

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

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Interviewee: Jehangir Mistry

Interviewers: Mini Bhattacharya (Junior), Dillon Chai (Sophomore)

Date/Time of Interview: June 23, 2014 at 10:22 AM

Transcribed by: Mini Bhattacharya & Dillon Chai

Edited by: Priscilla Li (5/30/2017)

Audio Track Time: 1:03:15

Background:

Jehangir Mistry was born in Bombay, India in 1945. He grew up surrounded by a tightly knit Zoroastrian community, but was also able to form friendships with many different kinds of people, because he attended a Catholic school growing up. After graduating from high school, he went on to complete a Bachelor's in both mechanical engineering and electrical engineering before immigrating to the United States in 1967 to get his Master's degree at MIT. After graduating from MIT, he went on to work for Ford Motor Company in Detroit, where he stayed for 32 years. His wife joined him in Detroit, where they raised their son and daughter. At the age of 55, Mr. Mistry moved to Houston, where he settled in Sugarland and retired after working for a couple of years.

Setting:

This interview was conducted in Room 204 of Fondren Library in Rice University, and it lasted roughly an hour. Most of this interview focuses on details of Mr. Mistry's childhood, his time in college (both in India and the United States), as well as his time at Ford Motor Company in Detroit.

Interviewers:

**Mini Bhattacharya**

Mini Bhattacharya is a junior at Rice University. Originally from India, she has spent most of her life growing up in the Dallas-Fort Worth area. She is studying Ecology & Evolutionary Biology with a minor in Business and is interested in public health/healthcare management.

**Dillon Chai**

Dillon is rising Sophomore at Rice University. He was born in Houston and lived there until moving to Shanghai at age 5, where he completed the rest of his education at Shanghai American School. His parents were first generation immigrants to the United States and residents of Houston, which is what sparked his interest in the Houston American Asian Archive.

Interview Transcript:

Key:

MB	Mini Bhattacharya
DC	Dillon Chai

**Houston Asian American Archive**  
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JM	Jehangir Mistry
...	Speech trails off; pause
Italics	Emphasis
(?)	Preceding word may not be accurate
Brackets	Actions (laughs, sighs, etc.)

**MB:** This is Mini Bhattacharya.

**DC:** And I'm Dillon Chai.

**MB:** And we're here today with Mr. Jehangir Mistry, who we're interviewing for the Houston Asian American Archive. Today is June 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2014, and the time is 10:22 a.m. So just to start off, can you tell us a little bit about your childhood and what it was like growing up?

**JM:** Sure, I'm glad to be here. Glad you guys are doing this project, that's going to be a very useful thing for all of us. Um, [coughs] excuse me. I was born in Bombay, India—now it's called Mumbai—in 1945, just as the Second World War was ending. And, I had an older sister, and we were a lower-middle class family, but we were happy. Um lots of uncles and aunts in India um, and neighbors. Lots of neighbors all around, all the time. Neighbors were even closer than family, so it was a very uh, very warm, uh socially warm system. My dad's father, or my grandfather, was a very successful businessman, and uh he had [laughs] lots and lots of money, and my dad's mother had died when he was very small, but he grew up living with lots of uncles and aunts and cousins who were all in the same house, all supported by his father. His father was the one who was supporting all of them. Every Sunday, the carriage would come around, the carriage with two horses, and they'd all go for a ride, and they were very well known in the entire city. Uh, their living room was so big, my dad used to say that they could cycle around the living room, all the cousins and there were walls so...um, things were good.

Uh, unfortunately, due to a shyster stockbroker, my grandfather lost all his money. And uh, overnight, became penniless. He was so ashamed that he let so many people down, who depended on him, because at that time—his brothers and sisters were not educated and really have any skills, that he went to the beach, he took off all his clothes, folded them neatly on the shore, and just walked into the ocean. So that is a pretty traumatic thing, my dad was very young at the time. He was like, 10 or 12 when this happened. Somehow he managed to—the support system was there—and uh he then became electrical engineer. Which was unusual in those days for people to become engineers, in those days, because India was under British rule. Uh, but he never wanted to work for somebody. So, he started his own business. First he was repairing radios—those type of big radios they had with the big transistor tubes—and then he started branching out into all kinds of inventions, uh, none of which were commercially successful because of poor marketing. He was, he was an introvert, and this needed an aggressive businessman to go out and peddle his ideas, and he just wasn't doing that, so—but I've still got all his ideas and they're really—I mean, I could write a book just on that alone, but we won't get into that. He was a brilliant man, all kinds of hobbies indulged in on Sundays, the only day he was home.

So, we lived in a three, three-room apartment, all small rooms, four of us, my sister, my parents and I. Three-room apartment, all small rooms, arranged in a straight line. Three beds in the front room, uh, a bed in the second room which also served as a sitting room for guests, and a third room that had a dining table and a small area to take a bath, which we'd get from a bucket of water. Financially, life was a struggle, for my mother, who

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

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always complained that she did not have enough money to pay our school tuition fees or the servant's wages. Yeah we had a servant, even the poor people had servants who were even poorer [laughs]. And the servant came in to sweep the floors, and you know, wash the dishes, and dust the furniture, and clean the bathrooms and stuff like that. And I remember how I had to go to the school principal many times to say, 'Sorry we don't have the tuition fees for this month, can I have an extension or a delay,' and so on. I feel very, very bad to do that, because tuition was only 12 rupees, which still was a very big sum for my parents. And another incident I remember is in the fifth or sixth grade, I wanted to go to a movie that the whole school was going to. And uh, once a year, they took us to a movie theater for a, for a big outing, and I really wanted to go, and my mom said no. And I didn't know it was because of financial reasons that she said no, because the ticket was only like two rupees. But at night after they thought I'd gone to sleep, I could hear them in the adjoining rooms, my dad saying, 'You know what, I'll give you my lunch money tomorrow morning, and you give it to him so he can go to his movie.' I was so ashamed next morning when my mother offered me that thing, but uh, I never told them that I'd heard them talk about this before, so it was that kind of situation. But still we were happy, and we went along fine.

Bombay was, and is probably even now, like no other city in the world, really. I don't know if you guys have been there, but lots of hustle and bustle, lots of noise and dirt and lots and lots of people, people everywhere, people every street, every nook and corner, every entrance to the building, even people sleeping on the streets underneath our apartment. So yeah, lots and lots of people.

