

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

Interviewee: Ratna Sarkar

Interviewers: Nicholas Wiese

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Transcribed by: Nicholas Wiese

Edited by: Priscilla Li (6/7/2017)

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Background:

Dr. Ratna Sarkar was born in the city of Lucknow, located in the Uttar Pradesh province of India, in 1960. At the age of three, her family moved south to the city of Hyderabad, where she was raised and learned Telugu. At age 16, she entered the undergraduate engineering program at the Indian Institute of Technology, where on the first day of classes she would meet her future husband, Vivek Sarkar, also sixteen. After graduating at 21 in 1981, the couple moved to Palo Alto, California for graduate school. Both of them enrolled at Stanford University, with Dr. Sarkar pursuing a Master's degree in computer science, and Vivek pursuing a PhD in electrical engineering. In 1991, she returned to Stanford University to obtain a PhD in business, and in 1998, she moved to Stamford, Connecticut, where she worked as an assistant professor of Accounting and Control, and as a research fellow at Harvard Business School. She also worked as a consultant for CRA International Inc., a leading consulting firm. In August of 2007, her family moved to Houston, Texas, where she would teach courses and work as the Associate Dean of Engineering for Global Initiatives at the George R. Brown School of Engineering. At the end of 2011, she began working as the Director of Institutional Research at Rice University.

Setting:

The interview was conducted in Dr. Sarkar's office in the Office of Institutional Research at Rice University, which she directs. The interview was forty minutes. She recounts her experience in India, California, New York, Connecticut, and Houston. The interview focuses on her school and work life, while also highlighting family life, community involvement, and to some extent, her experience in U.S. and Indian cultural relations. Her experience in the U.S. is largely one of success and of finding "place."

Interview Transcript:

Key:

RS	Ratna Sarkar
NW	Nicholas Wiese
...	Speech trails off; pause
Italics	Emphasis
(?)	Preceding word may not be accurate
Brackets	Actions (laughs, sighs, etc.)

NW: Hello, this is Nicholas Wiese, and I'm from Rice University with the Houston Asian American Archive Project, and I'm here today with Dr. Ratna Sarkar.

RS: Thank you

NW: So, let's begin. Ratna. If you will, tell me about your life, about India, where you were born, correct?

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RS: Yes, I was born in India in 1960, so I'm almost 53 years old now, in a town called Lucknow in the north of India, L-U-C-K-N-O-W. Uh, but when I was 3 years old, my family moved to the south, and I grew up in a city called Hyderabad in the south of India. I went to college at the age of 16 again back in the north and then came to grad school in the United States at the age of 21. So that's kind of a summary of um, the first half of my life.

NW: Hm and let's see, what led you to come to the U.S. for grad school?

RS: Oh I had studied, um, engineering in India in one of uh the Indian institutes of technology, there were only five there at that time, and it was a very common practice for graduates from the IITs to come to the States. It still is, uh for advanced study. The IITs are excellent for undergraduate study, but especially in my time, they didn't have much in the form of a graduate study, uh and the IIT I went to in Kanpur was actually set up with American aid. It was started in the early '60s by a bunch of American professors, so we had a very strong American culture, and I think more of the IITians from Kanpur came to the U.S. than any other IIT, so I was just definitely part of a very big bunch. I had done well in school, and it was easy for me to get a graduate assistantship to come to the United States. I went to Stanford to study computer science.

NW: And after graduating from Stanford, then, where did that lead you? Where did you go?

RS: I got a master's in computer science in 1983 from Stanford and I went to work for a computer company called Rolm Corporation R-O-L-M. Funnily enough, I learned many, many years later, Rolm Corporation was started by four Rice graduates whose last names started with R, O, L, M.

NW: And what was that like, working there?

RS: Uh this was 1983, there were very few women engineers, so that was kind of different, but fortunately I had been to Engineering school where there were very few women engineering uh students. The engineering undergrad school I went to, we were 5, 6 women in a class of 252 students, so um, I was used to being uh like the only woman in my class and things like that, so it wasn't uncomfortable, it was just a very different era than it is today. Uh it was a very interesting and fun company to work for with a very typical Silicon Valley culture. Even back in 1983 there was a gym and running groups and lots of outdoor picnics; things like that which I enjoyed, but I very soon learned that I didn't want to do pure hardcore engineering, certainly not hardcore programming all the time. Even though I was good at it, I kind of missed the people aspect, and then in 1985 I went back and got an MBA, uh, joined the MBA program at Stanford.

