

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

Interviewee: Prabha Bala
Interviewers: Daniel Ngo, Taylor Crain
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Transcribed by: Saniya Gayake
Edited by: Mai Ton, Steven Loyd (10/11/2018)
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Background: Prabha Bala was born in 1948 in Shimla, India. She grew up in various parts of India and went to school in Chennai where she developed an interest in the classical Indian arts. She moved to Houston in 1971 with her husband and since then, has witnessed the development of Indian culture and community in the City of Houston. An extension of her deep interest in classical Indian music and dance, Mrs. Bala helped found the Classical Arts Society of Houston and worked on the Asian Arts subcommittee in the Houston Museum of Fine Arts. She has also been involved with many non-profit organizations such as the India-American Charity Foundation, Teach for America, and Daya. In this interview, Mrs. Bala discusses her passion for the arts, her involvement in numerous organizations, her thoughts on the growth of Houston and India, and her favorite life advice.

Setting: This interview was conducted on July 6th, 2018 in Prabha Bala's home.

Key:

PB: Prabha Bala
DN: Daniel Ngo
TC: Taylor Crain
—: speech cuts off; abrupt stop
...: speech trails off; pause
Italics: emphasis
(?): preceding word may not be accurate
[Brackets]: actions (laughs, sighs, etc.)

Interview Transcript:

DN: Today is July 6, 2018. My name is Daniel Ngo.

TC: I'm Taylor Crain.

DN: And we're here to interview Mrs. Prabha Bala. So, to begin, can you tell me about when and where you were born?

PB: I was born in uh, in India, and in a city called Simla, which is uh, located in one of the Himalayan states. It's in the north. It's part of the Himalayas, and uh, the state uh, well it's, it is in—is in Himachal Pradesh. So it is way up in the north of India. And I was born in uh, on April 14th, 1948.

DN: Mhmm. Okay. Uh, how long did you live in Simla?

PB: Until I was five years old. [laughs] And then my parents moved to New Delhi. [**DN:** Ah, okay.] Yeah.

PB: And...my parents were in Simla. My father worked for the central government and uh, in those

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days, uh, in the colonial days, Simla was considered the uh, “winter capital” of India. So there were uh, government offices uh, in, in Simla, and my father worked in uh, the Central Water and Power Commission of the government of India. So that took them to Simla. My family is really from the very south of India. My parents are from the state that is now called Tamil Nadu. Uh, so they traveled, work took them from their home state, uh, to...to Delhi and then to Simla and so that's where I was born.

DN: What did your mom do?

PB: My mom was a homemaker.

DN: Ah, okay. Did you have any siblings?

PB: I have two siblings. I have an older brother and a younger brother.

DN: So what was it like growing up in Simla for the first five years if you remember anything?

PB: [laughs] Yeah, I remember. I have some vague memories of the place. [**TC:** Mhmm.] Uh, it is uh, those days have remembrances of uh, going up to the mall. I mean, my first mall, you know, early schooling, the first school I went to was, uh, I remember that. I remember the name of the school. It was the Loretta Convent [laughs] School. So, eh, just some vague memories. It's uh, you know, it's a mountainous place. I remember uh, going up, uh, this uh, you know, uh, pathways up, and then going up to a place which is called “the mall.” And uh, there used be a skating rink, I remember that. [laughs] I remember looking over the rails, down at the skating rink where people'd be skating. I also remember pony rides. So those are my memories of Simla.

DN: Uh, what about New Delhi, how long did you live there?

PB: Uh, we lived in New Delhi for uh, my parents lived for five years in New Delhi. So they—until I was ten years old. Uh, so uh, after that, my father moved to a uh, United Nations job in Bangkok. [**DN:** Oh.] He worked for a—one of the uh, UN organizations called ECAFE, which was the Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East. So that took him to Bangkok and my parents uh, uh, decided—initially my father was chosen, just a two-year assignment, so they did not want uh, the education of myself and my younger brother to be destructed, you know, just when new difference, uh, kind of schooling. So uh, we came to boarding schools in Chennai.

DN: Chennai?

PB: Chennai.

DN: Okay.

PB: And since then, rest of the schooling, college, everything has been in Chennai. [**DN:** Okay.] And...

DN: What was your favorite subject in school?

PB: Subject in school? [laughs]

DN: Yeah, like English? Math? Science?

PB: Well, it was science. [**DN:** Alright.] Science and uh, I'd say history. I liked science and history.

TC: What was it about it that really, like, drew you to it?

PB: Drew me to it? [**TC:** Mhmm, science and history.] Well I think science is uh, just a general, uh, curiosity, and also in my uh, family, uh, my grandfather was a physicist [**TC:** Mhmm.] and uh—on my mother's side. And uh, the engineers and all the STEM subjects were, were common among many of my, uh, relatives and elders, and my older brother was also into—he is, he is, he is a particle physicist. So science is there and history is just...I just liked history.

DN: Where did you go to college?

PB: In Chennai, the University of Madras. One of the colleges, just called the Women's Christian College, where I did my Bachelor's. And then I uh, went to University of Houston, got an MBA. University of Houston.

DN: What was your degree in, um, in Chennai?

PB: Physics.

DN: Physics? Oh, okay. So you really did like science. [all laugh] So when did you come to United States?

