

UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON
ORAL HISTORY OF HOUSTON PROJECT

Uday Mahagoakar
University of Houston Oral History Project

Interviewed by: Uzma Quraishi
Date: October 5, 2011
Transcribed by: Michelle Kokes
Location: Mr. Mahagoakar's home in Sugarland, Texas

UQ: Alright you can begin well by first telling who you are, a little bit about your background.

UM: Yeah my name is Uday Mahagoakar. Background wise I grew up in India and came to this country in 1970. I am... back in India I was a student, chemical engineering, bachelor's degree at IIT Kanpur in North India in UP and then in 1970 after I finished my bachelor's I came to this country and I was in the Master's program and subsequently later on in the Ph.D. program at the University of Houston in chemical engineering.

UQ: Okay and if you had to label yourself kind of for demographic purposes how would you label yourself? I am a...?

UM: An immigrant.

UQ: Okay.

UM: An immigrant who was more or less in the technical field in terms of education and occupation.

UQ: Okay do you consider yourself more Indian, more American?

UM: I would say it's both. I enjoy being part of both cultures and I find that a lot of richness in both cultures. I like both aspects.

UQ: So equal parts?

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UM: Yeah indeed.

UQ: Alright. What about your parents tell me about them, your mother, father what did they do?

UM: My father was also a chemical engineer and had actually a business manufacturing chemicals, a small business. He passed away I would say relatively young. He was in his 50s when he passed away. He had a heart condition so that didn't, that didn't... plus the fact that he would smoke a lot, so that didn't help. In those days if you recall there was not that much awareness of the bad effects of smoking so all that lead to sort of a not a very long life for him. But he enjoyed his work and he liked the business aspects of it plus the technical aspects of manufacturing chemicals. We lived in North India pretty much all my life that I was in India.

UQ: Okay what about your mother?

UM: My mother was basically a home maker and, in that sense fairly traditional. We came originally from Maharashtra but having settled in North India there was a change of culture for her and for my dad as well but my dad had also been a student in UP so he had assimilated to North India. For my mother it was more of an assimilation that happened after she got married. We had lots of good friends and so on in UP we lived in a city called Kanpur which is a big, very large city and there were lots of folks that sort of also had moved from Bombay and Maharashtra to Kanpur so we had a very large set of friends and we also had a lot of friends who were I would say indigenous folks from North India.

UQ: Did you ever travel back to Maharashtra to visit? Was there a reason to?

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UM: Oh yes, oh yes we would go there because a whole bunch of relatives lived there so we would go there all the time. We would go to Bombay all the time and by all the time I mean during vacations and so on.

UQ: Do you strongly identify with one more than the other?

UM: Culture wise? I identify myself more with North India since that's where I grew up. These days when I go to India, when I go every couple of years or so, go mostly to Bombay, Mumbai and... and also to Deli, but we don't go to Kanpur anymore because my family has subsequently moved away.

UQ: I see okay. What about your grandparents? What did your grandfather do?

UM: My grandfather was a forest ranger. He was spent a fair amount of time in Dehradun and he was I remember seeing some of the old pictures and he was in the (this was during the British days) he spent a lot of time in the National Parks or the state parks and he was I guess whatever the rangers responsibilities are and he was handling all of that.

UQ: Okay. What languages do you speak or dialects other than English?

UM: I speak Hindi, I speak Marathi and I speak English, three.

UQ: Okay and what about your children?

UM: Children speak only English.

UQ: English... do they understand some of the other?

UM: Little bit. They go to India once in a while and so they pick up a bit and they understand a little bit.

UQ: Okay. Can you describe your town... was it a town, a city where did you grow up?

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UM: Where I grew up, it was a big city.

UQ: Okay.

UM: Very large city, very industrial and I would say back... if you were making comparisons like something like Pittsburgh used to be in the old, old days with a lot of smoke and so on, a lot of industrialization before the pollution controls were put in. So it was kind of a city like that very large, a lot of leather industry, a lot of textile industry so very industrial but also at the same time quite polluted.

UQ: So it sounds like with that kind of a city a lot of people are migrating to the city for jobs?

UM: That is correct yes.

UQ: From just all over.

UM: Yes, right, yes indeed.

UQ: Okay what was your neighborhood like?

UM: A lot of the years that I lived in India I would say from the age of about seven to 21, well 7 to 16... at the age of 16, I went to IIT and hence I was in the dorms but 7 to 16 we were in this neighborhood that was very nice. It was basically a large what we used to call a bungalow with a big lawn in front and lots of trees and most of the houses were similar in terms of large yards, bungalows and fairly well spaced out from each other, very clean neighborhood, very nice.

UQ: Neighbors?

UM: Neighbors were...neighbors actually one side neighbors were American, one side the neighbors were British. Some of the other houses down the street they were like business folks a lot of business folks mostly not Indian but they were no I would say it

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was pretty diverse because even the Indians who lived in the neighborhood were from different parts of the country so it was all not necessarily all North Indians there were Parsees, there were Bengalis, there were other people from Maharashtra, Maharashtrians and also some people from UP, itself.

