

UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON
ORAL HISTORY OF HOUSTON PROJECT

Pankaj Desai
University of Houston Oral History Project

Interviewed by: Uzma Quraishi
Date: August 26, 2011
Transcribed by: Michelle Kokes
Location: Shell building in Houston, Texas

UQ: This is the oral history interview of Pankaj Desai on August 26, 2011 held at his office in the Shell building in Sugar Land, Texas. The interviewer's name is Uzma Quraishi.

PD: It's not Sugar Land, it's Houston, but it doesn't matter.

UQ: Oh okay, Houston. Alright so if you could just begin by telling who you are a little bit about yourself?

PD: My name is Pankaj Desai and I have been in Houston since 1974. I came from India to do my graduate studies at University of Houston in Chemical Engineering and I've lived in Houston every since 1974. I've been working at Shell for about four years before that with another Dutch company. At Shell my job is in sales, I'm a sales manager at Shell.

UQ: Okay. Where were you born in Bombay, India?

PD: Bombay, India yeah.

UQ: How old were you when you first left Bombay?

PD: I first left Bombay in 1969 to go to engineering school at IIT Kanpur, I don't know if you know those schools.

UQ: Yes.

Interviewee: Desai, Pankaj

Interview Date: August 26, 2011

PD: But in 1969 I left since I was 19 at that time. I was 18 actually, 18 and then I left Kanpur so I used to keep coming back and forth to Bombay on holidays but the first time I left Bombay was in '69.

UQ: Okay.

PD: In '74 when I finished from Kanpur, I came straight here.

UQ: Okay can you tell a little bit about your family?

PD: Yeah my parents are from Gujarat originally but they lived in Bombay since the 1930s, long time. My dad was an equivalent of a C.F.O. (what you would call today) for a privately held group of industries and he essentially spent his whole career with them. Five kids in the family, three sisters and my brother and myself; two sisters live in India and the rest one sister and a brother and I live in the U.S.

UQ: Okay. How would you describe your childhood?

PD: It was very, very happy childhood. Fairly privileged with a lot of luxuries that were not always available, so yeah we had a very good childhood.

UQ: Such as what?

PD: We used to always take long vacations and travel first class. My dad was pretty well to do so we were yeah I'd say we had a pretty decent lifestyle. Family was pretty solid and no issues there.

UQ: Okay.

PD: In general it was like a normal childhood but a lot of good memories.

UQ: Where did you travel?

Interviewee: Desai, Pankaj

Interview Date: August 26, 2011

PD: In India, all over India. Kashmir to south all over South India, Rajasthan and Gujarat, where else did we go? Danital—a lot of hill stations. It was pretty warm in the summer so we would go up in the hills in the summer time.

UQ: Okay what was your impression of... if you could compare Kashmir to South India, two extremes in geography; what was your impression of these places?

PD: South India has a lot of cultural value; lots of temples, old temples. We belong to the Jain Religion so there's some Jain influence there. Some natural beauty also like the hills in Ooty and Kodiakanal. Kashmir was always to us just full of natural beauty and wonder not very much in terms of culture as far as comparing temples in South India to temples in Kashmir.

UQ: Okay. What about the people that you encountered in both places when you were young?

PD: In Kashmir we are going on sort of like a school tour so we didn't really meet too many Kashmiri only we met people in the shops when we went shopping, etc. so I was interacting mainly with my classmates from school. So I don't know Kashmiris very well. In South India we traveled with the family and we were gone for like four weeks and had taken three cars so we would stop at different towns and meet the people and stay at different hotels and that was a lot more when I was familiar with them. So it was a very good experience in the South. Fun people, very friendly, open yeah. But that was in October 1965 or so that's a long time ago.

UQ: How old were you at that time?

PD: 15.

UQ: 15.

Interviewee: Desai, Pankaj

Interview Date: August 26, 2011

PD: Actually 14, 14 yeah.

UQ: So you certainly have clear memories of those places?

PD: Yeah it was a good vacation yeah. And we also went to Rajasthan very much.

There we had gone on another family trip. Usually our trips were by car so when you go by car you stop at a different town and the car breaks down and you have a guy to fix it up. You stay two or three days until the car is fixed and you move on. So it was... we didn't really have planned hotels here tonight, tomorrow, next night we just went as it came along. It was a lot of fun always. Cars were packed. One car would hold 6, 7 people so it was really enjoyable

UQ: Alright. Which school did you go to in your youth?

PD: In Bombay I went to Saint Joseph's.

UQ: From what grade?

PD: K through 12.

UQ: Okay.

PD: We didn't change schools in India. It was from kindergarten through 12th grade, same school. It was an all boys' school. It was a convent, a Catholic school. And next to us was a convent for girls so the sisters went over there and boys went over here usually.

UQ: Who were the teachers at your school?

PD: Most of the teachers were non-Catholic or Indians from different parts of India. I mean they were living in Bombay but they were South Indians, they were Maharashtrians, there were some Gujaratis and also we had some priests teaching us a few lectures. I think we had some teaching us Latin for a while. So...

Interviewee: Desai, Pankaj

Interview Date: August 26, 2011

UQ: Were there any people of European descent?

PD: No.

UQ: No?

PD: No by that time all the Europeans had left.

UQ: Right.

PD: It was all the priests who ran the school the Jesuit priests were all native Indians.

UQ: Okay. Did your parents have sort of, were they in any way troubled by sending you to a non Jain or even a non...?

PD: On the contrary it was an honor to get admitted to that school. In those days I mean the good was a Catholic school. The class composed of 45 students in each... I'm sorry, 90 in each standard, in each grade level but there were two classes A and B. So 45 students per class. Of the 45 there was maybe 3 or 4 Catholics. The rest were all Hindu's and Muslims and Parsis and Sikhs and Jains all mixed together.

UQ: Everything. Okay, alright. When did you get married and was that in India, was that here?

PD: I got married here in Chicago in 1980; December 1980.

UQ: So you were in Houston from what year?

PD: '74 through...

UQ: To the present but you went to Chicago to get married?

PD: I was on a business trip and I usually, I have an uncle, my dad's brother lives in Chicago. So when I'm in Chicago I try to stay with them rather than in a hotel. So there I saw a picture of this young lady and she became my wife now. She is my wife now.

UQ: Okay.

Interviewee: Desai, Pankaj**Interview Date: August 26, 2011**

PD: So it's been 31, 30 years now.

UQ: Alright. When you first came to Houston 1974 why did you come, what was your life like?

PD: I came to Houston because I had applied for various universities from India to go to graduate school to get a Master's that was the objective in chemical engineering and then University of Houston was the one that offered the highest fellowship, tuition plus living expenses and Houston is a good name. I wasn't that aware of the chemical engineering department standard at U of H but after I came I found out it was top notch, it was one of the best in the country.

UQ: Had you heard of Houston before? You said that Houston had a good name.

PD: I knew of Houston for sure yeah.

UQ: How, why?

PD: Because we were pretty good space nuts, space buffs so we knew about Houston as a space city. That was the most, that was our main interaction, main familiarity with Houston was the space program. In fact when I was first going to IIT Kanpur, the very first time in '69 I think it was July 22nd or so we go by train to Bombay to Kanpur and it's an overnight train journey and we had this small transistor radio and at every station we would get down because at the train you could not get any reception and listen because Neil Armstrong was landing on the moon at that time. So at one of the stations we heard that he has landed and he said those famous words and we were all that, "Houston, the Eagle has landed." So Houston was always known to us, through the space program.

