

UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON
ORAL HISTORY OF HOUSTON PROJECT

Interview with: Anil Kumar
Interviewed by: Uzma Quraishi
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Transcribed by: Suzanne Mascola

UQ: Oral history interview of Anil Kumar at his office in Sugar Land, Texas, August 2, 2007. Interview conducted by Uzma Quraishi for the Center for Public History at the University of Houston. You can begin by just telling a little bit about yourself, who you are and what you do here in Houston today.

AK: My name is Anil Kumar. I am past 60. I am basically an electrical engineer turned video production, whatever you want to call it, engineer. And also a video producer. That is what I do.

UQ: Can you tell about your background as far as where you are from in India and a little bit about your upbringing and your parents?

AK: Sure. I am from Chennai, India which is the southern part of India. Very major metropolis. I come from a middle income family, very well-educated, and everybody was focused on the arts fields a lot. Father has worked all his life in communications in the All India Radio of India and I have been involved in theater and so many other things - mostly arts related. Mother was also a dancer when she was in her younger years. Basically, it is all liberal arts oriented family.

UQ: Do you have siblings?

AK: No, I don't. I am the only son.

UQ: The only child?

AK: Correct. I am the only child.

UQ: What reason brought you to America? Why did you think about coming?

AK: Actually in those days, way back 33, 34 years ago, there were not that many opportunities in India for engineers. In fact, anybody who was qualified, you know, they had very limited opportunities job wise. And also, being young, there was also this dream about being in the West and the Western civilization and everything that is glamorous that is happening out there. So, I had my dream of going abroad, to start with. So, I tried a couple of avenues and I got my first entry out from India into London, England. I worked there for a couple of years. At that point in, I believe, the late 1960s or early 1970s, there was a huge discrimination problem in England. Didn't feel comfortable, didn't want to be there, so I applied for U.S. immigration and then I got it. I came. That is what happened. If you want the real answer for your question, it is very weird and it is very different in the sense that I have always been very, very crazy about

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drama, theater. And my only aim in my life was, at that time, to see basically a lot of plays on the West End in London and then see a couple of plays on Broadway and go back. But it all took a different turn.

UQ: That is different, that is true. About how old were you when you went to London?

AK: About 26.

UQ: So, at that point, you had completed what portion of your education?

AK: I finished my bachelor's in electrical engineering. I worked in India for a couple of years in a different establishment. That is where I was.

UQ: Were you single?

AK: Of course, yes, I was single.

UQ: So, you went to London with the aim that in the back of your mind, theater, and also to work . . .

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AK: Yes, because I was an electrical engineer by qualification, I got a job in no time and I worked there.

UQ: You said you were there for a few years?

AK: A couple of years, yes. 1968 to 1970.

UQ: But because of the discrimination, you . . .

AK: Not only that. I just didn't feel comfortable there. I mean, I did join an evening theater school but there was a distinct . . . I mean, I didn't have enough money also. That was one of the things. The accommodation was pathetic. Discrimination, again. Basically, whoever you would call, wherever you would call, you wouldn't get accommodation unless you were back with the Asian group. Not that I didn't like it but anyone who seeks a different experience, didn't get it.

UQ: So, from London, you applied for . . .

AK: Immigration, and a friend of mine who was here in Oklahoma, Norman, who is doing his Ph.D., I mean, we, too, were childhood buddies. So, he came here first. So, he got me in. He sponsored me. He got me in.

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UQ: Did you come as a green card holder then?

AK: Oh, absolutely. Yes.

UQ: And you originally came where in America?

AK: That is another interesting thing, is I really didn't move out of Texas or Houston much. I originally came to Oklahoma for maybe about 3 or 4 months when I was settling down and that was a period when the Vietnam War was at the peak. The minute I landed, they drafted me because all green card holders and younger people . . . and then, interestingly enough, of course, the telephone conversation was very difficult in those days but I did manage to call my dad or write to him or something back in India, and he said, "Why the hell do you want to serve a country somewhere else? You come back here and join the army here if you want." He said he didn't much care for the idea of joining the draft. He said, "Just back up and come." But I thought, I'll give it a chance. I didn't have any money to have any legal counsel also at that time. My friend who sponsored me was a student. So, maybe out of the \$500, I saved up in England or whatever it is, spent about \$170 with a lawyer in Oklahoma, in Norman. He bailed me out of it. He had some clause that said that I was not eligible or something like that. It was just a day difference, two days after my entry or my birthday or something happened. Anyway, he got me out of it.

