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ORAL HISTORY OF HOUSTON PROJECT

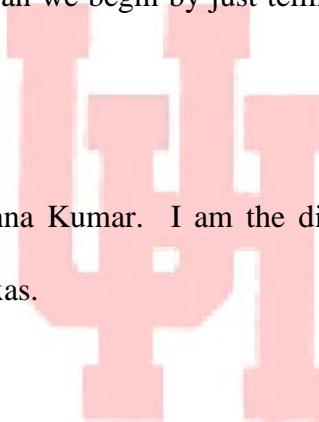
Interview with: Rathna Kumar

Interviewed by: Uzma Quraishi

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Transcribed by: Suzanne Mascola

UQ: Oral history interview of Rathna Kumar at her studio in Sugar Land, Texas, August 2, 2007. Interview conducted by Uzma Quraishi for the Center for Public History at the University of Houston. Can we begin by just telling who you are, your name and what you do now in Houston?



RK: Sure. My name is Rathna Kumar. I am the director of the Anjali Center for Performing Arts in Houston, Texas.

UQ: O.K., and what is Anjali?

RK: Anjali Center for Performing Arts is, as the name indicates, an institute of arts learning where we teach classes in classical and folk dances of India, vocal music, percussions, and periodically workshops by visiting artists.

UQ: Now, we are going to go way back. You can tell about your childhood - where you grew up, what your childhood was like, your parents, things like that.

RK: I was born and raised in Chennai in South India to a family of artists, very well-known artists. My mother and my aunt are reknowned musicians, singers and my father was a hero in films before I was born and stopped once he got married. And my grandfather, my great uncle, all of them are extremely well-known poets that have been honored and awarded by the president of India. So, I came into that family. So, I guess it was not surprising that I took to the arts rather than the sciences, though my father wanted me to become a doctor. I failed him in that poor thing. I studied dance just because my mother, who loved dance more than she did music, she wanted to . . . I guess, a frustrated person. Not frustrated but, you know, she wanted to learn dance very badly, was not allowed in those days because they were very conservative, and her mother put her into music rather than dance. But I guess that desire stayed with her. So, when she had a daughter, she decided that, you know, I should not be denied that opportunity to learn this beautiful artform. So, it was more her realization of her dream.

My father was very keen that all his children should get a good education, so we all went to college. I got a master's in English from a very reputed college. Madras University is supposed to be one of the best in India so I am very proud of my education, my academic background. And when I came here, I actually got into the Ph.D. program in English at Rice University but then I started weighing my options in life and wondered what I was going to do with my English because in India, I taught English in college but when I came here, the scenario changed so I decided that I grew up with this art form constantly with me from age 4 and it became my staff in life and it became more important to me than anything else so what I started in childhood in India, I brought with

me to this country and that is what I am continuing to do. So, that is my link with my childhood.

UQ: When you were in India, was there a portion of your childhood or even through high school and college, that you didn't dance?

RK: Oh my God, no! I guess except when I was sick or something. And most of the time, even days when I was mildly sick, I continued to dance.

UQ: But your parents really didn't encourage you to pursue it professionally? It was . .

RK: Oh no, they did. My mother was, you know, all out. I don't know whether she really cared too much whether I did well in school or not but she certainly was very concerned how well I danced and she made sure that I practiced. And I was always quite passionate about it. There was something about it, from my childhood - I don't know what it was that I enjoyed so much just being on stage and performing that I guess it was a natural thing for me to just enter into. And I was a professional dancer as a child. I acted in some movies as a kid. I was a child artist. And I guess had I stuck to it, I may have just been in the movies but I was not too interested in the movies. I was more interested in studying and in dancing. So, I gave up one and just continued . . . my dance was always, always there. I don't ever remember not dancing.

UQ: Did the practices ever feel like a burden to you?

RK: No, but when I was young, I guess like all kids, I wanted to go out with my friends on weekends and I would throw tantrums because my father would say, "No, you have to go to dance class," and I would be very upset. And then, I remember him scolding me one time, saying, "Do you even realize what you have? God has given you a gift, a talent, and you are making a big fuss about it? You can see the movies some other time. You don't need to go only today. But you have a performance and if you don't practice and you get a bad name, then I am not going to let you dance. So, you have a choice - you want to just quit dancing?" I said, "No, I don't want to quit dancing but I want to go to the movie." And he said, "No, in life you have to make choices. Your friends don't dance so it is OK for them but you dance and it is something different." So, I guess I was upset when it happened. Then, I would go to the class and I would forget everything. It didn't matter to me. I didn't care about the movie anymore.

UQ: You said that your mother and so many members of your family were well-known in the artistic fields. Can you mention some of their names?