UQ: I see. What were your impressions of Houstonians before you ever came? What did you expect? How did you sort of place them in your mind?

Interviewee: Desai, Pankaj

Interview Date: August 26, 2011

PD: I really I did not; I had expected Houston to be a lot less ethnically diverse as I found it to be. I thought we would see more white Americans and maybe some black Americans. I had no idea there was such a big Hispanic community in Houston. I wasn't even aware of Hispanics at that time. So that was surprising to me to see these people of multiple races. I had no idea there was so many Chinese for example living in the U.S. and Houston for sure. So that was a little bit surprising.

UQ: Was that the first time for you in the U.S.?

PD: First time ever out of the country.

UQ: Okay. And you said that you expected there to be white Americans but then also black Americans.

PD: Some small segment of black we expected that but that was it.

UQ: Do you recall how you would have been familiar with the presence of black Americans?

PD: Through history we knew about the race, the segregation of schools. We had heard about Martin Luther King. So we knew there were issues with the race with blacks and whites. So there was a small minority of blacks and the majority were whites. So that's all that we had thought about America as a whole you know. Then coming into a city like this, you see a lot more of a cosmopolitan make up so that was a little bit, that was just surprising that was a revelation.

UQ: Okay. Were you all concerned that given, from what you knew about the treatment of African Americans were you concerned about the treatment of foreigners before coming?

Interviewee: Desai, Pankaj

Interview Date: August 26, 2011

PD: Not really no, because when I first came to the University of Houston we I used to hang out with a bunch of international students. There was a very active international student community at University of Houston in the 70's and they would go out of their way to expose us to cultural programs in Houston: operas, ballets, Astrodome, the ball games and rodeo. So we were taken to all of these events. And most of this was lead by Christian missionaries. They were Christians and they were doing this because they like to hang out with students and they like to talk about their culture. There was never any pressure on religious, religion conversion or any of that nature but they were Christians and that was fine with us.

UQ: Okay. Where did you live when you first came here?

PD: The first year I stayed in the dorms at the University of Houston called Quadrangle. Quadrangle it's called?

UQ: Yeah.

PD: Yeah. Law Hall I still remember that.

UQ: And then after that?

PD: Then I moved to an apartment south of the campus on Macgregor Drive just near the bayou.

UQ: Okay.

PD: We used to take Calhoun Street and go down south and just across the bayou.

UQ: Can you describe that apartment complex to me?

PD: It was a small apartment complex. There was a complex called the Cougar Apartment complex which was huge and we really didn't like that that much so we went to another one that was just a little bit further, it would be like 20 or 25 units, small

Interviewee: Desai, Pankaj

Interview Date: August 26, 2011

apartment. Each apartment was like one bedroom. There were some that were two bedroom but we had a one bedroom apartment, my roommate and I shared that. It was nothing, nothing big, pretty basic. You could walk to campus if you wanted to or [by] car, drive either way.

UQ: Why did you prefer this apartment complex to Cougar Place since so many students did opt out?

PD: The Cougar Apartments were pretty crowded. They were two bedroom apartments most of them. The one-bedrooms were very difficult to find in that time. So there were two bedroom apartments and people would share each bedroom; so four of us hanging out. I didn't like that. I wanted to be with at the most one other person.

UQ: I see. The location of Cougar Place or the residence what do you remember about them?

PD: I remember the Cougar Apartments were rat infested in portions and all of that at that time run down, not very well kept. The one that we were staying was owned by one guy so he was fairly... he took care of it reasonably well. But that was only, we stayed there for only one year not too long.

UQ: Aside from students living in these apartments who else lived there if they were so run down and rat infested?

PD: In the Cougar apartments it was 90 percent was students or maybe 80 percent, 70 percent.

UQ: I see.

PD: Most of them were the students at the university.

UQ: International students?

Interviewee: Desai, Pankaj

Interview Date: August 26, 2011

PD: Most I would say.

UQ: I see.

PD: Most international students.

UQ: Alright. So you were at the university for two years '74 to '76?

PD: No '74 to '79.

UQ: Okay five years.

PD: I did my Ph.D. there.

UQ: Ah, so you didn't stop at the Master's, you continued?

PD: I finished my Master's in '76 or '76 yeah. Then I began my Ph.D. and the same professor, the same research project but just the second part and then I wanted to, I was not sure I wanted to live in the U.S. or live in India. I had my exposure to the U.S. so I said I need to explore what I want to live forever. So in '77 I told my professor that I'm going to take a break of six months and I'm going to go to India and if I like it, I'm not coming back if I don't I'm coming back. So I will ask you to keep my project open for me until I do decide. And he was a very kind gentleman. He understood that I needed to find out for myself where I wanted to live and he said that's fine I'll keep your project open. In fact he even gave me an extra month's fellowship because I was going to go by Europe and spend some time in Europe. So I reached Bombay and after I spent some time in Europe and you know in our country, the huge family, they come to pick you, so they came to pick me up and take me home and I was shocked. In three years that I was away I found a big difference in what I remembered of India and Bombay, this was totally different. Everything seemed to have shrunk in size. I thought my house was pretty big in Bombay which it was for that time. The rooms looked tiny and the

Interviewee: Desai, Pankaj

Interview Date: August 26, 2011

bathrooms were small and everything had shrunk and the people all over the place and I really felt that this was not the place that I left, not what I'd remembered. So on the third day I didn't leave my home for almost two days I was just staying inside. The third day I called my professor and I said, "I'm going to come back." And I had a great vacation for six months. But then at least he knew that I was coming back and I came back in '77 December.

UQ: Okay.

PD: And finished my Ph.D. in '79. I did some post doc research for 6 months and then I found a job with a Dutch company and that's 1980 I began working.

UQ: Alright were you at all concerned to Houston in the first place (I'm backing up), were you at all concerned with Houston being part of "the South" as opposed to "the North" what did you have in mind?

PD: Not at all. We really did not know that much about the difference in the South and the North. We knew there was the rebels and the confederates and we knew that but it never hit home how it is still prevalent. So that was never a concern before I came here.

UQ: Okay. So struggles that you faced after you arrived?

PD: Not really because I came into New York and my uncle, the one in Chicago, he is my dad's brother. He and his wife (they had no kids at that time) they came to New York. They drove there to pick me up. I was met right there at the airport and then had taken a vacation. They showed me the east coast, Washington D.C. and New York. Then we drove back to Chicago. I spent two weeks with them. So I was acclimatized to the daily, the groceries, the food and everything else. Then I came to Houston and there

Interviewee: Desai, Pankaj

Interview Date: August 26, 2011

were some friends here. So they were... it's got a nice network with Indians helping each other. So...

UQ: So they set you up?

PD: Yeah. I straight moved to the dorm. So one day I stayed at a friend's house and the second day I'm in the dorms.

UQ: Okay. You said that you were involved with the International Students Organizations activities.

PD: Right.

UQ: What about interactions with non internationals...

PD: Americans?

UQ: ...with native Houstonians yeah?

PD: It's kind of strange but in my entering batch in my graduate school I think there were like 7 or 8 students and there were three Indians, there was one girl from Iran (4), there was one from Mexico (5), one from Israel (6), one from Chili or Argentina (7) so there must have been...and there were like one or two Americans. So the interaction was again limited to internationals for the most part. So interaction with native Americans really began, became much greater after I began to work. While I was at school it was still more or less international community. It was pretty international, a lot of Chinese kids and Pakistan, India, some from Columbia so it was pretty International, some Europeans, a lot of French; a lot of interaction with the French but not so much with the native Americans because there weren't that many Americans in graduate school at that time.