PB: In 1971, when I uh, got married, my husband and I got married in Chennai, in uh, March of 1971. And I followed him here, to Houston, and Houston has been home since '71. I came here on—in May, May of 1971.

DN: Um, why did you decide Houston?

PB: Oh, it was not a decision of mine. [**DN:** Mhmm.] I just followed him and his job. [laughs]

DN: Oh so his—his job brought him to Houston. [**PB:** [unintelligible, overlapping]]

PB: ...it brought him yeah. He uh, he came to India between his uh, transfer really. He was uh—worked for Shell Oil Company, he was recruited Shell Oil Company in California. He came into the U.S. as a student at Berkeley, and after he graduated he, uh, started work with Shell Oil Company in Emeryville, in California. And they moved the Emeryville labs to Houston area. So he, he moved to Houston and soon after he moved, he came back to India and then we got married, and...I just followed him. [**DN:** Okay.] It was not a bad thing though, I mean uh...when I landed on May 3rd in Houston, 1971, the first thought that occurred to me was, as I got off the plane, I said, "Gosh, 12,000 miles I've traveled, and it is the same heat." [all laugh] The only thing that was different from Chennai and uh, Houston was that when I got on the uh, got off the flight and then he was driving me home was, the very quiet road. [laughs] Hardly any traffic, no traffic, no noise of the hustle and bustle of life that one encounters if you were in uh, any part of India. So that was my first impression was, "how quiet."

DN: Quiet but hot. [laughs]

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PB: [laughs] How quiet and how similarly hot and how similarly humid. That is it.

DN: Was there anything else, um, in the first few months of living in Houston that surprised you? Did you experience any culture shock?

PB: Uh not culture shock as much because, you know, we uh, since my parents had been abroad, and I was in boarding, and we traveled quite a bit, so there was not—it was not like the, uh, first trip out of India and seeing a, a new world. But certainly it was, uh...like I said, the freeways were very quiet and very wide, and...[laughs] so I won't say it was a culture shock as such. But uh, the language, uh, the new accents, these were all the new things that uh, the very first uh, few weeks of being here, it took a little getting used to. And uh, yeah, the new lifestyle of [DN: Yeah.] managing your home [DN: Mhmm.] without help. [laughs]

DN: So why did you decide to get an MBA?

PB: Why? Uh, that's a good question. [laughs] Well, it seemed to be a subject that would lead to a job since I had a major in physics, and I really didn't see myself as a physicist as such. Because my—as I said, I was interested in physics, but I also walked into physics because that what my grandfather had done, and my father was physics and then electrical engineer. My older brother was physics. Our whole family is physics. So, so that's why.

DN: Okay. What was your first job?

PB: Even after I got my MBA, I didn't immediately, uh, start working because lot of things happened. It coincided with uh, my graduation. It coincided with us, uh, my getting pregnant and also my husband had a—an impending assignment in Holland. So, you know, [laughs] I didn't work right off. Then we went to Holland in between seventy... '76 and '77, we were in Holland. And I, I did the MBA between '73 to '75. Soon after I graduated, lot of other things happened to me that uh, I didn't end up taking a job, and then after we went to Holland, then my son Vikram was born. And we came back and he was a young baby and I was not, uh, in—in that mindset to start working when he was still a baby, so. And so uh, work wise, mine has been mostly, uh, part-time. You know, I've been involved in—I've always been engaged in many activities and many organizations, ever since even coming to Houston. But uh, I did not follow a, a formal career path. [DN: Okay.] Yeah.

DN: Um, did you ever face any kind of discrimination in your schooling or your part-time work or anything?

PB: No.

DN: Okay. Um...I guess another broad question is, have you seen Houston change over the last forty years?

PB: Absolutely. [laughs]

DN: Can you tell us about it?

PB: Change in Houston, I mean, besides just the growth of the city's physical, you know, growth of the City of Houston. Uh, it has changed in uh, with the tremendous diversity that is now Houston. Even in

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the years as we were here, the '70s to '80s, uh...you did not really see that many uh...members of other ethnic communities. It was mostly the largest ethnic community that uh, there would be the Mexican. But uh, gradually, almost imperceptibly it seems, that rest of the world has now come to Houston's doorstep. It's uh—and with this came changes in uh, the uh, in, in the—Houston's landscape, uh, the architecture, and then um, the restaurants, the community, uh, life here. All of that has changed. I mean now it is, uh—when, when we came here, there must have been about maybe 500 or so Indian, uh, families, and many of whom we would have at least a nodding acquaintanceship with. And now that has, uh, changed too. I think now maybe 60, 80 thousand people of Indian origin. And when we first came here, uh, there were no, in terms of uh, the familiar foods for us, Indian foods, there were no Indian restaurants or anything, much less no Indian grocery store either. We used to shop at Anton's for split peas and we would—because a lot of our cuisine, especially our South Indian vegetarian cuisine, uses lentils and legumes. [DN & TC: Mhmm.] So we would make do with the split peas and whatever was available. [laughs] That scene has totally changed. See, when uh, now, if there was an Indian who is traveling for the first time to Houston, he can live a life of never seeing anything outside of a totally Indian life. There, there is, you know, the infrastructure that has now been created with this uh, large uh, population that has moved here. [DN & TC: Mhm.] So person can come in here, he can go into an Indian grocery store, he can go to Indian temples, he can go to meet Indian friends. [laughs] So he may never have moved out of India, and in-- in entertainment, movies, you name it, everything is here. And then through, you know, today with the global nature of uh, TV and communication, [TC: Mhmm.] [laughs] he may never have left India, but so that is, that is the change. Yeah.

