

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

Interviewee: Urvashi Jain
Interviewers: Zoe Clark, Sara Davis
Date/ Time of Interview: July 25, 2018
Transcribed by: Priscilla Li, Sara Davis (8/2/2018)
Audio track time: 49:50
Edited by: Steven Loyd (12/5/2018)

Background: Urvashi Jain was born in Mumbai, India, where she grew up in a Jain community, going to temple daily and practicing Jainism from birth. She first came to the United States in 1987 to Athens, Ohio where her husband completed his master's degree in chemical engineering. And for the last 25 years, she has been living in Houston with her husband, son, daughter and two dogs. She is the president of the Jain Center of Houston and is planning on starting another Montessori school with her son. She enjoys travelling and playing the role as mother at home, the Jain Center of Houston, and her Montessori school.

Setting: The interview was conducted on July 25th, 2018 in Fondren Library and covered Jain's childhood, involvement in the Jain community, and how the Jain and Houston communities have grown.

Key:

UJ: Urvashi Jain
ZC: Zoe Clark
SD: Sara Davis
—: speech cuts off; abrupt stop
...: speech trails off; pause
Italics: emphasis
(?): preceding word may not be accurate or transcribed
[Brackets]: actions [laughs, sighs, etc.]

Interview Transcript:

ZC: Hello, today is July 25th, um, at 11:56, and we're interviewing Urvashi Jain. I'm Zoe Clark.

SD: And I'm Sara Davis.

UJ: Hi, nice to meet you guys.

ZC: Okay, so could you tell us where you were born and your, like, and what your childhood was like?

UJ: Okay, I was uh, born in India. Mumbai. And uh, while growing up, I grew up in a Jain community where 90% of the people were Jain and we had a temple around and all that. So we practiced Jainism right from birth and, you know, we used to go to temple every day. Our parents did the same. We had a joined—come from a joined family. Um, I have three other sisters and two brothers and grandparents, we all live together in the same house and we practice Jainism right from beginning, yeah.

ZC: Okay, so what did you parents do as, like, a job?

UJ: Uh, my mom was a hou—a homemaker, and my dad had his own business. We had a wholesale in cloth merchants and all that, yeah, so.

ZC: Okay, so um, when did you come to America?

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UJ: I came to USA in 1987. My husband, uh, we came to Ohio, uh, Athens, Ohio. My husband did his master's in chemical engineering over there, and then we moved to Houston about 25 years ago. And we have been here in Houston for all that time.

ZC: Um, was there any culture shock when you came to America?

UJ: Yes, it was a big culture shock. Uh, especially in Ohio, because when we came in, people didn't know—we are vegetarian from birth, and we never had meat or anything, you know. And people didn't know what vegetarian was. And food was a big issue, and you know, everything is so different, you know. Uh, now-a-days it's not as much, but that time, there were not many Indians over there when I came in. So yeah, it was a big difference for me, yeah.

ZC: Uh, so uh, where did you go to—did you—where did you go to school?

UJ: I finish, uh, my high school. I'm only high-school graduate, I finished my high school in India. I went to Mumbai. I went to English-medium school where the—I mean, from kindergarten to twelfth standard, it's all English. And then I did some of college, but I didn't finish my college, yeah.

ZC: Uh, what was your favorite subject in school?

UJ: Wow, that's a big one. [laughs] Actually, I did economics. Yeah, so that was my favorite subject, you know. And then I wanted to do law, but somehow didn't finish college, got married, and came to the US. Yeah, so.

ZC: Um, what did you think of Houston when you first arrived?

UJ: Oh, I was very impressed with Houston, because when I came here I had a big community from my religion. And we had a temple over here and there were a lot of people. So for me it was a big change from a small town to big city where I saw a lot of Indian gr—Indian grocery stores, Indian...there's Indian of a temple, and where I could practice Jainism, yeah.

ZC: Uh, did you ever have a job in Houston?

UJ: Yes, uh, I've been working since, uh, long time. Uh, I did work at Star Furniture and some other job places, at Ross and all that, bu, for last eight years I have my own Montessori school in Sugar Land, Texas. So I've been having there, you know, we have about 75 to 80 kids in there, yeah, so.

ZC: Did you ever face any discrimination in Houston?

UJ: Not really, I didn't, I didn't really feel it. Um...I thought it was very welcoming. Houston was very welcoming when I came here, yeah.

ZC: Um, are there any community organizations that you're involved with?

UJ: Yes, I'm the current president of Jain Society of Houston. I've been the president for last four years and before that I was a vice president, and I'm kind of the first female president. There was one for a very short period, but I'm the one, the longest one. And I was the first VP also. And then, um, I was the kitchen coordinator for ten years. So I was very involved in my Jain community, Jain Society of Houston, yes.

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ZC: Um, so, regarding your last name of Jain, is it, like, that you're born with that last name, or do you, like, acquire it?

UJ: Oh no, I was born with that last name. [**ZC:** Okay.] So, my family had that, and then I got married, and my husband also had the same last name. So we normally change last name, but since it was same, it stayed the same. Yeah.

ZC: Okay, so, I think we can ask some questions about Jainism.

UJ: Sure.

ZC: So how do you perform Jainism in America versus the way you performed it in India? What's different, I guess?

