

UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON

ORAL HISTORY OF HOUSTON

PROJECT Interview with: Krishna Vavilala

Interviewed by: Uzma Quraishi

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Transcribed by: Suzanne ascola

UQ: Oral history interview of Krishna Vavilala at his home in Houston, Texas, July 7, 2007. Interview conducted by Uzma Quraishi for the Center for Public History at the University of Houston. You can just begin by telling a little bit about who you are, what you do, what your profession is.

KV: O.K., introduce myself?

UQ: Sure.

KV: O.K., my name is Krishna Vavilala. I am an engineer by profession. I am 70 years old. I was born in India in a place called Rajahmundry, Andhra Pradesh. I migrated to this country in 1974. We lived 6 years in New York and we could not bear the cold so we moved to Houston for a warmer climate. Ever since 1981, we have been residents of Houston, Texas and we have been happy. We raised our family here, we made a career, and we got involved with the community.

UQ: O.K., I am going to stop you there and ask you to back way up now. Go way back to your background. Tell me a little bit about your life in India.

KV: Life in India?

UQ: Your family, your parents.

KV: O.K. My parents were average, middle class, educated people but my father was a social activist and he participated in the noncooperation movement of Mahatma Gandhi and became a District Congress secretary. Then, he was debarred from the college and he did not want to do any job so he was mostly, I would say, as far as my knowledge goes, as far as I knew him, he was unemployed. But he managed his family of 5 kids and led a respectable life, just raised them at home and gave them a good education. Three sons and two daughters, he had. All of us were weB-educated. Then, after we went on in different directions for further studies, we left the town, Rajahmundry, particularly me. I left after 18 years and then I went and studied up north in India at Birla College of Engineering.

UQ: Which college is that?

KV: Birla College of Engineering. Now, it is called Birla Institute of Technology.

UQ: When you were 18?

KV: Yes, at that time. I finished my engineering, 4 year degree at the age of 23. After my BSc, I stayed home, relaxed, and didn't go to college. Finally, I found that I should do something professional and I went to engineering school which is a very good school and incidentally, is next to IIT [Indian Institutes of Technology: elite institutes of higher education in science and engineering]. It is one of the top private colleges in India. I was lucky to be supported by my brother who financed partially towards my education, so I am very grateful to him. He is no longer living. So, from a modest, average family, we all got a good education and we became professionals. My brother became the deputy general manager of the Oil and Natural Gas Commission of India. He was also one of the founding fathers of the ONGC, the oil company. He passed away a few years ago. Then, my younger brother also joined the oil company in India, the government oil company, and he became a deputy general manager as well. So, we brothers, we all did very well.

My sisters got married and they raised their families and they are in India, except myself. Nobody from India came to the United States or, for that matter, to any other country. They were very happy in India. They were very nationalistic. They just wanted to serve their mother country so they stayed back. However, they all toured all over the world, but they did not immigrate.

UQ: Why did you decide to leave?

KV: I am the middle son of the three, so I am a little bit different from the other two sons. They wanted to stay back in India and the mother country. But why did I leave the country? The reason ... I was kind of an impatient youngster. I felt that the conditions

in India were not changing for the better rapidly, particularly in those Nehruian, socialistic policies of the government. And also, I had the opportunity of going to England and then I lived in England 6 years. I got two daughters born there. And having seen the western countries and coming back to India to serve the country, I came back to India. Then, I got so frustrated that still, the conditions in India were not rapidly changing for the better. At that time, my standards were, you know, towards the western standards -- the cleanliness, the hygiene, the public services, the efficiency in the government. Then, the politics, the corruption in India, all these things were so frustrating to me, I felt in my whole lifetime, India may never come to those standards which I expected. And in those days, the United Nations' estimate was that India will take ... I am talking about the 1960s ... they estimated that India will take 120 years to come to United States standards and 80 years to come to the U.K. standards of living. So, I said, I will not live that long and in my lifetime, I want to live well and also give to my children a quality of life which should be better than what it was in India. So, that was the reason I emigrated from India.

UQ: When did you get married and where did you have the kids because you said that when you left for England, you didn't have children. You have two of them now. So, what year was your marriage?

KV: We were married in 1961, October. Then, we left for England in 1964. And then, we had two daughters born, one in Birmingham and another second ... Amanda, was born in Warwickshire, Rugby. Monica was born in Yorkshire, up north in England. Then, in 1970, I got an opportunity - the same company, General Electric Company,

offered me a job in Calcutta on a transfer. So, I took that opportunity and I thought also as a young man, I thought I would be going back to serve my mother country and also, my parents were aging - I wanted to serve them and be close to them. So, with family considerations, I went back to India.

UQ: In 1970?

