

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

Interviewee: Sesh Bala

Interviewers: Mijin Han (Sophomore); Connie Wang (Junior)

Date/ Time of Interview: June 25, 2013, at 5:30PM

Transcribed by: Connie Wang; Mijin Han

Audio Track Time: 1:28:23

Background:

Sesh Bala was born in Madurai, Tamil Nadu, India and moved to the United States in 1966 to pursue his master's degree in computer science at University of California, Berkeley. He moved to Houston in 1971 as he got transferred for his job working for Shell Oil Company, then Shell Development Company. He worked at Shell Oil Company for 35 years until he retired in 2002. He has been and still is on numerous boards of nonprofit organizations and is currently very involved with DAYA, a nonprofit organization that supports victims of domestic violence in South Asian communities, and Houston Greeters, also a nonprofit organization which provides free tours of Houston. He is married and has a son who lives in Texas. Most of his close family members live in India.

Setting:

The interview largely centers around the subjects of labor and capital, seeking to create a thorough narrative of Bala's life experiences. A large focus of the interview was given to the various occupational roles, namely his time as a university student and professional, held by Mr. Bala over the course of his life.

The interview transpired in the home of Mr. Bala in Sugar Land, Texas, and took an hour and a half to complete.

Interviewers:

At the time of this interview, Connie Wang is a Rice University undergraduate student majoring in English and art history and minoring in business. She is originally from Lake Forest, California, and was raised by Taiwanese immigrants.

Mijin Han is a rising sophomore at Rice University, and is majoring in English and linguistics. She was born in Ulsan, Korea. She is of Korean descent and is interested in the studies of comparative literature, especially that of comparing Asian and American literature.

Interview Transcript:

Key:

SB	Sesh Bala
MH	Mijin Han
CW	Connie Wang
—	Speech cuts off; abrupt stop
...	Speech trails off; pause
<i>Italics</i>	Emphasis
(?)	Preceding word may not be accurate
[Brackets]	Actions [laughs, sighs, etc.]

MH: This is Mijin Han.

CW: And this is Connie Wang

MH: We are here today on June 25th, uh, 2013, in the house of Sesh Bala to interview Sesh Bala for the Houston Asian American Archive oral history project. So, can you begin by telling us a little bit about yourself?

SB: Ah, yes. Um, by the way I'm very happy to participate in this interview, and my name is Sesh Bala, okay. Um, I'm, uh—I've been in, um—in the U.S. since, uh, 1966, so I've been here a—a while. Um, so long before you were born, okay. [laughs] Um, so, uh, I—I come from, uh, India, uh, specifically South India, okay? Um, from a town—uh, city called Chennai, okay. It wa—it used to be called Madras, okay. Now it's called Chennai. C-H-E-N-N-A-I. C-H-E-N-N-A-I. And, uh—and an earlier name for that is Madras. M-A-D-R-A-S. Uh, it is in, uh, Southern India, on the east coast, and, uh, it's sort of like a—like a Houston of India. Okay. Um, the weather is so similar, or uh—you know, it's hot, hotter, and hotter. We've got cockroaches, mosquitoes. We've got everything. So anyway, it's—it's also the fourth largest city, so it shares a lot of things with—with Houston that way, okay. Um, it's a holy (?) city, very ancient, ancient city, but it's—parts of it have become very, very modern.

Um, so, uh, I went to school. I did my undergraduate degree in India. Uh, actually, I was born in another town called Madurai. M-A-D-U-R-A-I. Uh, which is more interior, still in Southern India. And they're all in the same state called Tamil Nadu. T-A-M-I-L-N-A-D-U. That's the name of the state, uh, in which these towns are located. Chennai and Madurai. And, uh, I was born in Madurai, but eventually my father got transferred from Madurai to Chennai, and so that's how we went to this big town.

And so from everything I remember is all Chennai from my very, very young days. Um, now I did my elementary school, my middle school, my high school, um, and I went to the engineering college there, okay. That's all—that was in Chennai, okay. Um, and uh, I worked there for a year as a teacher. I taught—taught—taught electrical engineering and building that time. Uh, I applied for a graduate school and, uh, in electrical engineering and computer science.

So I went to University of California, Berkeley and did my Master's degree over there, okay. So when I did—'66, '67, um, I was over there. And I actually lived in California for almost five years. Um, I really fell in love with that place. Uh, I, um—I worked for Shell Oil Company. Shell had a big, uh, facility there, an R&D lab. It used to be called Shell Development

Company. And, uh, so I joined them, I worked for them over there.

And then, uh, in 1971 they transferred me to Houston. That is how I ended up in Houston, okay? And, uh—so between the time I was in California and I joined, um, um, Houston, I took a leave of absence and went back to India. And, uh, my wife Prabha and I, we got married then. And so, so that's the year. So—so when I was in California I was a bachelor. When I came to Houston, I was married. So—so I had a little leave of absence, a couple of months in India. So, uh, and, uh—so my wife is here, so you'll meet her.

Uh, so—so we've been here since, uh, 1971. So that's a long time, okay? Um, is this the kind of thing you want to know about me? Okay.

MH: Yes.

SB: Um, okay. Well when I was growing up in, uh, India, uh, in—in—in Chennai, you know, we were—it was my father and mother and my sister. My si—my sister's an older sister, okay? Um, she was in the, uh, education field, okay, and, uh, she eventually became a college professor. Um, and, you know, know she has traveled widely but basically said she settled down in India. She still lives there, and she's, uh—she's, uh, 80 years old and she lives in, uh—in Chennai, and very, very active in the education field still. Okay, she is a—uh, works in the health and administration office, some of the other schools, and so on. But, uh, she was a college professor, and she also ran, uh, some of the colleges and so on, like a—like a principal of a college, okay? Okay.

[0:05:02]

Um, let's see, what else can I tell you? My, uh—my father was a—uh, uh, he worked for the government, actually. He worked for the government in the, um, transportation department. Uh, so he had an engineering background. He was like a chief engineer of the organization then. You know, took care of all the transportation, buses, and—and all that—that st—that kind of stuff, okay. He was chief mechanical engineer of state transport, Madras. That's what it was.

Um, it is a huge organization. That was the primary mode of transportation in—in town, and so they had literally, you know, thousands of buses, and so they had huge departments. So they built their own cultures and bodies and so it was really a big operation.

So—and so—so I kind of grew up in that environment. Um, my father, professional, my mother was a homemaker. Okay. Uh, uh, but we were a—there was a huge emphasis on education. And—as you can imagine. Okay? Um, and so, uh, lot of school stuff, like that—and then, uh, also we were a—we are a very religious, uh, family. Hindu—we are—we are Hindus, okay. And, uh—and my—especially my mother and sister, they are very, very religious, uh, people. Um, and, uh, me to some extent. I'm not—I'm not—I don't consider myself a very religious person, but I understand the Hindu philosophy very well. And—and so on.

Um, uh, so, um—so growing up, I played cricket [laughs] like, uh, most people in India do. And then I played other games like, uh, volleyball and football, which is soccer, okay, not American football or Canadian football but soccer. Um, and, uh, um, I—I wanted to do advanced studies. That's why I came to the U.S.. And I wanted to do graduate work. I actually—my—my goal at that time was I wanted to do a PhD in engineering and, uh, go back to India and teach. That was my idea—idea.

And then, so when I was, um, in India, I started applying for admission and I—I had admission like—like four out of five universities, but I read about UC Berkeley in TIME

Magazine [laughs] in Chennai. In the United States Information Services they had this TIME magazine and it talked about Berkeley being like a number one ranked campus of the time. And it was also very interesting because it was in turmoil at the time. Uh, it is a liberal campus. Um, there was an anti-Vietnam War protests were going on, and—and so on and so forth. And it sounded like a very interesting campus. so I decided to go to Berkeley.

And—and no regrets. Really a wonderful place. Um, and—and there was this, uh—there was this northern side of Berkeley, and then a southern side of Berkeley. The southern side of Berkeley is a liberal arts area. The northern is the engineering side, okay. And if you are in the engineering side, you won't even know what's going on on the other side. There could be a riot going on there, and not—but here, going to classes, you know? Just nothing. So just—[laughs] But, anyway, um, it was very good. I really enjoyed it. I enjoyed going there.

