you almost tend to have this impression that they would not have an interest in things like reading a book or things like that. They may read a magazine or something. But during a break, a person sitting and reading a book was so surprising to me. So anyway, that's what I remember.

I was probably more aware of it maybe, because as a student, I had a window to the black community. In fact, I used to take many of my friends, to show them how the affluent—oh, and there is the other side of the city, where you can go. It is like any other place. It is well-to-do people, and it's nice. I was kind of the tour guide, because I had access to both places. So I used to do that.

And because of that, maybe I was very well aware of both sides of the society and where they lived and what they did, and I was comfortable. I am the person who moved in between both these communities very well. So maybe that's why I was tuned to it when I came here. I see the difference and I notice it right away.

PS: So as time went by in Minnesota, you did your job, had your family?

RM: Yes. Right, yes. I think when we moved in here, I think—oh, I know the reason that we moved in here. Because our friend who was in Houston lived here for many years, and graduated from the University of Minnesota, we had some common friends. They had talked about some of these friends.

So when we came there, we met some of them, and they became good friends of ours. And one of them, of course, is the guy who started the SILC [School of India for Languages and Culture,] the school['s predecessor,] the Bharat School, which is Shankar Menon. And so we met him, and he was married to Lisa. So there was Lisa and him and us, and there were a couple of people from the University. We used to hang around the University of Minnesota a lot, and we used to always get together and things like that.

So that was all before we had any kids. So we came to know of a community which are more, I would say, university-affiliated, various different groups and so on. And then there was a group

here which was involved in doing dances for the Munda group, and we got involved in that. I don't know that you have come across that group, but he was teaching in the department of, I don't know, sociology, anthropology, and things like that.

He was from a tribal group. Munda is a tribal group, and they brought in this traditional tribal dance, and there were many of us, including me, who all got involved in this thing. And there were a lot of students who got involved in that, and some of them were coming from India, some of them were local. This is mostly kind of a college community, and so we got actively involved in it

That became one of our social circles. Then there was the other social circle, which was the community, which, on the outside here, we have met through work and so on. So it was an interesting community at that time, and quite active, culturally and socially.

PS: So your job here in Minnesota was working for what company?

RM: TSI.

PS: TSI, Inc. And you're still with them now?

RM: Right.

PS: I joined as an applications engineer, and the reason I was brought in, I was told, was that since I was their customer for many years—I've used a lot of their stuff—they were looking for somebody who would bring in a customer's perspective. The reason being that these instruments are generally supplied to university professors and researchers. It's made by a different group of people who look at it from the standpoint of making an instrument. The people who get it use it from an applications standpoint. There is a big gap between the two. So, actually, one is electrical engineering; the other is something else.

So the idea was to fill the gap between the two, and to tell the company what we should design and produce as products. So that was one of my—one of the first people they hired, who came from a customer side, was me. And so I joined, actually, in a sense, in marketing, and this was a very difficult decision, whether I should throw away all my training in research, and I wanted to do research. Because the way I got the job was, when the company asked my recommendation when there was another candidate, and when I asked them the question, "Why are you hiring this person?" they said, "We are looking for people like that. Are you interested?"

And I said, "Oh, no way. I want to do research in my life." A year later, they had not found anybody and I asked that question again, because I was looking at the company and the university politics and how things were going, and I decided, it was time to leave. And they said, "Yes," and I came here for an interview, and they gave me the job.

So that's how I ended up here, and I had this feeling that maybe I would never use whatever I learned. That is not the case. I used to travel a lot then. Even now I do travel a lot. And so my wife, when we married, we took an apartment, which was next to a little grocery store. I mean a 7-11 kind of place [convenience store]. Because I used to be out of town, and she used to be very nervous about it, staying by herself in an apartment. But there were people in that area who were very helpful. Then she started working for State Farm [Insurance] about a year later, I think, or six months later. So she had something to occupy herself, too.

Yes, that's how I got settled into Minnesota. There are a lot of people—the community was very nice, in that sense. The people we knew, they were very helpful.

PS: So how did you get involved in SILC?

RM: Through Menon, Shankar Menon. I had heard a little bit about Bharat School, and then they had grown out of that, and we had heard some stories about what happened and so on. They had moved to the—actually, it used to be held in the student housing, the community center at the [married] students housing area called Commonwealth Terrace Cooperative. I think it was within the University [of Minnesota] on the St. Paul campus. I'm not sure. Yes, it was.

So that's where we used to have the classes. We had a friend at that time by the name of Ram Krishnan. Ramki, we used to call him. He was a very good singer, and when my first son was born, and he was a couple of years old, two, three years old, I think he used to stay with us, this Ramki.

He got his Ph.D. in pharmacy, but he was an excellent singer. And he used to stay with us, and my son used to sing with him, and he used to teach music at SILC, at that time. And by that time, I think it has become SILC. I think this is somewhere in 1982.

And because of him, and because of this, my son used to go with Ramki to school, the SILC school, and he used to give what is called the tune, you know, a note, because he was good at that. Although he was little, he could do that. But he was too young to join the school because you had to be six to join SILC.

So I used to go with him, and I used to sit in this class, the music class, and then the teacher will say, "Give me *do*," or something, and he would do the note. I think that's what he would do. So I said that, although he is doing this thing, I should give some money to the school because there is some benefit, and so I asked them [SILC], and I used to give some nominal amount to the school.

And then after that I became involved in teaching Malayalam, because it's a very good thing to get involved in, and so I got involved some time in 1983, 1984, maybe, or 1985. So I started teaching Malayalam classes. I was getting into a situation where I thought that the kind of traditional methods of teaching were boring to the students, so I wanted to change it to

something more fun, more spoken rather than written.

They used to teach this subject called General Knowledge, which was social studies. It was like the Indian style and I was very much against it, so I was trying to make some changes because I used to tell them, "Why should anybody living in Minnesota want to find out about rainfall in some part of India? It is very unimportant to us."

So I think I got involved quite a bit in it, and then I became an assistant principal, and we revised the curriculum. We wrote the curriculum, what needs to be done. And then there was a curriculum committee, and I became in charge of it, and so on. So I got involved in a lot of these things, mainly because I thought a lot of things needed to be changed, otherwise we'll lose enrollment and people will kind of move away.

So in those days, the biggest group at the time used to be the Gujurati students because that was a lot of this community. And still, although they have an active group, socially, they still used to come to school quite a bit. Then from there we moved to Como High School. Not Como High School—I forget the name of the school, but it's on Como Avenue, right by the state fairgrounds.

I think one year we had this enrollment jump up of like 30, 40 percent, which was a troublesome year. We had almost seventy-five, eighty students. We got into some problems with the administration because the kids were doing some mischief and all that stuff. And then went through a few crises, where we almost thought that we would not have a place to have a school.

