

UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON

ORAL HISTORY OF HOUSTON PROJECT

Interview with: Prabha Bala

Interviewed by: Uzma Quraishi

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Transcribed by: Suzanne Mascola

UQ: Oral history interview of Prabha Bala at her home in Sugar Land, Texas, July 11, 2007. Interview conducted by Uzma Quraishi for the Center for Public History at the University of Houston. You can begin by telling a little bit about who you are and what your role is in the community here.

PB: O.K., my name is Prabha Bala. I am married. I have a son, Vikram Bala, who is now 30 years old. My role in the community is being into a lot of volunteer organizations. My work life is rather brief. It has been mostly part-time though I came in here with a degree in physics and then took an MBA at the University of Houston from 1973 to 1975. But I never really did get into the work force in a full-time way. Right from the time that I came into this country, we have been involved in community events, community activities. So, I should say, largely, a community activist would be a good description.

UQ: Can you tell about your background in India - your family, your parents, that kind of thing?

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PB: O.K. My father was an engineer, electrical engineer. He initially worked for the government of India and later, he went to work for one of the specialized agencies of the United Nations in Bangkok. So, his retirement was from this organization called Ecofee (sp) in Bangkok, Thailand. And we started life in Simla where I was born. The first 5 years of my life was in Simla. The next 5 years in New Delhi. And then later when my father and my mother moved to Bangkok, I went to boarding schools in Madras – both middle school and high school, and college education was quite a bit in boarding where I would come to India for the schooling and then go for summer vacations to Bangkok. I have two brothers. My older brother is a physicist and he took his doctorate in the United States - University of Chicago. And then, he came back to India to teach in one of the IITs. My younger brother is also in the teaching field. He holds a doctorate in operations research and he is now teaching in a private university in Detroit. So, that is my family background.

UQ: Why did you end up leaving India and at what point, what age, what year?

PB: I left India, following my husband after I got married, so I was one of the wives and my move to the United States was as a wife. That was in 1971.

UQ: What year did you get married in?

PB: How old was I?

UQ: Both, the year and . . .

PB: I was married in 1971.

UQ: Oh, the same year?

PB: The same year. March 1, 1971 is when I got married.

UQ: And you came here?

PB: In May of 1971. See, in those days, there was not a very long wait to immigrate since my husband was already a green card holder when he came to Madras to get married.

UQ: So, he was already here?

PB: Yes. My husband came here as a student. He went to Berkeley and took his master's and then right away, he got into the workforce.

UQ: O.K., and then he went back after his master's to get married?

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PB: Yes, he came back after he had worked a few . . . after his master's, he worked how many years? Two or three years, I think. He went to work for Shell Oil Company and he has been a Shell employee until retirement.

UQ: O.K., when you came to the United States, where did you first settle?

PB: Houston.

UQ: So, after doing a master's at Berkeley, he came to Houston and found a job here?

PB: No, he was already working for Shell Oil Company and Shell moved him to Houston. So, actually, he just came between moves in 1971.

UQ: Can you remember when you first came to Houston, your impression of the Indian community then?

PB: The Indian community then was very small. I mean, at best, we might have been altogether 500, you know, all family members included. And it seemed almost as if everybody was at least a nodding acquaintance of each other. And we were undifferentiated because the community was small, the Indian community. There was not a large enough Gujurati community or a Punjabi community though I think it might have been just when there was some critical mass for the South Indian community and

the North Indian community in those big categories. But not as the individual language groups that are now represented in many organizations these days.

UQ: So, you would say that there was a division of dividing line between South Indians and North Indians? Are there any others?

PB: No. The dividing line . . . I mean, that, too, was a very hazy dividing line I want to say. The reason I mention this is because that is about the time when I think there was a group of . . . they were thinking of building the temple in Houston and then I think while they were discussing on where to build it, when to build it, how to build it . . . so there were little groups that formed, and one group, they got together and they got started on the Meenakshi Temple which is in Pearland. So, those beginnings are where there might have been a little grouping along the North and South.

UQ: O.K., and so, each group kind of had their own opinion or . . .

PB: Motivation, let me put it that way. Not so much opinion. I suppose opinions also. But really, there was only one organization that identified Indians and that was, as I remember it – there might have been others that I did not encounter but the first organization that we belonged to or came to be part of – was the India Student Association at the University of Houston. And this is right in 1971. So, that is why I said, from the time that I have been in this country, I have been in organizations and

community activities. We were members of – there's no membership, as such – of the India Student Association and we formed a women's group, and there was also a newsletter that the India Student Association used to put out. I mean, right away I got involved in the newsletter writing and contributing. And that used to be called the Patrika. The newsletter was the Patrika.

UQ: And you mentioned the India Student Association. Were you a student when you first arrived here?

PB: I didn't come in as a student in 1971. As I told you, I came as a wife.