KV: 1970. Then, for 6 years, I worked for General Electric Company in India. I stayed back in India, in Calcutta. Then, my parents would not leave their home town, Rajahmundry, to come and stay with us in Calcutta because different language, different culture, and in their old age, they did not want to move from their native town. So, my intention of going and serving them was not fulfilled. Then, again, in 1974, things in Calcutta were going bad with Communists and trade unions and so many strikes. The city administration was coming to a grinding halt and there were a lot of power cuts. So, the quality of life was again deteriorating. I said that is not the type of life I would like to live in India. Garbage dumps were not collecting. On the streets, people used to snatch the wrist watches or a woman's jewelry - the kind of social disorder and I didn't see great hope in the 1970s, particularly when Indira Gandhi declared an emergency and Jayaprakash Narayan launched an anti-governmental agitation. So, there was a lot of social upheaval in India. Then, I said, well, this country is again going backwards, not forwards so I said let me leave. I have no patience with putting up with all that nonsense.

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UQ: You said after you got married, your wife came with you. Did she also work while you were in the U.K. and while you were in India?

KV: Well, my wife never worked in India. When we went to England, of course, with the small babies, she was not working either. And only she went to work in New York; when we migrated to the United States, she took a part-time job there.

UQ: What was her education?

KV: She is a graduate in arts, B.A., from Ranchi Women's College in India.

UQ: Why did you choose the United States when you had the whole world to choose from?

KV: It is an interesting question. When I was in England, I had offers from the United States to come and work in the U.S. but I declined those offers thinking that I would go back to India and make a living there because in the U.K., I felt that even though I was a professional, but still, there was so much color bar and we were still second class citizens. No matter how long you live in England, still, a person of brown color is going to be a second class citizen.

UQ: Do you mean professionally? Second class citizens professionally?

KV: Socially, I am talking. You know, professionally in the offices, everybody does their work, business matter but there is no reason to discriminate there. But socially, we became - Indians are kind of unacceptable, second class citizens, particularly in those days when British conservative politician, Enoch Powell, made his famous speech that the Thames will flow with the blood [Rivers of Blood speech, 1968]. Those inflammatory speeches made a number of young people like me in those days scared; that England was not the place to settle. Then, I applied for an American immigration in those days, just as a safeguard. I applied and I got a green card from London and they asked me to go to America which I was not prepared to go. I wanted to go back and serve my family and my mother country but I kept the green card as a safeguard in my pocket.

UQ: Who is "they?" "They" asked you to go to America?

KV: "They" means the United States consulate in London. They gave the green card and they said, now you can go to America, which I did not . . . when I got my final transfer to Calcutta, and after I got the green card, I waited almost like 6 years. Finally, in Calcutta, the consulate sent a letter saying that you decide, you give up your green card since you have rejected it three times or called, you had better make up your mind to go or no go. So, at that time, I had to really think hard because I had a good job in Calcutta with good money and I thought I was almost settled there but again, despite all the social disturbances in Calcutta, I had to take a deep thinking. And then finally, I said, O.K., let

me go to America and try. At that time, I didn't have a job because the U.S. consulate kind of pushed me to take it or leave it type of ultimatum.

So, I came in 1974, June 30, to New York with a suitcase and \$8 in my pocket. And, of course, I borrowed some extra money from some friends and also the government of India, I borrowed some money which I had to repay later. So, I landed in New York on June 30 with a limited amount of money and no job, no friends, no acquaintances. I had to go straight from JFK to YMCA in Manhattan. Then, I checked in and I slept 2 days from jet lag. Then, the third day, I had to go out because I was hungry and needed some money to go to the bank. I went to the bank, cashed the checks. Then, I stopped by next door on 26 Broadway, next to the American Express office. There is a small company advertised. I went to the window and I said, "I am an electrical engineer. Do you have a job for me?" The girl at the reception desk, she said, "Sir, wait outside." She said, "Do you have a resume?" I said, "What is a resume? I don't even understand that word," because in Europe and India, they call it CV. So, anyhow, the personnel officer came and he took me inside. Bill McShare, chief engineer, interviewed me. It so happened that they were looking for exactly a person of that same experience which I had in England and in India. So, he said, "When can you start work?" So, I said, "I only came two days ago. I have to think about it. I can start work in a day or two." "That is not a problem." So, I basically started work in New York on July 3 and I was paid for July 3. The next day, I got July 4 holiday, a paid holiday. So, the personnel officer said, "You worked one day and you got paid for one day. You are lucky!" So, like that, my life started, without much hardship. I got a job right after a couple of days

in New York. Then, I was made a lead engineer after 6 weeks with a raise in salary and from there on, I never looked back basically. I did not experience the hardships which many Indians and immigrants had faced in New York.