We did not have any appliances to speak of. Actually, absolutely none. No refrigerator, no dishwasher, no clothes washer/dryer, not even a phone. Not even a toaster. I won't get into how we made toast [laughs], but we had a servant who came in, like I told you, and that was it. Transportation was by buses, trams, trains—uh, until I left India, I must have sat in a car probably just a handful of times. And uh, I had a rich uncle who was a doctor. And uh, when we went to some wedding, some time or the other, he would show up, and if it occurred to him, he would give us a ride back home, and that became quickly the highlight of the evening, when we had to sit in the car for 10 minutes to go home. Uh, he had a little Fiat, and the 6 of us would pile in there, believe it or not.

Anyway, I went to the St. Xavier's high school, a school run by Jesuit priests. Uh, I was a good student, I loved school, had lots of friends, loved playing handball, table-tennis, carom, and all that sort of stuff. So that's about my childhood, uh...me going to high school.

**DC:** Uh, so first I'd like to ask, were your neighbors Zoroastrians? You said you were very close with them.

**JM:** Yes, yes.

**DC:** So they were also Zoroastrians.

**JM:** The whole building was Zoroastrians.

**DC:** Oh okay.

**JM:** Sort of like a colony of, uh two or three buildings there that uh...

**DC:** What about your friends at school? Uh...

**JM:** Oh no, they were not Zoroastrian. There were Zoroastrians too, but uh, we had—it's a very cosmopolitan city. So...it was a Catholic school run by Jesuit priests, and there were Christians there, there were uh, Hindus, Muslims uh, Jain, all kinds of—you can imagine—uh, Buddhists uh, and I had friends across the board.

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

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**DC:** Oh. And you went to a Catholic school for before high school as well? Is that a different school?

**JM:** No no no, it started in the preschool stage and took you all the way through high school. Just one school. We didn't change schools over there, [**DC:** Oh okay. Alright.] we just had one big school that you kept going through.

**DC:** Okay, um, could you also describe your relationship with your servant? Like, what was it like? Did...

**JM:** We uh...the servant came in and uh, did her job, and uh, she was with us for many, many years. So it is almost like, you know, family in a way, because she spent a lot of hours in our house, and uh, there were times when she had personal problems and we'd take that over, and if she was not well, I'd go to her place and say, 'Hey are you coming today or not?' and so on. Uh, these days things have changed where servants now have, have children who are educated and they don't want their mother to go sweep floors at somebody's house. But in those days, it was a common system, and you had to have that because the economy supported those, those people. Uh, and they needed the jobs. So...

**MB:** So um, you were born in 1945?

**JM:** Yeah, right.

**MB:** And um, India became independent in 1947?

**JM:** Correct.

**MB:** So what was it like growing up in post-British India?

**JM:** I had nothing to do with getting independence [laughs].

**MB:** [laughs]

**JM:** But uh, I guess when I started to realize about British rule and all that, I was already in school. Um, India was a Socialist country at that time, run by Jawaharlal Nehru, the first prime minister, who also fought for independence. And um, there was this euphoria of a young country, who just went independent and free, and all that sort of stuff. Um, lots of um, agonizing about what we should be doing, what industries we should be emphasizing, what kind of foreign relations we should have with which countries, and so on. Um, and uh, as far as the common man was concerned uh, the only change they saw was that there were not too many British running around all over the place, controlling them. And you were now in charge of your own destiny, [inaudible word] now you were completely surrounded by Indians.

**DC:** Uh so you learned English beginning in—

**JM:** Oh yeah, we speak English in school (?)

**DC:** So starting from preschool?

**JM:** Yes, absolutely. Starting from preschool, it was all English. We did other languages also. Um, I actually learned Gujarati, which was the language we spoke at home as well. We uh...Hindi was our national language, so we had to learn Hindi. Uh there was an extra language that you had to take, which was French was for me. So—and then we spoke Marathi with our servants, so I knew about 4 or 5 languages, and I still do. Uh...mostly [laughs]. And that was common; a lot of people spoke more than one language. But English was spoken even

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

---

on the street, if you stopped people and asked them for directions in English, most of the time, you probably got an answer back. Because it was widely known. Road signs were in English, street signs, uh, billboards—all in English. So...okay? So that leads me to my college days. Should we talk about college?

**DC:** Yeah, sure.

**JM:** So, got out of high school, and uh, didn't know what field to get into, I had a flair for public speaking. I won gold medals in elocution debate competitions in high school, and I thought I wanted to become a lawyer, had read every single Perry Mason book. You probably don't know what Perry Mason is. I read—uh it's this whole series of over a hundred books written by an author called Erle Stanley Gardner, who wrote these courtroom dramas. Today what you see in *Law and Order*, and in those days, a different version. So I had read all those books and I was very excited to be a lawyer, I was gonna stand up in front of a judge and argue my case and so on, but lawyers there—India is not a litigious society—at that time, it certainly wasn't. If you enter court, it will take you fifteen *years* to even get heard in front of a judge. So lawyers basically were starving. They'd be standing outside in their black robes, outside the college saying, 'I'll fill your entrance form for the college for one rupee.' So in that vision in mind, lawyer had to be quickly abandoned. So then it became either engineering or medicine. One of the two, and medicine was not for me because I couldn't cut open insects and rodents and uh...so I had to go into engineering as a default.

Uh, engineering was uh was hard work, it was very hard work. And uh, it was made even more so by sort of the unreasonable demands that uh, that the system made on one's physical stamina as well as one's capacity to memorize lots and lots of figures and facts and formulas and so on. And just getting myself from my home to the engineering college was a daily grind that would be enough to tax anyone. So with my engineering drawings and my heavy engineering books in my hand, I'd set off and walk about 15, 20 minutes to the train station, take the train to a stop and then uh, cross a long bridge from one train system to another, from a Central Railway to a Western Railway system, get another train to go uh, to another stop and then walk to the bus stop, wait for the bus, catch the bus, and then when I finally got off, had another 10 minute walk to the college. [laughs] So it was all public transportation, but it was quite a hassle to go from my house to there and then you had to trace your steps back all the way in the evening, not much left inside me to do homework and spend time but...

So when my kids saw the Bill Cosby shows over here and they used to laugh uh, when Bill Cosby would tell his children, 'I used to walk uh, to school barefoot, uphill both ways.'