UQ: But they welcomed non-students in the ISA?

PB: Yes, non-students. The ISA was the only organization and through the ISA, non-students, we all used to participate in community events. And many of them are based, are located in U of H. In fact, when we did the Divali events, they used to screen movies, reel-to-reel movies. All that used to take place at the University of Houston. Agnes Arnold Auditorium.

UQ: Still there.

PB: Still there.

UQ: Tell a little bit more about ISA - their activities, the events, how many people used to be a part of it or, at least, active membership.

PB: Well, maybe at best . . . I am trying to think of whether there really was a board. There must have been some kind of organizational structure. I am not so clear about what it was. And used to mostly gather to celebrate the national days - Independence Day. And then, Divali was one event where we would have picnics, movie screening.

UQ: What kind of activities did you do for Independence Day?

PB: Maybe that was not the ISA. I think ICC is . . . when the India Culture Center was formed, that is when the formal celebrations and national days happened. But I think we used to get together for Divali. We had started a food fair, a Divali fair and we had kind of a picnic environment at the U of H campus.

UQ: And was it open to everyone but mostly Indians came?

PB: Mostly it was the Indians who came. I don't think we shut off anybody but it just attracted the Indians. And being a new bride, I remember in those days, we were delegated to rolling *gulab jaman* [a dessert made of small rolled balls of ricotta like cheese]. That was the only job that would be interesting to us but the community . . .

there were no Indian restaurants so any of these events would have to . . . the food and all that came from just all of us getting together and among us, there were a few leaders who had been here a little longer than we had.

UQ: So, by leaders, you mean amongst the women?

PB: Community. No, men and women. Men and women. And I am trying to think who were some of the early ISA guys. Yes, I think Suresh Patel used to be one of the . . . it has been quite a while. It is good to think about this.

UQ: Were these single students or . . .?

PB: No, they were families. Among the single students, Ramesh Bhuttara was an active name that I remember. See, I am not very clear right now. At some point, you know, ISA, the center of activities transitioned from ISA to ICC [India Culture Center] in the Indian community.

UQ: Who started ICC, do you remember how that even came about?

PB: I have to really do some thinking. I don't have the names in my . . . I don't remember that.

UQ: Was it some of the people who were part of ISA?

PB: Yes, some of them who had participated in ISA did get involved in starting the India Culture Center.

UQ: How was that different from ISA?

PB: Because it was not based on the University; whereas, ISA was a university registered organization, ICC was more of a community organization.

UQ: And were their activities or functions different from the ISA's?

PB: Yes, because once it moved into the ICC, there were more of the festivals that were celebrated. More festivals were celebrated. And the national days were celebrated. And ICC's original mandate was to be kind of an all-India organization, meeting the needs of the entire community. So, this would include students and non-students.

UQ: In the beginning, were you involved in the ICC as well?

PB: I was participating. There was one period I was on the board of ICC. I don't remember the dates.

UQ: What was your role?

PB: I was on the board, as a board member. So, board members usually get to organize whatever the events were for the year.

UQ: Was there any political interest in the ICC? Well, I guess I should say did the ICC show any political interest?

PB: Of what kind?



UQ: In the American political scene?

PB: Not initially. It was strictly a community cultural . . . as the name implies - India Culture Center. So, it was to promote cultural events. And it was a forum for . . . it was there to promote cultural events; that is, you know, present visiting artists and so on and it was also for the Indians to express their cultural interests. It goes both ways - both as a presenter and forum.

UQ: O.K., you said that the ICC made itself open to all the different language groups. Did it also include people of different faiths like Jains and . . .?

PB: It was not religion-based.

UQ: Also open to . . .

PB: Yes, ICC was not a religious organization.

UQ: When you first came to America, did you already have a network of friends or did your husband have a network of friends established which you just kind of joined into?

PB: Well, since we came, my husband came to India to get married, between moves when he returned and when we both returned to Houston -- he returned to Houston and I joined him in Houston -- both of us were equally new to Houston and the Houston community except that he had some friends and acquaintances at work. And also, since it was a company move, there were several that moved with him from California. The whole company moved so there were some that had already been in California that he had known and they moved with him. So, there were some acquaintances and friends.

UQ: So, did you feel like when you came here, it was easy to make friends with the Houston community?

PB: Yes.

UQ: Did you have relatives here at all?

PB: Not at the time. No relatives. But we had . . . Bala's cousin followed us almost immediately. She also got married to someone who was in Houston. So, I should say, we did have relatives right away, the first year of our being here.

UQ: O.K. What was your impression of Houston in general?

PB: My very first impression was when I came here, landed on May 3, so Houston was hot and humid by then. So, when I got off the plane, I said, oops. I was coming from Chennai, Madras. I said 12,000 miles and it is the same humidity and the same heat! The first thought. If you want to chronicle the first thought, that is what I felt. But as a city, it is new. The city was new. I felt the newness of the city quite a bit because I unlike the old cities of India or of Europe - this is a brand new, spanking new city. Every building is new. There are no buildings with age showing either in terms of the architecture or in terms of water that has stained the walls. There isn't any of that so, the impression really was the newness of the whole city.

