

Houston Asian American Archive
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

Interviewee: Vibhuti Shah
Interviewer: Saniya Gayake, Taylor Ginter
Date/Time of Interview: March 6, 2018
Transcribed by: Saniya Gayake, Taylor Ginter
Audio Track Time: 43:03
Edited by: Zoe Clark (6/11/2018)

Background: Mrs. Vibhuti Shah was born in Bombay, India in 1945. In India she received her Masters in Microbiology and Biochemistry, and after coming to America in 1970 she started using her medical technology degree to work in a lab. After moving around throughout the US, she and her husband settled in Houston where they have been ever since 1979. Even while working a job Mrs. Shah was very involved with volunteer work, helping with groups ranging from children with disabilities to the Gujarati community. In 1999 she and a few other doctor's wives founded Daya, an organization for members of the South Asian community who are dealing with domestic violence. She worked with Daya for a few years and was even president at one point. Although she no longer works with Daya, Mrs. Shah is still very involved with community service.

Setting: The interview took place on March 6, 2018 in a Fondren Library study room; lasted about 45 minutes; and focused on Daya, its role in the community, and domestic abuse in the Indian community.

Key:

VS: Vibhuti Shah
SG: Saniya Gayake
TG: Taylor Ginter
—: speech cuts off; abrupt stop
...: speech trails off; pause
Italics: emphasis (?): preceding word may not be accurate
[Brackets]: actions [laughs, sighs, etc.]

Interview transcript:

TG: My name is Taylor Ginter. We're interviewing for the Houston Asian American Archive. It is March 6th and we're in a Fondren study room.

SG: And my name is Saniya Gayake, also an intern with the Houston Asian American Archive.

VS: My name is Vibhuti Shah and I am from Houston. We have been staying in Houston for the last forty years and I've been working with a lot of organizations and one of them is Daya. And story—you want me to say the story about how we started Daya?

TG: Uh well let's start with your background first. So you've been in Houston for forty years?

VS: Yes.

TG: When and why did you come to Houston?

VS: Um, well my husband is a physician, so actually we started out with New York when we came from India. And he did all the fellowships and everything. We were in Virginia and New Orleans and Pennsylvania and everywhere, and then he finished his fellowship in

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gastroenterology and then we decided to go somewhere for the practice, so we were debating either Texas or California. So people were saying “No, no, California has the earthquakes so you shouldn’t be going there.” So we end up in Texas which is closer to Louisiana and we came here and we liked and we started over and you know. And while I was in Pennsylvania, I did my research in liver profusion. I did my Masters from India, microbiology and biochemistry. And I started my PhD here, but I didn’t finish it up to the dissertation. But I have done part of my PhD here. I have two children, my son Anuj Shah, he’s a lawyer, he’s the older. And my daughter Reena Shah. She’s a psychologist.

TG: Where in India did you live before?

VS: I born and raised in Bombay, India and I’ve been staying in India ‘til I- I did my Masters.

TG: So after you were done with school were you working or raising your family?

VS: When we came to USA 1970, February, I started working as a laboratory technician in one of the major New York research centers. I worked there and then when we moved to New Brunswick I was, you know, working as a biochemist in one of the lab as a supervisor. So I have medical technology degree also. And then we moved to Virginia. At that time, I already had a son so I stopped working. But when we came back to Pennsylvania I started working again and then I started my PhD also.

SG: When did you move to Houston?

VS: In...1979, December.

TG: What part of Houston did you originally live in?

VS: We started out with the north part of Houston, northwest part. And then my children were in a private school, they went to Kincaid. So we moved from, you know, Jersey Village to Memorial, Piney Point, we moved over there. Because the school is very close, close by. Kincaid. And we stayed over there until 2008 and then we thought that everybody is gone, it’s time to shrink [laughs] so we moved to [the] Heights. We have a smaller home compared to what we had in Memorial, Piney Point.

SG: What did you do after coming to Houston?