**MB:** [laughs]

**JM:** They would laugh about it, and uh I sort of smiled knowingly at that time because they didn't know what I had gone through also. Anyway, after I got my bachelor's degree in mechanical engineering, I looked around and found that all my friends were really getting ready to leave for the States. And I had no idea, I had absolutely not even thought about it, because my financial situation, I knew my dad would never be able to afford me to go. Uh, then I discovered that there were lot of Zoroastrian scholarships set up by my forefathers and others. Um, that uh if you were academically uh, accomplished, they would foot your bill. The tuition and everything else, even living expenses. Except that now I'd already gotten a bachelor's degree, and I was supposed to look for a job and uh, I really didn't want to look for a job. There were too many people competing for too few jobs, and working in Bombay had some horror stories about bosses who are extremely autocratic. They were, it's a very different system over there, in education as well as in business. At least used to be in those days, it's changed a lot now.

Uh, so I didn't really want to start work there for a small salary, and uh, what I did was I took another year.

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

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After getting my first bachelor of engineering degree in mechanical engineering, I took another year to get another bachelor of engineering degree in electrical engineering. Since I was there for a year, and I would be applying to American universities, I thought I might as well in the meantime get another, rather than sit at home and do it and waste a whole year.

So, uh, that's what I did, and then I started applying to American colleges. But selection of American colleges was a process that was like throwing darts at a board. It was like uh, I had no idea, one university to another. And uh, someone would say that they knew of someone or the other, their cousin's cousin who had gone to this university and he was happy, and so all of a sudden, that would get on my list for applications, and—or we'd read an article about it an American university in *Life* magazine, and boom, that would be another one on my list. I remember reading The Fabulous University of Michigan in *Life* magazine or something. And sometimes it was just the way the names sounded, you know, how it rolled off the tongue and kind of how it appealed to the ear—Cornell, Purdue, Princeton, or something like that [laughs]. And that's the way I applied. There was some information in the U.S. Consulate, and we'd try and depend on that a little bit, but—[recorder is scooted forward] okay.

But then all of a sudden, a friend urged me to apply to MIT for admission, and MIT and Harvard were two universities even over there were sort of well known. So we knew that was sort of off there in the sky, and I wasn't even gonna try for that. I didn't think I had a chance. And MIT also required a special entrance exam, the GMAT, for graduate management admission test. And uh...that was hundred rupees, and uh, that was a big thing for my dad. But when my dad found out that uh, that was the situation, he said, 'I will get you the money, don't worry. If it's MIT, I'll get you the money.' Which I did, I entered the uh, I took the test and uh and uh I guess—I guess everybody has a defining a moment in their life at some point or the other, and mine was when I got that admission letter from MIT, and I knew I was going to go to America. And uh, it was a very happy day. That was 1967. And I set off for the U.S.

**MB:** So, while you were getting your bachelor's, did you spend most of your spare time—was it spent studying or did you have other social activities?

**JM:** I had social activities.

**MB:** Yeah.

**JM:** Actually it was very skewed system. We...we didn't study too much during the year [everybody laughs], we hardly had any time because college took all day. And then there were other things, gosh I was 20 years old, and it was—life was too much fun to just sit and read books all the time, so—uh, but I was a good student, and I did do that, but uh, usually the last three or four months, you really crashed, you know. I must have hit the books uh—nothing happened, your life stopped, and for the last three or four months before the final university exam, uh I must have studied like...18 to 20 hours every single day without exception. To get caught up with everything [everybody laughs]. But which we all came out fine. The results were very, very *strict*. Um, about 30 percent of the people even passed. And they gave you classes: first class, second class, third class, depending on the percentage of marks you got. And uh, in the whole university there'd be like, three or four people who came in the first class, and then the second class and so on. I managed to get first class in every year, so that was what got me to MIT also, I think.

**MB:** Yeah, so what were some of those social activities that you did?

**JM:** Not much going on, I mean we had a radio at home [laughs]. We didn't have any iPads and computers and

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

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nothing of course, in those days. It was mainly going for a walk around the city and the beach, going to movies, um...playing carom and carom boards and table-tennis or things like that with your friends. Standing by the window, watching people go by [everybody laughs]. The biggest fear of my, my, my mother had when there would be summer vacations in school was, 'Oh my god, you're going to keep telling me 'I'm bored, I'm bored,' you know. So we'd read comics and books and—I loved to read books, but uh, went to the library quite a bit. But the library had such antiquated novels by authors that were written a hundred years ago, and uh, didn't really appeal to me too much, but still, spent a lot of time doing that.

**DC:** So how did your college days at MIT differ from like—

**JM:** Oh, it was like night and day. Um it was 1967 and uh, I was 22 years old when I left Bombay. It was my first trip by plane, and I was the first one in the entire family, as far as we could tell, from my uncles and aunts, cousins, everybody, to go abroad and leave the shores of India. So it was a big deal, and the day I left—I still got pictures, uh 20 to 25 of my family showed up and uh, to—at the airport to bid me goodbye and so on. Some of them still remember that. And uh, I was 104 pounds at that time, 5 feet 10, 104 pounds, skinny as a rod. And uh, I was one big ball of excitement and nervousness and said I had absolutely no idea what to expect when I was leaving. I stopped off in Zurich and London on the way to the States. In Zurich I stayed with the son of my dad's business partner, and he himself was working at IBM. He lived with two of the sweetest old ladies you can imagine in Switzerland. It was—it was really a fantastic 2-3 days I still remember fondly. In London uh, I was supposed to live with a family, but the woman promptly drove me to a YMCA, which had a room that was very very very *very* small. It had a bed against one wall, and just enough room to put your slippers before you hit the other wall on the opposite end [laughs]. So it felt really lonely and uh, and lost in there, in London. But then, and then we took for the States, and uh, um landed in New York, which was a whole new experience in itself.

Now, you gotta remember that [pause] what I knew about America, at that time, was probably less than what Neil Armstrong knew about the moon before he landed there. My impression of America and others around me also was shaped by Hollywood Westerns, you know, and [inaudible word] Goes to the Beach kind of movies, so I was wondering, is everyone in America just a cowboy and uh, keep frolicking on the beach and I mean, you know, what's life in America going to be like? And uh, the situation was the same actually in the States also, they knew very little about India. I remember years later, when I was interviewing for a job at Ford Motor Company, my boss asked me if I had ever had ice cream, which was shocking to me, and I said, 'Of course I have!' [laughs] That kind of thing. So there was a big gap—America and India, they—sort of halfway around the world. At opposite ends of the globe but—and today it's different, today it's softer borders, frequent travel, global businesses, things have changed *a lot*, but in those days it was um, countries were quite isolated from one another, unless you happened to be in a special field uh, where you got exposed to the other society.

