

UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON**ORAL HISTORY OF HOUSTON PROJECT****Interview with: Jagat Kamdar****Interviewed by: Uzma Quraishi****Date: July 11, 2007****Transcribed by: Suzanne Mascola**

UQ: Oral history interview of Jagat Kamdar at his home in Houston, Texas, July 11, 2007. Interview conducted by Uzma Quraishi for the Center for Public History at the University of Houston. O.K., you can go ahead and begin by just telling who you are and what your role is in Indian community.

JK: My name is Jagat Kamdar. I really do not have any role in the Indian community as such but I have been involved in many different organizations in the Indian community as well as of some mainstream organizations. I guess I started these activities in the late 1980s getting involved with various organizations. I was part of Indo-American Charity Foundation which was started in 1988. And now, it has become a 501(c)(3) entity in Houston and doing a very great job of contributing to the local needy people. When we started, we didn't know where we were going. It was just a shot in the dark. Similarly, I was also involved in creating, or one of the founding members of South Asian Chamber of Commerce. I think that also happened in probably early 1990s. And subsequently, I was also involved, one of the founding members of Indo-American Chamber of Commerce because the South Asian Chamber of Commerce, for whatever reason, did not function very well. And so, the Indo-American Chamber of Commerce came about just about late 1990s. I would say, 1999, and also one of the founding members of Indo-

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Americans, a political action committee which we started in late 1980s, early 1990s. And also I have been involved with a few other entities. I would say that I was one of the members of the committee of the Houston Police Department, overseeing some minority contracts for the advertisement. I was also a member of, I would say, Asian part of the United Fund which was never there at one time and I guess some of the other friends who happened to be from the Far East, we got involved with United Fund and started that wing of the organization that was also in the early 1990s or so. So, that is who I am. I am still here in Houston and still involved in a few other organizations.

UQ: O.K. Do you pursue community work on a full-time basis?

JK: Yes, I do. Absolutely.

UQ: Let's back up. Way back to kind of your beginning here in . . . not even here - your time in India. What is your background in India, your family, your parents?

JK: Oh my God! I am from India. I came here to the United States in 1970 as a student. As far as family is concerned, father and mother with 4 brothers and my father was also an engineer by profession and we all 4 brothers were engineers. I am the youngest of the family. I got educated in India. I got a degree in engineering in the early 1960s and worked for about 6 years in Bombay before I came to the United States in 1970.

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UQ: In India, where specifically are you from?

JK: I am from Gujarat. I am from the city named Baroda.

UQ: Why did you decide to leave India and come to America?

JK: No particular reason, Uzma, really. I am sure that you will get probably a lot of different answers. In my case, I guess all of my friends were working in Bombay and I guess I was the last one who came to this country simply because everyone else was here by that time and I thought, well, why don't I just go to the United States and get a degree and come back? That was basically what I thought about. When I was working in India, I wanted to do my MBA program in Bombay. My company did sponsor me but did not really pay for the other expenses, and I was getting admission in one of the universities in the United States. I thought that I had better go there and I will decide whether I want to come back or I just want to stay in the United States. So, I would say that I just came here simply because I had some opportunities for higher education in this country and that was the reason that I came to this country.

UQ: O.K., so did you already apply for universities while you were in India?

JK: Yes, I already had. As a matter of fact, I applied to only 3 or 4 different universities and I was admitted to almost all the universities. I accepted the admission from Norfolk, Virginia which is Old Dominion University.

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UQ: O.K. Is that where you first went in 1970?

JK: That is where I first went in 1970. Right. Of course. And I was a student for 2 years, 1-1/2 years, I would say. Graduated in summer of 1972 with my MBA degree.

UQ: O.K., and what is next? What happened after that?

JK: After that, I took some time off, just moved around a few places. I just wanted to see some parts of America, so I was able to do that. And then, I moved to Atlanta to look for a job. That was in July/August of 1972. I found a job right away, within 3 weeks, in Atlanta at that time. I stayed in Atlanta for a couple of years until 1974, December. And then, I decided to move again. So, I resigned that position and went to India for 3-4 months, got married, came back, and then I was looking for a job. The opportunity came up because one of companies in Houston offering me a job. So, we decided to move to Houston.