UJ: Okay, uh, in India, we did lot of sutras, you know. All the rituals are a little bit different. The way we practice in India is like, okay, my parents took me to the Sunday school, all we do is like okay, you have to memorize all the sutras. And when I came here, it was more like the meaning of Jainism, more I understood here, once I came here, and I was taking my kids to the Jain Pathshala, our Jain Sunday school, where they learn more about Jainism in detail. And sutras we learn, we memorize it, but we didn't know the meaning. But when we came here, it's uh, the Jainism class is very different over here, where we actually understood a whole lot, deeper into it, with the meanings, yeah. So that was a big difference, uh, from India and here, yeah.

ZC: Uh, we've done an interview with other Jains and they—and we spoke to a Jain that actually attends Rice, and she said that the way people, like, do Jainism is different. So maybe you don't—some people might eat eggs, or some people might drink milk. How do you perform Jainism in that sense?

UJ: Uh, my whole family's vegan for last two years. Uh, of course we have never eaten eggs, or no meat, or no nothing. We've always been 100% vegetarian, including my kids. And for last two years, uh, we became vegan, just because of all the animal cruelty, you know, in the dairy industry. So we all, four of us; me, my husband, my son and my daughter, and my two dogs also, we all are, uh, we are 100% veget—I mean vegan, for last two years, yeah.

ZC: So what is your relationship to the Jain community in America? What's your, like, you're very, um, you have a, like, a big—you participate a lot in Jain community in Houston, so what—do you participate in Jain activities that happen, like, nationwide?

UJ: Yeah, yeah, we have a JAINA [Federation of Jain Associations in North America] uh, every two years, and a YJ [Young Jains of America] conventions, so we always go to that, those conventions, and, um, we just had a recent convention in Chicago, the YJ, it was the Young Jains of America. We had that convention, and there were a thousand people in there. Basically it's more for kids, and every other year JAINA, where whole families going. So we do attend that and wherever there is new temple opening, we had a temple opening in Austin, so my whole family went there, you know, inauguration of the new temple. And we try to attend more, and we do have a lot of activities at our Jain center in Houston. So we do it and a lot of that. And most of them, I organize a whole lot. Because this is a way we get all the youth, and uh, all age group to be involved in the Jain activities.

ZC: What is the Houston Jain community like? Could you just describe, like, how...

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UJ: Uh, we—uh, Jain Society of Houston has been there for, like, almost 35 years. Maybe more, I'm not sure exactly. But I've been here about 25 years. And uh, we have a big community, we have about 800 families. And every, every month, um, every Sunday, we have our Jain classes for the kids. So um, there are about 250 kids, students who come every Sunday. And then every Sunday we have over four, five-hundred people. And most of the Sundays, we do have some activities, lectures, seminar, some plays going on, a lot of other activities. We try to do it so that brings all the Jain community together. And we celebrate all the Indian festivals which are celebrated in India, we do celebrate it here also.

ZC: Um, how have you—oh, I, I guess, I don't know if this is a good question, but, um, how have you taught your children Jainism?

UJ: Okay, for me, uh, for me to—for them to follow Jainism was very important because it's how I was raised, and I wanted them to know. Then, when they grow older, it's their choice, but at least when they were younger I took them to Sunday class every Sunday. Never—mostly never missed it, and because—and of course, we do, at home also, we do have our prayers and all that. And every night before going to bed we do our prayers, and I've been constantly doing it since they were young, and it did help, and right now my son is very involved in our Jain Center. He, he's a teacher also, and he takes Sunday classes. And my daughter is also very involved, she does a mentorship program at our Jain Center for the youth who's going to college and all that. So my—both the kids are very involved in the Jainism, yeah.

ZC: Mhm. Has it been difficult, like, performing Jainism in such like a urban industrial society, like, you know, since it's like, a city, and...I don't know, maybe is it just—like, I, I guess I'm just asking is, like, are there any difficulties practicing Jainism, I guess, in Houston, or...?

UJ: Uh no, Houston I don't see. Because we have so many families, and every restaurant you go, you find Jain food, or you know, like. So it's very friendly and we have lot of big community, so, you know, and, yeah.

ZC: So, I, um, so how does the Jain community react when there are like, uh, incidences of violence like um, mass shootings, or you know, like, you know, like, very big, like, mass shootings or things like that in, like, Houston or, like, in the US when they see that?

UJ: Uh, you know, when the recent shootings happen and all that, of course, everyone got affected. We practice nonviolence, Jainism is all about nonviolence. [**ZC:** Mhm.] So we don't kill anything, we don't...and gun is mostly out of question, you know. We don't lead with all that, uh, but we, that's why we practice nonviolence. And we teach our kids, stay away from all those things, and we take them to the temple where they learn more about nonviolence. So before getting into something, they always think twice. You know, that does help a lot, yeah.

ZC: Okay, so...mmm...so I guess we're talking about, like, indirectly causing harm, so maybe, like, so you know how cars, they have, like, gas emissions and, you know, it's not good for the environment, but how do you deal with, like, things like that, I guess, like, like, knowing that you're maybe indirectly causing harm?

UJ: Okay, I know, it is very difficult, you know. Our sadhus, and you know, our priests, right. When they take diksha, they are in that—another world, right, uh, they are separate, you know, so they can—no, but when we are in the Sansaar, you know, in this world, we have to, we have to travel, we have to do, you know, so we try to avoid as much, like, you know, harming other animals, small living beings, everything, we try to avoid it. But I know it's not possible to do it hundred per cent, but we do try our best, you know, so, yeah.

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ZC: What do you think is the future of Jainism, where do you see Jainism going in—at least in Houston?

