

Shanti Shah
Narrator

Polly Sonifer
Interviewer

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PS: This is Polly Sonifer, interviewing Shanti Shah, on March 19, 2000. How are you this evening?

SS: Fine, thank you.

PS: Good. Tell me first, your name and your age and your Indian language heritage, what language you grew up speaking.

SS: Shanti Shah. I'm fifty-three and I spoke at home Kutchi, which is a dialect, and Gujurati at school, which is the closest language, which actually has its own script of writing.

PS: So Kutchi is not written language?

SS: No, it's a—

PS: Just a dialect.

SS: A dialect.

PS: What part of India is Kutch in?

SS: It's in the northwest. It's a district of Gujarat.

PS: And you grew up and lived there until when?

SS: Oh, I was born there, but I grew up mostly in Bombay.

PS: And how is it that you came to live in the United States? How old were you when you immigrated?

SS: I was twenty-one, in 1967. I first immigrated to Nova Scotia, Canada, and lived there for about eighteen months, and then moved to Syracuse, New York.

PS: And why did you come to Canada?

SS: I got married. I had known somebody since I was fairly young, and he wanted me to be there, so I met up with him and we got married at the end of '67. I came in November, got married in December, of '67.

PS: So you married somebody that you had known. Was this an arranged marriage?

SS: Kind of, but as I said, we'd known each other for a long time.

PS: So that's what brought you to the United States.

SS: I'm sorry.

PS: That's what brought you to the United States, was he was transferred to New York.

SS: We chose, both of us—his name is Ramji, Vishant's dad, actually, and he left much earlier and lived in England for a while, then lived in Canada, and then we both chose to move to Syracuse. You know, we really needed to move some place else; a number of our friends had immigrated to the United States at the same time. We actually took a summer trip in 1968, traveled through New York and upstate New York, and did the usual Niagara Falls trip, and stopped in Syracuse for an interview, got a job, so we just said, fine, we'll apply for immigration.

PS: And at that time, that was no problem?

SS: It wasn't a problem. What we were naive about is that Canadian immigration was so easy, but American immigration took longer. You know, Canadian immigration, you walk in the office and within a month you've got something. We applied for U.S. Visas thinking that we were going to get it within a month or two. Well, it took six months to get through the process through and everything. But it was not a problem. It was not as tough as it is now.

PS: So then you were in New York. How did you happen to come to Minnesota?

SS: My husband, at that time, got an interview, and he also had a job offer in Minnesota. Ellerbe Architects, he interviewed with them and decided that he liked their offer. He is an architect.

PS: So he came here for a job and you followed?

SS: Yes.

PS: And by that time you had a child?

SS: Yes, at that time Vishant was almost two, or was it a year and a half? About two years old, I think. We lived in Syracuse for about five years, I think.

PS: And what was it like settling into Minnesota back then? What year was this then?

SS: 1974. It was really strange. When I first came, I didn't fully understand the distances, Syracuse is in the center, so within four hours, you can, at any given time, drive to New York, Niagara Falls, Montreal, Toronto, anywhere you want to go. Minneapolis is far away from every major city.

PS: Except for St. Paul. Who wants to go there?

SS: So, you know, it was easy for us to get out of town in Syracuse. Here you had to drive eight hours before you got to Chicago. And we lived in Eagan, and Eagan in those days was not big, and shopping was not close by. I used to write to my friends in Syracuse, saying, "You should see this place. This is like, there is hardly anybody here." You had to drive about fifteen miles before getting to a major shopping area. I think I went to that Target [store] in South St. Paul. We had to drive quite a ways. And of course, I didn't know much about other parts of the city. It was sparsely populated compared to the East Coast.

PS: And was there much of an Indian community here at that time?

SS: Let's see, there was. I remember going to one of the Gujarati Samaj Diwali functions, and the number of people that were there, like less than—about 100 or so, and we were in a circle. It was a small gathering. Not that Syracuse had that many Indians, so I was not that shocked in terms of the number of people. I thought that was probably common, in terms of having a small Indian community.

PS: So did you go to seek out the Gujarati community, first of all, or did you just look for any Indians?

SS: Actually, I know Neena [Gada]'s family from India. When my husband came to Minnesota, we had known that Neena was here. He had contacted them at that time. The Kutchi community, you probably know this already, is fairly small—even in India, we are a small community, so we kind of know each other. So we had contacted her, she had invited him for dinner. By the time I came here, my husband had already made the connection. That's the way I got introduced to other families, mostly Gujaratis. I had a number of Punjabi friends, both in Canada and in other parts of the U.S. So I tended to look for Punjabi friends, but I was not particular.

PS: And then at a certain point, you and a number of other people got involved with the SILC [School of India for Languages and Culture] school. Tell me how that came to be.

SS: Let's see, what happened? What was that year? Was it 1980, '79? I can't remember. I had met Shankaran Menon some place, and Neena had also mentioned that there is a school called Bharat School. Vishant was about five or six, I can't remember, and had decided that it would be nice for him to attend an Indian school. Menon has very high hopes about introducing Indian children to Indian languages, so I thought that would be interesting. You know, as a parent, you are always looking for these things.

We were living in Burnsville at the time. I had gotten a divorce in the meantime and I was back in Minnesota, living here, but I was in a small apartment. Burnsville was just like any other suburb. We were not very close to other Indian families, so Vishant really had no other Indian families who he associated with day in and day out. So I thought that would be an appropriate thing that he'd get to see other Indian kids once a week or whatever.

So that was my motivation to get him in some place where it was conducive to introduce him to Indian culture. And for Vishant it was not that difficult, because he was used to going back to India every few years, two, three years or so, so it was not a foreign concept to him at that time.

PS: Did you speak Gujarati to him or Kutchi to him at home?

SS: Kutchi.

PS: You spoke Kutchi. So he was already fluent in Kutchi?

SS: Yes, somewhat.

PS: Somewhat?

SS: Well, the kids are okay until they go to school and then they start speaking English with other kids in class. What happened, at least at that time, kids wanted to speak English, because the teachers would say, "Well, you're not doing too well." The kids are highly motivated to be more like other kids.

PS: So he was preferring to speak English?

SS: I think slowly it kind of migrated itself to English.

PS: So did you speak English and Kutchi to him at home?

SS: Yes, I went back and forth.

PS: So he was also fluent in English?

SS: Yes.

PS: All right, so you met Dr. Menon, and did you send him to the Bharat School?

SS: Yes, I actually joined Bharat School and I offered to help also, because as long as I was going to be there, that was one way for me to help. And Neena and I, we talked about it. I think we needed some help with the Gujarati group, so I offered to help. What I noticed is that Indian kids did not do outdoor activities. I offered to do things outside with the kids also. At that time, I knew Stefan [Peterson] and we used to go out skiing and things like that, so we took the kids out skiing. I think we may have had a couple of outings skiing and skating. That's the way I was also helping out.

PS: So you were physically active, which was different from a lot of the other Indian parents?

SS: Yes, yes. Or at least it felt like it at that time. Cold weather is not exactly conducive to outdoor activities.

PS: No, no, not generally. So you were sort of the Phy. Ed. [Physical Education] teacher?

SS: We did a lot of that outside, yes.

PS: So you got involved with that school and how did that go? What was that like for you? What was that experience like?

SS: It was very good, and I think the school may have gone on for about a year or less, I can't remember. But as the school came to close that year, we realized that there was some, most of us were thinking of this as a volunteer effort, as a volunteer organization. And Menon, in his mind, had bigger ideas. He's a very enterprising individual, so he was thinking much bigger. It is wonderful because he's thinking of introducing this concept all across the nation. You didn't hear as much about educational institutions, even in large cities, you didn't hear about it at that time.

So his concept was to make this a for-profit organization, or maybe as a school, it's nonprofit, but definitely privately held. And that was a notion that didn't sit well with a number of us. So we decided, let's rethink. What does this mean to us? It's nothing but a bunch of parents getting together, and it was nothing anymore than that.