So they were a world apart, and, and if you look at India in those days and the U.S., in every respect: language, food, education, way of life, anything else you can think of, they were different. Uh...it was a total transformation, for somebody coming over. But coming from—America is a very forgiving country. Coming from India to the U.S. is a lot easier to adjust than somebody who went from America to India would have to adjust naturally. So, anyway, I landed in New York, and a shyster cab driver promptly relieved me of the only 10 dollars that I carried. At that time, foreign exchange was a big restriction, and they only gave you ten dollars when you left the country, so 10 dollars in your pocket. That's why I went to all these places where people were there who could help me stay. Zurich and London and so on.

Anyway, so the cash was gone. Somehow I made it to Cambridge with two of my roommates uh, who were going to be with me at MIT. Cambridge, Massachusetts. And uh, adjustment to American life was really an

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

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adventure in the early years. I had—I loved music, I always did. So I had a small handheld transistor that I bought for god knows how much, maybe a couple of bucks at that time, from a store. And it didn't come with batteries. So I had to go get batteries, and I didn't really have [laughs] money to even buy batteries. And then I saw in an old issue of Reader's Digest, I saw an ad of Radio Shack, they were offering free batteries! What a wonderful country! They offer you free stuff! So I set off for that Radio Shack to get my free batteries, and that itself turned out to be a real adventure. I had to take the subway. And then when I got off, I asked people where this particular address was, they said, 'You got to now take a bus.' I took the bus, the bus dropped me off at a limited expressway with Radio Shack on the opposite end. So I had to cross this road [laughs], and in India, people cross roads and dodge traffic all the time, but this was an expressway, and the blaring horns and screeching brakes, and I almost damn near got killed so many times before I made it to the other side, entered Radio Shack and said, 'I'm here for my free batteries!' And the guy points to a barrel of batteries just thrown in there and says, 'You go take a couple.' [laughs] And so I took those two batteries and said, 'I wish I could take two more, because it'd be nice to have two spare ones and not even come back all this way.' [laughs] And then of course, I took two batteries only, I was too scared to take anymore [everybody laughs], and then I retraced my steps and came back and told my roommates what had happened, and they had a huge laugh at me, said 'I can't believe you did that, you spent enough to buy you 20 batteries on the subway, the bus itself.' [everybody laughs] But uh but I got the free batteries anyway.

And, and, and adjustment to life at the time was hard, I was [inaudible word] 22 and you can take it, you know. It was different then, I wonder now how I could react, but um, you had to walk from the grocery store. We were like 20 minutes walk, and in the winter especially it was hard, with two huge paper bags of groceries, and mostly they were canned foods, so it got really heavy. And the, the Laundromat was another 15-minute walk in the opposite direction. The area we lived in also was very seedy—it was very run-down and so on. 'Cause that's the only apartment you could afford. But there was no risk or fear of getting mugged, because the person who was mugging us probably had more stuff than, than what we had [everybody laughs]. So uh, we didn't think about that.

But America in 1967, I don't know if you've heard so much about that, but was really in turmoil. Um, the '60s, the big '60s. Uh, within a couple of months after I came uh to the States, Martin Luther King was shot. The Detroit riots had just happened in 1967. Martin Luther King was shot. Robert Kennedy, who I admired and loved very very much, who was running for president, was also shot. Uh, he was really the brains behind John F. Kennedy's presidency. The Vietnam War was all-consuming. I mean, there was nothing that people thought about, talked about or did except Vietnam War. People were being shipped off, young people, left and right, that you knew. And uh that had divided the nation in a very violent way; there was all kinds of things going on. Uh, my colleagues at MIT were in mortal fear of being drafted, you know. And uh they never knew when that letter would come and they'd have to be shipped off. And we'd meet for projects and all they'd talk about is, 'Oh my god, so and so got drafted, and he's gone and I might be next,' and so on. And uh, once in a while—and of course, I had friends who did get shipped off, who were in the middle of their studies. And once in a while, we would even hear of some other student at MIT that somebody knew who never came back, who got killed in Vietnam. So, it was uh—and then there were defections to Canada, people were running away to Canada. Uh, the Woodstock festival came along. I don't know if you've heard about the Woodstock music festival, uh rock music, uh, hippies with drugs and it's sort of a protest movement. Um, so the '60s were a very unusual decade to be thrust into a change from India to America, but also when America was changing so much itself, was really uh, quite uh, disturbing. And um, to this day in fact, '60's books are written, and then even now, CNN is carrying today a whole series of serials called *The Sixties*.

Coursework at MIT was, was very challenging. Uh, very high standard as you would expect. And it took me a little while to get used to the totally different way of teaching and learning. Um, but the pressure to excel in



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

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coursework, in coursework and get good grades was very very high for me, it was very intense, because all my scholarship money was contingent on my making good grades. And to be almost all As kind of thing, which was [laughs] not a mean feat to accomplish at MIT. And uh, I had this tremendous fear that my god, if my grades slipped and my money stopped, I'd be going back to the U.S.—I mean, going back to India. And with my head hanging down in shame, and then what would I do kind of thing, so there was a—so, it, it, it was really more of bookwork and studies than anything else at MIT, and that is one of the biggest regrets I have now, being exposed to so many different things and learning more about MIT after I left it, that there were so many opportunities that I could have availed myself of, and uh, and uh expanded my thinking and lot of the—just the narrow thing of getting grades in the courses I took. Uh but by large it was a wonderful experience. I was surrounded by professors who were Nobel laureates and [inaudible], and students, each of them were more brainy than the next, and uh so, it was a real challenge.

And uh, after about a year at MIT—it was a two year master's program—so halfway through, I had a summer job, in General Foods. They came to the campus and interviewed you. General Foods uh, was a large company—still is I think they've divested, and they're much smaller now, but there was a very large company. Made lots of frozen foods and canned foods and coffee and all that stuff, you'll find today in all the bookshelves, Birds Eye and the other brands. They were located in a sprawling campus in a suburb of New York called White Plains. And I had a job there. So uh, I took all my possessions in two suitcases and went off to New York for my summer job. And uh, a friend picked me up from the Greyhound bus stop, took me to dinner. And uh, we just entered the restaurant, sat down, the waiter brought us two glasses of water, and before I knew it, my friend got up and went out again to check on the car. And both my suitcases were gone. They were piled in the backseat of his convertible, with no trunk to speak of, and *all* my worldly possessions were in that suitcase except the clothes on my back, which I had. So here I was, my passport was gone, my books, my clothes, uh, even my scholarship money that had just come for the summer, and not even cashed the check. And uh, [laughs] and I was stranded in New York.