VS: I came to Houston and I was involved in religious activity, we call Pandurang Shastri Athavale. And from India, Bombay, I was involved in there. So while raising my children, I started doing all the religious activity and then I started working with the—we have—I’m Gujarati, called, so I was working with Gujarati Samaj of Houston as a volunteer work. And then I started working with handicapped children, volunteer—this is all volunteer, until nineteen ninety...I think nine, I started working as a biochemist in one of the lab. And I worked for at least three, four years over there. Meanwhile I was working, I still do a lot of volunteer work. And then Daya came in a picture. The way Daya came in a picture that we had a women’s auxiliary club, all the doctor’s wife. We had a club for the womens, we do different activities and everything and then we invite the guest sometimes, you know, to just speak. So at that time this lady came from Houston Area Women’s Center and she was talking about the domestic violence and then we six ladies decided that we sat down and talk about that. We have—our Indian community also has a problem with domestic violence or maybe Asian community. So we decided to set a, you know, a

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form, and we'd name it Daya. That's how, you know, I was the pioneer of Daya. Out of six doctor's wives, I was one of them. And the other five ladies are also doctor's wives and we all thought that let's start. When we started Daya, we didn't know how to go by so Houston Area Women's Center people helped us a lot. And we used to volunteer and go over there and sit over there and expose ourselves to the telephone calls and everything and how to process and how to do this and that's how we learned how to—I mean there was a small crash course that I have taken also—how to talk, dos and don'ts, and you know you don't say a certain things, you say certain thing, and that's how we started Daya. And then after a couple of years, I was president for Daya for two years and then I started working with other communities also. Right now I'm working with IACAN which is Indian American Cancer Society. I'm in the board right now. So...and then I left Daya after being the president for two years, so I was much involved in other activities, like I said, religious activity, I was traveling a lot, and I was helping people from different communities. I'm also part of SEWA group. S-E-W-A. And I also volunteer over there also.

TG: So when you started Daya, with I think you said five other women who were wives of doctors, why did you guys want to focus on domestic violence as an issue.

VS: See—I don't know you are aware or not, but the Asian community, like you know, the Indian community has a domestic violence problem. But the—what happens that it's all inside the shell. Nobody comes out and say anything. Or maybe they don't have a place to say anything. I mean if there is no place to talk or say anything where- where can they go? Because before we started we heard couple of incidents like um- there was a lady who came from India and she made—I'm allowed to say that, or no?

TG: Yeah.

VS: So, I'm not violating too much, but you know she came from India and then she started staying here but then finally she got involved in domestic violence and she- she was thrown out of the house and she didn't have a quarter—even one quarter to call anybody. So we had a couple of incidents from among ourselves that somebody told us, you know. Somebody said something like- she said something or something. And then we realized that maybe our community needs this. Maybe people need to come out and say something if they are really hurting. There is a place to go. There is a shelter also. There is a—you know, all kind of help out there. Psychological, emotional, all kind of help is out there. So maybe if somebody is bold enough to come out and talk about it, there is a help.

TG: So what services did Daya first provide and how has that changed throughout the years?

VS: Well, like I said, you know if somebody is willing to come out and talk about it then first thing, they have to call Daya. It's not like somebody's have a problem and somebody else call. It doesn't work that way. The person has to call herself. And just get, you know, the information and everything. And then we tell them to come and see us. We had a small place, you know, office-like, and they used to come there and then there is a—we had a lady who is a psychology major, she would come and talk to them and find out what's going on because this is only one-side story we have. We don't have two side of the story. But still from talk and everything, we pretty much guessed that she's in trouble. Then we tried to resolve in a way that—we don't try to tell her to go out and leave the husband or her spouse or in-laws or anybody. First we try to reconcile with the—sitting with the both of them or something, and find out, you know, what is the real problem? And maybe, maybe it's not really big issue but sometimes, you know, there is a

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different kind of abuse. It's not the physical abuse considered abuse, this is a mental abuse, there is a, you know, verbal abuse. There are all kind of abuse, you know, so we try to find out all the information and try to tell them, not necessarily—we don't tell them that everything will be alright because we don't know. We are not in their shoes, so we don't know, we cannot say that everything will be alright, you can go back, or whatever. So there are dos and don'ts like I told you, you know, so we tried to help them that way. And if the case comes to that she has to leave the home and then we have a shelter facility with the Houston Area Women's Center—used to be. Now it's all advanced and more things are happening. But then- then they used to go to shelter, then we start providing them, you know, food, and clothes, and—and they cannot stay in the shelter so much. So then there is a—there is a different avenues. So if she's already well educated then we try to find her a job. If she's not well educated, then we try to tell them to go to the school. And there is the ways we try to find proper school, or maybe funding if possible. There are so many things. Once they are in the shell—or once they are in the Daya's, you know, shelter or something, then we try to help them. Otherwise, all the helps are all outside.