And that's when I think Menon said, "You know, what I have in mind for Bharat School—I definitely have a different concept in my mind than what you are thinking. If you want to go have a non-profit school, it is definitely doable." But it was different than what he had in his mind. That's how we headed toward a non-profit school. And to some extent, both Ram [Gada] and Neena along with a number of parents who were there already, had a similar mind-set to open a non-profit school.

So we, Ram Gada and others had a number of discussions about this. It was always very good to have Ram, because he had helped a number of new organizations to start in the Twin Cities. , I think he might have been involved in the formation of Gujarati Sumaj and the Hindu Society [Hindu Mandir] at that time. So he knew how new organizations took shape, and as a result, it was good to have him on board to help us through some of that.

PS: This was Ram Gada?

SS: Ram Gada. And he helped shape some of what the thought processes would have been. So we, as a result, ended up, and my mind is just going blank, it was that fall or whatever, but at some point that fall, we started SILC. I remember being in a gathering where we met, one of the last meetings in the old building. It was some community center and I can't remember which one, but we all got together and decided we needed a name, and SILC was one that kind of stuck in everybody's mind, so off we went.

The building—I have to remember which one that was. Menon was renting, or getting that space from United Way, and I remember meeting with the president of the Minneapolis United Way at that time, meeting with him to say, “We’ve got a new school, we’d like to continue using this facility,” and he very politely declined my request. I don’t know how I ended up in the leadership position at that time. We decided then that we needed to find another facility.

And subsequently, through—I cannot remember what contacts we had—we ended up at the married student housing. It’s the usual, how do you find a space, and space that’s very reasonably priced, and also close enough, with appropriate parking. I mean, all the things that people look at. Safe enough for kids, you know, and a little space that we needed to play.

So the married student housing in St. Paul is what we selected. Very reasonably priced, and we had—I think one of the board members may have been living, who was a married student—living in that space, so it was easy for them to rent. Because we didn’t know for sure, as an outside agency, if we could have it, because we had no charter, nothing. We just had our name and I don’t think we had any formal documentation. We just said, “We’d like to rent a space that is really reasonable.” I think our price, the first few years, the monthly fee was very low—ten, fifteen dollars, I think.

PS: Per student?

SS: Per student. It was very low. So as a result, we couldn’t even think of having any more than that, because it didn’t even cross our mind, that you can pay higher rent, raise the price.

PS: But a lot of the people that were sending their children to be the students, what place were they at in their life? Were they young professionals?

SS: Mostly young professionals. All of them kind of came between the 1965 to 1970s time frame. You know, got their degrees, got their postdocs, jobs, then got married and had children. So the parents were at the same stage in their life, so they could have afforded more if they chose to pay more at that time.

We had, I'm pretty sure, fifteen students that we started out with. We may have had a larger number of students at Bharat School, so those who came to SILC were probably a smaller subset of that. But there were five or six core families. Neena, myself, Dr. Kumar and their two sons, Radhakrishnan Iyengar and his two children, Mahesh Jeerage.

Preeti Mathur was a new bride at the time, had just had arrived, and talk about somebody who has been there all along, it has been Preeti, for more than twenty years. She had no children at the time. I think she may have had a baby after the second year; her oldest daughter was born. Or she was pregnant during that time, but she was without a child, when SILC was founded. She was also an instructor in Hindi at that time.

And probably the languages would have been Gujarati, Hindi, Kannada, and Tamil, because I think the—yes, we did not have Malayalam at that time, because Godan [Nambudiripad] and those guys came a little later. Mrs. Iyengar was quite talented musically, so she was teaching music, Karnatic music for the children, and all of us taught the General Knowledge [classes].

PS: So that very first day that SILC opened up, describe the scene for me. The first day of the first class. What time of the morning is it?

SS: Sunday morning, I think it was like nine or ten, I cannot remember, and frankly, I remember little about it. I remember going upstairs and trying to figure out the configuration because we needed to have three classes, for three or four languages. We were quickly setting up the classes, so we just used the upstairs floor at that time. We had no clue on how we were going to get organized, just went with the flow. Arrange a table here, arrange a table there.

PS: And the students were already there at that point, or was this before the students came?

SS: Oh, no. We all arrived about the same time. It was nine o'clock.

PS: They were your children, right. I mean, everybody was bringing their children?

SS: Yes. So we just figured out the classes. That first time, I don't remember if we had like a break with milk and cookies. We introduced the break soon after, within that first year sometime, but I don't remember even having snacks for the kids or having this whole concept of having a break. I'm sure we did, but I cannot remember. It almost felt like that was a thought that came after. I mean, obviously, we were not thinking like children, or definitely not as trained professionals.

PS: So the first day, how did it go? At the end of the first day, all of you founding board member people, what did you say to each other? How was it?

SS: It was good. As I said, I remember very little about that first day. What I remember is that last meeting at Bharat School, where we decided that we wanted to have our own school, and that felt really good. There was probably a lot more exuberance in everybody's head, saying, "Yes, you know, this feels right" kind of thing. But the first day of the classes, I don't think, I don't remember much, frankly. At least it's not as vivid my mind as that other meeting was, which was, in my mind, was a turning point for us.

PS: Neena described to me the other night a bit about, that in India, typically, the men do leadership functions, and the men make decisions and the women just follow and do what they're told, basically. But it sounded, from what Neena described, like in SILC school, a bunch of women said, "Listen, Dr. Menon, we're going to do it differently," and a bunch of women just went forward and made something happen. What was it that gave you—is that correct?

SS: Yes, it was definitely driven by the mothers more than the fathers because mothers were there. They were the ones participating and they were the ones who were seeing the reality of things, because the men were not there volunteering, so that made sense.

PS: So what gave all of you Indian women, who traditionally were raised to be quiet and do what you were told, what gave you the wherewithal to go ahead and make this school happen? I mean, that's a huge undertaking, to start a school.

SS: I don't think it was that big a deal, because you have to think about it, all these women are, you know, they're all college educated. Mrs. Kumar has a Ph.D. All of us had at least undergraduate, if not graduate, degrees, so it was not a bunch of women who were stay-home-only-moms kind of thing. I was working outside. Mrs. Kamran is an engineer. Preeti had a degree in journalism and had worked as a journalist. So you already had highly motivated women, who obviously saw something that didn't make sense, and wanted to take a different route, and help do things better and differently, so that's what my sense is.

PS: So there weren't any cultural limitations on you because you were professional women, or because you were here in America?

SS: We were here in America, a), and b) none of the men, I don't think, ever said, well, we can't do that. Of course, Menon was the one who was trying to influence our decision making. For some people it might have been one of those, you know, here, you've got Menon and the rest of the women, and he's trying to lead and telling them what to do and we were saying, "Doesn't feel right, sorry. Gotta go." And I think that may have been probably more of an incentive to go out and do our own thing. It just didn't feel right, probably.

But as the other men—there was no one man, of the parents, who emerged as a leader to say, “I’m going to take charge and I’m going to direct us all as a flock to do something.” The good thing about it is that everybody kind of played a role, more or less, and that felt good. And that kind of tells you the women’s influences in collaborative way of doing things.

PS: So who were those early women? Can you remember all their names?

SS: Neena, myself, Preeti. Preeti came up with the name SILC, I’m pretty sure. Mrs. Kumar. I know Rijuta Pathre was also there, I’m pretty sure. There may have been a couple of others, but I cannot remember them now. [Kumad] Kamran. Kamrans and Rajani Patankar were involved at that time, also.

PS: And did that group of women become the first board of directors?

SS: Actually, we had maybe a couple of men who were directors. I think Radhakrishan Iyengar and Mahesh Jeerage, were the two men as part of the board, if I’m not mistaken. And myself being the principal, and I insisted that I did not want to be called “president.” And principal was not a concept that had run well with us yet, so I think I called myself “coordinator” or something like that. But in terms of organizing the classes and getting stuff set up.

PS: And you were working outside the home at this time, full time?

SS: Yes, I was.

PS: How did you find enough energy to do this all?

SS: Oh, frankly, it was not that difficult.

PS: It wasn’t?

SS: No, I mean, you know, it’s a once a week school, so it was not like every day.

PS: And you just took Vishant along with you?

SS: Right.

PS: And how old was he at that time?

SS: If this was 1979, he would have been like about seven or eight, I’m pretty sure.