So, from there, when I came to New York, I was already 37 years old. So, I had enough experience unlike many other Indians who came for the first time and landed in New York with no experience. But I was already experienced and highly qualified with chartered engineering in Europe and quite experienced with British companies. So, I did not face the difficulties which the average immigrant faced in those days. As a matter of fact, the Council General in Calcutta cautioned me that I may have to pump gas or become a security guard in the New York subways because most of the engineers in those days started their life like that. But luckily, I did not have to face those. So, after 6 months, my family came, joined me from India.

UQ: O.K. Why did you decide to come to Houston?

KV: The reason is the warm weather which I liked, like in India. Houston was a southern city in Texas which was fast growing and I heard in New York that Houston is the energy capital of the world and there were a lot of jobs in Houston. That was the reason I ... and, of course, in New York, this is another thing: New York was bitterly cold in those days before this climate warming. I bought a house on Long Island and I had to shovel the snow season after season and, as I said, I was entering middle age and I

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didn't want to get into trouble with shoveling the snow. I hated the snow and the bitter cold, so that was the main reason I moved to Houston.

UQ: O.K., so did you first search for a job? Did you have friends who had already come to Houston and that is how you kind of ...

KV: No, I had sufficient experience in New York by then. I was a lead engineer of a nuclear power project, so it so happened that the Brown & Root Company in Houston advertised in the national papers they were looking for a lead electrical engineer for the South Texas nuclear project. So, I applied and they called me for an interview and they selected me. And they would move me, lock, stock and barrel with sign on bonus of 6 months and I was designated as the key employee for the project. So, they moved me and gave me all the incentives for a relocation package which was pretty good. So, that is how we came with a job in Houston. I didn't know anybody in Houston - no friends, nothing. Just like in New York, I had no friends but I made my career myself. And here also in Houston, I developed friendships and I got involved in the community and that is how I established myself and got my roots into the Texas soil.

UQ: O.K., if you can kind of put your vision back to that year when you first arrived in Houston, can you describe what you found the Indian community to be like as far as organizations, activities, cultural events, those kinds of things?

KV: Houston was, in 1981, the population was I think about ... Indian community was about 60,000, I believe, 50,000 to 60,000, in the greater Houston area. It was a small community. The people were trying to build temples and mosques and gurdwaras [Sikh places of worship]. So, at that time, the children were growing into their teens so all of the community was kind of looking at opportunities of imparting their culture to the next generation. So, they started building these temples and then community centers and then people all the weekends met and exchanged their experiences. Then, they had these social activities, picnics and also every language group had their own functions [social gatherings]. Bengalis, Beharis, Telugu, Tamilians. You know, India has several language groups and all those language groups formed their own little cells in Houston and met over the weekends and had social support groups formed and they were happy in that way. Then, Houston started growing and the number is almost doubled now in the year 2007. We are probably 120,000 to 150,000 people in the greater Houston area. So now, there are so many organizations in Houston one can get involved and as far as myself was concerned, I was always a social activist. Even in New York, I was the president of the Telugu Cultural Association. I was involved in the Federation of Indian Association, so I met the president, Neelam Sanjiva Reddy [sixth president of India, 1977-1982]. And in those days, Prime Minister of India, Prime Minister Morarji Desai and Foreign Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee and so many ... New York was a gateway for most of the leadership who always came to the United Nations functions. Whenever they were there, we used to give them receptions and meet with them and all that. So, I was exposed to these activities even in New York and when I came to Houston, I promptly _____ and I was roped into taking some active roles in some of these organizations

here like the Telugu Cultural Association and then India Culture Center and organizations like that. I got very busy and tried to contribute something wherever I could for the community organizations.

UQ: Can you kind of remember which organizations specifically were here in 1981, major ones that were in your mind?

KV: Yes. In 1981 when I came, of course, being a Telugu-speaking person, basically I was recruited to the Telugu Cultural Association board of directors. Then, I became a president after a few years. Then, I was involved in the India Culture Center which is like a federal type of setup with all the linguistic group as members of that organization. Then, I became a secretary of the organization India Culture Center. Then, we used to interface with the India Students' Association at the University of Houston of which my daughter was also secretary of that at one time. They used to conduct big functions in the University called Basant Bahar which were very highly successful events. Every spring, they used to put them on. And so, there were other religious institutions which you started building up like Meenakshi Temple Society. They started small but then slowly, that temple became a huge complex and that was one of the high success stories in 1981 when I came to Houston.

UQ: Was it already established when you came?

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KV: Yes, it was established. It was established not to this extent it started out with a small temple for Ganesha, Lord Ganesha. It was a very small, one idol. And then people gathered around and then all the facilities. And then, they bought more land adjacent to that and then they built the main temple. And then, of course, it is now a huge complex by itself.

UQ: O.K. Who did you socialize with, would you say, when you came to Houston? People of your own culture mostly or others?

