

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

Interviewee: Shashank Karvé
Interviewers: Priscilla Li
Date of Interview: May 4, 2020
Transcribed by: Priscilla Li
Edited by: Shreyah Mohanselman
Audio Track Time: 1:24:41

Background: Shashank Karvé was born in Pune, India, and grew up in Mumbai. From a young age, he enjoyed working with his hands and building objects, and ultimately went to India Institute for Technology in Kharagpur to study Naval Architecture and Ocean Engineering. After graduating, he obtained a certificate in computer science from the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research, and moved to the United States to earn a Professional Engineering degree in Ocean Engineering at MIT. He began his career in the offshore industry at Brian Watt Associates in Houston, Texas in 1981. From there, Mr. Karvé would spend his career in top management roles and project development. The majority of his career was spent with MODEC, where he served as Chairman and CEO from 2000-2011. Mr. Karvé has a son, a daughter, and two grandchildren, who he and his wife, Medha, spends time bicycling with.

Setting: The interview was conducted via Zoom and covered stories of Mr. Karvé's upbringing in Mumbai, his role at MODEC, and his community involvement with Habitat for Humanity and the MIT Alumni Association.

Key:

SK: Shashank Karve

PL: Priscilla Li

—: speech cuts off; abrupt stop

...: speech trails off; pause

Italics: emphasis

(?): preceding word may not be accurate

[Brackets]: actions (laughs, sighs, etc.)

Interview transcript:

PL: Today is May 4th, 2020. I'm here interviewing Shashank Karvé for the Houston Asian American archive through Zoom. My name is Priscilla Li. So the first question is where and when were you born?

SK: Okay, well first to give us context a little bit of when we are recording this. We are in the middle of the coronavirus pandemic. So we are all homebound and you see me in my official work clothes [laughs] with my backroads t-shirt. To answer your first question, I was born in 1955, March 13. So I just turned 65 a month and a half ago, and I was born in a small town and not—it's no longer a small town, it's a pretty major town now in India called Pune, P-U-N-E. Back then a university town.

PL: Okay, and can you describe the neighborhood you grew up in?

SK: Okay, well, I was born in the city of Pune, but I grew up most in Mumbai, and, you know, like everybody else we had a rental apartment. Nobody—at that time, nobody owned their apartments. It was mostly rental at that time in Asia. And it was a—I would say, a middle class neighborhood, almost everybody who lived there. were, you know, their parents were working. I mean, they had jobs and they were employees. There was nobody who was in the neighborhood was like a rich industrialist or, you know, with a lot of wealth. So, everybody was—everybody had working parents. My—so anyway, that was the neighborhood that I grew up in.

PL: And then how about, like, the household you grew up in? What kind of your household—
[**SK:** Say what?] What kind of household?

SK: Yeah, so it was my parents, my sister and me, who were the four of us living together. But as in most Asian countries, you know, you have a pretty good extended family. My grandparents lived in the city where I was born, which was Pune. But my grandfather used to be in Mumbai every week. Occasionally, he used to come and spend the evening with us before returning back to Pune. He used to come up for meetings and then go back to Pune. My father was an engineer in the textile business, he was a textile engineer. My mother also used to work which was kind of unusual in India at that time. But, she was, I would say, went to work. She was really a teacher for the mute and deaf kids. It was more or less a social work than as a job on teaching them how to talk.

PL: Do you know what, I guess, motivated her to work instead of—I guess what was the usual job for South Asian women during that time?

SK: I'm sorry. Could you repeat?

PL: What motivated your mother to do social work? You said that wasn't very usual for women to do.

SK: Yeah, I mean, at that point in time, most women just, you know, kind of stayed at home and looked after the family. But I think she was driven and wanting to do something on her own instead of simply staying at home and you know, frankly, there's not much to do just staying at home. It was just me and my sister. And she made a good career out of it and got good recognition for it.

PL: And how far was Pune from Mumbai?

SK: Well, distance wise it's like about 120 miles. But in India with the traffic, it probably takes about four hours to go from one place to the other. In the US, we'll probably do that in an hour, hour and a half. But that's what it used to take.

PL: What kind of things would you do for fun during your childhood?

SK: For fun...For fun that I would enjoy, let me put it this way. I was a nerd growing up [laughs] as you can imagine, so for me fun was building a burglar alarm or a radio or intercom system, you know, things like that. So that, that was fun for me: building airplane models and flying them. So that was what I used to enjoy doing.

PL: Would your father, since he's an engineer, also partake in these activities with you?

SK: Yeah, yeah, yeah. So kind of unusual for me compared to most Asians that you will have interviewed and chronicled is in most Asian families, working with your hands is not considered normal because you hire help to repair and maintain and build things. You don't do it yourself. Well, that was different, in my case, because my father was an engineer. We worked with our hands. And we repaired and maintained our own car. We did not just send it to the workshop for people to do it. And as a result of that—I mean, I was quite unusual compared to the rest of my friends, because I used to build and repair and fix things and make things and you know, make them fly and things like that. I would say that that was a very unusual aspect of my upbringing compared to most others. All the way through school and college over there. I can't recall more than maybe another one friend of mine who had the—had it growing up, working with his hands and building things and fixing things. And the other thing that used to happen was my grandfather was very prominent in India who used to come to the US about every other month. He used to bring stuff back for me to learn and build. Like he used to bring electronic kits for me and, you know, different car models and things like that to build and work and tinker with and all that. I got exposed to that also.

PL: I'm not sure if you said this before, but what kind of engineer is your father?

SK: Well, he was an engineer in the textile business. He was a mechanical engineer. Yeah.

PL: Does your family practice a religion?

SK: I mean, we were born as Hindus. We practiced a little bit of it. You know, really the main, the major couple of festivals. But were we very strongly religious people? I would say no. I mean, I was born in a Brahmin family. We did our prayer in the morning, but then after prayer, we sat down for eggs and bacon for breakfast. So you know, you're supposed to be a vegetarian, but then you had eggs and bacon for breakfast. So, you know, you don't—we will—I would say, practicing religion practically.

PL: And over some values that your parents emphasized in your upbringing?

