TC: Alright, today is July 27th, 2018. We are here in Fondren Library at Rice University, interviewing Mr. Sam Kannappan for the Houston Asian American Archive. My name is Taylor Crain.

PL: My name is Priscilla Li.

TC: Alright, so to start it off, um, when and where were you born?

SK: I was born on December 28, 1943 and I was born in a village called Nattarasankottai in Southern Tamil Nadu, [TC: Okay.] India.
TC: Can you describe your childhood? Like what was it like?

SK: Oh, my parents and my grandfather, they were all traders, uh, businessmen in Burma. So I lived with my mother and grandfather in the village and I went to high school there.

TC: Mhm. What was it like at the high school?

SK: Well it’s a smaller, very close in population village [SK note: population of 8000], and uh, friend—friendly. Small town, that kind of thing.

TC: Okay, did you have like, a strong bond with like, the community in the village?

SK: Yeah, well everybody knows everybody, especially if you’re good or bad, everybody knows. [both laugh]

TC: Uh, How did your family influence you?

SK: Well, it’s essentially discipline. I had to follow discipline and uh, go by what the elders say, what they want, that’s all you follow.

TC: Okay. Um, did you feel pressured or inspired to follow in their steps?

SK: Well, uh, I don’t know, there must have been pressure, but in general I would call it inspired. I didn’t know the difference when I was a boy, um, but I think now I think it helped me, so I think it’s inspiring.

TC: How did they inspire you?

SK: Well, usually they showed the way, um, they—you just walk behind them, you see what all they are doing, and uh, you know the sort of thing to do, so that kind of, that’s inspiration, because you are going to be on the right path if you follow them.

TC: Mhm. What traditions did you practice?

SK: Um, well in India, uh, in a village it’s known that it’s essentially you have to follow the unwritten rules. Everybody knows what to do, what not to do, and they just try to follow. And usually you don’t question any of those traditions, you just follow, you know, faithfully. And you can ask friends why they do this, why they do that, but essentially you cannot change things so you just follow.

TC: Okay. Um, where’d the traditions come from, like…?

SK: I think they must have come from, you know, uh, grandparents to parents and to children, just passed on. Especially from grandmother to mother, type of thing.
TC: So you would say family is very important?

SK: Yeah. Definitely is.

TC: Okay. Um, so how did you move to Houston?

SK: Well I went to school and got my mechanical engineering degree in University of Texas, Austin. At that time, 1969, Austin was a small town. Uh, so I came to Houston looking for a job and found a job here so I settled here.

TC: Mhm. Um, so how did you settle into the South Asian community in Houston?

SK: Well, it was essentially, it’s University of Houston, university center, and now they call it student center, we used to call it university center. That’s uh, we lived in an apartment on Elgin Street right next to the Cullen, Elgin. So that all—you know, four kids uh, take an apartment and living there, so slowly, you know, they get to know other University of Houston students looking for job. And then saw Indian movies and then, um, festival of lights, it’s called, Diwali, um, at the University of Houston. So most of the yearly um—my impressions of Houston or Texas is from, uh, University of Texas Austin, University of Houston, Houston, those two places there I saw a lot of new things as a student.

TC: Mhm. Which one did you like better, Austin or Houston?

SK: Well, Austin is a, uh, university town at the time, everybody belongs to the university. Uh, Houston, just two minutes down is downtown, uh, big city, Greyhound bus, and uh, Houston is already big city in ’69. So there’s more urban village, a more urban setup in Houston. Austin is still a small town with lakes and trees and real nice, Austin. Uh, Houston was already traffic, uh, 45 south Gulf Freeway, already a lot of traffic, construction. So it’s more urban, Houston is more like a city, big city, with freeways already being built. You get lost in it.

TC: Okay, so how did you start to get involved with the temple?

SK: Well, you know, first I started what’s called, uh, Patients Hospitality Committee at the University of Houston, Indian Students Association, and that is to help the heart patients coming to Texas Medical Center. St. Luke’s Hospital, uh, the Methodist Hospital. So that’s how I got started. Uh, then came into what’s called Indian Students Association, then Hindu Worship Society. By October seventy—uh, ’77, um, it branched off and started what is now known as Meenakshi Temple in Pearland.

TC: Um, did you have any support or any, like, competition while you were like, creating the temple?

SK: Oh, yeah, the local people did not understand it, uh, because uh, that’s a time where uh, the Hare Krishna movement was, you know, ’69. Hare Krishna, um, started from New York and it was spreading all over the country, so a lot of local Americans converted to Hare Krishna. So local Pearland population thought we are going to convert their kids, so they didn’t like it. So we
had to tell them this temple is for us, our kids, not for—we are not trying to convert anybody. And then they kind of understood. If they want, they can visit, but we are not here to convert them. So then their positions slowly reduced, and people like Pearland mayor, Thomas—Thomas J. Reid, he was very helpful, uh, talking to the community and tell them, uh, what kind of people we are and things like that, so that helped.