NW: And after picking up your MBA, from there, where did you go, what did you do?

RS: So I finished my MBA in 1987 and uh did something different for a change. I went to work for McKinsey & Company, a consulting management, a consulting firm in New York. In '87 my husband finished his PhD at Stanford in electrical engineering, I finished my MBA at the same time—very nice coincidence, and so we decided to try something different—we moved away from the Bay Area, the San Francisco Bay Area and went to live in New York, and I actually worked in New York City, which was a lot of fun. I really think that it was the best thing I did while I was still young. I got to work in the city; I did not live in New York City, but lived just outside, but took the train in and we had a wonderful time. And we were, I was at McKinsey and we were in New York till 1990. In 1989 my first child was born, and she was born 3 months premature. She was born at um 27 weeks gestation rather than 40, and that was a huge, uh... um, turn in, in our lives, because she needed a lot of medical care and a lot of hands on care for the first 2 years of her life. And it's actually what made me stop working at McKinsey and spend time with her at home, but I was missing... I was missing doing technical,

analytical work, so I applied for a PhD program and went back to do a PhD at Stanford in 1991, I started my PhD in 1991.

NW: Tell me more about your family life.

RS: So, back to the nuclear family I grew up in, uh my dad is actually an engineer, or was an engineer—he passed away 2 years ago, a chemical engineer, and that's the thing I, *that's* the reason I became an engineer, is because when I was growing up, I looked upon him as a person who could pretty much answer any question and fix anything that needed to be fixed, um and I liked doing that with him. We worked on the car, the family car together. Um my mom had a sewing machine that he used to clean and fine-tune every 2, 3 months; I took that over when I was ten years old. I just thought engineers walked on water, and I still do, actually. So uh that's the reason I became an engineer is because of my dad's influence, even though actually he was against my becoming an engineer. Uh in the era I grew up in in India, women were not encouraged to be engineers and my parents begged me not to go to engineering school, but I was determined. Uh my mother is actually very highly educated herself. She has two master's degrees, two diplomas, one in foreign affairs, one in public administration, and she had started on a PhD when she married my dad and gave that up, so actually she really enjoys the fact that uh my, that I have a PhD. I have an older brother, a year and a half older than I am. He works, he is the manager of a very big tea estate in the northeastern part of India. Then there's me and then I have a younger sister who is four years younger than I am. She's a physician and practices emergency room medicine in Knoxville, Tennessee. She is the first, my sister is the first known physician in the entire history of our family, and so it's a real matter of pride that um, that she kind of broke the... the fact is that there have been lots of lawyers and lots of engineers in my family, but no physicians and certainly not a woman at all. Uh she's just a pretty amazing person. So that's my nuclear family. I, I've been married for 30 years to my husband Vivek who I met on the first day of undergraduate school in India when we were both 16 years old, and uh we got married at the age of 22. We um, my—I have two children ages 23 and 20, the older one Shilpa—both are daughters. Shilpa, my older daughter, just finished from Stanford last year and works in a company in the bay area. My younger daughter, my... my older daughter studied engineering, mechanical engineering with a focus on product design, and my younger daughter is studying math at Pomona, she's a sophomore. They've definitely both been influenced by the fact that their parents are engineers, no question, and influenced by the fact that they're of Indian heritage; I'm sure that that also has something to, a role to play in their choices. So that's my nuclear and the family that I'm married into. I've now lived in the states with my husband for 31, 32 years, and we've lived in, on the west coast, on the east coast, Houston is the first place we've lived in that's not on the coast. It's the first time I've lived in Texas, and it's quite an eye opening experience.

NW: And how has your experience here in Houston been compared to the rest of the U.S.?

RS: Oh, oh... Houston. Texas in particular is just like a whole other country compared to the United, the rest of the United States, in my experience. It's the only place I've ever lived in that has such huge state pride. When I moved to Houston, within a day or two I noticed the enormous number of stars all over on people's fences and gates and on the, you know, tops of their houses and I know it's related to Texas's history, but I just find it so amusing that everyone is into the um, into the, you know, into the, 'the lone star state.' Uh it's the only red state I've ever lived in and uh that has its own implications. I've always lived in blue states, um, before this. Uh I like Houston a lot. My husband and I both like Houston a lot, except for the horrible weather, but that... that can't be helped. I find the people very cosmopolitan and very, um... Houston is a very diverse city, and that has a really enjoyable aspect, so I feel very at home in Houston.