UQ: Okay.

Interviewee: Desai, Pankaj

Interview Date: August 26, 2011

PD: In school of engineering at least.

UQ: Right. What about the Indian Student Association were you involved with them?

PD: Marginally. Not very active in there but we used to go to watch movies. I mean they would screen them that was it.

UQ: Okay. When you were done with schooling and you decided to move, I would imagine closer to your work place where you found employment, where did you live?

PD: I didn't really move closer. Workplace was in the Pasadena/La Porte area. I don't know if you know that area.

UQ: I do.

PD: So that area was near La Porte but I always stayed in this area. So we had moved from that apartment I told you near the University which was there from '74 to '75 in the dorms, '75 to '76 in this apartment. Then '76 we moved to Greenway Plaza area near the Galleria, near what used to be The Summit which is now that church, so right around the corner from there. So we moved there. So I was there for a year. Then I went to India and then when I came back my roommate had moved into another apartment off of 610 South Loop and South Main Street by the Astrodome, so Astroworld that area, just 19:43 outside the loop, it was an apartment called Charleston Park Apartment complex. So we stayed there from '77 until '81 and I began working in '80 still staying in that apartment and then the job was about a 30 mile commute each way so I just drove.

UQ: Okay tell me about that area that you moved into on 610 and South Main?

PD: It was a pretty nice apartment complex, pretty upscale for that time, very safe. There were lots of tennis courts, swimming pools and there were students, a few students but there were a lot of Americans that lived there. So it was, in that sense, more

Interviewee: Desai, Pankaj

Interview Date: August 26, 2011

Americans lived there then now probably because it has become a bit run down now. But at that time it was a pretty nice complex.

UQ: Has it changed is it still in existence?

PD: I haven't been there but I think the makeup might have changed a little bit because that whole area has become a little bit more crime infested. So I think it has become a little bit more crime infested now. I haven't been there very much. I just drive by through it. So I don't know much about that area.

UQ: The demographic makeup do you remember what it was like?

PD: When we were there it was pretty mixed. I would say maybe 60 percent were Caucasians maybe about 20 percent African Americans and the rest could be mixed Hispanic, Indians, Chinese all that. That's what I remember I could be wrong. Maybe the numbers are off a little bit but the bulk of it was Caucasians.

UQ: And is that the same to your knowledge now?

PD: I'm pretty sure it is not the same, no. I do not know but I can imagine, because that whole area around there was an influx of people from Missouri City into these _____ went down and so that whole area has become more African Americans.

UQ: I see. Do you happen to know why that change happened?

PD: I... because this was a fairly good apartment complex and a little bit more expensive than other apartments. So as the African Americans became more affluent they would begin to move into apartments that were closer to town and a little bit more upscale. That's how I think it must have happened.

UQ: Okay. Alright in what ways did being a new immigrant after you left school, how did that affect your life here in the U.S.?

Interviewee: Desai, Pankaj

Interview Date: August 26, 2011

PD: As an immigrant, by that time I was already five years, six years so I wasn't new.

But what was new to me was working; because in my life I had never worked. When I was in India you go to school from kindergarten through college and then one find day you are in the work place. Same thing happened to me. I had never worked in my life until this job so it was a different kind of experience interacting with mainstream America a lot of Caucasians and everything. I would say it was a very good experience. The job was very good so it was one of the, I think the better companies to work for. So I had a good time there. I even stayed with them for 27 years so it was a long, long career there.

UQ: Were there any sort of struggles that you remember facing because you are an immigrant, any challenges that that might have posed?

PD: Well there were only one or two incidents that I can remember, just one I think. There was one guy who was maybe he was our... was he H.R. or no he was a controller, financial controller. He...I found that he was a little bit racial in his biases but that was the only interaction I had with race. I had no racial experiences of that type at all. Most people in the work place are pretty professional and if you did a good job they liked you. If you didn't then you were out so there was no two ways about it. And we were dealing with always white collar workers, never with the blue collar but maybe there would be issues of, "You're taking over my job" or stuff like that but there was nothing like that. At least at that time I don't know how it is now so.

UQ: What about outside of the work place? Any experiences?

PD: Again I don't... I mean we interacted with the fairly international community. So we never felt racially segregated.

Interviewee: Desai, Pankaj**Interview Date: August 26, 2011**

UQ: Alright and so around the time that you started working was around the same time that you got married correct?

PD: I got married a year, I began in February 1980 and I got married in December 1980 so about 10 months.

UQ: Alright and where did you and your wife choose to live?

PD: We moved in the same apartment by south, 610 South Loop after we moved down, after we got married and then she... we lived there for a year. Then we bought a house in near actually it's not Stafford but it is I think it's called Alief area, in the Keegen's Glen area, West Belford and 59, we bought a house there because she was going to school at University of Houston also.

UQ: Okay how did you choose that neighborhood as opposed to any other neighborhood?

PD: We wanted to stay in the southwest part of town because most of our friends live in this neighborhood and this was a new housing subdivision being built so houses were new. We wanted a new house and we found a house that we liked and in our price range so we moved over there.

UQ: Okay and at that point there was no consideration of good schools or anything like that?

PD: We didn't have any kids at that time.

UQ: Right.

PD: Yeah.

UQ: Okay you said that most of your friends lived there, where were most of your friends from?

Interviewee: Desai, Pankaj

Interview Date: August 26, 2011

PD: Most... by that time most of my friends were from India because as I became older and older my friends' circle was just two groups: at work and outside of work. Outside of work most of our friends were Indians. There were a few friends from France, they lived near the Galleria area, so not very far from where you are.

UQ: Okay and how often did you interact with your Indian friends?

PD: Very often, every weekend we would have some event or the other.

UQ: Did you ever interact outside of work with your non Indian friends?

PD: Yeah quite a few times. We would take them to Indian restaurants; we'd go out to eat food. We'd go to some ball games.

UQ: And where were those non Indian friends from, what was their ethnicity?

PD: They were mostly Caucasians.

UQ: Okay, your company was (I'm making an assumption here) largely Caucasian?

PD: Yeah.

UQ: Okay. Were there people of other ethnicities working there?

PD: Yeah, yeah there were. There were... it's like any other company now.

UQ: Okay.

PD: It's a fairly large company. It's about 65,000 employees so it's a big company. I mean it's not as big as Shell is but fairly big still, so.

UQ: Okay the friends that you knew throughout college and even beyond the ones in your Indian community, I have interviewed some people who have mentioned that some married non-Indians. Did you experience that? Did you have friends who married non Indians as well?

Interviewee: Desai, Pankaj

Interview Date: August 26, 2011

PD: I'm trying to think... there were a couple of friends who married non Indians but they were, then the marriage fell apart.

UQ: Can I ask who they married, what racial or ethnic background?

PD: Americans.

UQ: White Americans?

PD: White Americans yeah.

UQ: Were they both men who married white American women?

PD: Yes, yeah. There are very few women in our friend circle. Most of the guys came from engineering school so there were one or two girls but most of them men.

UQ: Okay. When you married your wife, before you married her what were your considerations about the kind of person you wanted to marry?

PD: I wanted to marry somebody who would be a professional, who would have her own career and I did not want to marry a person who wanted to be a housewife.