SK: Well, I would say to the combination of my, you know, being an extended family it was your parents, your uncles, your aunts, your grandparents, your—my father had some extremely close friends who are closer to him than his brothers, three or four of them. With all of them kind of in Asia, it's not just your parents who influence your value system. But kind of all of these people have a certain amount of influence on your value system. And for that—I was—I was lucky to have all these people, kind of, how should I say, teach me through life. And, you know, it's not unusual from probably most of the interviews you've had, is of course, hard work, is what gets you anywhere.

PL: And then can you tell us about your schooling in India? Like the primary school, secondary schools you went to?

SK: Yeah, yeah. I'll talk about primary school, secondary school, then college. I went to a Catholic school. Here I was born in a Hindu family, a Brahmin, had eggs and bacon for breakfast, and went to a Catholic school. And that basically got me to the point of saying, you know, really all religion is kind of a fairy tale. How much of it you want to believe and practice was left to you. Because going to the Catholic School, which was Don Bosco High School, we had a church in between the primary and secondary school. And we—I saw all the, I did not see all the abuse, but I could see all the things going on in the Catholic Church, that were not very complimentary of the church. And what a facade it was because we used to like sneak in into the church at lunch—at lunchtime, and pull confession slips out of the confession box and go behind the church and read them. And it's like the people who wrote them and put them in the box thought they were talking to God to get their sins, I guess, taken care of. And here we were young kids, fishing them out of the confession box, reading them and then burning them up and having a great laugh over it. So you know you, you're born in a Hindu family, but you don't practice it, you go to Catholic school, and you see all the, you know, all that's going on behind the scenes over there. And at the end, you realize that, you know, you've got to take out of every religion what you want to and what is good and live your life the way you want to.

PL: So throughout school did you have any mentors or teachers who you really valued?

SK: In school? Not really, I mean, school—my primary and secondary school. I mean, they were there, they were good fun, but I wouldn't say—I cannot think of any particular teacher who was a mentor who I absolutely adored. My mentors were really my father, my grandfather, and my father's friends I told you about—there were three, four of them who were just fantastic, you know, mentors.

PL: And then, did you know what interested you during school, like what you wanted to be? Did you know that you wanted to be an engineer when you went to—

SK: Yeah, you know, growing up tinkering with things, building things, repairing things. Of course, I wanted to be an engineer. And at that time, anybody who wanted to be an engineer, the hallmark of success was applying and getting admitted to what we had there called IITs, Indian Institutes of Technology. So that's where I applied and got into, and it is—at that time when I took the test, I think it was like 95,000 students who took the test. And I think they admitted the first 1900 students. So it was 1900. So roughly 2,000 out of 100,000, or about 2% admittance rate. So yeah, I took the exam got admitted, went to IIT. And what was funny was, at that point, there were five IITs across the country. The closest one to us was, of course, Mumbai IIT. And after you get admitted you have to go for an interview.

And the night before I went for my interview, my father sat me down for a little talk. And he said, “I really don't care what discipline of engineering you take, as long as you don't select Mumbai, IIT.” And I was like, “why?” He was like, “I don't want you to be at home, it's time for you to get out. And, you know, be a man in your own right.” So, when I went for the interview,

there's a map of India there, and they had five stickers on there, the five IITs were located and I found a piece of string and I drew a circle from Mumbai and I chose the IIT that was farthest away from Mumbai, purely out of spite. I ended up going to an IIT and a discipline of engineering purely out of spite because my father would not allow me to go to Mumbai IIT. You can see how, you know, your life gets influenced by different things and sometimes by wrong things. I mean, can you imagine spite against your father made me decide which IIT I went to and what discipline I selected? Because he didn't want me to stay at home. —but it turned out good. I don't regret it. [laughs]

PL: So what did your mother think about you moving so far away?

SK: Oh, she didn't like it one bit. I mean, she had an earful for my father for asking me to leave and to me, for having—for going out so far away. And I mean, she would have no part of it. She was just very— she revolted badly—that's what my father made me do. But, I mean, looking at it in hindsight, he couldn't have done a better service to me in doing what he did. Because if I had stayed at Mumbai, IIT and stayed at home, I would have been a very different person. Probably not as good a person or not as successful a person as I am today or have been. Yeah.

PL: So, what city was the IIT that you went to?

SK: I went to Kharagpur. So, you know when you take that distance and draw that circle around, Kharagpur was the farthest away from Mumbai. It was close to Calcutta. So, Mumbai is on the west coast, Calcutta is on the east coast. So you had to go all across the country, and at that time we didn't have flights and things like that. Neither could we afford a flight and Kharagpur didn't have an airport. So, you would have to fly to Calcutta and then take the train from Calcutta to Kharagpur. So, we took a train from Mumbai to Kharagpur. And the fast train took 36 hours. So, you got on the train one evening at seven 7pm and you got to your destination, not the next day, the following day at 7am. So you were on the train for 36 hours, going from your hometown, to where you went to college.

PL: Did you ever make those trips through college?

SK: I'm sorry.

PL: Did you or your parents ever make that 36 hour journey to visit each other?

SK: Well, yeah, I mean—so college, at least, let me think one, there's one, two. There were three breaks in the year, you know, so, at the maximum three times a year, we used to go back—I used to go back and forth. Because then we close for vacation like Christmas vacation, summer vacation, and then there's another vacation in the fall. You did that 36 hour journey. And then a week later, or two weeks later, or two months later, depending upon what vacation it was, you went back to college, both with 36 hours [laughs]. But that 36 hours was good because it told you are so far away that if something happened, you couldn't just go home. You had to figure things out and rely on your own skill sets and strength and muddle your way through it. There's nobody there to help you.

PL: So you described being at IIT as one of like, a mom—like a period of being able to mature and become the successful person you are today. So can you describe like, what lessons you learned at IIT? And what moments that really helped shape who you are today?