NW: And where were you before um, right before you came to Houston?

RS: Just before we came to Houston, we lived in... um, our residence was in Stamford, Connecticut S-T-A-M-F-O-R-D, not like the university, but with an 'm'. Stamford, Connecticut. Uh we lived over there, my husband

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worked for IBM research and I worked um from home, partly, for part of the time with Harvard Business School and for part of the time with a consulting firm called Charles River Associates. We lived there for nine years before we moved over here. Both my children did much of their schooling in Stamford, Connecticut, so very much, uh, very much New England part of the world.

NW: And what led you to move uh here to Houston?

RS: My husband Vivek took a job as a professor of computer science here at Rice. He was offered a tenured position 5, 6 years ago and he had worked for 20 years at IBM, done a lot of publishing, and felt like this was a good move in terms of a second career that could go on, uh that could go on late into life. So he, we, he wanted to do this and I supported him and that so we moved in August of 2007. My older child had already left for college by that time—actually she had just started college that year, 2007. My younger child came with us and spent 3 years in high school here and then went off to college in California too, so.

NW: And what did you think of the move, what did, um, what were your next steps upon arriving in Houston? Where did you go, what did you do?

RS: Oh boy. Um, I knew Houston was going to be hot and humid, but we arrived here on the first of August, so need I say more? It was a revelation. I mean I grew up in India, which is hot, but Houston hot, or Texas hot is something else, especially when combined with the humidity. So the first few days was just acclimatization to a, to a very different setting. I still do miss the fact that during the long days of summer when the sun sets at 9:00, 9:20, 9:30, that it's really not fun to sit out in the evenings, whereas that's what I was used to in there in the east coast; these long, lazy days of summer. On the other hand, on the east coast, we had horrible, miserable winters which we don't have over here, so when we first moved over here, we spent a lot of time getting acclimatized to the weather, getting to know the area. It was a big move for us because in Connecticut we lived in not as urban an area as we do now. We now live only about two miles from Rice and it's wonderful to be close to work and all, but it's very much more urban than the setting we lived in in Connecticut where uh we were little bit off a, off a country road and had, you know, an acre of land around our house and we had woods and forests close by. Uh but we're enjoying being in the city and accessible to the city. Um, we, we would have liked to explore Texas some more, but we learned soon enough that it's gonna be pretty hot through September, October, um and so we, you know, we only started doing that the first winter we were here.

NW: And while here in Houston, did you apply for any job positions or engage in any um-

RS: Well actually, fortunately when my husband got the offer from Rice, I had a friend who taught at Rice. A professor, uh Shannon Anderson; she taught at the business school. And I just casually picked up the phone one day and called her from when I was still living in Connecticut, and I said to her, 'Shannon, I'm moving to, we're moving to Houston. Vick's going to teach at Rice. Um is there anything, you know, can I teach for a little bit at the business school,' because I had taught at the Harvard Business school before. And she just amazingly said, you know? I'm about to go on sabbatical. Why don't you take my spot? So, yes. When I arrived at Houston, this was August of 2007 and I didn't teach that Fall term, but I taught two courses that Spring term starting January, 2008. So during the Fall, one of the things that was fun to do was, I got a, they gave me an office at the, at the Jones School, and I actually attended some lectures at the Jones School, got to know how things are taught, you know, what approach do people take, because Harvard Business School was just a very different school than the Jones Business School. So I knew I would have to change my methodology somewhat. So I got to see uh classes in action over here during the Fall and then into January 2008 I actually started teaching myself. I taught at the Jones School through uh the s—uh... through the, through that whole semester and also through the Summer of 2008. And then, um, actually in April 2008, in an overlapping timeframe, I started to work for the school of engineering as the associate dean of international affairs doing all kinds of international programs for the school of engineering. I'm an engineer by training as I mentioned, so this was an easy transition for me. I

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started to work pretty closely with the professors and the departments to see what I could do about international programs for the students.

NW: Hm and what was that like? What um brought you into, let's see, what led you to look into International programs, or what interests...