RK: Yes, my mother, who is here in this country with us. Her name is Anasuya Devi and my aunt who is here right name, her name is Sita Devi, and they were known as . . . just because I think there were two vowels . . . Sita ends with an A and Anasuya begins with an A, so they would be called Sitanasuya. So, people always refer to them, though

my mother is older . . . so they would [say] “Sitanasuya Sitanasuya,” you know, like making it one long word. People still talk about them because they were the first women, I guess in India, to have done extensive research in traditional folk music which the classicist shunned saying, “Oh, it is just folk.” But then, when they started doing the research and my aunt actually did her master’s and her thesis was on folk music and all the classical music which is based on how certain *ragas*, as we call them, *rag*, were inherent in folk songs and classical music, the formal classical music came later and the folk music was the original form of singing by unlettered people who had no training. And the classical music was by thinking minds who gave it format. So, she connected it and she had illustrated with many songs that sounded so classical and sung by ordinary people. So, then people started noticing so they became a regular fixture and all the big, big events all over the country including presidents and prime ministers. So, I used to tag along with them as a kid and enjoyed hanging around sometimes just standing, insisting on standing behind them and singing all the songs with them.

UQ: What about your father? What is his name?

RK: My father passed away many years ago and his name was Giri. My brothers have taken that last name, my father's first name as their last name. He was a very good looking man, had a very deep and beautiful voice. He was a good singer and he was a radio announcer, talk show host and wonderful actor both on stage and . . . in those days, there was no television, so a lot of plays took place on the radio. So, there were a lot of

oral plays rather than visual. So, he was very well known for those because, you know, he had such a beautiful voice.

UQ: You had mentioned earlier that the society was a little conservative, or your family was more conservative. What did you mean by that?

RK: Well, because in the south, dancing was done by women for a long time in the temples. They were called temple dancers. Unfortunately, what happened was that certain patrons coming to the temple, devotees who were well-to-do, solicited the favors of some of these dancers who were very good-looking, very knowledgeable scholars in music and dance and maybe some of them succumbed to that, to these advances. And though the women did not like go around with the different men, they stayed true to this one man, but most of these men were already married, had families, so they became mistresses, like second wives as they said but they were not legal wives. So, they started being ostracized by society and they were all dancers. They were the temple dancers who dedicated their life to the temples, to the worship of God but because of what happened in their personal lives, they were kind of booted out of the temple and they were looked down upon and then people started telling their daughters, "I do not want you learning from this woman. She is a woman of ill repute." But really, they had not done anything wrong. I mean, they stayed true to this one man. They never married anyone else. They bore children only to this one man and remained true to him. But their reputations had already been soiled and as a result, dancing came to a standstill for a while and women in

the south were not allowed to learn dancing because *bad* women danced. If you danced, you became a bad woman. And it was about 60, 70 years of status quo there.

UQ: From when to when?

RK: This was the late 19th to early 20th century it was like that, like almost early - 1930s, 1940s, until then, it was like that. Then, there was this wonderful lady from an upper caste South Indian family who did the first shocking thing by marrying an Englishman 20 years older than herself, then traveled the world with him, saw Anna Pavlova during dance and wanted to study ballet because it was so beautiful, then Anna Pavlova told her, "Why do you need to study ballet? Study your own dance. It is so beautiful – even better than ours." And then, she came back and at age 30, she started studying Indian classical dance - people thought that she was crazy and that she was bad to do this kind of thing but really, she blazed a trail. She went through some hardships but she helped every single woman who was dancing today. It was a big time to her. And this institution, it is called Kalakshetra, it is a big school. It means "the abode of arts." So, it is well famous.

UQ: What was this woman's name?

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RK: Her name was Rukmini Arundale but people called her Rukmini Devi because her husband passed away and she dedicated herself full-time to this. She is known as Rukmini Devi. And she passed away some years ago.

UQ: Did you know her?

RK: Yes, I knew her and had the honor of meeting her. She was the head of the Vegetarian Congress and she had come to Houston a couple of times. My husband and his friends, including Prabha Bala's husband, they all owned the first Indian restaurant in Texas called Maharaja. And at that time, Rukmini Devi and a big delegation had come to have dinner there. So, I had personally served her and taken care of her. So, that was a great honor.

UQ: Backing up to your days in India, you had attained a master's degree in English. At what point did you get married or was marriage not then? Did you do some other things, pursue some other . . .

RK: Actually, I was not very keen on getting married. I was very happy with my dancing, with my work. Maybe I was spoiled, being very free and not being told to do this, to do that. I enjoyed my work.

UQ: Did you have brothers and sisters?

RK: Four younger ones. I was the oldest.

UQ: Girls? Boys?

RK: Two brothers and two sisters. Except for one sister who is now the assistant station director for the national television based in Chennai, all the others are here in the United States. So, I was blissful in my single state. I think my parents were getting a little frustrated. They kept . . . "Once you are past 22, 23 in India, they think that you are an old woman," and I was already like 25 or 26, 27. My mother was really despairing. I kept going. I told her, "I do not want to get married. I think I am quite happy just being a dancer. I just want to dance. That is all I want to do." And then, it so happened that my husband came along. I was concerned about marrying an unknown quantity, some stranger who probably would turn around and tell me later on, "I don't want you to dance." Then, what would I do? Stay in the marriage or tell him, you know, "Go fly a kite - I am not going to give up my dancing for you?" So, I had to think of if I did get married, I would only marry someone I knew and someone who had similar ideas, similar tastes. So, that is why when he came along, I said, "Yes, O.K."

UQ: How old were you, if you don't mind me asking?

RK: No, not at all. I was 28, and it was late according to my mother. But I thought I was only ready then and not before.

UQ: And by that time, you were done with school obviously?

RK: I was teaching. I was done with my masters before I turned 21 and I started teaching right away.