Well, uh, my—my plans kind of changed. Um, um, like, I decided to stop with my master's degree, and—and I just wanted to take up a job. And I said, 'I'm gonna work for a couple of years and gain some experience before I go back to school,' which I never did, okay. You know, I did—I did go to school to take courses here and there, but I didn't enroll in any major programs since then. But, um, so I just—I joined Shell and I just stayed—stayed with Shell until I retired 35 years later, okay.

And so most of the time, lived in, uh—since '71, lived in, uh, Houston. Except for one year, when my, uh, company sent—sent me off to—to the Netherlands. I lived in Holland for a year, okay? So, um But that stuff, it's all here. But, uh, my company asked me to travel a lot. So I used to travel, uh, for work.

But, uh, so that's kind of my, uh, professional background. Well—well, it was about seventeen of those years I was in a technical project management, that kind of stuff, project leader. But then other seventeen, you know, half—about half the time I was in management. Okay, and so I—I was a technology manager. Um, so at, uh—at one—I think at that, uh, high point maybe I had like 200 people in my organization. Okay. And so I was reporting to a vice-president. And so—so I had a pretty senior level job. Um, and that—that kind of thing happened, um, I mean many years ago and at that time there were not people of, uh, Asian origin who moved into management positions, okay. Especially in an oil company in Houston, okay. [laughs]

[0:10:13]

So there were some—there are some stereotypes, and there is—there's—glass ceilings and all these kinds of things. Uh, but I had a couple of mentors who, uh, thought, you know that, I—they should—wished to give me an opportunity, and—and, uh, so it worked out very well. I—I enjoyed, you know, doing that. Um, I learned a lot about, um, organizations and people and cultures, and things like that.

Um, in fact, there were not that many people of, uh, Asian origin at all in—in Shell when I joined. Okay? And—and then gradually, with immigration from India and China, and, you know. So they were gradually—now it's a—it's a very different company. The company I joined is very different from the company I left when I retired. So, you know, they're very diverse. Um, and they were hiring worldwide, you know. Um, so—so it really became a very, very different, uh, kind of company. Uh, so there's another change that I saw taking place in organizations.

Of course, Silicon Valley changed the whole thing. I'm sure you know that. Uh, you know there're a lot of Asian people there, and California is different. And, then, gradually some of these kinda changes were taking place in other kinds of, um, companies. Um, over a period of

time, so. So maybe you can ask me some questions. Am I just—uh, and so, am I just talking? If you ask me, or direct me, uh, then I can probably the kind of things you're probably looking for.

MH: Yes, actually, um, you just mentioned a lot of very interesting, uh, facts about your life.

SB: Okay.

MH: And, we—I thought the part when you mentioned glass ceilings and not many Asian people working in the industry part was very interesting. Can you elaborate a little bit more about that part? Were there any, um—except for like the stereotypes, were there any discriminations?

SB: Um, I—I—I have had some very, very minor, um, incidents of, uh, some—something being, uh, like a discrimination, okay. Um, but, uh, most of the time, it would be anything, it would be subtle, okay? It w—it w—you won't know. You won't, uh—you won't know. 'Why didn't I get that opportunity?' And you start thinking maybe because, uh, of—of my race. Okay. Um, but I—I could never prove it or anything like that.

My—I had two experiences when I first joined Shell in California. Um, one of them was, um ... the—the lab where I joined was huge, 1300 people working there, okay. It was, uh—it was one of the biggest industrial research labs in the country. And, uh, it had a lot of people from Stanford and Berkeley, and all that because that's where they situated it.

Um, and, uh, it's like, uh, three or four days after I joined, I, um—I—I was in the cafeteria. And, um—and I pick up my tray and I got my food, then just walking. There was this like—I passed this table, about seven or eight of them were standing. I was headed to a table where my—people I knew were sitting, okay? So as I was passing, there was this woman who made a remark, 'Hey, look at this thing! There are all kinds of people working here!' [laughs] You know? And—and—and she said, 'Look at this one.' You know, uh, it like, um—you know, like you would say, uh—not even a human being, right? You know? It was kind of strange, right? I ignored that and I went away. But at that—at that time, I—I think, um—I think I was the second—uh, third person of Indian origin being hired there, in that—at that time, okay. 1967. So it was—it's very new. They had people—they had to get used to these things and, um, so, anyway that was one incident.

Another incident was, uh, I had a, uh, colleague. We were like peers, and we joined about the same time. He's an—He's an—white American guy. Um, uh, we kind of became good friends. Um, and, uh, I used to work hard, you know? I used to put in an enormous amount of hours, and I, you know, produced a lot of results. And, um—and I was feeling good about all that. And my—my friend was not—you know, he—he didn't put in that much effort and energy. But, um, at the end of one year, when we got a—a pay raise, we both got the same pay raise. And I said, 'Hmm. I don't understand the system.' [laughs] Okay.

But, gradually, you know, I think things changed. And—and so those were a couple of minor incidents. [phone rings] I—I was not worried about either of these, but those kinds of things were happening. And I think, uh, the—the companies were also learning about peoples of other culture, and gradually beginning to appreciate, and, you know? And they—they liked me and all that. So it was—it's, uh, worked out okay. That's why I—I stayed on.

But, um, uh—but much later on, I would say, uh, in—in my case it kind of worked out the opposite. They gave me lots of opportunities, and there was, uh—there were diversity initiatives coming into place, and so on. And so they gave me an opportunity and said, 'Why

don't you become a team leader?' Then I became a supervisor, and eventually became a manager, and then I became a senior manager. Over a period of time, all those things happened. Um, and in fact, I helped, uh, with some of the diversity initiatives in the—in the company. And, um, you know, helped, uh, you know ways I know they can be promoted, and—and things like that. So they got—got me involved in some of those kinds of, uh, initiatives. So that worked out very well. Yeah.

[0:15:47]

MH: Um, so you just mentioned that you actually could later on help the company work with those new diversity, um, initiatives and new programs. Can—so did you end up helping other people of Asian origin, um, who were coming into the company or working there?

SB: Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely. In fact, I helped hire a few people, uh, okay. Um, and, uh, um, another thing I did is, um, among my old friends, if somebody said they're looking for a job, um, and they had the right kind of qualifications, then I would recommend those names to a manager or supervisor and they would interview. Some—some got jobs; some didn't. There are—there are a few, uh, you know, I helped hire, you know, and—and from—from all Asian groups, okay, not just Indian people. And so that—that worked out well. So yeah.

In fact, there is a—there is, um, a network called, um, Shell Asia Pacific Employees Network Group. SAPENG, okay. Um, I was one of the founder members of that. And I had, uh—I had friends from Vietnam, from Taiwan, from China, from Malaysia, uh, you know. So uh—[phone buzzes] So I—and I—in fact, I got to know many of them through that—through SAPENG. And it was just across the, uh, company. So it was not like one division, one part of the company. So I got to know people from many parts of the company because of this, uh, network organization. Yeah.

MH: That's interesting. And you also mentioned that you lived in the Netherlands for a year?

SB: Yes.

MH: Because of your job? Can you tell us a little about that experience?

SB: Yeah. Uh, sure. Uh, Shell had a—a program called an Exchange Scientists Program. And so they would, uh, ask a couple of Dutch people to come and work in the U.S., and at the same time they'll have two from the U.S. go work in the Netherlands, okay. Uh, they actually had four. Two people going to, uh, upstream, and two downstream. What that means in, uh, oil industry terms, uh—terms is upstream means, um, oil exploration, production. That is, you discover oil and you take it out of the ground. Okay? Downstream means refining. That's where you make it, turn it into gasoline. Okay? And—and so Shell had separate laboratories, an upstream lab and a downstream lab. And each were huge, hundreds of people working.

So there are—they send two people to upstream and two people to downstream labs. And so I went to the lab in Amsterdam. So, uh, it was very good. Um, that—that experience was kind of, um, uh, very unique and different, also, from the living in the U.S. Okay? Um, we actually lived in a, uh—a small village called Abcoude, which is just south of, um—south of Amsterdam. A-B-C-O-U-D-E. Abcoude. Um, and, uh, we actually exchanged houses with a—with a—with a Dutch family. So they lived in our house in Houston and we lived in their house, which

happened to be in Abcoude. And, uh, so it was a small village, like a—like a kind of a—you know, they had canals, and bridges, and all that, just like in a postcard—picture postcard, you know? Like a—cattle, you know, absolutely breathtaking, um, uh, place. And, uh—and it so happens our—our son was born there, when we were there, okay? And so that was also a unique experience for us.