UQ: Okay.

UM: So prior to the age of 7 we lived in a more industrial area which is quite crowded and I have vague recollections of that. But as my father's business grew he was able to move to this other neighborhood which was much nicer.

UQ: Okay where did you go to school for these early years?

UM: I went to school in Kanpur the name of my school is Methodist High School and it was pretty much geared towards the British system of education and I think it was even affiliated with Cambridge in the UK so I, when I went for the year for the final school year exams it was like a board exam which was administered by a board in the UK.

UQ: Okay and were you at that school from your early grades until the end of high school?

UM: I would say from about the age of 8 or so to 16.

UQ: Okay and was it co-ed or boys only?

UM: It was co-ed.

UQ: The medium of instruction at the school?

UM: Was English.

UQ: And the teachers were they from India or did they come from abroad?

UM: The teachers were from India. Our principal was American but all the other teachers were from India.

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UQ: Was there some kind of religious instruction that was required?

UM: Yes there was, yes there was in the mornings we went to chapel, yes.

UQ: Okay. Let's talk about your expectations regarding the U.S. before you ever came here. So first of all had you ever heard of Houston? Well back up did you come to Houston immediately upon arrival in the U.S. or did you come from somewhere?

UM: No, I did I came to Houston immediately when I came and this was my port of arrival. Well I came, flew into New York and caught a flight right away into Houston.

UQ: And what year was that?

UM: 1970.

UQ: '70 okay.

UM: In terms of the U.S. I had of course we used to get American movies and American books that we would read as kids and so on so there was a lot of exposure from that standpoint to the U.S. I had... it was based on books and movies. When I went to IIT, which is the engineering college there, there was a much stronger exposure to the U.S. in the sense that a lot of the professors were American. There was a very strong consortium of American universities that was affiliated with our institute. So and even all of the Indian professors most of them had done their Ph.D.s here in the U.S. so there was a very strong kind of a U.S. exposure.

UQ: Okay.

UM: So that was from the age of 16 onwards to 21 with the 5 years that I was in engineering at IIT.

UQ: Okay and so had you heard of Houston?

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UM: In Houston during those 5 years I would say around the third or fourth year was when I heard of Houston and of course we also knew had heard about Houston more from the space program. But in terms of Houston as an oil city and a lot of chemical industry from that standpoint I got more of that exposure when I was in IIT and there were some folks who had studied in this area in Houston or around Houston at Texas A & M for instance and I heard more about them from about this area and had to offer beyond the space program.

UQ: Okay so you had sort of students who were who had studied at IIT Kanpur, they had come to Houston and returned and kind of word of mouth spread?

UM: No we had when I joined the IIT it was fairly new so I was I would say the 5th batch so there hadn't been enough, enough time had not elapsed for students to come to the U.S. and to come back to IIT Kanpur. Now there is there are lots of folks at IIT Kanpur who are professors who have, who were at IIT Kanpur (like I was) and then came to the U.S. and then back as professors. At that time most of it was from professors who had come to the U.S. but who had done their undergraduate education elsewhere, in India, because when they were that age there was no IIT at the time.

UQ: Okay did you know anything about the history of the U.S.?

UM: Yes but not a lot. Most of the history that we did back in India was English History and Indian History.

UQ: Sure.

UM: In fact we had two subjects in school one was called English History and one was called Indian History two separate subjects. So there was not a lot of exposure to the U.S. History.

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UQ: What kinds of things can you recall that you may have known at that time?

UM: Most of the things that we knew about the U.S. at the time were this was back in the 60's so it was the Kennedy era and we did get a lot of information and kind of exposure to that. The assassination of John Kennedy was also something that people talked about it here. Do you remember where you were when that came out and I also remember where I was when we heard about the assassination of John Kennedy so that was a pretty strong influence in terms of about the U.S. and subsequently the also were keyed into some of the other tragedies that happened, Martin Luther King and then Robert Kennedy. So those were the events more recent history I guess as opposed to some of the older history that were fairly well known within our sphere of influence.

UQ: Alright did you know I guess what was your expectation about coming to the U.S. did you have any kind of apprehension of how you would be received considering during that you were not American?

UM: I didn't have that much of an apprehension. I was... because I guess when you're young you probably just look at the bright side of things and so I actually did not have that much of apprehension or any apprehension and I had interacted with American faculty at IIT so I was fairly comfortable, although I would say that a lot of the American faculty at IIT were from the north, northern U.S. a lot from the Boston area, Princeton, New Jersey, some from Berkeley, California. So they were a bit apprehensive about my coming to Houston, to Texas. They... I felt a little bit of uneasy on their part. This was, if you will recall, this was a bit before 1970, '69 and so they felt that I was going to a place that was not as forward thinking as Boston was for instance or New York or California.

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UQ: What kinds of things did they say to indicate that?