**TC:** Okay, so you reached out to like, area officials to get support for building the temple?

**SK:** Yes, mhm. **[TC: Okay.]** Uh, I visited most of the neighbors and talked to them, some of them would not talk to you but still we went to their house and say hello and talk to them. And slowly they accepted us. Took some time.

**TC:** Mhm. Um, so how long did the process take, kind of like from the idea to…

**SK:** Well we started in ’77, uh I would think about 18 months to two years, slow, and then we kind of, then they start smiling at us, waving their hands, and all that slowly, slowly changed. I would say two years.

**TC:** Okay. Um, how was it financed? Where did you get the funds from?

**SK:** Oh, to start, uh, we started with just a few, few people put their money in and tried to buy the land and trying to pay for everyday expense. So first two, three years was a really small expenditure, very tough. But end of five years, uh, we already solvent and more visitors coming from all over the state, more people coming in, and then giving donations, so by ’82 we became solvent and become a bigger temple. So it took about five years to really establish higher-level income. ’82.

**TC:** Okay. Who all was, like, involved with helping you get the temple?

**SK:** Oh. [clears throat] To start with we had nine board members, we called them trustees, nine of us. And um, see Indian, um, people are from different states, based on language, so each language is different, each person speaks different language. So we have to get people from different states. So essentially Meenakshi Temple is people from South India and there is some that are from North India, but most of them from South India, and um, so we kind of invited people from different states because they bring a difference. So out of nine, we have a mix of different states. That’s how we formed that very first board. Uh, that sustained, and in the long run it helped. And even today we tend to get people from different states to come and participate because they bring in their friends.

**TC:** Mhm. So it wasn’t just like a local endeavor, it was national, and…?

**SK:** Yeah you can call it, it’s not completely India, it is mostly South India. Meenakshi Temple is. There are some other temples in town where there are more people from North India, because language and also the, the way the, uh, rituals are done, the way the religious procedures are done, they priest’s language, all that, so they connect with the, the local, what they know in
India. So um...but the participation, a lot of Clear—people from Clear Lake, NASA and all, they come from, um, the whole Indian population, because it’s close to Clear Lake city.

TC: Mhm. Okay. Uh, what was your vision for the temple? Like, why did you want it to be created?

SK: Well, first of all, to start with, it’s like security, just to want some place to call it your own, okay. That way you are comfortable with it, okay, and the family can spend lot of time there, safe, that type of thing. And then, um, as time went by, uh, you become good friends and, you know, the families and children, you know, grandchildren, so through this 40 years, uh, all these, uh, families have become very close to each other. So later when there’s a problem, you know, for somebody, everybody jumps in and helps. So it started for religious reasons, but it went social, economical, to help each other, all that came to particulars. Not planned, it all came naturally.

TC: How did you decide on where to build it?

SK: We—I looked at land in five different locations in Houston, and Pearland, land is uh, relatively at that time, less expensive. Some parts of Houston are already very expensive. I’m talking ’78, okay. That’s number one. Number two, there were two other traditional temples in this country before I built the Meenakshi Temple. The other two is in New York, which is built inside the city. And there are quite a bit of, uh, parking problems, neighbors didn’t like it. And then the second temple was in Pittsburgh, which is uh, just way out in a hill, and there’s no neighbors, so there’s no problem, nobody complains. So then I thought maybe it’s better to build in a place where there are not many people already living, because they think their property values will go down when the temple is built. Their house prices will go down, and more traffic, um, all kinds of just, “This kind of people come through my town,” and everything. So um, but if you go to a place where you are the first one, you know, nobody to complain. [TC: Right. [laughs]] So that’s how, uh, the Pearland was selected, and I, I think it worked out. Because now Pearland has grown bigger and bigger, okay, but at the time it was a rural, small, ranch type of town. You know, lot of acreage available for low price. So that’s why, uh, Pearland was selected, and I think it worked out good.

TC: So this temple was the third Hindu temple in the U.S.? [SK: Yeah.] Okay.

SK: Just the third Hindu traditional temple. Okay. Now, [clears throat] uh, from some parts of India, some other people come. They kind of building a hall, that type of building, and kind of remodel a building and put the God. That’s one type. The other one is like, we build traditional. It uh, it’s called Dravidian architecture. It’s a specific architecture, uh, follow that in all these, all these things. Um, it’s specific rules to follow. So this is the third traditional temple in this country. There are a lot of temples with uh, you know, where you can see big halls and uh, like, convention-center type, type of thing, but this type of detailed architecture, was the third one. Now there are a number of them now, but at that time we were the third one. And we brought skilled workers from India and uh, they built it here.