TG: So it sounds like the woman has to take the first step and know Daya's number. Do you—does Daya reach out to certain groups to disperse this information? Or how would people know [overlapping] to call Daya?

VS: Yeah they have different, you know, outsourcing programs and they have advertising, they have a gala every year. They let people know what is Daya doing, so. There are so many ways, even they advertise in radio program, and you know.

TG: So how has Daya grown or evolved like over the years?

VS: It has grown quite a bit. Ever since I left—you know, since I was there, it still it was a small group and we were doing everything. But now it's getting huge. Because see there are different groups also involved with Daya. There is- In Austin there is a—I think Austin or New York, I am not quite sure, there is a group called Saheli. They are also with the- on domestic violence. There is a group also in New York. There is a group in, I think in Chicago somewhere. There is another group—so I think they are communicating, you know, everywhere, you know. We were involved with Saheli also when I was there with Daya. I am no longer with Daya, but you know.

TG: So just to be clear, those other groups are also specifically for Indian American people?

VS: Yeah.

TG: Okay. So what responsibilities—how were you involved when you were with Daya? Because you were president, but you were also—

VS: Everywhere, everywhere. I was going to Houston Area Women's Center and we used to take turns like once a week I used to go and sit there for four hours and somebody else will go. Somebody will do the administrative part, somebody will just take the calls and before we had a huge, you know employee—or maybe the volunteers, we used to have a voicemail, you know, and then we used to respond. Now I think Daya has a huge office, there are a couple of employees already and I think they are doing tremendously nice and good. I think lot of womens are getting help from them.

TG: Do you know statistics how many calls are placed? How many women go through the doors each year?

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VS: Not lately.

TG: Okay.

VS: No, not lately.

TG: So when did you—what years did you work with Daya and when did you leave?

VS: We started I think...if I remember correctly, in 1999. We just invited this lady from Houston Area Women's Center, so I would say about close to 2000 or 1999, if I remember correctly, yeah.

TG: And then you were there for how many years?

VS: About four years.

TG: Four years? Okay. So do you have any involvement with—have you had any involvement since leaving?

VS: Yeah, I used to go for, you know, outreach programs. Sometimes I volunteer. But then I started getting involved in different, you know, because I was also vice president of Gujarati Samaj of Houston, they call it GSH. And then now also I started getting involved at SEWA. So then, you know, time limit gets smaller and smaller because you get involved with something else and you...

SG: So does Daya interact or coordinate with other organizations in Houston?

VS: Which way?

SG: Like trying to solve the same issue of domestic violence? Or is it mostly an independent organization?

VS: It's independent. As far as I know, yeah. Now if they have involvement with somebody then I don't know.

TG: Can you talk about why or how domestic violence is unique within the Indian community and how it's different, or the same, in the Indian American community?

VS: Okay, I'll give you classic example. We had a couple came in to, you know, Daya one time. And we were all sitting and taking the interview of husband and wife. So the husband said, you know, that he was abusing her every way, even emotionally, physically, and verbally. So when we were talking, he said, "I didn't know this is called [clears throat and excuses self] this is called abuse because my grandparent were doing with my grandmother the same way. My father was doing with my mother same way so I am following the same way. I didn't think this was a domestic violence that you call." You know what I'm trying to say? It's- It's like people are so naïve that they don't think that this is a domestic violence they are involved in. Or they are abusing their spouse. They think it's normal.

TG: So that's in the—in both communities?

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VS: I guess in any community. You know like sometimes you must be hearing that, you know, if some— in the family, grandfather is alcoholic maybe father is alcoholic. More likely the son will get alcoholic also. This is something they think it's normal.

TG: So how does Daya help break the cycle?

VS: There is no way of breaking the cycle unless you are willing to come out from that shell and call Daya. Otherwise there is no way. The call has to be made by somebody who is getting hurt. That's how you break the cycle, right?