UM: Well they would say, you know, not sure how advanced Texas is not sure whether they are still backward in their thinking so they... I noticed some apprehension and I was a bit surprised to me because for me everything was I viewed the U.S. as pretty much the same everywhere in terms of its culture, its attitude. I certainly had no idea of any of the nuisances and differences between the different parts of the country. But that was the only thing that I recall that I got from my conversations with the American faculty.

UQ: So you weren't really expecting those regional differences?

UM: That's correct.

UQ: In the U.S.?

UM: Although there were a couple of Indian faculty members who had come to A&M and they said that they were fine and they enjoyed the experience.

UQ: Okay. Did you know about... so you had some idea about current events in the U.S., political events, major kind of assassinations, you also had some idea that there were going to be some regional differences, did you know about the different ethnic groups here in the U.S.? Were you aware that for example there are Hispanic Americans here?

UM: No I was not.

UQ: Okay.

UM: I was, I was not that keenly aware of the different ethnic groups, Hispanic Americans and African Americans. I knew there were African Americans because we had certainly we had the knowledge about Martin Luther King and the assassinations and so on but certainly had no idea about what Hispanic Americans at all.

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UQ: Okay did you know there were other Asians here?

UM: No I did not. I did not know that there were others... I when I came here I was surprised to find a lot of Asians from China at that time all from Taiwan were here. There was a very sizable population. That was a revelation to me I did not know that.

UQ: Okay. Tell me about your arrival in Houston, what was that like, how did you get settled?

UM: Actually as a matter of fact somebody did come to pick me up at the airport when I arrived in Houston. My... one of my professors said, "My cousin lives in Houston and then he will come and pick you up." Which made it nice and I subsequently stayed there for a couple days or so.

UQ: Was he Indian?

UM: He's Indian yes, yes, Indian and his wife is American. So and then I had already signed up with the U of H dorms so in a couple days I had moved into the dorms. This was at U of H this would be the new dorms at the time Moody Towers so that's where I moved in.

UQ: Okay so you moved to Houston pretty close to the start date of the semester?

UM: That is correct yeah that is correct I moved, I came to Houston a couple days, moved into the dorms and the semester was getting started and so on so they were pretty much absorbed in the start-up activities, etc.

UQ: What were your initial impressions?

UM: I was enrolled in the Master's program, initial impressions was the Master's program most of a large set of students were foreign students, several from India, several from Taiwan, people from Latin America. There were a few American students but I

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would say a smaller percentage. So it surprised me that there was such a large percentage of foreign students within the graduate academic community. The faculty was pretty much all American at the time. Interestingly if you look at it now and go back at the faculty is as diverse as the student body was. But that time the new generation of students from India and other places was just coming into the graduate programs. Over the years all of those folks have of course received their Ph.D.'s etc. and so on. So now if you look at the departments many times you find that the head of the department is somebody from India or somebody from Pakistan or China. So you see a lot of diversity. There was not much diversity within the faculty ranks, a lot of diversity in the student ranks.

UQ: Well diversity it sounds like they had a lot of international students?

UM: Yes.

UQ: What about the American students was there diversity there as well?

UM: Yeah there were some American students who had come in from other universities in the north but it wasn't exactly like everybody was from Texas. So and the ones that came in from the north were equally surprised to see the culture in Texas and this was 1970 and they were, they felt it was quite different from what they viewed.

UQ: We will definitely return to that. So during that first semester as you are adjusting to life here what's your impression of America as a whole?

UM: I felt that America was certainly very advanced compared to what I had been used to in India, back in 1970 in those days there was a large gap between the U.S. and a large part of the world, especially in the east and almost everything that I would see here was significantly more advanced. Examples being the telephone system, the roads, the traffic,

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the cars, the travel between cities, the airline travel between cities all of that was way, way more advanced than anything that I had experienced in India. So that was certainly my first impression that this country was, just way advanced.

UQ: Okay what about your impression of Americans?

UM: My impression of Americans was very positive. I found them to be extremely welcoming and found them to be certainly have very positive attitudes towards international students. Several Americans who would participate in international student activities and making the international students feel welcome. So I was quite impressed that the American families would participate in a lot of that and U of H had done an excellent job at, I forget what it's called international relations department at U of H and they had done a very nice job of putting, putting the international students in touch with American families and others. There was an institute called IIE, Institute of International Education and they would have activities and I would meet a lot of American families there. So I found it to be very welcoming.

UQ: Okay, during that first semester did you have an opportunity to leave Houston and sort of just do some touring in the area?

UM: Not during the first semester. It took a while until I... well the nearby areas yes I had the opportunity with some friends who had cars. I didn't have a car at the time. But that would only be nearby opportunities just outside of Houston but not too far. In terms of starting to see other parts outside of Houston it took a couple of years until I got, I was able to save up enough money to get a car myself and then after that I was able to move out further and so on and explore other parts.

UQ: Okay. Did you have a job during this?

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UM: No I had a scholarship from the University so that's how I was supporting myself. I was fortunate to have a scholarship right from the start from the chemical engineering department here at the university.

UQ: Okay so when you say you saved money...?