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UQ: Because of that little glitch?

AK: Yes. That was interesting. I mean, the minute I landed . . . I loved the pizza all right which was like . . . in those days, \$9 for a large pizza is equivalent to almost \$30 now. So, that was a very big delicacy. Anyway, with that, I did not much have a pleasant entry experience because I was attending all these interviews for the drafts, every other day almost. Anyway, I got out of it.

UQ: How long did that take before you finally kind of disentangled yourself from that?

AK: Six months. Almost five to six months. And because I worked for a company called Burroughs in London and in computers, the closest civilized metropolis was Houston, so they had a branch and they took me the minute I called them. So, I came here.

UQ: So, for six months, you didn't even look for a job?

AK: No, I was but this was kind of a preoccupied situation. I didn't know that I was going back or I was joining the U.S. Army.

UQ: So, after six months, you got a position here in Houston and this is where you came?

AK: Yes.

UQ: Did you know anyone in Houston before you arrived?

AK: Not really. I mean, my wife's friend was there and so I just met them. When I came to Houston, there were like 300 Indian families, or 220, something like that. Very small.

UQ: What year was that?

AK: 1969, 1970. I speak Telugu which is a South Indian language and I also speak Tamil very fluently. So, I ran into this family who was speaking Telugu and then kind of once a week, you know, I went and visited them because they were also hard-up for people who spoke the same language and shared the same interests. In fact, that gentleman was my father's contemporary though I didn't know that he was here. But that is how it happened.

UQ: O.K., so you came here, between 200 and 300 families?

AK: 250 families.

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UQ: Where did you stay?

AK: And most of them were all just couples. That's all.

UQ: So, very new?

AK: Very new, yes. And then, my job assignment was as a maintenance engineer at Rice University computers which was quite a big challenge because they were all scientific computers in those days and a lot of weight on it. I mean, a lot was running on those computers. I just walked across and there was an efficiency apartment on Sunset Boulevard, \$70 a month, and one single cute room. That is all I wanted. Independent. And that is what I liked.

UQ: You had no problem getting it?

AK: No problem getting it. Not at all. Absolutely open arms. No problem at all.

UQ: Nothing like England then?

AK: No. There was discrimination at that time, only when you went to certain restaurants. Like Conroe. Outside Houston, there was a problem. There were specifically some places that were quite apparent.

UQ: So, what was the nature of that discrimination?

AK: They wouldn't serve you. The minute you walked in, the looks were different and they way they took the order. They were just waiting for you to get out, kind of thing.

UQ: So, you felt that you weren't welcome?

AK: Yes, in certain places. I can remember still. In Huntsville, Conroe, Beaumont, Baytown - that area. But, you know, I didn't go to those places that often anyway so it didn't bother me. But otherwise, it was wonderful.

UQ: Within Houston, you really didn't get much of that?

AK: Oh, no. Not at all. It was absolutely . . . I was just amazed at the reception.

UQ: So, overall, you would say that the reception for you as an immigrant . . .

AK: Very friendly. Very happy. Really, I thought I found the right place to start a career, yes.

UQ: So, what were your social activities like when you first came here?

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AK: My social activities were, of course, I brought some music with me and, you know, remember, that was the Vietnam high-end hippy time. So, somehow, I got into that crowd very fast through Rice. You know, just sitting in the bar or this or that or something, and then I met all these . . . in fact, I met all these intellectuals who were doing their Ph.D.s and the girlfriends and the friends were all on the anti-war thing. So, I mixed into the social group pretty fast. We had plenty of evenings together, a lot of chatting, philosophy. As people who think . . . there really were not that much drugs at that time, at least in my circle. Just maybe a beer or two. Something very acceptable.

UQ: So, how would you say that your social interactions were mostly with . . .

AK: All Americans mostly. Locals. Young. Very free. Loving. Giving. One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest. That kind of thing. There were a lot of anti-revolutionary things in the air. So, we were all hot-blooded and that kind of . . . no violence but, you know, it was mostly on those lines.

UQ: What was the nature of your interaction with other Indians in Houston?

AK: I only knew about one-half dozen to 10 people. The only organization that I can remember is India Association at the University of Houston.

UQ: The Student Association?

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AK: The Student Association. ISA. So, you know, I mean, they were all young. No one had any much money or anything like that but everybody was craving for something Indian. And so, I really got into the activity very fast. I think I was one of the prime movers of the Indian culture. I mean, you know, since I was interested in theater and I had a lot of background from back home, I could manage anything backstage, I could put together shows, I could present it very convincingly. So, you know, I could pull the packages together very much. Any show. Anything that happened. Nothing went on without me. I can say that confidently. I mean, with a lot of confidence, yes. I had a good time.