KV: Well, we chose to live on the north side of Houston which was basically an all white, suburban type of thing, and because somebody recommended to me that there are good school districts there so that is how we landed there. We didn't have much ... I mean, we didn't look around. We didn't particularly look at ... the Indian enclaves basically. A lot of people in those days in the 1980s, a number of Indian immigrants converged into southwest/Alief area and we were totally detached. It was almost like 25 miles from where we lived. And where we lived on the north side, FM-1960 area, there were not many Indian families in those days. But then, we lived 25 years from that side of that and, of course, we developed relationships with the Americans as well as Indians, the few Indians that we had. We got involved in mainstream also. I was involved in the Democratic Party in the 1960 area, Democratic Party club, and I was also centrally elected to be delegate to the state convention of Democratic Party. So, I was kind of involved in both our Indian community as well as the mainstream community as well. It was kind of the weekends were the only time and so whatever time I had left, I used to

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balance my life with a job, family, and the social activities. I think we ... I got as much involved as possible in the Democratic Party activities. I met Hillary Clinton, Richard Gephardt and some of the big-wigs. Even Mayor Bill White, the first time I met him was in Dallas at the state Democratic Party convention. He was the state chair for the Democratic Party. So, ever since I was meeting them off and on all the weekends and many functions.

UQ: Are your children just as politically active as you are?

KV: O.K., my children both were as active as they were until they got married and they are now busy raising their families. They are not politically active but socially, they are very active. Both my daughters were secretaries and vice-presidents of the India Students' Association at the University of Houston and they were the emcees for Basant Bahar. And then, my second daughter, Amanda, she went to the business school. She became the president of the alumni at the Bauer School of Business during her time, two years consecutively. She raised money for the university by creating some innovative ideas like Cowboy Night and Casino Night and things like that. So, they were active in their own way. But now, they are busy raising their children.

UQ: You have how many children?

KV: Two daughters. Monica and Amanda.

UQ: To what extent do you think race affected your life here as an immigrant?

KV: Really, I did not find any discrimination because of my race. Unlike in England, that was always a topic, always the TV and media and the politics in England, they reminded me of my race and my color almost every day. Whereas, in America, it never happened to me. I just conduct myself professionally, I deal with people like human beings, you know, I interfaced and race has never been a problem to me in America.

UQ: O.K. Did you have any concerns about raising your family in a western country as opposed to your own country, India?

KV: I should say that definitely, there is a difference. In India, there is a lot of cultural baggage. Their expectations are different. But in America, being an open society, you can live your own life. My wife goes around with a *sari*. She never abandoned the *sari*. She never wore pants in her whole 40 years in this country. She always wore a *bindi* on her forehead to show she is a married woman. That was the cultural tradition in India. So, she carried and nobody objected her dress code or her behavior. We lived basically, you know, a life of our own choice and nobody said or discriminated against it. Only perhaps my wife probably could have gotten a job in Texas and done a job but again, Texas being a conservative cowboy state, even if she went for a few job interviews, they looked at her face and *sari* and all that, probably they didn't want to give her a job, you know, because she was not wearing trousers or skirts. She was in Indian attire. So, she did not want to abandon her Indian attire. So, some sacrifice has to be made. And

moreover, I was fairly decent in my earnings and one paycheck was good enough for the family. So, she never went to work on her own.

UQ: Is she also involved in community organizations that you are?

KV: Oh, yes. She is a great supporter of my activities. Without her support, I would not have been able to spend time for my social activities. Basically, she was the backbone for the family. She raised the children, she took care of the welfare while I am busy at work, travels, and my social activities.

UQ: Do you think that raising children in 1981, about 26 years ago, do you think that there is a difference between raising them in that era versus now?

KV: I raised my kids in that era. Obviously, they were growing up ...

UQ: How old were they?

KV: She was 14 years and then 11 years, like that- 3 years difference between them. And being girls, we were very protective. We wanted to make sure that they had the right friends around. That is the reason we chose an area where less crime and mostly suburban neighborhoods we chose. And they did very well. Monica became a physician and Amanda became an MBA and business development manager in a New York company. Of course, now she resigned and is raising the kids, a stay-at-home mom. But

Monica continued. She is an assistant professor at the University of Washington. She did her pediatrics and specialty in anesthesiology with trauma cases. So, she chose an academic life in medicine and did extremely well. So, I mean, the influence on kids, raising the kids in the present times, now, kids are exposed to electronic media. The internet was not there in those days in the 1980s. One less thing to worry about - what they are watching on the computers. So, the computer has a tremendous impact on the generation of kids growing up in this age. So, the parents, I think, have an extra responsibility to watch over their shoulders what they are watching on the internet.

UQ: At what point after coming to America did you decide that you wanted to stay in America permanently?