UM: From the scholarship money yeah.

UQ: Got it okay. So your, although you are staying mainly in Houston you're not going you know all around a lot of time studying I imagine, your impressions of Americans are based on these interactions with Houstonians but also it sounds like your getting to meet people from other parts of the U.S. as well as other parts of the world. Are you getting a sense that Houston was different from the rest of the country? You mentioned that your friends had...

UM: Yes that's right I am getting, at that point in time I'm getting that sense based on some of the conversations with my fellow graduate students and friends who came in from other parts of the country and they, yeah... they certainly felt that Houston was, was different. They felt it was, there was more a gun culture in Houston and they found that to be quite alarming, they felt like it was more common in this area for people to own guns and they were not that used to it.

UQ: Did you find that alarming?

UM: Yes I did, yes I did.

UQ: So you noticed it as well?

UM: Yeah exactly, sure did.

UQ: Okay anything else that they found that was noticeably different about this city?

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UM: Well I remember one of my friends was from the north he found it there was the campus, University of Houston campus some of the apartments on that campus were in areas that had been subjected to crime and so there was, there were some cases of students getting assaulted while walking back home to their apartment, not in the dorms but lived in the apartments. And my friend a grad student friend from the north he and his roommate I think was confronted by somebody on the street and so he mentioned he reported the matter to the police and what was amusing to my northern buddy was the police said, he told the guy, he said, "Well you've got to be careful in these neighborhoods here and what you've got to do is you've got to get yourself a gun and that way you'll be protected." He said he found that to be absolutely amazing and he couldn't believe that that was the police told him to do.

UQ: Okay. Tell me more about this neighborhood. Did you have to you lived on campus so you didn't really have to go.

UM: I didn't have to go outside but this was not too far from campus I would say just maybe a couple of blocks on the other side of I believe it was on the other side of Wheeler so... it's all changed now. Now you've got new buildings and so on but there was a lot of apartments where students lived at the time. The neighborhood around there was not very safe and that was the other thing that I found quite surprising that I had not expected that the university campus would be in a neighborhood that was not necessarily very safe and I found from discussions with other people that there are lots of campuses in this country which, that are in downtown neighborhoods that are not considered that safe. Which surprised me a lot but there are lots of universities like University of Pennsylvania and I heard of Columbia and things may have improved now but at least at

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that point in time in those days there was a lot of concern about the neighborhood surrounding some of these universities.

UQ: Did you have some kind of experience in Kanpur with similar types of neighborhoods that were recognized as higher crime areas?

UM: Not so much because you wouldn't have muggings in Kanpur whereas I was surprised to find in the U.S. you had to be careful of muggings on the street if you are not, if you happen to be walking in an unsafe neighborhood. Although north India for women they would say that they, they would say that it's not very safe for women to be walking around by themselves in North India but not so much, not like in unsafe neighborhoods in this country whether you are a man or a women you could potentially get mugged for money. But in India it was more an issue for women rather than for everybody.

UQ: Okay, why did you choose University of Houston?

UM: I there were a couple of faculty members from the University of Houston that had come for sabbaticals to IIT Kanpur and so I, so that's how University of Houston sort of got on my radar screen and as I was applying to various universities I included the University of Houston and I was applying for scholarships as well. Since I, since University of Houston awarded me a scholarship that's how I decided to come here.

UQ: Did you apply outside of the U.S., UK, Germany?

UM: No I did not.

UQ: Just U.S.?

UM: That' is correct.

UQ: Why just the U.S.?

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UM: Because for one thing at IIT Kanpur there was a very strong U.S. influence in terms of the interaction with American universities. So there was as I had mentioned earlier a lot of the faculty, they were American faculty in there and they Indian faculty also was educated in the U.S. so there was a lot of U.S. interaction and a lot of the work especially the academic work with the books and so on were from U.S. professors, especially in our field of chemical engineering and the language of course was a big factor as well which would not be, which would not be any different for the U.K. but certainly would be different for other countries like Germany for instance.

UQ: Okay so you really didn't consider going to the U.K.?

UM: That's correct.

UQ: Did you have friends who did go to the U.K. for higher studies or the ones who were leaving were they coming to come to the U.S.?

UM: Pretty much the latter. I didn't really know of anybody that was going to the U.K. at least not in the technical field they were all coming to the U.S.

UQ: Do you think that's because as you said that this sort of engineering being the link between the U.S. and India?

UM: That's right and for and this was all for a graduate advanced studies and certainly the U.S. has always had in my opinion a very strong curriculum in advanced studies in the technical fields and with so many universities and with the whole lot of research going on. So the U.S. was clearly the leader at that point in time. Now we hear it's not as much a leader as it has been in the past but certainly in that point in time it was clearly the leader.

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UQ: Okay so we talked about first impressions of America as a whole. If you were to compare first impressions of Houston versus the rest of Texas how did those two compare?