PS: How did he feel about going to school on Sundays?

SS: I don't think he liked it. I didn't know about that until I read his narrative, of how much he did not like it. We always liked to tease him because he's a slow starter sometimes, most of the time. So he would be sleepy in the morning, and you would literally have to drag him out. Frankly, nearly all the kids were being dragged out of their beds, you know, Sunday morning, asleep, and had to quickly take a shower. We would force them to eat, and head for the school. This may have been one of the only mornings they could have slept in, and here we were, nasty parents that we were. Get them out of bed, and get them ready, and then, for me, I think it was like about a half an hour drive, so I had to leave by nine-thirty or so. So he had to get up at least at nine, so that was not an easy wake-up call.

PS: So what was it that motivated you to do all that? What was the strong purpose or the intention behind starting the school, that you would put all this energy into it and drag your children out of bed, and all that stuff?

SS: It came natural to me because I've always been active in the community. Both in my family, plus my own habits of doing things. If there is something I see needs to be done, I just do it.

PS: And what was it about the concept of SILC school that you said, "This needs to be done."

SS: Again, it was more the concept of having some place for our children that gave them the type of education, the type of cultural background that we wanted to give to our children. And at that time, I think our focus was mostly, we'll teach the languages, we'll teach them music, we'll teach them geography, we'll teach them history, and all that. None of us quite realized that what was the most important aspect of it was the socialization kids were getting, which I think we realized later on. This was kind of a bonus.

PS: So how to structure all the education so that the kids would get what you perceived as important for them?

SS: Fortunately, all of us, being brought up in India, we had a very structured set of basics that we were taught, so that's what we carried with us. We just simply translated, saying, "Well, you know, we need languages." Unfortunately, there are like 18,000 of them but we'll just teach the ones that we know." So language was in, no questions asked.

General Knowledge, as we knew it—we used to call it "Civics," you know, history, geography, and civics, or government, was traditionally taught. Math is something we didn't need to teach because it's the same, and then, the music. So those are the components that we started out with.

What we also realized is that at some points we needed to have some kind of break, a holiday or break kind of thing. So we started putting together plays and things, which were more involved. And then our involvement with Festival of Nations also forced us to start thinking, dancing and things in the springtime. So those were the combination of things that we came up with, but the

music, general knowledge, and languages were like the core competencies that we were thinking about. And music only because we had an individual who could do that.

PS: And who was that?

SS: Mrs. Iyengar and then there was Ramki, who was also a student, I think, at the time, a Ph.D. student at the university, who was quite talented and very involved with the kids. He was just very good.

PS: And what music did he do?

SS: He did Karnataki music and I think he taught an instrument—harmonium.

PS: Tell me what a harmonium looks like.

SS: It looks like a small keyboard, like a small piano keyboard, and I'm not sure exactly, looks like a little box with black and white keys, and I cannot even tell you how many keys it has, with accordion style air vents.

PS: So the sounds are on the cracks between the piano keys on a Western style piano?

SS: Right, right.

PS: Interesting. How did the children respond to learning about the harmonium and things like that?

SS: They enjoyed music. They really enjoyed it. They did rather well in thinking of the songs, although they didn't always understand the words because a lot of the songs were in Kannada. We knew that the kids needed to learn the Indian national anthem and *Vande Mataram*, which is not quite a national anthem. It was one of the freedom songs.

So in the morning the school started with *Vande Mataram* and the afternoon closed with *Jan Gana Mana*, which is the national anthem, which is another carryover from the Indian schools when we went to school. A number of us, at the schools where we studied, had sung morning prayer-like songs. They're not prayers, but they're like a prayer to the education, knowledge. So that was another carryover. The school always started with *Vande Mataram*, closed with *Jan Gana Mana*. So they had to, at minimum, learn those two songs. So that was part of the thing, and they enjoyed that.

They also liked learning harmonium, and I believe Ramki may have also taught *tabla*. And actually, I remember bringing one harmonium back with me one year, from India, for SILC, and a set of *tablas*, also, because also Vishant got real interested in *tabla*. In one of his visits in India, decided that he was going to learn *tabla*, so we had a *tabla* teacher and brought the drums back

with us. So that's one of those side outcomes that a lot of kids kind of took away with them, and that was a positive thing because if it wasn't for SILC, a lot of these students would not have gotten some of these side benefits.

PS: And what exactly is a *tabla*?

SS: *Tabla* is an Indian-style drum. There are two drums, actually, and when the drummer sits, you know, they sit cross-legged on the floor. The *tablas* sit on top of like this doughnut-shaped coaster-like support. The middle part of *tabla* is really what produces the right sound, because the edges have different sounds. So for a really good *tabla* player, it's the wrist and the fingers, a combination of the wrist and the fingers that really make the right sounds together. There are a number of harmonies that are played with *tablas* and harmonium together.

PS: So how long did Vishant study *tabla*?

SS: A couple of years. He lost interest.

PS: But a couple of years is quite a while. So tell me more about—I'm kind of not following my questions here. You went on being on the board with the title of "principal."

SS: The first year I was the principal, and then I remained on the board for a couple of years, and subsequently, then I stayed—I may have been on the board on and off for a number of years, but mostly stayed on as a teacher.

PS: Did you prefer being a teacher to being on the board?

SS: I preferred to not be on the board because what happened is that as people found out about SILC, we had an increased number of new parents, so it was easier to get new parents to be engaged if you had them on the board. We were always bringing new people on board, on the board itself, they helped us in decision making because not everybody could be there as a teacher, but they could be on the board and be attending monthly meetings and whatever.

PS: And what was the style of decision-making that the board adopted?

SS: Very parliamentary. They use real parliamentary proceedings, in terms of the group decision-making. You bring up a subject, bring up an issue, and just make a decision. We didn't have formal Roberts' Rules kind of decision-making, but the group decision making.

PS: So it was more like consensus rather than voting?

SS: Consensus, yes.

PS: What language did you conduct your board meetings in?

SS: English.

PS: And yet, there were all these different language groups represented by the people on the board. When people found somebody who spoke their own tongue, did they have a tendency to go off and have their own conversation in that language?

SS: Not during meetings and things. They tried not to.

PS: Was that difficult to enforce, or did people just conform and speak English?

SS: For the most part, it was not that—I don't think that was a problem, because people spoke Gujarati or Marathi or Tamil or Kannada or whatever during the class sessions and when they were visiting with their friends. What we also found there were friendships being formed while the parents were waiting, at the same time the school classes were being conducted. We had the classes upstairs and what we found is the parents would congregate downstairs. Occasionally we had to send parents out because they were too noisy, and the classes were being disturbed.

PS: Not getting done.

SS: Kids would listen in.

PS: Would the parents be speaking in their Indian languages?

SS: Some. Yes, some of them. One year, Periakaruppan—Muthu Periakaruppan, it's a long family name and I cannot even, I don't think I'll ever be successfully able to spell it correctly. They were a family where the parents always spoke to their children, always, in Tamil, and the kids responded in Tamil. And these kids, I think they came to school after their morning prayer, and in a traditional Southern style of worshipping and everything, they would have ash marks on their heads when they came to school. But you know that was perfectly normal for SILC kids to see a lot of that, and not have any questions about it.

PS: Is that a Hindu tradition?

SS: Southern style. I think it's Shiv Panthi tradition.

PS: But it is a branch or a sect of Hinduism?

SS: Right, right. But, as I say, styles of worshipping rituals differ from region to region in India. Even if you are Hindu, depending on what part of India you are, your worshipping might be different.

PS: So would some of the other children in class, the first time, say, “Why has that child got ashes on their forehead?” and then you would talk about it, or was it just accepted as that’s how it was?

SS: Accepted, because they realized that the kids must have had the morning prayers. I never had any student ask me that question. So there were two brothers. You have one end of the spectrum where the parents insist on speaking only in Tamil, on that end, as opposed to most other parents who are speaking to their children in a non-Native language—English.

PS: When the parents would bring their children, were the children there because the children wanted to be there, or was it the parents just saying, this is how it is?