UQ: Why was that?

PD: I always wanted to marry somebody with whom I could talk and think more. Eating was, and eating home-cooked meals and all was not an important part of my life. I would rather the companionship and the ability to talk and debate was more important to me.

UQ: Was she all those things?

PD: She was yeah.

UQ: Did you also consider her being from the same region of India as you was that a major?

Interviewee: Desai, Pankaj

Interview Date: August 26, 2011

PD: It happened to be. She is from Ahmedabad and I'm from Bombay and they are not very far apart. Actually she happens to be a Jain just like I am but that was not a consideration. Our uncles are friends; her uncle and my uncle were friends, that's how we met.

UQ: Okay was she already here in the U.S.?

PD: She was in Canada in Toronto. Because she had come to go to school in Dallas but she came six months before school began because her aunt was going to have a baby. She said, 'I'll go early, get used to the lifestyle, help the aunt with the baby, then start school.' So before the baby happened, before she became school we met and got married then she moved to Houston and began school at Houston.

UQ: Okay. Did your parents play a large role in helping you decide who you were marrying or did they leave it to you?

PD: Well, my mom tried to find a bride for me in India and that girl came here to meet me. She had a sister who lived in New Jersey. In my mom's eyes she was the right girl for me but when she came, we met, we realized that she was not what I wanted because she did not want to... she was more keen on being a housewife. And I told her this is not going to work so after one meeting we didn't pursue it any further.

UQ: Okay.

PD: After that my mom and dad stopped finding girls for me and then this, just my uncle connected us, my uncle and her uncle connected us.

UQ: Okay. What made your mom think that this girl was the right girl? What criteria did she meet for your mother?

Interviewee: Desai, Pankaj

Interview Date: August 26, 2011

PD: For my mother she was a nice homely girl who knew how to cook and clean and from a pretty decent family from Bombay, same religious background. So that's what my mom thought would be... because she was looking at her like my sisters were. "Oh she's like one of my sisters." I have three sisters, two are more the homewife, the housewife type. One was different. The one that is here is different. So this girl was more like my sisters who are living in India so that's what she thought.

UQ: Okay was this girl also a Jain and Gujarati speaking?

PD: Yeah.

UQ: So that satisfied I guess probably...

PD: All the criteria of my mom.

UQ: Okay what about, you don't have to answer if you are not comfortable but what about the way she looked, was that an issue for your mother?

PD: For my mother it was, yeah. She looked pretty.

UQ: What does that mean?

PD: My mother liked the fair skinned girls and she was fair skinned and she had a nice symmetric face and she was fair skinned and that was all that my mother wanted.

UQ: Why do you think there's a preference for fair skin?

PD: It's difficult to say. I guess because my mom's generation grew up knowing the British and all that ruled India so there was always an adulation of the fair skinned, that's all I can think of.

UQ: So do you think there's a link between that and colonialism?

PD: I would think so yeah.

UQ: Okay.

Interviewee: Desai, Pankaj

Interview Date: August 26, 2011

PD: And it probably still lingers today. I mean even in India you find that people prefer fair skinned then less fairer skinned people.

UQ: Do people in the Indian community ever talk about that?

PD: Not over here.

UQ: No? Or even disagreeing with it?

PD: It's just not a topic that... we have been married for so long now that it's not even a topic we look at.

UQ: What about for your own children?

PD: Yeah for our own kids also whomever they marry is I am happy if they marry somebody from our own country or culture but if they marry a white American, or a non white American that might create some problems not because the person is non white but because in general there is not a stigma but there is a feeling that there is more crime and people are in the other place African American community, more crime... people are... drugs and I just... all kind of stereotyping that goes on.

UQ: Have you seen friends' children, children of your friends marry into white American communities or even African Americans?

PD: Yes. Two or three friends we know that children have married non Indians.

UQ: Okay and how is it sort of talked about? How is it perceived?

PD: No issue at all.

UQ: No? Okay. Any children marrying African Americans that you know of?

PD: No that I know of.

UQ: Okay, I see. And then Hispanics?

Interviewee: Desai, Pankaj

Interview Date: August 26, 2011

PD: That's probably one of the reasons it's not talked about they have been marring white boys or white girls so it's not an issue.

UQ: I see; Hispanic marriages?

PD: There is, I think there have been one that I know of but nobody close to me so just that friends of friends something like that.

UQ: Okay. Alright. Among your friends, how much control or how much input is there from your generation toward the marriage of the second generation?

PD: Yeah I would say it's very, fairly less then it was with our generation. It's for the most part what parents look for is a boy or girl my child is marrying educated, we look for that. That's a key thing we look for from a fairly decent family and can they afford the lifestyle on their own that they are used to with us? That's the only criteria. We are happy if they marry from our own community because it makes it easier for the parents of the children no other reason than that. But if they were to marry non Indians I don't think it would be a big, big issue like that. So...

UQ: Would you say that possibly there has been an increase of intermarriage with non Indians or about the same?

PD: I mean there is an increase but that's from a number of us from one to two that's a 50% increase but it's still not a huge number I mean.

UQ: Right.

PD: So it's not that big a number. For the most part there are still... most of the marriages are within the community. There are a few that are outside.

UQ: Alright. I'll do a different question. Are there groups here in the U.S. who are discriminated against in your opinion?

Interviewee: Desai, Pankaj

Interview Date: August 26, 2011

PD: Discrimination in what sense, define that?

UQ: I'm going to let you define that any way you understand it.

PD: If you say in terms of race.

UQ: That's one.

PD: Then I imagine that in some parts of the U.S. it's more prevalent than in other parts. Like the Deep South we talk about Alabama and places like that I'm sure there is discrimination. I have never lived there outside of Houston so I cannot say from personal experience. But I believe that there is more discrimination there than it is in the bigger towns. Discrimination against, on religious basis one community that stands out is the Muslim community as you probably have experienced that or at least you've seen it outside (not you personally) but you've seen whenever there are attacks and things like that they are segmented, separated out. So that may be more prevalent I think than I mean more prevalent on a broader part of the country than in the deeper South that's what I would think.

UQ: Okay. So the discrimination towards African Americans you think occurs kind of only in the Deep South or more in the Deep South?

PD: More in the Deep South. Even in the... even in Northeast and I'm sure there is discrimination but it's probably not as prevalent as in the Deep South.

UQ: Why do you think that is?

PD: I feel that it's because the other parts of the country have a more of an influx of foreigners. They are more used to seeing Indians or African or Europeans moving into in the Northeast corridor and in California they are used to seeing Oriental race coming in. So they are more used to foreigners so they are more tolerant of other races because over

Interviewee: Desai, Pankaj

Interview Date: August 26, 2011

100 years you get conditioned. In the Deep South there has been less of an influx of foreigners because there are not that many jobs in also. That's what I would guess.

UQ: So you think they are just continuing the sort of older ideas that...

PD: Correct.

UQ: That have been there.

PD: And not being exposed to something else then what their parents were used to.

UQ: Okay. So to a lesser extent the discrimination occurs in larger cities, have you ever seen it?

PD: I personally have not seen it no. I have never... I don't even remember any incident where I was an observer or let alone being a participant but not even as an observer.

UQ: In passing comments from Indians or non Indians?

PD: Nothing sticks to my mind.

UQ: Okay. You said you had heard of the Civil Rights movement, Martin Luther King. What were some of the impressions in India of these movements?