DN: Do you remember when the first Indian grocery or Indian [PB: Indian? Yes.] restaurant opened up?

PB: Yeah, the first Indian grocery I remember was uh, an enterprising lady who was, uh, got round to assembling many of the Indian uh, grocery items. And uh, she would bring them in the trunk of her car. [laughs] And—and I don't know where she—maybe from Chicago or some other town, she sourced the groceries, and uh, she would come and then there would be a weekly uh, time when she'll announce it, she'll come into a neighborhood, "I'm here," you know, so we would go to her and buy. It was called 'Jay Stores.' I mean this lady, later, she—she opened a store. She called it the 'Jay Store.' That was the first uh, Indian grocery store that I can remember, and uh, we used to pick up things from her. And now there is a whole, you know, little India out on Hillcroft.

DN: Mhmm. Um...did you try and instill some of the values you learned growing up in your son Vikram? Um, rather than having him being more Western I guess, because he was born here.

PB: No, I mean the values that uh—we, he would have gotten an exposure to things that are identified with India and Indian, especially in the area of uh, uh, the uh, music and the arts and so on. Because in India I went to a school, uh, in, in the boarding school I went to in Chennai, it was called uh, it was part of what is now known as Kalakshetra. And it combined uh, a art institution where, you know, something like the Juilliard, where they would learn music and classical music and dance and so on, and you also had a grade school that was attached. So it was an institutional feel, three schools really. And uh, having that exposure—and it was a institution of national repute, anytime there would be, you know, visitors, state visitors and so on, they would be brought to Kalakshetra for the cultural, uh, exposure and uh, you know, to—for the state visitors to see something of the arts of India. So that has created in, in me, both a familiarity and a love for classical Indian performing arts like music and dance. So uh, when we came here and we were a small group, uh, those of us interested in classical music, we would often get together. And then we had amongst us a lady named uh, Indu Krishnamurthy, who was uh...you know, those days, we thought she was much older, she must have been in her forties or fifties. We were all, uh,

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in our early twenties. [TC: Mhm.] So she came from a highly uh, gifted family of musicians and artists, and she started many cultural traditions here in Houston, and all of us sort of gathered around her, and she started a uh, a festival for an eighteenth-century, uh, composer of classical South Indian music. And that festival, it was like in uh, honoring this composer. It was called the Tyagaraja Aradhana, and that is a festival that is held almost all over India, you know, in honor of—sometime in the early January of each year. So that tradition of Tyagaraja Aradhana was started by her, and uh, we have since formed a formal organization called the Classical Arts Society, uh, that is now in its 25th year. And we continued the Tyagaraja Aradhana since the early '70s when we all had gathered as uh, you know, young families. So under her leadership, we started this festival. And uh, similar festivals and similar arts and cultural interests have grown over the years. So since we were so steeped and engaged in, uh, in, in this activity, that would be exposure for Vikram [DN: Mhmm.] for some of our uh, cultural life and cultural values, arts, and so on. So that is one way that uh...instilling some of the Indian arts and values, cultural values, into Vikram.

DN: I feel like you read my question sheet because you're just answering them before I even asked them.

PB: Alright. [laughs]

DN: Yeah, so I was going to ask about the Classical Arts Society of Houston. Uh what—what sort of other things does the—does that do?

PB: The organization? [DN: Mhmm.] See, when we started as I described earlier, in the early '70s when we started this getting together music groups, and uh, it was an ad hoc group when—where, it was as I would describe our Tyagaraja Utsavams of that time. Utsavam is a word, a Sanskrit word that means festival. So, and it was, gave everyone—all of us who were aficionados of classical Carnatic music to get together and have uh, what can be called jam sessions. [laughs] So, and so it was mostly just us. I mean this—Mrs. Krishnamurthy would be, she would teach us the songs, and so we were the organizers, we were the uh, performers, and we were also the audience. So that went on from the early years, and then later, closer to '80s or so, uh, many Indian professional artists started to travel, come on uh, professional concert tours to the U.S.. So when uh, we presented them, we needed to present them in a formal uh, through a formal organization, a non-profit organization, so that we could manage all the organization land and the finances and so on. So that is how the Classical Arts Society was formed, and then they—the founders of the Classical Arts Society was Mrs. Indu Krishnamurthy and one Mrs. Nalini Mukhupadhya. Both of them were senior to me, and then I, I, the three of us started the organization. And we have uh, presented, and we—our mandate initially was just to do this annual festival, which now in India has grown to be very well known, every city, every place, where there is any kind of classical music interest, they will gather and during that period to perform the uh, Tyagaraja festival. The biggest of its kind now-a-days takes place in Cleveland.

DN: Oh really?

PB: Yes, where they do it on a...it's a week-long event where practically every artist of both uh...every artist of repute, whether it's a beginning artist who is just on a career path or senior artist, they all gather in Cleveland, and they give performances and so on. So what we have been doing is mainly the Tyagaraja Festival, and we also uh, that has grown to a spring festival and a fall festival. [DN: Oh wow.] So, and then we uh, also present uh, visiting artists through the year, as, as they come.

DN: Okay.