UQ: So, were you involved in some of the productions of the University on campus?

AK: Absolutely. Nothing happened . . . I mean, I was there backstage. In fact, I was directing a lot of things, meaning if they were inviting someone from New York or some Indian dancer was coming, you know, I could plan the whole thing out, the events, the timing and see that everything went smooth. The lighting, sound, that kind of thing. So, we were quite a congenial group of people in that way.

UQ: Were there a lot of students who were a part of the ISA?

AK: Yes. Plenty of them. Most of the children who came to my wife to learn, their mothers, their parents are all ex-ISA people.

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UQ: Were there mostly men at that time as far as the members of ISA?

AK: Yes, mostly men. I saw a few girls also.

UQ: So, they had kind of these productions, stage productions?

AK: Yes, and then films. There were these 16-mm films that were coming, so the University of Houston - I think it is the Lamar Room or something like that - some classrooms they were given, and we used to get the projector from the University and all the people were . . . you know, \$5 in those days was a very large amount.

UQ: So, \$5 to rent the room out?

AK: No, per ticket. The movie.

UQ: Oh, per person?

AK: Yes, because we had to pay . . . all these films were coming from Chicago. The current radio hostess, Meena Datt, her uncle was the guy who was getting the films for the US in those days. I mean, these are all memories, of course. The scene has changed a lot.

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UQ: So, they had the movie fees . . . I am trying to get an idea of what kind of activities ISA had. They had stage productions like plays?

AK: No. Invited artists. And then, once in a way, like Divali or Indian Independence Day or something like that. Some 50, 100 of us used to get together and just put up a little variety entertainment show. You know, nothing to today's standards but for those days, it was quite good. So, it was a participatory spirit. Cullen auditorium was a stinking, old auditorium but it is all renovated now.



UQ: The attendees, were they mostly students or the general population?

AK: A lot of students.

UQ: And you said just 50 to 100 people would show up, about that much on average?

AK: Yes.

UQ: We are not talking thousands of people?

AK: Oh, no. About 200, 300 maybe. All Indians will be there. All the 200 families will be there. And so, in spite of not having internet, we all had somehow . . . some letters, it is all letters mostly.

UQ: And were there non-Indians who also attended these functions?

AK: Yes, quite a few.

UQ: So, it sounds like you spent your time between work, socializing with some of the people you met . . .

AK: All weekends were all with either my American friends or with Indian families. So, actually, the leisure time was wonderful, I mean, very enjoyable, because they didn't have families, children and all that so everybody would gather. From 11 onwards, some barbecue cookout or swimming pool parties - something or the other like that. And all weekend was a lot of people gathering.

UQ: Did you maintain connections with your family in India?

AK: Yes, with letters mostly. Otherwise, you had to book a call and wait and all that.

UQ: So, letters in which language?

AK: In English. Mostly English.

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UQ: Did you visit India also?

AK: And they used to send paper clippings and some magazines of our language. Once in a month or something, there would be a little pack in the parcel that would come, book post as you would call it. It would take about 6 weeks to get here.

UQ: Were you able to also go back and visit India regularly, once every couple of years?

AK: I am also one of those I didn't make it that often. Probably once in 5 years or something like that.

UQ: How long did you keep that job on Rice University campus?

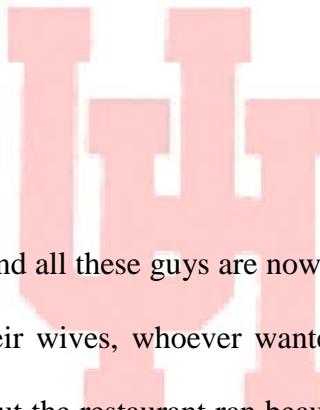
AK: I didn't want you to ask that question but anyway, I am one of those very restless "stupid" people in that way. Anyway, the thing is . . . I think I kept it for about 2-1/2 years or something. I left it. All these British professors at Rice who used to be around me in the computer lab, they always used to say that "Anil, man, there is no good curry in the city. You need to do something about it. Why don't we do something about it?" So, I opened the very first Indian restaurant in Houston in the Village on Times Boulevard.

UQ: What was it called?

AK: Maharajah. I ran it from 1972 onwards for about 3, 4 years.

UQ: Did you do this alone or did you have partners?