UQ: Did that appeal to you?

PB: I don't know whether I had a qualitative feeling about that. It was just something new. I was starting a new life. And fortunately for me, you know, I did not suffer too much homesickness or anything of that kind. Maybe two reasons - already having been

in boarding schools, I was acclimatized to not being with family all the time. That was one thing. Secondly, I also had a little bit more exposure to outside of India life, you know. Since my father was with the United Nations, I had occasion to travel almost yearly to Bangkok and from there, we had also done a bit of traveling in other parts of Southeast Asia. So, the foreignness and the newness were not new things that I had to encounter. I was already familiar with that kind of travel.

UQ: When you learned that after marriage, you would be settling in America, did you have any personal goals that you hoped to achieve?

PB: Personal goals? Not very clear-cut goals. I mean, I expected that, you know, since I enrolled in college within 2 years, I thought I would be in the workforce.

UQ: So, you had actually imagined that you would work after you came to Houston?

PB: Yes.

UQ: And was your family or your husband's family and your husband, were they supportive of this?

PB: Yes.

UQ: How did they feel about you working?

PB: Oh, very much. It happens that my husband's family is very geared towards spouses working. My husband has one older sister and she has been teaching. She has been at the University. She has been a professor from the time she graduated. And my mother-in-law was also very progressive in her thinking in that area. I mean, she would always tell me, she'd say, "Why aren't you working? You have to learn to be on your own, manage on your own two feet." So, I guess for me, the message from outside was untraditional for those days.

UQ: O.K., so when you came here, you did or did not work? How did that end up?

PB: Well, it just so happened that when I finished my MBA, several things happened simultaneously. One, immediately after the MBA, I did go to India, had a break and came back. And we bought a house, I got pregnant, and we had a move scheduled to Holland for one year. So, all of that took me away from any immediate job prospects.

UQ: So, did you stay at home?

PB: Yes, then I stayed at home because when we were in Holland for one year, that is where my son was born and when we came back one year later, Vikram was young and it just so happened I was a stay-at-home mom. But my activities still continued wherever I

lived. I continued to be active in the community. I was a volunteer mom in the school and every activity in the school, I had a role to play. And where we lived, again, it was a newsletter. Newsletters seemed to keep me occupied.

UQ: Was this the same newsletter as before or a different one?

PB: This one. Then ICC started its newsletter so we were . . .

UQ: What was the name of the ICC newsletter?

PB: Well, actually, the ICC newsletter which still exists, it started off with just the ICC newsletter and then a friend of mine and I who were at that time editing the newsletter, we decided to have a naming contest and the winning entry was . . . it will come to me in a minute. Whatever the winning entry, it still continues to be the name of the ICC newsletter today. So, I was helping with our subdivision newsletter - you know, where we lived. We lived in Glenshire and Glenshire had a newsletter and I used to help with it.

UQ: Speaking of where you lived, when you first came to Houston, was there an area where you found a lot of Indians residing?

PB: At that time, we were more distributed but most Indians seemed to live either in the southwest part of town or in the northwest.

UQ: After you arrived in the United States, what struggles do you remember facing, if any?

PB: We were fortunate that we didn't have any particular struggles. My husband's job was steady. We didn't face any problems or issues with the job so I have to count myself among the fortunate, that our life was pretty smooth.

UQ: How did you maintain contact with your family back in India?

PB: Through the phone and visits.

UQ: Were you a letter writer?

PB: Yes, I was a letter writer. When I wrote, I wrote long letters. My folks, they came over every . . . not as frequently as they did in later years but the first time they came was in 1973, two years after we had come. And it was 1975, I visited India and then there was a long gap after that before they came again. But, we were, I would say, we averaged about once in three years in the early years.

UQ: And you continued that same pattern . . .

PB: Yes, and more recently in the last 10 years, I have been going every year. And my parents have also been coming once in two years. My husband's parents had also come. We lost his mother recently but his father continued to visit.

UQ: Why do you think that the frequency of your visits to India increased more recently?

PB: It had to do with not being tied to school years and also the fact that I didn't have a career that dictated my time or visits or the length of stay or anything. I mean, it was just by choice and I felt in later years, the last 10 years, I felt as my parents were getting on in years, I felt a greater compulsion to visit, be there.

UQ: Were you able to keep up with popular culture in India? Was that something that interested you and if it did, how did you keep up with it?

PB: What do you mean by popular culture?

UQ: Popular culture, things like music, the movies, fashions, things like that.