PB: Yeah.

DN: Um, could you tell me about the Indo-American Charity Foundation?

PB: Okay, the, the Indo-American Charity Foundation is the first...Indian American foundation where their uh...where we sought to—it was founded so that uh, we knew images that had taken—become, um, citizens and, and we have adopted Houston and America as a home. Give us a chance to give back. You know, where we have settled down here and we have uh, prospered here. So the Indo-American Charity Foundation, the basic uh, the, the idea is to provide a, an org—an organization through which we could do an organized uh, donation back to the country of—to our new country. And uh, it's uh...actually this giving equity is twofold. While most people do give on their own, it seemed it will be good for this new immigrant community to do so in an organized way where we, you know, collect the funds through the, uh, community. Uh, also it is to teach the community to give. **[DN: Mhmm.]** Giving is also something that can be learnt, and uh, and by doing this, we encourage the community to give, and the receiving organization can see us as an identified group that is uh, participating in this charity work. So the objectives were twofold. It had its beginnings by uh, with a doctor who was very moved by an uh, a patient's experience, uh, which apparently it was an old lady who had been his patient and he had prescribed certain foods for her. And...and her visit following, on a follow-up visit, he asked her, "Have you been eating all of these things?" and all that. So she's very hesitant and then she said, "Well doctor, uh, you know, the food that you had prescribed for me, I really couldn't buy that." But you know, she—she bought dog food which had the same amount of protein that he had recommended for her to, uh, include in her diet. So when he heard that, he felt very moved, he said, "Look, we have people who are in need of help in this country. And now that we have, many of us have made this country our home, we should also think of uh, paying back into the society." So that was the story that is—it's a narrative for the start of the Indo-American Charity Foundation. And I uh, was invited to join the board of Indo-American Charity Foundation and uh, I also ended up uh, spen—being the president of the India—**[DN: Mhmm.]** That was in the year of 1998. And what we, we, the Indo-American Charity Foundation follows a pattern similar to the United Way, where we're merely uh, getting the donations, and then we give it out to many of the organizations in, in the Houston area. The first recipient of the IACF, uh, donation was uh, the food bank, and now there are so many. In my year, I—we donated, we were uh, we, we donated seed money for a Indian doctor's charity, uh, club that started, so now that is also continuing. Uh, so...**[DN: Okay.]** any other questions about the Indo-American? **[DN: Uh, just kind of what resp—]** And, you know, the monies that have been raised have grown over the years. **[DN: Mhmm.]** In the first year, I think they raised 10,000 dollars and now the annual fundraising is in the 300, 400 thousand dollars. In my year, I think we raised 350,000 dollars for the Houston area charities.

DN: What kind of responsibilities did you have as president?

PB: Responsibility was of course to um, do uh...the running of the organization, organizing the uh, the monthly board meetings, and then look for new board members. And these are all some of the responsibilities, and then the—planning the annual gala. The annual gala was the big event, and also when uh, the charities, when they are raised, we would uh, you know, go to the institutions where we were giving—donating the money to. So we've gone to those uh, locations, study them. **[DN: Okay. Are there any other—]** And encourage a lot of others to come and donate. **[laughs]** That is the big job, **[DN: Of course.]** and that's not easy at all. **[TC: Mhmm.]**

DN: Yeah, so are there any other specific organizations you'd like to talk about, that you've been

involved in or were particularly important to you?

PB: Well, many organizations that I have been involved in, I have to thank my very good friend Anne Chao. Whose...both our sons went to the same school, they were in same class at St. Johns. So that is how I uh, came uh, to meet Anne Chao, and we've been friends over the years. And so Anne did uh, introduce me to the Houston Ballet where I was on the advisory board, uh, for a few years, and at that time, I have uh, uh...introduced some of the visiting Indian performing artists to the Houston Ballet and uh, you know, they organized some master classes and so that was some exposure at uh—for the ballet students in the ballet academy to Indian, uh, formal Indian dance. Then uh, through Anne I think I also got introduced to Teach for America. That was a great experience. I was on the board of Teach for America, and uh, because of that—Teach for America stands for is very, very attractive. It is very practical and is something that also has a uh, long-term reach, you know, because uh, it gives the opportunity for uh, the inner school. You know about Teach for America, it's an organization. [DN: Mhmm.] So, so I, I, I really liked what it stood for, because uh, it gives these bright youngsters coming out of, uh, graduate schools to um, you know, a life that is totally maybe unfamiliar to them in the inner-city school life of the children. And they bring their enthusiasm, and so that is an immediate, um, benefit for society, that these, uh, children, uh, get the teaching experience from these bright youngsters who are not too, too [laughs] distant in age from them. The other is the long-term benefit, that these uh, graduates who come to these schools to teach and they have a first-hand experience of what it is like in the uh, field of education, and if any of them were to choose their careers in the field of education then they can bring this experience and knowledge to maybe help with new directions, new improvements, and solve problems. [TC: Mhm.] So the whole idea is very, very attractive to me. And I think it has been a great experience to be on Teach for America. Then what other organizations, uh...I'm associated with uh, Daya, which is an Indian organization, it is a family-outreach organization, through my husband being on the board of Daya, and he's been with Daya for many years, 10 years I would think. And uh, he's uh, he's—this year he's the past president, so he's the very first male uh...[DN: President?] president of an organization that you typically see as being uh, uh, manned by women leaders. So that's—Daya is another organization that keeps us quite busy, and the Houston—the temple in Houston, the Meenakshi temple, which is the third Hindu temple in the uh, United States, third Hindu temple that is built uh, you know, following the Indian temple architecture, typical South Indian temple, it has been, with the same form that you would see temples in India. [DN: Mhm.] So this is uh, this was also started in the early, you know, '70s when we were all starting life and so we, there was uh, we had lot of involvement in the very beginnings. Or to say right from the beginning, we're still connected to the temple. So that is another organization that we are, we relate to. Actually there are many or—if I walked you through our study there then you will see labels on [all laugh] many organizations.