PD: It was compared to Gandhi a lot.

UQ: Because that is the common theme. He believed in non violence and protests without violence and that really brought to light the problems the African Americans had faced here because we are totally...when we saw movies and television, not TV we didn't have TV at that time. Movies, Hollywood movies I read books I hardly saw this racial segregation. It was all about Hollywood and western movies and good guy/bad guy but no color issue entered in that. So I didn't know much about the how deep rooted

Interviewee: Desai, Pankaj

Interview Date: August 26, 2011

it was until he brought it to light and that is all I remember because he died when I was still under the formative age, before...

UQ: Right.

PD: Before I had formed any ideas of my own.

UQ: Okay. Going back to... you have gone through this interview really quickly, usually it takes a lot longer than this. I think I'm done with this so I'll go to my own questions now. Regarding... do you have children before I make that assumption.

PD: Yes.

UQ: Which area of town do you live in now?

PD: Sugar Land.

UQ: Sugar Land. And your children went to school where?

PD: We have just the one child, one daughter. When she was born we were living in this house in the Stafford Area in Keegens Glen. When she was three we moved to Braeswood and Fondren area we had a house there the Jewish neighborhood it used to be Jewish at that time. The schools in that neighborhood were not very good so we put her to Saint Thomas.

UQ: Episcopal?

PD: Episcopal yeah.

UQ: Okay.

PD: It's a full school K through 12 so she went to that school from kindergarten onwards and when she was in 7th grade or 6th grade we moved to Sugar Land so she continued to go to Saint Thomas until she finished her 8th grade and then when she came to the 9th grade she had to decide to stay in Saint Thomas or change. Luckily for us the

Interviewee: Desai, Pankaj

Interview Date: August 26, 2011

public school in our area is Kempner and they start like mid-August and Saint Thomas always starts after Labor Day. I said, you have a window of two weeks where you can try Kempner, if you don't like it go back to Saint Thomas. She went to Kempner and the first day when she came home I said, "So how was it?" She said, "Dad in Saint Thomas my entire school K through 12 is 600 kids. Kempner my freshman class is 900 kids." She said, "But I love it here I want to stay here." I said, "Fine, then we told Saint Thomas, "No" so she went to Kempner because she wanted to... I thought Saint Thomas was a good school more for liberal arts. She learned a lot of languages, Greek and Latin and French and not Spanish for some reason, which they should have taught but they didn't. But they did not emphasize the math and sciences and she... we thought that she might be better off going into the math and sciences area. So in Kempner she got a lot of opportunities so she enjoyed that very much.

UQ: Okay how old is she now?

PD: She just turned 26.

UQ: And so she went to college where?

PD: At A & M. She got a bachelor's in environmental biology at A & M from 2003 to 2006 and she joined Fluor right near our house at the HSE department and after two and a half, was it two and a half? Not three years or so at Fluor. She wanted to go to graduate school. So she left and went to Rice to get a Master's in environmental science and she finished this May and she is going to join workforce now, also Shell.

UQ: Okay.

PD: She is going to stay at home and work in Shell, not here but a different campus of Shell.

Interviewee: Desai, Pankaj

Interview Date: August 26, 2011

UQ: No carpooling huh?

PD: No she is going to be on the Woodcreek Campus that's on Diary Ashford and I-10.

UQ: Okay.

PD: Which is fine, so.

UQ: You had mentioned living Fondren and Braeswood and saying that that area has...

PD: Run down.

UQ: At that time it was Jewish. It's not Jewish anymore?

PD: No. It's... even when we were there the last... we were there from '87 to... '88 to '96. The last two or three years we found that the makeup had changed because of the apartment complexes nearby which were upscale apartments at one time but the city took them over and made them into low-cost housing and a bus route also came in so all kinds of unruly elements move in. So every night we would hear police sirens, ambulance back and forth and shooting and all. So we didn't want to have our child grow up in that neighborhood. We would be scared if she would go on her bike alone in the evening. So we moved out from there. So... one saw that the Jewish moving also.

UQ: Okay.

PD: You would see them all walking on the Friday's with their yarmulke going to their shule or their synagogue because they can't drive on Fridays but that's all that's gone now.

UQ: So when they started moving away, who moved in?

Interviewee: Desai, Pankaj

Interview Date: August 26, 2011

PD: For the most part it was the African Americans that moved in that neighborhood, affluent African Americans.

UQ: Okay. Alright...anything else that you'd like to add before we wrap up?

PD: Let's see what part haven't I covered yet? We touched on religion a little bit. We are Jains as I told you and these days our just like you in the Muslim religion you have the *Eid*, Ramadan and *Eid*. And we have the 8 days of Jains which is called *Paryushana*, the holy days for Jains, the holiest days of all for Jains in the year. It began yesterday to this is day 2. It goes on for 8 days and most of them time people spend in fasting, to the amount that you can. Either one day or a half a day or three days or 8 days or 10 days.

Our fast is nothing at all. Not eating at all you can just drink some water and that's about it.

UQ: Meaning that if you decide to fast for three days you don't eat from day one until the end of day three?

PD: Sundown... let's say Sunset today I stop eating and I start sunrise after three days. So it's almost three and a half days.

UQ: Wow so then a full eight days would be very difficult for anyone?

PD: People do it for 10 days, 12 days also.

UQ: Wow!

PD: And we have a temple which is off of Westpark between Fondren and Gessner so in these days it's full of activity people are there and when you are with the community and worshiping together the fasting goes easier, you know. So and if you are eating only one time a day, like today we had only that's our plenty our only one meal. So we eat at the temple and there's a family of volunteers who always serves these *Tapasvis*, as we

Interviewee: Desai, Pankaj

Interview Date: August 26, 2011

call them. And they prepare the food. It has to be freshly prepared with all the dietary regulations, Jain food and then every evening there is a lecture by a holy... by one of our holy ladies. So it's a fun, it's a good time. Then there is a celebration at the end of the Tapasvi feast, we have fasted so much so it's very nice.

UQ: What is that celebration called? Is there a name like we have the Eid?

PD: I'm trying to think if there is a name for it. It just slipped my mind. What is it called? There's a word for it but we celebrate the people who are fasted there's a name for it but I can't think of it right now.

UQ: Okay, so apparently you are involved in your Jain temple?

PD: I am involved because my wife is involved. I'm not a practicing Jain because Jains have very strict diet rules, vegetarian, total vegetarian, not even eating any roots like potatoes, onion, anything that goes under the ground we are not allowed to eat; over the ground yes. Absolute non violence towards any living being (human or otherwise). So no... they are all vegetarians by definition. I'm not practicing all those things. But my wife is pretty... she practices for the most part. She is a vegetarian, she does eat potatoes and onions but she is a vegetarian. And my daughter has become a vegetarian since she was 12. And it's kind of interesting why we became active in the Jain temple. I told you that we put our daughter in Saint Thomas Episcopal school because I went to a Catholic school in Bombay Saint Joseph's right? So I thought it will be just like that. However in Saint Thomas Episcopal every morning she had to go to chapel for one hour, learning about Christ. In Saint Joseph in Bombay we also had to learn about Christ but it was more like stories it was not like chapel type thing and when you walk from my home to my school you walk through one Jain temple, one Hindu temple so you hear the

Interviewee: Desai, Pankaj

Interview Date: August 26, 2011

prayers and also by osmosis you observe the religious values. So Christianity is a religion for me. So is Hinduism, so is Islam it's all religion so I get exposed to all religions. But in Saint Thomas she only was exposed to Christianity and she didn't have this luxury of walking through and learning by osmosis. So we had to expose her to our religion so she knew that, so she would know that there are other options besides Christ. So we became active in the Jain temple. My wife became a teacher, teaching the Sunday school. She's been doing this since 1991 so lots of Jain kids in Houston have learned from my wife.