SS: It started out, most of the time it was parents who wanted children to—it always seemed to start because parents wanted their children to be at SILC. During that first year, I remember doing quite a bit of “marketing” or advertising. Whatever organization I ran into, I always took some time to speak about SILC, at a Diwali function or whatever. As a result, through word of mouth, we had other parents bring their children to SILC, always at the initiation of the parents themselves. But the children, once they got ingrained with the social aspect of SILC with their friends, then the second year became easy for them to come on their own.

And there I had seen, and I cannot remember what year that was. Sometime in mid-eighties when I know Vishant and a number of other girls, they were probably junior high, and we had close to seventy students. All of a sudden it was very fashionable that year, those couple of years, for teenagers to join SILC. And that was one of those few years that were kind of unique, where children were driving parents to come. And it was, as I say, a number of teenagers who wanted to, that was almost an “in thing” to do.

PS: What do you think made it trendy?

SS: I think it was probably a couple of girls who decided they wanted to do it, so it became fashionable. They brought two friends with them, so you almost had, it’s not two, you had four girls who joined, and a few teenage boys. I think hormones may have played some role there, too.

PS: Hormones? Now in Indian traditional education, are the girls and boys educated together?

SS: Yes. I went to coed school.

PS: Is that the norm in India?

SS: A lot of cities—at least in Bombay, it was common, when I grew up.

PS: Okay, so the mixing of girls and boys together was not that unusual for most of the Indian parents?

SS: Not those who came from cities like Bombay. Now, I don't know if that's necessarily true for smaller cities or in northern cities, perhaps.

PS: Did you ever have any concerns about the teenagers, especially like dating each other, because that wasn't—most of the parents had had arranged marriages, correct?

SS: Right, right.

PS: So did you have any concerns that these fourteen-year-olds with hormones might start falling in love or something like that?

SS: I don't think any parent, if they were concerned—the subject did not come up at that time, because I think most of us considered our children to be children. I don't think it even crossed our minds that they would want to date. I mean, that's a subject that came much later when the kids were in high school, or later in high school, but in the early stages when they were embarking into that—eleven, twelve, thirteen years old—we were still thinking they were children.

PS: In retrospect, were you correct?

SS: Yes, I think they became good friends. A lot of these kids, like Raneer Ramaswamy's daughter, Aparna, and Vishant were the same age, and they still hold their friendships, till this day, so my sense is that they became good friends and became lifelong friends, to some extent. We were probably naive, in retrospect.

PS: When I was interviewing the second generation, I heard some things off the tape.

SS: Yes, that's what I mean. We were probably naive.

PS: So tell me about how you became a teacher. You went to college in India?

SS: Right.

PS: And what was your subject there? What did you major in?

SS: My undergraduate was in economics and history. Actually, history was my favorite subject. When I was in Canada, I was substitute teaching, because that's about the only occupation I could get a job in, and Canada needed quite a few teachers. Then I taught for one year as a regular teacher, fourth grade, in a public school. But the experience was so horrible that I never wanted to be teaching once I came to the United States.

PS: Well, what was horrible about that?

SS: First of all, I did not have a teaching degree. I was a college graduate, but, you know, wasn't trained to be a teacher, not that it should have prevented me from doing it. But I was actually teaching in a—it was a Halifax school district, but in a black community, which was kind of segregated. It was really a poor community where—I was probably not really teaching as much as being a mother, to often these underprivileged children who came to class without a breakfast or a bath.

I had one child who was fourteen years old, who was in fourth grade, and you know, the regular age kids, so I had the full spectrum. Learning skills were very low. They liked drawing and music but beyond that—so there was a big disparity in the way in which kids learned, because the fourteen-year-old was being just disruptive. I think it was third graders, now that I think about it. And so it was not a satisfying experience at the end of it.

And now, looking back, I'm thinking, if I was not so young and naive, I would have really gotten a lot out of that experience, because I had co-teachers—it was one of those bunch of misfits. I had a Pakistani, Muslim woman, who chain-smoked. I had a black teacher, who was blue-eyed and gay. Which for me, the whole concept of gay in 1968 was so foreign, I didn't quite understand that. A white teacher, who was the only white teacher, I think, who was mentally disturbed. So as I said, it was just a bunch of misfits, just kind of coming together. And looking back, I wish I was more mature so I would have gotten a lot out of that experience.

PS: What do you think was there to get that you missed?

SS: The black teacher, or he was mixed race, maybe, lived in New York for a couple of years, trying to be an actor and was totally disappointed and came back to Nova Scotia. You know, he was Canadian, from Nova Scotia. I thought he had a lot to offer.

PS: But you couldn't just get past him being gay, at the time?

SS: Well, I didn't understand the concept, so no, I liked him a lot. We all liked him a lot. I mean, I knew that. Here is another example. We lived in Dartmouth, Halifax, and the school was sixteen miles outside of town. I didn't have a car, so I rode with the Muslim teacher. Well, she gave a ride to five of us, in her Volkswagen. It was a very tight space. And that's what I mean. You don't realize these things until you say, "That was a good experience. I should have gotten more out of it." But I think maybe because I was naive, I probably did get more out of it than if I had a preconceived notion of what a gay was, for example.

PS: So you came out of it with some teaching experience, but it wasn't very positive?

SS: Yes. For me teaching comes natural, but this particular teaching experience was not that positive. I think that's why I probably got into establishing a school like SILC. We knew what we wanted to impart as parents, and that was probably more important than our ability to teach.

PS: So where did you get your curriculum and your teaching materials, or did you make it up?

SS: We made it up, and as I said, again, based on our education and background, we all kind of went through the normal school cycle of a very structured way of learning. All of us went back to India on a regular basis, so we knew—if I wanted to get like the first grade Gujarati book we could get it. I knew of a set of Gujarati books I could bring back with me. So we have brought back books with us, which were like the first grade, second grade, third grade, so you knew how you could progress.

PS: Was it hard to get a hold of those in India?

SS: Oh, no. We just went to the same bookstores that sold books for the local kids, so we kind of modeled after that. That was probably the only thing we knew. Similarly, in terms of general knowledge, history and stuff, our books mimicked the same level of grade experiences, so if we were using the general knowledge book, history, for example, for beginner students, it was more storytelling. You know, storytelling about our leaders like, Ghandiji, so the book would have a chapter on leaders, for example, as opposed to more senior level students would have more complicated information. In Geography, the beginner would have just a map of India, with cities and whatever. The more advanced would have the wildlife, the crafts, and stuff like that. So, we were kind of mimicking the books that were brought back from India.

PS: So did you actually use those books or did you copy from them?

SS: Depending on what you were doing, you would copy sections or entire books. I don't think we ever had a chance where we got like twenty books. All of us were visiting, so we would at least bring back one or two books of every kind, so we were able to copy things if we needed to.

PS: And then you were all going back to different parts of India as well, when the parents or teachers would go to India. Did the people on the board and all other parents bring back materials, or just the teachers?

SS: Everybody. We never requested, but everybody brought back stuff. And I think the SILC library, if somebody ever kept track, probably grew quite a bit because of that. And sometimes parents would just find wherever they happened to find. This might be interesting, something they would enjoy like books, novels. And that was pretty good for older children because when they got bored, they'd pick out something else to read.

PS: So the kids could just go to the book area of the SILC school?

SS: Earlier years, we didn't even have a separate area. You know, I had a bagful of whatever and carried it back and forth.

PS: So did you check those out like library books or did kids just read them while they were at school?

SS: If kids wanted it, we just gave it to them, and then they would bring it back and leave it. But I don't think anybody really ventured out. At earlier stage, because most of the kids were fairly young, they were just at the beginning stage, so none of them took the initiative of saying, "I want to read this book."

But as the same kids grew older, like I know Iyengar's daughters, and some of the more serious kids, you know, wanted to do more and they would read extensively. And same, some of the older kids helped prepare lessons and things, and those were the kids who gave us feedback, saying, "You know, you're teaching in a very traditional manner, which is not the same way as the American kids learn." The way, at least in those days, what the American classrooms were teaching. So our methods had to be improved a lot over time. But that was good to receive feedback from the kids.

PS: So what kinds of things were the traditional methods that weren't working very well for the kids?