UQ: That is interesting. You said that you didn't have a job when you went back to India and someone actually married you as an unemployed person?

JK: Yes.

UQ: It must have been your charm and good looks, right?

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JK: Well, I was so confident that even if I go . . . because I knew that no one was going to give me 3 to 4 months off, you know? I really didn't have a choice but to resign my job and just go to India, get married and start all over again. And I don't know what it was . . . if it was my upbringing, my experience in Bombay or my confidence or whatever you want to call it, but I was so sure of getting a job, if not in Atlanta, anywhere else in America, you know. And it just so happened that the Houston company offered me a job. As a matter of fact, I had a job in Houston and I had a job in Philadelphia. And, as a matter of fact, I accepted a job in Philadelphia but then decided to come to Houston because I had a cousin here at that time, and I already had a job in Houston office also - one of the companies in Houston. So, I just came here, visited Houston, I liked it and I called Philadelphia and I said, "I am not coming back." So, that is how I ended up in Houston and that was August, 1975.

UQ: Did you have any trouble getting a visa both of these times when you came the first time and then when you came . . .

JK: I absolutely didn't have any problem getting visas - either student visas which I came on from India or getting my green card because at that time in the early 1970s, it was unheard of that people with an education would not get a green card if they wanted to have a green card. So, you know, I mean, I came out as a student . . . of course, I still had my student visa and then I had my working permit to work in this country. And then, subsequently when I got a job in Atlanta, I applied for my permanent residency in this

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country. And within 6 months, it was approved and I got my green card. It was that simple.

UQ: Can you describe your life in America, in Virginia when you first arrived?

JK: I was a student basically. I was the only Indian in the MBA program at the University. We were only 44 Indian students there at the University with a student body of about 11,000 to 13,000 student body at Old Dominion University. So, I didn't have any problem. As a matter of fact, I was accepted very well. As a matter of fact, when I was in college, I never felt ever that I was being discriminated. None whatsoever. As a matter of fact, I had a group of friends that we used to study together and there was one black guy, there were 3 Americans and 1 Italian girl. Those 5 and plus me, 6, we were just studying together every single day and never had a problem whatsoever except that I didn't have a car at that time. So, I used to get a ride from each and every one of them.

UQ: O.K., were there a lot of other minorities on campus at that time?

JK: No, definitely not. That doesn't mean that there were not minority students in some other places, particularly in the New York area. I am sure that there were a lot of minority students but on our campus at Old Dominion, I didn't really see a lot of minority students.

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UQ: O.K., and was there any kind of an Indian cultural group? I would imagine not with so few of them.

JK: No, there was no Indian cultural group. There were 44 students or 45. There were a couple of Indian, I guess, professors who had come from India. So, that is about it, you know, and the majority of them were teaching at various universities around the Norfolk area. And there were some working folks and doctors and other people. So, it was really not a very large community which you see today.

UQ: What were your living arrangements?

JK: Do you really want me to go into that? [laughing]

UQ: Yes, I do. I want to know how you survived it all.

JK: Well, as a matter of fact, as far as some of the expenses were concerned, we were living just right off campus in a very small apartment - one bedroom apartment that we used to share with another gentleman who also happened to be from India. And, you know, in the 1970s, the dollar used to go very far. You could literally stretch your dollar. That was the time. We were just fortunate enough, at least I was fortunate enough, to get some money from the school. I was on an assistant scholarship where I would assist a professor of mathematics in his research and I was paid for certain hours on a regular basis. At the same time, I worked during the summertime. So, I really did not have a

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problem as far as money was concerned or expenses were concerned. Of course, I could not afford to buy a car and those kinds of things but day-to-day, I really didn't have a problem. I guess I was one of those fortunate ones.

UQ: O.K., how did you find that original roommate?

JK: I really didn't find anyone. As a matter of fact, because when I was working in Bombay, I was pretty much used to living by myself and I really was not looking for one because I thought that I could very well afford to pay that kind of rent, you know, but somebody approached me and he said, "Would it be O.K. if I shared this apartment with you?" So, after thinking overnight, I said, "Yes, that's O.K." I was really not looking for a roommate.

UQ: O.K., so you didn't have any friends when you first arrived, no one you knew ahead of time who had preceded you?