UQ: So, all those years, you had been teaching English?

RK: Yes, I was teaching for 7 years and then I actually got other jobs. I did some exams and got a job as an officer in one of the biggest banks there. And, you know, the starting salaries were all way more than I was going to be making through my dance or teaching. And I got a job as a producer for national television. I probably would have been some big shot somewhere in India by now but I kept worrying about what will happen to my dance, what will happen to my dance? Will I be able to dance at all if I get into these jobs? They will take up so much time that I will not be able to perform anymore, I will not be able to go to dance class and spend hours there. So, you know, I had to make a choice. So, I got through every exam, was selected for everything, and didn't take up a single thing. The only thing I took up was I got a scholarship for dance which paid a pittance but I was very happy with that. So, I guess, you know, I was just happy doing dancing and the other things, you know, just to make my father happy, I

would do this and do that and then I would quit because I didn't like it. So, 7 years was spent doing this and still continuing to dance. And then, I got married and came here and continued to dance.

UQ: So, when you say that you danced, clarify that. You danced where? For whom? Did you travel a lot for dancing?

RK: All over the world, I performed. I performed at different venues. I performed for prestigious organizations, events like big-time . . .

UQ: In India, you mean?

RK: Oh, all over India. I performed in Germany and France and Austria and Italy, Singapore, Malaysia, Sri Lanka . . .

UQ: Different groups would invite you?

RK: Right. I was invited. I was a solo dancer. I didn't dance with other people. I was invited myself so I performed extensively and enjoyed that. So, that is why I didn't want to be stuck in one job thinking that I can't go anywhere.

UQ: Did you have an agent to handle this?

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RK: No, the idea of agents didn't exist in India. I don't know if it still does but definitely not then. No.

UQ: So, you received letters? There wasn't internet, there wasn't that kind of . . .

RK: Right, in those days because even before we had a telephone, people would write letters and later on, people would call and ask and ask my mother, you know, "We would like your daughter to come perform."

UQ: Were you still living with your parents at that time?

RK: Oh, yes. It is India. You don't leave your family. You always stay with your . . . yes.

UQ: O.K., and so you are still in Chennai this whole time?

RK: Yes. And Chennai is still home when I go back from here. We have a flat there so I go back to Chennai. After 32 years, I finally filed for [American] citizenship. I came with a green card in 1975 and never changed.

UQ: Really?

RK: Never.

UQ: Why?

RK: I did it because the fee was going up the next day.

UQ: Practical reasons.

RK: Very practical reasons. Saving myself \$275. But I could have done it for \$20 if I had decided to do it 27 years ago.

UQ: Why didn't you want to accept American citizenship all those years?

RK: I don't know. I keep going back every year to India. Sometimes like 2, 3 times a year. Maybe I was hanging onto something. I actually had toyed with the idea of going back and I had tried talking my husband into going back because my kind of profession, definitely India is the place. I cannot say that I have regretted being here because I have done wonderful things here and this city and this country have been very, very kind to me. But still, you know, as a performer . . . see, but my performances have completely come down. I am not a performer anymore - I am a teacher and that is not something that I wanted to be. I wanted to be a performer. I *was* a performer and I came here at the

peak of my career. So, it was very hard, that shift in my focus. So, that is the reason why I kept thinking I'll go back when I am still young enough and do a lot of dancing. Then, you know, you have children and your children grow roots here and what do you do? You cannot uproot.

UQ: It sounds difficult, very difficult. So, you came here in which year?

RK: 1975, August 17. I landed in Washington, D.C.

UQ: And then, from there, straight to Houston?

RK: Yes. And I was received there by one of my school mates who works for the World Bank and she came to the airport with this . . . I still have it . . . gift that she came with. She welcomed me with this gift. It was a musical thing that you turn and there is the little bird singing and it is a beautiful tune. It always reminds me of the warmth and love with which I was received here and it made a lot of difference. I guess if I had come to an unknown place and then searching around and not knowing where I was going, nobody to help me, put me on another flight - it would have been difficult. But the fact that I was received by a friend, it was like an auspicious beginning.

UQ: So, you'd come to Houston. What did you plan on doing being that you were, as you said, at the peak of your career and your performance?

RK: Well actually, I had applied prior to that for a master's in theater at U of H and I had been accepted but I didn't want to start right away. I wanted to see what I wanted to do and so I deferred it. And then, I kept looking around. Then, before I knew, I had all these mothers calling me constantly saying, "Oh my God" . . . because they saw me perform. As soon as I arrived here, there was some event taking place. The [Indian] ambassador was visiting from Washington, D.C. and so I was the only dancer around. So, they asked me to perform. People were shocked. They thought I was just a very casual dancer. But then, I was a professional dancer who had come from India so they were stunned. They said, "We didn't know that your caliber was like this. We thought you were just doing it for fun." And so they said, "We want our children to learn." And I kept telling them, "No, not now. I need to find out what I want to do with my life." And I kept getting calls every day, every day, every day, from morning to night, there were people calling. Some of them were very . . . they were pursuing me with a tenacity that I could not resist. So, after a while, I kept thinking, O.K., really, what do I want to do? I have come armed with all this knowledge. I need to do something with it.