AK: Yes, well, it was like a \$12,000 investment. That was one of the things. Actually, a very low investment deal. I had an Indian roommate, him, myself, one or two other people, just very little investment, we started it.



UQ: Who cooked?

AK: See, that is what it is! And all these guys are now CEOs of Shell and all that. All students and everybody and their wives, whoever wanted immigration used to pile up there and cook and we ran it. But the restaurant ran beautifully well for the first 2 years. Extremely well. I mean, there were waiting lines for 45 minutes. Later on, we couldn't manage it right, properly, so it went down the drain. But anyway . . .

UQ: Good experience though.

AK: Yes. When it shut down, we had a big, black tie morning session and all that . . . lots of Americans - all the Montrose gang was there. We had a big candlelit bye-bye to the restaurant.

UQ: Where did you get your spices and all those kinds of things?

AK: There used to be only one spot for a long time in Houston called Antonios [Antone's]. That was the only place where you could get some pickles and spices at an extremely high . . . but there was another store called J Store that opened on Times behind my restaurant. They were supplying . . .

UQ: O.K., so you got your things from them?

AK: Yes, but again, all of them were very high-end, extremely high priced.

UQ: Your clientele at the restaurant, were the patrons mostly Indian or non-Indians?

AK: Indians didn't much care for our cooking but non-Indians loved it. We can now talk about it in all fun and glory but I am just saying . . . I don't know how many students from U of H or Rice were dishwashers in my restaurant and all of them are in great positions. We often gather and have a good laugh about it. These used to just work for a meal, I mean, you know. Just that simple.

UQ: Kind of unfortunate that it closed down.

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AK: Yes, true. I mean, it had to be run professionally - somebody with a electrical engineering background and love for theater. You can't expect somebody to be there from 8 in the morning until the wee hours of the night. It doesn't go with the personality. It is as simple as that. Or, you have to have the money to hire a manager.

UQ: So, you worked on campus _____?

AK: I started here, right. I started the very first Indian radio program in Houston, too, on Pacifica KPFT. It is called the Morning Ragas. Raga is a scale. Complete Indian, Pakistani music, everything is based on those scales, the musical scales.

UQ: And when did you start that?

AK: 1970. Late 1970.

UQ: While you were . . .

AK: At Rice.

UQ: So, before the restaurant, you were already working on this _____?

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AK: Oh, yes. This was like an evening. I had gotten a call and they said, "Would you like to play some Indian music on KPFT?" I said, "Yes. Sure." So, that is how it started.

UQ: Where did you get your music from? What was your source?

AK: I just had about 10 LPs. And then, this Home Entertainment, the shop, they were the only ones who were carrying some international music. So, everything was Ravi Shankar in those days. Everybody was high on something or the other and Ravi Shankar. I had some recorded music with me but it was nothing to speak of.

UQ: It was enough to make a show on?

AK: Yes, and, you know, we keep asking people there . . . everyone had something or the other in their own collection.

UQ: How long did that show last?

AK: A couple of years probably before Meena Datt took over, actually. KPFT. Meena Datt came at that time later on.

UQ: Early 1970s?

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AK: Yes.

UQ: I have been trying to interview her but have not gotten hold of her yet. So then, what was the next step in your adventure after the restaurant?

AK: Everything! The restaurant. Then actually, while I was in the restaurant, I got married to Rathna and in my old restaurant was when her first dance classes started.

UQ: Oh, right off the bat.

AK: In 1975, yes. And she shut the restaurant down. She said, "This is stupid to be here like this." See, a lot of dignitaries at that time, because it was the only [Indian] restaurant, all the political leaders and artistic people coming from India and if they'd ever come to Houston, they were all brought there. There was no other . . . and Rathna being a very popular lady in India, everybody was saying, "Rathna, what are you doing here?" that kind of thing. So, she said, "Oh, my husband runs it and I am trying to help him out." So anyway, we shut it down and _____.

UQ: Tell a little bit about how you got married since you were here and she obviously was there.

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AK: Back home . . . again, it all goes back to artistic interests and all that. She was good. She comes from a family of poets and of national recognition. Her mom and aunt are undisputed queens of folk music which they brought up in India. A lot of recognition. And Rathna was a child prodigy in dance. Probably between her 9th and 13th year, she had given as many programs as anybody would in their lifetime. I mean, she was so busy. And we knew each other. Family friends. We lost touch because she went away to France, I came away to England. I mean, my engineering studies and all that. And I just ran into her during one of my India trips as well as . . . she was meeting my dad very often back home. And so, he was also mentioning it, "You know, why don't you marry her?" and that kind of thing. That is all. We knew each other. That is very basic. And she decided not to get married unless she knew the person well. We knew each other's idiosyncrasies and all that. She didn't want to get in with anyone . . . me, too . . . I didn't want to get involved with anybody with whom I didn't know right. So, it was a very easy, smooth thing. I proposed. Just one letter, one line, and got married. That is all.