JK: My brother was here before I came here and he was already working in the United States. He was working in Virginia but not in Norfolk. So, yes, I had that advantage - having my brother in this country at that time. And like I said, I was fortunate enough to get some scholarships and I was able to get a summer job and then I was able to save some money.

UQ: O.K. What kind of summer job was it?

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JK: The summer job used to be with Virginia Electric and Power Company.

UQ: And how far away was your brother from you?

JK: Oh, he was about 30 miles, 40 miles.

UQ: O.K., so still somewhere where you could actually see him on a regular basis?

JK: No, unless he would come because I didn't have a car.

UQ: O.K., and was he married or no?

JK: No, he was not at that time but he subsequently went in 1971 and got married in India.

UQ: O.K., so you had had a brother who had already come to America to pursue higher education and you mentioned you already had friends who had done the same?

JK: Yes, but they were not in Norfolk, Virginia. They were pretty much in the New York area.

UQ: How did your family, your parents, feel about their sons leaving India and going abroad?

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JK: I am sure that they didn't appreciate it. Particularly probably my mother didn't appreciate it. But I think at that point, she must have realized that hey, listen, these people are grown up, all my sons are grown up and if they want to go to some other country, it was O.K. with her. But I am sure in her heart probably she felt, oh, there he goes, you know. And, of course, we never talked about those things.

UQ: O.K. Were there brothers who remained behind?

JK: I have 2 brothers that were in India.

UQ: How did you decide to pursue engineering?

JK: Well, as you know, there was a time in India that if you were a doctor or an engineer, you could make a good living. Otherwise, you would go into some other profession like biology or arts or commerce. Then, you had to do a lot of postgraduate work also. And from the beginning, from high school time, I was pretty good in physics and math. So, that is how I decided to go into engineering. And, of course, there was a push from the family because everyone was an engineer.

UQ: Did many of your friends also pursue the same path - engineering?

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JK: Oh, absolutely, except some of them who went into commerce and arts and subsequently had their CAs and CPAs and LL.Bs and you name it, but they are also quite successful in their own right.

UQ: And when you say arts, what specifically are you referring to?

JK: Say that again.

UQ: When you say that some of your friends went into the arts, what specifically are you referring to?

JK: Liberal arts school. Sociology, psychology. A few of them went and majored in English. And then subsequently, of course, they decided to continue their studies after undergraduate and came to this country and did their MBA. And some of them did their CPA here in this country.

UQ: O.K. Would you say that most though went into engineering or kind of those subjects as opposed to liberal arts?

JK: Yes.

UQ: Were there hardships or struggles that you faced after arriving in the States?

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JK: Did I have a hardship, is that what you are asking me?

UQ: Yes, hardships or struggles of any kind?

JK: No, I really didn't. Like I said, I was one of the fortunate ones. Of course, I was always very careful how to spend one dollar, you know. So, I really, except that, like I said, I didn't have a car. I was walking to the campuses all the time. So, those were the kinds of . . . if you call that a hardship, then yes, I did have a hardship but I really never missed a car or anything when I was on campus because it was just about one-quarter of a mile walk, you know, which was not bad.

UQ: O.K., and how did you maintain contact with your family back then?

JK: Just letter writing, basically. Not too many telephone calls but once in a while, we used to call on telephones. You know, the telephone system at that time was that you had to book your call and whenever the connection goes through, they will call you back. It could be in the middle of the night or any time. So basically, it was just letter writing.

UQ: When you came to Houston after a few years, can you remember kind of your first impression of the Indian community?

JK: I really didn't know how many Indians were staying in this city of Houston at that time. I just came here simply because I had an opportunity. I didn't know anyone in

Houston, as a matter of fact. None whatsoever. Initially, when I started working, I guess I was more concerned about my wife and her education and just making a living - making sure that we both were very comfortable living in the Houston area. So, I was really not looking for Indians as such. But anyway, you meet people when you go to some social functions and other things and all of that and you know somebody that was in Houston. So, that is how I started knowing people, like some of my college friends were in Houston which I was not even aware of it.

UQ: Were you involved in any community or social activities back then?

JK: When I came to Houston, I wasn't really involved in anything. Like I said, I came here in 1975. I really did not get involved in anything until 1985.

UQ: How did you feel that the greater Houston population treated you?