I can't remember the details now, but somehow I made it to work the next morning. And I told my story to uh, the uh people at General Foods. They were extremely sympathetic, but not shocked that this had happened in New York. Uh, I had to go to the police station after that too and sit—if you've ever been to a New York police station in the middle of the night at 2 o'clock, and you see the kind of characters they drag in there [laughs], that was really uh, something. So I spent half the night there, and anyway they were really nice about it, said, 'You know what, take as much time as you want off, get settled in, find a place to stay, and so on, and uh, and then come to work.' They even gave me a cash advance so I could do that.

That's the wonderful American way, it was so forgiving in every respect, even at college. That uh, that would not have happened in India. Anyway, so uh—so that, that's what I did, I took the time uh, I didn't know how to drive in those days so I only had a bicycle, I went off and got a bicycle, and that one woolen suit, heavy woolen suit that I'd got from India. And I pedaled to work in the summer in New York, uphill and downhill to work, and I even made the company newspaper: the MIT student who comes to work on a bicycle, because everybody was driving all around me. And uh, I managed to stay with a nervous German widow, she was nervous to stay with me alone because she lived alone, and she was looking for a paying guest and, and I pleaded with her. White Plains is a small suburb, you can't find too many apartments or places to stay, and somehow she—and it was a very pleasant experience with her too.

So then I returned to Cambridge after summer was over, and back to the books for the final year. Uh, now I had the hang of the system so I got even better grades with less work, and I began to enjoy life a little bit, run around and do things. And also I had a little money saved from my summer job, so life began to get better from that point on. And uh, by December of '68 [clears throat], um I um, was six months before my graduation from

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

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MIT, from a 2 year program and I was receiving job offers from companies and they regularly visited the campus and wined you and dined you and called you out there and so on. I interviewed several companies and Ford Motor Company was one of the companies that I also interviewed and around Christmas time, the person, the guy from Ford calls me and says 'What's holding you up? We'd love to have you.' And I say 'well I've got this other offer from Humble Oil, in Houston.' There used to be a company called Humble Oil, I think they've been bought subsequently by Exxon. 'And I'm kind of inclined to go there because they're offering me a little more salary.' 'How much more?' 'They're offering me 500 more. They're giving me 13,000 a year.' 'Alright tell you what, I'm going to give you 13,500.' Then I said 'Done! It's a deal' [laughs] And that's the way I made up my mind, I had no idea where Houston was and what Detroit weather was like. But Ford was a nice company, it had impressed me in the interview. So for 13,500... princely salary a year I joined Ford. And it was, it was quite a good salary in those days. I was very comfortable. And I graduated from MIT, traditional cap and gown, but of course nobody was there to cheer for me during the ceremony, as you would expect. And so it was off to Ford Motor Company.

**DC:** So you mentioned there was a different way of teaching and learning compared—at MIT compared to India. So could you, like, clarify a little more what the differences were?

**JM:** Oh, I could really go on and on about that. In India it's uh—the teachers are like, are like God. You know, you don't say a word against them and uh they enter the class you have to stand up. Not say a word, you know, unless you're asked a direct question to answer. Over here, it was like uh, I was shocked, the first day in management school the student leans back, puts his—both his feet on the table, talks to professor and says 'You mean to tell me, if this company had done this thing differently—' and I said 'Oh my god, he's going to get expelled tomorrow. You can't do that!' [laughs] So that is a big adjustment the relationship that teachers had to students, to the way students behave. The other thing also was uh, more of a teamwork—they had a lot of team projects where you formed your own little groups and you worked together which was kind of nice, also. Uh a lot of independent study, they expected you to do these things. In the very first day of class they tell you, you know what you're seventy pages behind, I'm going to start, you should have read that before you came kind of thing. So uh a lot less spoon-feeding I would say, a lot less hand holding. And you're more autonomous. And of course, then of course the selection process of courses, you've got a hundred courses to choose from, the professors you choose, the classes you take, and you could go here, you could try this, you could try that, and that's the wonderful thing. I had—my roommates were taking courses like the Appreciation of Classical Music. And so I think that was a tremendous thing, in universities in India you did one thing and that's it, you didn't have this broad exposure to different fields.

**DC:** Did you participate in any of the protests?

**JM:** No I didn't, not at all. I, I, it was, it was a—not politically advisable, because if you got rounded up and you're on a student visa, at that time you could get shipped back. The terms and conditions were not to get involved in any of those things. And plus I didn't quite understand the ramifications, the implications of the war, and why America was in it and so on. Uh having just come from India, I had no idea what was going on, but I did know that it had a very real effect on the people around me. I wish I had somehow, it was very exciting to get involved in those protests, you should have seen how excited people got you know, the adrenaline was really running, especially on campuses, more than anywhere else.

**MB:** So what was it like working for Ford?

**JM:** Ford Motor Company, uh, I worked at Ford for 32 years. Joined Ford and that's where I stayed. Uh I retired at a relatively young age of 55. Uh I had started in the finance staff, and they had hired about thirty