UJ: I see it's growing a lot. In last four, five years, we have grown time and a half. And now our center, it was enough for everyone until now, but now it's small, so we're looking for a new temple and we are growing. We see a lot of new people coming from India. And our kids are getting more and more involved. And plus, even outside the Jain Center, everything is easily available, people know about Jainism, the awareness is a lot than before. So it makes it easy for the kids to also practice Jainism. And more and more kids are getting involve, you know, Jainism, yeah.

ZC: So does Jainism have any other moral beliefs besides, like, nonviolence, or is it...?

UJ: Oh yeah, yeah, there are, uh, there are more deeper studies into it. You know, Anekāntavāda and all that, you know. So we believe in a lot, you know, not to, uh, collect too many things, or nonviolence, and there are five, four or five of them which we follow but yeah, I wouldn't know exactly right now all of them, but, you know, so yeah.

ZC: Mmm, uh, could you tell us more about maybe the rituals that Jain—that are involved with Jainism?

UJ: Uh, in Jainism, there are, there are like, three different, uh, kind of Jainism. Śvētāmbara, you know, Derāvāsī, Sthānakavāsī, and Digambara. So, I'm Derāvāsī, Śvētāmbara. So, for us, uh, we go to the temple, we pray to our idol, so we give them a bath, uh, we do puja, you know, with the saffron. We pray to our god and in the mornings, we're supposed to do rituals, do puja, and then do our prayers, and even in the night before going to bed, you know, we do other prayers, and so Śvētāmbara's a little bit different than Sthānakavāsī. Sthānakavāsī, they don't go to temple, they don't believe in idol, but they practice in, uh, a big hall. Right, you know, and pray to the gurus, yeah. And we actually pray to idol more, yeah.

ZC: Mhm. Um, so is Jainism a, like, a religion that is about—that focuses more on the self, or do you, like, judge others' actions?

UJ: No, it's more on yourself, you know. Whatever you're doing, you're doing for yourself to achieve moksha. So it's like your karmas, you know, if you're doing good deeds, you wash away the bad karmas, and you're gonna get moksha, you know. So everybody does for their own self, your own soul.

ZC: Okay, so, so, any opinions that, um, I guess Jains have on, you know, like...other social movements, I'd say, like, you know, like, maybe the environment, or like, LGBT or, like, just things that are usually used as like, political that are, like, politically, um...um, political causes I'd say. So, it would be directed more by Indian culture or would it be coming from like, Jain, from the religion?

UJ: Oh, that's hard, hard to say that. But yeah, for environment, I can say about environment. That's why, like, uh, when we are vegetarian, we are adding less to, you know—in a meat farm, like, you know, when they grow a lot of animals and all that, so they need lot of land, and they're killing and you know. So for disposal of the waste, whatever. But at the same time, you know, when they eat, uh, vegetarian food is more of, you know, wheat and all that, right. So they don't need so much land, so the biproducts are not as much, which is good for the environment. So we are more very environment-friendly, and then becoming vegan, so we're all plant-based diet, more and more Jains are converting into vegan. It's healthy also and it's good for the environment, and good for your body also, yeah.

ZC: Okay, so um, is there any, like organizations within the Jain community, maybe that, like, um, that, like, oversees, like, activities? [**UJ:** Yeah.]

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UJ: We have uh, JAINA, uh, JAINA main committee, which, uh, to uh, looks over all over US, and which really helps all the communities, uh, either financially—some committees, some temples in other, uh, cities they need help, you know, financially, or any help. But yeah, JAINA does look over all the centers all over USA, yeah.

ZC: Mmm, is there any, like, um, rules about way that maybe men and women interact, since, I guess in, um, like, like I guess, is there a specific way that different members have to interact with each other? Are there's—is there like, any, like, mmm, rules, like um, maybe like, in, um, like in Islam there's, like, separation between men and women. Is there any sort of similar...? [**UJ:** Uh no, no, no.] Okay.

UJ: We don't have that, yeah.

ZC: Okay. [To **SD**] Do you have any questions?

SD: Uh yeah, so you mentioned that you were born into the Jain community. But I was wondering since your kids were born in America, did they ever give you any pushback about, um, studying Jainism or going to Sunday school or anything?

UJ: Uh, no. You know what, since I was very involved—me and my husband both, we were very involved in our Jain Center, they are right from birth, they are so used to going to the Jain Center, they really didn't—there was a time in between when my son finishes college...and I mean no, he finishes high school and when he went to college, that four-years gap was a little bit more. That time, you know, it was like, little bit he didn't go as much, you know, but then since they saw us going, and then he got involved, and he's a teacher right now and he's back in the society giving back, yeah. [**SD:** That's great.] So yeah, no, they did not give me a hard time at all, yeah.

SD: Okay, and then when you first moved to Ohio, how did you and your husband sort of maintain your culture, since there wasn't a big Jain community there?

UJ: There was no Jain community. No—we were the only Jain families. In fact, there were very few Indians, [**SD:** Mhm.] so it was hard in the beginning. Because coming from India, everything was very different, 27, 28 years ago. [**SD:** Right.] Phones were expensive, it was like three dollars a minute, so you couldn't talk to your family, all that. Everything was very different. But we, we couldn't eat much food outside, so whatever we cook, we could eat, you know. But basically we didn't even get a lot of groceries and all that. But we, we were so strong Jains, you know, we manage and we, you know, we believed in small—whatever we have, we learned to live and do that, and yeah, we stayed there almost three years, and when we moved to Houston, it's like completely different world for us, yeah.