TG: Yeah...So is the goal—or I guess, okay. What's the typical client who comes in like maybe age range and then how does—

VS: Mostly I think, you know, all the spouses or ladies I have seen they're in their early 30s or maybe they are married for five, seven years and they come from India and the things are different here, you know. So maybe, maybe sometimes if it's domestic violence—I mean they think they are, you know, being abused, sometimes it's not abuse but it's just a way of communicating. And it's really easily done, all the womens who are well educated, sometimes they misinterpret that, “oh he is shouting too much at me” you know and they think this is violence, or this is abuse but maybe it's not but it's just the communication gap. So it depends.

TG: And then it also might depend what education level? Like is there a typical education level of people who come in?

VS: Not—speaking of coming people from India they are mostly highly educated. Very few of them are not educated, I should say, you know. Because when the guy studied here, he's working here, when he goes back home and find a girl he's not going to find uneducated girl, of course. He wants somebody who can come here and...help him out you know working-wise or communication-wise, you know, interest-wise. You know, I don't think somebody would bring somebody from India uneducated, in my opinion.

TG: How long is the process of Daya working with the client?

VS: It depends. Like I said, you know, some clients are imagination is like- that this is abuse. Some are really involved in abuse. So it's nothing like you can say it's one day or one month or year or something. Maybe it takes longer because if, you know, the in-laws are involved also sometimes.

TG: As far as you're aware, are there organizations for domestic abuse in India?

VS: No. As far as I know. Only- only thing I know is that they just leave home and go to their parents' home or relative's home or something. And they just deal from there, you know.

TG: So why do you think that has- there's the difference in America then?

VS: I- I think, you know in India also, they do that. But there is no organization that I know of. Now it might be. I've been here for forty, forty-five years, you know. So there should be something, you know. Probably you- you know something I don't know. But, uh, in our community, everything is hush-hush. You're not supposed to let anybody know that you've been abused. For longest period of time, you know. It's- it's considered very bad if you talk about your

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family when you are get married or something. So for the longest period of time, no- none of the ladies would come out unless it's like a somebody's going to kill somebody or um, very obvious that it's somebody's hurt or maybe the bones are broken or something. Then only, people would come, come in forward and say ok, let's get out from this situation. Otherwise, the small, small verbal, emotional abuse, all the females just deal with it, that's our life.

TG: Shifting gears a little bit, um, how does Daya raise money to support their services?

VS: Oh there are so many ways. They have a fundraisers. Like I said, they have a gala every year, and they raise the fund that way. Then there are so many donation bases. They have so many outreach programs. And basically, it's all donations.

TG: Can you talk a little bit more about the gala?

VS: Gala is like uh, you know, inviting like uh, you know, you have a gala chairperson or some person who has a lot of influence in the society. You invite them. And then, you have a silent auction. You just have some kind of a function program, you know. So people- people can buy the tickets. People can buy the table, you know, for thousand dollars or five thousand dollars. They have a silent auction. They collect the money from there. And uh, I guess, that's about it. That's any Gala.

SG: How does Daya like distribute the funds? Or like, how is money allocated for the services.

VS: It depends upon individual. I mean, there is nothing set you know, that ok we want to spend only hundred for this client and thousand for this client. I mean, two hundred for this- It just depends what kind of need they have. Maybe there is no need. Like I said, some people imagination is that they are abused. But maybe they are not. So they just, come for a visit. They talk, and they say, some people even, some ladies say "ok, I understood now. I want to go back to my home. I want to go back to my spouse." So there are not that many, in my opinion, or you know, understanding that there are not like hundreds of womens are out there, you know, they have to help.

TG: What services are provided that specifically cater to the Indian-American community? Like what makes Daya different than another different domestic abuse organization?

VS: I don't know any other domestic violence organization. I never worked for anybody else or any American. I didn't even work for Houston Area Women's Center. That is for domestic violence also. But I never work for anybody else. I just worked only with the Daya so I couldn't tell you honestly how different Daya is. Only thing I know that they are helping South Asian community.

SG: So you mentioned volunteer work after leaving Daya? Like what kind of work?

VS: Well I did all sort of like uh, you know SEWA. I do, if anybody needs a ride to go to the doctors or a hospital. Or if they had any kind of need that they cannot come out of the house and get them- themselves. Then I go and provide that help. And they have a different camps you know, diabetes camp, or something for yoga. I go and do coordination over there. And, any organization needs lot of work, you know. So they need volunteers and right now, I am with the, you know, IACAN, Indian American Cancer Society. And, I am in the board, so we do lot of work there. We help- we do bone marrow, um, you know, drive. We do all, give the information

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to the cancer patients, where to do, which hospital to go, what kind of a help they need, and all that stuff.