UQ: How old was your daughter when you decided to get active?

PD: Five or six when she joined Saint Thomas.

UQ: Okay.

PD: I think five or six when she went to kindergarten. So my wife just stopped teaching last year I think because she said, "I've taught a lot of kids and I need to learn myself and listen." When she's teaching she can't listen to the lectures. So that was an interesting part of our religion. The religion is important to us because it is important to my wife and my daughter. My daughter is not religious except that she is a vegetarian. But my wife is, her background in India was more religious than mine. Her parents and her grandma took her to the temple a lot more often than my family. My family religion was when you retire and when you are old and when you are ready but not when you are young. So that is...that is one aspect of our life.

UQ: Are there other groups that you are involved in aside from your temple, that being a group?

PD: We have a group of friends who were with me since the mid 70's onwards, University of Houston. Some came in the 80's, some came in the 90's, some come in the 2000's. We are about maybe 20, 25 families. Most of us got married the same time, our kids are the same age so we had birthday parties together and so we used to hang out together. We still hang out together. Every month we have a party at someone's house. At Divali or this or that or Super Bowl to get together and watch it. So that's our social network.

UQ: You'll find an occasion even if there isn't one?

PD: Yes. Well if we haven't met for a long time let's go for a movie then after the movie we will come to somebody's house and eat Thai or something and talk until early in the morning and then there are friend we play cards with, another Indian couple we've known them a long time.

UQ: Bridge?

PD: Actually it's not bridge it's a different game. It's an Indian game it's more like rummy but you're with partners. You play with partners. We play that quite competitively.

UQ: Do you play for money?

PD: No points. No money at all. But it's real, we are very fierce competitors so my partner is the other lady and my wife is the other guy's partner. So everybody, somebody happen to fail we keep peace that way. So we get together with them after all the parties we have to go to. Friday nights and other nights we meet at 11:00 and play until like 2:00 or 3:00 in the morning. That's kind of fun. That's our social relief in all. We really enjoy that. We have played with them since the mid 80's. So we have the books for the date

Interviewee: Desai, Pankaj

Interview Date: August 26, 2011

and the score and we can say, "Hey this is what happened then." It's of no value except to us we have a good time with them.

UQ: Okay.

PD: I think I run a lot. I began... this is interesting I'll let you, you might like to hear. See I was working for this company for 27 years never changed jobs because the job was very good and I got a lot of opportunities. And my wife, my wife is an attorney so she went to law school at U of H and she began her own practice in '86. She has been practicing law since '86 and I've been... so we've been chugging along with no, luckily no layoffs nothing like that. So it was pretty easy life right? So we began to think that life has become too complacent. It's like being on cruise control. They are flying on the jet at 35,000 feet and nothing happens you just keep, I said, "We need to bring some turbulence in our life." So one thing we did is I changed jobs. I came to Shell. I said, "Now this is late in the career but I want to do it" and I think it was a good choice. But this is much more challenging job. Not that great too but this is just a challenge, it's turbulence. Then I began running. I used to run two, three miles every day on the treadmill but I did it for longer runs. I did the half marathons. So every Saturday I run like 11 miles.

UQ: Starting when?

PD: In the morning?

UQ: No I guess starting at what age or what year?

PD: I began about, I began running in 2007 so 4 years ago. So I've done 4 half marathons now. Early January in the Houston marathon, I did the half marathon. And to keep training I run every Saturday at 11 miles. I wake up at 5 in the morning and...

Interviewee: Desai, Pankaj

Interview Date: August 26, 2011

UQ: Wow!

PD: Saturdays, Sundays there's a group of friends in my neighborhood. Most are retired, some are working, Indians and very professional group, Shell, KBR, TI so engineers and that kind and mostly South Indians so they walk in this park, Lost Creek Park in Sugarland. So they come at 7:00, at 7:05 we start walking. It's a four and a half mile track but I go before them at 5:15 or so and I run the track one and a half times, six and a half miles and then I walk with them four and a half miles. So I really get a good workout you know. Then some days I just walk four and a half miles with them. So that walk it takes, if I am really in good morale I walk pretty fast but sometimes I need to socialize so I'll chat with them, and we solve all the world's problems in that little walk and we know people that have been coming there for years so we say hi to each other. I mean its nice network there. Unusual you know? But it's a group of Indians, a group of Chinese, all walking around, some Americans.

UQ: Is it all men?

PD: Some of the ladies also come, wives also join us. My wife comes with me all the time.

UQ: Sounds like a great bonding experience.

PD: It's fun yeah. And the ladies sometimes walk slower so they'll group and walk on their own and then talk and we'll be faster. Some ladies walk fast so they walk with us.

UQ: Have you found any Indian friends who run with such passion as you?

PD: In half marathon I've met a few Indians. There are a few of us who run. There's one guy I met him through this... he has run like umpteen full marathons. But now I

Interviewee: Desai, Pankaj

Interview Date: August 26, 2011

think he's got some cancer so he stopped running. So there are a few Indians who run.

But for the most part it's not so common.

UQ: Okay.

PD: Either that or what else we do? Watch Indian movies, mostly on DVD's. It's too much of an effort to go to the theater so we just get DVDs and watch them.

UQ: Yeah. You had mentioned that you had friends; there was already a network existent when you came to Houston in '74. Can you remember some of the people who were...

PD: Sure!

UQ: ...who were here then and are still here now?

PD: Yeah quite a few of them. Do you know, I don't know if you know Udhay Mahgaonkar?

UQ: No.

PD: He was Udhay Mahgaonkar and Sunita Mahgaonkar, both Shell employees.

Udhay was in fact the guy who took me to my first day to the campus. He was already in the University of Houston working on his Ph.D. when I came, same department. He came from IIT Kanpur also. So I've sort of followed him through everywhere.

UQ: I see did you know him before you came here?

PD: No I met him at the University of Houston.

UQ: Okay.

PD: I met his wife Sunita so we see them not so often but he's around. Let's see who else was there? He's the one that sticks out from that day period. And of course my roommate with whom, he's another Indian guy we were together in Kanpur and both

Interviewee: Desai, Pankaj

Interview Date: August 26, 2011

came to U of H together, same department, chemical engineering, he married a Chinese girl from Hong Kong so I see them very often. They live in League City.

UQ: What's his name?

PD: Pradeep Mehta. Let's see who else?

UQ: Did he spend any time in Houston after graduating?

PD: He got a job and he moved to Connecticut after he got his Ph.D. Then from there he moved to Corpus Christi. He was in Corpus for a long time. Then he moved to Houston I think 6, 7 years ago now or maybe 5 years ago. _____ Udhay he was a Shell employee he is retired from Shell last year. His wife still works at Shell, Sunita.

UQ: So you don't only remember these two people that...

PD: From that time...

UQ: ... they were at the university with you both of them?

PD: Yeah.

UQ: What about outside what about families who were already here, did you have interaction?