SD: Why did you originally decide to move to Houston?

UJ: My husband did his uh, master's in chemical engineering over there and after that, Houston is a hub for chemical engineers [**SD:** Right.] so just in search of job, uh, we came here. [**SD:** Okay.] And then we heard that, okay, we have a big Jain community here, so we decided okay, let's go try it out here. [**SD:** Mhm.] If not then we'll go and—but since then my husband got a job here and we have been here [**SD:** That's great.] forever, yeah.

SD: And have any of your parents or siblings come to the US?

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UJ: Yeah, I, I have my younger brother and his wife and his family. Uh, they have two kids, they are here. [**SD:** Mhm.] Of course, they also attend the Sunday school every other—my uh, my two sisters, they do often visit me every...once in two years. And my mom she tries to come see, you know, she's been here six, seven times, yeah. My sister has been here like four times, yeah, so.

SD: And do you ever go back to Mumbai to visit them?

UJ: Yeah, I do go. I do go every six months, yeah. [**SD:** Oh okay. Wow, very often.] Yeah, in fact I was there in April, my daughter, Mishu Jain who went to Rice University, she was one of the first children who went and did (?) the Jain—Jainism class here. [**SD:** Oh.] Yeah, uh, at the first batch here, so yeah.

SD: How have you seen, um, your hometown change since you left?

UJ: Oh, gosh, it's a big change, yeah. [**SD:** Yeah.] It's become another US, you know. [**SD** laughs] It was very different when I came. Uh, here it was, like, wow, this is US, you know, it's...it was different, but when I went back after few years, you know, because we were, you know, students and all that. When I went there, and India's grown so much I was like, Wow, that's another America now. [**SD:** Mhm.] So yeah.

SD: Would you say there's still a really strong Jain community over there now? [**UJ:** Oh yes, yes.] Right.

UJ: There is a strong, very strong, yeah. [**SD:** Mhm.]

SD: And did you meet your husband in Mumbai or when...?

UJ: Oh no, in Mumbai. [**SD:** Mhm. Okay.] We had an arranged marriage, so our parents fix it for us, and yeah. And we met there and then we got married, and we came here [**SD:** Okay.] to US, yeah.

SD: What was like your first impression of him when you saw him?

UJ: Well, I was 19, I didn't want to get married. [**UJ** and **SD** laugh] It was too young to get married, but that was the culture at that time. Now, things have changed. Now girls don't get married 'til they're 24, 25, and they choose their one, but that time when I was growing up, I got engaged at 19, and by 21 got married, yeah. It's, it's different. [**SD** laughs] You don't know the person, you know, like...so I told my daughter, you need to find your own self, you know. Know that person, and then, you know, see if you really get along, and then go, yeah. But then, you know, of course we met, we started knowing each other, then the love comes in later on, versus love comes before in marriage, you know. So yeah, it's different, yeah. [laughs]

SD: Um, would you say that it's important for you that your children also marry someone who's Jain?

UJ: Yes, I do really believe—because if they want to follow Jainism, my kids are strong believer of Jainism, and if they follow Jainism, you know, and the other person is another religion, it's a clash, you know. [**SD:** Right.] So we tell them, you decide what you want to do, you know. But it's going to be a clash, you know, if the other person is a different religion. [**SD:** Mhm.] Then, you know, what do you practice, you know, where do you go. So first choice is if they marry someone from the Jain community.

SD: Um, and how would you say—how would you identify personally, would you say you're Indian, or Indian American or...?

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UJ: Eh, um, we do call ourselves Indian Americans, because we were Indians first, and then we came to US and of course this country has given a whole lot to us. [**SD:** Mhm.] And now we are American also, you know, so we call of ourself Indian Americans, and that's what my kids also call them. They say, "we are American Indians," you know, [**UJ** and **SD** laugh] because since they were born here, but their culture is still, you know, uh, we still have a lot of Indian culture in us, so yeah, they call themselves Americans, and then they call them Indians, yeah. Yeah.

SD: Okay. Um, what would you say that you do for fun?

UJ: Oh, uh, I like to travel a lot, yeah. And my best place to travel is India [**SD** laughs] which I'm again going tomorrow. [laughs] [**SD:** Oh, really.] [**ZC:** Oh wow.] Yeah. I'm going to see, visit my mom as my parents grow older, yeah. I'm going tomorrow or day after, I'm still trying to finalize my ticket, but yeah, in a day or two I will be going. That's my best place to go, see my family back home. Here—of course here we have been family vacation, we have uh, Vegas [**SD** laughs] is one of our favorite place, you know. I like lot of lively places, so yeah, we do visit LA, California. And my daughter's going to Stanford, so I'm looking forward to that. She's going to Stanford Law, so looking forward to California again, yeah.

SD: Yeah. You can visit her over there.

UJ: Yeah, visit her, yeah.

SD: [To **ZC**] Um, do you have more?

ZC: Okay, I was wondering what's your responsibilities as like, president of the Jain community?

UJ: Uh, as a president, you're like a mom. You run the whole temple, you know. Uh, right from kitchen to maintenance, to keeping programs, you know. Everything, like, basically the presid—of course I have a committee, but the president has to plan everything. Work with the kitchen committee, work with the temple people, work with the dignitaries who come here. We do have lot of programs arranged, all that. Basically you take care of the whole—any maintenance issue, the president runs to the temple, you know. So yeah, basically you're taking care of the whole thing.