TG: Why do you like spending your time volunteering?

VS: It's my passion. It gives me pleasure doing something for somebody. You know, at least, end of the day, if I can help one person, that makes me pleasure. That I- I did something, you know, instead of just sitting home and, I don't know. That's how I am.

TG: Mhmm. Can you think of a specific instance or story that's really stuck with you when you helped someone?

VS: When I was working with handicapped children, there are so many stories but the end of the day. After a few months I think, I left because I, I just couldn't see those young kids struggling for their, you know, food and they cannot get up and they cannot use the bathroom. It's- it's too much for me to do something. I would rather help somebody that doesn't need that kind of help. So, you know, I mean, all other organization I can deal with, work with, because- but when you look at these small children, hurting, you know, you just don't feel good about it.

TG: But you've been able to find joy in helping out people and you've had positive experiences.

VS: [overlapping] Oh yeah! Definitely. When I come home, first I cry and then I feel good. [laughter] Because whole day, when I see these children I say, "God, I don't know," you know.

SG: So how often, how much time do you think you spend volunteering?

VS: Everyday, I don't volunteer. As I needed, you know, I volunteer. So maybe in a week, I spend about, you know, eight to ten hours.

TG: That's great. Um, going back to Daya a little bit, I was just wondering where did the name come from and what does it mean?

VS: Honestly, I forgot. We all have decided the name together. Just as Daya means in our uh, Indian language, is you know, passion or compassion, you know, to help somebody, Daya, means like, you know. [to SG] Are you familiar with Daya word?

SG: Not with that word.

VS: Oh, so it's like compassion, you know. Feeling sorry for somebody, you know.

TG: What issues did Daya face, like while you were with Daya, especially starting up the organization. What issues did you face?

VS: I guess it's very different project that we took over. And it took us a really long time to establish, you know like- like I said, you know, we don't get any clients in the beginning because the Indian community is so close. Nobody would come out and say that I have a problem. So, you know, we took all the trainings, we used to go to Houston Area Women's Center and wait for somebody to call us. Nobody would call us. So many people tell us the story that "oh, somebody's in really bad shape. You should help them." But then Daya has, I mean Houston Area Women's Center has specifically told us, unless and until somebody calls themselves,

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you're not supposed to do anything. Nobody knows what's going on in their mind. I cannot speak for you. I mean, you know, you have to speak for yourself. So that- that was the hardest part for us, to break that. So we had so many, you know, volunteer program, and so many outreach program, and so many advertisement, and everything. So I think, the- we broke the, you know, ice maybe later on. Because first of all, what happens you know, when somebody goes to somebody, the trust is always has to be there. We cannot violate their trust. If somebody calls, that doesn't, I cannot just go and tell somebody the rules. Even though I know the person, I cannot tell next, you know, and even to my spouse, I cannot talk about it. It's- that's first thing.

TG: So without mentioning any names because of privacy, did you- did you know women firsthand who were maybe your friends or family members that were struggling with this?

VS: Yes.

TG: You did? Did you reach out to them or let them know about Daya?

VS: I would give them a number that call this number. If you really want help, call this number. I wouldn't say anything that "oh, you know, you should come to Daya" and, you know, all that stuff. None- We are not supposed to. I can just send you the number and say, that's your wish. If you decide to call, call.

TG: Was that tough for you, to see other people going through that?

VS: Yes, of course. I mean, if you see people there with black eye or, you know, bone broke or something, you feel it. But there is nothing you can do about it. It's not your place. And we were not there so we don't know. We cannot even say that "I understand." We don't understand what people go through, you know. So everything is no-no, nothing, we just cannot say anything. If somebody calls me and says, "somebody is hurting and something happen." I say "ok, I'll give you Daya's number, call Daya." And let the person call and they will take it from there.

SG: These people that you knew, are they part of the reason why you and the other women were inspired to start this organization?