SK: Well, so two aspects of it. IIT was first of all, from a personal viewpoint or character building, it—you know, being so far away from your house, was the defining, not moment, but the defining element, because you had to rely on your own self. You had to make friends. You have to help them and have them help you. But you were there on your own, 36 hours away from your home. You didn't have anybody other than yourself to rely on. And it was a five year engineering course. It's not like you were gone just for two, three months. You were gone for five years. Now. Understandably every vacation, you went back home, but those were brief periods. What IIT taught me was, you know, self reliance you know. You rely on your own self to muddle be—through life, to learn the lessons of life and know what it takes to move up. From a professional viewpoint, I would say IITs were the most difficult place to enter, you know, with 1900, 2000 students out of 100,000 coming in. But from a professional level, I wouldn't say that the courses or the teaching or the curriculum was very challenging. It was really an easy coasting after you got in. Now, what was different I would say was when I went to graduate school at MIT, I mean, that was tough. [laughs]

PL: Okay. And then you said you majored in something in engineering out of spite of your father. So what would—what did you end up majoring in at IIT?

SK: In India, I majored out of IIT in Naval Architecture and Marine Engineering. Okay. And then, while after I graduated, I got a job in Mumbai, and I was staying at home in Mumbai for two years working and got a graduate degree in computer science. So, I have a bachelor's in naval architecture, a master's in computer science. And then I went to MIT. And I got—and MIT has, at the graduate level, it gives a Master's degree, a PhD, a SCD and a professional engineers degree. I got my professional ocean engineers degree there. It's in between a Master's and a PhD. And then, MIT was tough, was very tough. And, you know, Friday evening was just the two days before Monday morning [laughs]. I think Friday evening, couple of hours was the only off time I could get to have a beer or two. But otherwise it was just hard work. But MIT was not only challenging technically, and learning the subjects and all that, but it also taught you a lot. On again, you know, the key elements of becoming successful, and hard work and everything else. And in fact, I enjoyed it a lot over there because we—the MIT, on the logo, and it says at the bottom mens et manus. That means hand and mind. So it is working with your hands and your brain. Yeah.

PL: Okay, and then going a little bit back, what years did you attend IIT?

SK: So I was in IIT from '72 to '77. So that is a five year course.

PL: And then what motivated you to pursue the Graduate Certificate in computer science?

SK: Well, I was staying at home. And this was in 1977. Computers were these huge mainframe computers that occupied an entire building. And they were just starting to kind of take off and I wanted to be involved in it, you know, to know what is going on and all that. And I got my

Master's from a reputable, very reputable organization called the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research. It was a two year course. And it was a lot of fun, but that was a time when it was way before your time, Priscilla. But that was when you made punched cards. And if you know either Fortran or Pascal or something like that, and you had these huge decks of cards that you carry to the computer center and the main for processing, and three hours later, you knew whether you have complete—whether your program worked, or it aborted because of some small you know, like a parenthesis was missing somewhere, and the program did go through.

PL: And then after getting your certificate in computer science, what motivated you to go to MIT and like, leave the country?

SK: Well, life had become too easy. I was staying at home, my meals were prepared, my laundry was taken care of. I was making good money, but my job was not challenging. I enjoyed the computer science and that was fun and challenging, but life had just become too easy for me. And you know, that's just not as—is not in my code. And I knew I did not want to stay in India forever. Because my father just like he told me to go to the farthest IIT—well, sorry, when he told me don't go to Mumbai IIT, he was also smart enough to see through me and he said, “You really don't belong here. You need to get out of here and go go to the US.” And why did he say that? Well, small things when—for example, when we had a meeting, Zoom meeting today for nine clock. For me, nine o'clock is nine o'clock. It's not 9:02, or 9:03, or 9:05. It's 9 o'clock. But you can imagine in India, nine o'clock means sometime around nine o'clock we might end up talking. It could be 10 o'clock [laughs]. Well, then there's no way I could accept that, you know? I'm a, I'm a very, very, I would say, bordering on OCD disorder and obsessive compulsive disorder of things have to be on time, things have to be perfect, things have to be 90 degrees. 89 degrees, 91 degrees is not acceptable. It has to be 90 degrees [laughs].

So that's why I said okay, it was time to move and I applied to MIT. I got accepted. I did not have a scholarship or anything initially. I arranged a bank loan and came over. But within two months, I found a job on campus at MIT as a research assistant. And then, you know, paid my way through MIT.

PL: Um, so what was the year that you moved to the US for school at MIT?

SK: '79. 1979. Everything I own was in one Samsonite suitcase. That was a hand me down. And I remember landing at JFK. And my connection to Boston, the travel agent who booked me in India, so I landed at Kennedy, and my connection to Boston was from Newark. And I went through customs, immigration, and I go to check in for my next flight and the booking agent goes, “Your connection is from Newark. That's like an hour and half two hours drive from Kennedy to Newark. How are you going to get there?” I was like, “I didn't even know there were two different airports in New York City.” And then she told me to go to, instead to go to LaGuardia, and take a shuttle. And I'm like, “A shuttle. What do you mean by a shuttle?” I mean, coming from India, you didn't realize that there is airplane flights that just fly like a shuttle. You know. So anyway, somehow or another, I think somebody was watching over me, because I had it—I had enough opportunity to get screwed up over there. But somehow I found a coach that took me from Kennedy to LaGuardia. I found the Eastern Airlines shuttle terminal and got onto

this plane that took me to Boston. I don't know how I managed to do it. I look back sometimes and I go, "Oh my gosh." [laughs]

PL: Oh, so where did you stay at MIT—was there like grad—

SK: At MIT, I stayed on campus. But it was again, that was interesting too. I was—I got—I was registered at Ashdown house which is a graduate dorm just across from [inaudible] the main building and they had overbooked. There were three of us: a guy from France, a guy from Lebanon, and me. They converted the TV room for the three of us to stay in the TV room for one term. And that was interesting. The three of us in the TV room with no bathroom. We had to go outside and go downstairs into the basement to go use the bathroom. And every so often people used to open the door thinking it is still the TV room.

PL: So what was that like living with—[SK: Sorry?] What was that like living with roommates in like, a foreign country?