KV: When I left India, I kind of made up my mind that I was leaving India for good because I had seen both sides of the world. When I left India, I had enough data to compare before and after. Since I lived in England for 6 years, I knew how the life in Western countries was going to be. There are good things and there are bad things. So, I said, it is up to you how you want to take the best out of the Western culture and leave the bad things out. So, the Eastern culture had some wonderful value systems which we try to maintain even though we are living in the Western world. I decided when I left India, I said, since I know full facts of both cultures- Western and Eastern- I said, O.K., this is what we are going to go into and I made a conscious decision that I would like to give myself and my children, and their children a standard of living which, in India, would take years and years to come to this level of the Western countries. So, that is the

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decision I made to live in the Western countries when once I left India, that was a decision made right then and there.

UQ: How often, if at all, did you travel back to India to visit and take your children with you?

KV: That was one conscious decision, even though it was an expensive affair to take the whole family to India, but we made a conscious decision to connect our children, my children, with their cousins back home, to my sister's children and brother's children, and my children should know who their aunts and uncles are back home. And also, they should know the realities of life in the less fortunate countries like India. So, we always went to India every 2 to 3 years. We took the whole family, showed them around and we made them aware of the conditions in India- how their kith and kin live in India and also the culture, exposure to some culture back home. So, that is why they are able to speak the language even now. Our Telugu language, they speak and they are in touch with their cousins. They know who is who back home. So, I made sure that they knew. But now, it is up to them to maintain those connections to their children.

UQ: And do you see that they make that effort as they speak to their children in your language?

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KV: Yes, they do that. Again, they don't have much time to spend with them because the language, they [grandchildren] understand but they don't talk back. So, as grandparents, we try to do that, to compensate for that.

UQ: Right. You mentioned that none of your siblings left India after you came here. What about your wife's family, her siblings?

KV: No. They are fairly well-off and they are also patriotic. They didn't want to leave. Only me and my wife are the only people here. We started our roots in this country. So, I didn't sponsor a single person, neither did my wife sponsor anybody. We have no extended family brought from India. We are just on our own. We are the first generation family members in this country. When I came, probably I am the only Vavilala in the entire United States. Now, I don't have sons so this is ... but then, I saw the next generation. I saw my uncle's grandchildren, they are now in the information technology field. They are doing their jobs in other parts of the country. But they are next generation, not my generation.

UQ: O.K. Of the people that you found here, did you already have a lot of friends? You had none in Houston but in New York, did you have any network, social network that when you arrived, gave you some help?

KV: No. I didn't know anybody. I stayed at the YMCA. I started my life at the YMCA in New York.

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UQ: How did you know to go to the YMCA?

KV: Because I went to USIS library in Calcutta to find places to live and the YMCA was the only cheapest place to live. It was \$9 per day. So, with \$8 in pocket, at least I could stay there.

UQ: It made it easy to choose.

KV: That is all I could afford in a non-air-conditioned room. I could not sleep in that room but that is all I could afford until I got a job. Luckily, I got a job after a couple of days, so I moved to an air-conditioned room thereafter.

UQ: At the YMCA?

KV: In the YMCA. I stayed 3 months in the same YMCA, not knowing any other place and also not having time to hunt for apartments. One day, my personnel manager called me in the office and he said, "Mr. Vavilala, you are" ... (end of tape #1)

UQ: Continuing oral history interview of Krishna Vavilala, tape 2.

KV: I remember our human resources department manager calling me. I remember his name, Patterson. He called me into his office and he said, "Mr. Vavilala, you are

professional and the YMCA is not a place to live for professionals." So, he brought out a big map of the 5 boroughs of New York City and he showed me the north side, east side, west side, and he showed me that, "Manhattan is a very expensive island - you cannot live here. So, for your salary, you had better move. Most of your Indian ethnic people live in Queens borough." So, he showed me where the Queens borough is and he said, "Flushing is the place and Jackson Heights, so you can go take a trip on the Flushing train and you go and look for some apartments and you find something or go to the New York Times apartment advertisements." That is how I went and I found an apartment. Then, whenever you go to Indian shop for groceries, you meet people. That is how we made our first acquaintance. That was the beginning of that. But other than that, I didn't have any relations or friends that I landed in New York.

UQ: We are going to fast forward to the present and tell a little bit about what you are doing now.

KV: O.K., I am an electrical engineer. I have been an electrical engineer all of my life. For the last 40 years, I have been doing that. Now, I work for Bechtel Corporation. I am on the project management team of Bechtel overseeing a big, billion and a half dollar project in Trinidad, West Indies. There, we are building 5 different projects and a refinery and my job is to oversee the work done by 5 different subcontractors. Of course, being an electrical engineer, I only oversee the electrical portion of the project. I have been at Bechtel for the last 1 year, roughly 1 year. I will be completing 1 year next month. And before that, I worked for CDI Engineering Corporation. And before that, I

worked at Dow Chemical Company. And then, I worked at E&C companies like Stone & Webster, Brown & Root and one operating company I worked for, BASF Corporation. I used to administer the electrical engineering department.

UQ: What about your community activism? What are you doing towards that end?