VS: Well, we have seen in the community, you know, especially, I don't know too many Asians, but I know Indian. And back home, I have seen every- every tenth family has some kind of abuse going, you know, either it's verbal or emotional or physical. Because it's all joint family back in India. Now, it's not. I'm talking about forty, fifty years ago. So in a joint family, in-laws are there, sister in-law is there, husband is there. So husband gets into some kind of mold. That somebody complains about somebody, you know, and then it all begins, you know. And it's been going on. I think, every- every community has that. Every community- I'm not just know the Indian. All the community goes through this domestic violence. Otherwise, there wouldn't be this huge, huge organization to help them.

SG: Do you think it's getting better? Or not necessarily?

VS: No, I don't know. I wouldn't know that.

TG: When you first came to Houston, were you very involved specifically with the Indian American community?

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VS: Well, when I came to Houston, I knew only few people. But like my nature, the first of all I knew that I started working with our Gujarati community. I started working with, you know, like I said, I was working with the Gujarati Samaj of Houston, you know. That's how I started. And from then, there are branches. People said, "oh, we need help here, we need help there." So it just- I just grew, you know, myself.

TG: And were your social ties mostly with other Indian immigrants?

VS: Oh yeah. We have a huge group, huge community.

TG: How have you seen the Indian American community change within Houston?

VS: Yes, people change and when you are dealing with your own small family, or maybe environment, or the facility. People change.

TG: How have you seen the community as a whole change?

VS: They are- People are more open, more, you know, like I say, you know, what do you say. I say, more open, you know. They are not afraid of, you know, like used to be in India that, "oh how can I talk somebody about my problem?" But they are- Just like, gay people. You see lot of, you know, communities are coming up and talking about it, you know. They are not afraid anymore, you know. It's just, you know.

TG: In America?

VS: Yeah, I'm not talking about India.

TG: Okay. Yeah.

VS: You're talking about here, right?

TG: Mmhmm, yeah. Do you go back to India?

VS: Yeah, I go every year. [**TG:** Oh!] My- all siblings and everybody is in India.

TG: So did you- assuming you took your kids back too, when they were growing up.

VS: Yeah! Oh, yeah. They speak all kind of languages.

TG: Oh!

VS: --When they growing up, yeah.

TG: That's great. How else do you connect with your Indian identity while you're in Houston? Besides being involved in so many organizations and volunteering.

VS: I didn't understand the question.

TG: Do you uphold traditions that you had while you were growing up in India? Like what do you do now that you are in America?

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VS: Tradition wise, we have so many weddings. We have so many, you know, like, religious functions, we have so many temples. So we still have our traditions and rituals that we follow just like India.

TG: And you and your family specifically?

VS: Yeah, we go to temple. I do volunteer sometimes over temple also. But not as much as I do for other organizations.

TG: Do you have anything else you'd like to add that we haven't gotten to?

VS: No, I guess I have said more than enough. [**VS & TG:** Laughs] To me, I don't know, if you have anything to, you know, ask me, you know. But I cannot give you any more information about Daya, because their progress, because I am not involved with them right now.

TG: Great. Thank you for your time. It was really interesting.

VS: [overlapping] Thank you. Thank you. [**SG:** Thank you] And I hope I gave you some information that can help.

TG: Yeah, for sure.

SG: A lot.

VS: Thank you.

TG: I guess, maybe one last question. I'm sure you're aware of the #metoo movement that's been going on in America. Have you heard about that? [shakes head] Oh. Okay. It's about a lot of women stepping out and talking about the, like harassment that they've faced. A lot of it is sexual harassment. So, I was just wondering if you thought anything like that would happen in India?

VS: Like I said, this is all hush-hush society. The, you know, the sexual harassment comes last. Nobody talks about it, you know, in otherwise, you know, the job place, you know, any place. Even- even, I don't know about her, but there are stories about uncle abusing niece or father abusing somebody, somebody. Those stories always everywhere in world. But in India, nobody would come out and say anything about that. That's absolutely... no.

TG: Even to this day?

VS: I don't know about today. [**TG:** Okay.] I don't know about today. But I- Like I said, people in India also, people are very, very open. And very, you know, they think, they speak their mind. So I think there is a progress, lot of progress in India also. And they sometimes show in the movies also, Indian movies. They have some social movie going and they all take that subject, you know, sexual harassment or domestic violence or something. So the people who are not educated, they would see that and probably, they get some inspiration from there.

TG: Yeah. All right, great. Thank you very much for your time.

VS: Thank you.

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SG: Thank you.

[recorder shuts off]