UQ: And you got married in India?

AK: Yes.

UQ: Lavish wedding?

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AK: Very simple. Both the families didn't have that much money. Whatever was earned was all spent on artistic pursuits anyway. And also by nature . . . she is not fond of big wealth and diamonds and Lexus cars and all that.

UQ: That's good for you!

AK: Yes. Neither me. I am very happy with . . . my happiness is different.

UQ: O.K., so you got married in India. What year was that?

AK: 1975.

UQ: And then, you both came back together or you came back before her?

AK: Yes, I came back before her. I filed all the papers properly. She came in about 4, 5 months. She had a very big job opening there as one of the deputy station directors just then starting TV stations. It was like a national level opening and all that - unless you were competent, they wouldn't take you that easily. She just quit everything and she came.

UQ: And you were still staying on Sunset Boulevard?

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AK: No, at that time after she came, we were with some friends for 1 month or so. Then, we bought a condominium and then moved out.

UQ: When you married, this was in the middle of running the restaurant? It was about the same time frame?

AK: Yes. You know, I shut down the restaurant. Then, I got a job luckily with Texas Instruments because of a good friend of mine who was my roommate who was in a very high position here. I worked for 10 years at Texas Instruments as a designer for memory chips. Then, I got laid off. I didn't even apply for the job. Again, all my thoughts were all on video media, something on those lines. So, I started a video production company in 1985. That is it. I have been with it since then.

UQ: O.K. Talk a little bit about the Vietnam War. You have already mentioned quite a bit as far as it influencing the circle that you moved in. Can you maybe elaborate on the effect on the Indian community? Did it have any impact at all in terms of . . .

AK: No. What happened, at least when I came . . . the Vietnam War, at least in my observation, had become such a day-to-day thing, you know. I mean, for example, it is an accepted thing. What's the big news? O.K., it is like Iraq or, I do not know. Every night, there used to be Nightline, Ted Koppel covering it for about 45 minutes of nonstop gunshots and, you know, all that showing on the TV. I mean, the people had accepted it

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and said, O.K., what the hell? How many people killed? O.K. All right. And then, there would be one headline in the paper the next day, you know, they are trying to negotiate and pull out. Nothing happened. O.K. That is it. I mean, it has just become a normal routine thing. It is like, you know, if you don't have cream available in the tea, you drink black tea and you say, O.K., fine. It is like that. It is just a very ugly thing that was happening. Everybody was feeling helpless. They just left it at that. And there were a few protestors who were yelling and screaming.

UQ: Now, since much of the American population had been drafted, did you find that that affected job availability for Indians?

AK: Job availability? Everything went in cycles. It still does in America. There was a big need for chemical engineers so they just grabbed anybody and everybody. I mean, to answer your question, job availability was very easy. Plenty of jobs in any field you wanted. But if there was a crunch on chemical, everybody would be laid off. Like, I was laid off. Texas Instruments here had 7,000 people working and with that layoff, they had only 1,500 people. They laid off 4,000 people overnight almost. So, because Japanese competition was so strong, they couldn't compete in electronics with them at that time.

UQ: Also, I want to talk a little bit . . . I was interviewing someone else and that person had mentioned how they were hesitant to move to England because of the historical experience of colonialism and they didn't want to live in the country where this nation

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had come and colonized their own. Did you have a sense of that or did you see that
_____?

AK: In England?

UQ: Oh, yes. I mean, you walk in the snow at night from the tube station to your apartment or something, these guys/youngsters would throw stones or snowballs at you. It was very humiliating. Plus, I didn't find anything great about the country anyway. They were living in better standards because . . . it appeared to be better standards. That is all. It was just hopelessly closed in, no heating. A lot of apartments had a lot of problems. They were poor actually. It appeared to be great living but it was not. It didn't. It is just that they were not huts. That is the only difference. It was just wooden structures. I mean, you know, all the plumbing and the whole place was a mess in many, many places. Nothing to speak of.

UQ: And you didn't find that since there were so many more Indians in London, that that made a difference as far as pulling up the community and making the standards a little better . . . didn't make much of a difference?