PB: See, my interest has always been in the classical arts, both dance and music. So, yes, my visits to India did include being part of the music and dancing in India. So, I am not so interested in the popular, the Bollywood interests. So, those changes impacted me very much except maybe in terms of fashion . . . we would go to India to get clothes stitched and it would reflect a bit in the clothing styles. But I have not been too avant garde in that area.

UQ: Were you able to incorporate your interest in classical dance with your activities with the ISA and later, the ICC?

PB: Yes. So, in terms of . . . again, getting involved in the community arts organizations in Houston. So, through ICC and then, you know, we have been involved in the presentation of several music concerts in Houston through ICC. Then also through other types of organizations, we have been involved in presenting another music festival, classic and South Indian music festival for the last 30 years. It is called the Tyagaraja Utsavam. Tyagaraja is one of the great saint composers of Carnatic music. I mean, his compositions are among a very significant part of the Carnatic music repertoire, and they form a bulk of many concerts, presentations by all major artists. I mean, he is like a Beethoven or a Mozart for Carnatic music. And the Tyagaraja festival has now become almost a global event. Originally, the festival was held in a place called Thiruvaiyaru. This is just for your information. I am sure you will pick it up. Thiruvaiyaru is near Thanjavur in Tamil Nadu. That is where he lived and composed and the festival to honor

Tyagaraja by singing, presenting all of his compositions, it started in Thiruvaiyaru. Now, Tyagaraja festival is held in any part of the world where there is a gathering of people who have an interest in South Indian Carnatic music. There is a major event that takes place annually in Cleveland where they host almost 30 of the leading artists who come from India and they hold a week long event in Cleveland. But Houston has not been any less. We celebrated the 30th annual Tyagaraja Utsavam in Houston this year in the month of April. So, there is a core group that has worked on the Tyagaraja Utsavam and I have been part of that core group for the last 30 years. And, you know, that kind of involvement has kept me very much in touch with the music.

UQ: Has that been your major interest now?

PB: It is one of my major interests. So, in 1993, 3 of us formed an organization called the Classical Arts Society of Houston. Maybe that can go into the annals of any archival material because through our mandate, we took it upon ourselves to formally present the Tyagara Utsavams in Houston which, until then, had been an ad hoc effort. Every year, a group of us would just get together. Focal point for the Tyagaraja Utsavam in its beginning and early years was a lady named Mrs. Indu Krishnamurthy. She just passed on in August of 2006. But she was really a person . . . she was a hugely talented individual, very learned, and she was the one who attracted all of us. We would gather around her and she started the Tyagaraja Utsavam tradition. And initially, she would teach us the songs and we would organize the event. We would participate and we would

also be the audience. So, that was how it started. And now, it has become a major music and art festival that people look forward to annually. So, I will show you some of her brochures that we have had from over the years if you want to take a look.

And then, through Classical Arts, we also, besides the Tyagaraja Utsavam, invited several leading artists from India and presented both music and dance performances in the city of Houston including in venues such as the Wortham and many . . . we used to use the Rice University auditorium, the Hammond Hall, for many of these performances. Also, the Cullen Auditorium at U of H. So, that has been our arts involvement.

UQ: Were there any other activities that you would like to include regarding ICC or ISA that have not been covered yet?

PB: ICC? Well, in terms of what we remember, what is special for us is that we were involved in the first time that we had a flag hoisting ceremony for ICC. This was held in that small house that ICC owned. I remember my husband put together the flag hoisting mechanism. It was a makeshift, where we found a pole and created a pulley using . . . what is that thing . . .

UQ: The part that goes...

PB: Yes. So, it was all a makeshift, hand-made, flag hoisting pole and pulley. And the first time we got the flag and we practiced the way to wrap flowers for the mechanism

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to work when you pulled the string and the flower falls. So, that was an ICC memory that both my husband and I personally hold dear because it worked! And then, that same thing that was a tradition, continued for another 2 or 3 years, by which time, it became a bigger event and I think we got a proper pole and the proper pulley. But this was a fond memory to reflect on.

UQ: I am sure. Do you have any photographs?

PB: We might. I will have to dig through. If we dig through and we find some pictures, we will let you know. That was the very first flag hoisting, official [Indian] flag hoisting ceremony in Houston.

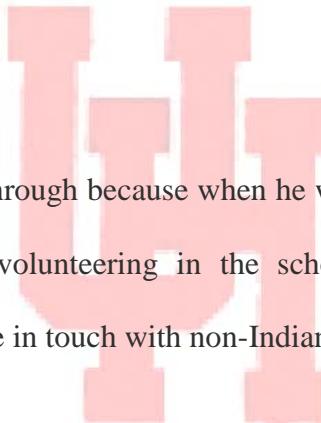
UQ: What were the interactions like with people outside of the Indian community here in Houston?

PB: My interactions largely had to do with my fellow PTA members and then also, some of my school associates, you know, when I went to U of H. And I did have a little brief working . . . I took a course on tax preparation and for 10 years, I worked as a tax preparer for H&R Block. But that was part-time. So, I had associations from my work colleagues and parents that I met as part of my moment with schools, all the schools that my son went to.