DN: Can you tell me about your involvement with the Houston Museum of Fine Arts?

PB: Oh yes. That'd be the best. That has been incredible, very, very enjoyable for me. Again I must thank Anne who—for uh, introducing me to the uh, the curator, Asian Arts department's curator, and I joined the uh, the...the As—what is this? In—into the committee, Asian Arts subcommittee. The Houston Museum and they're uh, when I joined the subcommittee, uh, all of uh, the museum's Asian art objects were just located in one area, one room. But now since uh, how long have I been there? Maybe in early twenty, twenty years at least, thousand, two thousand and, yeah, around 2000, year 2000, is when I joined. So in these last twenty years, the museum has changed so much. Uh, in, especially in—with respect to its Asian Arts department and the Asian Arts collection. And um...when I joined, it was just all the art objects were in one location. Now there are five Asian Art country galleries with the uh, the first of its kind being the Egyptian gold, then that was followed by the opening of the Korean

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gallery, and then the Arts of India gallery, Arts of China gallery, and the Arts of Japan gallery. So it has really grown and my interest in the arts, uh, of not only Indian...arts, also having been associated with the museum and familiarity with many of its other art collections, all of that has brought it. So being associated with the museum has given me that uh, little deeper and broader, uh, engagement with the, with the uh, the arts. And the experience of uh, the Hou—Houston Mu—being on this Asian Arts sub—subcommittee, I have a pretty nice narrative of some of the early, uh, beginnings of the formation of the Arts of India gallery. Uh, when I just joined, there was a uh, our uh, subcommittee, uh, chairman was one Mr. Goods—Goodman. John Goodman. And he uh, suddenly he declared uh, that you know—and he's a polo enthusiast. He, he owns polo teams in uh, here in Texas, so—and apparently he had uh, attended the International Festival in London which had honored India, and so he was thinking of that and he said he would like to honor India through, through polo. [all laugh] So when I joined the subcommittee, I was the only Indian, and it was a subcommittee that had uh, sort of lapsed. I think museum has had a Asian Arts subcommittee but it had sort of lapsed, and now it was being revived because uh, the museum had just appointed a new uh, assistant curator named Christine Starkman. So, so breathing new life into this Asian Arts collection of theirs. So, and I was, I was the only Indian there [clears throat] and he said uh, he'd like to honor India through polo and I said most people [laughs] in the community, Indian community, may know nothing about polo. I don't know [laughs] how he can get the community interested. But anyway he said, "No no," so I said well, maybe if you would organize an event, uh, which would be related to the ac—acquisition of some art objects that people are familiar with, then it might uh, you know, we, we could do what you have in mind. So it was coincidental that—the uh, curator, Christine Starkman located a, a very beautiful uh, uh, sandstone uh, uh, piece from a, from a dealer in New York. It was the image of uh, Saraswati, Saraswati in—among the Indian uh, you know, pantheon of gods, stands for uh, education and learning. So this sandstone piece was now available in the market, so she uh...and then that became the rallying, uh, you know, art object [clears throat] around which, um, Mr. John Goodman, uh, organized this polo event. So it was 2003 and, and for this polo event we invited the uh, Maharaja of Jodhpur from the state of—western state of Rajasthan with whom John Goodman had at one time played polo with [laughs] in, in, in, London, so it—he invited uh, for this event the Maharaja was invited, and he came with his son and his nephew and, and uh, when he came, what was just going to be a Asian Arts department event, and it blew up to be a full-blown museum event. And there was a gala held at uh, the Houston Polo Club. [laughs] So this was a gala at the Houston Polo Club to benefit the Asian Arts department of the Houston Museum of Fine Arts. And so that was a great start for some of these uh, events that have now, you know, expanded into all these country galleries and so on, so immediately I mean, that gala became a very successful gala. For the first time, we had at the Houston, uh, Polo Club, there were many Indian—members of the Indian community uh, who were—came to participate in this museum event. And I would say that that has been a uh, good starting point for the pretty significant participa—participation of the uh...well-heeled Indian community in the museum. There was—there are some people who are uh, uh, we have uh, a family that has now uh, donated significant amounts to the museum and I know this lady told me, she said, "Prabha, you know, I never went to museums before." [laughs] And since we got together on that Houston uh, Polo uh, Club gala, from that point on and so their involvement grew, and so they are now among the sig—significant, uh, donors of the, to the museum. They are also on the board and so on. So that has changed, [DN clears throat] made a significant change in the Indian community I think.

DN: Okay. Um, before I move on, going back to the Classical Arts Society of Houston. [**PB:** Yeah.] I was just wondering if you have any particular memorable stories about that?

PB: Memorable stories about classical arts.