ZC: Hm, you said that the Jain community has actually grown in recent years. Is it from im—like, Indian immigrants, or has there been just like new people, so like...?

UJ: Yeah, Indian immigrants who have come to US for jobs and all that, so we have lot of, lot of new kids. And even the kids who have taken a break, like my son, I was tel—talking, right, in college he took a break, and uh, kids who have gotten married and now they have kids, so now they're coming back. [**ZC:** Mhm.] So we have lot of kids like that also who are back into society, they want to give their kids our culture as well, yeah, lot of those kids are back too.

ZC: Yeah.

SD: And you also said that—did you say that you ran the Montessori School in Sugar Land?

UJ: Yeah.

SD: Okay, how did you get into that?

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UJ: Um, I wanted to do—we come from a business community back home, and for me to work for someone was difficult always. I wanted to have my own business, and I saw this place and I liked it and then I learned a lot about it and it just came into my lap and I decided to run. It's been eight years I've been running that school, yeah, so.

SD: Um, can we talk [**UJ:** So—] a little—oh sorry, [**UJ:** No no.] go ahead.

UJ: So I run the temple, I run my home, [**SD** laughs] and run my daycare, so I'm a mom of three places. [laughs]

SD: That's a lot of responsibilities.

UJ: Yes, it is.

SD: Mhm. Um, I just want to talk a little bit more about your childhood in Mumbai. So like, what kind of school did you go to? Did you, um, have, like, prayers during school? Um, what activities did you do? [**UJ:** When I was growing up...]

UJ: ...you know, since we—where I lived, there right opposite is my temple. [**SD:** Mhm.] Uh, so, you know, when you're very close to temple you tend to, you know, practicing more of what Jainism—in the morning we would wake up, first thing, without getting any food, have to go pray. Like, to the temple, we would walk to the temple, run back, take a shower, get ready for school, go to school, and yeah, come—and we also go to—over there we would have, um, Jainism class every day in the evening. [**SD:** Okay.] So before going to, you know, after dinner, we would go to our classes, then do prayers and come back, you know. So that was kind of, uh, yeah, Jainism, where we did most of it, yeah. Yeah.

SD: And what sort of activities did you participate in?

UJ: In there, mostly it was, like, we do of course prayers and puja and every sa—um, they also would have lots of activities during weekends, like some sadhus would come and sun—you know, sadhus would come, they would do dikshas and all that, lot of other things over there, but, yeah, mostly, uh, going to classes, religious classes, [**SD:** Okay.] was more of a deal, yeah.

SD: So no like, sports or dancing or anything like that? [laughs]

UJ: No, not really, yeah, [**SD:** Okay.] not really, yeah, so.

ZC: Can you like, desc—I guess des—you said you like, grew up in Mumbai, so could you describe your, like, Jain community in Mumbai?

UJ: Uh, in Mumbai where I come from, basically, in Mumbai, actually there are a lot of Jains. Basi—every like, every street has a Jain temple, you know. Especially in Mumbai, any other part of India it's different, but in Mumbai we see lot of Jains, so, you know, it's very common wherever you go you see Jain food, you see Jain people, you meet lot of Jain, you know, there are a lot of activities and all that, you know, so yeah.

ZC: [To **SD**] Do you have any more questions? It was kind of a short interview. [all laugh]

SD: Um, did you learn English before you came over here?

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UJ: Uh, no, I went to a English school over there, [**SD:** Mhm.] uh, I was kinda the first one to go to English school, you know, when I was growing up, you know. [**SD:** Mhm.] So yeah, I learned, I knew from right there, you know, after my generation, everybody started going to English school, you know. Yeah, before that we had different Hindi schools and, you know, Gujarati schools, but it—I was the first one to go, so I knew right from there, yeah.

SD: Okay, so growing up did you speak Hindi or Gujarati...

UJ: Uh, no, uh, Marwari. [**SD:** Oh.] Marwari and Gujarati.

SD: Okay.

UJ: Marwari's one of the languages over there, [**SD:** Mhm.] so yeah, we learn Gujarati and Marwari both, yeah.

SD: Okay.

UJ: And of course English at the school, so we grew up with learning that, yeah.

SD: Did you teach your kids to speak any of those languages?

UJ: Yeah, yeah, my—both they can speak Hindi.

SD: Okay.

UJ: Yeah, so at least they understand all the Hindi movies we watch. [**SD** and **ZC** laugh] Yeah, we love to watch Hindi movies together, so both of my kids know Hindi, yeah.

SD: Okay.

ZC: So I was wondering, uh, like, what family members still live in India?

UJ: I have my mom right now, uh, my older brother, his wife, and then their kids, and their spouses, and my three sisters are there in India. [**ZC:** Okay.] So, and their families, of course, husbands and kids and, yeah. We have a big family up there, yeah. Here it's just me and my brother. [**ZC:** Okay.] Yeah.

ZC: Could you tell us, like, why your brother came to America?

UJ: Uh, he wanted to get out of India and see—try something more, so he, eh, he has his own business over here too. So he wanted to come and try out something different. He came to try out for few years to see if things work out. Even though he had a business back home, but, you know, it was a thing to go to US. That time, you know. So he came here and then he liked it and he stayed here, yeah.

ZC: Do you have any—are those—so your brother's your only, like, relative...[**UJ:** Sibling, yeah. Mhm, he's only my...] sibling that's in...

UJ: We have six siblings, uh, four are in India, and me and my brother too are here, yeah. So yeah, it's only one, yeah.