UQ: What area? What part of town was that where your son went to school?

PB: We were living in this place called Glenshire, just off of West Belfort. And so, my son's early schooling besides the Montessori education, he went to the Kate Bell Elementary School which is a public school and he also did 6th grade at the Louie Welch Middle School, also public. And then, 7th through 12th, he went to St. John's School.

UQ: And did you remain active throughout or just in the early years, as far as your parent involvement?



PB: I remained active right through because when he went to St. John's, I was helping out with the library, various volunteering in the school and in all various school committees. So, that brought me in touch with non-Indian associations.

UQ: How did you feel that non-Indians received Indians in Houston? What was the reception like? How did you feel they treated them?

PB: I can't really generalize, you know, because I think particularly with respect to something like this, each of us has had our own separate experiences. In fact, with this in mind, at St. John's, together with some other friends, we initiated a special effort for St. John's to hold events that would be inclusive of other parents and kids, families that are of ethnic origins to participate.

UQ: Were they receptive?

PB: Yes, they were receptive. In fact, we talked to them and then we . . . at St. John's, they had this tea tradition every Friday. The mothers would host the tea offering at the common room. So, we said, why don't we have an international tea offering? I think the first time we had *Holi* as a day to celebrate. So, they did things like that. It just happens that I found it easy to get into these committees and organizations. And I know there were some other parents who were not so readily free, who didn't get into any of these committees so easily, Indian parents. And once you had an event and made that extra effort to invite them to participate, there was a little greater participation from the other Indian parents. So, I think, you know, with all of us in a new environment, the level of participation and comfort must vary from one individual to another. I don't remember any personal problems or issues that we confronted.

UQ: That leads to the next question. How do you feel that your race or immigrant status affected your life or opportunities here in Houston in any respect, whether professionally and you may probably speak for your husband or for yourself or socially?

PB: I think with respect to that, I must let my husband speak for himself. Not having put myself in situations where I would encounter any serious problems, I personally don't have any . . .

UQ: You don't think it was much of an issue for . . .

PB: For me. But I know there have been issues for others, from hearsay, from descriptions that others have narrated, incidents either at work, they were passed over or didn't feel that their work was as well recognized. Since I personally had not been in that situation, I don't have a first-hand comment on that.

UQ: And did you find that Houstonians were generally friendly to you when you first arrived?

PB: Yes.

UQ: Regarding raising your son here or any number of children that you may have had, were there any concerns about raising children here versus in India?

PB: No.

UQ: You were completely comfortable with that?

PB: Yes.

UQ: How has your view of the United States changed since your arrival?

PB: My view of the United States? I have to think. I can't comment without giving that question a thought because I think it is, you know, I can be quite expansive on that.

UQ: Some people have had experiences where when they first arrived, a little apprehensive and once they come, they settle down and are more open to being here. Others have the opposite experience. So, it does vary.

PB: Well, in those terms, I should say that I have grown more and more at home. You know, it seems since the numbers, immigrant population numbers have grown so much from 1971 to what it is today, certainly there is a much greater level of comfort and greater level of the sense of belonging. You don't feel so much that you are in an alien environment. I think over the years, the community has grown and we have created several facilities in this country where you don't feel the alien-ness that much.

UQ: For example?

PB: For example, when we first came in 1971, there were no Indian grocery stores. We would do makeshift groceries like substitute split peas for *tur dal* [lentils]. And then, there were no Indian restaurants. So, not having those facilities certainly made you aware that every minute, that you are not in India and that you are on foreign soil. So, you

know, that kind of . . . and gradually over the years, the grocery stores have multiplied. And then, the number of people here have multiplied. Communities have grown big. You know, it is possible now for a newcomer from India, him or her, never to feel they left India because they can walk into all the familiar sights and sounds, if not exactly the same, are available now and they can go to Indian movies, go to Indian restaurants, go to Indian grocery stores. There is not one single festival that is not, I think, celebrated in some form or the other. So, yes, there is Little India.

UQ: Do you remember the first grocery store here?

PB: Yes, the first grocery store, or the first store we used to go to, to find equivalent foods was that Greek store [Antone's].

UQ: Droubi's?

PB: No, not Droubi's . . . I need a moment. So, that is a progression.

UQ: So, you couldn't find exactly what you needed?

PB: It also coincides with the fact that we didn't know very much of cooking so I don't think I missed the ingredients that much because I didn't know the ingredients to begin with or what to start the kitchen pantry with. I will remember in a minute. So, we used

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to go to the Greek store and that is where we picked up things like split peas. Other than split peas, I am not able to remember any other Indian groceries! Yes, and mustard seed. We used to use white mustard seeds.

UQ: The ones that they had there?