TC: Mhm. How large was the Hindu community when the temple was built in Pearland?
SK: You know, the—I would think, oh, 20,000 Indians. Um, and possibly 15,000 Hindus. Majority of them are Hindus, of the 20,000. Also a good percentage of Christians. They settled essentially in Stafford, or so it is today. There is also a Muslim population which settled in Sugar Land. Um, but I think about 20,000 at the time.

TC: Okay. Um, so you let the population kind of—for the temple—grow from like, word of mouth about the temple being there, or did you like, go out and get people to come?

SK: No, we didn’t, uh, go and uh, get people to come, but there are many families which moved to Houston because of the temple. Because uh, they may live in some other city, and the women, the ladies say, “Well, we want to live in the other temple because we believe that uh, you should live near a temple. You should be able to visit the temple as often as you can.” So ladies go, at least two or three times a week, they want to go. So some of these families did move to Houston, looking for a job in Houston, moved to Houston because of the temple. But most people came here because they got a job here and then, uh, they know there is a temple, so they ask where the temple is, they come.

TC: Do you think it was more so because the temple is like a traditional temple? That may have also attracted them to—?

SK: Well, yeah. See, what happens here is that uh, we believe the more people come and worship in a temple, the temple becomes more, uh, vibrant, more positive energy, okay. More people come and pray, and it adds up, okay. So uh, slowly, uh, then you start feel—getting a feeling that when you walk in there, you feel good, you are peaceful. It happens there, not outside, but it happens there. So then people start thinking, oh it’s good. They came here and feel good, type of thing. That’s because of the positive energy. So uh, many people—especially first-time visitors, after they come to the temple, spend some time, maybe one hour or something. Then um, they run into you, or they run into somebody, then they’ll start talking, “Oh, it’s a real nice temple. Just like being in India. I like it.” And they will make positive comments and go on. You know, they’ll just tell you, I feel good and everything. So it help a lot of families reduce stress. And the priests, talking to the priests, talking to the volunteers, it all make them feel good, and we have a very, uh, inexpensive cafeteria where you can buy Indian food. A lot of students, uh, Rice, uh, University of Houston students, they come there on the weekend, buy the food, then on the weekdays they learn how to cook all the Indian, uh, um, cuisine, you know, real inexpensive, because we are, we are not doing it for profit, see, so it’s very low, cut-down price, just for the cost plus maintenance. So—and we also have a very good, uh, library. Um, people can sit there and read, uh, library books, children’s books. All those things, they spend the whole Sunday, sometimes whole Saturday there. Families come in the morning and they will stay there ‘til evening. Um, so it has become a place to meet other Indian families. Now we also start getting American—local American visitors. See, this is the visitor—visitor’s book [items shuffling] published by Pearland Visitors Bureau. Uh, we didn’t print it, they printed it at their cost and then uh, they distribute to essentially Americans. They, you know, come in two, and we arrange two for them, ten, ten of them, twenty of them. So uh, quite a bit of people knowing about it. It’s also in the [clears throat] Texas State Places to Visit, you know, um, so people come there to visit. And there’s no restriction, anybody can come in. Just into the main temple you
have to remove your shoes, the main temple. In the rest of the buildings you can wear the shoes. Only main temple, when they come in and sit here, main temple, then you have to remove your shoes. That’s the only restriction, there’s nothing else. Nothing the—you can stay there, meditate, uh, do yoga, for a number of hours there inside. So now we get a small number of Americans every day now. You know, um, school children they come in groups, they come and see our sculptures, come in and take pictures. We allow taking pictures. Some temples don’t allow taking pictures inside. We allow—from the beginning I said if somebody wants to take a picture and take it to New York and show it to some people it’s okay. So um, people come with their cell phone and take pictures and they send it to India, they send it to wherever, that they are here in the temple, type of thing. So it has become popular and beautiful architecture, beautiful temple, so they take pictures and send it to their friends.