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But the thing is, um, they, um—the—the—the Dutch—the—the Dutch people treated us so well. We—we had a great time. We got to know our neighbors. Um, and, um—and so we had a—uh, you know we used to socialize with them. And they'll come over and we'll go to their homes. And so we had a—we had a good time. And me and my wife got to know lot of the people there in town. And, um, so if she went to the grocery—local grocery store, they—they wouldn't let her carry anything. They—'No, no, no. We'll—we'll bring it over to the house, and'

So we—we had a very, very good, uh, time. And when our son was born, that was huge news. It was in the local village paper. [laughs] So it was—we had a—we had a good time. And, uh, working with the Dutch people, that was another experience in itself. It's really, uh—their—their working style and culture are all different from Americans. Uh, in an—in a—in an American system they like to make very quick decisions. Um, and the, um—the—the Dutch style is to analyze quite a bit before they make decisions. So, that was—I said, that is one huge difference.

Um, uh—and—and—but—but I learned quite a bit there. Really, you know, very, very bright people. Um, they're multilingual, you know. Uh, you know, most of educated Dutch people can speak three languages very comfortably, and they'll know at least one other language decently well. Okay? When I say 'comfortably' I mean enough to read technical books. So, many of them would know—of course besides, uh, Dutch, they would know English and probably German. They can read German textbooks, no problem. Just like that. You know, and they can—they can even speak German. You know? And they will know enough—enough French to get by in—in France, or enough Spanish to get by in Spain, you know, that sort of thing.

And—and—and because they're—they're a small country, you know? And, uh, they realize that, uh, they have to know many languages, and that's the way they can attract, uh, um, multinational companies to come and set up shop over there. And they—even though it's a small country, it's very prosperous, and they attract a lot of foreign capital. Many companies had, you know, head—headquarters, and so on, so. So that is one—that one year, we lived in Holland, that is kind of—we have very, very fond memories of that.

MH: And you also mentioned that your son was, um, born in—

SB: [overlapping] Yes, yes.

MH: Holland. Can you tell us a little—like when was the year, exactly?

SB: Uh, he was born 1976. Okay. So he's—he's—he's also—he's not (?) 36 year old now. [laughs] So he's married, and he—he lives about 15 miles from here. So, uh ... he went to Rice, by the way. He did his undergrad at Rice, yes. [laughs] Uh, in, um, material science, now part of

mechanical engineering. And then he, uh, went to Stanford for his master's degree. And then, uh, he worked for this Intel corporation in Arizona for five years. And then did his MBA at Northwestern, uh, Kellogg School. And then he is back here. He's working in a small company here. He's into manufacturing technology. So like, that sort of thing.

So—so—so, uh, we have—we have a lot of, uh, um, friends, who lived here, who all went to Rice. Uh, my nephew went to Rice. And, uh, my wife's cousin went to Rice—two cousins, they all went to Rice. And so—so we have a lot of, um, emotional connection to Rice. You know, we—we have a very fond—fond—we're very fond of Rice University.

MH: And you also mentioned that, um, before you started working, in Houston, you went back to India to marry your wife. Can you tell us the exact year. Was it '71?

SB: '71, yeah. Yeah. First of March, 1971 is when Prabha and I got married. So, um ... so what, we've been married, um, 42, and there are some pluses (?), years. [laughs] Yeah.

MH: So, um, how did you get to know her?

SB: Um, uh, her parents, um, knew my sister, uh, and her husband, and—and his parents. So my sister's in-laws and my wife's parents, they knew each other. And so, uh, when I went to India, they, uh—they helped, you know, connect—connect us and introduced us, I guess. And, uh, so, uh—so we didn't really have a long courtship or anything, just, uh, um, in fairly short order we decided to get married. So. [laughs] So that's our elaborate—yeah. Uh, so the introduction was through—through the parents. That's like her parents, in my case, my sister's family, yeah.

MH: And was it the first time for your wife to come to the United States, when you moved here?

[0:24:59]

SB: Yeah, she has, um—she was—you don't know. That was her first time to the U.S., okay. Uh, but she had a—her parents used to live in, uh, Bangkok. So her dad worked for the United Nations, so she has gone and visited them, uh, for vacation, summer vacation, and all that. But otherwise, she also studied in Chennai. Um, and she has traveled to Japan and few places but not the United States. So her trip to the U.S. was very first one after getting married. Okay, yeah.

MH: And you also mentioned that you moved to the United States, um, to get your master's degree at UC Berkeley. And was that also your first time to come here?

SB: Yes. Yes. Yes. In fact, uh, when I left, uh, India, uh, to go to California, uh, that was my first time even to get on an airplane. I'd never been on an airplane before that. So I was 22 years old. So, um—so that was my—that was my first, um, trip. So my trip was from, um—I went straight to the West Coast, right? So—so I went from Chennai to—at the time it was not called Chennai. It was called—still called Madras. So from Madras I went to Singapore. I spent, uh, one day there, and then from Singapore went to Bangkok, spent one day there. And then from there went to Tokyo, spent one—one day, uh, quickly did some sightseeing, you know, what I could do. You know? Um, and then from there went to San Francisco. So—so—so, um, um—so that was my first trip outside of India, actually. Yeah.

MH: And how was the transition from, um, Madras to California?

SB: California? Um, I really didn't have a whole lot of time to, uh, think about that because, uh, school started soon after. And so, we were focused on just getting our place, and, you know—and I—had—I found, and I met a couple of guys there and we rented an apartment. And so we had to kind of quickly get adjusted, and then of course, school because, you know, that's what, uh, we're there for. So I had just, like, um, a few days.

Um, so, but during the time, you know, there were other—other students from India who had already been there. They helped us a lot. Okay. They told us, 'This is where you go to buy grocery, and this is where you go to do this,' and And, uh, so, we had a quick, uh, orientation [laughs] to—to the United States. Um, and, uh, um—so—and—and then we had a—for our department orientation in the department. And that—so they—so they gave us a little, you know, tour.

So, um—so, in other words, un, I really didn't have a whole lot of time to adjust. But then, just as a natural course of, um, you know going to class, and just going about day-to-day work and cooking and eating and—and all that, I kind of—I got acclimatized to that. To the—to the California way of life. Um, and it was good. It was challenging. Um, yeah, you know, you couldn't get the kind of thing, that, you know—you couldn't get Indian food. So you had to make some things on your own. Um, and I was, uh—I wasn't—didn't used to eat a whole lot of meat and chicken and all that. Now I do. But at that time—so I had to find lot more vegetarian food, and my—my—both my roommates were vegetarian, so we—we learned how to make vegetable curries. And—and, uh, we couldn't get the Indian roti and chapati and all that.

There were—there were *no* Indian restaurants in Berkeley in 1966 or 1967. Now you go there, every few feet you run into—see an Indian—it is—the whole thing has changed. Very—there was a—there was a Indian restaurant in San Francisco. But—you know, but you had to get there, right? And—and then, it was also pricey, and, you know, so when you're a student, you got to be careful.

Um, so one of the ways I, uh, made money there is, uh, they had a thing called a readership. That is where you, uh, grade undergrad papers, and correct, you know, homework, and all that. So I got—they paid me a little bit for that. And so—so, uh—and, uh, my big thing was I—I switched from like a hardcore electrical engineering into computer science. Okay, during the time. That was my major change for me. I really loved it. Okay. And so that's what gave me my job in Shell. You know, they were looking for people with computer science background, to, uh, help with the oil industry, uh, research and application. So it was kind of focused toward the oil industry, and so that's how I—I got in. So—so that was very nice.

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So—but, um, um, we had, um—in Berkeley there was an international house, okay. Um, and, uh, you know they, uh—every Friday, they would have folk dancing, and all that, so we'll go there. And so that's where we met, uh, people from different countries, um. So it—it was very interesting because, um, I had, um—I had several Chinese friends. Um, and I had, uh, a couple of Turkey—uh, friends from Turkey. You know, I never met anybody from Turkey before. And, um—and I met, uh, somebody from Portugal. You know, these are all—these are all part of that, you know, wonderful experience of, uh, studying in a large university and meeting international, uh, students. Of course there were a lot of Indian students as well, so you got—got to know several of them.