UM: I felt Houston was more cosmopolitan than other parts of Texas and as time went by it was more and more so. More and more people were coming into Houston. It was clear at one time that almost everybody that you met in Houston was not a native Texan but had come here from somewhere else, even the Americans. So we felt that there was a distinct advantage of being in Houston in terms of the diversity and in terms of the cosmopolitan atmosphere and with time it just became better and better in terms of both the diversity and the cosmopolitan atmosphere.

UQ: Okay so first impressions of Indian immigrants; the other Indians who were here when you first arrived? Especially before you had time to make lots and lots of friends so that kind of first impression of the Indians that you met?

UM: I was surprised to see that there were a fair number of Indian students who were undergraduate students. I didn't expect that and I was surprised because it's quite expensive to come here to study if you have to come all the way from India so that surprised me that, like I came on a scholarship for graduate work but for undergraduate studies you almost wouldn't get a scholarship at all. It was surprising to me that there were a fair number of students and both from India and Pakistan were here for undergraduate studies and I was kind of learning how were they able to afford all of that. Some of them would actually work but you really couldn't as a student, as a graduate student you couldn't find a job with a high enough salary that would cover all of those expenses. So they would probably still have to get either a lot of loans or a lot of money

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from home and with the exchange rate that would mean a lot of money in local currency back home.

UQ: Sure.

UM: So it surprised me that there were quite a few of undergraduate students from India and Pakistan. Not so much, not so many from China or from Taiwan. Most of them were graduate students.

UQ: Okay, did you immediately make friends with the Indian students who were here?

UM: Yes.

UQ: Well I guess before even you answer that question when you arrived here you said that there were about 300 students from?

UM: 300 total Indians plus students plus... a large part of that was student community but there were some that were a bit older and had, had completed all of their student life and everything and were working but there were very few, the total Indian community was about 300 people kind of generally knew each other.

UQ: Okay. What was your first impression of Hispanic Americans you met them for the first time?

UM: That was another surprise that Spanish as a language was that common here in Houston. I had, I did not realize that, that was a surprise I did not know that was the case before I came here and I found out how widely Spanish was spoken and many times people would think I was Spanish and would start a conversation with me in Spanish and then it would become a little awkward because I was, "Sorry I don't know the language." So yeah, the language, the Spanish language and also the fact that there is a very large Hispanic population that was something that I had not known and was a revelation.

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UQ: Did you have to... you said that people would sometimes mistake you for someone of Hispanic origin was that on campus or off campus?

UM: It was largely off campus.

UQ: So when would you leave campus and for what reason?

UM: Like to the grocery store or to... there were not that many malls but there were just like one or two malls at the time here in Houston. We would go to the mall so somebody would talk in Spanish...

UQ: Were you usually with someone else when you left campus?

UM: Yes, yes we would always be with other fellow students, friends and sort.

UQ: What was your first impression of African Americans?

UM: The first impression of African Americans was that I felt physically they were quite tall and large relative to my size as an Indian. A lot of them were in the athletic programs and was at U of H for instance both in football and basketball and they were all much taller and bigger than most of the folks that I would normally run with or work with. I found the African Americans had a distinct culture of their own. I found that their language although English they had an African American accent. I found that it was a very unique and different culture of its own which was...

UQ: What were some of the other features aside from the accent and also phrasing I'm sure?

UM: Yeah that's right the African had accent and certain phraseology, etc. was more uniquely African American. I also still felt, and then I became a bit more aware of the history. We said that back in India there was not as much exposure to U.S. history beyond the 1960's. But then I became more aware of the history, I became more aware

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of what the African American community had gone through. There were some Houston at the time; there were some in fact allegations against a Houston Police at the time for being I guess for racism and so on. So that type of awareness was something that I got at the time. In terms of I did think if we had any African Americans in our graduate program and I don't think we did so didn't have the opportunity to strike sort of a friendship with other African Americans. There was nobody in the student body being in the graduate program for instance.

UQ: Okay so did you see evidence of some of that history? You mentioned that you sort of learned about the history of African Americans here.

UM: No I did not see any direct evidence myself but I kept hearing about these things a lot and actually it wasn't too long before that, this was the early '70's we're talking about and it was not too long before that that there were things like separate water fountains and separate eating places and so on for people who were not whites even as late as in the '60's and I think that may have been one of the things that my American faculty members back in Kanpur were thinking of when they were thinking of Texas because back in places like Boston and so on had already changed a long time prior to that; whereas Texas things were still backward at that time back in the '60's.

UQ: Okay did you ever see any evidence of that? Did you ever see kind of the different water fountains or bathrooms?

UM: I did not. By the time you know I kind of was wondering about that that I had heard of that a lot, I'd seen like old photographs and but when I went through buildings, etc. I think all that, at least in the places that I went to there was no evidence of that. By the early '70's it was all, it was all cleaned up.

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UQ: Okay did you, you mentioned that the police were being criticized for sort of prejudicial treatment of African Americans...

UM: Right.

UQ: ...did you ever see any, anything like that? Did you ever witness any kind of that treatment? Not necessarily by the police but anybody toward African Americans?