ZC: Mhm.

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SD: Um, a good question we like to ask is [**UJ:** Sure.] what's your greatest accomplishment, do you think?

UJ: Oh wow. Uh, my greatest, it's becoming a president of, uh, Jain Center. And being a girl, you know, it's always, like, okay, you have to struggle, but yeah, I did—I think—I know when people write to me that, oh, you're the best president, [**SD:** Aww.] and it makes you feel good. Because I'm very active, I'm very ambitious also. So I like to do lot of different activities at the temple. [**SD:** Mhm.] And every Sunday I try to get new things. And, you know, I get more and more people involved, and, you know, that was one of my biggest things. And also of course, my school, uh, since I'm not very educated, you know, I knew that I'm not gonna get a very good job outside, so I decided to run my own business and uh, you know, without any education also I came so far. Yeah, those two things are my biggest pride, yeah.

ZC: Um, I have, uh, could you, like, ex—um, could you just describe the types of activities you, like, coordinate at the Jain Center?

UJ: At the Jain Center, okay, uh, we do lot of youth activities, um, more we are trying to involve our youth, so they mingle. Um, they have, uh, youth sleepovers at the temple, they go bowling, you know, so we involve—and the banquets and all that. Here, in India, it's different in India, when I went to Sunday school that's all was it, you go to Sunday school, you come back, you're done. Here with the Sunday school also, we try to do lots of fun activities, like you asked before. They do—our youths do lots of fun activities. They'll go to banquet, uh, we just had lot of—of course, for the adults, older people, I do call lot of dignitaries from India to give, uh, lectures and all that, so, older people do enjoy all that. Uh, recently I got two things, one I got a Jain play, which was uh, at Stafford Civic Center, April 29th I think. So we got the play from India, where, you know, everybody could enjoy it, it was an amazing play, it was a beautiful play. And last, Sat—uh, Saturday, we got a singer from India, so, you know, it was like a musical thing also. It was a religious thing of course, but it was a musical where all the—everyone, all age group enjoys. So I try to do it where we do a lot of picnics or, um, do activities for the fun—fun day, and stuff like that, yeah. And every Sunday we do cook at the temple. [**ZC:** Okay.] We have Paryushan, which are eight days, so we get together. We have Ayambils, (?) you know, there's also another eight-day program which we try to organize, yeah.

ZC: So, what would be the main—what's the largest age group in the Jain community, in Houston at least, like, is it, like, a lot of families, or younger peo—like, you know, like, adults, or is there a lot of older people or young people?

UJ: Actually, there are a lot of families. Mostly there are a lot of families, yeah. And we don't have so many, like, uh, single, single people, like—but there are more families, you know. And there are a lot of older—actually, I would say in all age group we have quite a lot, yeah. We have lot of older now, who are getting old and kind of retired and all that, then again there's a next generation coming in. Now we see lot of young generation coming from India with little kids and all that, so, we have kind of all generation. So that's how you plan activities for all the age groups, yeah.

SD: Where is the main Jain temple in Houston, or which one do you go to?

UJ: Oh, well we have, uh, main one is, uh, Jain Society of Houston, where I'm the current president. Uh, it is on Westpark between Fondren and, uh, Hillcroft.

SD: Okay, is that near Chinatown? [**UJ:** Not really.] Or no, not really. [laughs] [**UJ:** But close.]

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UJ: But it's not very far from—I would say about ten minutes. [**SD:** Okay. Okay.] But it's more like Hillcroft, where all the Indian community is, on Hillcroft. [**SD:** Okay.] It's like very close from there, yeah.

SD: Okay, is that like the only temple in Houston, or are there smaller ones elsewhere?

UJ: No, there's only big temple in Houston. We have another, um, Jain facility also, it's called JVP, [**SD:** Mhm.] uh, we have two nuns there, um, and they uh, there is more of—we do yogas and meditation and our two nuns, like, um, Sadhvijis, we call them Sadhvijis. They, they live there, yeah. So that's another part, yeah, but I'm more involved with Jain Society of Houston. But we do go both the places, yeah.

ZC: Mhm. Um, does the Houston Jain community interact with other Jain communities in the state, like, in Texas?

UJ: Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah. Uh, we do, uh, like, in...I would say a few months ago, we took our [unintelligible] party it's called, we took our two buses and we went to Austin. So we went there, we took lot of people, you know, so they could see the temple over there, and we—actually we went (?) to Dallas also before. So, we try to communicate that way, yeah, we do. We do, yeah.

ZC: Is there a lot of, like, interaction between the communities? [**UJ:** Oh yeah.]

UJ: We do, yeah. When, whenever we go there, when we go to Austin, we try to go visit the temple, and they know, they feel free to come here, and that's how we interact with—when they're opening last, last weekend, last to last weekend, Austin temple had a new tem—uh, beginning, you know, they just inaugurated their new temple. Lot of—half of the community was from Houston over there, because they're a small community, they're still growing. But half of our Houston was there, yeah. We do interact a lot, yeah.

ZC: So, you said your son took a break around college years, [**UJ:** Mhm.] so do you see that—is that common within the Jain community? [**UJ:** Yeah.]