Um, and, uh, they also have this, um, system of a thing called 'host family.' So, uh, a local American family will—you know, will look at the list and say, 'Okay, uh, you know, we'd like to get to know this student.' And so he's from India. And so—so there was a local, uh, family, uh, a doctor and his wife, and they had a, uh—a son and, uh, and a, uh, uh, daughter. So, every two or three months, they'll come and pick me up. I'll go have dinner there. So I—I got an exposure to their—their family. So I had, uh, Thanksgiving dinner with them. Um, um, I—I kind of lost contact with them. They moved away from the area and so—so I just lost contact. I don't know what happened to their family and all that.

So, uh, so that—uh, that was my exposure to, um—to an American family. Uh, and then there were neighbors, you know, just to chat with them, little bit. So there's, um—and then of course there were the professors. You know, they're also a big source of knowledge and culture. So, uh, I think, um, uh, adjusting to life in California is not that hard. Uh, it was not like our—no major hardships, or anything like that. All the minor things, and you can overcome those. Yeah. Yeah.

MH: And you also mentioned that you had to change your major from electrical engineering to computer science. Was there a specific reason why you changed it?

SB: Well, it's all part of the same department. It was called the Department of Electrical Engineering and Computer Science and you can—you can do whatever you want there. There's such freedom. And so, uh, the very first, uh, quarter I took, uh, a course in computer science and that was very nice. I really enjoyed it. And then so—so the second and third (?) I took a lot more computer science, uh, courses. So, I—I did not realize that was going to be my career path, but that's what happened. So, really a little bit of, uh, serendipity, okay.

MH: And you also mentioned that you went to, um, college in Chennai first and then went to UC Berkeley. Was there a difference in the college culture?

SB: Absolutely. Absolutely. A huge difference. Um, um, in fact, I found that—uh, some of the courses I found it very hard. Um, the—the—the huge difference in standard. And, uh, I struggled with a few courses. I—I had, uh, um—I—I did okay, you know? But, um, um, um, I—I did realize that, um, my undergraduate education didn't prepare me very well. Okay? Um, and I think our—our, um, uh—our, uh—our learning system, methodology and all that, were very different. Um, there is a—there was a huge emphasis on getting your grades in—in—where I was studying my undergrad. Um, it was not so much on, uh, learning, okay. Um, it's my fault. It's not—it's not—you know, it's not the system's fault. [laughs] Okay?

Um, but I—but I think, um, that—I think there was a gap. But, uh—but I could adjust after a while. Um, and I was not the only one. Um, I knew that some of my other—other friends were finding it difficult as well. And, uh, they're not necessarily the ones from India, either. They're from other countries. They are—there—there is a—a definite difference in—in the standard, uh, of education from many countries to, uh, universities like Stanford and Berkeley, and I'm sure—I'm sure there are many other. Rice, um. Yeah, okay. Um, but there was—there was—uh, I had—I struggled with it, but I—I overcame it. In fact, if I—if I—if I had to say that there was any major issue that I had, it was that, okay. I mean, I—I had to put in *so* much time, and—but it was okay. I welcomed that. But it was a—when it was done, man I felt good! [laughs] Yeah.

[0:35:01]

MH: And you also said that you first—first when you came to America you wanted to get a PhD and go back to India to teach.

SB: Yeah. Right.

MH: But you said you changed your mind after you started working for Shell. Was there a reason why you changed your mind?

SB: Um, yeah. Um, the time when I gr—did my master's, um, there were—finding job—finding a job was all very, very easy. Um, um, I took several job interviews. Um, and then my plan was like I'm gonna work for like couple of years, and then go back to work. And after I worked for a couple of years, two things happened. One is that I liked my job very much, okay? And money was good, okay. Um, the other things is there was a—there was a dip. There was a minor, small recession. And, uh, lot of PhDs were not finding jobs.

So I said, 'Well, you know, why am I going to leave this thing and go and study and I may not get a job?' Okay? And, uh, um, you know, that was also about the time I was changing from a student visa to a green card. Okay. And so, it was about the time—if I had left, I would have left about two years later, but I didn't because of all those reasons. Uh, and then this transfer took place, and then this wedding took place, and all those things. And, you know, so I said, 'Okay.' Um, I made some attempts later on to go back to school, but that didn't work out too well. So I just—just—just hung in there. Yeah.

CW: It sounds like you enjoyed your time, also, in California and the Netherlands.

SB: Yes.

CW: What made you stay in Houston?

SB: Ooh, well, it's a job. It's a job. And, uh, that was the primary reason why. But then after we came here, uh, we kind of liked this place. We liked Houston. And, you know, we made new friends here. Um, and, uh, um—and I think it was mostly the—the friends and, you know, those kinds of things that, um, um There were other people coming in from other places and we realized this is a—you know, Houston is also a—a booming, um, oil industry place. And, so we kind of, 'Okay, this is it.' So we made Houston our home. You know, yeah.

Um—oh by the way we still go—we, uh—I retired ele—11 years ago. But, uh, we—we go to India every year. Um, and—and spend some time—my wife spends a little longer than me in India. But, we go to India. So it's kind of—it's kind of like, um, you know, like 10 months here two months there kind of thing. So that's kind of what we're doing right now.

MH: You mentioned that Chennai is a lot like Houston. Um, can you tell us, like, except for the weather, but like how it's similar or how it's different?

SB: Um, well, uh, you know it's, uh—it's more things like it's—it's a southern city. Okay. And, um, um, I would say, warm and friendly. Um, fourth largest city. You know, those kinds of things. Uh, but there was an attempt here to make, um, Chennai, uh, a sister city for Houston.

Um, but that didn't work out for, uh, some variety of reasons. But, uh, San Antonio became a sister city for Chennai. And I think that the mayor there was a little bit more aggressive or whatever. So uh, um—but—so it is that kind of—those kinds of stuff. Um, um, you know, being—being, um, uh, very close to the coast, and, like I said, southern, um, fourth largest, you know, warm people, flat surface, uh, you know. So—so there are a lot of those kinds of things. Yeah.

MH: And you also said you grew up in Chennai, even though you were born in, uh—

SB: Madurai.

MH: Yeah, Madurai. Can you tell us what your neighborhood was like when you were growing up?

SB: Um. Yeah. We, uh—well, uh, uh—you know, I—I—I think I described what my father did and my mother and all. So we were—I would say we were like, um—like, um, a—a middle class, uh, kind of folks. Um, um, uh, may have been upper middle class. I don't know, okay. Um, we lived in a—it's, uh—it's urban, uh, area, and we—we lived in a rented house. Um, and, uh, um, it was kind of walking distance to the school. We could either walk or ride the bike. Um, and our homes on either side, they were kind of nice big houses, some, you know, much richer people were living there.

Um, and, uh, our house is also very close to, uh, the, uh—the school's, uh, sports areas and a playground. So—so we would—uh, at the end of the day, we just go—go—and go play there. And so, um, you know, that's where we played, uh, cricket, and, uh, soccer, and—and—and—and all those things.

[0:40:08]

Um, it was also not too far from, uh, a temp—a couple of temple—Hindu temples, okay. Uh, and we had a—we had a—um, we—we knew our neighbors quite well. And okay, neighbors across the street, and they—they had boys who would come and play with us, and ... um.

But, you know, the boy-girl relationship, you don't—you don't—you know, it's very different. Okay, there's—it was—it was not a co-educational school, it was an all-boy school. And there was another separate girls' school. And—and so I didn't really know a whole lot of girls, um, growing up.

Um, and—and this is even through the college days, okay. Our—our college, the engineering college at the time, um, there were, uh—it was, um—it was a five year program, okay? Um, and, uh, there were altogether, I would say, uh, 12 or 13000 students, all doing engineering. There were only like three or four girls. That's it. Uh, who were there. And—and, I—I went back to visit. Now, it's more than 50% are girls. And, at the time, when I was there, there was not a single, uh, woman faculty member. Not one. Okay? The—the only girls that were there were working in some administration. I think filing and that kind of stuff. But there were no—not a single woman faculty. Now, there are department chairmen who are women. And so I went back and visited then—then a couple of times. So that has changed a lot.

Um, so, you know, growing up there were, uh—it was, uh, family. Uh, my cousins—uh, those are mostly the kind of people that I knew. My uncles and aunts, um, and, uh, my—my parents' friends, uh, you know, and, you know, their children, maybe, and that was the kind of

extent. I didn't really have a—a, you know, social interaction with, uh—with—with—with girls. That's, uh—that's, uh—that just—it just didn't happen. Just the way that society was. [laughs]

MH: And can you tell us the name of the college?