My teacher, before leaving, I went to take . . . I had two teachers for two different styles of dance. I went to take their blessings before leaving because I wanted always to feel that they were with me any time I was dancing. And one of them told me something, he said, "You know, according to our religion, knowledge is not something you should take with you to the grave. Money and knowledge are not something that you are going to be able to do anything with after you are dead. While you are alive, distribute them.

Money as well as knowlege, you need to give them away. You cannot keep hoarding them because you will get nothing out of it." And he said, "It is a sin not to pass on knowledge." I don't know why I remembered that. I said, "O.K, then." He blessed me and told me, "Don't keep this to yourself. Spread it everywhere." I said, "O.K., then, I need to do something about it," and that is when I decided O.K., I will.

UQ: So, you had never taught dance prior to this?

RK: Only I used to assist my teachers. Every now and then, they would say, "Here, help this child. She has just started." So, we would get up and show. All of us are trained to do that, to help younger ones who just joined.

UQ: So, you hadn't really taught professionally as far as being a teacher?

RK: No.

UQ: Did you have somewhere in the back of your mind this fear that you weren't going to get to perform once you came here? That must have . . .

RK: No, actually, I was performing quite a bit.

UQ: You still were?

RK: I was still at . . . I guess, at the prime, it was, for me a workout. I would practice every day on my own and I had all my music with me so I was teaching and I was performing and I was traveling a lot and performing even here. As soon as I came, a few months after I came, I went on a tour where I went to Chicago and performed in Urbana, Indiana. And then, I performed in other places. Then, I went to Europe from here, performed on a European tour. No, I was performing quite a bit.

UQ: O.K., so that didn't end?

RK: No, and I kept going back to India to perform, too. I still keep getting invitations. I still perform in India. So, I kind of reduced my performances because, you know, as you get older, it is meant for nice-looking young people to dance so I don't do that because I have students who are way better, so I allow them to do all the dancing.

UQ: So, this is before you had kids, I am assuming?

RK: No, I continued dancing even after. 28 days after a C-section, I flew to Chicago and performed. I had a little baby, nursing him. [laughs] I am a crazy woman!

UQ: Yes, I couldn't even walk after I had mine so you are good. Tell me what it was like, your life after you came here. What was Houston like, I guess I should say, for you?

RK: I am very happy that I came to Houston because the people were very warm. The community was very small when I came. There were maybe 400, 500 Indians. I don't think there were more than that. It was a very small community. Everybody knew everybody else. There was no north, south, east, west. No differences. It was just a very close-knit community. They would have movies at the University of Houston and we would take bed sheets to cover windows with tape so that the sunlight wouldn't come in. It was a lot of fun. There was just one single grocery store.

UQ: Where was that?

RK: J Store. And Rupa became like everybody's friend. And not all the groceries were available but, you know, who cared? With limited resources, we were able to have lunches and dinners and meet at one another's houses and everybody was very relaxed. I was fortunate. I know other people came here not knowing anyone but when I came here, I already had a few friends. And besides that, we were not staying on our own. We were staying with a couple. They also were newly married and sometimes I feel bad that we did that. But they were very insistent because Venkat—that is the person's name—Venkat and my husband, Anil, were roommates. So, when Venkat got married and Anil wanted to move, Venkat said, "No, I don't want you to go anywhere." And then, we got married very soon after. So, they insisted that we stay with them for a while. But I felt very bad. After a while, I told my husband, "They are also newly married. We shouldn't

be with them," so we moved to an apartment. But see, I had someone. She would do the cooking, I would do the cleaning. And I didn't know any cooking, so it helped.

UQ: It was a good situation.

RK: I was very happy. Not just at that - I was very homesick, too. Very homesick. I had never left home for a very long period. The only time I had gone away was like almost one year I spent in France and England and I was performing, I was in a television film. It was all dance-related. I did get homesick then every now and then but then I knew I was going back. But this was on a more permanent [basis] and I didn't know when I was going back. Any little thing would trigger off a memory and boo-hoo, I would be crying. There was no stopping me. And my husband got frustrated not knowing what to do with me. He would bring me all my favorite kind of music, those long playing records - the LPs from J store, whatever was available so I would be happy. And I would listen to the records and I would cry more! So, it took a while for me to adjust myself. During the day, I was fine. In the evenings, I would remember my family and cry and I would call. Any time I could, I would call and talk to everybody.

UQ: Where did you live? Whereabouts with the roommate couple?

RK: In their house. They still live in the same house in West University.

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UQ: Were there a lot of Indians in that area?

RK: No.

UQ: Was there an area of town at that time where Indians lived predominantly? Now, you can say Sugarland, you can say Southwest Houston.

RK: Sugarland didn't exist. Actually, past Fondren and all that, there were lots of places which were not developed. I guess we can say that more Indians lived there in that area off South Braeswood, Holcombe, Bellaire - that area. Many people lived there because it was close to the Medical Center. Shell Oil had a thing there. And most people worked downtown because I don't think there were offices elsewhere. So, it was the heart of the city. And so, that is where we were. That is where the restaurant was, close to Rice University so that was probably where most of the Indians lived.

UQ: Where was your first condominium?