UJ: That is very common, because not everyone goes to the college in Houston, you know. Once they graduate, they go to college somewhere else, four years, and then also it depends where do they get the job. But my son got job in Houston, so he came back home, and then...yeah, he saw me so involved and all that, and, you know, that he wanted to take very active role, and he got involved and yeah. So he does lot of—he gives lot of, um, lectures on veganism, and yeah, since he practice a lot. And he teaches older kids, eleventh and twelfth graders, so they can communicate better with a, you know, child who already graduated from the same way, rather than us, you know, so he really gets along. And we do have a youth camp. Every year we take them, uh, during the April, uh, Easter weekend, we take them out of town for three days. So we take about seventy kids from Houston, yeah, three days, yeah, it's fun. [laughs] So I try to go every year with them, yeah.

SD: Do you know what the Jain community is like over where your daughter's gonna be in Stanford?

UJ: No, they do, not in Stanford, but in San Francisco close by, they do have a big community over there. [**SD:** Okay.] So I'm sure my daughter will go there, you know. Because wherever you go, you want to go and pray and, you know, that's, that's how they've been raised, [**SD:** Right.] so, yeah, she's definitely gonna go and visit that place, yeah, temple or whatever, yeah.

ZC: So in a lot of the big cities they usually have a large Jain [**UJ:** Yeah, yeah.] community?

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UJ: Mostly, mostly in the big cities, yeah. Ev—I don't know any big city that doesn't have it, in all big cities, yeah, they do have a Jain temple, yeah.

SD: What are the main Jain holidays?

UJ: Main holidays is a Paryushan and Diwali. [**SD:** Okay.] In Diwali, because Mahavira (?) got moksha, so we celebrate Diwali a lot because of that. And Paryushan is, like, eight days, and after as soon as the Paryushan gets over, that is Das Lakshana, which is a Digambara thing, you know, so that's another ten days. So, Payrushan lasts about eighteen days, you know, eight plus ten, yeah.

SD: What do you do to celebrate that?

UJ: Uh, lot of people do fasting. The eight days, people fast only on water, they stay on water. Some people do for—they eat only one time a day, some do two times a day, some, most of the people do complete fasting, they don't eat for almost 30—24, no not 24, about thirty—36 hours. Yeah, if they're fasting tomorrow, they'll stop eat food from tonight 'til tomorrow all day, until day after at eight o'clock, yeah. And some people do fasting for eight days, 15 days, just on boiled water. [**SD:** Mhm.] So that's, that stuff I couldn't do, [all laugh] that's not me, it's very tough, yeah, I cannot do it, but yeah, you need a very strong will to do that, yeah.

ZC: What is the significance of fasting? Like, what is the—why do you fast?

UJ: It's like, uh, you know, you're washing off your karmas, you know, bad karmas, you know, and see how much self-control you have, you know, that is the main thing. You like, try to control your body, try to, you know, see how much you can do it, you know. It's tough but, yeah, people do a lot. Lot of kids did it, yeah.

ZC: What time, uh, what—when, when are these holidays?

UJ: Uh, they are—every year it does go according to the Hindu calendar. [**ZC:** Mhm.] This year it's going to be in September. Some days—some years it, I mean, I think alternate years it's in August or September, sometime in between there. And then all the festivals follows that, you know, Diwali will be in October, November. There's not fixed dates every year, it varies because there's one extra month, according to Hindu calendar there's an extra month every other year, so that changes, yeah.

SD: Does your family celebrate Thanksgiving or Christmas?

UJ: Here, we do celebrate, yeah. We do celebrate Thanksgiving because we are in this country. Uh, you know, it's a nice—I really like to celebrate all festivals, yeah. We do follow, uh, uh, Thanksgiving, we do celebrate and Christmas, of course lot of gifts, Christmas tree and gifts and all that, you know. We do a lot of Christmas parties, we do have Thanksgiving party, but Jain, you know, of course we don't eat meat, so we have all Jain menus. Yeah, you know, so, we do celebrate all that, yeah.

SD: Uh, backtracking a little bit, um, could you tell us a little bit about your experience, um, finding a job in America when you first came, being a woman and a recent immigrant?

UJ: Yeah, it was—since we were on student visa, of course I couldn't work, but when I got my visas, uh, green card and all that, it was hard to find because of my education. [**SD:** Mhm.] So I couldn't find anything much, you know, and I did find some jobs of course, but it wasn't enough to satisfy me. So

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that's when I decided I'm gonna do some business. I was looking for all different kind of businesses, and since my husband had a good job, you know, he did his master's in chemical engineering, so money wasn't an issue, so I was, like, trying to find out, okay, let's do something what I like, you know. And then I got into, uh, Montessori School, you know, daycare, and...and I really liked doing that so I'm opening another one in about...hopefully now, I'm gonna close on the property in a month, and then I'm going to build my property and build another one. [SD: That's great.] Yeah. So my kids can take over my business, you know. [SD and ZC laugh] Yeah, my son wants to do it with me. [SD: Mhm.] So, and he wants to also open a vegan restaurant, so we are working on that too, a vegetarian, vegan restaurant, yeah.

SD: Did your kids attend the Montessori School?

UJ: No, my kids were older. I waited 'til my daughter grew up a little bit [SD: Okay, I see.] Uh, I didn't want it to...you know, when you have your own business you're very involved, you cannot give time to your kids. And my main focus was I wanted to give lot of time, so when my daughter was in, like...how, middle school, she was finishing, that's when I got it, yeah. [SD: Okay.] So she was old enough, and I could be with her or she could take care of her own self, yeah. That's when I actually, yeah, I started my school.

ZC: Uh, why did—you said about two years ago you became, you and your family became vegan. [UJ: Yeah.] What made you shift, like, completely from vegetarianism [UJ: Oh, gosh...] to veganism?