SB: Uh, they—the—they're called the College of Engineering. Uh, it's part—at that time, it was part of the University of Madras system. Uh, it's a huge university. Um, and, uh, so they had, you know, liberal arts. They had medicine, medical college, and they had this engineering college. Um, since then, what they have done is they've taken all the technical institutions and founded a separate university.

Um, and this one was called College of Engineering and—and the location, um, a lot of people in India, uh, know that location, that—that little town where the college was is, uh, Guindy. G-U-I-N-D-Y. And the reason why they know that, it is because it is—it is—it is the oldest engineering college in India. Okay? And at that time it had a good reputation. Very (?), very competitive. And so, uh—and then the British, uh, started that as a—as a school of survey. Um, and the reason they started that is—it is to train Indian people. They can perform survey work. Okay, and then they gradually turned it into, uh, a degree-granting school. And—and then it was only civil engineering, and then gradually, they added other things, and so on. So yeah.

So there are two old, very old, uh, universities in India. One of them is this one. Uh, oldest engineering college. One is this one. There's another—another—another one is in Northern India, called Roorkee. Those are the two very old engineering colleges. Um, uh, and I taught one year in the same—Guindy. Okay? I—I taught like lecture, electrical engineering.

MH: You mentioned that there weren't that many girls in your college.

SB: Yes.

MH: Was it the same in other colleges, like the liberal arts one?

SB: No, liberal arts, there were lots of girls. This was only the technical stuff. Even in medical college, there were lots of girls. It was just engineering! It was just not attracting, uh—but that has changed! That has changed drastically! I—I would say there are more girls, uh—I—I gave a talk when I went back. Um, and it was like a—an auditorium kind of seating. But they were still sitting separately. [all laugh] So this side was all girls and this side was all—I—I—I don't know. Maybe they—maybe they mingled later on, but I don't know. But in class—[laughing] in class that's how they were sitting. Yeah.

MH: And you mentioned that education was a, uh, very important thing in your family

SB: [overlapping] Yes.

MH: And your sister also, uh, went on to teach.

SB: Yeah.

MH: Can you tell us what was, like, the education like in your family?

[0:45:03]

SB: Her's—yeah, um, she—she—she eventually did a PhD in education actually. Um, and she, um, and—and she spent a year in London, um, and—but—but mostly she got her PhD from India. Uh, and so—so she's—from day one she was like an educationist. And s—and—and so, she taught, um, department of education and—and she's a lecturer and became professor and that kind of stuff. And she—so she's very smart and she helped me a lot with my homework and things like that. She's much older than me. She's 12 years older than me.

So it was just three people in my house my—my parents, my sister, and me. And I was the youngest, of course and, uh, the age gap was huge. Uh, so—so I—I used to say maybe I was an afterthought, you know. [laughs] But anyway, it was good. It was good. They—they take good care of me. And, yeah. So sometimes I used to joke and say there's, uh—there are three managers and one—one employee, you know. [laughs] You know, in our house. Just for joke, yeah. So that was good. Um, my sister has visited us here, um, from India. She and—she and her husband, um, they've been to U.S. many times. Uh—as—as, but mostly as tourist or visitors and—and then go back, yeah.

MH: Are you one of—uh, are you the only person who moved to the United States in your family?

SB: Um, in my very immediate family, uh, well—well, my—my sister's son moved to—in fact, he did a PhD at Rice, chemical engineering, and he works for Exxon, and he lives in, uh—in Clear Lake. Okay, so he moved here. Um, and then our, uh—at a cousin kind of level there are a few people who moved in. Uh, my wife has got a lot more people from her family like cousins and they moved to the U.S.. More than in my case. But many of them have come as tourists and gone back, and yeah. Um, there are, uh, like—like, uh, um, my—my—well, my father's younger brother's grandson lives in New Jersey. So really not a—not a huge number, I can just count them. You know, yeah.

MH: So with those of them who are staying in the United States, do you guys have any reunions?

SB: Uh, yeah. If there is, uh—we don't plan it like a reunion, but if there's like a wedding something, you know. Our son got married two years ago, so they all came. So that's, uh—or we happen to visit there, we go meet them. Uh, so, uh—so that—that happens. Yeah, we are—we're in touch. We're in—I'm in—I'm in touch with many of them, yeah.

MH: And you also mentioned that you visit India every year.

SB: Yes.

MH: So, is—is there anything like you, [paused due to an interruption] like an Indian tradition you keep in the family even now?

SB: Well, I—I just went to meet my sister, brother in-law, be with them. Um, my—my um—my wife's there. She's in her 90s. That's why we visit them. Uh, I still have lots of friends, uh, my—from my college day friends. I mai—maintain touch, uh, with them. And so, when I—when I go there, I visit them. You know, um, we go have—go to parties, and, you know, go to—go to

music concerts and, uh—and that kind of stuff.

But we'll do some sightseeing locally. There's a lot to see in India. Okay? So, uh—and so we try to make a trip or two every year trying time to go there yeah. And so we have a house. My wife has got a house, so—so we stay there, you know. So, that's, uh But it's a—it's just an interest to keep in touch you know. Um, and mostly it's family. Family's the main reason, uh, to go visit there.

MH: Um, but do you guys still have any like, Indian, um, celebrations or things that you do here?

SB: Uh, yeah, things like Diwali and all that, so we celebrate. And—and I—we're—I'm—we're associated with this temple in Pearland. There's a Hindu temple in Pearland called Meenakshi Temple, M-E-E-N-A-K-S-H-I, Meenakshi. Uh, that's a—that is a name of a goddess, okay, Meenackshi. It's, uh, Shiva's consort okay. And so there is a temple. Um, if you've not been there, sometime you might want to take a trip, um, and have a tour. It's very—very easily done, okay? Um, and that'll give you an orientation to, uh, what the Hindu religion is all about and—and what we do and, um, we've given a tour to, uh, Dr. Tani Barlow, uh, at the—the temple one time. And Anne Chao has been there many times, but so. [Door knock] What was that? Let me ...

[0:50:03]

MH: So we were just talking about, um, the temple and how you gave a tour to Dr. Tani Barlow and everyone. And I was just wondering, um, do you speak any other languages else than English in your family?

SB: Oh, the—the—the language that, um, native to me is a language called Tamil, T-A-M-I-L. Okay, that's, uh—that is a language spoken in Tamil Nadu. In fact that's why that name '*nadu*' means land, Tamil people, land of the Tamil people. And, uh, in fact the state was also called Madras at one time. And when the British were there, you know—uh, as you know India was a British colony for, oh, 200 years. So—so there were a lot of like, Calcutta, uh, Bombay, um, you know, they all changed. They changed name. Bombay became Mumbai. Um, you know, Madras they—it was changed to Tamil Nadu back to an Indian—Indianized name. Um, so the language we speak at home is, uh, Tamil, T-A-M-I-L. It's a very, very ancient language. Um, it's got its own script and literature and grammar and everything. It's a very ... poetry, very, very rich language, okay. Uh, so I speak only Tamil and English. But my wife speaks, uh, also Hindi, H-I-N-D-I.

Hindi is the national language of India. And it's, uh, spoken lot more in northern India than in southern India, but, um, um, more speak—more people speak Hindi in, uh—in India than any other language. So that—that kind of became the national language. That is the official language. So there are two official languages in India. One is Hindi; other one is English, okay? Uh, in southern India, especially like our state Tamil Nadu, uh, you know, you nee-you need—you know, you have to speak in either Tamil or in English. Okay? [laughs] There—there are now speak—more and more people are learning Hindi and so on.

So, um, there, uh—there—in—in India there are around, um, like 20 different languages and—and—and many hundred dialects, okay. Um, but some of these languages are, uh, very different from each other. Um, in southern India there are four states, and one is this Tamil Nadu.

There's one called Kerala. One called, uh, Karnataka, and other one called Andhra Pradesh. Those are the four main southern states of India. They—the—the main language of each state, they're all different from each other. So I cannot understand the language spoken in our neighboring state. I can pick out a few words and—but—but not speak comfortably at all. So, um—so those are all very, very different—uh, different language.

Um, and it's the same, uh, situation in northern India. There are many different languages Gujarati. There is Punjabi. There is, uh, Bihari. Uh, you know, various Oriya. There different—and—and—and Bengali. Bengali is the language spoken in Calcutta, okay, so that's very different, very different from any of these. Many of them have their own, you know, script, poetry, language, [indistinguishable]. They hold their own literary conferences and, you know, things like that. [laughs] Yeah.