JK: I was very well accepted once I started getting involved in various organizations and started knowing people. As a matter of fact, I never had any problem. I am one of those that I really did not want to get involved only in the Indian community or in your own local community, colloquial community. But coming from Gujarat, there were a bunch of Gujuratis here or South Indians or Punjabis. At that point, I really thought about getting involved in the Indian-ness of the Indian community rather than based on the linguistic basis, you know. So, I really didn't have any problem and I guess I was

more interested in getting involved in the mainstream organizations rather than any other organizations in the community.

UQ: O.K., for example?

JK: For example, politically I was motivated from the beginning so I got involved with some of the early city elections in the 1980s and that is how I came to know many of the Hispanic people and many of the police department people and many of the Anglos who were running for various city offices or county offices.

UQ: Were you able to keep up with news, politics and popular culture back home?

JK: News, yes but popular culture back home, no. I was never one of those who was very high on keeping up on culture. When you say culture, would you want to define in a little more detail?

UQ: I just mean things like the music and movies, things like that. Bollywood.

JK: I was never into Bollywood, even in India when I was growing up. Movies really didn't turn me on. Neither did music. So, I would listen to the music but it was not something that I had to listen to it, you know. So, no, I really didn't follow up when I was in India and even today, I do not follow up.

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UQ: O.K., what about politics in India? Are you interested in that?

JK: Well, when you say interested - in a sense, yes. I love to know the news on the political front but that doesn't mean that I am really getting involved in it. But I do keep updated as far as the politics in India, politics in America or politics in some of the other countries concerned.

UQ: What has your relationship with your neighbors here been like?

JK: The neighborhood that I live in is a big, stable neighborhood. As a matter of fact, we have some block parties in the neighborhood - one every year. Different families would arrange it. And you are part of it. As a matter of fact, people, when they move out from the neighborhood and when people move in, sometimes it becomes difficult to get yourself introduced to them. But subsequently, we do meet and subsequently, we do come to know [one another].

UQ: I am going to ask a couple more questions about relationships. One is how would you describe the relationship on kind of an organizational level between the Indian and Pakistani communities today?

JK: I think there is more to be desired between the two communities, between Indian community and Pakistani community. I think, unfortunately, the Indians live within their limits and the Pakistani community live within their limits and even though both

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communities do get involved in the mainstream, but the dialog between the two communities is really not there.

UQ: O.K. I guess there are some organizations in which they work together like DAYA, things like that.

JK: That is true. DAYA was started by Indians predominantly in the mid 1990s. And, of course, when it comes to the domestic abuse, you do not really want to see whether they are Indians or they are Pakistanis or they are Asians or they are Americans. Domestic abuse, as far as I am concerned, is universal and anybody who needs help, DAYA needs to help. And that is the way I look at it.

UQ: Speaking of domestic abuse, what problems do you see the Indian community facing now?

JK: As far as?

UQ: As far as in any respect that you perceive? Problems on a social level, on a personal level that people experience that are maybe increasing?

JK: That is something I think you talk to so many different people and you look at different times. But I really do not see that the level . . . those kind of problems are going to increase in the older generations as we call it in this country for the *desis* you know. I

mean, of course, there are the second generation Indians who are coming up, that second generation of South Asians who are coming up in this country. So probably you might see different dynamics in the younger generations, but in the older generations, you find some sporadic incidents but I don't think that overall you really see a lot of problems in the community. That doesn't mean that the problems do not exist but apparently, no one wants to talk about it - whether you are talking about the Indian community or talking about the Pakistani community.

UQ: Do you feel that race or immigrant status has affected your opportunities here?

JK: No. As a matter of fact, it was very helpful to me. I guess I was very lucky. I didn't have any problem whatsoever simply because wherever I went, I worked with so many different engineering companies in the Houston area. And, to be honest with you, never had any problems. As a matter of fact, at one of the companies - I am not going to name the company - during the early 1980s when the majority of the people were laid off in the Houston area and around the country, many of the American colleagues of mine were laid off but I was lucky enough to keep my job. So, no, on the contrary - I honestly believe that probably, it helped me.

UQ: Do you think that the public perception of Indians or Pakistanis or any South Asian group for that matter has changed over the past few years?