PS: Because they were harming the building in some way?

RM: Well, we were using existing classrooms, and they were messing up the stuff. And the teachers who had to come on Monday to run a class, they just didn't want these rooms to be given out on the weekends.

PS: Of course. Makes sense to me. How did you resolve that?

RM: Well, we kind of, we thought we were faceless. We had to go and meet the people, face to face, and tell them what we are doing, why we are doing it, and that helped. But we kind of realized, we have a problem. We have to look for something different.

PS: So it was the people at the school, the teachers, that you went to see? The classroom teachers?

RM: No. We went to see the administrators.

PS: At the school?

RM: At the school. The school district. And then we had the PIC [Parents of Indian Children]

parents, people who wrote letters, supporting our need, because I think we were getting to a point where we thought that we may not get a school, because they had some issues there.

So a lot of things were smoothed out and then we donated something, I think, to the school. I think we bought a projector or something, and we said, "We should give back something." And this became very, very important, from the standpoint of what we are giving back to the community, and so we were all in support of it, and things like that.

I think the main thing we felt is that, if you are a faceless organization, how do they know what is happening. So we had to have a person in front of it. And that's what we did, and then we started looking around for places where we could really run as a classroom.

Because the early days, it was not a classroom. It was like a room like this. You sit around and talk to each other and there are groups, with no separation (partitions), in a sense. So the noise level could be high, and so on. And it was all on sofas that we sat and talked. So things were different at that time.

When we decided to go to the regular schools, it became far more formalized. We had classes, we had curriculum, we had levels for each class. We started doing seminar courses for the senior-most students. I did a course on public speaking, because I said, "The things which are not taught in school, may be what we can teach. I don't want to teach science and math." A lot of places do.

So one of them was the Toastmaster's style of public speaking, which I had gone through already, and I did this for the senior-most students. One of them was Guptan [Nambudiripad,] no Godan's [Nambudiripad] eldest son. He was in my class.

And so there were a lot of experimental things we did, to keep the senior-most students in class, because by the time they are fifteen, we are losing them. They stopped coming to class.

PS: Did your children attend?

RM: Yes. Both my kids attended. My eldest, Manas, was here, and then later he became an instructor at the school. He started teaching social studies. Since he was second generation, I still hear that he is one of the most popular teachers. The kids kind of used to wait for him. One of things he has is an amazing knack to handle kids. We see it all the time. So he went back and taught two years, I think, at SILC. First and second grade.

And then my younger son went to school I think up to the time he was a junior. Not a junior. Sophomore, I think, in high school, and he took music classes. At that time they used to teach *tabla*, the drums. So he took some of those classes.

Then we introduced cooking some time, I don't remember when—maybe in the late eighties—which became the most popular class in school, for both boys and girls. But you had to be, I

think nine years old, I think, in order to get into this class.

So ideas like this were introduced, which are kind of novel. Everybody was given a free rein. If you have idea of something to teach, do that. I ran course on music, appreciation of music. What I did was to arrange outside speakers to come and talk about Indian music and Western music, compare them. Like a seminar course, it was done for senior students, which actually became very popular with adults. We had more adults at the music class than students.

So I mean, the argument was that we cannot run the school like this. I was saying that we can run the school in the conventional form, but you've got to look at things which interest them and benefit them, other than give them textbook material.

Then I kind of started—I became president of the school. I don't remember, I forget when. I was there for about three years, then I was on the board. Then I kind of said I should be out of this, because fresh ideas should come in. In other words, you have a tendency to say, "During my time—"

PS: "Back when I started—"

RM: Yes. And I think the first time I used that sentence, I said, "That's the time to leave. Somebody else has to come in." So I go to help once in a while, but I'm not active. I think it happens when your children graduate and leave. You know, that happens.

PS: So what are some of the kindest or sweetest memories that you have of particular days or classes or events or things that happened at SILC?

RM: I used to do bizarre things at school, even as a teacher. That actually became—so a lot of students wanted to come to my class. My feeling was that, if you want to teach somebody a language and they'll remember it—I remember this famous book by Daphne Du Maurier, called—I forget which book it was. Where he talks about, this character talks about his uncle, who taught him the English, or the language, and he said he never forgot the letters of the alphabet, because with every letter, he taught him how to swear.

PS: [Laughs] So did you do that in Malayalam?

RM: Well, in Malayalam, I taught them a sentence, which I think everybody still remembers it, which is not very bad, which is a play on words. It is actually like, in English—you know, the problem with a lot of them is that, if you ask them, "What is the word for such-and-such?" they don't remember it.

For example, they always used to confuse between the east and west. So one of the questions I always gave for the exam was always the same. Write "The sun rises in the east." They always wrote it wrong. They would say—because the east and west was—and [unclear] there is no

attachment to it, there is no identification of it, so that you can say, "Well, it sounds like something."

So I taught them this very silly sentence, which may have shocked the very prudish people, but I don't think it was that bad. And it was a play on words. The sentence goes like this. The first two English words it has are "can you." The word is—there's silk, market silk, in the sense of not the school [SILC], but silk material, and then there is the word "market" and then there is the word "shop." The whole thing is a question.

This was something we used to say when we were kids. The sentence was, "Can you silky—" So it was, I assume there is an "e" added, or an "e" sound added to it, not an "e". And then they would say "markety shoppy." All together, "Can you markety shoppy?"

The reason for that is this. The word for silk in Malayalam is *pattu*. *Pattu* is the word. So if you say "silky", the implication is that the word *pattu* becomes patty. You add the "e" sound, and the meaning changes dramatically. You go from the material silk to a dog. The word patt-y means dog. You go to market. Market, the Malayalam word for that is chantha. Markety, so the sound should change, it becomes *chanthe*. *Chanthe* means "behind", "posterior." And shop is *kada*, and "shoppy" is *kadi*. And so, if you translate it, you're asking the question, "Can you bite the behind of a dog?" [Sonifer laughs] And no kid ever forgot this sentence.

So because of this—and then I used to allow them to do anything they feel like and say anything they want, as long as it's not in English. And this gave them a lot of freedom, so we used to, middle of the class, we used to stop and do exercises. You know, like stretches. You had to say "To the left, to the right," but you could not say "To the left" or "To the right." You had to use the Malayalam words.

So all these things became novel to the kids, and so it brought in a lot of attention. Everybody wanted to be in the class. It was fun. I don't know how much they learned. Overall, I thought many of them learned enough, and most of them, when they went to India and talked to their grandmother, they came and said, "You know, I was able to say something to my grandmother."