Um, oh I think that's, uh, kind of a part of, um, the—the richness, okay, of India. And—and there are—there are people, uh, in the U.S. and people in, uh, Europe and people in Australia, people in New Zealand from all these parts of, uh, India. So, that's one of the, um, kind of unfortunate things that happens that is when they bring—they bring their own regional groups into the U.S., okay.

So—so in Houston, um, there are organizations that are Tamil Nadu focused. Okay? Uh, linguistic basis. There are organizations that are from our neighboring state Andhra Pradesh, and they—and they speak their language called Telugu. So there are Telugu associations here. So for every linguistic group, there is an organization here. So we kind of brought some of those kinds of things over here to the—to the United States, okay?

And that's a—so that's a—it's good and it's bad. It's good that in a sense you—you help that—that culture grow and you retain the culture, and, uh, you kind of, uh, impart that knowledge to your children. Um, but at the same time you're still separated, um, so there is little bit of that.

[0:54:55]

Um, the—on—on the other hand, when—when—when I first came to the Houston, 1971, uh, there were probably about 500 people to 1,000 people of Indian origin. So it was a small number, okay? And—and most of them were students at—at U of H or—or Rice, um, um. And then they gradually, um, you know, the—the—the immigration from India was opened up in 1965, and I think that's true of many other Asian countries as well. The big influx of Asians into United States happened after 1965.

Um, and so a lot of people came into Houston looking for jobs and the Indian population in the Houston area right now is over 100,000 okay. So it really grew from like, uh, 500 to I think it's more like a 110 nowadays maybe even 120,000, uh, in a—in a span of, uh, 40 years. 40 to 45 years it's grown that much.

Um, and, uh, because there are so many people and they're so diverse in—in their, um, uh, language, um, and their needs, um, and their religious, uh, practices are different, okay. Even though they're all same—fundamentally the same Hindu religion, their worship practices may be different, language that's used may be different. So they all built their separate temples here. So there are like 20 temples in this area, in the Houston area, Hindu temples. So, uh, um—so we have to have those separate—separate groups. So—so that their temple here, um, that I mentioned in Pearland, that is essentially a—a South Indian, uh, temple, and it's got its unique architecture. Uh, and it caters principally—it's open to everybody, but it's—it caters principally to the needs of, uh, South Indians. So that's, uh, something. Did I answer your question or did I

get—veer off?

MH: [overlapping] Oh, no, you did. Yes.

SB: Did? I—I may have veered off a little bit on—onto something else okay. So, you're asking about festivals I think. Okay. Um, yes, um, the temple celebrates many of these festivals. So we go participate in some of those, and some festivals we do at home as well, okay. Um, in, uh—I don't know whether you know it or not—in, uh—in many homes of most Hindus there is a prayer room. It's called a puja room. Okay. So—so there you will see, um, uh, images of gods kept there, and—and it's also a meditation room, okay. So, they say you don't really have to go to a temple. So, there is a little temple in every home, so you do a little, um, prayer there and—or you go to a temple to do praying. And so—so we—we do celebrate, um, many of the Indian festivals. Uh, um, there are ver—too many. So you really have to know—pick a few that you like and follow that.

MH: Can you name a few of those festivals that you—[overlapping] follow?

SB: One is called Diwali. Uh, well, we—we call it Deepavali, D-E-E, two 'e's, uh, P-A-V-A-L-I, Deepavali. It is also, um, called (?) in northern India as Diwali, D-I-W-A-L-I, okay Diwali okay. Um, and then we also have, uh, this thing called Tamil New Year's. it's not, uh—it's, uh—it follows a different calendar. It's—it follows the, uh, lunar—lunar calendar. So our new year's, uh, for the Tamil culture, it starts around mid-April, okay. So—so at that time we have a little celebration. We go there. Um, and there are other things. Like there is, uh, Shivaratri. Uh, and there is, uh, Krishna's birthday called Janmaashtami. And but if you, uh—if you go to the temple website, every month there are like two or three. You know, so we just—we just go to the ones that we like. And usually Diwali is the one that we definitely go. Um, it's very well attended. Uh, you know like, during the day, there'll people about 10,000 people that come there, you now, in that just all through the day. And they have—they have a bazaar, you know, and so.

MH: Um, can you tell us what Diwali is about? What kind of [indistinguishable]?

SB: [overlapping] Diwali. Oh, um, it, um—it's—it's called 'festival of lights.' Okay it's festival of lights, and they light the lamp at the house and the temple and all that. Um, there are two or three different stories associated with that. Um, one of them says that that's the day when Krishna, who's an incarnation of Vishnu, uh, he is supposed to have destroyed this demon called Narakasura. Okay. And so it's—it's like—it's, uh—whole story's about, uh, victory of, um, good over evil kind of the idea. Okay?

Uh, but it's one of the few festivals that is celebrated throughout India. Okay. And—and it—it has different stories in different places, okay? Um, and, uh, for—for the merchant community, that is their New Year's Day. Okay. So they close out the books for the previous year and start a new—new set of books. Um, and that's also the day of when you, um, buy new clothes. You put on new clothes, and, uh, you go visit, um, other older people and get their blessings. And that's also the day when you make a lot of sweets and things like that and have a big feast. So, uh, it's a very joyous, uh, occasion.

And, um, um, you should come there some time. You know, you can come to the Diwali this year. You know it's, uh, very easy, and, you—very easily done. Just go there and, um, lots of food to buy, and there's also a religious kind of a celebration prayer going on at the same time.

Uh, so that's one. And I—I would say that's probably the—the one that, um, you will know, uh—you will hear most about. And even write up about this in the *Houston Chronicle* and things like that. Uh, there is another function called Holi, H-O-L-I, and they, uh, uh—that is more a, uh—north Indian kind of a function. And, uh—and—and they're now celebrating that in Houston as well. Yeah.

[1:01:24]

MH: Um, and you mentioned that you speak Tamil, um, and that's your—also your native language.

SB: Right.

MH: Does your son speak it too?

SB: Um, good question. [laughs] Uh, he can understand, but he cannot speak. When he was very young, he was very comfortable speaking, and then gradually, they just—you know just, uh, after he started going to school here and became—essentially became English. But if we speak, uh, he can understand almost all of it I think. Uh, and he will try to reply, but he doesn't do very well. Okay. [laughs]

MH: Oh, and you mentioned that you moved to Houston in '71, um, for your job. Uh, what was the first neighborhood that you were in like?

SB: Um, we lived in an apartment, um, and not too far from where I was working, you know, Shell Oil Company. Uh, at that time Shell Development Company was (?) on Bellaire Boulevard. Um, so, uh—so we—we changed, uh—let's see one, two, three—three apartments over a period of, um—over a period of four years I think, okay. And before we bought our first house. And mostly we lived in the southwest part of it. So—so we lived in a, you know—in a two bedroom—you know, before we started in a one bedroom apartment, and we moved to a two bedroom apartment. Um, and then, uh, my wife Prabha, she joined the University of Houston. She did her MBA there. Um, and, uh, her brother, uh, he—he joined, uh, University of Houston and so he also was staying with us. Uh for—for [doorbell rings] can I catch this also if you don't mind?

MH: Yes. Okay.

SB: So, mostly we were in the southwest. So, there was an apartment complex on Stella Link. That's where we lived and then we lived near Chimney Rock on an apartment. And then, uh, we went—lived in an apartment in Brompton—Brompton Street called Brompton Court Apartment. That's where you are? Okay, very nice, uh, complex. And then when we were there, we look for a house because my wife had—you know, was going to have a baby. So, what happened is, um, um, uh, we were gonna have babies. We—got—bought—bought a house, and then my company said, 'Would you like to go to Holland?' [all laugh] So I consulted her and she said, 'Yeah, let's go to Holland.' I said, 'Okay.' [all laugh]

CW: That's very brave of her.

SB: Very brave.

MH: Wow.

SB: It's a—I mean (?), we were young, and we didn't know any different I guess. I don't know. Um, but we consulted a lot of people. They said, 'Hey, you know, Holland is just fine, just good. You just have to find a good doctor there.' And—[voices in background] so we went there and then, uh, we had our son over there, and so [laughs] I don't think a few years later we would have done that, but we were too young and we were so—but we—it would be—we—we had a good time so. Our son was born there and, um We have—just have one kid. That's it, just, uh, that's all yeah. Um, so, uh, we moved and that's the house that, uh, we exchanged with that, uh, Dutch family and then we came back to that house and moved to another house, and then we came here in 1992. Okay. Uh, so—so we changed houses, uh, in a few times I guess. But this is—this is it. I mean, uh, [indistinguishable] but consciously, I'm not gonna move to another house in Houston. This is it. Exactly (?), so.