SK: Oh, very eye opening, you know. But then, you know, at MIT you are—you have to be so focused on what you're doing, you really don't have too much time to think about other things. You just—you would—it is just hard work all the time and you're always behind, you're never on top of things. By the time you get on top of things, you were thrown the next bunch of challenges. You were just trying to survive over there. And surviving there is I guess means you've done pretty well [laughs]. I really didn't have a chance to get much exposure to the US culture, the US society, US values or anything like that. I mean, you are just trying to just make it from one day to the next, with all the tests and assignments and projects, and I was also a research assistant, and then a teaching assistant. I was teaching a course at MIT on dynamics. So trying to balance all of that, you know, was just very tough. I really started getting exposed to American society, culture, values, and all that. When I graduated and you know, moved to Houston.

PL: And what made you decide to go to MIT specifically? Was it the programs there?

SK: Well, I mean, of course, there's the reputation of MIT, and having had a Bachelor's in naval architecture, what I really wanted to do was get into the offshore business. You know, the offshore oil and gas business. And MIT—there were only three schools at that time that offered it was Michigan, at University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, California-Berkeley, and MIT. And, of course, the, between the three, it was a no brainer that MIT was a place to go to. And I'm glad I made that choice. I'm happy I went there. Because of the work we did there, really got me going in life.

PL: And so you describe your time at MIT as the defining of your DNA. Can you describe more of like, like the experiences you had at MIT to helped, you know, define your DNA in that way?

SK: Yeah. Well, [clears throat] MIT just first of all, fostered my obsessive compulsive disorder [laughs], kind of reinforced it. You know, because everything's got to be 90 degrees. 89 not acceptable. 91 not acceptable, it has to be 90. Nine o'clock means nine o'clock, 9:05 is not acceptable. So MIT kind of just strengthened my OCD even further. But the other thing, I mean,

of course, hard work. Of course, you got to be smart and intelligent. But you know, it's—there's a little difference over there at MIT. By definition, you are smart when you go there. But you have to learn to prioritize, because there is so much pressure and so much demand on your time, that you have got to learn and you end up having to learn very quickly, how to prioritize your time and what to spend your time on, and what gets you the most effective results. Because otherwise you can—you cannot make it through the school.

The other thing MIT taught me was a very strong sense of ethics. You know, and just to give you an idea: I used to take courses, and I used to teach a course. Okay, on dynamics. So there was one course when I was sitting, taking the course as a student. The next hour, I would move up to the stage to teach the course. But never, never at any time, did any of my friends ask me, “Hey, what's on the quiz on the course you're teaching? What are going to be the problems you are going to be asking? How are you going to grade me? Can you give me a better grade?” Never, never once. I mean, when you're a student, on student part, you work like a student. When you were teaching, there was no, there was no blurring of the lines. And then the worst part used to be when we used to take a test, and we used to struggle to get our taking a test and at the end of the hour, the professor's to say, “You know what, for those of you haven't finished, just take it home, and turn in your test or the next lecture.” That test was so difficult that he didn't mind you taking it home and working on it. And that meant your entire weekend was ruined. Because you were working through the test and you didn't know which way was up. And even though you took it home, we wouldn't talk—the students wouldn't talk to each other about what—which way they were going at it and how to solve the problems. Everybody stood—stayed to themselves and work to the test. So it taught you a very, very strong ethics that you know, you do on your own. Yeah.

PL: And then—so can you describe your path like after graduating from MIT with the professional engineering degree?

SK: Yeah. So, but what's interesting—what I did at MIT was at that point in time—I'm talking about 1979-1980—the industry could not drill in 1000 feet of water depth. Okay, today we drill and produce in six, seven, eight thousand feet of water. And the problem that kept happening was the drill string used to snap and break. And nobody knew what was going on. Why was the drill string breaking? Why was it snapping and all that? So I was doing research under my professor, professor Kim Vandiver. And we picked up the project. And we were able to, we were able to identify the problem: why the drill strings were breaking, we were able to numerically model it, we were able to predict when they would break, and then we came up with a solution for it.

And part of the solution was we had strung a 60 foot long cable in one of the bays in May, offshore in Maine. And as the tide came in and went out, along the cable, we had 16, bidirectional accelerometers that measure the acceleration of the cable. And then we did a double time series integration to—backward from acceleration to velocity to displacement. And we were able to show the displacement of the cable, and so that was a combination of, you know, when I said mens et manus, that is your hand and your mind, working together to—we were able to like I said, we were able to identify why it happened, model it numerically, predict when it would

break, and come up with a solution for it. So once that research finished, of course, the natural thing for me was to get into the offshore oil and gas business.

PL: Okay. Um, and let's see, so, going—so what was like the, I guess, culture of offshore gas industry? Was it like a booming industry when you graduated? Or, what was it like?

SK: Well, when I graduated and came to Houston in 1981, it—two or three defining moments over there, first of all, in 1981, gas—oil was at that time was at a very high price and that price that time I think it was like \$35 a barrel, which was, in 1981 dollars, that's a very high price. Probably more than \$140 today. And the bumper stickers in Houston used to be, “Drive at 90, freeze the Yankees.” You know, because that is a time we had to just come out with speed limits and all that to reduce fuel consumption. It was around that time that we had the national speed limits of I think 65 miles per hour or something like that. And the bumper stickers in Houston everywhere were, “Drive at 90, freeze the Yankees.” You can imagine the town—what Houston was then. And then by 1986, the bumper stickers were, “Will the last guy leaving Houston, please switch off the lights?” Because in '83, '84, the price of oil crashed. And it came down to \$6 a barrel. And Houston just shut down. I mean today, Houston is a little bit more diverse with you know, being in with the, with all the work in the medical center and other things. But at that time, it was just oil and gas. And with oil and gas falling, with oil falling to \$6 a barrel. They were just massive, massive layoffs. The block on which my house was, I was on the dead end of the street. And my house was the only house occupied. All the houses on the road had been abandoned by their owners who'd given the keys back to the bank, and they had left town. So I saw in those five years from an absolutely booming town which said “Drive at 90, freeze the Yankees” to '86 when people were leaving town, Houston in droves.