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

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young people in our department, in operations, research, and computer science. Uh they had hired people out of all kinds of good prestigious colleges like Rice, I had a colleague from Rice, and Stanford and Berkeley and so on. And it was fun, because we were all youngsters starting off together, making money for the first time, serious money. Uh we uh spent Friday nights playing poker games and uh went to [inaudible word] and [inaudible word] and stuff like that, which was kind of nice. Uh somehow I managed to do well even among this group, and uh I got three promotions in four years. And uh very soon I was in what they call the management role. And um you get a company car and medical benefits. And that was in my mid-twenties at the time I think and the personnel guy called me in and told me you're probably the youngest guy at that level in the entire Ford Motor company. As far as you can tell, you can't tell for sure, looks like it that way, which was very nice, because Ford had 500,000 employees, that time. Which is a very large company, second largest company in the world, now it's slipped a lot. General Motors was first, Ford was second. With oil prices going up now, of course Exxon Mobile and Wal-Mart and others have, have overtaken Ford. But uh the reason I could work so long at Ford, at one company, uh was Ford was so big that changing jobs was like changing companies. I went from finance to engineering, you know, it was like going from a bank to work for General Electric kind of thing. Uh I, I went into computers, went into marketing, I went into business process improvements, I was an internal consultant to the company where I traveled all around the world uh educating and coaching senior managers, [inaudible word] managers on various things, on manufacturing processes and product development and so on. So uh I got involved in total quality, cost management, I went into IT, information technology, I was the IT manager for a 2 billion dollar division of Ford, Ford Motor Company. So there was a lot of variety in the work I did, but uh after the impressive start I had in those 3-4 years my career hit a plateau. Because what I was doing was jumping from one ladder to another rather than climbing one ladder all the way to the top. And Ford was a very traditional company in those days, probably still is. They were looking for people who had spent 20 doing marketing or 15 years doing finance, and when you went for a job interview within the company, they would look for that stamp on your forehead that said you were the finance guy who had proven yourself and done this, this, and this. [inaudible word] And I had computers and marketing and finance and engineering, they didn't know what to make of me, you know. But I was a quick learner, and once I got in I had a great time, I did a very good job, I got excellent performance reviews. But I think that hurt my career, had a good time doing it, but I didn't go as far as I could have easily got, now that I look back at it. Also coming from India, I guess I was a little more diffident than if I would have been if I was American born and raised, I was not as outspoken at meetings as I should have been. I'm thinking of things we had in front of other people, where before I say it someone else says it, or if I say it I don't say it in a forceful enough way to get noticed, and two minutes later someone else repeats the same thing in a slightly different way and everyone says 'that's a very fantastic idea.' I say 'What the heck? I just said that five minutes ago.' So that was kind of a struggle.

The name also held me back quite a bit, Jehangir. If people don't remember your name, they can't remember you. So very soon I had to change that to make it JB, and one of my American friends helped me do that, and that sort of helped me too but that was a little later in the career. So all of that stuff and— also I wasn't that driven to just climb the corporate ladder. I found a lot of people spent all their time and energy climbing the corporate ladder of success and they found that the ladder was really leaning against their own building. They gave up a lot of their personal life; divorces were rampant in those places where there was a lot of overtime and stuff going on. Um their children suffered, so I didn't want that, I wanted a balance in life. My family life was also just as important to me, and I was very happy, I was making enough money, having good jobs, and people thought highly of me, so it was fine. But I did make it to the director level, which was fine, I could have made it to the VP if I wanted to. So that was my work at Ford, 32 years and I retired and came to Houston.

**DC:** Uh so why don't you tell us a little about your family life.

**JM:** Okay. Um, after—two and a half years after I started work at Ford, I went to India with the intention of getting married. Uh life was getting quite lonely over here, especially on weekends and I would go to the office

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

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and write long letters home, because there was nothing much else to do. And at that time, we're talking about the 60s, dating an American girl for me was out of the question. Because uh I knew that I was so vulnerable that I'd fallen head over heels with the first American girl I held hands with, so I deliberately kept myself away from all that and I went to India to look for an arranged marriage. So I went there, and um my mother had some girls lined up. And what we would do is my parents would get all dressed up, and I'd get dressed up, and the girl would get all dressed up and they would all come and lead me to the restaurant or at the girl's house. And she'd come with her parents and I'd go with my parents, and we'd look at each other, and if we get the chance we might say a couple of words to each other directly. Uh the parents mostly talk. And uh so anyway I found my wife Arnaz, her name is Anoo, and she was one of the first girls I saw, it was a good family, she was only 19 at the time. But I was a good catch, I mean come from America at that time, it was a big deal. And uh her father went with my uncle to work and they were chapel buddies, and that's how people knew about it.

**DC:** Sorry, could you pause and spell her name?

**JM:** Arnaz, Her first name is Arnaz—A-R-N-A-Z. Her nickname is A-N-O-O, it's what I call her and all her friends call her.

**DC:** Okay.

**JM:** So. Anyway so that's what happened and we—once the reply went back saying yes we are interested, she's interested, I'm interested in exploring this further, we went—we started going on dates. And I went on two dates, just two dates. And that time India was at war with Pakistan, and uh it was December, so the days were short. By 6 o'clock it was dark, and there was a curfew at dusk, nobody on the streets after nightfall. So I'd meet her at 4 o'clock in uh, bright sunshine weather, we'd walk around for 2 hours or so till 6 o'clock and drop her back home. We did this twice, and the second day I'm going to drop her home and her father calls me in and says 'come on in' in a very stern voice. I said 'oh, something's up.' And he says 'What are your intentions?' [laughs] It turned out that uh a girl gets dated over there those days if she's moving around with a boy, and he was afraid that I would have a good time with her and fly back to America and leave her tainted. So at that time I told him I had already proposed to her, which was a big shock to him, and that she had accepted, which was an even bigger shock to him. And then I also told him that they had 15 days to get ready for a marriage, because I wanted to get married before I went back. [laughs] And uh so that's what happened, we got married, I came back. She couldn't, she stayed back for 4 months. In those days it was only four months, now it's—I think it's more, as a spouse to come under an immigration visa. So she joined me 4 months later, by the time she came I had almost forgotten what she looked like. I'm just kidding [MB giggles]. But um. So I met her at the airport and I joked about it once and people said 'so how did you—Did you really forget what she looked like? How did you recognize her?' So I carried a name plaque, I held a name up and whoever girl showed up and that was it. I still don't know if it's the right girl I married with [DC, MB laughs]. Which is of course not true.

Anyway, so I've been married now for 43 years, and uh, been blessed with two wonderful children, son and a daughter, who'd make any parent proud. My son graduated as a valedictorian from high school and uh he was able to get four degrees in four years, from Johns Hopkins, two Bachelors and two Masters. My daughter—that's a whole separate story how he did that. [MB: Wow. [laughs]] Yeah. And that was also in biomechanical engineering, which is very very challenging. My daughter got her Bachelor's degree—she was also—my daughter was also a salutatorian, she got one B+, because of one mark the teacher wouldn't give us. Anyway and she got her Bachelor's from Cornell and she went off to become a veterinarian from uh Kansas State University. And they're both happily settled now, one in New York, one in Detroit. Uh my son works for Google, my daughter is a veterinarian, and they're both happily settled now, married, wonderful spouses, and three grandchildren. So life is good.