**TC:** Mhm. Okay. Can you describe like, the inner layout of the temple?

**SK:** Yeah. See, the inner sanctum [papers rustling], you can see it there, right here, okay, this is the, this is the front entrance, you know. This is what we call the main temple. These are the sanctums, okay. This is the primary deity, which is the goddess, okay. And this is her husband, uh, Lord Shiva. This is Meenakshi. And this one is her brother who gives her away in the marriage, it’s her brother, brother’s wife. So these four sanctums are the main sanctums inside the main temple, okay. And then, uh, this was built in 1982, okay, it was really first main temple built, ’82. Then we built the outer wall and uh, all these, these tall gopurams, this is on this one. And these are all three more but shorter. Uh, like, not this high, but they’re like this, there are three of them on three sides. One, two, three. The east always, the east is the most auspicious, uh, direction for us, so the primary deity always looks to east. That’s our belief. So that’s the east tower. It’s the tallest tower. And then the Conner they are called Conner temples. Because see, people come from India, from different parts of India, and each part there’s certain deities, certain god and goddesses are more well known. It’s called “Iṣṭha-devatā.” “Isha-devatā” means “What I like.” “Ishta” means “like.” “Devatā” means “god,” okay. So um, I like, uh, this god. Okay, so I like the temple to have this god like that. So people make request, um, can I have this, can I have that. And then uh, we have what is called Advisory Council, and then there’s priest and then there’s architect, temple architect, and the local American architect. They all sit together and say yeah, we can fit in, we can put in. And there’s really restrictive rules of uh, what kind of a god and goddesses you can have. You cannot have conflicting ones in it because if this conflicts with that other then it is supposed to be emanating negative energy. See, so there are rules written down long time ago. Uh, so these uh, temple architects have read those texts, so they say yeah, we can put this, we can do that. Then, you have to kind of fundraise, okay, we want to build this it’s going to be a hundred thousand dollars, if we are going to build this it’s going to be a million dollars, whatever it is. And you have to come up with a plan to raise money and then build it. So this is the, this is the total thing is the main temple, this is the sanctum, innermost sanctum. This is outer one. This is the main part. And then we have wedding hall, we have youth center, we have library, business center, all those buildings are separate.

**TC:** So how’d you go about choosing like, the architects and the priests and the people that were like, involved with the temple?
SK: Okay, um, architects are two, two types. One is the local architect who went to school here and uh, licensed by the American architects. You know, they’re licensed, okay. They are the ones who come up with all the local code and everything. Because um, you look for a, um, person who will understand the Hindu religion and how to go about it, okay. And then the temple architect, they are trained or taught, um, traditionally by their, um, grandfather, father, and now there are schools in India to teach these temple architects, okay. So there are a number of them available, okay. So, like for example, if you are going to build one for goddess Meenakshi, then you start asking who—which of the temple architects built goddess temple, okay, in this style. You know, so you’re trying to find out who will do a good job for what you are going to do. So some names will be given and you do them, and you write them, they will come here and then interview them. And then he will bring—temple architect will bring his own assistants trained by him, okay. So um, essentially the—then I talked about the nine, uh nine trustees, nine board members, they decide. Now we have, uh, twenty of them now, we expanded. Start with nine, now we have twenty. Every two years we conduct elections. Out of eight hun—we have 800 members, okay. They elect these twenty board members every two years, okay. And uh, like if I serve once, then I cannot come back again because we want to give opportunity to new people. That’s very good about this temple because some other Hindu temples in other parts of uh, U.S.A., the same people want to continue, hold on to the power. They put money to start with, they want to hold on to the power. But I have decided that by giving opportunity to a lot of people who want the temple to grow, more people will come in. And that turned out to be true because uh, um, anybody can think, “Okay, I can come in and I can move up in the services.” Then, you know, “I don’t have to be a rich person to do a lot with money, but I volunteer, I work hard, then people elect me. They know me, they elect me.” So um, that way it’s uh—most of the temples are run, managed, by limited number of good people, they are good. But our format is uh, um, the 800 members, they elect who’s good, okay. Because they, ’cause you sell (?) them they elect you. They like you, they elect you. Terrible thing. So it just worked out, go to this book and say every two years, you know, just… [papers rustling, mumbling]

[motioning at documents] Okay, 1983-’85, the board. Then ’86-’87 board, it’s all different people coming to, uh, running the temples. Like, that even—uh, this is the very first, um, board. This was uh, it started in ’77 but formed the board in ’78, March ’78. So this is the very first one. Uh, there are nine people, somebody passed away and we took some, somebody else in, so this is the very first board. Like that, to go along, in about 40 years we are about 20 boards. This is the most recent one, 2017. This is the very first one. So you will see about 20 pages here of different people running this temple. And somebody said Sesh Bala, Prabha Bala—that is Sesh. [TC: Oh yes.] [PL: Oh yeah.] [TC and PL laugh] That is Sesh. He was on the board in ’97. So different people. Uh, I came back, um, about year later, yes, and then came back in ’98. See, um, even though I said you cannot come in, then we had a little escape plan let’s say, 4 years gap, okay. You can come back after 4 years. So uh, I was there in ’78 then I came back ’98. 20 years. That’s, sometimes you see you don’t get good people so you have to have a plan saying you can come back. So most of us at least came back once, you know, uh, ‘cause of course the power, and you like power so, [all laugh] you come back. So I came back only once. It turned again to me, 1998. So I can see how, how many different people saw this temple. We have what, 30 people lived there, big family, kids, staff, priest. And uh, so many people worked part-time. We hired a lot of local people. Some were part-time coming in. And they were new there but they’d
come in the morning, work over there. So it's become a major, uh, it's like a small village, everybody together.