AK: No. There were more Indians but everybody was . . . it was because of the weather I think, actually. Everybody was to themselves. Nobody would dare go out or

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do anything openly much. There was also a big gap between the people from Pakistan and people from India and all that.

UQ: How so?

AK: See, here, it is very, very nice actually. There is really not a whole lot of . . . I mean, there are definitely differences but when it comes to shows and this and that and everybody is . . . I don't know, I think it is some cultural thing or something like that. Like the restaurants had their own choices, areas, certain areas. That is how the formed. Here, you don't find that kind of thing. Everybody is everywhere.

UQ: So, you think as far as the Indian and Pakistani communities in London, they didn't mix as much as they do here? Is that what you are saying?

AK: No, and also, the politicians did that damage also to a certain extent.

UQ: Making it separate entities?

AK: Yes.

UQ: That is actually an interesting point to bring up here as you mentioned. You don't see the same thing here as far as the Indians and Pakistanis?

AK: No, they have their own organizations and everything but nobody fights for anything in any blatant way. Take Sugar Land, for example. Or Alief. Everybody lives everywhere. I don't think you can call a particular area a Pakistani commune or Indian commune. See, but all that has one thing to do with anywhere in the world, there is equal availability, equal chances for everybody. So, there is no discrimination in that way.

UQ: So, I assume you must have felt a marked difference when you came to America in the way that the average person treated you.

AK: Oh, absolutely. It was like daylight and darkness.

UQ: Not just the intellectuals on campus but just . . .

AK: Everybody. Oh, yes. Very nice. I felt very relieved to be accepted in 99% of the places. There is a little of this thing . . . conservatism is there everywhere in the world. India is not a great country. Neither is Pakistan in that way. I am sure they have their own differences.

UQ: And do you feel that it is the same now as far as the treatment of immigrants?

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AK: It is the same. Actually, I don't know how Pakistanis feel but at least because of all this economic boom in India and all that, I mean, anything Indian sells - with absolutely no questions asked. That is my opinion.

UQ: Very true. Would you say that your view of America has changed since when you first arrived till now?

AK: You know, I am a very liberal person in that. Always I am very compassionate about a lot of things in my life. It is my personality. I don't like to really criticize anything unless it hits me personally very much. I really don't even feel the religious differences in my own thinking. So, no, my view of America hasn't changed but I feel sorry for the country in a way in the sense that I think it is losing its glory like Britain did. Britain did because of sheer neglect and to a certain amount of "ego and arrogance" kind of approach. But here, it is not the case. The case is there is a lot of neglect in their own society, in their own values. That is basically it. I think it is very important to bring up educational levels and awareness of a lot of things. It has to be there, otherwise, you will see it go down a lot.

UQ: So, you think the problems here are more internal?

AK: Yes. There is a lot of neglect, a lot of negligence. Somebody has to wake up and make people, youngsters realize that you've got to work for it, you've got to realize the

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values of education. Anything you've got. Don't make it too easy and acceptable. Am I on the soap box? [laughs] It is so easy to say.

UQ: Yes, that is true. These problems are never easy to solve. Concerning your community activities, you worked with the restaurant, you also worked with . . .

AK: I was there everywhere. I was in India Association, India Culture Center - anything that made some meaning to the community, I was on the boards or I was a volunteer. And, again, you know, starting the first kind of thing, it is not only the restaurant, I mean. I realized there was a need for someone to do the audio and video services in the Indian community. In fact, Indo-Asian community. I did a lot of work for even Pakistan Association in those days. So, I bought independently my own sound system - big one, professional ones. I did the sound system for Asha Bhonsle's and Lata Mangeshkar's shows and all that when they came first. Now, I don't. I'm old. But I used to enjoy it. You used to see me in my truck with these big speakers and the whole works. Stupid things! And a lot of lighting design for the Indian shows. Anything connected with theater.

UQ: Do you remember the religious activities, the temples, things like that - the very early years?

AK: Yes, I got involved with Meenakshi Temple.

UQ: And that is the first temple _____.

AK: I probably am the only one even today that chronicled on video from day 1 Meenakshi Temple for 30 years or 25 years, from the time they put the foundation stone, the Garbari Temple, Arya Samaj and I am doing it for the India House, too.

UQ: You are doing the videography?

AK: Yes. I mean, I have got the footage right here with me which even they don't have that in the archives. They want to go back. Tons of it for all these things. And it is all voluntary. Most of it is voluntary. I mean, I do charge once in a while.

UQ: Can you talk about the founding of Meenakshi Temple since you were there?