PD: Not very. Very little interaction. Because the university period was pretty, well it wasn't that demanding in terms of time for academics, we had all this fine time for socializing which we always did but most of our friends' circle were students on the campus. Not necessarily Indians but like I said the international group: Chinese, Indians, Pakistani's, Mexican's all combined. So we hang out with them a lot.

UQ: You sort of self contained?

PD: Yeah. All had the common objective. They all moved away from their homeland looking for someone to latch onto. So that was a good network.

Interviewee: Desai, Pankaj

Interview Date: August 26, 2011

UQ: Okay. Are you involved with the Gujarati Samaj?

PD: Not really. We are more involved with the Jain Society, the religious. My wife more is involved with Gujarati Samaj because she is an attorney. She helped draft the constitution and she got involved with that kind of activities. But lately it's our involvement is only limited to Navratri and Divali parties and that's it. Jain Society we are pretty active. It's becoming less now but she's been a chief trustee several years in a row, plus a teacher.

UQ: Are there other sort of cultural groups whose activities you attend? Not that you are active in the group itself but you just attend their functions?

PD: Other Gujaratis group, yes we do attend their functions. But not I'm trying to think besides Gujaratis... not really. Not even other Indian other associations like South Indians and all. We don't interact very much of their social activities. This walking group is mostly from South, South India.

UQ: Which group?

PD: The walking group that I walk with.

UQ: Oh the walking group.

PD: They are mainly from South India...

UQ: Like Kerala?

PD: Madras, Tamal Nadu, and Chennai.

UQ: Okay.

PD: They have been here for 35, 40 years.

UQ: What language are you speaking with them?

PD: English.

Interviewee: Desai, Pankaj

Interview Date: August 26, 2011

UQ: English, all English?

PD: Totally English yeah. We teach some of words of Gujaratis they teach me a few words of Tamil so we greet them and that's about it. So...

UQ: Okay well alright. Question occurred to me regarding... you seem very open minded. But have you heard Indian friends talking about African Americans as ever come up in passing sort of stereotypical kind of judgments?

PD: Yeah.

UQ: It's a very direct question.

PD: Yeah no it's... it's a fair question. I mean we, we all have our biases and there always... I can tell you that most of my Indian friends would be very much against their children marrying an African American. Right or wrong I'm not passing any judgment but I'm just making a statement of fact. Because the differences we feel are too large. They may not be in reality but it's a perception that they are too far apart. And again I could tell you that most of us have a tendency to favor the fairer colored race than the darker colored race. In that grain, it would be more accepting to marry a Hispanic. Because I feel that the family values in the Hispanic community is a little bit closer to our community then it is in the African American community. We hear stories about this lady has kids, doesn't know who the father is, and all that for us is not acceptable. So we just want to not experience, experiment with that with our children. So I'm one of them probably I will be less inclined to let her marry an African then a Caucasian American. So those kinds of comments you do hear.

UQ: Okay.

PD: They say they are not but they certainly practice it.

Interviewee: Desai, Pankaj

Interview Date: August 26, 2011

UQ: Okay thank you for your honesty.

PD: You're welcome.

UQ: Is there similar thinking among parents here even though they don't have as much choice in arranging the marriages of their children, is there similar thinking regarding the skin color, darker versus lighter?

PD: It's not darker versus lighter in this country, amongst the Indian circle. It's more African American versus American, versus Indians or versus Hispanic. I mean Hispanics or Indians the Hispanic or Indian person is lighter or darker skinned, that is not the issue.

UQ: It doesn't matter; it's more the culture that's attached to that group or at least the perception of that?

PD: In India there is the case where they are all Indians but there, the mom would like a fairer colored Indian than a darker colored Indian. Over here that is not the case.

UQ: What about for in terms of marrying another Indian? Is there a preference among the parents generation that their child marry a fairer or darker Indian?

PD: No that's what I'm saying it's not... as long as she's Indian?

UQ: It doesn't matter?

PD: It doesn't matter fairer or darker. As long as the Indians, they are all Indians. You are happy that they are marrying an Indian rather than a non Indian. It's... I'm not passing any judgment. I'm just stating a fact.

UQ: So that's enough, whether they are from I don't know... Kashmir...

PD: Punjab or Kashmir or South India or Kerala or Bengal...

UQ: Makes no difference?

Interviewee: Desai, Pankaj

Interview Date: August 26, 2011

PD: It makes no difference. It's more the fact that is the child educated or will they be able to look after our children and afford them the same life that we are affording them?

That's the underlying principal that we look for rather than everything else.

UQ: Alright one question occurred to me. When you lived in the area around Cougar Place (even now) and historically that area has been an African American area.

PD: Yeah.

UQ: U of H is in African American area. U of H is actually in that neighborhood.

PD: Actually yes correct. The neighborhood is African but the Cougar apartment area was like I said 60% students and most of them were international students so there were not... there wasn't an African American at that time. It was much less than it is now.

When you step out of it and you go to Old Spanish Trail and all... that is very African American, even then and even now.

UQ: Okay what about the houses around the apartments?

PD: Around Cougar apartments there were very few houses.

UQ: I see.

PD: Because it was University and you took that street Wheeler Street or wait Calhoun Street and there was this huge apartment complex. Then when you cross that you came to the bayou, Braes Bayou, then you went over it. Then you come to Old Spanish Trail and then there were some houses, pretty run down and they were mostly African Americans. So one of my friends was mugged when he was walking. We didn't think much about walking in those but he went in that area and he was mugged. So those things don't leave a good taste in your mouth. I don't know how it is now.

UQ: Same.

Interviewee: Desai, Pankaj

Interview Date: August 26, 2011

PD: Similar?

UQ: Yeah. So your interaction at the University really was limited to the international students. It wasn't so much the African American students because I'm guessing if there were white Americans in your graduate program...

PD: There were very few. There were no African Americans in that program.

UQ: Okay.

PD: But my interaction was with international students was not necessarily in my department. They were in business school...

UQ: Right.

PD: ... chemistry school. The Chinese kids came to go to undergraduate school here. Mostly from India you can do graduate school because it was expensive to come and we didn't get fellowships to go to undergraduate so we didn't come. We had good schools in India so we just came for graduate school. But the Chinese kids they come for undergraduate level you know so we would hang out with those kids. The gap maybe three or four years, not big gaps still reasonable.

UQ: Okay. Have your parents visited you here?

PD: Many times yeah.

UQ: What's there, what was their first impression the first time they came?

PD: My dad is no longer alive. He died when he was 87 years. He lived a ripe old age. He passed in 2000. His first trip here was in 1982 or '83 I believe with my mom. Now my mom doesn't know a word of English.

UQ: She speaks...

PD: Gujarati.

Interviewee: Desai, Pankaj

Interview Date: August 26, 2011

UQ: Gujarati.