UM: I'm trying to recall but I don't think I did. And I did I would say I do recall in terms of police stopping people at that time. A lot of times the person being stopped would be an African American, whether it was for a traffic violation or whatever it seemed like there was more of that in terms of who the person was that was being stopped by the police.

UQ: Okay were there Hispanic American graduate students in your program?

UM: There were a lot of Spanish speaking folks in the program but they were not Hispanic Americans they were from Central America and Latin America.

UQ: I see so they were from... international students?

UM: International students and quite a few in fact. There were quite a few. I'm surprised. That was the other thing I was not that aware of the entire South America as a region of the world other than the fact that yes there was something called South America but this was the first time in my life I think that I had met a lot of people from South America from Central America, from Columbia, from Ecuador, from Panama, Mexico and also from places like Brazil and Argentina and Peru and Chile.

UQ: Wow!

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UM: Yeah so there was indeed in fact in our graduate program I would say a large percentage of the students were from this Central America and Latin America and a large percentage were from India, some from Pakistan and then also from Taiwan.

UQ: Okay.

UM: So those were the sort of the big blocks of students.

UQ: Like a mini U.N.?

UM: Yes exactly, absolutely yes indeed, yes indeed!

UQ: Okay what about African American graduate students?

UM: Yeah and I'm trying to recall when I there were... there was no African American graduate student in the chemical engineering program that I can recall at the time that I was there.

UQ: Okay how would you explain that?

UM: I would say that it still is one of those problems that we hear of people talk about, politicians talk about that right from the start they focus on education has not been there in the families and that this needs to happen right from when you are growing up. African American families I also noticed a lot of times they would be single parent families and so from a, right from the family structure it seemed like that there was not much a focus on education and hence for that reason you wouldn't, we didn't see any African Americans in the graduate student community.

UQ: This is undergraduates and...

UM: Mostly the undergraduate community and in the undergraduate program yes there were, not many at the time but there were a few, but certainly not at all in the graduate program.

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UQ: Okay. Who were your earliest closest friends in Houston?

UM: Earliest closest friends were actually fellow graduate students, both American and Indian and Chinese and in fact, also, some from Latin America. So the Indian students of course would be there was more of an affinity because of the... we had come from a common culture and also there were a lot of friends from Pakistan because we had again came from a common culture and there were some post doctoral folks from Pakistan that I was very good friends with.

UQ: Did you have kind of three or four best friends?

UM: Yeah that we spent a lot of time with yes.

UQ: Can you name them?

UM: My, these were all fellow graduate students, one was Akil Bedani one was Sharma one was John Steinki, Anil Kumar and these were all graduate students mostly chemical, not necessarily all in chemical engineering some were in electrical engineering. My office mate was a guy called Segundo, Segundo Choo who was from Peru.

UQ: Of Chinese descent?

UM: Japanese descent.

UQ: Interesting.

UM: That also surprised me that there were a lot of people of Japanese descent in places like Peru and he said yes that's right there was a lot of migration that had occurred.

UQ: Right okay. So you started at U of H in 1970?

UM: Yes.

UQ: When did you end?

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UM: I pretty much finished my Ph.D. in 1975. My official graduate was '76 but I had left the department in '75. I finished all my work and had started working. So I was basically there for 5 years, in 1970 through 1975.

UQ: And during that time was there an ISA that was active, and Indian Student Association?

UM: Yes there was, yes there was and there was both an Indian Student Association and an International Student Association so there were a lot of activities that were, that we would get involved in terms of whether it was events and so on or fundraising for some cause.

UQ: Were you involved in?

UM: Some of it. As time would allow most of the time was taken up by academic work and but yeah we got involved because it was a good a good activity to do something beyond the academic work and also you got to know more people.

UQ: So after '75 what happened to you where did you go, what did you do?

UM: So I started working. I got a job at a chemical company in the area and essentially, and my that's what I was looking for was to get, was to get exposure to industry and to work in industry I had been in school for quite a while. And so that's what I did; I started working I was working in Freeport, Texas which is about 50 miles or so from here.

UQ: That was your first job?

UM: That was my first job.

UQ: What was the company.

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UM: The company was called Dow Badische which was a joint venture between Dow Chemical and BASF.

UQ: Can you spell the second word that you said?

UM: Badische is B-a-d-i-s-c-h-e and it's really BASF more well known as BASF and subsequently that joint venture was bought over by BASF completely and so now it's that same facility is called BASF.

UQ: Okay.

UM: So I worked there for a couple of years and then I went to work, for a couple of years I went to Chicago to work for another company called Armak. In fact that's....

UQ: Is that A-R-M-A-C?

UM: M-a-k. In Fact, Pankaj Desai worked for Armak as well for many, many years and it became, it changed some names, became Axon North America and so on. _____

But I worked there for a couple of years and then came back to Houston and joined Shell.

UQ: What year was that?

UM: 1978. So I left U of H in '75 and about a couple years in Freeport about a year and a half or so in Chicago and a year and a half to two years and then the end of '78 came to Houston, came back to Houston and joined Shell.