SS: Let's see. What, traditionally, what we did was that, for example, if you learn the alphabet, you do your alphabet like in a sequence of a, b, c, e, f, g, h, i, and so you just have, written down, a, b, c, d, the entire thing, in the right sequence and you insist on learning that right sequence, and that makes a lot more sense when you're learning Gujarati, because those have—every five sets of letters have, where they come from your mouth, like in Gujarati, you go [makes Indian language sounds], so it starts from the bottom of your throat and moves up. So that was the traditional method.

Well, American kids were used to learning cards. So you pick up any letter in the middle of the deck and say, "What's that letter?" and they will know. And we didn't do that. It took us a while to get to the cards, for example. So those were some of the things that were nontraditional, and as I said, most of us, because we were not teachers, or trained as teachers, we just based our teaching methods on our experiences with that.

PS: And they were from twenty years previous, in India?

SS: Right. And frankly, I don't think those had changed at the time we were teaching them. If you went to any Indian school, that would still be the same.

PS: Is that still how it is in India? Have you kept in touch, or have they changed the teaching methods in India, as well?

SS: I haven't really, but my suspicion is that there's—they tend to be a little more structured, in terms of the way things go, and kids definitely learn differently than they do here.

PS: In what way?

SS: For one thing, in Bombay, for example, you've got your schools, what is it, seven in the morning until noon or so, so you've got that five or six hours of schooling, and you may have eight periods and they're very structured. You go one after the other, and each one has the lesson sets and stuff, you're taught in a sequential manner, so it's not like Montessori, where the child can kind of walk around and figure out what things are. Where the students are given more opportunity to learn on their own and explore, and you hope that they learn something at the end. As opposed to feeding them whatever, which is the traditional method, probably.

PS: So Indian school is finished at noon?

SS: Because the schools, especially in Bombay, they're so crowded, that you actually have two shifts, so then the afternoon students come in.

PS: Interesting system.

SS: They have noon to six, or whatever, and then seven to noon.

PS: And what do those students do the other half of the day?

SS: Many of them have a tremendous amount of homework. And I know, over the years, more. Since I've left, a lot of them feel that they are not getting the type of education, they end up going to what they call tuition classes. They take classes. If they're not going to school, they're taking classes to learn the same subjects that are taught in the school.

PS: Because the state-provided school isn't—

SS: No, a lot of these are private schools. They're not state-provided.

PS: So in addition to their class, they're taking other classes to learn what they should have learned in the class that they're paying for?

SS: Right, right. Because a lot of time, the content and the depth may not have been covered, but when you look at the actual textbook, it's much more complicated, so a lot of students need help.

PS: So here was SILC school—I've got to get back on subject here with SILC. I get so interested in the stories. So here's all you parents, bringing your children to SILC. How many years did Vishant attend SILC school, your son?

SS: He probably attended one of the longest time frames. I think he dropped out when he was in high school. I know he was at least through eighth or ninth grade, and he started when he was in third grade.

PS: Did you notice things changing about him as a result of going to SILC school?

SS: Yes. I think, I'm not sure. I want to say yes, as a parent, because, you know, you put in all this effort, you think you ought to be getting something out of it. Parents are always probably more hopeful than kids are. I think so. And as I said, most of us thought that they were going to be learning and speaking fluent Hindi or Gujarati, and they'll know Indian history and stuff, in and out, or whatever.

What happened is that they got enough exposure to each of those things. They never came out speaking fluent Gujarati or whatever, but they probably became more well-rounded because of their social experiences, the friendships that they established, and their other experiences that made them closer to India overall. So it was probably not as we thought we were intending. If we were intending to make them more aware of India, more aware of its culture, then I think we were successful in that, but if we were expecting them to speaking fluent Gujarati, that didn't happen.

PS: That didn't happen, okay. I'm assuming that a number of the parents took their children back to India for visits to their relatives in India. Do you think that attending SILC school helped those children feel more comfortable when they went back for those visits? Or in what way did it assist them, if at all?

SS: I think it did. Because, for example, I was—Vishant, he learned Gujarati, I remember traveling some place, and he's looking at a board that was written in Gujarati. We were traveling through Gujarat. And there was a shop and there was on the board, and it's something, something, and sons. Well, what it turned out to be, it was written in Gujarati, but the words were English. So he slowly read that out and then he spoke it out loud and he said, "Oh," because it was English, something and sons, you know, it was some company and sons, or whatever, and it was an English word, but written in Gujarati.

He had tried to write letters to his grandfather in Gujarati, which I thought he really liked a lot. I'm not sure if the school made any difference, when it came to speaking a language in India, because most children seem to do this well. They land in India and then they start speaking whatever the language is fairly quickly. I mean, they just go right in, they leave, they go right out. Every parent says the same thing. They're there, they speak, you know, with the parents and the grandparents and everybody, languages they can speak. It may be broken, but—because it's the immersion factor. So my sense is that it made it easier for them to be able to talk, but I don't know how significant, because I think most children tend to do that anyway.

PS: So the emphasis on what you were teaching was on spoken language rather than written or reading language?

SS: In school, reading and writing. And spoken, probably less than the parents would like us to do.

PS: Did you get feedback from the parents about what they wanted their children to be learning?

SS: They wanted their children to be able to speak fluent Gujarati and stuff, and what we had to tell them is that, that means they will have to speak to them in Gujarati at home, because in half an hour, we could not accomplish that.

PS: Right. And so did the parents do that?

SS: No.

PS: Why not?

SS: You know, it's just probably a matter of habit. Those parents who did, did, but there were a lot of them who didn't.

PS: In some cultures, when the first generation would come over and they would have a language that their children didn't speak, they would kind of save that language so that they could speak to—the adults would have conversations that the kids couldn't understand. Do you think that that was operating at any level for these parents?

SS: Not that I think of, because I think all the Indian parents know that their kids understand. They're not fooling anyone.

PS: What was the most challenging thing for you about teaching at SILC?

SS: The most challenging thing was to keep these very dry subjects interesting. In the language, the challenge was teaching the kids some of the sounds, because there was no similar sound I can say to them that, well, this sounds like "X". Kids had to figure it out on their own, to some extent, because I didn't know the English language good enough to say, "Well, you know, it sounds like that."

And some sounds were definitely a lot more guttural than most American words would allow you to say, so they would always get confused with the sound of particular letters. So those second sounds were always hard for them to say. Like Shanti is that "ti" at the end is very soft, so there are like three versions of that "ti" sound, and there was no way for us to communicate that, unless they heard that repeatedly. So that was in the language.

In General Knowledge, I tended to probably overestimate my students, and always gave them material that was a lot more difficult than they were able to handle. It was interesting to me, but they're like, you know, it's just geography, don't talk to me about it. And I always thought geography would be a lot more fun because it has places and it has more objective things to it. It's either there or not there. A city is there or not there, that kind of thing.

PS: And these children had visited some of these cities, right? So they were real places to them? They weren't just something they could imagine.

SS: Right, right. So making those subjects interesting was a challenge.

PS: So when you were teaching the geography, did you teach it with pictures or with maps or with globes? How did you do it?

SS: Maps. Maps were very handy. I always found that, just give them blank maps and say, "Okay, we're going to tour rivers today," or "We're going to figure out what certain national products, like rice grows in this part of India, or wheat grows here, or tea grows here." But then I would do something more difficult. Like when I brought outside material, like there was a *Wall Street Journal* article. These were very young kids when I brought this *Wall Street Journal* article that talked about 400 inches of rain in Assam. So we talked about that, and they thought that was a lot of fun, because we talked about this little boy, how did he cross a street. When you have 400 inches of rain a year, how do you go from one place to the next because you're under water most of the time. Stuff like that.

So I think they found those to be a lot more interesting and enjoyable, but I don't think I was always able to translate every material like that, that would maybe be more fun for them. It still made some sense. I mean, you know, they then knew why tea grew in that part of the country.

PS: And why is that?

SS: A lot of rain.

PS: Oh, so tea needs a lot of water to grow?

SS: Yes. Besides very black soil, and the mountains.

PS: See, I learned something. I obviously wasn't in that class. What was the most rewarding part of teaching?