RS: Uh at that time in the school of engineering there was a, um, the dean was Sally Keller-McNulty, very interesting woman, who had this idea, and she said, um, and she presented the—I would never have thought about doing international programs. Um, um... but she presented the idea to me like, you know, fun and interesting thing to do. There was also support from the president's office at that time to, to kick start international programs in engineering. They particularly wanted engineering at Rice, particularly wanted to reach out and form partnerships with the Indian Institute of Technology, my home school back in India. And so I was very excited about doing that, and that's why I took the job. It was, it was a little bit different than what I had done before because I've always done very analytical things, but it was fun. Um this, it had an analytical component, but it actually had a large marketing component in terms of reaching out to the students and convincing *them* to undertake um, international, um, study abroad kinds of, kinds of, um, classes.

NW: Okay, let's see, what else, what else... Let's see, you mentioned on your questionnaire that you, you know, were affiliated with the, the Texas Association for Institutional Research and the Association for Institutional Research, AIR and TAIR.

RS: Right.

NW: Tell me about that.

RS: Well, they're the, they are the professional, they are the uh, professional, um... what's the word I'm looking for, the professional associations for the kind of work I now do. I'm now the director of institutional research at Rice, and it's a very fairly technical job, and TAIR is the Texas body, AIR is the national body. There's a lot of, you know, we, uh, there's a lot of information flow that happens between the members of these two associations. We really help each other out, everybody is pretty much in the same boat, where there's a lot of demand for data, a lot of demand for analysis, a lot of demand for information, and limited resources. For example, I, I, I mean, I'm the director here at Rice, and just have two people who work with me in, in the department of IR. So we often need help from outside in terms of, you know, how to do such and such thing quickly, or how to define certain things, or what would be a response to, you know, we got this inquiry from outside: what's an appropriate thing to do? And it's almost like having colleagues all other the na—all over the country. So I've only just begun, I've only just paid my, paid my institution dues, both to TAIR and AIR in the December time frame. I've attended a TAIR conference last month and I'm going to go to an AIR conferen—ah, yes, I'm going to go to an AIR conference in June, so that, I'm looking forward to that. At each conference, I know I'll meet a lot of people who'll end up becoming my, you know, colleagues and help mates, um, for as long as I'm in this job.

NW: And speaking of which, right now you are the head of the Office of Institutional Research here at Rice?

RS: Yes.

NW: Hm, when did you start working here?

RS: I started working here on the 7th of November of 2011. And so I've only been in the job uh about—four months.

NW: Wow... and how's that been so far?

RS: Sorry?

NW: And how's that been so far?

RS: Uh, it's been, it's been like drinking out of a fire hose, uh because there's just a lot to be learned. There are, you know, there's certain ways of doing things in, in IR, in institutional research that I'm learning. Um and I think my challenge is to... um, understand how things are done and respect how things are done, but I think my boss would also like me to change how things are done, so that's a very delicate balance between, uh okay, how did we always do it, and I'm always questioning, why did we always do it that way? And that, that doesn't make people very comfortable, they would, on the one hand they would like to continue working in the exactly the style they were working before. On the other hand, demands on us are so great, that unless we change the way we do things, uh we're not going to be able to serve Rice as well as we should. So, uh, I am learning that, I am learning that trick—how to do that, how to get the work done, but start bringing some efficiencies and some uh deeper understanding to what we do.

NW: Hm, and how has your, how has the support here at Rice for you been?

RS: I've had um, my boss supports me fully, it's been excellent. I think it's hard on the group I work with because they, their boss left, the old director of institutional research left, in, left her, retired from the job in end of May, 2011. So they did not have anybody for 5 or 6 months. They developed their own style in terms of working and now they have to adjust to me. So it's an adjust—while I'm adjusting to them, they're also adjusting to me, which is a big adjustment. Also, the old boss who had been in the job for 20 years had a very different style than I do. Uh to put it very mildly, she, as so many people had told me, she was a 'perfect southern lady', and I don't think that that describes me at all. So, um, they're going to have to adjust to a imperfect, unsouthern lady and I'm gonna, as I said, I'm looking to bring changes into how we do things, so I think it's a big learning experience both for me and for them. But we're doing fine. We're, we are getting a, a lot of, I think a lot of people excited about my coming onboard and giving me a lot of support, and helping us out in ways they did not help before, so I think I, I'm very hopeful that this will be an, that this group will be an enjoyable group to work for. I'm actually in the process of trying to hire one more person. Yeah.