DN: Yeah.

PB: Okay, see, the Classical Arts Society, since we formed it, I mean we've had uh, we've uh, presented over uh, 60 leading artists over the years, every—you know, the festival have been an annual event, so every year we would have visiting artists and these are all people who are at the top of their fields in terms of vocalists or instrumentalists, they're all at the top of their field. We've also presented performances by leading uh, uh, dancers, so, so in—in terms of—so that, that has made a big impact I think, they uh, that festival not only uh, presented professional artists, but every year, we also, it's, it's an all-day event, now held at the Meenakshi temple, where we have uh, kids who are learning from various teachers, who are learning music from various teachers, who'll bring their kids and then give them a chance to uh, sit on stage and present a—one of the compositions of Tyagaraja in—as an homage to this. And it has now come to be loo—looked upon as an event that most kids want to participate in, and they want to, to be a—and, and it goes into many of their résumés. So I would like to think that uh, the classical arts uh, work in presenting the festival has had a, a deeper reach into our community, where uh, kids have been encouraged not only to learn and then when they see their friends uh, onstage, uh, it has given them the desire also to continue to learn and and, and uh, present their uh, talent on stage. I think that has been one significant, uh, contribution of classical arts to the community. And besides that, uh...organizations such as ours has encouraged schools also to prepare their students, and I think today we can say there are at least five or six, uh, kids who are of, uh, concert caliber in their performance. So that is uh, some—I think that classical arts has uh, can feel good about. [laughs] [**DN:** Okay.] And we started off as not a board-driven organization, we were just the three ladies and all our friends meet ad hoc and have the performances. But now we are a formal board-, uh, managed organization and we have board meetings and so on, and our budget has also grown over the years.

DN: Okay. Uh, moving on. What languages do you speak?

PB: My uh...what my language at home is, it's a South Indian language called Tamil, properly pronounced as Tamil (/t̪əmiɻ/), anglicized it is Tamil (/ˈtæmɪl/). And uh, I speak uh, our uh, national language, Hindi, only because I was raised both. I mean, my initial years have been in North India, so I speak Hindi, and uh, even when I joined school in Chennai, which is in the South, uh, you know, in our school your medium of instruction has been English all through. And then we had to pick one of our native languages as a second language, so my second language was Hindi rather than Tamil because of my early exposure to Hindi in my early years. So I speak Hindi, I speak Tamil, I speak English, and a smattering of Thai if I may say so since my parents were in Thailand for nearly 12 years, and we used to go there for our vacations, so some Thai. And um, I understand a, another sister language, um, called Malayalam which is uh, spoken in the state adjacent to Tamil Nadu where we lived. So there's a little similarity, so I like to think a little Malayalam as well.

DN: Okay. Did you try and teach these—any of those languages to your son?

PB: [laughs] Well, our attempt to teach our son, uh, our language, Hindi—I mean Tamil, uh, lasted only the first three years of his life [laughs] and once we spoke to him in Tamil, he used to speak back in Tamil to us. But after he started school, uh...his uh, ability and interest to speak Tamil fell off, so. He fully understands when we speak the language but he doesn't, doesn't speak it [**DN:** Okay.] very much. I, I mean we went on vacations back to India, he will say a word or two, a sentence or two, but he is not—unfortunately has not learned Tamil. Yeah.

DN: Okay. How often have you been back to India?

PB: Okay, been...quite often. All through we would, uh, all through my son's school years, we would go every two years, or ever other year. My parents have also visited here, so we've kept connected. And recently, in the last, I would say, fifteen, twenty years, I go every year. And now-a-days when I go, I stay a, a longer length of time than uh, than I used to before. Because before our vi—our travel to India was linked to the school vacations. [DN: Mhmm.] So we'd go in summer. And uh, since my son grew up and went to—went off to college and all that and he was no longer part of the—our uh, India visits, uh, I've mainly been going during the uh, uh, winter months, especially during the month of December. Because the month of December, whole city of Chennai erupts into music and dance. It is simply that period in December, from December 15 to the end of the year, it used to be, it's just called "The Season." So, when usually you meet someone who is interested in classical music or dance, they say "Are you going to Chennai for The Season?" When that—so, and this is a magical time in Chennai, not only is the, is the weather fantastic, it is like you ordered it off a menu. [laughs] [DN: It has to be better than here.] That's right. And it is, it's just cool, it is not as humid, and it's just not cold, and uh, every...Chennai is considered the cultural capital of South India for classical music and dance. And during this season, there are many venues. There are some—two main venues, there are two or three main venues, where almost every artist from India will uh, gather in Chennai for this music festivals. And what used to be connected only by three main organizations, one of them being Kalakshetra, the other is an organization—a, a venue, theater venue, called The Music Academy, has the most uh, uh...modern theater. And the other was one organization called Krishna Gana Sabha. These were the three venues where the festival used to take place. But now there are uh, festivals held in venues in almost every community, you know, that Chennai has developed into. And they say annually there must be at least 2,000 concerts. I mean, not annually, during the season, these 15 days, there are about 2000 concerts [DN: Geez.] that happens in the city. The main venues, of course, they are—attract all the, uh, top-notch artists from all over India, and uh, but if you are in Chennai during the month, during the month of December, you would have access to vey fine music and dance and other performances, uh, in any part of Chennai. And this interest which was mostly South Indian classical music, South Indian classical dance in Chennai, now it has become like everybody in Chennai needs to have their fill of their favorite art form. So there are also uh, festivals that uh, will present Western classical music. They have festivals that present [laughs] anything that uh, you can think of. So it is really a very lovely period to be in Chennai, so if you ever want to go to Chennai, come to Chennai in December.