**TC:** So with like having the board change like that, how do you keep, like, certain things the same, or like, how do you…?

**SK:** Okay. See, the people who serve on the board, they have been promoted in what is called advisory council. After the board, then you retire. You get kicked up, kicked up, what is called advisory council, okay. So these are the people who have served on the board before. And they continue to kind of, uh, oversee. They don’t have any real power, but auditing, conducting election, ethics, all those uh, things are with these advisory council people. They are called advisory council, okay. The power they have is, if anybody complains about any of these people, if somebody complains about me, they go to them, okay. Then they will call me in and say what happened, why, and whatever. So um, so these are the, um, people who keep the tradition alive. Make sure that, you know, things don’t completely change upside down. They are called advisory-council members. These are the people who served as officers. They get promoted as the council members. See what I’m saying. Okay. So we didn’t put their pictures again because they were, see, they were here already, you know. See, okay I was here, then I’m here, you see. So I’m here in ’98–’99, the second time around. Then when my term is over, then I come 2002 as the advisory council, so these are no pictures here, because my pictures is already here. So uh, yeah, that’s how they kinda keep the tradition alive.

**TC:** Okay. So there’s like layers of leadership within the temple. [SK: Yeah. Yeah.] Okay.

**SK:** Well, finally what we call the supreme authority is that 800 members, okay. We meet, uh, well not many people show up, but the general-body meeting, all the members meeting twice a year, we call for the meeting. And we are the, the people who are running the temple have to present to them the income expenses, problems, all the body membership, and any questions you have, you are, you are answerable to the members, okay. After that, the board. Then the advisory council. Okay, so there are different layers of, uh, responsibility. And very well defined in the bylaw. We have a very strong bylaw, so you have to follow that, no exceptions. You know, you cannot say it’s…because there are ethics coming to you, they will, they will step in if you violate any of the rules. So, so we have a very disciplined group, and it has worked out. That’s why, uh, we don’t fight, we don’t have, you know, no big problems because the board, one and a half million dollars a year income every year. Every day we get uh, donations, cash, everything that we take to the bank. So we settle for, um, a lot of uh, uh, things that go around, contract. But with all of that there has to be discipline, all the members were disciplined. Otherwise you will lose your tax-exempt status and have a problem, see. So we don’t want to og into any of those problems. So they are very strict. We are to follow the rules.

So now, and I think you had one other questions about [papers rustling, unintelligible speech] and currently, what they call the—this is uh, um, Sesh Bala is the editor. He is the one who put this thing together. See, this is what they call a honorary president. It’s more ceremonial. [TC and PL laugh] None of the real power, but uh, they listen to me. [TC and PL laugh] So they wrote what happened for 40 years, so if there’s any problem between two guys, uh, two girls, whatever it is, then they’ll come to me and say this is what uh, this person is doing, this is what
she’s doing, this is what he’s doing. So I kind of listen and then say, let’s fight about all these things, you know, what was making the temple greater. Because if you are not important you come and go, because—but the institution is important. After we leave, after we are gone, institution is important. So don’t do anything which will hurt the temple, see. So I will, then they’ll kind of, um, go back, so I go back, see. So, yeah. I have the, what’s called the highest honorary position, very well respected. People before me, the people who were in that position, they um, I took over from the people who are very highly regarded. These are the people who built the—um, [pointing to a picture in the book] assistant director general of the UN, his number two man in the UN in New York, during the Cuban crisis. He was the one who built the New York temple. He is the father of the temple movement in New York City. He [pointing to another picture in the book] is the professor of physics in uh, UT Austin. He just passed away two months ago. Um, and this [pointing to another picture in the book] is a philanthropist. So like, see, these people, really respected. Um, so now I have taken—they all passed away now, I took their place now, okay. And uh, their names uh, helped the temple for the outside world. So if they are involved, it should be good type of uh, name recognition. So I have taken their place now, uh, honorary president, they were all honorary presidents like that. [puts history book away] So forty years, between forty and fifty years now.

TC: Yes. What would you say is your proudest accomplishment with the temple?