PL: So were you able to secure a career at that time, with such a—

SK: Yeah, yeah, so when I graduated, I came down here with a job as I was in a small consulting company called Brian Watt Associates. And I think in two and a half years, I became an associate in the company, which is like a partner in the company. And because of my research at MIT, I was involved in a lot of front end—I won't say research but development work on how to produce in 1000 feet water depth. My research at MIT was how to drill in 1000 feet water depth. I came down here and the challenge was, okay, now we sorted that problem, or we can drill. Now, if you find oil in 1000 feet, how are we going to produce it? That's where a lot of my work was, was on: how can we produce in 1000 feet water depth? Because it was—because up till that time, the technology was you just built those platforms, you know, found it to the bottom, and you just build platforms. But as you're going deeper and deeper and deeper, will you go to have 1000 foot platform and how is that platform going to behave? Because now you have a long thousand foot long pogo stick, sitting in the middle of the ocean doing this [waves arm side to side].

And that's when we started developing the concept of floating production systems. That is, systems that are anchored to the seabed, but not fixed to the seabed, like a platform. It's a floating vessel from which you produce. And that was—it was really at the front end of technology then of coming up with the systems to design and define those. And that helped me along all the way through life because the people who are doing that front end development work then in 1981 to

'86, we are all in our 20s then those guys moved on to life to become, you know, top management of all the oil companies. And that friendship and through network helped me through life.

PL: Um, so can you describe the people who you worked with at Brian Watt Associates? You know— [**SK:** Can I what?] Can you describe the people who you worked with—

SK: Can I describe the people I work with? At Brian Watt Associates were really a collection of all, I would say—maybe I would say 80% of the people there were MIT graduates. Brian himself was an M—was a PhD from MIT. And so were a bunch of other people. And so it was a further reinforcement of my obsessive compulsive disorder. But it was, it was fun. We were about 30 people, all involved in front end development work for the oil and gas industry. And our clients were the oil and gas companies. And in 1984 I think we sold the company to Ralph M. Parsons. And that was great timing because oil prices crashed after that. In '86, Ralph M. Parsons shut the company down. Here I was with a one year old baby. I mean, she's now 30-34. She also went to MIT, and Houston was shut down. But my experience from IIT, being by yourself, you know, taught me that I had to find a job. There was nobody around to help me. You know, and there's no safety net. What I did in 1986, when oil was at \$6 a barrel, I found a job at McDermott, which was at that time, you know, one of the premier oil and gas contracting companies. In 1986, I was hired into McDermott and the day I went into work, I was hired by the corporate head offices, New Orleans, but I would be officing in Houston. And the day I went into work, they had laid off 1000 people. And I show up on my first day, registering as a new employee, and 1000 people leaving the building. So I was like, whoa.

PL: So what were you hired as at McDermott?

SK: I was—so McDermott at that time was, I would say, the biggest, the strongest in the conventional market of building those fixed platforms. But as you, as we were describing earlier, you know, we were going into deeper and deeper waters, and you cannot continue building bigger and bigger and longer and longer platforms, because there's a limit to the pogo stick. And so, McDermott wanted me to take the company into some of these newer technologies of floating production systems. I was hired as a worldwide manager for floating production systems, for McDermott, and to take the company in that direction. And I was there for about four years, a little less than four years, three and a half years. And through the connections I had from my Brian Watt Associates where we were doing a lot of development work, I was able to—we did an extended well test offshore Philippines and I got two other projects. We got three projects into the company at a time when there were no projects coming in. I mean oil was at \$6 a barrel who was going to do anything. And I will—I managed to bring in three projects into McDermott.

PL: Um, so was management very different from what you had been doing before with like research?

SK: Yes, I mean, I was involved a little bit in management at Brian Watt Associates. But it's a 30 man company. You know, now you're in a company that is, I don't know how many people there were at McDermott when I was there maybe two, three thousand people worldwide, offices all over the world, you know, fabrication sites all over the world, marine vessels all over the

world, all kinds of things. And because of the position I was hired in, I was attending a lot of the executive management meetings every month. And I would probably say that my four years at that company probably taught me—it taught me a lot of how not to do things. It was...let me just leave it at that, it taught me how not to do things.

PL: And then you said you spent four years there?

SK: Yeah. From September of '86 through March of '90. Then March of '90 was when I was recruited into MODEC and MODEC at that time—well MODEC is a Japanese company that is part of the Mitsui group. And MODEC had gone through its own gut wrenching restructuring. And even though being a Japanese company, they had to go through restructuring, laid off a lot of people, and they had shrunk down to about 30 engineers working on top of a grocery store in Tokyo. And they basically hired me into the Houston office to take on the company and take it into the floating production systems business. And I was there for 22 years, had a blast, built the company up. It is one of the biggest contractors in the floating production marketplace today.

I rose up to become the chairman and CEO, as the only non-Japanese head of a Mitsui group company at that time, and probably there haven't been any since me either. When I left, we were about 2500 people, about two and a half billion dollars in revenue every year. And built it up into a very solid, straight company. And at that point in time, our biggest competition was SBM Offshore. And since then, for people in the industry who have read, you can see all the reports about all the FCPA Foreign Corrupt Practices Allegations against SBM and all the settlements that they have done all over the world for bribery charges. Well, you don't hear MODEC's name with any of those allegations. We ran a straight ship. We were not as successful then as SBM. You know now why, but we ran a straight ship. We kept our mouth shut. We did our work. We delivered the projects. And we had fun doing it.

PL: So what was that like working in a Japanese company, in comparison to like the first team you worked with, which was Brian Watt, and then McDermott? Like, was there a stark difference between them?

SK: Oh, very, very, very different, very different. But the good thing I will say, first of all, having learned a lot of how not to do things, I was able to do things the right way, you know. Because a lot of times your negative experiences [are] your best experience because you know what you should not be doing. And that makes you do the right things. You know, like having failed or having screwed up is sometimes the best experience because you know what you should not be doing at all. And the guys I worked with at MODECC at that time, they were, they were very—two of the guys Yamada and Yaji. They were very non Japanese in their thinking. But it's a very different culture. Work—working, working with the Japanese compared to the US. And what was challenging was you're building a global brand. Your client, your clients are not Japanese companies. There's no Japanese oil and gas company. Your clients are all Western companies. Your projects are all outside Japan—there is no oil and gas project in Japan. You're doing all the work outside Japan. It's just that your shareholders are all Japanese. You know. So it's a—it leads to some unique tensions. The only thing we did out of Japan was a little bit of engineering. And mostly it was all the funding. It led to some very unique tensions and, and juggling of, you know, cultures and values.