KV: O.K., on my weekends, I always get involved with the community activities, social service. I am involved in various activities, as a matter of fact.

UQ: Your major projects?

KV: My major project - presently, I am the chairman of the Foundation for India Studies Program at the University of Houston. I started the foundation with a purpose, the purpose being to educate the next generation Indian students, Indian children who are growing up in this multiracial society to know something about their culture, their languages, their history, their roots, and a higher level of education at the university level. And when my children graduated and went to the University of Houston, there were no courses in the India studies. They took Italian, German and French and all those foreign languages. So, I said, well, our children are there- we need to give some education about where they came from, about India. So, I said we should have a program started at the University of Houston so that the Indian children or, for that matter, all the students from the Indian subcontinent who want to learn Hindi. So, the purpose was to give some exposure to our next generation Indian children and children who started going to the

University from the Indian subcontinent, some exposure to Indian history, Indian languages, Indian culture, Indian anthropology, all those subjects related to India. And these are credit courses offered by the University. So, this is a community-driven project.

I went and approached the University authorities with this proposal that there is a big Indian community out there and the University should reach out to them and provide certain courses which would be of interest to them; that is, how this foundation was registered as a nonprofit organization and the Consulate General of India, Mr. S.M. Gavai. He is on our advisory board. And we have a community activist board, full board, in the foundation and we already have started courses at the University in Hinduism, Jainism, and Hindi language classes. Those are currently running at the University, and we are going to take it to the next level in 2007 and 2008 by introducing advanced language – Hindi language courses and also we will introduce anthropology of India in 2008. Also, we are looking for a professor from India, a distinguished professor, to come and teach at the University to teach the Indian history.

UQ: Whose idea was this?

KV: Well, you are talking to the person who had this idea for a long time but finally, the right conditions happened. I went with my son-in-law, Richard Morales. We both one day took a trip to the University with an appointment with the president of the University, Dr. Jay Gogue and we talked with Dr. Strickland. And then, we convinced them that yes, this program is a timely project for the community, having grown so much and there is the potential for UH to attract students from this large community.

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UQ: They were receptive to this idea?

KV: Very highly receptive. As a matter of fact, Dr. Strickland even wrote a check, his personal check for \$500 towards the Foundation. So, that much enthusiasm is there from the University side.

UQ: And it has continued?

KV: It has continued. On August 12, 2007, we are going to celebrate the first anniversary of the Foundation at the University of Houston, at the University Center.

UQ: So far, have you utilized the professors who are on campus to teach these courses?

KV: Yes, well, the administrative part of it, meaning that selection, appointment, courses, everything is left to Professor John Ante!. He is the dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences. We provide all the resources and we recommend the teachers if they cannot find. Luckily, they are able to find some professors. In fact, they hired people from outside the campus, from the person who teaches Hinduism and Jainism. Ms. Andrea Jain, she is from Rice University. And similarly, Arun Prakash, he is from the community. He is teaching the Hindi course, level 1.

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UQ: O.K. How is funding taken care of in this effort?

KV: Well, funding basically is provided by ... the University found funding within its own resources. And from the community side, from the Foundation, is raising money for scholarship. This year, in August, we are going to present them a big check to support the program. And the idea is the community raises money, enough money, as an endowment and we will give the money to the University as an endowment which generates the money and interest. Those proceeds will be spent for supporting the program towards the teachers' salaries and also the scholarships the students _____. Of course, besides the teaching of the students, it will also pay their tuition fees. So, they do get revenues from the student fee and on top of it, we provide scholarships.

UQ: What degree of support have you found from among the Indian community?

KV: I think since we are only in existence for 1 year now, the word has gotten out very much and there is a tremendous good will, I noticed, of the radio stations calling and asking for more details, newspapers publishing articles about this program. And then, when I go out and ask for money, for donations, people are writing checks. We haven't really gone out into the community in a big way because right now, our needs were very limited. But when we expand the program introducing other courses, that is when we need more money, that is when we will raise a lot of money. That is what we are planning to do.

UQ: Is there a physical space at the University on campus, an office for this?

KV: Yes, the physical address is the same, care of Professor Antel – Dean Ante) at the College of Liberal Arts at the University. He has a big office. He has got secretaries and an administrative staff And he also has a separate ... he created a separate identity for the India Studies program. Professor Antel has created a website on his class website. There is a link there. If you plug in India studies, it will take you to our India studies website. That is where you get most of the information. And besides, Foundation for India Studies also has a website fully operational and functional, and people can get the information from there as well.

UQ: How have you found the student support to be for the causes? Are they interested?

KV: Yes. Within a short time ... as a matter of fact, without much publicity itself: I mean, we were surprised that over 70 students have enrolled and already graduated with those credits and those subjects.

UQ: So, they count for the foreign language requirements?

KV: Yes, that will be counted towards performance and credits. They get 3 credits for every course.