SK: I’d say…people uh, become, um, supportive of each other. It would not, it would not have happened without the temple. See you would have lived in different parts of Houston, maybe never met each other. Because of the temple, I think uh, so many families become close, okay. Children, grandchildren, for many generations to come, they help each other. That’s, that, I think that is the most important, uh, benefit for the whole community. See, because we don’t, we don’t know how important that is, but it’s very important. Especially when you get into problems. Just as family problems, financial problems, loss of job, all kinds of problems. Uh, this kind of uh, temple institution will help. You know, they will come together and help you, see. That, uh—if the temple is not there, you won’t have it, see. So I think that is the most important, important accomplishment. Which is not visible, but it is there, see. Only you have problems then you will know it is there, see.

TC: So that’s why you kind of made it more than just a temple, like you have the youth center and the library and everything?

SK: Yeah. Well, we…first we started, uh, of course purely religious, exclusively religious, then based on the need you have to expand. You have school, you teach languages, and uh, buy library books, now CDs, DVDs, all that. And then some place to eat when you are there, you know, because you are there for the whole day. Uh, we are building and then cultural programs, music, dance, you know, children want to dance, learn dance, for all that thing you need an auditorium, you need a stage. All that came about, one after—then parking, of course, you have a basketball court, you have a walking trail. All those things came about based on the need. The people donate money and they build it.

TC: So was there any support from like, the other Hindu temples? Like you mentioned, like, the New York temple. [SK: Yeah.]
SK: New York, well, we built it because of New York’s help. New York temple was uh, uh, they gave us, they gave us loan money, you know, to start with, and uh, um, they pointed to all the, uh, contacts in India they already had. They, they were, uh—they started in ’70, we started in ’77, so they were about seven years ahead of us, see. So we used all their contacts for instance, New York temple helped a lot.

TC: Um, and then the temple in India as well? The Meenakshi temple?

SK: Yeah. [TC: Okay.] Well they essentially, um, those days, uh, we think uh, we did not expect any money from them because we have enough money here. Um, but they did send us the priest, all the procedures, how to do things, what they are doing there, all the guidelines, all came from Meenakshi temple. All of our early priests came from Madurai Meenakshi temple. So that way they helped.

TC: Okay, so you got priests from India that were…? [SK: Yes.] Okay, and they stay here? [SK: Yes.] Okay.

SK: Yes. They, um, bring their family and they live here, they settle here. Yeah. They came from Madurai to start with, now we get from different temples now in India.

TC: How did you choose to make the temple here like the Meenakshi temple?

SK: Why Meenakshi temple here, or…? Is that—say the question again?

TC: Oh, why did you choose like, that goddess?

SK: Pardon?

TC: For the temple?

SK: Oh! [clears throat] You see, there are so many temples for god, men.

TC: Okay. [TC and PL laugh]

SK: Okay. The goddess is a very important part of Hindu religion, okay. Uh, she is the strength. In fact, she gives strength even to god. The, what we call “Sakthi,” which is the energy, um, energy for god himself, we believe comes from the goddess, okay. So um, even though New York and Pittsburg at that time, and they all have temples for god, it’s uh, men formed. Um, we decided uh, we should have one for the goddess, so…and then we trying to choose which goddess and then from different parts of India, the goddess is called with different names, okay. So I’m, I originally from uh, I came from Madurai area, so that’s a goddess temple I have gone, so that’s easy to copy. [all laugh] You know, it’s something which you are familiar with, you are comfortable with, okay, so that’s why Meenakshi came about. It’s not because of my wife’s name. [all laugh] My wife got her name from the name of the goddess.
TC: Okay. So how has the temple grown throughout the years? What have you seen, like, change most recently?

SK: Well, there is a, the younger generation are mostly IT, information technology. And families from India, um, with young kids. There are a lot of uh, um, devotees, people coming, people are coming. A lot of younger families, high income, the IT group. Uh, that’s more recent, last 10 years. [TC: Okay.] The old timers who were first, a lot of engineers came, afterwards doctors came, okay. Those groups, they are still here, but they are all in their 60s, 50s, you know, that age group. But their children are here, born here. So I would say now, um, the mainstay support still comes from the early first-generation immigrants that are coming. Uh, they all came 1960, ‘70, ‘80, they are still the core supporters. But they are getting old age, okay. The newer generation, okay, um, I don’t know how long they are going to stay, how much they are going to support, uh, they are a moving population. They are here, uh, IT, for a number of years. But they come in large group, larger turnouts to the temple. So that’s a newer population coming in, so there’s a growth with that. And the children of the early immigrants, they are still here. They get married at the temple, they have been, uh, coming to the temple with their kids who are, you know, four or five years old, they start coming to the temple, so they think it is their temple. So they will continue to support, the children of the immigrants, first immigrants. So we have two groups of people: the early immigrants, their children; the bunch of newer computer IT population. Uh, so you can very easily see, when you see somebody at the temple, you know which group he belongs. See the old timers compared to the new timers, you know, it’s—both groups are important, [TC: Right.] they are doing well. The temple is growing because both groups.