PL: Um, what were some—I guess, besides the difference in culture and values, what other challenges you faced in, like the management and administration roles that you took on?

SK: Some very difficult ones because, you know, like, the system and the culture is so different. Like in the Tokyo office, everybody wore a suit and a tie every day. And like all the other offices of MODEC, I was like, “No, you don't wear a suit and tie just come to work.” I mean, you know, over there, people work long hours, not because there is work to be done, but you got to appear busy, be your own bosses, and to society. Because if you get—if you got home at 5:30, you're probably not in an important job. So even if you were caught up with work, you stayed at the office, so that you did not show up back home till 8:30 or nine o'clock at night. You always watched when your boss left because you never left the office before your boss did. So it is like—it's a very, very different culture.

And the other thing is you're never fired in a Japanese company. So there is—so your promotions and moving up is based on your tenure, how long you've been at the company, rather than how successful you've been for the company and nobody gets fired. How well you perform, or how badly you perform really has very little impact on your salary, your bonus or anything like that very, very little impact. The 30 people in Tokyo became 100 people as we grew, but still it was 100 people and I had, I had 2200 people outside Tokyo. Okay. But the, but the way the company ran in Tokyo, and the other 2,200 people were very different. It did lead to some very unique tensions and conflicts. Because everywhere else, I had it as a strict meritocracy. The guy who made it up was the guy who produced the most, was successful was promoted [inaudible]. You know, I—we used to have a layoff, we used to retrench people, we used to reward people is to move the company up and build the company up. But these hundred people here [in Tokyo] you couldn't do anything to. It didn't matter how, how well or how bad you perform. You couldn't do anything here.

PL: Did that ever change over time? Or is that still how it's run?

SK: I'm sorry?

PL: Did that like—do the cultures ever, I guess mesh or it's always that tense?

SK: No, no, it's always that way. It still is that way. I mean, yes, they have been a very successful economy and a very successful country. But it's a very different culture than the West.

PL: And then more of a general question, but what would you say are key aspects that a company needs to be able to grow?

SK: Well, in my mind, a very key element for a company to grow is the top person. People say, you know, it doesn't matter who is the president and CEO. No, the President and CEO has an—has the most influence on how a company performs in terms of growth, in terms of its value system, in terms of ethics, in terms of—you know, in terms of how it does business. And I will also go on to say that the president, CEO, needs to have very deep knowledge of the industry the company is in. I'm not a fan of an MBA, going to run any business. You got to know the

business. Just because you graduated out of MBA school doesn't give you the knowledge and the wisdom and everything to go run any business. You got to have your hands and passion in the business, and then you need a vision. And then you've got to go after it. Building a company from 30 engineers to 2200 engineers and two and a half billion is a lot of hard work. I remember my last three years at MODEC, I was at home for only one week out of the month. Three weeks out of the month I was traveling, and I got on the plane, it was not for an hour or two. It was—the show my shortest flight was ten and a half hours. Every month I was for a week in Singapore, a week in Tokyo. And my third week was either in Europe or in Africa or in Brazil. And then one week back home and the routine would start again. And you know, you could—you can do that only for so long.

PL: Wait, so how long did you have to like travel like globally?

SK: Well, ever since I joined MODEC in 1990, I was traveling. The last three years was the toughest because actually what happened was in all in '0, in '08, I stepped down away from MODEC. I still remained on the board of directors, but I wanted to pursue other things. I left them in '08. And they came back to me and in the six months I had gone, the company just fell apart. Projects were delayed. Operations were dismal. Things would just go—just went very bad. And in fact, in '08 MODEC declared a loss. And the board of directors essentially told me you got to come back, you got to come back and take this thing over again. I came back in December '08. And that's why over 2009, 2010 and half of 2011, two and a half years, was when I had to do all this traveling to re, you know, re-basically, re-establish the company, reconfigure it, retool it, and get it going again. And that was the two and a half years when I was on the road all the time and a lot of stress and a lot of work.

PL: Um, and during all this travel you had, you said, I think you had a daughter, right?

SK: I have a daughter and a son.

PL: And a son. [phone rings] [**SK:** Sorry about that.] How were you able to—[**SK:** Sorry.] How were you—balance work and life?

SK: Oh, I couldn't. I couldn't. I mean, I was just [phone rings] I was just completely into work. I mean, both my son and my daughter are very successful in their own way. Right? They are very successful. But the reason they are is because my wife kept the home going. I mean, I was just totally into work... And with the—with the—with that kind of well, in '09, '10 and '11 when I was doing a lot of the traveling, you know, it was different in the sense both of them had gone to college. My daughter was at MIT, and my son was at Tufts. Neither of them were here at home by then.

PL: The next question is—so your areas of expertise include business strategy, project development and management. Would you say you've applied these expertise to lead and improve your own personal life?

SK: I'm sorry, can you repeat again?

PL: Um, so your areas of expertise include business strategy and project development, would you say you've like applied these levels of management to your own personal life?

SK: Yes. Uh, I mean, your personal life is an extension of what you are in business, you cannot divorce the two, you know, separately. But, yes, they are applied to my personal life too, in the sense that that's a value system, both my kids have. You know, and the—yeah, I mean, you cannot divorce your life between your personal and professional.

PL: And then in 2007, you attended an executive leadership seminar at the Aspen Institute. Can you describe like what led you to attend this—this seminar on leadership.