DN: So do you usually go only to Chennai or do you go anywhere else?

PB: Well we've gone on short, uh—my home is in Chennai, my parent's home is in Chennai, so my main uh, place that we visit is in Chennai. And as it happened, my husband is also—his family is also from Chennai. So when his parents were alive, we used to visit both homes, mine and his parents. Now he has a sister whose—lives in Chennai. So we, well um, we stay at home, in our home, but I see his sister very often. So we're all one happy family together there. [DN: Okay.] And his sister is also an academician, as is my—both my brothers. I have a younger brother who teaches as a professor in Michigan, and my older brothers, he's a particle physicist, so he's...he, he's a professor in, in India. He, he was director of a Institute of Mathematical Sciences in Chennai, so...and he used to teach at—have you heard of the IITs in India, the Indian Institute of Technology? There—there are five [DN: Oh.] IITs from which very very bright people come for studies [DN: Okay.] in many of the U.S. universities. I mean, *the* most competitive, uh, admissions [DN: Mhm.] are for the IITs. And when these IITs started, they were all linked to different countries. And my older brother, he did his doctorate at the University of Chicago, and then he came back to India to teach. So he was uh, he taught at this IIT in a city called Kanpur which is affiliated with MIT I think. [DN: Oh okay.] So.

DN: Okay. Kind of flipping the question, um, how has India changed over the years?

PB: India has changed. [**DN:** Or Chennai?] Chennai. Chennai has now become as global as any other city in, in the world. So uh, while the population has—everywhere it has grown, technology has changed India totally. That is, the uh, technology, computer technology. [**DN:** Mhm.] So uh, you know, a lot of things that were uh, very difficult in India at the time when we were growing up, and also in the early '70s, '80s, uh, not every family in India would have access to something as simple as a phone. And when uh, the uh, cell phones came, and that really changed that part of life, you know, communication. Because we uh, a lot of the people who were not—we had to wait for phone lines to be assigned to homes. Because there was not enough, uh, phone lines that were available. Now with the cell phone, that changed totally. Now everybody was, you know, from the um, um, the person who is a vendor on the street, to the uh, most, uh...highest level, uh, professional. I mean they all had equal access to communication. So I'd like to say that communication has really totally changed India. And uh, this current generation and then one generation before in India has taken to, somehow, technology so easily.

DN: Okay. Uh, just have a few more [**PB:** Okay.] kind of random questions, uh, are you religious?

PB: Am I religious?

DN: Yeah.

PB: Uh, you know it's very difficult to define that word, religious. I mean, if it is, uh—uh, there are many different ways of being religious. [**DN:** Mhm.] There are some where people practice certain, uh, rituals, ritual uh... [**DN:** Mhmm.] so I, I would not fit in that category because I'm not doing that. Then another way of describing religion is uh, to be aware of uh, the spiritual and other philosophical, uh, principles of various religions. So if you ask me "Do you, are you, do you, do you associate yourself with a religion?" I'll say yes. I mean, the religion I associate with would be Hindu. [**DN:** Mhm.] How I practice Hinduism is more, uh, through being interested in its spiritual, uh, teachings and understandings. And spiritual teachings of the Hindu religion makes it very universal, whereas uh, you might find the ritual practice of Hinduism being very specific, and therefore, uh, maybe a little, uh, ritual, a little restricting. But uh, spiritual practice of Hinduism is very universal, so I like to think I am that kind of a Hindu.

DN: Okay. And what do you do for fun?

PB: For fun? I love to...I love to listen to a lot of lectures, so I do that. [laughs] I mean Youtube has made that possible. I love to play the word games [laughs] on the mobile phone, *Words with Friends*, which is now becoming an addiction for me. Then in the... [**DN:** Yeah, I like that game.] yeah. You do? [**DN:** Yeah.] Then I think we should play. [laughs] I'll—you should invite me. Then um, uh, I may be engaged in a lot of, uh...activities, many, we have lots of friends that we have made over the years, we gather in uh, discussion groups, just plain party, travel. What else should I—do you want me to say? [**DN:** No, that's fine.] I'm not such a movie buff though, you know, [**DN:** Mhm.] I can't call myself a big movie buff. And I like to do a fair amount of reading, though it doesn't seem to—it has fallen off a lot compared to the...years ago when I read more, because visual entertainment is so easily available everywhere [all laugh] things. [**DN:** Definitely.] I enjoy, uh, just sitting and looking at the skies. I love sky events, such as uh, full moon, anything.

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DN: Hmm. Okay, a couple of hard questions now. What would you say your greatest accomplishment thus far is?

PB: That is a very hard question. [laughs] My accomplishment...that's a very tough question. I don't know. [laughs] [**DN:** It—it definitely is.] No, if I had been a career, I'd say, I did this project and so I accomplished this and this et cetera, which I have not. Mine has been a life of a generalist, and I'm in generally good cheer, and uh, I uh, make uh, good friends. I'll tell you what, being a good friend of Anne's is one great accomplishment. [all laugh] [**DN:** I'm sure she'll like that.] [**TC:** Yes.] [**DN:** Okay, and—] And I have a wide range of interests, I mean, from science to the arts, [**TC:** Mmm.] so that uh...my accomplishment being of general good cheer. How about that?