UQ: Okay so had you applied for Shell when you were in Chicago?

UM: Yes I had.

UQ: You already got the job so you came because of that?

UM: Yes.

UQ: Okay so how would you have, how did you compare Chicago to Houston?

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UM: Chicago was, it was a bigger city, to me it was a bigger city, especially in those days (this was still in the '70's) Houston was still kind of growing whereas Chicago was already a very well established big city in the U.S. and...

UQ: Where did you live when you were in Chicago?

UM: For some time I lived in downtown area of Chicago which was kind of pretty neat because it gave you the downtown atmosphere. Then I also, then I moved to the suburbs. It was the suburbs were a bit different more of a... felt more like Houston did, the suburbs of Chicago, whereas the downtown part of Chicago was different in the sense it was downtown and yet it was residential. In Houston at the time there was hardly any downtown residential type area. Now there is mid town and all that has come up but in those days there was hardly anything that was residential in downtown Houston but Chicago there certainly was a very large downtown area that was nice and residential. So I enjoyed that for some of the time and then it started, then it was not, it was expensive so I moved to the suburbs and then lived there for a while but it was a different lifestyle you have to catch a train to come into town. Weather wise Chicago is very different of course. The winters were very cold and extremely, cold and long.

UQ: Did you prefer the weather there or did you prefer it here?

UM: I think between the two of them I prefer the weather here because the cold winters were quite extreme; something I had not experienced before in that kind of freezing weather.

UQ: Before I continue would you like to take a break for a little while and we can stop?

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UM: No I'm okay whatever is convenient to you. If you want to take a break that's fine.

UQ: I'm... I'm a talker so I can talk but you are doing most of the talking right now. So whenever you want to stop just let me know and we can easily stop.

UM: No that's fine we can keep going.

UQ: Just let me know. So what did you, how would you compare Chicagoans to Houstonians?

UM: It seemed like Chicagoans they were... the culture was they seemed to be more diverse in their awareness and in their culture. When I was in Chicago it seemed like it was a lot of Greek influence in certain parts of the city, Greek food and so on which was kind of pretty exciting. Then they seemed to they were not that aware of Texas as the culture and a place other than Texas being cowboy country. But it seemed like people in Chicago were more if I could use the word sophisticated, they liked to dress better, the weather allowed that. It just, it just seemed like it was more formal but at the same time especially in the '70's I found that there was a lot more sophistication in the lifestyles of people. Chicago people were more aware of different kinds of cuisines, people were more aware of different kind of cultures than people in Houston, local people in Houston.

UQ: Did you find that either place was more welcoming to Indian immigrants?

UM: I thought that the welcoming aspect of it was pretty good with both places. I found that in Chicago as well it was very welcoming. It was, it was just different in the sense that in Houston, for instance, even when I worked at the plant, at the chemical plant in Freeport I made friends with a lot of other people who worked there (Texans, if you will) and they would invite you for barbecues and to go fishing and it's a different kind of

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activity. In Chicago it would also again people would be very friendly but there wouldn't be so much fishing it would be more I would say, "Let's go to the theater" kind of activity, a bit more urban in nature. So there were differences in the activities in the culture but in terms of friendliness and the welcoming nature I found both were friendly.

UQ: Okay what kind of struggles do you remember facing upon coming to the U.S. and being an immigrant, anything in particular?

UM: Oh the first thing I found was the food wasn't as good as I was used to. So especially back again in those days in Houston, back then going back to the '70's in Houston. It is nothing like what it is right now in terms of the sophistication in the cuisine and so on that you can get and you can even go to different kinds of stores and get all sorts of things. It just was not there. You can go to places like HEB right now and you can find everything that you can think of on different ethnic cuisines. But in those days it was just all hamburgers, fries, fried chicken and that was about it. So that was a struggle yes! I was in the dorms for about I think one semester, one full semester and then after a first few days I got tired of the dorm food. And so then I decided at the end of the contract I would move to an apartment with friends and then learn how to cook.

UQ: Oh so that's the reason you left the dorm is for the food!

UM: Is for the food; that is exactly right! That is exactly right! Yeah absolutely and even if we went to eat out there were not that many options and of course eating out is expensive but even if you went you could consider eating out at not very expensive places but there were very few options it was all the same kind of food, the fast foods and so on.

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UQ: Okay in what ways did your being an immigrant effect your life here. Did you think that perhaps it may have changed your experiences as compared to someone who was raised here?

UM: I think the first few years as an immigrant you felt not so secure from a financial standpoint and from the fact that you didn't have any financial safety nets. You were pretty much on your own. In fact you were also at the time, several of us were also being challenged by the visa situation and trying to get a permanent residence visa and a green card, etc. etc. so that made you feel insecure and that feeling of insecurity was I think that was totally different from what somebody who has grown here would feel. Like my kids for instance they would not know anything about that part of being insecure. Because you were not sure whether you would be able to settle down here and find a job in which case you'd have to leave the country or whether you'd even get permanent residence status in which case you would also have to leave the country and in those days the job opportunities back home in India were not as good as they are now so there was that whole feeling of insecurity, financial wise.