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JK: I am sure it has. No question about it. But I think I would . . . I don't think that I would put blame on the American community. I think I would put the blame on the Pakistani and Indian community because, for whatever reason, they still want to live within their own shell and they just do not want to go out. Few have ventured out and they have become quite successful people in the business community. I mean, it is a totally different dynamic. For example, now when you go to work, you come in contact with all Americans. When you come home in the evening, all of a sudden, either you become a Pakistani or you become an Indian or you become a Bangladeshi or Sri Lankan, whichever you want to call it. But you revert back to your old self, you know. And unfortunately, the blame lies with the community itself or individual families that they just do not want to be part of the mainstream.

UQ: Do you think that this is a negative thing and if so, how?

JK: I think it is still a negative thing because I think the reason that . . . I don't know if it is the culture that makes them behave like this or what. I mean, I am not an expert on culture. But I honestly believe that the majority of the *desi* immigrants still believe that in the back of their mind and their heart that probably they would go back to their own country. So, assimilation has become a little more difficult for those people. That is what I think.

UQ: You are talking about first generation then? You think that most of them have in their mind still that they want to go back?

JK: That is what I think. And, of course, they know that they are not going back, you know. Everybody wants to do something good for their own country and I keep on hearing from everybody that, listen, there are a lot of opportunities in India, there are a lot of opportunities in Pakistan, why don't we just do this back home? And my answer to that was that how many times have you gone back to your own country? A visit is one thing that every 2 years, you go there and visit it but in honesty, what have you really thought about doing in your own country? And the answers predominantly would be nothing, you know. So, I don't think that the majority of the Indians or Pakistanis or anyone coming from southern countries are really going back. Very few of them that would go back. So, the fact is you would be better off accepting the fact that you are not going back so that you can live your life and be part of the mainstream in this country.

UQ: O.K., how often have you visited India in general? What has been kind of your pattern?

JK: The last time I visited was in 2002. I used to visit a little more frequently before that but lately, I have not gone in the last 5 years.

UQ: How has your view of Americans changed since your arrival?

JK: Of Americans?

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UQ: Of Americans, of America.

JK: Has my view changed about America? That is what you are asking?

UQ: Right. How has your view changed about Americans or even the United States of America? How has it changed since when you first arrived?

JK: Not really because when I first arrived, I knew the responsibility was on me to be part of the mainstream. Unless you extend your hand, no one is going to shake hands with you and that is the philosophy that I very strongly believe in. So, the country that I am coming from is pretty much a freedom loving and democratic country. So, I really didn't have a problem. I really knew what I needed to do in this country to be part of the mainstream. And honestly, I guess ever since I am in this country, more so at this point, that I really have a good opinion about Americans than when I came to this country because the first time when I came to this country, I thought that maybe they are a little more aloof. But looking back, the Americans are not really aloof. They are very outgoing people. But you need to break that ice.

UQ: O.K. Have you had other family members immigrate following you? Immigrate to America?

JK: No. Me and my brothers. That is about it. No one else.

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UQ: Your parents haven't really shown interest in coming here?

JK: They are deceased now.

UQ: Obviously not. O.K. Would you recommend that family members migrate to America? Do you think it is still a good opportunity for them to come here?

JK: You know, for me, it is very hard to say but what I read in the newspaper today and so many different magazines, that there are a lot of opportunities in your own country at this time and if you can somehow or another grab those opportunities, I don't think that you want to come to this country because any time that you come to this country, it is really not a struggle as such but you still have to start all over again. So, if you can succeed in your own country, I would advise somebody to take that chance rather than come to this country and take a chance.

UQ: Just in your opinion, do you think that people kind of share in that view now, that the economy in India is strengthening so that perhaps they have a better chance of just staying there and making it there?

JK: I am absolutely certain because some of my younger friends that were here for 10, 15 years, they left for greener pastures in India, thinking that they would be very successful in India after living 10, 15 years in Houston. And so far, they have not regretted their decision. So, I am sure that there are opportunities in India, that if you

really want to have a successful career as a businessman, you can do a lot of good things in India at this time.

UQ: More than before?

JK: More than before. Right.

UQ: O.K. That pretty much wraps it up. Is there anything you would like to end the interview with?

JK: No, I really don't. I guess I really appreciate your taking this topic up. I am sure that you probably have heard a lot of different points of view. At the end of the day, I would like to hear from you - how your research comes out.