NW: Regarding the type of work you do here, how do you feel that your, er, how do you feel your past experience and education has prepared you, or helped you?

RS: Oh gosh, I mean in, in every way. I, uh, we do a lot of analysis, which I've done, I've done as a worker bee I've done a lot of during my consulting years. Uh and now I have to manage other people who do that, so that's one thing. Um, I have, um, my own PhD thesis, my own research when I was at the Harvard Business School was all data driven—so I'm very comfortable with data and with analysis. I know a lot of statistics, I, I think I was short one or two courses of a statistics master's and statistics which I, which I did not get because I had two children at that point, uh and I had enough master's degrees, but um, so I'm comfortable with that. I, um, I've, I've also spent a lot of time as a programmer before I went to business school, so I'm trying to bring some of that discipline and some of that hygiene into what we do over here. I think that experience as a programmer helps a lot, because I can pretty much pick up anything that needs to be done. I certainly can't do all the work myself because there's just too much of it, but in terms of understanding how the work is done, or what the impediments are, or how we might make it more efficient, um I think I have some good experience under my belt. So I think my background as a, as somebody whose studied computer science, somebody whose studied statistics, somebody whose studied business is all actually coming together very nicely in this job.

NW: Okay, and, how would you describe the work culture here?

RS: [sighs] Well it's very different. It's definitely very different than a consulting firm where pe—where I was used to people working very long hours and, you know, a fairly competitive setting. I think that a staff job at Rice is actually a very nice job to have. Rice is a very, uh, is a good, great place to work, and it's a very nurturing place. Uh I would like to find ways to inject more urgency in what we do. By urgency I don't mean 'deadlines.' We have plenty of deadlines. But uh much more of a desire to excel, I think, than we, than we do right now. So um, it's a great place to start. We have lots of support, but I think there's a lot of change coming too.

NW: And compared to India, how would you compare the culture here in America as a whole?

RS: That's a hard question for me to answer because I left India in 1981 when I was 21 years old. I actually never worked in India. I went to college there, but I never worked in India. In those days, it was not common for college students to even hold summer jobs at all. So I've never worked in India, certainly not professionally. I've never run a home in India, I've never, you know, had my own home. I always, when I was in college I went back to my parents' home all the time, and I still did even many years later, so it's hard for me, my life in America is sort of the complement of my life in India. I was a child and a very young, and a teen and a very young adult in India, and I've been an adult only in the United States, so it's hard to compare. Um, I do know that I have, uh, in India I would have had a lot more help in the house than I do over here, which is, but that's, but that's, you know, I knew that. And I accept that. Uh I think I've had more opportunities, more creative opportunities career wise in the United States than I would have had in India because certainly India in the 80s and 90s was all about slotting people, and I think I would have gotten engineering work, but not much else, whereas here I've been able to really explore all sides of me. Um, my children were born and raised here, so I think of America as home, so it's kind of hard for me to actually compare the two. I do go back to India all the time, I go back—my mother lives there, my brother lives there, so I go back every, uh, six months to a year, often two times a year, or three times in two years, so I spend time there. It takes me a little time to adjust to being back 'home' so to speak, uh but in 2 to 3 days actually people can't tell that I've spent a major part of my life abroad. Uh it helps that I'm not, haven't put on much of an American accent or, or let's put it this way: when I go back to India, even the little I have goes away. I do speak the local language, Hindi, very fluently. I speak a couple of other local languages—Telugu and Bengali just a little bit, enough that when I'm in those areas, uh people can feel at home with me. So, that's my experience.

NW: And, speaking of foreign languages, and so you mentioned Telugu, which I've noticed is mostly spoken in certain regions of India, and not in-

RS: Correct. Right. Telugu is only spoken actually Telugu is the language of the state I grew up in. Andhra Pradesh was the state, and Telugu was the language only there. You just move to a different state and it's a different language. To the south of us we have Tamil, to the southwest of us we have, uh, Kannada, to the very, to the deep south we have Malayalam, to, to the northeast of us we have Oriya, so, Telugu is only spoken, uh, in, well, the people of Andhra Pradesh, for the people of Andhra Pradesh, Telugu is their native tongue, and it, and its script is different from the script of all those other languages, so it's not like as though if you speak Telugu you can understand other things. They're very, they're very different languages. So, I had to learn Telugu as a, what is it, second, third something language, I don't know the definitions, Telugu was one of the languages I had to learn growing up in Hyderabad, and which my parents also insisted we learn, because they felt that we should learn to speak the local language. So I learned to, learn Telugu in school. My written and... written and reading, I could read and write very fluently, the speaking part is going away with disuse over the years. My sister whose been a physician in Andhra Pradesh for a large part of her young adult life is actually 100% fluent in Telugu because she felt she can't treat the local people unless she speaks their language, so she actually went