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

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**DC:** So when you grew—so growing up in your house uh—like your kids growing up in your household, did you strongly emphasize Zoroastrian culture as they grew up?

**JM:** Yes, yes we did. Uh a lot of friends were Zoroastrians, and uh, their kids and my kids always hung out together. We had religion classes once a month, nobody to really teach them except the parents who knew not all that much. So we had to learn ourselves. Um. It's funny, in India when you practice Zoroastrianism, or any religion as a matter of fact, it's really simple, because you're surrounded by that whole environment. You know, you step out on the street and there are religious temples you can go to, there are ceremonies that are performed. Uh people are praying around you all the time, all kinds of stuff happening. Here, you're—it's very hard to, to will yourself to do religious stuff, you know, to pray every day or—there's no religious space you can go to and worship or anything like that. So uh so we try to make up for that deficiency. And, and also in India the emphasis was not that much on the studying religion, I knew very little about Zoroastrianism when I left, very very little. And whatever questions we asked, my parents—'Well, what does our religion say about life after death,' they would not know either. They knew all the prayers by heart, they knew all the ceremonies and the rituals, but the real knowledge of religion was not there. So when we had to teach religion we had to learn it ourselves. And then we started doing these religion classes and uh and kids came to those, of course. Now it's hard for them to keep it up, 'cause they're all married. Both my kids have married non-Zoroastrians, so I don't know.

**DC:** So was—this was in Detroit correct?

**JM:** Yes, in Detroit.

**DC:** So there was a strong Zoroastrian community in Detroit?

**JM:** There was a Zoroastrian community, a small Zoroastrian community, not as big as Houston. Partly the reason I came to Houston, retired in Houston, is there is a large Zoroastrian community, it's very active, we have a center, and there's about 500 people. And uh it's a very vibrant, strong community. There we didn't have that, we had a handful of families, but we were still very closely knit, and we did the best we could.

**DC:** So who would teach those religion classes? One of the families would teach the classes?

**JM:** Yeah, we'd take turns. So it's your turn now, we spend the whole month studying up and once a month it'd be our turn and then somebody else would take over and so on.

**MB:** So, more generally speaking, what was the neighborhood like in Detroit, where you raised your family?

**JM:** Detroit has a very bad name because of the riots, and uh and the crime and all that other stuff. But it's really a, it's really a good city. Surprisingly enough, Detroit—I was surrounded by professionals. Everyone I knew, my neighbors, and I'm not just talking about Zoroastrians, I'm talking about everybody, were either engineers or doctors. There were very few lawyers I knew, I didn't know lawyers that much. But in Houston it's more entrepreneurial, the people here come with money. And uh they set up their own businesses, and uh, in Detroit it was—so you were surrounded—just like Cambridge had a lot of campus—type professor—type people, you know, students and professors, Detroit had a lot of professional people. Because there was Ford, General Motors, Chrysler were the three big employers, and they hired hundreds of thousands of engineers, who all came swarming them. And brought their support people, who were also professionals, finance, and supply and so on. Uh and the suburbs of Detroit are very attractive, and very nice, and very pretty. And Detroit can be very nice in spring, and very nice in fall. Winter is usually good, except they had a real bad one last year, but

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

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winters were a little challenging. Um. And Detroit had a lot to offer, it's the uh it's the only place where you can cross over to Canada and Canada is to the south of the United States at that time, so we'd go over to Canada quite often also, it was by the river downtown, and so on. Um but it's an unfortunate thing probably of a lot of cities in America, where the people have abandoned the downtown areas and settled in suburbs. Before you used to live in suburbs and go to work downtown, go shopping downtown, go for entertainment, music, and movies downtown. Eventually now everything's come to the suburbs where you have no need to go downtown anymore, so they're all deserted at night and that's when the crime and all takes over. And that's what happened to Detroit also. Of course now, with General Motors going bankrupt and all the other companies struggling, they have laid off hundreds of thousands of people, the population has shrunk, abandoned buildings all over the place. So Detroit is a very sad place today, it's coming back, but coming back slowly.

**DC:** Um, so when did you become an American citizen?

**JM:** I don't remember the exact year—it was in the early '80s. Um there was a time period, I think you had to be on what they call a green card or an immigrant visa for what was it 10 years before you could do it. Yeah. My wife had come in '71, after marriage, and so we waited 'til the early '80s. I was [inaudible] after. It was never my intention to go back to India. Uh. [coughs] Excuse me. So as soon as that waiting period was over, we went ahead and applied. And then I had to apply also because I wanted to sponsor my, my wi...my sister, who wanted to come to the States for the sake of her children and their future. So I sponsored my, my sister and her husband and her two kids and so on. They came and lived with me for 2 years, and stuff like that. But uh so it was in the early '80s.

**DC:** Do you still have your Indian citizenship?

**JM:** No, no. You had to renounce it, there's no such thing as dual citizenship. Some countries have an agreement, but I think U.S. by and large does not condone that, maybe for very special cases like... I don't know, some countries they might. But as far as I know, the U.S.—the others England allows that a lot, if you're a UK citizen you can be a citizen of Pakistan or Indian or other countries... My wife's parents, uh as I said are 97 and 93, they live with us. Since we've moved to Houston, at the time (?) we moved to Houston they uh—we called them over here because they were all alone over there, nobody to look after them and they were getting old. So they've been with us 13 years now, and fortunately still doing okay. Um after uh I retired from Ford I came to Houston in 19 in 2001, when I was 55. I did a lot of coaching and teaching. I was too young to sit in a rocking chair and watching the world go by. And I always love to teach, so I started teaching you know after school, there's a franchise that had after school kids coming in for school work, all the way from 5<sup>th</sup> grade through high school. So it'd be 5th grade mathematics then 11th grade chemistry, and 1 hour each and so on. So I did that for a while. And then I went to teach uh mathematics in a university, in the Houston Community College. So I taught mathematics there, uh college algebra, geometry, advanced algebra, for a couple of years. And then I went to work as a director of operations for a commercial real estate company for two years. And that was it then I said no more, I've got to stop at one point, because I've got too many things I wanted to do in retirement and I have a lot of interests I want to get into.