DN: Okay. That's, that's fine. And the last question that I have is um, do you have any advice you would want to give to younger generations, especially in Houston? [**PB:** Or anywhere.] And what do you want to see change in the future?

PB: See, my first advice would be for everyone, younger generations also, to have faith in the goodness of people generally, you know, a lot of people have uh...um, unpleasant uh, events take place, because uh, you don't trust that the other person's intentions are good. Generally I think if we would keep that attitude that people generally are good, and they mean well, I think it takes away the edge of many other unpleasant uh...encounters in life. That, that is one thing I do, I would give—that is one advice. My other advice to youngsters is to believe in the power of truth, just being honest in—at all circumstances. When you're honest, it makes you very confident, and it gives you great strength. Even in a situation where it is calamitous not to be honest, you'll find that honesty is a much better strategy, long-term strategy. So if you would keep that, uh, as something in the core of your values, you know, it, it, it is a—very easy, and it covers a large ground, big—lot of ground, this thing of being honest. [**DN:** Mhm.] So I think that is uh, in short, if I were to pass on any uh, advice, those are the two things, believe in goodness, believe in, uh—and take pleasure in the very simple things of life. That is something I learned from an, an essay by Bertrand Russell, and there is a book he has written called, called, *Is Happiness Possible?* In that book, there is one chapter where to convey this idea of being happy, he says uh—and then the whole essay, it goes through various life situations. So, you know, so-and-so had some challenge and then he met the challenge, or uh, some wound that you had created, and then after you've reached the goal, and then immediately you're feeling happy for some time and then it goes off, so going through all of these various life situations. Finally uh, Bertrand Russell in his—in that chapter, he comes down to talk about this gardener, you know, who's planted his garden and he's waiting for the, uh, for the plants to grow and the flowers to bloom. And uh, when the first bloom comes, the gardener looks at the bloom, and he's so happy. So he says, you know, that is pure happiness, and it comes from taking, and this—these words I have always remembered, he says that happiness that you get from taking an interest, in the uh, taking a friendly interest in the very simple things of life. That is another piece of, uh, advice I'd like to pass on. Take a friendly interest, friendly interest, always you should have, you know, don't feel that what I'm doing is very good—best. Somebody else is doing something else and you could just be.

DN: Is there anything else, um, you would want to see change in Houston?

PB: Change in Houston? Well, you know, if you go into any of these uh...not just in Houston, Houston, Texas, U.S., everywhere. Definitely the one change I feel is necessary is, uh, getting guns out of the hands of people. I think that second amendment had a place and a relevance at the time it was created. I think we should believe that it is no longer so relevant, because you have standing armies, you have a

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police force, all of this is there to create, uh, protection for the people. [TC: Mhmm.] I think uh, um, that is an issue. [DN: Okay.] We haven't talked about any of those kind of things in this interview, but if you were to ask me. [DN: Okay.] So that—that goes for Houston also. [DN: Uh, I'm—oh.] Oh, then another thing is when you think of Houston, Houston is—maybe if we have better transportation. [all laugh] [DN: Oh, definitely.] [TC: Yes.] You know, going from, you know, if you could be like New York or Boston or Chicago, and you didn't have to rely on your car. [DN: Definitely.] That, Houston's connectivity through mass, uh, transit of that kind.

DN: Okay, well I am out of questions so if Taylor has any...

TC: It's, for me, it's more like general life advice. So what is like, a lesson you've learned that's really like helped you throughout your life or like has really impacted you?

PB: Lesson I have learned? [TC: Mhmm. An experience.] I can't think of a single, uh...I, I can't think of a single lesson as such, [TC: Mhm.] I think overall I must say that, uh, my life has been quite smooth. I've not had to, uh, you know, I had um...fairly un—uh, straightforward life, not had any uh, bitter experiences or, or any tragic events that have, you know, impacted my life. [TC: Mhmm.] It has generally been...been friendly and good. Life experience uh, you know, if you can avoid being...I, I don't have a single experience, I mean, to answer your question. I can—I mean, what I say may just turn out to be another platitude. [laughs]

TC: So I think that's an answer within itself [PB: Generally—] because I think just the way the way you live your life is why [PB: Yeah. Uh huh.] I think is why its been so smooth.

PB: And uh, generally we're uh, we're very open uh...we are open doors. We invite everybody to our home, and uh, I don't have a great sense of privacy. You know, a lot of people feel very private about their lives, and what they do, what they think, and, and uh, their possessions. I just don't have that. I feel quite open...to people. Does that even answer your question? Am I going around your, [laughs] you know, I'm sure there are single events, I am just not able to think of one right now.

TC: Mhmm. Or is there something that you say frequently, like, advice-wise to people that's kind of like your go-to kind of saying?

PB: Yeah, I, I think I said that I...the one advice I have repeated often is just that think that people mean well in general, you know, that is a good uh, starting ground-level, ground-level, uh, anchoring or centering of your person, is to first believe that people by and large are good, and so.

TC: Okay.

DN: Okay. Thank you very much.

PB: Oh, you're welcome. I'm glad that you both came home.