AK: Oh, yes. I got a call. There was something . . . I think it was called Hindu Temple of Houston or something like that. They started a long time back in Clear Lake. And all the current members of Meenakshi Temple and all of them . . . yes, it is called Hindu Worship Society. That is what it is. They were all the members of the same organization but they split because they wanted to build this temple and some of them didn't approve of the idea. Anyway, yes, they called me if I would be interested in joining the group and get this rolling. I wasn't too much keen on a split at that time. Not split, but joining

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groups. I said, "No, I'll help both if you want. I'll be there. Whatever you want. I don't want to [partake in a split]." And also, I am not very much for controversy. Anything constructive, I don't mind anybody, any group. And if they start fighting within themselves, I am out of it. I don't have the strength and I don't want to waste my time, more than anything else. In that way, I am not a good leader. I am a bad leader. I give up.

UQ: O.K., so the Hindu Worship Society, was this the first or only . . . I am sure there must have been another group in Houston that was already established as far as a large . .

AK: No, Hindu Worship Society was the first one.

UQ: Out in Clear Lake?

AK: Right.

UQ: Why was it in Clear Lake?

AK: I think there were some people who got together who got the idea and started it with a small worship in somebody's room or house or something like that. That is how it

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starts everywhere - Oklahoma, Dallas, all places. It starts in somebody's house or garage, then it goes out somewhere else.

UQ: Had you been to this location?

AK: The Hindu Worship Society? Yes. Once, I went. They used to have some Sunday morning gatherings. But I am not a very religious person. I respect my religion, I believe in God but I . . . even my parents, my father, mother, we used to go to – like a mosque –we used to go to temples once in a way and feel good about it for a few minutes but not fanatics, not be there from morning until night. I don't come from that lineage. Even here, it is the same thing. Even Meenakshi Temple. I go there when there are events, you know, when something is happening - you want me to videotape. I go there, I enjoy it, I really enjoy the heritage or the beliefs that have come in from millions of years and I always wonder who created it, who propagated it, who believed it and how is it here like this? That is my thought all the time. But I don't participate in the actual happening in that way.

UQ: The ceremonies?

AK: Yes.

UQ: So, were you a part then? Did you decide to help both of those groups?

AK: Yes, and actually, I wasn't really doing much to them until I heard that a group of people that put in X number of dollars to buy the land and it was starting to become a reality, that is when I stepped in. Until then, I didn't really.

[End of Tape 1]

UQ: What was your role when you finally decided to step in and help out for the Meenakshi Temple?

AK: I would help in little things. Little chores. Mowing the lawn. This and that. And if they wanted somebody to go to the airport, if somebody was coming, to pick them up. Anything temple-related, I would. But basically, again, I came back to the same thing - I want to do something that I am good at. I had done all their audio/video needs because that is an integral part of the thing. Any time, anything they'd want . . . taking the equipment, all their fundraising. I have done all their promotional videos for all these organizations, to raise funds. I designed the sound system and the lighting for the Meenakshi Temple, that big _____ up there. I designed the thing for Arya Samaj also. So, you know, I did all that. That is all I know. What I know is what I do.

UQ: Your area of expertise applied to . . .

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AK: Yes, and since I am not a very big believer in the ritualistic part of it, I am not there when those things happen much. That is it.

UQ: Did any of your other family members follow to settle in the U.S. after you came here?

AK: No, except my wife. Nobody that I know.

UQ: No siblings or cousins?

AK: My family members came as students so we provided board and lodge for them when they were pharmacy students, Ph.D.s and electrical engineering students at Rice and things like that. That is all. They just came. They found their own jobs. They got married. They went away from there. But I didn't sponsor them or anything like that. They came on student visas. Whatever they did, that was it.

UQ: And did they then settle in America or did they go back . . .

AK: Yes, some of them did. At least two of them. But that is another interesting fact. Since 1970, I don't know, scores of people . . . one interesting fact you may want to see . . . in the early 1970s, Houston was the Mecca for all heart surgeries and bypasses and all that. There used to be so many unknown people coming from India. Not so many - those

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who could afford it because it was expensive. They all used to end up with me or in my house. Quite a few of them. So, we used to take the food, especially vegetarians, morning ones, night ones, bring the patient back. It was a lot of work.

UQ: It is a lot of work.

AK: Yes, it started straining us a lot, even financially because even in those days, it was \$2 or \$3 every time you would park. And then, you know, take them out for some shopping or whatever.

UQ: Right. So, it was just your family or other families also helped out in this?