Chitra Subrahmanian, who is here, she actually picked up on it quite well, and she speaks quite well now. My sons, whenever they go to India, they always say that they can reasonably well understand what people are saying. And more importantly, because they know a lot of history about India, and social studies, actually, they come across as if they know more about India than the people who grew up there.

For example, I taught classes on dance and music, which is one of the electives. You go through the seven major styles of dance, and they have to see each one of them, what the difference between them is, and we had people who knew about it come and speak about it. And so it was interesting that when they went to India, they knew more about the major styles of dance, what the difference was, where they came from, all these details, which absolutely stunned the local

people. They said, "We don't know anything about it."

And so I think, in some sense, the goal of SILC was probably that, is to get a bearing, and also to pick out the best of both worlds, in some sense, so that you have a very well-balanced life, in some sense. So that they don't feel out of place when they go to India, they don't feel out of place when they come here.

I think many of us in SILC tried to make sure that they don't become Indians. That is a meaningless thing to do. But it is like changing costumes, in my mind. You should feel comfortable to move from this to that. It is somewhat like the way I lived in Atlanta, I sometimes feel. I could move from this corner to that corner very easily, and I am in two different worlds, in some sense, at that time.

And it's the same way they do it. I think that was probably the most rewarding feeling I had, when people [in India would] say that they know—kids who go from here, they say they [those kids] know a lot more about India than our kids, and they're able to adjust, in the sense that the value system doesn't seem to be different. They're amazed at how it is possible that, living in this country, their attachment to material things doesn't seem to be overwhelming. Because this is the impression people get from TV and *Time* magazine.

So in my mind, those were the most rewarding things, as far as, you know, what has SILC offered. And I think most of them, by the time they are sixteen, seventeen, they all say that SILC played a great role.

And more than anything else, I think, socially, feeling comfortable here. They all met people who were in the same situation. Trying to satisfy or live in two cultures, and trying to make the best out of it, and not getting into trouble because of that.

So I think, to me, that was the most rewarding experience. And working in the school, and we were doing volunteer work, you always wanted to do far more than what you did, but you ran out of time. So it was a learning experience for me, too. I learned a lot about how to be with people, learning about India. I learned far more by doing that.

PS: So you learned things that you didn't know, even though you grew up in India and went to the Indian school system?

RM: Yes. I mean, not in the systematic way, for example. I knew all these things, but I never—you know, it is somewhat like learning a language by listening to people, as opposed to learning it systematically, by knowing the reason behind it. So there was some structure that was brought in because that was needed, and I had to tell this to somebody, which was also a good learning experience.

And I think one of the things I liked a lot about SILC was, it was apolitical. It was not at all—at

least the time we were involved in it. And it was not religious. I think people tried their best to keep religion out of it, keep it as secular as possible.

I think to many people coming from Kerala, this is a notion they have always grown up with, because we have been exposed to all religions. We can't run a school without being—it is—the reason I say this is because I see a lot of communities where they cannot. When they talk about education, religion automatically gets in.

PS: And then there gets to be conflict because of the—

RM: Then it obviously a question of exclusion. When you say you're going to teach a religion, who are your students going to be? Are you going to say no to several people? Are you going to say yes to several people? It doesn't matter. And I think that automatically brings in a situation of saying, "Okay, these are the people who come to SILC. Maybe only in this religion, or only who believe in this religion."

PS: So were there Muslim people who came to SILC, and participated, and were treated as equals?

RM: I'm not sure. I mean, I know there were Christians, there were Hindus. I think there were Muslims. There were Parsis. I know there were a couple. Parsi is a very small community. They were there. Some Sikhs, who wear the turbans—

PS: Sikhs?

RM: Yes, they were there.

PS: Jains?

RM: Jains were there, right. And so, you know, what is different for them? I mean, we did have speakers who came and spoke about a religion, as a religion, but not as religious teaching.

PS: So, purely informational?

RM: Purely informational. For example, what are the major religions of India, and things like that. That is okay to teach that, but not a session in something else.

PS: How you should pray.

RM: Right. No. And there were no prayers. The only prayer was only sung—the two songs you sing in SILC. One is *Vande Madarum*, which is like—*Vande Madarum* really means that you are paying obeisance to the mother, which is the land. Physically, it is the country. It was written by one of the famous writers in India and was set to music. It is considered to be one of the—I

would say it's somewhat like "God Bless America," in that sense.

And the other one is the national anthem, which you sang at the end of the day. So neither one is supposed to have anything to do with religion. Everybody sings it. And when we were in school, we used to sing it every day.

So I think those were the good things about SILC, I feel. And I think one of the other things we may have accomplished is to go away from Indian style of teaching into a much more liberal style of teaching, with focus on what they need to know as opposed to saying, "I got a textbook from India, so let's learn it." Which was hard at the beginning. A lot of people found it difficult to switch away from, because it is a lot of work.

Well, another thing, at least I believed in, was that to give maximum exposure to students, in the sense that, if there is a program, and there is an emcee [master of ceremonies], at least I thought that it should be run by students. Because this is the best training for them for public speaking and getting on the stage. Otherwise, there is a natural tendency for adults to run the program, thinking that, well, you know, they are students.

This was, again, a change which was hard to make, but I think it has taken place. Now the students run the program, which is the way it should be, in my mind.

Then, a lot of the people we worked with became good friends, socially. And I think once you have reasonably sincere goals, and you're not doing it for any personal reasons, I felt that that was probably the best thing. It brought in people who are really, oh, what I would call totally unselfish. They have no personal motives in any of these things and are a terrific group of people to work with.

PS: Were there any down sides to SILC? Or any things you could look back and say, "Gee, I wish we'd done this differently, or learned that faster, or whatever?"

RM: Yes. The down side of all that is still the shortfalls of a volunteer organization. Getting enough people motivated to come and participate, and formalizing it. Formalizing a structure, which is a lot of work. I mean, there are times. We had a summer project. All summer we worked on this project for curriculum revival. Syllabus and things like this.

So, yes, some of those things, definitely there is a lot more one can do, but I consider them to be more the problems of volunteer organizations than anything else. And I think, too, some of it may be, we may be reliving that wish list we had when we were students and we looked at a lot of teachers and said, "This should not be the way it should be taught." And maybe there was that motivation, too. That, if I became a teacher, you know, this is the way I would do it.

And maybe many of us may have done it because the Indian way of teaching is not the most inspirational. I mean, I had some good teachers, but besides that.

PS: So the Indian style is teaching by rote or lecture?

RM: By lecture, yes. It is, very much. It is that, the onus is on the student to learn, not the teacher. But I think, you know, I think many of us—at least, maybe I don't know that it's true with everybody. My parents did not drive in anything to do with religion. It was like, what you absorb from the society and the community.