PB: The ones that they had there. And then, our spices were bought from the regular grocery store. So, we used things like cumin. You could get cumin but coriander and all that, we didn't use them. We just did without. So, that was the very early experience.

UQ: When people came in from India, did they bring with them . . .

PB: Yes, and we did. So, we brought a lot of the spices with us. Every visit to India or every visitor . . . [end of tape 1]

Much of the groceries came from India.

UQ: Did you have family members that came to Houston after you had settled here?

PB: Yes, we did. After we were settled here, the next person to come was my younger brother but the same year that I came to this country, he also came as a student to Cleveland. He went to school in Cleveland and then he came to Houston. Actually, he

just came for a holiday and then he ended up . . . he went to the University of Houston Business School. He was invited to join the Business School. So, he ended up joining U of H Business School and he did his doctorate at U of H. The next person to arrive was a cousin of mine who came to study at the Rice University. And then followed another cousin who also came to Rice University. Again, all of those decisions, I am sure were dictated by the fact that they could have gone to other schools but then, their families would have felt comfortable that we were here and so chose Rice over other schools, that sort of thing. And then, the other person who came was my husband's nephew who also got admission at Rice University. So, we were a Rice family.

UQ: O.K. Did your son end up going there, out of curiosity?

PB: Yes, he did. [laughs] So, my husband's sister's son, he also came to Rice University and did his doctorate at Rice. So, that is the extent of the family. Both my cousins, they moved to California after they finished their studies in Houston. My husband's nephew, however, he graduated out of Rice and then joined Exxon in Houston. He had a brief stint outside of Houston but he is now back in Houston with his family.

UQ: When you came here, you were married. Did you and your husband already have in your mind that you would be staying in Houston or in America permanently?

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PB: I don't think we had permanent so clearly etched in our mind but I don't think my husband had the idea of going back to India crop up at any time. So, I would say he came here as a student and then found a job. But that sort of decided our permanence.

UQ: So, you, yourself, in your own mind, you really didn't think we will be going back in a couple of years, let's not buy a vacuum cleaner or curtains, things like that?

PB: No, I didn't.

UQ: Would you recommend that other family members or friends migrate to the United States now?

PB: Would this still be a good option for our families to migrate?

UQ: Right. Things turned out well for you so . . .

PB: I would because regardless of all things good and bad, this is still the country that gives everybody the maximum opportunity to work to their full potential - whether you are drawn to capitalism or not. Even if you are not, it seems like several of our fellow immigrants and friends and family that have moved here are able to give good expression to their non-capitalistic interests as well. So, I think it is a country still of opportunities.

UQ: What would you say, do you remember, or could you even pinpoint a turning point in the community where you would say, O.K., small community - not many businesses established in the community, and was there a year or an event or a point where you would say, O.K., this has been a big change?

PB: Actually, the growth has been continually upward, so I don't know if there was a breaking point as such. Maybe, you know, when there was the oil crunch in the 1970s, that might have been a period where things slowed down. I think it was just a slowing down as far as immigration. As far as everything because, you know, that is the spirit where people are being laid off and jobs were difficult. But I think it was in the 1980s when the employment climate in Houston changed when the immigration into Houston also followed that same set of opportunities. So, I don't know - I am not able to think of any specific watershed period where there was a slowing and then sudden increase. Well, thinking now, it really points at this spurt of growth of the community. It has coincided with the growth of the IT industry. Whenever that happened, I think that same timing would apply to Houston as well.

UQ: What was your interaction like, if any, with other South Asian groups - Pakistanis, Bangladeshis?

PB: I wouldn't say it was very specific or extensive.

UQ: In the early days?

PB: In the early days, again, because it was seamless at that time so it was not anything specific.

UQ: I think we are almost just ready to wrap it up. Someone had mentioned or maybe I am mistaken that you have been involved in some museums. Can you tell about that?

PB: Yes. Outside of the Indian organizations, my other involvements are with Teach for America and very early on, I have a friend who is also a fellow parent of a child at St. John's, so I would say she is responsible for getting me into some of the other boards. She sat on the board of the Houston Ballet with my interest in music and dance, Indian classical, she recruited me to join the advisory board of the Houston Ballet. So, that was a good exposure. It gave me an opportunity to also introduce some of the leading artists who came to Houston, to the Houston ballet groups and, in fact, we organized some lecture/demonstrations by leading artists at the Houston Ballet Academy. So, we had created a little interaction among the two arts communities. And also, I was invited to join the Asian Arts Committee at the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston.