SS: Let's see. It was always fun to see the kids perform wherever. Either that they were doing something or that they were doing it so proudly. That was always rewarding to see. When they sang *Jana Gana Mana* and they sang it end to end without a mistake absolutely flawless, without any accent—that was good.

PS: So you just had this feeling of pride when they would succeed at doing something that you'd spent a lot of time teaching them?

SS: Right. Or just overall, SILC overall. I wasn't teaching them music, but yes, SILC overall. I know, for a few years in between, I saw the same kids emerge in leadership roles, in a lot of different organizations. I saw Sujan Kamran in leadership at Gita Ashram, and all these kids were doing so well. I mean, not that it was probably unusual that they have done well, but I remember, at some gathering, I said, "Have you seen how many SILC children are at the front row of these things?" They were on the stages, they were doing this, they were doing that. So I said, "Have you seen how many SILC kids are leading?" and then people said, "Oh, yes, you know, I noticed that."

PS: So then you had the sense that what you were doing was really making a difference?

SS: Yes. Because we saw them in leadership roles in these other Indian organizations, doing things at the front, which other kids were not doing. So I thought we may have given them a venue to do it.

PS: How did you see the school change or evolve during the years—now you're still involved, right?

SS: No, no. I haven't been involved for about seven or eight years now.

PS: Since your son is not a student now?

SS: No, since it was like twenty-five miles one way. I taught for a long time after Vishant stopped going, but at the other end of St. Paul. And once we moved here, and we've been living here for about seven years. I think I haven't taught for about six years, because after the first year I think I tried to teach, but it was twenty-five or thirty miles one way, and it became quite a hike.

PS: Okay, so then back to my original question. How did you see the school change and evolve during the years of your involvement? How did it change as time went by?

SS: At the beginning, from being purely, just a bunch of parents, just only parents who were involved whose children came, to the year we saw a growth of sixty, seventy students, and we became a very well-known name. So that was very good. With a lot of new people coming on board, we introduced a lot of new things. The cooking came into play. A lot of more elaborate things. People introduced things like SILC Day, a closing at the end of the year kind of thing.

So a lot of those things were introduced. It became probably a little more of a formal institution rather than just a bunch of people sorting their way out. After the second year, I think, we had started developing curriculum with a very definite criteria that said, "This means this person is

beginner, middle, or advanced student,” So it evolved into more of a formal institution like regular school.

We struggled for the longest time, saying how do you accredit yourself? What are the criteria you need to give yourself? And we would engage people who were in the field of education, to start thinking about getting accreditation. The student body changed. At its height, we had some older students who were interested in certification. Then it shifted, because then we ran out of students. We had less children who had Indian parents who were at home.

And then I know for a while, Indian children who were adopted started coming in, about the time I was leaving, I think. And I know there are quite a few Indian adopted students now there. We always had them, not as many as before. Until you had a second generation of Indian parents who were also here, the enrollment dropped. Now we have a second generation of Indian parents who are now having children who are coming to SILC. That is, our children, like, Lisa [Gada] is having her baby and wants to bring her children to SILC.

PS: The new wave of immigrants?

SS: Right.

PS: Like the people that are coming to do computer programming and so on?

SS: Right. Or, you know, another set. So now we'll start seeing another set of parents whose younger children may want to come.

PS: So at a certain point, the kids of the original founding group sort of aged out of it?

SS: Right.

PS: And did those parents then tend to drop away as well, and wait for new parents to come in?

SS: Typically, that is the flow you saw. You'd have about fifty—there were like four groups of people who stayed for a while. My friend, Ranjan [Patel], stayed for a little bit, after her daughters were done, for like a couple of years. Neena stayed there for a while. I stayed quite a few years after Vishant left. I know, for example, Preeti has been there all throughout, and she took a break when she was pregnant but was heavily involved afterwards, but she was always there.

And so a number of parents, like the Gangulis, they were involved with SILC for a long time. So you had a core group of people who stayed long after children were gone, but then you had another set of parents to stay involved while their kids were.

PS: And that just seemed normal to you that people would come and go, kind of following their children?

SS: Yes, that made sense.

PS: Do you think that as those older, the later groups of students came in, do you think the same kind of bonding was happening among those parents, as happened for your group of parents?

SS: I think so. I know, for example, with Preeti and [Rajan] Menon have a great friendship. There's a group of those folks that came, like the second wave. That was a younger group, also, yes, they bonded in a similar manner.

PS: Do you think that's still happening? Are you in touch with anybody?

SS: Not much. I can't tell you exactly, no.

PS: Just something you also eventually grew out of and the distance made it challenging.

SS: Right, right. But I stay in touch with certain people, like Preeti and other folks, but otherwise, no.

PS: My guess is you probably have your friendships so intertwined now, you don't just sit and talk about SILC all the time when you're together, either. Lots of things to talk over. If you had it to do all over again, is there anything you would change or do differently, knowing what you know now?

SS: On one hand, I will say no. On the other hand, I will say, yes, I would have changed. I would have made more—I'm not sure if that would have made any difference, but making it more like a school, regular school, would have attracted maybe the fringe type of people, or more people perhaps. But on the other hand, it is definitely accomplishing what it truly set out to do, which if you think about it, is the imparting of knowledge about India, and feeling good about yourself. And that it is doing, I think. Kids get out of there saying, "So what, I'm different."

PS: So what aspects of a regular school—when you say you might make it more like a regular school, what aspects of a regular school would you have—

SS: A formal set of curriculums. Things that allow you to kind of gauge where students are.

PS: Like a grading system?

SS: Yes, right, right.

PS: But in terms of it accomplishing its mission, you think it's done that, regardless?

SS: Yes, I think so. Well, you'll have to ask the students that. I mean, they'll have to tell you.

PS: What's your vision for SILC in the future? How do you see it going on, or going forward?

SS: My vision is that I'd like it to be, continue to be a small institution, but continue to provide a good set of core competencies, like the language and things, and enhanced competencies like formal education. You know, when you come out of that, you have some kind of certification that says, "I can speak this."

PS: So a vision of kind of a diploma or a degree or a something, at the end of it?

SS: Yes.

PS: Okay. When children would finish going there—I know they could leave at any time, right, so some of them would quit after a year, some after three years, some after five or seven, whatever. When they would leave, how did you—did you mark that in any way or celebrate it, or did people say, "I'm not coming back next fall," and then you'd have a party, or how did you do it?

SS: Nothing happened. The students didn't come and—

PS: And that was the first notice you had that they weren't coming that year?

SS: Right. It is a voluntary institution, so people, when they drop out, they drop out for whatever reasons, and sometimes it has to do with other activities. Typically, when the kids got into high school, their schedules got so tight, this was one less thing they could do, and they made that choice. And we respected that. But there was no formal crossing over that said, you know, they like to. But what we did find is a number of these students did come back later as substitute teachers themselves, which is great.

PS: Really? Tell me about how that worked.

SS: Mostly teaching. If a student was typically there for four to five years, what we found is that they were senior enough to be able to teach basic language skills and stuff to the new students, for example, or help out there. So we saw that. And nearly all of them did that, if I'm not mistaken. Vishant did that, Ganguli kids all did that, Godan's kids may have done it, and I know Preeti's daughter is definitely doing it. Neena's kids, I'm not sure that they did that or not. The older one may have done it, Lisa may have done it. So there are a number of kids, they helped out in other parts of SILC, so that was great, that they were able to help out. And I know KP [Subrahmanian]'s daughter, Chitra, has been very much engaged in SILC. Those are the success stories.

PS: And that first group of kids all of whom were the cutting edge of SILC, how old are most of them now?

SS: Let's see. The oldest ones are probably, in fact, thirty-one, about thirty-one.

PS: And your son is?

SS: He's twenty-eight.

PS: Twenty-eight. Okay, so they're in their early—they're in their adulthood.

SS: Right.

PS: Are any of them having children that they're bringing back to SILC at this point, or are their children too young, or not born yet?

SS: Too young or not born yet. In most cases, not born yet, or just embarking on that. I think two of—I know at least two of SILC children are having their own children. Guptan [Nambudiripad] and his wife, and then Lisa, who's having a baby. At least those two I know. I'm not sure if Sujan [Kamran] and his wife have had a baby yet or not.