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UQ: O.K. Let's talk about the prior project you worked on. You mentioned helping to erect a statue in the Hermann Park area.

KV: O.K. That was in 2004. A statue for Mahatma Gandhi has been installed in Hermann Park. I was the project chairman for that statue project in which Mayor Bill White has dedicated on October 2, 2004, and from Washington, D.C., the Indian ambassador for the United States, he flew from Washington, D.C. He was also there at the dedication sitting with me. There were many previous ... Mayor Lee P. Brown, who did the ground breaking for the statue project, he was also there. And many other Consulate . . . there were about 70 consulates in the Houston area and other foreign dignitaries, and a majority of them came to the impartation. It was a big event and the Mahatma Gandhi statue has become a landmark, an added landmark, for the city of Houston.

UQ: What was the vision behind it, the purpose behind that statue?

KV: Well, that was, again . . . for 20 years, I have been toying with the idea but never got to the point of execution. But it has always been in the back of my mind that we, as a community, should be visible in the mainstream and there should be an icon for the Indian community and for Mahatma Gandhi - he is a worldwide icon for India. And then, an apostle of peace. He represents peace and nonviolence. And at one of the . . . I was asked to speak at a peace rally on the City Hall steps. Just inspirationally, I said the Indian community is quite prosperous and we would donate the gift to the Houston city, a

statue of Mahatma Gandhi as a reminder of peace, a constant reminder of peace to the people of the city. And also, Texas being noted for a cowboy culture, I think it is worth having a statue for a reminder of peace and nonviolence. And, at that time, that peace rally was organized by a peace activist group in Houston and they were protesting against the war, so I thought that was an appropriate suggestion to make. And at that time, I had no idea that this project would get so much support from the community even though I blocked it out, kind of extempore, without preparation. I thought it was only a good idea but actually, that idea got implemented.

And when I told the India Culture Center- I was a board member at ICC -and I told the president that, hey, you know, this is a good project to take and without the board permission, I just blurted something and if you give me an opportunity to work for it, I will take up that project and I will raise enough money to do it from concept to completion. So, what they did was they made me be project chief. Then, I set it up like this, as a tripartite project. One is the government of India will supply the statue free of cost as a gift of the Indian ... Council for Cultural Relations, Government of Interior Department, and Dr. Nazma Haftullah was the chairman. She came from Delhi to do the ground breaking ceremony. She came all the way from Delhi. And with her help, we were able to get the statue free.

Then, we went and talked to the Parks Department to give us a piece of land and also a commitment to maintain the statue forever. We got it in writing and they showed us several sites and finally, we selected Hermann Park being the centrally located, well cared park. So, they showed us outlying some other parks like Franklin Park and Bear Creek Park. I said, no. Their logic was Mahatma Gandhi is from India and most of the

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community lives in that part of the town. I said, "No, Mahatma Gandhi is not for India only. He is for the whole world. He is an apostle of peace and we want to focus him for the mainstream America. We know Mahatma Gandhi but we want Americans to know about him and his message," so that is how insisted on Hermann Park. And finally, they approved it. Now, they are taking care of that statue very well. So then, the third party for that tripartite project is the community. We went into the community. raised money to build a pedestal for that. So, we got the pedestal, we got the statue, we got the maintenance from the Parks Department, land and all that. So, that way, everything ... the puzzle was totally solved and it was a good project, completed on time - actually, before time under the budget. We projected \$50,000 but actually, the total cost came to only \$35,000.

UQ: Can you briefly describe the statue?

KV: O.K., the statue is 6 feet high standing in a walking posture with his stick, and then walking in his loin cloth. That symbolizes that his first march in Surat in Gujrat ... the Dandi March. He went to the seashore to make salt on his own as defiance to pay the taxes, the British taxes imposed on salt. So, that was the very first act of nonviolence. In a peaceful way, he protested to the illegal taxation of British taxes on the salt. His argument was salt was freely available and why should it be taxed? So, he demonstrated that salt can be made by the people themselves. They don't have to pay taxes on it.

UQ: Where specifically is the location of the statue in Hermann Park?

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KV: In Hermann Park, there is a garden called Rose Garden and the statue is located in the Rose Garden just adjacent to the Garden Center.

UQ: What do you think the Indian community gives to Houston?

KV: I think the Indian community is a very vibrant community. It is a fairly well-to-do community. Now, the first generation people like me have realized that they have to give back something to the community, the Houston mainstream community. So, there are organizations in Houston, Indian organizations, like DAYA - a charity organization that collects money and gives out money to people who are in distress. Then, there is an Indo-American Charities organization that collects almost one-half million dollars every year from the community and they disburse the money to, like, United Way, to various charities within the mainstream American community. Then, there are like India Culture Center, there is money during catastrophes like Katrina, Rita where they do social service, food, clothing and collect all those things that are needed here.