That involvement led to another major move for me. At the Asian Arts Committee, our role was to really advise the curator on new acquisitions for the museum. And we became very involved with the acquisition of an art object of Indian origin. It was a 6th century sandstone *Saraswati* [a Hindu goddess; here, it refers to a statue of the

goddess]. The curator had located a dealer who had the *Saraswati* available. And so, we combined two events in the process of raising funds to acquire this art piece. It happened that the Asian Arts Committee was headed by a gentleman named John Goodman who had an avid interest in polo. And he had been at the Festival of India in London when India was felicitated and celebrated through polo. So, he said he would like to host a similar event in Houston to celebrate India through polo. But I felt, you know, polo alone is not going to draw the Indian community too much because it is somewhat of a distant sport for most people. So, we said, why don't we combine that into something where we would involve people in the acquisition of an art object. So, in 2004, we had a fund raising event, a museum fund raising event at the Houston Polo Club for the Museum of Fine Arts to raise funds and whatever funds were raised went towards the purchase of this 6th century sandstone *Saraswati*.

UQ: Can you describe what that is?

PB: What, the art object?

UQ: Yes, because people who listen to this interview won't know what that is.

PB: The *Saraswati* is a deity or Hindu goddess, goddess of learning. And what was acquired was a sandstone sculpture of this goddess of learning. It is dated to be the 6th century period, belonging to the period when the Gupta dynasty who were a powerful

dynasty of kings that ruled a good part of India - middle India, and their empire extended almost to the south. So, this art object is identified as a Gupta period sandstone Saraswati sculpture.

So, what did we do? The event became a major event at the Museum. The guest of honor was the King of Jodhpur, Maharaja Gaj Singh who came who had an avid polo interest. And his son and nephew, they were both polo players so they were invited to participate in a friendly exhibition match which was one of the focal points of this polo event, and at the banquet that followed, the fundraiser banquet that followed. The reason it became a major event is also because it immediately created a partnership. The Houston Museum invited Majorajah Gaj Singh. He said "Not only will we be happy to come and participate in the exhibition for the polo match, in fact, we would like to strike a partnership relationship with the Houston Museum of Fine Arts." The _____ that is being donated by the Maharajah of Jaipur, they said, "We will bring 30 of our Madvar paintings. These are water color paintings that have never been exhibited in the U.S. or they have never gone out of India except once to a neighboring country." So, he said, "We would be willing to bring that and then do a special exhibit at the Houston Museum of Fine Arts." So, you know, his offer and his involvement raised this event which normally would just have been . . . you know, Asian Arts Community went into a full-blown museum event and it became a very successful fund-raising event, for the first time the Museum saw the participation of the Indian community at large at this fund-raising banquet. And, in fact, the director remarked that the Museum had never seen a whole community come together the way they did for this fund-raising event. And that,

in a way, led to, he said, the board of the trustees of the Museum of Fine Arts feeling that they should include an Indian on the board because they see the community as a vibrant community that is able to support and participate in the Museum. So, at the end of it all, they invited me to join the board of trustees. So, that was another first for me and I guess first for the Museum because I was the first ever Indian male or female on the board of trustees.

UQ: So it was a first for the Indian community as well.

PB: Yes, that is right. So, that is my museum involvement. Now, the Asian Arts Gallery itself . . . the Museum is planning to move the Asian Arts Gallery to a larger space in the Museum. So, the new galleries will be opening starting the end of this year and going through 2008. We are going to open the Korean gallery first and then we will . . . the Korean gallery is opening the end of 2007 and the India/Pakistan gallery will open towards the end of 2008.

UQ: Is that part of your effort as well?

PB: Well, that is too presumptuous to think it is part of my effort but I think all of this has led to getting a greater interest in the Asian arts collection for the Museum. The Museum, I guess, had already planned to expand but the Museum, its main focus is Western European art and the Asian Arts collection is not very extensive but there is an

interest to make that also significant. They don't expect it to be a very vast collection but the Museum would like for its Asian Arts collection to be important - whatever they have. If it is going to be small, but very important.

My other interest is also I am on the board of Teach for America. Again, through my friend who was . . . I tell her it looks like wherever she goes, I am her diversity contribution, you know, her contribution to any organization is to present someone else and bring me into it! In fact, when we were recruited, Bala and I, we chaired that year's gala for Teach for America. Teach for America was another organization I think has received a familiarity in the Indian community, first by being introduced to the . . . you have heard of the Indo-America Charity Foundation?

UQ: Yes.

PB: O.K., it is an organization that has gone into its, now it must be 18th year. And it is a very significant force now in the South Asian community. It was started by a group of friends . . . initially, I think, by a doctor who felt we should give back to the community that we have adopted as our home. And the mission is to raise funds largely from the Indian community and donated to the Houston area causes. You know, there are many organizations, charitable organizations that raise funds for causes back home, the home country. But the specific mandate of the Indo-American Charity Foundation is to raise funds and distribute them to the Houston area charities.

UQ: So, does that mean Indian charities; I should say Indian-Americans or everyone?