PS: It would have to be a preschool at this point, huh?

SS: If any. I think we'll have to wait for three or four more years.

PS: Do you think that the way SILC is laid out would need to change when it's like the—at that point, it would be third generation, because second generation was your offspring. When it's third generation, do you think that they would need a different kind of school than, say, the children of immigrants who come here to be professionals, who are coming directly from India and bringing their children, who have maybe lived for a time in India and now are in the United States?

SS: Yes, I think it will probably be similar to the ones that they are gearing up to or—they may have geared up to do already, for children who have been adopted. So they may have already fine-tuned, calibrated to that thing, where parents are not speaking the language, for example. That would be one example. So you gear it toward slightly different targets.

PS: So do you think they would drop the teaching of language?

SS: They wouldn't drop the teaching of the language, but they wouldn't expect kids to be speaking because they only have that half an hour or an hour a week, as opposed to expecting that the kids may have an opportunity to speak that language at home.

PS: Tell me about your involvement in special events that SILC school was involved with over the years. The Festival of Nations, or India Day, or any other special projects that you took on as part of your service.

SS: I was involved in the first Festival of Nations when Bharat School and the old India Club used to help at the Festival of Nations. So the first one, Menon said, “Oh, we’ll do it. SILC will do it.” And Stefan and I did like 400 *Gulab Jamuns* that first year.

PS: What are *Gulab Jamuns*?

SS: *Gulab Jamuns*? It’s the roseballs.

PS: So it’s a sweet, it’s a dessert?

SS: It’s a dessert. Stefan wouldn’t eat that stuff for at least a while afterwards.

PS: Just couldn’t look at another one.

SS: We fried that food, and we cooked all the food. It was a fundraiser for Bharat School in a way, and that was a great opportunity. I remember offering help at first to Menon, I said, “Well, I can...” We kind of came up with a menu at that time. I said, “Well, I can do the chicken and I’ll help.” And then I realized, I couldn’t do it. I came home and I thought about it, and I’m thinking, “What am I saying? I’m a Jain, I can’t do this.”

PS: Because you can’t cook chicken?

SS: No. Why would I want to do that? So I called him up and I said, “You know, I’ve thought about it and I don’t think I can do this. This is not what I’d like to do. But I can do *Gulab Jamuns*.” So 400 *Gulab Jamuns* later, we spent three days cooking them. Dr. Dixit and Mrs. Dixit were involved in SILC also. Mrs. Dixit taught Marathi. They did not have children of their own, but their daughter, Nayna, now has, her two daughters have been in SILC for a while. I don’t know if they’re still there or not, but they were going there for a while. And she and a bunch of other women did *jalebis* in the same kitchen as we did *Gulab Jamuns*.

PS: That was quite a bit of sweets. And what are *jalebis* like?

SS: A *jalebi* is, it’s like a pretzel, except it’s all tangled up and it’s made of white flour—you let it to rise, then you deep-fry it and then you dump it in sugar syrup. It’s like a batter that you deep-fry and then dip it into syrup that’s a little thick. So when the *jalebis* come out, they are very crisp, glazed almost, and very good.

PS: So very sweet as well?

SS: Very sweet.

PS: Indian desserts are almost pure sugar, aren't they?

SS: They are, and you know what they do, is that they force you to not eat more than just a tiny little bite, as a result. Which is the advantage, because of that, you typically don't eat very much.

PS: All right, so you made *Gulab Jamuns* until you couldn't stand them anymore.

SS: Oh, God.

PS: How did you set that up? Did you have a big assembly line going?

SS: Well, it was just two of us, Stefan and I, and we just, yes, it was almost like an assembly line. I just kept frying and he dumped them in the syrup.

PS: And then you sold them there?

SS: Yes. We had to make them ahead of time, so we used one of the, what would have been health department food kitchens, and then sold them at the festival. So subsequently, I think I have been to every single Festival of Nations as either organizer or participant until about two or three years ago. I'm there for three solid days, for a number of years, for all three days, as a fundraiser.

Because of how well we did at the Festival, subsequently, the following year, India Club decided that they wanted to participate. They were trying to decide if they wanted to still remain in existence or not. From SILC, a group of parents, went to their meeting and said, "Yes, you do need to remain in existence, a) because you're kind of an umbrella organization so you're not swayed by regional preferences or religious preferences; and b) they have this wonderful thing called Festival of Nations, which is a great fundraiser."

And when we decided that the India Club would remain, we negotiated so SILC could participate in the Festival. So the first year we actually participated in organizing the food booth, the exhibition booth, and entertainment, getting kids to participate, and then adults. You know, some years we had adults participating also. And in return, we were going to get twenty to thirty percent of their take, and that proved to be an extremely profitable solution.

PS: Can you say how profitable?

SS: On the average, I think they got like five, six hundred dollars out of that, which was pretty good money. Paid for what we were taking in, you know, ten, fifteen dollars an hour, or whatever. And subsequently, it has gone up to as much as a thousand maybe, but I'm not sure. You know, they can probably tell you. But that was a good way for us to raise funds for SILC.

I had also participated in many other events. So what we have done is made sure that SILC was represented in whatever community organizations were doing, we had our presence and our name. SILC and India Club, you could almost see the intertwine of people representing SILC on the board of India Club. So we stayed at the forefront of that, and participated in organizing the first India Day that is now almost a routine every year in the fall. It started out as Mahatma Gandhi's birthday on October 2, the first one, in some community center that I had organized.

We also stayed very closely linked to other organizations, too, so we either participated or partnered with them to present Indian culture to local schools, for example, or community groups or senior centers. So the kids would go dance at community groups. International Institute had a lot of pre-programs before the Festival [of Nations] and we participated in those.

I also helped with the first PIC culture camp for adopted children. I don't know if they still do that or not. In September we had an all-day, like a PIC camp for Parents of Indian Children where we show these adopted children all about India for a day. And I helped initiate that, the first year, and a few years after that. Within the school itself, we did a number of things. Put the plays together, where the kids actually wrote the script. They set up the stage and all that. You know, it was traditional, like *Shakuntala* and *Ramayana* stories. I think the first play we did was *Shakuntala*, and I remember doing forests, doing big trees out of cardboard.

PS: What's the plot line of *Shakuntala*?

SS: Oh, *Shakuntala* was actually a love story—I didn't realize it until after, we started doing it and it was actually a love story. I'm going to get this wrong—a king fell in love with Shakuntala and gave her a ring as a promise, and said, "I'll come back. This ring is my promise to you that I'll marry you." And because they were in love, Shakuntala and the king, they actually consummated their marriage without officially getting married. This ring was a symbol.

Well, the king went off to—and I can't remember if he went off to the war or not—and she would remain behind and was in a boat, and her finger slipped in the water and her ring was dropped in the river. In the meantime, she had a son also, and the king came back and decided that the ring was the proof that she was his wife and that they were married. When she could not produce the ring, it was considered that she was not the person who he had left behind. So he accused her of producing this child through someone else. What had happened was the ring was consumed by a fish. A fisherman caught that fish and when they opened it, the ring was there.

PS: And then they lived happily ever after?

SS: And then they lived happily ever after. So the whole thing—and you know, as I said, until after I put it together, I'm thinking, "God, this is an extramarital affair." Not extramarital, what do you call this?

PS: Premarital.

SS: Premarital affair. We were going to not try and explain anything. The kids had fun.

PS: And when they would act them out, what language would they play them out in?

SS: English. Because all the kids were participating, and different kids know different languages, so we couldn't really settle upon one language, you know, Marathi or Hindi.

PS: So how did you develop the script for who said what, and how many parts there were and all of that? Did somebody write it?

SS: We just took all of the children's storybooks and just divided it up and said who was going to be the king and who was going to be Shakuntala and all that.

[Tape interruption]

PS: ...in their regular class time?

SS: Yes, it's the end-of-the-year celebration, where, they present something they know. Instead of having a parent-teacher conference or having midyear presentation of what students have learned to their parents. We did this play.