RK: First we moved to an apartment, Napoleon Square Apartments. I still remember. Off Renwick or Rampart or something. Later on, I heard that it has gone to the dogs. It has become delapidated, dangerous, and so I am glad we got out in time. Our first purchased condominium was on Bissonnett, a little past Fondren on Bissonnett. We loved it. It was very exciting, you know, that first buy.

UQ: Was that kind of the fringes of Houston at that time or was it still somewhat central?

RK: It was still very much . . . it was before Fondren. It was near, I think, Renwick, Bellaire, Bissonnett, in that area. It was not too far. I don't think it exists anymore. I don't know what has happened. That whole area looks so different. I don't recognize the city anymore, you know. Things are so different. Then we bought our first house, it was across the street from Houston Baptist University, just behind - not on the main road but the parallel street.

UQ: Were there any Indians in that area?

RK: No.

UQ: How did you make your decision to which areas? Was it because of his job?

RK: Well, at that time, my husband was working at Texas Instruments and I got a job at the Houston Public Library which was off of Fuqua. So, it was easier for him but, you know, I don't know why we chose that. It just happened that our realtor, who happened to be a friend's wife showed this. We saw several houses and we just liked this house.

Then we moved to Westbury which is where I had both my children. It was special that way.

UQ: When did you have your first and second . . .

RK: Sons, both of them. The older one was born in 1978 and the younger one in 1981.

UQ: And during this time, I guess you came here, you were debating teaching and you started teaching when? This must have been founded in that timeframe?

RK: October 1975. I landed in August and I was hounded . . . August, I arrived here and then I think one week later, they were having a celebration of India's independence one week after I arrived and I performed. And from that time on, it was . . . and I waited because October, there is a special day which is a very good day, so I said I am only going to start on that day. I was very insistent because I had started learning on that day when I was 4, so I insisted and I started on that day. And, you know, I guess it was a good day because it has come quite far by God's grace.

UQ: Is this in your home that you began your classes or did you rent a property?

RK: No, I have never taught at home. Only for a short while when the building we were renting was flooded and they were renovating it. That was the only time I taught at

home. Otherwise, I never taught at home. I was always teaching in . . . the restaurant that my husband and his friends had, after hours, we would clear all the furniture and make a big space and that is where I would teach.

UQ: And how many students would you say you had in those initial . . .

RK: The very first class I taught, there were 2. And then, the next class, I think I had about 10. And then, the next class, I had about 15, 16 or something. And, of course, you know, it is not a sustained thing because when children find out that it is very hard on the body and you have to work hard and you are expected to go home and practice, not everybody was keen on doing all those things. They thought you just come and move your arms and legs and go on stage, dress up. So, I had some quitters who I meet occasionally now and then and they say, "I wish I had not given up. I should have stuck to it. I wish my mom had told me not to quit," and different things. And I keep thinking I am very fortunate that my mom didn't allow me to quit. I don't know what she saw in me at that time because I was too young and I don't know whether I had talent or not but obviously, she saw something that she felt she had to encourage and support and nurture. So, I am glad.

UQ: So, from the beginning, you were teaching the children of this young group of the Indian community that lived here? Were there people who were from different language groups?

RK: Actually, I was also teaching Leisure Learning classes at the University of Houston and I was teaching there. And I had all my husband's friends' wives - all of them young women including Prabha herself. There were a whole bunch of them who all started dance because they all wanted to learn when they were younger and this was an opportunity. And then, I had met some young ladies from Rice University and they were non-Indian and they wanted to learn, too. Then, I was invited to Austin to teach workshops and, of course, there were Americans who were . . . we used to come from there to learn the . . . so I did have non-Indian students from the beginning.

UQ: Can you talk about the growth of Anjali - what it was to what it has now become?

RK: I guess it is like the city. It has grown. It has grown a lot. The city has given me a lot. Opportunities to grow. Lots of awards, recognitions. I owe a lot of happiness to Houston, where the school has flourished because in 32 years, we have had innumerable landmarks. Not just that it was the first school in Texas. It was the first school in the entire southwest of the United States and the second school in the U.S. because there was only one other in New York. And historically, this was just the second [Indian] dance school in this country. And the non-Indian community of Houston was quick to recognize that this is something which is enhancing the culture scene and that it was the bringing in, this diversity element, and it was good for the city. Not bad in any way. So, way back in 1981 was the first time when Jim McCann was the mayor, that I received an

award. I was 9 months pregnant and they weren't sure whether I would be in the hospital delivering or on my feet. And I received my first award from the mayor of Houston for contribution to performing arts here in the city. So, that was a first step. Then, what is now called the Houston Arts Alliance . . .

UQ: Did someone nominate for the first award?

RK: I guess so. Yes, I was nominated. We had an honorary counsel general at that time, Dr. Harb Herr, who was . . . actually, maybe he is retired . . . a professor at the University of Houston. I think he was one who had nominated my name because I was performing at the University, I was being invited . . . vice-profs had a gathering and they wanted to highlight an international art form and I was invited to perform. So, different things like that. So, there were a lot of . . . I was kind of blending myself into the mainstream. So, other people saw my dance. 1975 . . . in those days that what is now the Houston International Festival was then the Main Street Festival. It took place on Main Street. And it was not in April or May but it took place a little later. And so, as soon as I arrived, that was one of the first things - I performed at the Main Street Festival. I heard about it and I just called and said, "Hey, I would love to dance." So, I have a picture of myself dancing on Main Street on a little stage. And until now, that chain has not been broken -- 32 years we have been, every single year participating in this festival.