And generally, the approach we took here also was similar, to say that, if you have anything to do with religion, maybe let's just learn it at home, rather than at school. Because religion is probably the most personal of all your beliefs. I mean, you may be married to somebody, but your beliefs may not exactly coincide.

And there it is something you have to develop through somebody or through your parents or whatever it is, so we got away from those things. Which was a very good thing, because, periodically, there was this topic coming back and everybody said, "No, we should not do it." I think which was good, in my mind. I don't know if everybody agrees with that or not.

PS: When you were teaching Malayalam, did you encourage the kids to speak Malayalam at home, and did you have mostly children whose parents were native Malayalam speakers?

RM: Yes, the majority were. And we had some PIC [Parents of Indian Children] parents, and for them we kind of—all languages, we encouraged the parents also to attend it, especially for PIC parents, so that they also learn along with the children.

We tried things like using an audiotape. We used to have kind of a little listening lab and all, that I tried. But practice is obviously the most important. So, yes, they were supposed to speak in Malayalam, but, you know, the conversation became very brief, the vocabulary being limited. We tried this here, with our kids, that during dinnertime, they had to speak in Malayalam. Finally, it became sign language, because their vocabulary was limited. Yes, we talked about all these things. The problem being that it's only once a week, and then you go home.

Oftentimes, you don't have anybody to practice with. That's the thing. In fact, our kids used to blame us and say we did not speak enough Malayalam at home. My wife and I spoke to each other in English more frequently than Malayalam, which happens in a lot of Indian families. And so they were saying, that way they didn't benefit. I don't know if that's true or not.

And the other thing I looked at was, when I was growing up as a kid, I was exposed to so many things—culturally, socially, and religion-wise. And I think, at times, I had looked at, how do we expose the kids to the similar kind of thing, so that it is not pushed on them but it is absorbed. So that you have a critical eye to some of these things. Some of us, I think, were focused on that side, too, at least unconsciously.

Because I think when we look at how we grew up, I think—like even when I go back now, I think we grew up, kids were kids, in a sense. We had absolutely—we did not have anything materialistic. I used to play chess, for example, and in order to make the different pieces, I used to collect caps of different bottles. The most powerful one was the biggest cap.

Or you could make it out of the stem of the banana leaf, and they used to cut it. And this is how they used to play in the very, very old days. But we had a lot of fun with it.

And so, one of things we always felt was that here the kids have got so many things to do, and sometimes they have to be—at times, you know, they have to be by themselves. They haven't a doubt. They have to take care of the surroundings, watch out who is there, and whether they are safe, and all that stuff.

That is one thing we always thought, that as kids, we had just a freer time, because every neighbor looked after us, you know, if you're around someplace. Our neighbor knew where I was, or I could go to my neighbor's house. Nobody would ever worry about it. I could be there all my life. All day I could be there. Whereas it's kind of not so common here.

PS: No. It's very different here. Were there any special events or projects that SILC got involved with that you have special memories about?

RM: Well, most of the time, I think the special projects we got involved with in SILC were for the Festival of Nations, where we got involved in the cultural booth design, and we have been involved in it I don't know how many years. In 1990, we got the award—the award is sitting right there—for the best exhibit. And that was the year we were in charge. "We" meaning my wife and I were the people in charge.

So that was kind of a very—and the theme was weddings. So we designed this wedding—I don't know how we call it—mandabum. The mandabum is the stage, literally. I used to call it as a gazebo, but it's not a gazebo. Basically, we designed the floor and the four pillars and the roof, and we put it all together here in the garage. We assembled it, and spent a lot of time, and took it over to the Landmark Center—not Landmark Center. To the—

PS: Civic Center.

RM: Civic Center. Yes, the old [St. Paul] Civic Center. And assembled it, and we had a lot of fun doing that. From that year onwards, and many years, we had worked for those things. Maybe six, seven, eight, nine, ten years, working on various projects. And working late into the night and putting all these things together, which is a lot of fun, working together. Because you're trying to make things out of Styrofoam, and this and that, and you're doing everything yourself. So there were a lot of us who did that, and those were really fun projects to work on.

PS: Did you involve the kids in the projects? In building things?

RM: At some level. At some level, yes. They used to come and help, at some level. But mainly it is manual labor, which is assembling. But in some cases, they did help. And some of the people here, they had kids who also helped. They volunteered at the booth, very oftentimes.

I think they got over the fact that they are wearing something different, which is okay. They knew what it stood for and things like that. So in many ways, I think the biggest benefit SILC brought in was that comfort level. They could switch from one to the other, and they didn't feel inhibited by that, as if they lost something or they are diminished by something.

PS: So they became multicultural?

RM: Definitely, yes. And I think—I was talking to my son the other day and I asked him the question, "Do you feel, in some sense, having a greater understanding of whatever you want to call it—life, how you look at life—than if you were not exposed to it?"

He said, "Yes." There is an added, small dimension, which has been added on to his outlook, and the way he looks at things, and in his value system. And I think if that is what SILC wanted to accomplish, I think that's what, really, it wanted to accomplish, in my mind, is to give that extra dimension or whatever. Because they know a different language, they know different music, different arts, and the question is, are you able to derive some pleasure from it? And they seem to.

PS: So your son found this really helpful?

RM: Yes. I mean, in many ways, personally, that is what I was hoping. It's just like, when I came here and I learned about all the things here and the culture and the history, I definitely feel enriched, and the value system. There are a lot of things which this country instills in you, and I think that definitely made me a different person. A better person, unquestionably.

Personally, that is the same thing I was looking for for my kids, is that the benefits I had, will they be able to benefit, by being exposed to what they did not have, when they're growing up. Not readily available, but it's available through SILC—

PS: Tell me about some of the other special events for SILC that you worked on, that you have special memories of, if there were any.

RM: When we started working at SILC, we had a very active person here. She moved to California now. Rama Padmanabhan. She used to be a principal of SILC, and I think later became president of SILC. I think the time I was working with SILC as president, she was the principal.

We talked about various things and one of the things that was brought in, I think around that

time, was the idea of celebrating festivals. These are typical festivals in India, which were celebrated at different times of the year. And, again, one of the things we wanted to do was to bring in secular festivals, which everybody celebrated. So that the importance is the festival, not the message or the religiousness. And I'm sure they all had some mythological story behind it.

The idea was that we will take one day of a SILC class, and we'll have no classes but we celebrate it as if we are celebrating it back in India. And, to many of us, I think we were reliving these great memories. I mean, I have memories about this festival called Onam, which is a harvest plus flower festival, as a kid. For the kid, this is probably the greatest thing.

PS: How do you celebrate Onam?