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and learned it from a tutor and is 100% fluent in Telugu and watches Telugu movies and translates all the jokes for us and everything. But yes, it's a very regional language. India has like 27 or 28 regional languages.

NW: Wow.

RS: Yep.

NW: I would imagine that would make travel throughout India a bit... complicated.

RS: Yes, uh but, two things. One is, because we were ruled by the British for almost 300 years, we, a lot of us speak English, in the middle and upper middle classes, a lot of us speak English and increasingly so with American influence and all the work, outsourcing work that's going on in India, that's one thing. So you could, you could make do with English. The other thing is the national language is Hindi, which happens to be my mother tongue, and you can often make do with that. So very rarely have I been in a situation where I just cannot make myself understood to some person, because, say, they only speak Oriya, and I only speak Hindi and Telugu and English. Uh oft-, most of the time I can make myself understood. Even people who don't know English know some key words in English, so you could make, you could manage.

NW: So, I take it then that the, um, let's see, language barriers here in the U.S. were not a problem as they might be for other Asian immigrants.

RS: Oh yeah, yeah, for most Indians I would say, and since I grew up I went to a school where the first, everything was taught in English, and my parents were very particular about us speaking the QUEEN'S English. Um and when I came to the U.S., language was, not only was it not a problem, I'd actually say my English was better when I came here 31 years ago than it is now, because I went to one of those very proper schools where, you, you, in India where you couldn't say things like 'ya' or 'yup' or 'darn' or... you know, you, you'd get rapped on the knuckles if you spoke like that, so I spoke very proper British English. Not much of a British accent, by a very proper British English when I came over here. And over the years it has atrophied and worn out to the point where I've sort of... I say a lot of 'yup' and 'ya' and [laughs]—things like that. I don't think I used to say much 'hi' before I came to the U.S., I always used to say 'Hello' or 'Good evening' or some other stuck up thing like that, so, yes, language is not a problem at all.

NW: And at home, now, what language do you prefer to speak?

RS: With my children?

NW: Yes.

RS: Unfortunately, English. Uh my, my younger daughter actually knows, has chosen to learn Hindi and knows Hindi, but part of the issue is that my husband is a Bengali. He's from a different part of India. So, he knows two languages—he knows a little bit of Bengali and he knows English. I know uh English and Hindi, so really only our common language is English. And the simple reality is, I think in English, and so does he. I dream in English and so does he. So it's a little bit artificial to speak any other languages. Our older daughter does not know any Indian language. She knows western language, but she doesn't know an Indian language. Our younger daughter knows an Indian language, and when we go to India, she very quickly comes back to speaking a little bit of Hindi with us, but we mostly communicate in English. Sometimes we'll communicate in Spanish because we all know a little bit of Spanish. So.

NW: And, speaking of your husband, you said you got married at 22?

RS: Yes.

NW: And you came to study here in the U.S. at 23.

RS: At 21.

NW: At 21?

RS: Yep.

NW: Sorry. Let's see, where did the two of you meet?

RS: We met on the first day of undergrad college when we were 16 years old at registration time... He started electrical engineering in the same college, same place as I did, yeah.

NW: When you married, were you studying here in the U.S. at the time?

RS: Yes, when we got married, I was doing my master's in computer science at Rice, and my husband was doing his Ph.D. in, um, electrical engineering, sorry, I was doing a Master's in computer science at Stanford, and my husband was doing his PhD in electrical engineering in the same university. So we went home, it was only a year after we came here when we went home and got married there, but we were both studying at the same university here in the U.S.

NW: Something I found interesting is that you've... described, mentioned that you've traveled, you know, extensively throughout the U.S., at least

RS: Yeah.

NW: From what you've told me. And going back to studying on at least two or three occasions?

RS: Yes.

NW: At Stanford.