TC: Mhm. Has the temple, like, purposely done—like, had changes to like, their programing to attract the younger generations to the temple?

SK: No, um, see, attracting a younger generation is very difficult, and we are not successful because we don’t know what they want. We think we know what they want, but we really don’t know what they want. So we try to offer them days of young lecture, offer them school, offer them basketball, all that. But it’s a very slow process. But, you know, they will find their own liking, you know. Uh, it’ll take time. Even now, still we are trying, okay. But we—I mean, it’s not a failure, but we are not that successful, because we really don’t know what the youth want because our mindset is different. See, we are born in India, we will think 50 years back, see, so we cannot connect with the modern thinking. But things will change, and they will find what they want with the temple and they will improve. [TC: Right.] See, they will change things the way they want. But it’s slow. I have to admit, it is slow. You know what I’m saying, right? [TC: I do, yes.] Yeah.

TC: Yeah I think that’s um, a problem with a lot of like, organized religious places now is how to appeal to the younger people and keep them coming. Um, so are there any renovations happening currently? [SK: Yeah.] Are there any planned?

SK: Uh, the, what we call Wedding Hall, which is an auditorium, um, where 700 people can sit there, auditorium. Now we are remodeling the auditorium, [TC: Okay.] this year and next year. This board is uh, going to remodel completely the auditorium into bigger stage, better audio
system, because, you know, the mission program audio is not that good, see. All that. The current expansion is the Wedding Hall auditorium. By next year it will be ready. We call it “kalyana mandapam,” which the translation is uh, “wedding hall.” “Kalyana” means “wedding,” okay, “mandapam” means “hall,” so it’s essentially “wedding hall.”

**TC:** Okay. I think you explained some of this before, um, how does the temple impact its members, or even people that don’t even go to the temple too?

**SK:** Even the people who don’t go to the temple?

**TC:** Yes.

**SK:** Oh. When somebody is really sick, okay, um, the only place they can think of where they can call, even though they are not members, they are not supporters, but still they call, okay. The temple, uh, doesn’t, um, discriminate against who is member, who is a donor, nothing like that, and the call comes and they send a priest or they send a volunteer, whatever. That’s one time. The other one is uh, when somebody dies, okay, and you have very specific Hindu rituals you have to do, okay. Uh, in ’70, 1970 and all that, we used to do—volunteers used to do, now we have a priest who can do. So we send a temple priest to do all these uh, rituals. It’s called “last—last rites,” before you go to Heaven you have to—they have to send you off, okay, so you have to do it right, okay. So uh, the families who are not even members, um, and somebody dies, then they call the temple and say, “Can you send a priest?” Okay. Yeah, and the temple sends a priest like that. So these are the people who are not associated with the temple, even they get the help. But if you’re already a member, if you’re already, you know, associated with the temple, then you know this already. Say, you know, you can just call somebody and say, “I need help, can you come?” But even otherwise people call and the temple will send people, okay. So it is still a support system, always available, it’s a very large, uh, very resourceful, uh, organization, see. We have a lot of employees, lot of volunteers, so they are—they are there, the ability to help, see. So that way even people who are not members, they can, uh, draw the benefit if they need.

**TC:** Mhm. Um, do you see any downsides to the temple being a tourist attraction for like, Americans?

**SK:** Personally, myself, no. Um, I would like um, more tourists come and see—that’s what this uh, [papers rustling] this is ab—this is about this. [taps] Uh, try to get more tourists to come. But some members are not very comfortable, um, um, because some of the tourists, uh, don’t like what we do, what we pray, how we pray, because their religion is different, they think different. So, uh, they could do some pro—give some trouble, type of thing. So, but I think majority of the members like this. But we, we usually go low-key. Uh, you may not have seen us a lot on the news, not on everyday radio news, you know, all that. That’s because we don’t know where some negative reaction can come from. So we are low-key. But tourists are welcome, see. At the same time we are kind of, we don’t show off because it could bring in unexpected problems.

**TC:** Right. Uh, what distinguishes Meenakshi Temple from the other Hindu temples in the U.S.?
SK: Oh, of course this is for goddess, okay. Um, that’s number one. Number two is um, the elections. The democratic system. Not the same people holding, uh, onto power for 40 years, some temples like that in U.S.A.. See when you form, the way you form the charter and the bylaw, they stay. They stay. But this temple, we decided to conduct elections and change people, okay, so that’s a big difference between most Hindu temples in U.S.A.. Other than that, uh, you know, the southern state, when you live of course in Texas, it’s different, okay. To get accepted in a state like Texas and survive 40 years. [TC: True. [laughs]] That’s definitely different compared to some other places where people might be more liberal, they may accept what you do, you know. So that’s what is different about Meenakshi Temple.