SK: Oh, that was—that was—that was an eye opening seminar. So, you know, I was the CEO of — I had build the company up, the company was very successful. And I was like, looking for more meaning to success now. And that's when I've found this executive leadership course at the Aspen Institute. And it—first of all, it's a 10 day course. And there were I think, maybe about 10, 15 of us. And it's just—so it was not a lecture. You sat around a circular round table. And it was more of a discussion. And you did all your reading before you went to the Aspen Institute. They sent you a stack of stuff to read, and you're supposed to read everything. And when you go there, you just sit around and have a discussion on each topic. And that was the first time probably the first time in my life that I was reading great philosophical words by Tocqueville and I cannot remember—Pluto and all those people talking about nature versus nurture. What is society? What is government? How does individuals and government react what is the responsibility of government? What is the responsibility of you as an individual in a society and, you know, very philosophical subject to talk about, and having grown up as an engineer, educated as an engineer, working as an engineer, to now reviewing and discussing philosophical subjects, and to talk about society and the meaning of society and our obligations to society and society's obligation to us. I mean, these are all very, how should I say, intellectual subjects, but not hard and fast.

They're not like engineering. There's not a definite answer. There's no right or wrong answer. There's not a formula to describe it. For a hard nosed engineer, it's a tough transition. But it opened my eyes up and it opened my eyes mainly from the perspective of, “Okay, I built a business, made it successful, I'm personally successful.” But now you start thinking bigger beyond that as to what are my obligations to society? What do I expect from society? What are my obligations to family? You know, you start developing your own values, your own understanding and defining things like of society and your family and you and you know, those kinds of things. It leads you to start thinking of issues beyond the formula. And, and, and that's when, in my present days now, it has got me involved into, for example, I'm very involved now in Habitat for Humanity. I'm very involved with MIT and the Alumni Association, but it was those defining moments from the Aspen Institute where you start thinking about society and you and your role in it and you know, and basically how to give back.

PL: And what motivated you to join, to get involved with Habitat, Habitat for Humanity specifically?

SK: Well, it was really, you know, the first thing I'll say this, is you start thinking about society and charity and all that and giving back after your stomach is full. Okay, but once—once your

stomach is full, what I do admire a lot in the US, is the philanthropic endeavors that all of us in America do. We look beyond ourselves to look at and search for ways by which we can do better for the greater society. And that is amazing in this country. I see it more in America than I've seen it in any other country in the world. The giving back and the philanthropy is just amazing here. And I do—I do my bit in it. But so do so many people do so much. It is truly impressive. But what—so I got on my giving backside, I really have done three things. I've funded a lab at MIT called...and it—it's to design, develop and disseminate solutions in the developing world. It's called D-Lab. And the kind of stuff they do was like, in Haiti, for example, turning sugar cane waste, into fuel, so that you're not using charcoal and thereby leading to deforestation. So that's the kind of projects that D-Lab does. I funded the D-Lab project at MIT. And now I'm on the MIT Alumni Association, graduate Alumni Council.

The other thing I got involved in Habitat for Humanity was because it brought—it brought together my experience in strategy and projects. And my mens et manus, you know, doing things with your hand and your mind. And I like the vision. the purpose of it because you know, having a home, having a house is so important for stability. And it turns people from being recipients of society to contributing members of society because you're not waiting on handouts you are, you have your own house and a lot of times these family that is the first asset that they have ever had. They don't know what it means to own something. And that you got to take care of it, you got to look after it, you got to pay the mortgage every month, you got to pay the power bill every month, you know. I firmly like the mission of Habitat [for Humanity], and I could bring a lot of you know, value to it. So now I'm on the board of the organization Yeah.

PL: Um, and let's see, in what other ways do you give back to your community specifically at the Museum for Fine Arts?

SK: Well, that is my wife's vehicle. I'm the spouse over there. She's very much involved at the Museum of Fine Arts. We have endowed a chair at the museum, but that is my wife. I am the engineer. I mean, I cannot draw a straight line without a scale. I am—I'm happy I have the means that she can support that and we do a lot, but I know nothing about art. Sorry [laughs].

PL: And how did you meet your wife?

SK: Oh. you know in India, it is mostly arranged marriages. Well, mine was not an arranged marriage. It was an arranged introduction. I was living in Houston then and working. She was living and working in San Francisco. And through some common contacts, I was given her phone number and she was given my phone number. But, of course, she refused to call me, so I kind of [laughs] succumbed to it one day and picked up the phone and gave her a call. And since then, we've had—we got married in '83. We've been about 37 years of a wonderful married life.

PL: You mentioned that you enjoy biking and sports. [**SK:** Yeah.] What activities have you been keeping up with lately?

SK: Well, right now with this pandemic [inaudible], you there's not much you can do but I can still do my biking, and I love biking. You know as you age, you cannot do a lot of the sports. Like I cannot go outside and run anymore. I mean your knees are just not strong enough to do

that. And I love biking. It's a great sport. It's a great, you know, it's a good cardio sport. And what is neat about biking, like is that we have gone on about six bike trips around the world. we have biked in Chile, Germany, Croatia, Prague, Vienna. I cannot remember all the places we have gone to but we biked all around the world. And there's in my mind, and we've done mostly with this T-shirt I'm wearing with this company called Backroads, and in my mind, there is no better way to see a place than off of a bicycle.

Because you are there with the people. You know, you can stop at any place, talk to the guys, have a cup of coffee, chat with them, get on your bike, go another 10 miles. And so, it gives you exercise. You can see places and you can meet people, talk to people, and that way get to really understand a place or a city. Because I cannot sit in a coach bus and be told there's a monument here and there's a church here and there's this, you know, I'll kill someone very quickly. I have to be doing things. I just love biking as a result and as an exercise and to go around the world and see places. And what is very comforting and satisfying these days is my grandkids who are five and seven. They have become great bikers, and they love biking too. And even when we are under this lockdown, we go once a week, we go for a 20, no, a 12 mile bike ride, the kiddos and my wife and me. We are gone for about three, three and a half hours. And we do a 12 mile bike ride. And we bike to a spot. We sit there, we pack a picnic lunch. We have lunch together, and bike back. And it's wonderful. And in fact, next year, I'm planning to take both of them on a Backroads trip somewhere. Yeah.

PL: Oh, that's cool.

SK: Of course. Now these days with aging and with my knees acting up these days, I've graduated to an E bike. You still got to bike but on the very steep uphill climbs, it gives you a little bit of a help.