UQ: Okay were you, when you first came here did you come with the intention to return to India and work there or did you know that this was going to be?

UM: Actually it was totally open, I was thinking about that but I don't think I had any firm thoughts about that in either direction. I figured that I would that where would the opportunities where I would go and in those days the opportunities back in India were very few and the opportunities here were more but there were challenges that you still had to face and here as well. We go through economic cycles in the job market wasn't that great but it seemed like there were more opportunities then back in India.

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UQ: Okay were there (other than the food) were there things that you missed about living in India?

UM: No actually I did not. I because here I was actually independent in the sense that most of the time in India I was much younger and so I was basically too young to be independent I was living with my parents but here as I have grown up some more, so there was this independence and so I actually kind of liked that and I didn't feel any, I wasn't missing anything from that perspective.

UQ: Lifestyle?

UM: No I was fine.

UQ: Okay.

UM: And in fact because of the advanced when you talk about lifestyle the fact that the U.S. was much more advanced at the time and the gap was quite a bit the lifestyle here was definitely more comfortable and so yes indeed that was, that was a big positive and in any of these situations as long as you have friends then you don't miss anything in terms of being alone by yourself and so on. So there were plenty of friends here as well and plus the American lifestyle.

UQ: Okay I didn't ask did you have siblings in India?

UM: Yes I do. Yes I do. I have one brother who is much younger than I am, about 11 years younger than I am. He went to IIT Bombay and then he did engineering as well but then he chose to stay on in India. For one thing he is much younger so times in India has started changing a little bit at the time and he went into business with some college buddies, or one college buddy and decided that that's what he wanted to do and has been doing well in business. So he is very well settled there.

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UQ: Is he in Bombay?

UM: He's in Bombay.

UQ: Okay. So this is now 1978 or so you've returned, you're working for Shell what happened after?

UM: Then basically we were, I started working for Shell and I was working in the R & D division at Shell and Shell being a very large international oil and gas and chemical company I found that there were lots and lots of opportunities in lots of different areas that were of interest. So I really enjoyed the Shell experience and the atmosphere and also all the opportunity that exposed you to the different parts of the company.

UQ: So how long did you stay at Shell?

UM: So I worked for Shell for 31 years.

UQ: Wow you really did like it!

UM: That's right! So and so different parts of the company and so I enjoyed working at Shell and being, Shell being global in nature there was a lot of interaction with other parts of the world. We did a lot of work together with our colleges in Hague and Amsterdam and so we traveled there quite a bit. Then we also did a lot of work in other parts of the world so we traveled there as well. I was based in Houston but with a lot of travel opportunities to different parts of the world.

UQ: And you enjoyed that?

UM: It was pretty good, yes I did.

UQ: Okay when did you get married?

UM: I got married in 1973.

UQ: Oh early!

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UM: Yes, yes. And so my wife and I we were both graduate students for quite some time. And so we were, she was at the Medical Center, School of Bio Medical Sciences, here in Houston. So she was working on her Master's and Ph.D. when I was working on my graduate work as well. Both of us were grad students for quite some time, several years. She too was in grad school for about 5 years before she finished both her Master's and her Ph.D. So that's how I know that these things take time.

UQ: Okay so when you went to Chicago when you had your job you were already married and she was with you did she move around with you?

UM: No she was... when I left to go to Chicago she was I would say roughly where you are in your Ph.D. program. She had done a fair amount of work and I said to her, "It's best that you don't move otherwise you will lose all this. We probably got another year, year and a half to finish it all up so just go ahead and stick with it." So we sort of did the commute kind of thing. I mean I lived in Chicago and the reason I moved from here to Chicago was I had I was struggling with my immigration status and so somehow I was not being able to get a visa an immigrant status from here and...

UQ: From here meaning?

UM: From the Houston office and from the company here whereas I had I had contacted some immigration lawyers and they said that it would be easier from Chicago with your Ph.D. background and so on and each office seems to work differently. But they said, "You'll have to move to Chicago because otherwise your... all your application would still be going to the Houston office. But if you move to Chicago then it will go to the Chicago office and they are viewing this differently in the sense that you have a better chance of getting it from there." So I said, "Okay fine." So that's how I

moved to Chicago but I decided I'd better move otherwise my immigration status was I had it was going to expire. So then I moved to Chicago my wife was still finishing her Ph.D. so she stayed on here. So that was like a year and a half to two years that she was here and I was there.

UQ: Okay.

UM: And that's why I came back to Houston, I was looking to come back to Houston. I did get my immigration status when I was in Chicago and I was looking to come back to Houston. She was still wrapping up her Ph.D. at the time and then I found the opportunity with Shell and then I came back and joined Shell.

UQ: Okay I'm thinking we should probably stop here. I have many more questions so I can come back another day and complete it because I feel like it just goes on, it can go on very, very long.

UM: Oh I see.

End of Interview