UQ: Still?

RK: Still, except the number of performers keeps increasing. We had, I think, almost like 75 or so dancers this year which, economically, it is good for the festival because all the parents buy tickets, and the parents, grandparents, cousins, friends - they all buy tickets. And they all buy tickets and go. So, the participants are the only ones who are given free tickets. So, it is good. So, I keep encouraging a lot more students to participate. So, every year, the number of performers grows which means, you know, our school is growing, too.

I started with two the first time and then it increased and it was just one location and I received the award. Today, we have several locations where we teach. I have my senior students who have graduated. They are doing their Ph.D., working at Baylor, studying law - all kinds of things, but they continue to dance and they teach classes. They have integrated themselves, you know, so well. They are able to . . . they are dual nationalities of being born Indian but, like any other American kid, you talk to them, they sound just as American as anyone else, but they are able to balance themselves so well. And they wear blue jeans or something and go off to their labs in t-shirts. And then, they come here looking all Indian and they are completely different and they teach and they instill the same . . . they tell their students to be respectful and they have rules and regulations in the class. No chewing gum - all kinds of things. And they are able to balance these two different identities perfectly and they are teaching now. So, I have when I started as a teacher, with just a handful of students and now, those students, some of them have graduated, some of them have become professional dancers in New York

and California and they have their own dance companies now, some of my students. This was the seed I sowed in their lives and they are now . . . I cannot even tell you how happy I am that they have taken this, they have gone way beyond me. They have gone and studied master's: they have master's in fine arts with dance as their subject. And they have formed dance companies.

UQ: Have they gone to India to dance as well?

RK: They have performed in India.

UQ: That is the real test is when you go back there.

RK: Right. Oh, they have performed in India. They have a very good name. They still mention my name as their teacher. I am so moved that they remember. And some of them who have stayed back here, still continuing their studies and working here have come back to teach in their alma mater. So, they have that sense of loyalty. Every year, I bring in professional teachers from India with a work permit legally. So, they come here for one year and we bring the people with the same style so there is no change. So, there is a continuity because 365 days of the year, the classes are on. They never, never stop except long weekends or Christmas break because nobody is around. Otherwise, we don't stop the classes. It is open all the time. So, the fact that we have this building, I cannot believe that this was my dream. I used to think wherever . . . because we were

always renting places and small places and I used to think how nice if one day I could have my own place to teach. So, this is more than a dream. I never, never envisaged anything like this. So, this is something wonderful that we have, perhaps the only ones in Texas that actually have our own building and performing arts school.

UQ: You were mentioning how Houston recognized your contributions to the city.

Did they do the same in other ways as well?

RK: Yes, I received another award some years later. I have forgotten the year. And in the year 2000, I got a congressional recognition from Sheila Jackson Lee. And in 2002, my name was nominated to the Texas Womens Hall of Fame. I don't even know who sent it in. I didn't get the award but I got a recognition from the governor, Rick Perry. And then, in 2005, the Asian Pacific American Heritage Association which is quite a big thing, honored me with an award for contribution to Asian performing arts. The Metro gave me an award for outstanding Asian in 2000. I have been a teaching artist with the young audiences of Houston for more than 15 years and the only Indian dancer. And then, I also have been . . . there was a great organization one time called the Texas Institute for Arts and Education which was very strong. And I received their Apple Award which is for outstanding contribution to arts and education. And I guess because of all these things that I am involved with using my art form as a tool to connect . . .

[end of tape #1]

I was saying that because of my involvement with the arts, performing arts and using my particular art form as a means to connect, to educate and to inform, especially the younger generation, non-Indian. I was invited . . . I received an Arts in Learning grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, not me personally but our school, to work with after school programs and teaching children because kids go to school and they come back and they need something after that, right? So, we had after school special summer programs where we had an like extended day thing through the whole day where we taught children yoga and dance and a little bit of history and also improvisation.

UQ: So, you were going to the public school system . . .

RK: No, we had classes here. I have received other grants like from the Arts Council to work with physically challenged children in T.H. Rogers School because that school has the largest number of physically challenged students. So, one summer, entire summer, I spent working with these children using simultaneously one of their interpreters with sign language and I used the hand gestures of Indian dance which is also very stylized sign language. So, we juxtaposed it. And I was amazed at the quickness with which these children picked it up because they used sign language and I felt very good and they enjoyed themselves and I thought I was . . . I was happy that God gave me a chance to do something for these kids, something different in their lives.

But I was invited last year to Lisbon, Portugal by the UNSECO to give a keynote speech at the first World Conference on Arts Education. And I just returned a few days ago from Hong Kong where there was the first World Creativity Summit also, too, with Arts Education. And again, I was invited to give a keynote speech. And this is in connection with the formation of the World Alliance for Arts Education. And so, I am happy because, you know, it is not just me as a performer, me as a dancer, or a teacher but someone who has branched out into the world of educating through art and that is something that gives me immense pride. I have been able to give something back to this city and this state. You know, I have gained so much from them and I am happy I am able to give something back through my art because I have gone to so many inner-city schools the length and breadth of the city and I am very moved by the conditions in which many people live. And I open a new world to them when I go and use this. I know maybe it is a world of fantasy because it is something, it is an escape, but at the same time, it is a little bit of history, some art, and then I use the language, you know, it is called the Texas Essential Knowledge Skills. They are what they teach in schools. I used their curriculum, the materials that they work with, and use that, just translate it through my dance and use my dance as just an additional method for them to learn whatever they are already doing in school.