RS: Yes.

NW: And, let's see, what did your husband do during that time? How did he take that?

RS: Okay, so when I was getting my Master's in computer science, the first degree I got, uh, Vivek, my husband, was doing his PhD in uh electrical engineering. And then when I went back to, um, and when I, um, went back to get my MBA two years later, he was still doing his PhD in electrical engineering. Fortunately, PhDs take much longer than Master's degrees. So my two Master's, my, I started my first Master's at '81, in 1981, finished in '83. And my second Master's started in '85 finished in '87. Vivek did his PhD between the years of '82 and '87. So we graduated in '87, he got his PhD, I got my MBA at that time. So for many of the years that I was studying, he was studying too. Then later, once we had children, and I decided to go back for my PhD, fortunately sense prevailed, and my husband worked for IBM while I went to school. It is, it would have been much harder to raise two kids on, on uh, student salaries in the, in the bay area—two kids. Uh but he was working, and I went back and got a PhD.

NW: Okay. Let's see... and in your questionnaire, you also mentioned being involved in community organizations.

RS: Right.

NW: With children. I noticed you, er, while living in Palo Alto, you were part of the neighborhood association?

RS: Yes. So we were, when we lived in Palo Alto, uh there was a neighborhood association in the area we lived, and the one big project we undertook which I felt very passionately about was, there was a very old run down park very close to our house. We used to be, go there all the time, but it was in horrible shape. All the play structures were very uh rusted and dangerous. So I led a group of people who documented the bad conditions, uh went to town hall, asked for new playground equipment, checked out suppliers, budgeted, drew up the, drew up a budget for what it would cost, and got that whole thing passed and actually, very soon after it got passed, they installed new equipment in that park. So we got to enjoy it for a few years while my kids were still little. So I, I liked doing, that's one of the things I love about the United States. I think that, and I hope this is still true, is that people get involved at the local level and try to make changes in their lives, rather than just complaining about it. I think there's less of that now than there was twenty years ago, unfortunately, uh with the internet and everything. Well, on the other hand, young people are using the Internet to effect change, so I guess just moving with the times. I do, I do hope that my experience with America is not unusual, which is, that people get involved in the local level, in their community organizations, and try to bring about change and form, and, and form relationships with others and do things with others, um, in their local communities. I think that's very special about the United States. When I lived in Stamford, Connecticut, I taught for literacy volunteers. Uh this was adult literacy, so I taught several people both how to read in English and also I had one student who needed to get a GED, so I worked on math and English and social studies with him and sciences. And then there, one person I worked with, she, her literacy was re—she was not illiterate, but she read very little, but she was really hoping to become in, a nurse... um, a nurse's assistant. Not a nurse, I don't think she had the training or the background to actually become a full-fledged nurse, but she wanted to become a nurse's assistant for which she had to pass an exam. And so I helped her with all of that too. And funnily enough, um Marie, the woman I helped with the, with the nurse's training, her three children, teenagers, uh were also having trouble in school. So my own daughters and I, my daughters were teenagers by that time, the three of us got together and tutored her three children through their middle school years. So that's the kind of community stuff I've done. And I feel sorry that life is so busy that right now I'm not involved too much in community things in Houston. I'm involved at Rice. I'm a Rice asso—Wiess associate, and I spend time with Wiess students and time—spend time with students at other colleges, you know, either talking to them, advising, whatever, but I would like to do more program—community things in the near future.

NW: And what's your opinion of the community here in Houston? I suppose community won't be the right word, communities, right?

RS: I... You know, Houston is a very big city and very sprawling so, I've had a hard time putting my arm around, arms around what might be the appropriate community level organization to get involved in. Um, I get the impression that there's a lot going on, and people do a lot, but I'm just not up to date. I, I do things, more things at Rice than I actually do in Houston. I've used Rice as my community.

NW: What are your thoughts on Rice, so far?

RS: We've been here four and a half years. This is our fifth year at Rice, had a really good, a really good experience, find it, um, it's a, it's a lovely small school, so, you know, in four years I've gotten to know a lot of

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people through various walks of, of, at Rice, and it's um, it's really nice to... be included in many of the ongoing things. I think, um, my husband and I both enjoyed being in, uh, being called upon to serve in various ways at Rice. Okay?

[The recorder is turned off. The interview ends. Dr. Sarkar is thanked for her participation]