UJ: That's a nice story. Me and my son were in India visiting, uh, went for a wedding, and my son was bored, you know, he was sitting in the back seat, and, so going through phone, you know. And he saw this one video where so much animal cruelty and that's it. He literally had tears in his eyes, and he said, "Oh my, mom, look at this, it's so much cruelty in the animal world," you know. And he said, "No, we want to become vegan." And then he showed me and that's it. I, after that, I was done, you know, so, we—even at Jain Center we do cook lot of vegan food, yeah, and the YJ just recently happened in Chicago. Thousand people, 90% of the food was vegan. And desserts, you name it, they had everything. So it was very impressive, it was very impressive. How kids—more of youth, our, our young kids, are following veganism. That's very impressive. Still, it's not as common as in my age group, but in youngsters it is a lot, and that when my kids decided, and when I saw the video, then my husband saw it, then we all went, okay, you know what, we all are gonna do that, and we are big animal lovers, so. And then we decided my dog—you get everything online, even vegan dog food. Yeah, so then my dog's also vegan now, [laughs] so, yeah.

SD: Hm, what are your favorite vegan dishes to cook? Or to eat?

UJ: Oh, I cook lot of Indian food, of course mostly Indian food, uh, we can make it vegan. [SD: Mhm.] Uh, we eat lot of Thai food, Chinese food. In Chinese and Thai we don't have to worry about vegan, [SD: Right.] because most of the food don't have dairy products, you know. Of course they put fish oil, but of course they make it vegetarian for us, yeah, so I cook lot of Chinese and Thai, you know. I cook everything Italian also, and you get vegan cheese, in Whole Foods you go, you find everything. All kind of milks, so many almond milk, this milk, that milk, you know, we have lot of kind of, so. We never regret, you know, and every food—and nowadays all the restaurants are so vegan, uh, vegan-friendly, so they always make a vegan menu for you, you know, so, yeah.

ZC: So I guess the switch to veganism has been pretty...

UJ: Pretty easy, pretty easy, yeah. And because, you know, even, you know, we go to parties and that's when we see lot of food, and sometimes we don't find food at parties, you know, but that's okay, you

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know, we are, we are strong vegans, so we are mentally prepared that, you know, okay, we are going to here to a party, we know we might not get lot of veget—I mean vegan food, but we are okay. We normally try to eat something from home and go, so we are fine. But outside restaurants or anywhere traveling, we never have issue, never. [SD: That's good.] Yeah, so.

SD: Are you involved in any community organizations outside of the Jain community?

UJ: Uh, yes, I'm involved in the Gandhi, um, uh, Mahatma Gandhi's completing 150 years, you know, this October 2nd, so I am on their board also, trying to do the celebration—yearlong celebration with—for Mahatma Gandhi this year. So I'm involved in that also. And we do of course lot of community, uh, we go to shelters, animal shelters, we help them out, yeah, try to do lot of activities, yeah. But more, I'm involved so much in Jain Center, and it's uh, 800 families is a big, big, [SD: Takes up a lot of time.] lot, lot of time, yeah, because there's always something. Right now also, I have a lot of books in my car, you know, [SD: Right.] I told you I have to donate to the library. So there is always something, yeah, yeah.

SD: I think I've asked all the questions I wanted to. [UJ: laughs]

ZC: Let me see, yeah, um...I guess, how have you seen Houston change over the years, like, besides, like, not—not specifically in regards to Jainism, just...

UJ: Just overall?

ZC: Just overall.

UJ: I, I saw a big change. You know, now, like, in the beginning of course things were different, we were new and everything, but now I see people are more friendlier, they're uh, accepted Indians I would say, you know. At any job places you go, you see lot of females, Indian females, are there at the top positions. It's quite different, yeah. Now when our kids go to work and all that, it's quite easy for them, you know, yeah. I've seen Houston grown a lot in all these years, you know, before it was different, but now it's like, very friendly, I find it very friendly, yeah.

ZC: I think we've covered all these questions. [UJ laughs]

SD: Is there anything else you'd like to add?

UJ: Oh no, thank you so much, you know, it was nice, you know, I'm very proud of, uh, I was involved in the Jainism class when we started here with Dr. Sulekh Jain. Uh, he came with the proposal that uh, we want to start Jainism, I said, wow, I was, like, amazed. And lot of, you know, city all over US have started their Jainism class, uh, um, so I supported here. Being a president, you know, he came and approached me, and I supported him. Very happy that the Jainism has started, and first year there were a few kids, but the following years, now there were waiting lists, you know, so that is very impressive. And uh, Dr. Brianne Donaldson, she is wonderful. [SD: Mhm.] My daughter loved her. She is so good, and the way she is handling, I mean, and she knows so much about Jainism, you know, it's very impressive, yeah. [SD: Mhm.] So, very proud of, you know, that Jainism is—you know, people are aware, there are so many, Jainism is one of the oldest religions, more than Hinduism also, so people know about it, because it's a small religion, lot of people don't know about it. And you know, we are very close to Buddhism, and when Buddhism traveled from India, you know, Jainism became more, like, popular and all that, yeah. So, but very proud of Rice—thank you to Rice University for accepting, you know, Jainism, to start Jainism, and, and it's doing very good, so, yeah. Very thankful, yeah.

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SD: Well, thank you for your time.

ZC: Thank you for your time.

UJ: Thank you so much. Thank you.

ZC: Thank you.