RM: The regular celebration, for ten days you bring flowers. You get up early in the morning, you go and pick flowers, and you bring, and then you make flower arrangements, very beautiful flower arrangements.

PS: In a vase or on the floor?

RM: On the floor, outside the house. They kind of clean up an area, and then they put flowers in a particular way.

PS: And the whole family does that together?

RM: Usually, it'll be done by somebody in the family. Women usually do it. Like it will be my sister or my mother or somebody, would typically—but as kids, we were the ones who go ahead and picked little flowers. It was an enjoyable time.

And then, on the tenth day, you celebrate this thing called the Onam, and it's a feast and you eat a lot, and then you have singing and hear music and you have boat races. And you get holidays. You get a week off, typically, in the old days, for schools.

I think, as kids, we remember this with very fond memories. It's kind of a great time. And so we wanted to bring that concept in from—this is from Kerala, and then we had Holi from the northern part. I forget what the other four were. There were four celebrations marking four times of the year.

PS: Tell me about Holi.

RM: Holi was very nice. As a kid, I did not know about it because I grew up in the south, and Holi is not very common in the south. I think now it may be different because of the communication and TV and so on.

And so the first time I played Holi—that's what they say, you play Holi—is when I went as an

undergraduate for engineering. I went to study in IIT in Bengal, and that's where I was. And then so the dorms that I stay in, people just go nuts. It's [unclear], basically, because you're at school.

PS: What do you do?

RM: You throw color on anybody. You have this colored powder and colored water, and you can throw it on anybody, on any of their clothes. And then you are supposed to embrace each other or hug each other. It's a day of friendship. So you wear the worst clothes those days, because you know they're going to be trashed anyway.

PS: And what were the colors and the powders made out of?

RM: These powders, I don't know what they were made out of, but they were typically bright red, bright pink, yellow, all kinds of colors.

PS: Sort of the beginning of punk-rocking, huh?

RM: And they had these big piles, and I don't know what they are made out of. These are the same things they put on the forehead and all that. Similar kind of—it's very fine powder. It's one of those things, I dealt with it, but I don't know how it is made.

PS: It doesn't have a smell?

RM: No. It doesn't have any smell.

PS: So it's just colored powder. And when you make the water, and throw the colored water at people, is it just that same powder, dissolved in water?

RM: Something like that, yes. I think they make it, and then sometimes they had little bombs (balloons) and all that. They can squirt it on people. And there were interesting sides to it, in the sense that, as young guys or whatever you want to call it, one of the things you always look for to hug is, of course, are girls.

PS: Yes.

RM: And so in those days, they would not get out of the house.

PS: The girls wouldn't?

RM: Well, they don't want to because all these guys will be coming and hugging them all the time. So there was that mischievous portion, too.

PS: So how did the boys cope with all these girls being in their house that day?

RM: Well, you know, we all grew up that way, in the sense we were all separate. The boys grew up as boys and the girls grew up as girls.

PS: Right. Did you, though, coax the girls out of their houses on Holi?

RM: No. You better not do it. You'll be in trouble.

PS: Oh, okay.

RM: We were in the hostel, in the dorm, so it is different there. So we went to the boys' dorms and even among the dorm, we have a couple of hundred people.

PS: So even at college, the boys and girls were separated?

RM: Yes. Living-wise, absolutely. The girls had their separate dorms, and there is no coed dorm.

PS: And in classes were they separate?

RM: No.

PS: No. They could be together.

RM: Not in colleges, not really. Not unless you went to some—high schools, it could be, but the schools I went to did not have very strict ones, and they had for some years, and I think for some years they didn't have it. Just combined.

PS: So when you did Holi at SILC, how did you do that? You were in somebody else's building, right?

RM: Right. We kind of controlled it by using a finger or something, and just touching it on the face, or, you know, a little bit. Not throw colors. And if you did that, we used to clean it up after that. So it was, yes, we had that situation that we cannot mess up the place.

PS: Was it hard to get a hold of the powder here?

RM: No. You can buy it. You can get it. I think even the stores, Indian stores may sell it, or things like that.

PS: At that time of year?

RM: Right, yes.

PS: And what time of year is that?

RM: That is towards the summertime. I think it comes in March, April, I think, if I remember correctly.

PS: So in India, where Holi is celebrated, is that then seen as kind of a playful time?

RM: It is. It is supposed to be—it has noble ideas behind it, but it can get mischievous, you can get into trouble, depending upon where it is. But generally, it is a time where, you know, it is like a time where families get together and things like that.

PS: Oh, so there is a family component to it?

RM: It depends—I think different people and different segments may have it slightly differently. The reason I'm saying this is because it is not something celebrated even now in my house or in my brother's house or anything. Holi is not ever—people know what it is.

PS: Are there any true celebrations you can't remember what they are?

RM: I think one was Diwali, the festival of lamps. I remember like the festival of flowers, festival of color, festival of lamps, and the fourth one, I forget. It was festival of something else.

PS: And what are the roots of Diwali?

RM: Diwali can have religious connotation to it, depending upon how you celebrate it. And the traditional one has a mythological story behind it, on how Diwali comes in. But when you look at it in the practical sense, what you really do is light up lamps and keep them outside the house, all over the place.

PS: So, fire lamps?

RM: They are oil lamps, oil lamps of various different kinds. It could be oil lamps or [unclear]. One of the things we did in school was, basically, to make the lamp out of clay, and then, basically, you can go to any level you want. Some people, I think, even went to the level of making it, and then firing it in an oven, and then getting it into a form, and things like that. And then you can do some little paintings and decorations on it.

So it became more of an art project, as opposed to getting into the religious side of it, because there's a connotation to it. And the idea being that it's a festival of lamps. Just like saying one is a festival of flowers, rather than get into the details of why it came. Because to the kids, maybe the more important thing is how it is celebrated, as opposed to why it is celebrated, really, in some sense.

PS: So you were dealing with the mechanics of it, rather than the meaning of it?

RM: In some sense, yes, because I think it definitely becomes a mythological story.

PS: And the mythological stories all have religion connected to them?

RM: Absolutely.

PS: Okay. So you just wanted to—

RM: Well, this is where there is some confusion in it. The two epics in India are *Ramayana* and *Mahabharatha*. These have taken on a meaning as if they are connected to the religion. The religious books are not—they are not the religious books. They are the mythological stories, which are to bring in some points or issues or whatever it is.

But to many people, they even consider the characters to be gods and goddesses. The real fundamental book of religion is not that. So, again, to some people, that may not be the case. To some people, that may be the case. So in one of the mythological stories, there is an event that takes place, and somebody comes back or whatever it is, or a bad guy is removed or something, and this is some kind of a celebration associated with it.