PS: Say some more about the Festival of Nations. What was the biggest thing you learned out of being involved with it for, what, fifteen years, twenty years?

SS: Yes, quite a long time. The biggest thing was, if I ever wanted to own a restaurant, all I had to do was go work at the festival for those three days, and it gets it out of my system faster than anything.

PS: So you could not be a restaurateur?

SS: I cannot be a restaurateur. What I have learned is it is so much fun. We have established a community of not only other Indians who went to the Festival year after year, but a number of people from other nations. So we have some of the best friends in the Hungarian booth and the Russian booth. Because you see similar tendencies in these other countries also. It has been a wonderful experience. And I was involved at the International Institute for a few years in between also. [The International Institute has presented the Festival of Nations annually since 1932.]

PS: And what did you do there?

SS: I was on a couple of different boards. One year I think I was on the children's board, the adult entertainment board, and maybe exhibition. So two or three different boards over the years. Mostly for the Festival of Nations, not ongoing kind of thing, but making sure that we were organized and helping out.

That was kind of fun because we were working with other communities like the Japanese when I met Linda Van Dujaveer. I just saw her on TV just a couple of weeks ago. She's Japanese, and she has been putting together the Japanese children's show for a number of years. The food booth next to the Indian food booth was the Russian booth for years and years, and there was a Russian family like a family of four or five people, who would manage that booth for three days in a row.

In the Indian booth, we had like twelve people, four shifts, so over a three-day period we could have easily had close to 120 people coming through, and we thought that was work. And we would look at the Russians (only five people) and say, "My God, how could you manage it?"

PS: But just one family took it on?

SS: Yes, it was mostly one family that we saw, a family of four or five people, and oh, we had a ball. Stefan is Icelandic, so we would have fun with these two or three women in the Icelandic booth. It was handled by these two or three women that were, I'm sure, no less than seventy-five each.

PS: Seventy-five years old?

SS: Seventy-five years old. I mean, you know, it was a dying breed, and we would have these laughing conversations about having the Icelandic organization carry this tradition beyond them. I think they have died now. It was in like the late seventies, early eighties, and that was the end of the Icelandic booth.

PS: No Icelandic people were born after that.

SS: Well, you've got them, but obviously they're not all that interested in putting it together. We had, let's see, a couple of other exhibition booths, and the Swiss booth, we had a lot of fun with the Swiss group. And Hungarian was—two different groups, Hungarian and Romanians, as adult dancers, they do a wonderful job and we had the same team of people that we've gotten now year after year, and that was a lot of fun. Getting to know these other people, that's what made it so much fun.

PS: Did you stay connected with any of those people between the festival times, or did you just see them at the festival?

SS: Mostly at the festival, because my sense is a lot of people just lived so far away in distances that we probably didn't run into each other outside, you know, like shopping and stuff.

PS: But the people in the Indian community, even though you all lived in different parts of the Twin Cities, you made a point of getting together.

SS: Right, right, yes. The Indians, a lot of us were friends, a lot of us were together at SILC, or were involved in similar other organizations like India Association. So we ran into each other at a number of different places.

PS: SILC school is unique in a lot of ways, and it's been twenty-one years now, that it's been around, and it's all volunteer still. What do you think has contributed to making it keep going? A lot of volunteer organizations, as you say, one leader goes on and that's the end of it. What has kept SILC alive? What keeps it going?

SS: I think it's the parents. Kids and parents. Parents are there because kids are there, and their commitment and involvement.

PS: And how do you think that SILC school, in the big picture, has contributed to keeping the Indian community going, in some way?

SS: It's probably not so much the Indian community right now, it's the future Indian community. It filled the gap for children when nobody else had anything for them. None of the other organizations had youth groups. [brief pause]

PS: I'm sorry, go ahead.

SS: SILC filled the gap when nobody else had anything for children at the time. You know, most of the organizations at the time were really geared toward adults. Indians tried to make their place in the society, and kind of feeling their way, having a place to worship, having a place to socialize like regional groups, but they didn't have any youth groups or anything like that. Subsequently, most of the other organizations now have youth groups that cater to children

But that's the role SILC filled, is something for the children. I'm hoping that it really made the future generation better. People like Lisa, who is so connected. Today she was saying, "Well, I want the children to be speaking Kutchi." She's looking for a Kutchi babysitter now.

PS: So all the kids that were in the potential pool of Indian kids in the Twin Cities who could have been in SILC, what percentage do you think attended for at least a little while, a year?

SS: Very small. I would say five percent.

PS: And what do you think kept the others from coming?

SS: Parents.

PS: Their parents?

SS: At least for the longest time, our argument was that parents went to these late night Saturday night parties, and couldn't get up the next morning.

PS: So why did you keep it starting early in the morning on a Sunday? Why not move to a Sunday afternoon or a Sunday evening? What kept it where it was?

SS: We knew if we kept it around ten o'clock Sunday, from ten to two gave us enough time. Ten to one gave us enough time, but still freed up your rest of your day to do whatever you needed to do, for people to do, get ready for the next day. Some of us were traveling, so getting ready to go wherever. A lot of people caught their flights Sunday night, to go to someplace. And so that was one reason.

We also found, at least at that time, Saturdays were not good because a lot of kids were involved in a lot of different things. I know now SILC is on Saturdays, I'm pretty sure. I'm trying to remember what time though. Is it one o'clock or ten o'clock? I'm not sure. It is now on Saturdays. And part of that happened, because the children adopted by American families had Sunday church. So they did switch to Saturday, which I'm sure Vishant would have liked. I was reading his transcript. He was saying, "Oh, yes, no more Sundays." At least not Sunday mornings.

PS: Is there something magical about having the three-hour time period? Do you think that will shift or change in the future?

SS: You almost need that much time. Between the subject matters you are trying to cover and allowing kids that time to socialize and things, you do need that time.

PS: So you imagine it'll just go on being three hours long?

SS: My sense is yes.

PS: And do you think it'll keep being on Saturdays?

SS: I'm not sure. It seems like they're quite successful on Saturdays, probably just as successful as they were on Sundays, so my feeling is yes.

PS: Well, I think I've covered all the questions that I had as formal questions, unless there are any things that you want to tell me about or share with me that you think would be important for anybody listening to this to know.

SS: SILC has had so many wonderful, dedicated people. It is amazing. Part of the reason, the strength of that institution is because of the parents who are involved, and the students who have grown up and stayed involved. And that's really the biggest chunk of that institution. It's just wonderful.

PS: And there's some loyalty that's been created there.

SS: Yes, because it is one of those places that knows no bars, if you think of it. It has no barriers. There are no language barriers. I mean, you could, if you want to teach Kutchi, sure, go do it. Even if you had one student, you could go teach that. There were no barriers. I have made more friends from all parts of India there than I could have ever otherwise, and that, for me, would be the biggest take-away.

And real-life experience. People are so talented, and everybody—and when I say no barriers, that whenever people came up with any ideas, no ideas were bad or not good enough to try and experiment with. Where could you do that? Not at the temple, or any place else. So that's why I'm thinking, it's always been a place without barriers.

PS: Do you think that was because a group of women started it and they were more collaborative than if a group of men had started it?

SS: My suspicion that it was because of both, men and women, who were all—men and women who are attracted to that school are probably already behaving that way, so it's a natural tendency.

PS: So it just keeps repeating itself, keeps drawing the same kind of open-minded, creative type people?

SS: Right, right.

PS: So when you think of the, just think of the list of the names of the people that you think have been most instrumental in creating and sustaining SILC over the years, just name them off.

SS: You know, I can think of Preeti Mathur and Anoop Mathur, Rajan Menon, K.P. Subrahmanian, the Gangulis, Godan Nambudiripad, Neena and Ram [Gada], the list can just go on. And then some people who were not probably as flamboyant as some of the others, like Mahesh Jeerage, very, in a quiet way, was quite influential in the early stages. We've had both men and women who have been very influential. Some are probably more flamboyant than others.

PS: Anything else that you want to say about SILC school or your involvement or anything?

SS: No, I think I've said—the last bit I've said is a good place to stop.

PS: Thank you very much.

SS: Yes, thank you.

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