AK: I am only talking about here. I am sure they did, too. But we were seeing a lot of patients. There was one period of about 8 to 10 years, 1975 to 1984, 1985 - lots of patients. You know, go to the airport, pick them up, bring them back, drop them. It was a lot of work.

UQ: Who organized all of that?

AK: Nobody. It is like somebody would write from back home, so and so's cousin is coming, can you take care of them - like that. That was one of the things . . . and students, not that many. I had probably about 3 or 4 of them . . . they were all fun. They

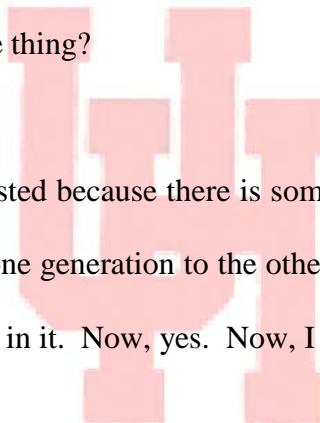
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used to paint my house. I used to give them money for that. Part-time jobs. Work as dishwashers, all kinds of things.

UQ: What is your political activity like? Are you involved in anything . . .

AK: Very nonpolitical. I mean, I am a Democrat anyway, if you want to . . . but that doesn't interest me.

UQ: Even in India? The same thing?



AK: Politics, now I am interested because there is some intelligentsia surfacing. Until now, it was all passed on from one generation to the other kind of thing. So, I was never interested in it. Never interested in it. Now, yes. Now, I am, at least, observing.

UQ: Would you recommend to other family members or friends in India migrate to the U.S. now?

AK: Not anymore. They won't come, even if I ask them. My son got married in Hawaii 2, 3 weeks ago, and a lot of people came from India. A couple of them came - youngsters. I mean, the guys are just beaming with money and comforts and everything. Why should they come here? I don't see any point. They won't come also. The charm of coming to the States is gone. That is for sure. In the younger generation.

UQ: Oh, in the younger generation you think?

AK: Oh, yes. At least from India. At least in my family. They will come on a visit. They can afford it. They can come to Hawaii. Pay their own money. Come and go. Unheard of things in those days, in the earlier days.

UQ: But the dream of studying in America and moving here, you see that that is diminishing?

AK: Beautiful institutions in India. They are very lovely places and recognized.

UQ: Is there anything else you wanted to add before we wrap anything up? I do want to ask one last question. Community activities. Aside from your videography, is there anything else that you would, if you looked back, you would say this is the thing I have helped out the most on?

AK: Patients. Heart patients. Every major organization that is here, either me or my wife have been on the boards or volunteered very heavily, and community activities to speak of - what more do you want than Anjali Center of Indian Performing Arts? 32 years of glorious service to the community. We put the Indian dance and music on the platform of diversity of Houston. Nobody else has done it. . . you can ask any

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organization, any theater of some value in the city - there is not a single person who doesn't know Rathna, Rathna's contributions to the art.

UQ: How long have you been doing this full time?

AK: 15 years. Video?

UQ: Not the video, working with the school.

AK: 32 years. So, that is the impact. I mean, I can give you a list of at least 30 organizations, arts oriented, to whom we have helped or we have participated in their activities or whom we have advised, you know. Quite a few people from places like Bay City, Galveston. A lot of schools come here for a little tour of this place when we arrange it properly, with a little lecture on Indian history and this and that and all that.

UQ: Field trips?

AK: Field trip like thing. So, it is an established organization. That, I think . . . I think are lives are fairly dedicated to something like that.

UQ: And you say "organization." In my mind, I think school. School of dance. What is the difference? You are obviously thinking more broadly. What else is [Anjali] . . .

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AK: No, I mean, cross-cultural programs, if you take other Indian organizations or Pakistani, for that matter, how many of them have done programs with, you know, Battery Dance Theater of New York? How many of them have presented English plays of Indian origin, bringing artists? How many of them have brought artists in residency from Canada, from London, England? I mean, very few. And then, we have started also recently something called Rising Stars of India program which is encouraging the upcoming artists, not only the established ones. Not that we pay much because we live on the grants given by the City of Houston plus our own contribution, but time spent arranging their programs and all that - it is a lot of work.

UQ: Could you end this tape with just maybe a one sentence description of what Anjali is?

AK: Anjali is the conduit between the East and the West in Texas, to a certain extent, for United States. It is a dedicated attempt to promote, present, propagate Indian performing arts.

UQ: All right. Thank you very much.

AK: Thank you.