But it was looked upon as one of the celebrations where people light lamps and have gettogethers. Because in the end, that's what you do. You get together and have good food and meet the people and all that stuff.

So I think the idea was to take that portion of it, the celebration portion of it, and celebrate it as a simple festival. And for people who wanted to get more deep into it, they can look it up and that sort of thing. It's a lot like, you know, everybody celebrates Christmas. You may not be a Christian, but—

PS: Right. By exchanging gifts and sending cards and all those things. That was exactly what was coming to my mind. And yet, most people who grew up in the Christian culture understand that Christmas is about the birth of a particular baby in a particular country, and all that went with that. Would you say that the average person on the street, who celebrates Holi or who celebrates Onam, understands the mythology behind it, or do they just do it on a "Oh, this is a big party" level? When you were growing up, did people around you understand the—

RM: Well, when we were growing up, I think Onam was a little different. Onam is a statewide festival. Everybody celebrated Onam, in different capacities. The people who were Hindus probably celebrated a little more with the religious side because they would go to the temple, they would light the lamp, and things like that. For the rest of the people, it may be just a party. It's a family get-together because they give holidays. So for the rest of them it is, but they do

celebrate Onam as a very important event. It may not be as an important religious festival. So, in some sense, because you have boat races, you have a holiday, you get awards, you have this, that, people who work even get bonuses for that time, money during that time, you know, to celebrate. It's like getting a Christmas bonus.

So I think when it comes to Diwali, I think the situation is different. I think a fair number of people may celebrate it as a religious festival, in India. And a fair amount of people may not celebrate it at all.

PS: But they would at least understand.

RM: They understand it as, at that time, they light lamps and put it all around, that sort of thing. It's a lot like a Christmas tree, in some sense. You may have a Christmas tree in your house, but you may not be a practicing Christian, but you may have it.

PS: And yet, the Christian churches are full on Christmas day. No other time of the year. [Laughs]

RM: So, yes, it takes on different meanings to different people. I think the best example I can give is, a lot of the people, if you, you know, one of the comments you always hear is that, in India there are thousands of gods and goddesses. Well, not really, but that is the level some people feel comfortable in thinking about it.

The religion, basically, talks about one. The word "om" actually corresponds to that. But these stories about God appearing in various ways or whatever, I mean, they're stories. And sometimes people tend to think of them as, you know, whatever it is, gods and goddesses.

There is this, what do you call it, dichotomy, so to speak, where you hear them refer to that, and then you ask somebody. They'll say, "Well, really, if you look at the religion, it has nothing to do with it" kind of stuff. It's kind of confusing, I admit.

PS: So you said you weren't raised with any practice of Hinduism, and yet, what would you identify your practice as?

RM: The way I said it is because my parents never sat down and taught me, specifically, like reading from a book. We had these books at home, to read from. My mother used to read. But, you know, it's like saying, "Okay, I went to Sunday school to learn it." No, I did not do that.

But I grew up next to a temple, so the temple had all kinds of things, on a daily basis, because three times a day there is something happening at the temple. And I know all the intricate details about what is done, why it is done, all these things. And then there festivals maybe two or three times a year when there are a lot of cultural programs, like dances and so on. All that stuff.

PS: Did you attend those?

RM: Yes. For example, as a kid, I used to go see Katha [dance]. Kali is the most famous dance coming out of Kerala. They [a troupe] came here and performed at Minnesota a couple of times. People go absolutely—people who love this art form, they literally go nuts over it. This is a dance form, and a story is being told. Actually, it is sung.

And there is a person who—there are characters who are dressed up in certain ways. By looking at the person, you can figure out—all that makeup, you can figure out if it's a good person or a bad person, because these are all mythological stories. And you go to see this program. Usually it starts late in the night, maybe around ten, eleven, twelve o'clock in the night, and goes on all night.

And as a kid, I always used to go and see this thing. As a little kid, some of the stories are scary and you scream and all that stuff. But those are very fond memories, and I'm really, really fond of it now because, you know, if you can understand the singing, it is just absolutely magnificent. I cannot think of anything else which is more interesting.

But then again, I think there was no—there was nothing forced about it, though. You could criticize anything you wanted. I had an aunt who used to go to the temple daily, and my brothers and I used to make fun of her, and say that you're wasting all your—lighting all these lamps and things like that.

And that was fine. You know, you can criticize the practice, but your belief may be something else. I think there was a distinct difference between the belief and the practice. The practice was very important for people who thought at a simple level. I mean, not in the philosophical level, I should say. For the other people, it is not at all important. By that, what I mean is a person may never go to a temple, but he may be a God-fearing person, so to speak. And I think the same is true here, too.

So that is the way I was brought up, but I had a neighbor, a person by the name of—I still remember him. Very old person. His name was—he was my next-door neighbor. His name was Gopala Iyer. Iyer indicates that he was a Brahmin who came from the Madras state, because they spoke the language of Tamil.

One of the things he used to do, as a little kid when I was growing up, every day, or—I don't know remember, was it every day or not? He used to read these books, these mythological books, which have got I don't know how many thousands of stories in it, like Arabian Nights. And he used to tell these stories in detail. So I still remember listening to all these stories from him, and so I knew all the mythological stories.

Then by the time I was in high school, in the temple I found, during festival, there is a performance by a storyteller. He's a professional storyteller, and we used to go for it. And he

will, for example, take three lines, four lines, a stanza from this book, which is in Sanskrit, and then he will recite it. And then he will explain it. It may take an hour to explain that. And he'll make stories out of it.

One of the things he could do is that he could make fun of the audience, anybody. So he could look at me, as a little kid—when there was a monkey in the story, he would point to all the little kids. Because one of the rules in this is that you're not supposed to laugh, although it is very humorous.

And the reason is because, in the old days, this was the entertainment for the kings, and he, the storyteller, had the freedom to even make fun of anybody in the audience. And, naturally, if the king is made fun of and you laugh, your life is in danger.

So this was how this art form came up. We got interested in this because, when you're very young, you're not interested in anything like that. And then, the person who spoke was outstanding. He was very short and a very meek-looking person, but once he took on this role, he was like a completely different person.

So I used to go and listen to this, and my brother and I used to go to listen to the storyteller, and we knew all the mythological stories in great detail, of everything that happened. But at the end of it, you also understand why the story was there. So that's how we picked up a lot of the things without being sent to a religious school or whatever.

The choice was ours, in the sense that nobody would say anything if we didn't go. But there were certain things which we did, like, you know, praying—like, my mother will light a lamp every day in the evening, around six o'clock, at dusk. It is a rule. And then she will take the lamp to different parts of the house. At those times, there are certain times you may pray during, you know, certain locations.