PB: Everyone. Among the main recipients of the funds raised by this organization are food bank. There are about 15, 20 organizations. They are not rolling off my . . . I mean, SEARCH, women's shelters. Every major organization you can think of in the Houston area. So, my friend . . . the Teach for America was also a recipient organization that was introduced by me to the Indo-American Charity Foundation while I was on the board. I also served on the board of the Indo-American Charity Foundation and also as its president for the year 1998. I was president of IACF. So, we introduced Teach for America as a deserving recipient organization. And that came through after sufficient scrutiny. And then, IACF since then has been a regular donor to the Teach for America cause.

UQ: How are the funds raised? Do you do fund-raising dinners?

PB: IACF raises its funds through a Walk-A-Thon in Spring and a fund-raising banquet in the fall. And currently, I think more than \$2 million has been raised by this organization and distributed in the Houston area. The last fund-raiser of 2006 . . . 2006-2005. The funds raised exceeded \$300,000. I think the highest was one year when they raised nearly \$400,000, \$450,000. So, that is another major Indian organization.

Interviewee: Prabha Bala

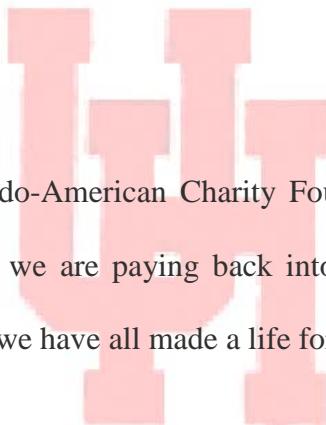
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UQ: Is DAYA a part of this?

PB: DAYA was funded by . . . the seed money for DAYA was provided by Indo-American Charity Foundation and my husband is on the DAYA board. And also, the Indian Doctors Charity Clinic. It also received its seed money . . . it was in the year that I was president, we gave the seed money for the Indian Doctors Charity Clinic.

UQ: So, this is aiding not just the Indian community here but also the others. So, it is

_____.



PB: Yes, the mandate for Indo-American Charity Foundation is to aid the Houston area needs. It is one way that we are paying back into the community that we have adopted as our home and where we have all made a life for ourselves.

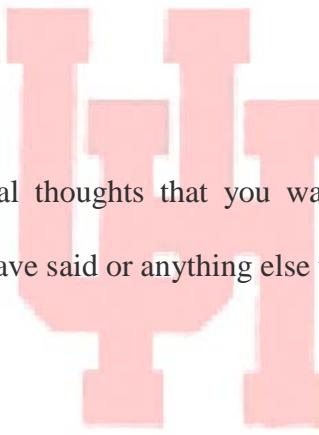
UQ: So, do you know of other charity groups in the Indian community, some of the major ones?

PB: The charity groups, this is really the stated charity group but there are many other groups that may be cultural groups that also raise funds and that have donated, stepped up to the cause. And the Meenakshi Temple during the Tsunami and also during Katrina, all of the organizations have come together to donate.

UQ: But this is kind of the major force for charity?

PB: For charity, a stated charity foundation - the Indo-American Charity Foundation.

The other major Indian organizations would be India Culture Center. And there is another group - the Chamber of Commerce. I think that is also becoming a significant force, Indian Chamber of Commerce. And the IPAC, Indo-American Political Action Committee. These are all becoming significant forces that are leading various activities in the community and encouraging community members to participate. Many different roles.



UQ: Are there any other final thoughts that you want to close the interview with regarding any of the things we have said or anything else that you would like to add?

PB: Final thoughts?

UQ: It's a little difficult . . .

PB: Nothing comes to mind.

UQ: I don't have any other questions. I guess wraps it up. Thank you very much.

PB: You are welcome. O.K., concluding, something that occurred to me - I feel that now, compared to what it was when we first came, I feel we are a much more equal member of the Houston citizenry because we have and are continuing to make a mark. And, you know, we are adding to the amalgam that all immigrant populations are creating, in the presence of all these different immigrant populations. Initially, we would think of ourselves as a very small minority in the Houston demographics, in the life of Houston, but I think our own growth, both in numbers and in our stature in society, has made our presence more than just a small minority. We have now become a significant ethnic group and as individuals also, we have become a significant contributor. So, as I was describing my life in Houston to you, I am also realizing that in the course of this description, it occurs to me that hey, I am into so many things in Houston, so that is the difference. You know, I have a voice in the Houston Museum of Fine Arts. I have an opinion and a voice to offer on the board of Teach for America where we are taking some policy decisions on growth of the organization and how rapid the growth should be and where we should be spending the money. They are doing that. And besides this, I think, you know, we have a whole generation has lived its life out in Houston. The second generation has come of age. So, in this period, I think besides the voluntary organizations that I am a part of, I think those who have been in the workforce have also made very significant strides in their own work experience and their contribution is of similar importance.

UQ: And these forces worked hand-in-hand to achieve . . .

PB: Yes. So our presence here is no longer just a small minority. That is my concluding statement.