So, now, there is a lot of awareness in the Indian community and their understanding the concept of giving back to the society where they derived so much benefit from. So, now, the community is mature and trying to give back a lot. And, in fact, there is another project which is under construction. It is called India House project. That, I was fortunate to be one of the founding secretaries of that project as well. And that project is almost like in the first phases, about \$4 million project. Then, the second phase is about \$18 million. So, phase 1 is getting constructed and, that is, basically, India

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House is a multi-function, multi-service building. It will cater for the mainstream community. They provide basic services like health care and senior citizens services and computer literacy services - things like that. They have social programs. Then once the building is ready which is expected to be next year, they will provide all the services to the public. Not only to the Indian community but also the mainstream community - anybody who walks in gets free service. So, this is a major project which the Indian community is giving back to the mainstream.

UQ: India is a land of many languages, cultures, and religions. To what extent do you feel all the different languages, cultures and religions are represented in these kinds of efforts? Do they come together? Do you find it a divisive point?

KV: Well, as you know, the language is a uniting factor for the people who can speak the language but between linguistic groups, it becomes a divisive factor. Just like religion, language is also a divisive force. But despite all that, there is a feeling that in the community, that we are all one entity coming from a great country like India which is a very diverse country, just like America, and despite so many groups within America - religious groups, linguistic groups, and ethnic groups - America is a nation of nations. Similarly, India also a very diverse country with so many states, each having its own distinct language and culture. So, in many respects, India reflects America and America reflects India. So, having come here, we are united by one thing - that we all came from a subcontinent called India and we are a democratic country like Americans. So, we have a lot of similarities, between American and India. India, we feel proud - even though it is

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a poor country that we come from, but we feel that value systems wise, culturally, we come from a good country where we have something to add to American way of living. That is why you see a lot of spiritual leaders coming from India. And now, yoga has become a fad in America and everybody associates yoga with India. Similarly, Indian culture is making an impact and most of the politicians in America, they recognize Indians as a unique culture, culture and group. Unlike in the past, it is by State Department definition, is like a South Asian region but not many people distinguish that South Asian region has so many countries within that region. And, of course, the dominant country within that region is, no doubt, India. Now, India is doing so well in terms of IT, information technology. So, India has gained a lot of respect in the recent years. And I am sure that the relationship between India and America is going to grow stronger and also, the number of Indians participating in political process that also has an impact now in Washington, D.C. So, Indians have a larger role to play and within a short period - one generation - they made a splash on the American scene.

UQ: So, you think they have been able to overcome the differences and work together towards whatever goals they have?

KV: Right. The linguistic groups, these linguistic groups will slowly integrate as one group as time passes. Already, the second generation Indians, which are our children, they really do not know the difference between a Tamil person and a Kerala person or a Telugu person. For them, it is all Indian looking guys. These people came from India.

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So, this amalgamation will take place as time passes and basically, America is a melting pot obviously. These differences will disappear over a period of time.

UQ: Do you think an Indian identity will also disappear?

KV: Indian identity will not go away that easy because of their distinct culture and religions and the names, like, you know, Brzinski, for example, he was the Secretary of State and he was in the government and he was of Polish origin. His name still is Polish but he was American. Similarly, the Indian names, you will find more and more in the future and everybody will associate them with India. But for all practical purposes, the American like, for example, Sanjay Gupta on CNN, American correspondent - he is Indian. Everybody knows he is from India but the accent is American and he is totally integrated with the American mainstream. Similarly, you will find more and more people like that in the future. So, Indian identity by name, by looks, will remain but they will, for all practical purposes, they become American. That will happen, it is just a matter of time.

UQ: Do you have any closing thoughts you would like to add?

KV: Well, personally, I have no regrets for coming to America. I think I have been able to achieve some things which I wanted to do professionally and socially. It is a great land of opportunities and you are only limited by your own vision. I think the American way of life has been adopted subconsciously all over the world whether they like their

politics or not but somehow, the American value system of freedom of speech and the values of democracy and their way of life . . . Americans are very practical people and they are not very dogmatic. And even though they practice religion over the weekends in their own homes and churches, but still, when it comes to actual life, they look at things very objectively and for them, the purpose is very important. They are action-oriented people. They are risk takers. They are entrepreneurs. So, there are many things which the rest of the world can learn from Americans. Subconsciously, the rest of the world wants to follow America, even though they don't agree with many things that go on in America. But left to themselves, they really wish they were like them, you know. So, I think the world is going in the direction of . . . of course, America is a trend setter. Things happen here. New things always continuously develop and all these products which we enjoy today like computers, internet and all these are thanks to American inventions and the rest of the world will follow. So, this is a country which is a leader in the free world and I think we immigrants who came to America have done far better than the immigrants who went to other countries. And God bless America!

UQ: All right. Thank you very much.