MH: And just to know like, how everything cost back—way back then. Um, can you tell us the rents for your first, um, three apartments? If you can remember?

[1:05:06]

SB: Uh, wow. Um ... hmm. [voice in background] Let—let me try to recollect that. It was, uh It was about \$200 I think. It was like 180 or 200 dollars is what we paid, uh, um, at the Stella Link. And uh, it was just a little bit—nother 10 or 20 dollars more in Chimney Rock. But the one on Brompton was much higher. Because it was a much nicer apartment. But, uh—but we also had, uh, my wife's brother sharing with us, and so it was like 320 bucks or something. And at that time it was considered a luxury, you know? So and—and so people were saying, 'Oh my god! For that kind of a money, you can buy a house and the mortgage payment will be lower than that, ' and—so anyway. That place is probably now—I don't know maybe—maybe over 1000 bucks rental. Uh, what's—what's your address on Brompton?

CW: Um, I'm at 7520 Brompton.

SB: Yeah.

CW: [overlapping] It's not quite so luxury.

SB: [overlapping] It used—is it—is it Oakwood now? Called Oak—oak—Oakwood? It used to be called Brompton Court Apartments, then they changed the name to Oakwood.

CW: Mm. So that must be the newer Brompton.

SB: Newer Brompton.

CW: Oh, it's not as nice.

SB: Yeah. Yeah. I don't know how much they cost rent for [indistinguishable]. So, uh, uh, the

very first house we bought was about \$50,000, okay? And, uh, second house we bought was like, uh, \$110,000. And we moved into this house, it was, uh, \$315,000 okay, yeah, something like that. Now, house prices don't go up that much in these kind of areas. They move just a little bit, you know. If you bought a house in, uh, West U twenty-five years ago for \$300,000, now it will be worth \$1,200,000. Three to four times, they have grown. So you know, it's a—it's a location thing and, uh, real estate, you know. Yeah. But we—we like it here, you know. But we wanted a house with, uh, water and all that so. It's still okay, yeah.

MH: It's beautiful. And you mentioned that your wife's brother was staying with you, um, when he was going to U of H. And, um, is he still staying here or maybe he went back?

SB: Uh, he graduated, uh, and then he moved to Detroit. Um, he worked in the auto industry there for a while and then he quit that and he's gone into teaching. Uh, he's—he's a—he has a PhD in Operations Research, and so, he teaches there. Um, at a university in a—in—near—near Detroit. Um, but, uh, he liked [indistinguishable] University of Houston, um, and he—in the business school. He went to the business school here, yeah.

CW: As for your wife, what did she do for a living?

SB: Um, well, you know, she was—she would have gone to work, but, you know, she became pregnant and then we moved to Holland, so things like that happen. Um, she, uh—she—she later on became a tax consultant. She did some work and she prepared tax returns and things like that for a while. But, uh, she didn't really, uh, you know, take on a full time job, but until like then. And then we—sh—she was a home—she became a homemaker for all practical purposes.

But she's very, very busy in a lot of these, uh, nonprofit organizations. Um, um, and, uh, she and Mrs. Anne Chao became very good friends, okay. And because, um, their son went to St. John's and our son went to St. John's, okay. And so that's where they became friends, and then we kind of maintained the friendship with them.

Um, in fact, that is another huge Rice connection for us, okay. Um, but, uh, you know, we—we get involved in many of, uh, outreach organizations, and my wife is busy with, uh, many of the Museum of Fine Arts kind of thing, Asia Society. We are both docents at Asia Society and give tours there. Um, so we—we keep ourselves very, very busy, uh, with—with community work, volunteer work.

Uh, and I have my own set of organizations. I'm on the board of couple of organizations and she has got her own. We were, uh—we were working for Teach For America for two, three years. Um, I'm on the board. She was on the board for three years and so. And so, uh, you know, once you get into some of these nonprofits, lot of people keep calling you. 'Hey, can you help me with this? help me with that.' Fundraising or organization structure, you know, so.

[1:10:03]

And my wife is also quite a bit involved in, uh, Indian classical music. So, uh, she, uh—she—she's an—she's a presenter. That means she orga—arranges for professional artist to come and give concerts here through a nonprofit organization. So we raise funds from the community and we invite these artists to come and we do a music festival every year. And so—so that's how we—we keep busy. So, bottom line, she didn't—she didn't take up a job. [laughs]

MH: Um, you just mentioned that you're on couple of boards and you're involved in various nonprofit organizations. Can you tell us a little bit about those?

SB: Yeah, um, there is, um—there is one called DAYA, D-A-Y-A. Um, I am currently on their board. I've been in their board like six years now already. That helps, uh, victims of, uh, domestic violence in the South Asian communities. Um, and, uh, I used to be on the board of an organization called the Indo American Charity Foundation so, um. So the, uh—you know, a lot of the Indian people living today (?), you know, we have become a part of Houston society. You know, we should contribute [phone rings] to the mainstream communities. So—so we hold a charitable event every year, raise money and distribute it to the—like, uh, the homeless people, food bank, um, Habitat for Humanity. Um, and there are like fifteen or twenty of those charities. And so I was on the board. My wife was also on the board earlier.

Um, and, uh, at any given time I'm associated with, uh, um, half a dozen organizations doing different things. But it's not like continuous, you know. They'll call and say, 'Hey, can you help with this running a little workshop for us, um, planning or ...?' Uh, so I do—do that. And—but there's—there's one called DAYA. I'm also on the board of an organization called the Houston Greeters. Uh, and I've been on their board also for five years now. And—and so—so those two I—I, um—I'm—that's—there's work throughout the year. Some of these others just come and go. Uh, my wife has got her own two or three things going on so.

Um, if you want to get involved in, uh, nonprofit there are lot of—lot of opportunities, lots of things. Like the—like the Asia Society. It's very nice, uh, if you've not been there, then that building is, uh—it's on Southmore, uh, in the museum district. Um, and—and their—their purpose is to, um, you know, foster understanding and relationship between, um, Americans and Asia. And so, they bring in Asian, uh, talks and lectures, um, discussion sessions, um, dance performances, uh, you know, fine arts, you know. There (?) all that kind of stuff.

CW: As a member of all these Asian or Indian American communities, um, what is your experience or opinion on the racial dynamics in Houston?

SB: What? What? Say which? Say that again? Which dynamics?

CW: The racial dynamics.

SB: Racial dynamics. Oh sorry, I'm sorry. I didn't catch that.

CW: It's okay.

SB: Uh, Houston has become very different, very different. It's become—it's, um—it's uh—it's become very diverse, incredibly diverse. It's, uh, um—and, uh, it's kind of a leader in the city I think. And there are some towns like, uh, Pearland and Sugarland and—and the main Houston area I think, there are, um—there—I think that one of them is concerned the most diverse city. Yeah, and—and I think what that means is it—it—it—it—it represents the, uh—the diversity of the entire United States. Okay, um, Houston has come a long way. Even in the '60s, um, I think there are—there were race problems here in an—in an—in an open way. Um, um, but all of them—all of that has gone, I think. Um, but there may be—I think there still is some racial—racial kind of things, maybe in a subtle way. Um, and—and there may be, uh, discrimination within organizations. I'm sure there is some of that.

Um, but, um, in—in—uh, by and large when it comes to Asians, I think, uh, Houston has

been, uh, very welcoming, okay. Uh, the Vietnamese community is, uh, in the downtown area. The Chinese community is in—along, uh, Bellaire. The Indian and Pakistani communities around the Hillcroft area. Uh, I don't know if you—if you not been there, that's another place to go—to go for you. It's, uh, 59, um, and Hillcroft. That area has been, uh, named, uh, the Mahatma Gandhi district. Okay, that's all Indian stores and Pakistani stores, like restaurants, uh, Sari stores, jewelry stores, travel agencies, um, boutiques, um, all kinds of things. You know, if you want to buy, uh, Indian spices that's ver—one of—that's mostly where you go. Okay.