**MB:** Like what?

**JM:** I love to read, so I've got a ton of stuff I piled up to read. I, I want to learn music, I have a piano at home that my kids played, and I have never been able to get past Old MacDonald Had a Farm [MB laughs], so I want to be able to do that. Uh I want to learn how to paint and draw, I've always loved that coming from engineering, but now I want to do it for, for fun. Uh love to travel, which we have, but now we can't unfortunately, because our parents are getting weak, we can't leave them. We have traveled all over the world: China, Ireland, Scotland,

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

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Africa, Brazil, Europe...all over Europe. So I'd like to do a lot more of that that we haven't seen. And I've never once got bored since I retired, saying what should I do today. There's always more to do than anything, life is so complicated in the U.S. So many things going on, still with the house and all that stuff, and phone calls to make, so a lot of the time goes off. There's always email.

**DC:** Do you still visit—do you still visit your family back in India?

**JM:** The only family I have now is my cousins, my aunts have all passed away. Uh I haven't gone in a long time, over 10 years now. Uh probably because, again, since our parents came here we've not been able to go. Uh they cannot travel, so my wife went alone once, and then I went alone once. In fact, the last time I went was to go and get them. I went alone and got their suitcases packed and everything, sold their apartment and came over here. And I haven't gone back there, and it's changed so much in the last 10, 12 years, people tell me it's like a different city completely. And I'd love to go back and visit sometime, which we will.

**DC:** So how involved are you with the Zoroastrian community in Houston?

**JM:** Quite involved, uh sometimes more so than I'd like to be. But when you're in a volunteer organization, they somehow suck you in [laughs], and all your time is gone. And uh I'm, I'm, I'm on the Zoroastrian Association of Houston Library Committee, lots of work to do there, doing their website, constructing the website, and writing newsletters every month and stuff like that. I'm also on the Board of— Directors of the World Zoroastrian Chamber of Commerce. [coughs] So that takes up a lot of my time. I teach SAT classes uh in the December timeframe, for free of course. Um I do—and I take part in plays and other different programs and stuff, so it's fun.

**MB:** So when you first moved to Houston, how did you first start meeting other Zoroastrians?

**JM:** We moved to Houston because we knew some people already, who moved from Detroit and other places, we had friends already. And we had come to Houston a couple of times before that. And also there's a there was a North American—no there was World Zoroastrian conference held in Houston. And I came here in 2000, about two three months before I was ready to retire. My first choice was Florida—I wanted to go to the beach. And I said 'I can't keep sitting there and watch the waves come in every day and do nothing else' and uh so—and we had friends here and social life was still important and all that. So. So. And they did such a good job, that community did such a good job at the world conference that we thought this would be a nice place to, to be. My kids were gone at that time; we were empty nesters so it didn't matter.

**DC:** So where in Houston do you live right now?

**JM:** I'm in Sugar Land.

**DC:** Oh okay.

**JM:** Sugar Land. I love Houston—it's a tremendously cosmopolitan place, city. It's—in some ways it's a cleaner, quieter version of Bombay, where I grew up, so—I have never regretted my decision to come to Houston. Even though it was a big shock to people in Detroit when I told them. 'So you're retired, where are you going to go?' And I said 'I'm going to Houston.' And he says 'What?' Probably the first guy from Ford Motor Company. 'Why Houston? What's in Houston?' [laughs] Houston really has a—doesn't have that good a reputation uh that it should, that it deserves, you know, as a cultural city and everything it has going for it. It's known mostly as an oil town by people who are not knowledgeable. And I appreciate Houston more after I moved in here than before... So I, I often wonder what my life would have been like if I had stayed back in

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

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India, and where my children would be now, you know. The life story of [inaudible word] might be completely different. Um I guess human nature is such that you want to be remembered, and maybe this will help somebody later on—the—some events that change the course of history, I haven't changed history that much. But at least uh for my children and grandchildren, this was something that happened which has—is going to affect their lives quite a bit. And uh I hope it's useful for them to understand where they came from and what happened uh years and years ago and when it all started for them.

**DC:** Uh, I just have like a random question.

**JM:** Of course.

**DC:** Uh do you still keep in touch with like, your friends you made from your college days? Like, the MIT network kind of?

**JM:** Yes, yes, but not a whole lot. A lot of people uh from MIT went back to their own countries. It was a big cosmopolitan crowd. People went back to Argentina, and France and Australia, people from all over the world. So it was very hard to keep in touch, remember those days right after I graduated there was no email, no nothing, no Facebook. But at reunions, when MIT has its 25<sup>th</sup> reunion, or 50<sup>th</sup> reuni—not 50<sup>th</sup> gosh no—it's the only time you get to know people. Unfortunately I missed the 25<sup>th</sup> reunion, at that time I was not in the country. But uh—I have—and you know of people because their name comes up and they say 'oh I remember Arthur Gibson and I remember John Boddon' and so on. But I've not really—nobody's really kept in touch on a frequent basis...School more so—High school more so than here, because there was a big reunion there and I happened to be in India at that time so—people change so much after 25, 50 years, you can't recognize them anymore.

**MB:** So I had a question um...

**JM:** Yeah?

**MB:** You said you were involved with the World Zoroastrian Chamber of Commerce, so what exactly is your role there? What does the Chamber of Commerce do?

**JM:** We plan events. We plan—we try to do things for the community that we think would help from a business perspective. Um we do coaching and mentoring to youngsters who are getting ready for college, um and for people who are graduating from college, looking for a job, coaching them in interview skills and job hunting and all that kind of stuff. Um we bring all kinds of speakers to uh to Houston, to address the community on various topics. But all business—related somehow, it all has to get back to uh how we can make a buck some way or another, because it's about commerce.

**MB:** Cool.

**DC:** All right. Do you have any more questions?

**MB:** I'm good.

**DC:** So I think we can just end with the question, uh: what would you want to impart about your immigrant experience to the next generation?

**JM:** My experience is done. Uh if mine—someone down the line has an immigration experience like mine, it won't be as radical a change now, because the world is getting to be a much smaller place. Uh uh what I would



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

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like to say is that uh, uh the hard work has been done. We are now in the most fantastic place we can, we can be, the land of opportunity, land of the free and all that. And um while they can look back and be thankful that they got the opportunity to be in this great country, they, they can also do for their children something that changes their lives for the better. And uh whatever is in their power to do at that time, maybe relocating to a different country, it may be staying here, doing whatever helps them.

**DC:** Alright then.

**JM:** I don't know what else to say.

**MB:** [laughs]

**DC:** Alright then—thank you!

**MB:** Thank you!

**JM:** Thank you.