Those were all part of it. Or we may go to the temple with my mom, and you may pray. But the prayers and all that are not taken from a book. It is what you may hear your mother saying, or what you may think that you are saying, or things like that.

So in that sense, it's very hard to describe. On the one hand, we were exposed to plenty of it. On the other hand, there was nothing thrust upon us. Nobody will say that you have to go to this class or you have to go to that. There were no classes, to start with.

And so I think it was free-wheeling, in some sense. And you can absorb and pick up material to the level that you want to, so we used to have serious arguments and discussions, if you like the philosophy of it. And say that the important thing is not these stories, what was behind the stories.

So that's how I grew up. I benefited a lot from being next to a temple, not in the religious

schooling of it, but because of the activities there, which gave me a chance to listen to things in great detail, which was good.

And the interesting thing was, this temple had an idol. It's kind of hard to explain. Each temple has a particular idol in it, and this could be from a mythological character, or it could be—yes, it is mostly from mythological characters, or whatever it is. So here, the idol is a woman, but she is known for education and knowledge.

And so it is a *Saraswathi* temple, and *Saraswathi* temples are famous for—the blessing is—you go to pray there to say that you want to get a good education. This is what is said. But that doesn't matter. So these temples are associated with that, and there are only two such temples in India, I'm told, or in the southern part of India, and one was next to my house.

So during exams, it's a busy place. Everybody will go, including me, used to go there. I went there every day because I used to take a bath and walk through the temple every day. But you may pause a little longer kind of stuff, you know.

So on the one hand, you had that kind of, I don't know what you'd say, that kind of a direction, or that kind of a thinking, that you do have somebody specifically for something, or you're asking for a favor, or whatever it is. On the other hand, it's up to you, too. You don't have to go the temple.

So there were some interesting combinations of that, from that standpoint. And there were lectures on various things during festivals, and you can go and listen to it. And that's about it. So I think 99.9 percent was left to you.

PS: At least in your family.

RM: Yes. It's true in—I would say it is true in the circle of friends we had, where it's really never forced because you cannot force it. There is no particular class you go to. There are certain groups where they think that this is their profession, that they want to become a priest. That is maybe a little different.

PS: What caste was your family from?

RM: This is a very interesting story, and why I'm saying it's a story is, till I was in the final year of high school, I did not know what caste I was in, because it never was an issue and it never sprung up for any reason. For what reason does it become important?

The reason I say it is important is because I did not realize that this is only the case in where I was growing up, but in a lot of other places it was a number-one issue. The day they were born, they knew their caste. I had no idea what caste I was in.

There was a very interesting story that somebody was getting married, and a guy from a family was marrying a girl from another family, and they were a slightly different caste, but this guy could marry this girl. But his sister could not marry somebody from a similar family.

So I was sitting with my mother, and I asked my mother, "Why is this a problem?"

And she said, "They're from two different castes."

I said, "So what's the big deal?"

Well, then she said, "Well, don't you know that if you're from this caste—"

The men can marry down, so to speak, if you're in a hierarchy, but the women can never marry down. The reason the men married down was, there were not enough women in the group. This happened in Namboodiris, for example. They would marry Nairs. Namboodiris are the Brahmins, but the Nairs are not the Brahmins. The men could do that, but not the women.

So that is when I came to know that we are not of this particular caste. Then I asked her what caste it is, and nobody knew what it was. So I kind of decided I should find out by myself. Because there are the four castes, right? Not the four castes, but four groups of them. The Brahmins, the warriors, the businesspeople, and whatever is the lowest.

And so I did not know who belonged to the warrior group and the business group. I never knew anybody by that identification, and there was no identifying last names which could say, "You are from this." So I finally found out that we are from the lowest caste, the *Sudra*, which is supposed to be. All Menons come from that. I didn't know it. I have never been asked this question. You know, "What is it? What is your caste?" And hence, the implication.

So when I went to other states, they all knew it, and I was very, very surprised, why is it so important. And then they started explaining the reason behind it, of, socially, it was important. You know, who they marry is important, or who they did not marry was important, and so on.

Kerala, or maybe the place I grew up in, had some slight differences in this area, and many of us didn't know. Like, my wife did not know what her caste was.

PS: Wouldn't it have been unusual that your father was extremely well-educated and did the level of work he did, if he had—being from the lowest caste? Wouldn't that be somewhat unusual? Isn't it also—

RM: No. Kerala did not have this—okay, there is the other called scheduled caste, which is not in the list even. I think one of the blessings of Kerala was the education side of it. The kings gave very much importance to the education.

And I think, as I became more and more curious about it, as I started reading, what I found, mainly, and I heard this is true, is that the biggest thing was the—educating the women was the most important thing that happened in Kerala. And once the women got education, they made sure their children got educated. If that had not happened, I don't know what would have happened.

And so, like, you know, my mother's generation, there are many I know who went to high school and college, which is unthinkable in a lot of other communities. Like my wife's mother, she has a bachelor's degree in biology. My mother's biggest disappointment was that she wanted to go to college and her father did not allow her to go to college, and she could not speak English. This was one of her disappointments.

So I think that actually eliminated the need, or eliminated these caste-related issues, in a certain level. I think if you go into the very small villages, I think it's a different situation. [unclear] My father, by the way, was not highly educated. He had a high school degree, and I think at eighteen or nineteen, I heard—I still don't know exactly when he left—he left India, and went to work in Malaysia, and that's what he did. And then he would spend all his life there. But in those days, a high school education meant you had some good education.

In that sense, I don't know, at least in my generation, getting an education was not a problem. It doesn't matter who you are.

PS: In Kerala, at least.

RM: In Kerala, yes. You could walk into any school, get an education. It was never a problem.

PS: So it was based on your ability to learn, rather than having the money to pay for it or being from a certain class.

RM: Education is almost free, and you have to pay very little money. Like up to high school, it is free. Hardly anything at that level. I mean, a little bit here and there. But the money was to buy the books, which were expensive. Other than that, no, there is no expense. So anybody can come.

In fact, we used to have people, what they call servants, in the house, you know, who helped us. They cleaned the house. We had a young guy in our house, maybe fifteen, sixteen. He had not gone to high school, so we made sure that—he used to help us—he was the one who taught me how to ride a bicycle and all that stuff.

So we wanted him to go—so we started teaching him school. Then I started teaching him. And then made sure that he got a good job, instead of working in our house. I remember, he went and wrote the exam to become a bus conductor, the person who gives a bus ticket. And he was so excited when he got the job.

And I think a lot of families kind of give them money. Like the person who worked in our house, who used to clean our yards, I think her daughter or son wanted to finish high school, and we made sure that he went to high school.