PL: And so you mentioned the pandemic impacting what kind of activities you can do. So how has it impacted your—like how you perform on the board of Habitat for Humanity? Like, has that stopped? Are you still do meetings through Zoom?

SK: Oh, no. In fact, we are going through some very challenging times at Houston Habitat, because as you can imagine, well, two things. There are the contributions we received from companies to allow us to do the Habitat's mission. And I don't think we will be impacted much for 2020. But I think 2021 will be very difficult because along with the pandemic, the price of oil is becoming—minus \$30, two weeks ago, because low storage capacity. There's the financial contribution but the other interesting element with Habitat is that the donating organization actually volunteered to come and build the houses. And with the lockdowns and social distancing, we don't have any volunteer teams coming out to help build the houses. It's getting the money is one thing, the second challenge is having the volunteers to come out to build the houses.

And with the social distancing, we cannot have the people come out to build the houses. It is going to be a very difficult and challenging year for Habitat this year, and I think next year will be even, even more difficult. And then being on the graduate Alumni Council at MIT that has its own set of challenges. I mean, the campus is shut down. And graduates are coming into the

industry. Well, first of all, a lot of the graduates who thought they had a job have found that the job offers have been rescinded or pulled back. And then those who, who still do have a job are moving into towns around the country, which is a very different town than what the town or city were four months ago.

PL: Okay, and then moving on to like kind of Houston questions. How would you describe the South Asian community in Houston?

SK: How would I describe the South Asian community in Houston? I don't think I'm qualified to answer that. And the reason I'm saying that is because we really are not very involved as South Asians. You know, we are kind of involved in community. We are not particularly involved in the South Asian community if you see what I'm trying to say. We are integrated into this society, we are not—and we are not that integrated into a part of the society of just South Asians. I mean, we don't ever go to the temple. We don't go to a church or a temple or anything. You know, so we are not part of any religious group. We are not part of any South Asian cultural group. But we are rather involved at the Museum of Fine Arts and Habitat [for Humanity] and things like that. So I really cannot comment to you on how the South Asian community in Houston is.

PL: Okay. And then how has Houston changed? In general, like the city itself? How's it changed since you arrived here?

SK: Well, in good and bad ways, Houston has changed. First of all it, I mean, it comes compared to 1981 when it was just a cow town, you know, it was really small, little town. I mean today in 2020, Houston is the fourth largest city in the country. Very, very high, diverse population. Very much a cultural center now with the Museum of Fine Arts and the new Kinder building going up over there, and what the Museum of Fine Arts has done, but not just the museum, you go around and look at all the other things. We have the Asia Society, the Science—Museum of Natural Science, the zoo. I mean, Houston's really become a really nice place. The restaurants and eating establishment, I mean, it's really become a foodie town too. I mean, the number of neat great restaurants in town. Universities, you know, your school, Rice University, and St. Thomas, and University of Houston. All around I think Houston's become a very nice place. I wish we would do a little better on things like mobility and public transportation. So that everybody's just not getting into their cars and driving down freeways and making—building bigger and bigger freeways. There are a few things that we could do better on, like our homeless population. But Houston's become a really nice place to be. Would you agree? I mean, you are here as a student, right?

PL: Yeah, I definitely agree. It's a good city to be in. [**SK:** Yeah] Moving on to identity questions. So how would you identify yourself?

SK: How would I identify myself? I would say for myself, I would say I'm a very high energy, extremely focused... no bullshit, straight shooting person. And these days [clears throat] enjoying the love of my family, my grandkids, the society, giving back to society. You know? I've had a good life. I've had a great life. I had an accident when I was about 13, 14 years old, when a cricket ball hit me in the head. And I could have died then, or I could have been comatose all my

life since then. But I didn't—but, you know, medicine saved me and I've had a great, fantastic run. I have really great family, great kids, great grandkids, nothing, nothing to complain about.

PL: Um, so what are your proudest moments in your career?

SK: Proudest moments in my career. So that question is focused on my professional life because you're asking me about my career. I would say...I would say I would not call it a moment, but I would say, the period of building up a company, you know, from 30, engineers to 2300, whatever, more than 2000 people and making it very successful, very profitable. With an extremely high—with an extremely high reputation in the industry was—I'm very proud of that.

PL: And then would you have any advice for anyone who wants to succeed in oil and gas industry or top management roles? Any advice—

SK: Well, I wouldn't make it specific to oil and gas industry. Because, you know, the world is way beyond oil and gas industry. In fact, I don't know how much of a future the oil and gas industry is going to be having. The energy industry, yes, we're all going to need energy. But my advice to anybody is, first of all, you got to have passion in what you're doing. Whatever it is, whether it is being an artist, being a ballerina, being a piano teacher, being a whatever, or an engineer, you have to have passion in what you're doing. And as long as you have passion in what you're doing, you'll do well. Now, to carry that passion and becoming successful. There is no replacement to hard work, focus, and drive, drive, drive [laughs]. So there's no—there's no, there's no silver bullet.

PL: Um, and since arriving to the US for graduate school at MIT, did you ever travel back to India to visit your hometown?

SK: No, I mean, I used to visit often while my parents were there. But I've never never considered moving back because the very reason I came to the US was because I couldn't fit over there. I was a misfit because for me, things had to happen on time. Things had to happen perfectly. And at least when I was growing up there, neither of those two things were taking place [laughs].

PL: Um, so what cultural or I guess, what values did you raise your children with?

SK: Well, and we've talked about it several times during this interview, but like I said, there is no, there is no replacement to hard work. There is none. I wish I could give you that there is a silver bullet there is not. You've got to work your butt off every day. Because if you don't, there's millions of other people who are and who are going to pass you by. You got to have focus. Because you cannot be spread around doing too many things. You have to focus—laser focus on what it is you need to be getting done every day. Keep a list of things that need to be done. I go to bed every night, even though I'm not a full time employee, I go to bed every night with a list of what I have to do the next day and over the next week.

PL: Okay. So I think those are all the questions I had. Um, is there anything else you'd like to add?

SK: No, no.

PL: Thank you so much, Mr. Karvé.

SK: All right. Take care.

[interview ends]