And I have learned how to look at dance in a different way. So, it has broadened my view of dance. I was very conservative when I came here. I was a classical dancer and I would not have . . . when my husband suggested modifications, I would look at him and say, "My God, that is unthinkable. I cannot. It is a sacrilege. I studied it this way

and I cannot budge past those parameters." But I have learned now that there are a lot of wonderful things you can actually imbibe from other cultures. I have worked with . . . I don't know if I would have had this opportunity had I just stayed back in India when I did because now, a lot of things are changing there. But then, I learned way earlier on to work with dancers from Africa, from Japan, from other countries, you know . . . Mexico . . . and we have done collaborative programs with these people. And I have come to love it so much that I am doing a special program. This has been 4 years . . . I have been thinking about it for 4 years. But it is a fellowship grant I have received from the Arts Alliance for a project that I am doing on September 3 at the Jewish Community Center which is called Complete. And it is about incomplete people, people with physical challenges. But it shows a very positive thing of how there have been examples of people rising way above these . . . we have shown the best examples, you know, from India and from here. It ends with the story of Helen Keller. But it is just a tribute to all these people to whom there are physical challenges. So, nondeterents and realizing their dreams. So, I am using African American drums and Indonesian gamelan music along with Indian percussions and Indian music, story telling, narration but there are different components to this. Some modern dance and some Indian classical dance. I would not have done this, 32 years ago, I would never even have thought about this. I would have been horrified. But today, I think my vision of dance has grown because of what I have seen here, what I have been exposed to, the kind of people I have met and the wonderful artists that have influenced me. And all this is because I am in this ambiance, atmosphere - the availability of these things here which I would not have had 32 years ago in India.

UQ: When you say "here," you mean Houston?

RK: In Houston. I have always lived in Houston. Houston is home. I don't think I would want to go anywhere else. My husband had an opportunity to move to Los Angeles to work for Magnavox but he sacrificed it because then, my school was already growing big and a lot of times, I felt guilty but then I am very happy because I think home is where the heart is and Houston is where I am happiest.

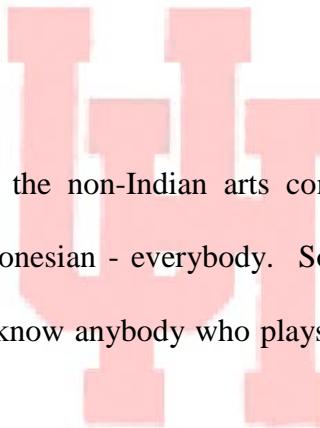
UQ: You don't think that your school or your vision could have been enhanced by going to LA?

RK: Perhaps it would have. I don't know. But then, I had already established myself here to uproot all this and then we start somewhere else, I would have wasted 10 years of . . . no, by then, my older one was . . . I had only been here for 6, 7 years, so it would have been difficult. I guess I could have done it if I had been forced into it.

UQ: You would prefer to stay. I was going to ask you how Houston has really helped in achieving all of these things that Anjali has accomplished. But I kind of feel like you have addressed a lot of that already.

RK: And I have had a lot of support even from the Indian community, from the arts community, people who believe in me, believe in my work and, you know, all of them have supported me in all my artistic activities. So, I have a family that is strongly supportive, very strongly supportive of all these things. So, Houston has nourished all my activities in a very positive way with a lot of good input from people of the community, all the communities that I work with.

UQ: And when you say the greater arts community, do you mean obviously outside of the Indian community?



RK: Yes, I work a lot with the non-Indian arts communities, a lot of them, and Chinese, African, Japanese, Indonesian - everybody. So usually when people want an artist, they call on us, "Do you know anybody who plays gamelan music?" I say, "Yes, of course."

UQ: Do you also work with the mainstream, I guess I should say the non-ethnic groups. Do you work with them in their arts performances or in their endeavors?

RK: Yes. Absolutely. One of my good students is performing the next weekend at the Wortham Center for Dance Houston which is an American organization. We are the only Indian performers. The others are all non-Indian. And then, we perform in the Miller Theater. We have a season actually. Ours was the very first Indian performing group

and organization to be featured at the Miller Theater. I was also on the advisory board so the Mayor had appointed evidently something that, you know, it is a recognition not of me but of my work. So, I was on their advisory board for 2 years way back. So, it was a long time ago. So, from early on, they have, I think, the non-Indian arts community has been aware of my contributions.

UQ: It sounds like you being a part of all of these different endeavors has really helped to shape Houston's acceptance and celebration of Indian dance. It is not just that you keep doing what you are doing and then they happen to recognize it, it is that you are a part of the system that is there and you help - as you said, you are on the board so you actually get to choose, O.K., we need to have this and we need to have that - put your input.