Now when I go, I have my brother's house—there's a little girl who comes to help, and they are from Madras, and there the education importance is very little. Her mother doesn't want her to go to school. So whenever we go there, I give her money, separately, for her. Because if you give it to her mother, she wouldn't get it.

And then I found out, the best thing to do is, I give her all the pencils and pens, for a year's supply. And every time I tell her, "Don't give up school. When I come back, if you're out of school, I'm going to come and get you." And very often, I think that a lot of—one of the good things I see in Kerala is this importance given to education. That is your meal ticket, and that's the way we all grew up. So education, as far as I can see, I mean, I can pick out the poorest of kids, but the kids went to school.

I know this lady who used to live in our town. She had leprosy, and she had no place to live. She used to kind of live in a little shed by the police station. Houses next to a police station, too. But her son went to school, and daughter went to school, and I think she finished high school. I'm sure, some way, she has taken care of her mom.

So, education was always a meal ticket, in that sense. When I came out of Kerala, I realized it's not at all the case.

PS: In the rest of India.

RM: In the rest of India. It's a different beast. It's shocking. I'm sure in Kerala, in small towns, where the people have strong control, you know, it's a dominant family, things may be different. What town is it, doesn't matter who you are, really.

PS: Well, I think we're running out of time. But thank you very much for sharing all your stories. It's been fascinating.

RM: I kind of feel like I was lucky, in some sense, because somewhere in there, there was this independent spirit somebody gave me. I don't know who it was. Because I remember, when I was in high school, I kind of realized that the way we are speaking English was not right.

And so I tried to listen to BBC every day, through the radio. And I said, "If English is spoken, the English people would speak it." I think it came from my father, I think. My father used to be very particular about how you speak English. He said otherwise he would—I think he was influenced by the British, anyway. But he used to say that I owe it to the language.

And so I was, in many ways, you know, the idea of self-taught became very, very attractive, in the sense, if I don't know something, I'll go and read and find out, which I think helped many of us. And then, I think we grew up at a time where we kind of did a lot of things ourselves.

Like seeing this movie, *Cinema Paradiso*, it reminded me of my town, where I used to go and collect little films [clips] from the movie theater. You know, the thing they cut off? And then we'd bring it home, and then we will take a mirror and reflect the sunlight through that, and you project it and you see a picture, a still picture. This was science at its best.

And so things like that. Then we decided to start a handwritten magazine, by the kids in our street. So my brother drew the pictures, and I wrote articles and jokes, and somebody wrote this thing. And we had this magazine, which we used to publish every month. That way, all kids of our age started writing at a very early age, and this became—it took a lot of time, but this became a very, very important activity.

Then we started playing cricket. And then we had the temple next to us, and then we had a church nearby. And so many different things. We had a library. We could go and borrow one book a day. Not more than that.

And so I think, in many ways, I consider myself lucky, being exposed to a lot of different things. I think maybe nobody ever told me that I could not do something. I hear from a lot of others that, oftentimes, they've been told that, you cannot do something [this or that].

Maybe because my parents were outside India. My brothers had—you know, my brother was already as a visiting professor. He had gone from one country to the other. And he used to bring things from Malaysia. My mother spoke Malay, and I learned Japanese when I was eight years old. We had a book to learn Japanese. I still remember words from it because, under the Japanese occupation, everybody had to speak Japanese.

So it was interesting, and I consider myself to be—I don't know whether people get the same chance. And there was no TV. Such a wonderful thing. No radio in my house. I think the first radio was when I was at college, I had.

I just feel that I was lucky. In other words, I probably would not have been exposed to all these things. And I never thought that I would end up in United States. I never wanted to come here. If my studies in India had gone well, I would not have come here.

PS: Fate stepped in, huh?

RM: Something steps in, and there are so many people who helped me, or who look out here. I remember, in Atlanta, I used to live in the dorm and I used to walk to buy groceries, and people used to look at me, and they knew that I was a foreign student or a graduate student, and there were many of us.

So I went there, and one day—next to that there was a store, and I wanted to buy a cowboy hat. I'm in the U.S. six months, maybe less than six months. I lived in the dorm for about two years, in the graduate dorm.

So the store manager looked at me and said, "Are you a student at Georgia Tech?"

I said, "Yes."

He said, "What are you studying?"

I said, "Engineering."

And he asked me, "Are you an undergraduate?"

I said, "No."

And he looked at me and said, "You know, you don't need that hat."

I think that was the best advice I ever got, and I didn't buy it. He said, "You're a graduate student. Why do you need this hat?"

So I used to buy groceries, and I learned cooking, how to make chicken. That's the only thing I knew. And then I used to buy groceries in a bag, and I used to walk. It's reasonably cold. And one day, a person who was driving by stopped, and he asked me, "Are you going to the dorm? Are you a student?"

I said, "Yes."

He said, "You know, it's a little cold. I'll drop you there."

So I got in there. I mean, this is 1971. You know, it's safe. So he picked me up. It was only maybe a half a mile. He dropped me there and he said, "You know, I know that you will graduate, that you'll get a good job, and you'll buy a car, and when you buy a car, come to my gas station and buy gas."

So, three years later, when I moved into an apartment and I bought a car, a second-hand car. I still don't [unclear]. A Toyota for \$500, I bought. And [unclear], and I had an accident the next day. Or a week later, a left turn, somebody hit me. The insurance paid me \$499, because of the \$500 they wanted for the car. And I got the car fixed for \$90. So I got a car for \$90.

And so after that, every day my friends used to give me their car, "Please drive my car." The reason I am saying this is that I bought this car and right away I went to his gas station and I

said, "Do you remember me?" Of course, he did not remember me. I said, "I am here because I bought a car, and I want to buy gas from you." And I did go and buy gas from him, and I think gas in those days used to cost thirty cents, I think.

So there were people in my—as I said, my advisor in India, who was an Indian, who kind of looked at me and said, "You know, you're wasting your talent here. You're going to be here you'll do your thesis, but I don't know that you're going to be happy. Why don't you go abroad? I'll write a recommendation letter for you."

And so there were people who appeared at particular times. You know, like the job I got here was an accident. It's when they asked me about another person, and I put my recommendation because I knew this person, and then I ended up getting the job.

And I picked a field which was totally new in 1975. Our institute, Georgia Tech, in Atlanta had just bought this thing. It was in the next-door lab. I go and look at it, and I kind of feel that this is something of the future, I want to learn it. So I started learning a little bit about it.

The reason I was hired in Houston was because I knew a little bit about it, and my first job was to implement this new technology, which is made by this company, and that becomes my career. So there are all these twists in life. There are so many things that have happened in life.

PS: And it will continue to happen. Well, thank you very much for taking time today.

RM: Well, thank you very much, yes SILVesot

PS: I appreciate it.