PD: And she knows Hindi, broken Hindi, broken Marathi— it's the language of Bombay but no English. My dad speaks pretty good English. Well I shouldn't say speaks, he wrote very good English, he read very good English but his speaking was with an Indian accent, very difficult for Americans to understand but he knew English. I mean he was an English scholar. He loved to write, was a great writer. He loved this country. He would have loved to have lived here all his life. I mean he used to read John Wayne books and movies and he used to watch every John Wayne movie that was on T.V. He would stay up in the middle of the night watching John Wayne movies, big fan of John Wayne westerns. He loved America and we took him all over the place. He saw quite a bit of it and he wrote a memoir, his diary of his first visit here which he had my wife was in between schools in semester break so she typed it up and we have it somewhere I'm sure I think I know where it is. So he had a great time. My mom, it was okay because my dad had sort of retired and he was good with reading. You could leave him alone with the T.V. and reading and he was happy. He didn't really feel that he was in a cage when you would go to work. He made his own thing and he loved to do things like that never physical work but just reading and stuff like that. My mom would cook a little bit but then she'd get bored. But then when my dad passed, so they came three or four times and then when my dad passed away my mom came several times. Then she feels pretty bored being at home alone from like 8:00 to 5:00 if we are at the office she gets absolutely frustrated at the house. So that's like being in a cage. So she is now 87 herself so I don't think she will make any more trips here. Maybe once if my daughter gets married she

Interviewee: Desai, Pankaj

Interview Date: August 26, 2011

might come. She wants to do that soon. In fact, we are going to... I told you this about 8 holy days for Jains.

UQ: Yes.

PD: And my mom lives in Bombay and she goes to this town called Devlali, which is 3 hours from Bombay. It's up in the hills, so it's like a hill station. I don't know if you know that word even in Pakistan you have that like Murree and other places. It's not that high but a little bit cooler and there are a lot of Jain retreats if you mind that I might call it that way, up there in Devlali, so that these Jain worshiping places and around the worshiping places they have these bungalows or apartments which you can rent for one month, two months, three months in a year. So every monsoon season she goes there for like two months or so with her friends of her age. There's a group from Bombay that travels there and they are renting an apartment on their own and then they worship in this retreat in the central place. They can eat. There is a kitchen there. You can buy food there or you can cook it, cook on your own, whatever you like. She has a great time there. So this, in fact, next Thursday my wife and I are going to India. We're going to go to Devlali, we're going to surprise her.

UQ: Ahh!

PD: She doesn't know we are coming!

UQ: This Thursday?

PD: No next Thursday.

UQ: Next Thursday so a week from now so wow!

PD: So she's going to be totally shocked that we are out of the blue we will just pop up!

Interviewee: Desai, Pankaj

Interview Date: August 26, 2011

UQ: Yes she is.

PD: So I think she's going to enjoy that very much.

UQ: Okay.

PD: I don't know how this topic came up.

UQ: I asked about your parents and their impression of here.

PD: Alright so my mom doesn't know. So worshiping that's what I was getting at. So she does prayers, like I told you in our family once you retire you start praying you become closer to God and so that is what she has been doing. So she does the prayers in the house. Even now when she comes but still she gets pretty bored. So I don't think she is going to come here very often now. Maybe once or twice also. But my dad would have enjoyed living here.

UQ: When was this memoir that he wrote?

PD: In '83.

UQ: In '83 oh he came soon after you got married very soon after that?

PD: Yeah because they had not met my wife. We got married here right!

UQ: Right.

PD: They didn't go for the wedding.

UQ: I see, I see.

PD: After the wedding we went to India and we met them but that was just for a week and they came and stayed with us for like 4 months so they really got to know her then. So...

UQ: Okay.

Interviewee: Desai, Pankaj

Interview Date: August 26, 2011

PD: I wish I could find that memoir. I'm sure I can find it somewhere in our house.

I'll just look for it.

UQ: I'd love to read it!

PD: If I find it I'll give it to you.

UQ: In fact I'd love to donate it to the archives, a copy of it even.

PD: Sure if I find it I'll give it to you.

UQ: That would be invaluable those kind of things.

PD: I'll get it copied and yeah. It was typed up I know that. We must have copies around here somewhere.

UQ: That would be great! Do you know of any other memoirs since your father was very interested in literature?

PD: He didn't write, not that I'm aware of.

UQ: Not that he wrote but just that anyone. Even published memoirs?

PD: No. There was one book I read when I was... because I went to a Catholic school so my Gujaratis skills are not very strong, reading and writing. I can speak very well but reading and writing... reading is better than writing. Writing is horrible. I read a Gujaratis book once long time back. I'm talking about 35, 40 years ago about an author who traveled to America and he went back and he wrote about his memoirs. When I read my dad's memoir I found that, you know, they had very similar experiences of America. What they thought about America before coming here, some confirmation and then some total surprises. So that was the interesting part that I found. If I find that memoir I'll be happy to share it with you.

UQ: If you remember the author.

Interviewee: Desai, Pankaj

Interview Date: August 26, 2011

PD: That author? I... let me think...Algari Rafarpatti? Rafiq Javeri? My wife might know I'll ask her.

UQ: Okay definitely. I'll email you. Alright I think that we have come to a close unless there is anything else that you wanted to add in.

PD: I can share something with you which you didn't touch but maybe for some reason that you might have cared not to but I don't mind sharing with you. When I told you that I would have less problem if my daughter married a white American versus a non white American was I myself was involved with a white American and we were pretty close. We almost got married but she was Jewish and then and she was an Orthodox Jew so that came in the middle that she could not give up her Orthodoxy so but we had a great relationship. We are still good friends. She is a surgeon. So we talk to each other every now and then. She is the first person my wife met was her when we got married. We are good friends. So that was a pretty good experience. A very good memory in my life that I, also my daughter knows about that too. It was a good memory.

UQ: What kinds of things did you have in common since you said that [with] African Americans you feel there'd be just too many differences whereas?

PD: This girl she was at Baylor College of Medicine. She was from Yale and then to Baylor. So she was obviously very intelligent. That was a criteria that I needed in my wife, my partner. Academic intelligence and general intelligence had to be of a high level. So she, this girl fit all this criteria and she was full of life. I was full of life so we had... we would have gotten married absolutely no question had it not been for the Orthodoxy that I could not fight her God you know. So but that was the thing in common was just the joy of life and learning and just enjoying.

Interviewee: Desai, Pankaj

Interview Date: August 26, 2011

UQ: Where did you meet her?

PD: At Houston we met at I think it was a picnic for international students and she was there and I was there. I think it was in 1978 or something. After I came back from India and before I got married. So...just a good relationship; still is a good relationship.

She's...

UQ: What would your parents have thought?

PD: My dad would have had no trouble with it. My dad would have been pretty happy. My mom would have felt a little bit surprised that I would do that. That, "I can't talk to your wife." But I think she would have come around. If I was happy she would be happy.

UQ: Did you have friends who similarly kind of?

PD: I told you this friend Pradeep, he married this Chinese girl Susie.

UQ: Yes.

PD: His parents were like my parents. His dad had no issues. His mom was a little bit surprised but then she came around. So...It was no big deal.

UQ: Were there students... I guess how common was dating amongst Indian students, men who came by themselves and weren't married?

PD: Very uncommon. It was not so common. For some reason it just whether it was Indians as a general rule we do not like to be rejected. I guess most men are like that but so the fear of rejection was more stronger, that prevented us from taking a risk of being rejected. So we would just not ask somebody to go out. After a few bumps and I had no issue with that. So I was able. I would date but there were very few Indians who would

Interviewee: Desai, Pankaj

Interview Date: August 26, 2011

do that. That's the main reason is fear of rejection. It's strange but that's how... we would rather stay in our own little shell than be told, "No."

UQ: So you don't think it's a cultural or religious...

PD: It's not religious, it's more the fear of being rejected believe me.

UQ: Okay.

PD: Check it out. You'll find out ask this question, if they are honest they will tell you that that's probably the reason why they didn't ask girls to go on a date.

UQ: Okay, well alright thank you, this has been fascinating. I've learned a lot.

PD: You're very welcome.

End of Interview