TC: Has the temple experienced any discrimination or any problems of that sort?

SK: Eh, not discrimination. But see, the, the early years, it’s not that obvious now, but in the early years, uh, they would come and uh, uh, they would come in a pickup truck and harass people, honk, and uh, sometimes they even climbed up on some of these uh, ornamented towers, uh, they would climb up trying to break something, you know, uh, kind of things, because uh, “We don’t want your religion here,” type of thing. But that’s very early years, okay. Now, whenever we are all gathering for the festival of lights we get about 8,000 to 10,000 people. And uh, there’s so much parking problems, you go rear parking, you have bus take people to school parking lot. Even after that, um, the neighbors complained that uh, their driveway, somebody blocked their driveway, they cannot take their car out to go to the hospital, all kinds of problems they had, okay. They complained, yeah. But uh, it’s two times a year when we have large crowd and um, the opposition is reduced compared to early years. They will be still there, inside their mind, but uh, on their own soil, you know. And we don’t confront them, we don’t fight with them, we are very low-key people. So uh, it’s much less—opposition is less now.

TC: Okay. Uh, where does the temple get financial support from?

SK: Okay, um, we have two systems. One is, uh, worship services, okay. To do any worship to God, okay, there’s a fee, okay. Why fee, why money? Okay. Because you see, we have to employ the priest, okay. He will be waiting on you when you come in, okay. You say, “I want to pray,” this this, okay, you know. So he will help you to pray and there is a fee, okay. And that’s the, uh, revenue for the temple. You pay the temple and then you get a receipt, okay. That’s, uh, one. The other one is we have what is called donation box, okay. Um, every deity, every god, goddess, in front of that, we have that donation box. So when you walk in you like this god, you put some money, okay. So uh, at certain times of the week, um, we remove most of the cash people—sometimes they put jewelry, sometimes uh, other, you know, valuables, some people put uh, share certificates, whatever, you know. Some of them are very valuable, diamond, you know. They all put inside the donation box, okay. Because if you were to take all out, and are confident, but three people have to sign what was inside, how much cash and everything. So the worship service is one income, the other one is, is donation box, okay. The rest of the things like uh, cafeteria, food services, library, um, they bring in some money, but they are not big revenue because we are—our prices are low, we want people to come and enjoy, okay. And donate, they donate money to the temple, so it’s their temple, so we give them food at a lower price. So we don’t make that much money, uh, in food services or library. The main revenue is from the worship services fee. And then from the donation box. Those are the two top revenue items.
TC: Okay. Uh, what hopes do you have for the temple for the future?

SK: Well, I, I, I would like this to become, uh, more um, supporting the needy people, okay, and the educating people, provide health services, have a sewa clinic. “Sewa” means “service.” Free, we, we have free clinic. People who don’t have insurance, their doctors provide health services, okay. And uh, so I would like to have, uh, schools, teaching, okay, yoga, meditation, all, all that, um, free. People come and they spend time there. And uh, the knowledge, okay, the more knowledgeable people are, that much better, okay. So health, education, social services, helping needy people, I would like to expand into those uh, areas, in all service. Because we have the institution, we can do all those things easy, see. That’s what I would like to see. We do some now, but I’d like it to be expanded.

TC: Mhm. Okay, those are all my questions. Do you have any, Priscilla?

PL: Um, I’m not sure if you mentioned this before [SK: Sure.] but what was the name of the New York temple?

SK: Oh, New York Ganesh.


SK: Ganesh is that elephant-head god. [PL: Mhm, oh yes, mhm, okay.]

SK: Okay, that’s Ganesh. [PL: Ganesh.] Okay. And the Pittsburgh temple is Vishnu. [PL: Vishnu]. Yeah, Pittsburgh is Vishnu. [PL: Okay.] Vishnu is the preserver. He’s the one who gives you—his wife, Lakshmi is the one who gives you money. Vishnu is the one who gives you wealth. [PL: Oh, good.] So more people go to Vishnu temples for wealth. This uh, goddess, Meenakshi and all that is a, uh, protector. It’s uh, it’s the, what do you call, if you are in a, um, real bad trouble, somebody to save you, that’s where goddess Meenakshi will come in, okay. But uh, Vishnu and Lakshmi is for everyday good life, more money, okay. And so more people go to Vishnu temples and Lakshmi temple because that’s immediate. You want something now, okay. This one is for further down. Um, when you are in trouble, you know, all kinds of things, uh, the goddess Meenakshi will come in at that time. So that’s our belief.

PL: Great. Yeah, that’s all I have.

TC: Alright, thank you so much.

PL: Thank you so much.

SK: Thank you!

[recording stops]