RK: Yes, I do think so. I taught Indian dance at the University of Houston for a couple of years when they had enough funds to have a different dance form in their department and for the past few years, from 2002, 5 years now, I have been teaching at Rice University. And it is taught as a credit course.

UQ: Through which department?

RK: The Lifetime Physical Activity. Dance is a part of the LPAP as they call it. It is called the Lifetime Physical Activity Program but they have Capoeira, they have Middle Eastern classical dance and they have Indian.

UQ: So, teaching here, teaching in different other venues as well and you're also are still traveling?

RK: I travel off and on but I try not to travel too much during the school year because I don't think it is fair for those children for me to go away. But my annual exodus is in December when I go to India. That is when I usually have performances or my students perform there.

UQ: I have just a quick question. Non-Indians, do they come to Anjali to take classes?

RK: Yes. I had a Chinese girl who is taking a break now because she was studying for some exam. I don't know what it is for. It is for some Gifted and Talented program. So, she was just taking a break during the summer. We have a Mexican child. We have a young American adult who loves it. She is an architect. She loves Indian dance. She is very good. And we have people from Bangladesh. And what is interesting is because dance is so beautiful, we do not teach any religion. We do not, at any time, make it sound like this is a Hindu fundamentalist activity or something, so we have a lot of . . . I have Christians, Muslims, Hindus, a couple of Buddhists, and they all learn. And they all learn

it because they think it visually a very beautiful art form. And we teach it that way - that it is an artistic exercise, that it is meant for you to express yourself and it is not necessary . . . it is not a prayer. It is an art form. That is why you perform it in venues which are open to the public. If it is a prayer, you just go sit in a place where you are by yourself to pray. So, because of the way it is performed and the way it is done now, it is appealing to a lot of people. It is amazing that all these non-Hindu students that I have are very, very good. Very good and very expressive. They seem to take it quite seriously which is heartening because I think, you know, that is how I visualize music and dance and painting and all of them - to have no linguistic, religious, social, cultural barriers of any sort.

UQ: O.K. Any boys in your classes?

RK: I have like 5 boys.

UQ: Still predominantly girls though, it sounds like?

RK: Yes, I am glad these 5 boys are brave because one boy, his mother brought his younger sister and he is 11 years old, he is not that young - he was watching and then he asked his mom, he said, "Do you think I can learn, too?" And she was quite amazed because she didn't expect it. And when he asked permission, she said, "Please do." And the boy is very good. He enjoys. He is in a class with many girls and he doesn't care.

UQ: Did your sons learn?

RK: My older one learned. There is a picture of him there. And he was very good but I think it was very hard on him. I guess I wanted him to be better than anyone else and he got very frustrated with me. He said, "I don't want to do it anymore. You are mean." That's OK. I didn't want to force him. But then, he was more into baseball as he was growing up and that became his life.

UQ: I think we have covered a lot. You gave me a lot of time. Is there anything else you would like to add before we close it?

RK: When somebody asks me, "Why did you keep your Indian passport," I was telling them, I said, I don't know why but everyone has to go one day and I said, you know, I don't know why but I feel somehow I should die in India. Not that I have a choice but I just keep thinking about it. And I said, you know, I don't want to die in an accident on the street or some horrible thing like that. I would just like to die performing, dancing. Well, you know, if I should die here, I would like to die in the Anjali Center teaching a class because somehow I feel that this is my life. It would be a fitting finale to what I have been doing. And I remember my kids used to accuse me when they got mad with me, "Mommy, you love your dance more than you love us." And sometimes I think, is that true? Maybe subconsciously it is true because, you know, I have made so many

sacrifices for my dance, have I made that many for my family? You know, you weigh the pros and cons and I think dance has always been like number one. So, I don't think that was a conscious thing. So, that is it.

I am very happy . . . this is a legacy that I know that I will leave behind in Houston. And I think the Anjali Center has like permanently changed the cultural map of Houston. In 1975 when we started because I didn't know which way to go. I had no idea of success or lack of it in the future but with no thought of that, I had started. I was not planning to make money out of this, nothing. I charged like \$10 a month. That is what I used to charge. A small amount. Even now, we don't charge that much. When I think of how I have paid \$35 for one-half hour of lessons for my children's piano and violin, I keep thinking for private lessons for 1 hour? I don't charge that. But then, it doesn't matter to me and there are lots of people who forget to pay, you know, don't pay for a few months and then later . . . but somehow, all that fades away because I keep thinking like any teacher, the reward is in seeing the results. You see someone, that one person who is just doing an outstanding job and is blossoming into a beautiful dancer and you see that as a teacher and you feel O.K., to heck with all the money. This is all that I wnat in my life. So, I am happy. Sometimes I am frustrated that I don't dance as much, I don't have that many opportunities, I don't have the motivation. I am getting older and it bothers me. But then, I keep thinking, no, but I have done things that I couldn't have done. How many people have I taught? More than 2,000. Maybe more than 1,000 definitely in 32 years. And I keep thinking, well, I have changed the lives of at least those people. I have

added something to it so when it is all said and done, I have had a satisfying life as a dancer and a teacher. I choreograph a lot and I love choreography. So, no complaints.

UQ: All right. Thank you so very much. That was a beautiful interview.