[1:15:36]

Oh, by the way, when we first, uh, came to Houston, 1971, there was one Indian grocery store. And that was on—on Hillcroft. And we heard that that guy, before he had the store, he used to sell grocery at a—from the back of his station wagon. Okay? [laughing] And he's—so—so from that time, now there are literally dozens of Indian grocery stores. You can buy spices and Indian vegetables and all that kind of things, now, many, many places. But that was a starting point.

Um, and I believe that's—that may be true of other—you know, Chinese. You know, there's no Hong Kong stores here that are—you know, sell (?) Hong Kong stores here, right? Um, and, uh, I—I think, um, as far as Asians are concerned, Houston has been very, very welcoming, okay. Um, and I'm—I'm sure you know this, uh—this Kinder Institute which is at Rice. They study, uh, diversity, and they said Houston has become—uh, the—the—the whites have become, uh—it's—it—well, this ar—this area has become, um, majority minority state. So that is if you add up all the minorities, it's bigger than the number of whites, okay. Okay. Um, and, uh, of course it's a, uh, lot of growth in Hispanics and so on.

Um ... so, um, I—I—my—my impression about, uh, race relationships in this area is a—is a—is very positive. There are—there are no open animosities. Um, they seem to kind of give each other distance and space, and they understand each other.

Um, um, there are a lot of professionals in the—in the Indian community and there are also the people who—that Indian guy who's in the gas station, okay? The Indian guy who's in a 7-Eleven store, okay. So there is—there is that, and I think people kind of understand that. Um, um, and I think there are opportunities for, uh, people to learn about other communities. And I think that wel—welcoming and open that (?).

Um, and another (?)—there is—there are religious kind of things that are different. Of course, there is a, you know—even within Indians, there are Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, and all that okay. And, uh, a lot of Pakistanis, most of them are Muslim, okay. They have their own places of worship like mosques. And, uh, the Indians, there are temples, and, uh, the—the people who belong to the Sikh religion of India—they're the one who wear the turban and all that. They have their own place of worship. They are called gurdwaras. And there are, uh, a few of those in this area because they have their own place of worship, yeah.

Um, well right now there is Mahatma Gandhi district, uh, you know, the—the Indian stores and Pakistani stores. They're all coexisting, you know, side by side, and I'm sure they compete with each other. [laughs] But, uh—but otherwise, you know, they're there. You know, there are no overt kind of, uh, animosities that, uh—that you read about or hear about.

Uh ... assimilation. Assimilation is another—you know, we—I don't know what's gonna happen down the road. Uh, um, I—I think, um, Indians, and—that's probably true of many other races—they tend to marry within their own. And, in the last two, three years, uh, we're seeing more and more Indian people marrying people from other races. Okay? Um, in fact my wife and

I were, uh, talking about it the other day. I think year before last maybe we would have attended maybe 10 weddings here. Um, at least four of them were—were an In—an—an Indian girl marrying, uh, a Vietnamese, uh, or maybe a white guy. Um, and—or an Indian guy marrying, um, a white girl or a Hispanic girl. So there are more and more of that beginning to happen, I think.

[1:20:55]

MH: Uh, you also mentioned that you're on the board of Houston Greeters. Can you tell us a little bit more about that?

SB: Uh, yeah, um, Houston Greeters is, um, uh—it's like a free service that they offer for, uh, visitors and, uh, residents alike, um, where, uh, you go to a specific place, uh, for like two, three hours. Okay. So—so there are—there are this volunteer greeters. Um, and there are 70, uh, different areas like the Museum District, and the Houston Tunnel System, and the Texas Medical Center area, um, ethnic foods, um, you know, antique shopping, uh, rodeo when it's in season, and the baseball, when it is in, you know, season. Galveston beaches. So these are all different areas and there are greeters who are volunteers who know those specific areas very well, okay.

So, uh, the Houston Tunnel System greeter knows the tunnels very well. So somebody who wants to—who's new, never been there, uh, want to know, so you go online and you register. So say I want to see the Houston Tunnel System, and so greeter will call you and you—you—the greeter and the visitor meet there and they have an experience of that system, of the tunnel system, okay. Spend two hours, three hours just talking about it. Um, so they may, you know, walk about or maybe even sit down and have coffee.

So you get to know, um, about a—a particular, uh, area from a native, uh, or somebody who knows the place well, okay. Um, it's usually like, uh, one greeter and two or three people. It's not like a big group. Generally they're not big groups. And this Houston Greeters is actually, um, similar to, um, uh, the Big Apple Greeters in New York, and there's a greeter thing in Chicago. Uh, and in fact, there is a thing called a Global Greeter Network. Um, and there are in London and Paris and in Australia, in, uh, Sydney, Melbourne places like that. Buenos Aires has got one.

Um, so—so I'm on the board. I'm their treasurer and, you know. It's a—their organization is kind of struggling a little bit to, you know, survive, uh, because it's—it's free and we have to have money to—to afford the staff and [indistinguishable] couple of part time staff, and we have to advertise. And so—so we're struggling to survive, but it's been there. You know, Shell Oil Company has been a—a supported that a while and, uh, I think Fondren Foundation supported that a while. But on an ongoing basis, it's a—it's a struggle to keep raising money. You know? So I'm—I—I just want to stay with them, make sure that they—they can survive. So [indistinguishable].

MH: So now you have stayed in Houston for a very long time. Do you consider yourself as a Houstonian?

SB: Yeah, absolutely, absolutely. I'm a Houstonian. Um, um, and—and—and in particular, I'd like to think of myself as somebody belonging into Sugarland. You know, Sugarland is my favorite place. So I'm a Houstonian, uh, and definitely an Indo American, okay. We all became citizens, uh, in the late 70s. And we, uh, um, vote regularly, you know. We participate. My wife

campaigned for Hillary Clinton, you know, that kind of thing. [laughs]

MH: Wow.

[1:24:50]

SB: So, um, and we have campaigned for some local candidates, and so we want to be part of that, that process. And so essentially we have two homes. You know, our emotional home is also India, and there's other home. So there's really two homes. This is like an adopted—adopted home. 'Cause I've lived here—we have lived here much longer in the U.S. than in India. Uh, but we can still maintain our family ties and emotional ties, I guess our cultural ties with India.

Uh, I think it's going to be different with our son's generation onwards. They are—they are gonna become something entirely different. Um, and, uh, if you talk to him on the phone, you won't even know you're talking to an—to, uh—to an Indian kid, right. He—he sounds so—like sounds American. Um, if you see him of course you'll say, 'Hey, you're from Indi—you have—you have Indian ancestry.' Yeah.

MH: Oh, and you have also mentioned that your wife works a lot for, um, Museum of Fine Arts or Indian Art. Can you tell us a little bit more about ...?

SB: Um, yeah, she was in this Asian Arts, uh, Subcommittee, um, and then she was also a trustee for six years. Uh, and, uh, during that time when she was there, spend—there's a arts of India gallery got built. Uh, and so, you know, she helped introduce lot of people from India to the museum and so, um, um—so they got to know many people through my wife. Um, and, uh, so she kind of, uh, encouraged lot of them to, um, support museum activities, fundraiser and—and so on. Um, and she is—we—we're both interested in museum art. Uh, we're—so every town we go to, we go to art museum, okay. And, so we're—there's kind of—and, um—and—and likewise there's this music festival I mentioned to you that is a part—done through a nonprofit organization that she and couple of others started called Classical Arts Society. And, uh, so that's how we bring the South Indian classical music every year and present that, you know.

CW: About wrapped up for time right?

SB: Yeah right.

CW: All right?

SB: Yeah.

CW: Oh, last question.

SB: Sure.

CW: What do you consider your greatest accomplishment?

SB: Uh, [all laugh] uh, my son I think. [laughs]

CW: Oh, that's fair.

MH: Yeah.

SB: That's fair? Yeah, I—I mean I think, um, uh, our biggest, uh, thing—joy of course is my son. Uh, professionally, of course I—you know, my—I like the—my Shell career, you know, so I think that was, um—I would say that was my accomplishment. It enabled me to retire so that I don't have to work, you know? So that's a—that's an accomplishment. Uh, a lot—lot of other good things, you know? So yeah. House and a car and all—all those things really wonderful but more—I—I would say number one is that I would—I would say, uh—I mean, equally important is all the—all the friends that we all made. All the friends. Oh really, really wonderful, wonderful friends. Yeah.

CW: All right. Thank you for your time!

SB: All right. Okay.

[1:28:23]

End interview