A TEI Project

Interview of Gyanam Mahajan

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1.1. Session 1 (February 24, 2010)

Hampapur
: It is February 24, 2010. My name is Veena Hampapur, and I'm here with Professor Gyanam Mahajan in her office at UCLA. So thank you for agreeing to do this.

Mahajan
: My pleasure. I look forward to it.

Hampapur
: I'll be starting off with just a couple of basic questions. Where were you born?

Mahajan
: So I was born in a little town; I guess it's not so little. I was born in a town called Dhanbad in Bihar in India.

Hampapur
: And when were you born?

Mahajan
: I was born on April Fools' Day, so that's first of April in 1959.

Hampapur
: Okay. I'd like to start off the interview talking about your childhood and your family, so can you tell me a little bit about your family in India while growing up?

Mahajan
: Sure. So the first thing is, since I was born on April first, April Fools' Day is a big thing in India, so one of the first things they did was to name me Gyanam, which means knowledge, so they thought that since I was born on the first of April that my only redeeming feature would be by naming me appropriately they'd get out of the thing. So anyway, so that's how I got named Gyanam, which is actually not a very common name in the northern part of India, but

that's also because my mother was a South Indian.So I was born in Dhanbad, but then we moved almost immediately to a town called Patna, also in Bihar. But most of my life--I think I was six years old when we left Patna, so I have some memories from Patna, but mostly I grew up in Delhi. So we moved to New Delhi and all my schooling was in Delhi. In Patna I did go to I guess grade one and two I completed. Actually, grade three I completed in Patna, so I'm one of those who skipped kindergarten, so by the age of seven I think I was already in grade three.

Hampapur

So you mentioned your mom was from the South. How did your parents end up in Bihar?

Mahajan

So my father worked for the central government, so he would get posted from one place to another, so we moved around because of--the word used is transfer. So he'd be transferred from one place to another because he worked for the central government. He was in IRS, so that's how we were in Bihar for a while. Then he got transferred to Delhi, and he was transferred in between from Delhi, but we never moved. The family never moved after that, because my mother was working by then, and we just stayed in Delhi, so most of my life was spent in Delhi.

Hampapur

And where did your parents grow up?

Mahajan

So it's a kind of really very complicated thing, so bear with me. My mother was born in Rangoon in Burma and then after the war they moved back, I should say, to Tamil Nadu, so her family was from Madras presidency, but her father--so my grandfather had a--he started a college in Rangoon and so he used to run the college in Rangoon, but because of the war they came back to Madras area, and he tried to get his business going again, but it was really difficult. But they were financially, they were very, very wealthy in Rangoon, so they had to leave everything behind and come back to Madras, where they were okay because they had some land and something, but they were okay.So she came back to Madras, but for her studies she left Madras and came to the North, and at that time the best university was BHU, Banaras Hindu University in Banaras. So she came all the way out, a young South Indian girl, a Tamilian girl who came to Banaras and to university for her studies. So she did her B.S., which is Bachelor of Science, from Banara Hindu University, and she went on to medical college. So she became a doctor, and this is, again, quite phenomenal in the sense that she was again a young girl from the South studying in the North, went to medical school in the North, and we're talking in the forties.

Hampapur

Wow.

Mahajan

Yes. And my father, his family is originally from Gujarat, but they moved to Banaras. My grandfather's father or grandfather moved from Gujarat. My grandfather's grandfather moved from Gujarat to Banaras, and my grandfather used to work for his highness, the maharaja of Banaras. He was his, something like a prime minister or someone, or actually so--I don't know that they call them. I mean, he used to take care of the finances, and he was the--the type of family that we come from on my father's side, we're called Nagars, and Nagars are big on education and accounts and things like that.So my father grew up in Banaras and that's where he met my mother, at BHU, so they come from totally different families, and again, we're talking in the forties. They kind of knew each other in Banaras, but then my mother went for her medical school to a different town called Agra in Uttar Pradesh, and my father finished his M.S., which is master's in science, and he got a job to teach in Agra. They kind of didn't know this, and when he was walking down the college one day, he saw my mother again, so we find it a very cute story. They met again and they said, "Oh, you're here?" And she said, "You're here?" And they then got married, despite the fact that they come from very different families. It wasn't an arranged marriage, and again, in the forties, so in some sense nothing typical about my story. On the other hand, I'm sure there are many people like me.

Hampapur

Okay. Was it an issue for them to get married, since they were from different backgrounds in India?

Mahajan

Yes, it was a major issue. So I think my mother's side were slightly more educated. Well, no, my father's side is educated too, but my mother's side--they went to Tirupati to get married, and my mother's side did come for the wedding, whereas no one came from my father's side for the wedding. And Nagars, my father's side, they're very conscious of this label, the Nagar label, so it went way beyond just caste and a non-arranged marriage. My mother was a Brahmin, but she was a South Indian Iyer Brahmin, whereas my father's side, not only do they have this whole big thing, or had this whole big thing about being a Brahmin, but Nagar Brahmin. So in their family it was, even if someone was from the North and a Brahmin, it wasn't enough. You had to be a Nagar Brahmin.So I'm not quite sure if what they were reacting against was not just that it was a non-arranged marriage, but the fact that my mother was not a Nagar was a big deal. So none of them came, and it took them many years to forgive my parents. In a few years, I mean, they were okay, but we did go through a period where we used to have people visit us and initially, like, they wouldn't eat in the regular things that we ate in. We would have to serve them

tea or whatever in silver cups, because the other things were, quote, unquote, "contaminated." And then later on--earlier like they would drink only milk in silver classes, which we as kids used to find kind of funny. I was too young, I mean, so some of it is just stories and anecdotes that I have heard, but even by the time that I was growing up and I have memories of this, we used to have people, relatives from my father's side, come and say--they would eat everything and then they would tell my parents, "Could you please not tell anyone that we ate here or that we had dinner with you? Don't share this." And like, yes, who cares.My mother kind of never cared, but they were very, very conscious of this whole Nagar thing, and one of my earliest memories of becoming conscious that I was from a mixed home--so it's going way beyond caste. But I remember attending a wedding when I was, maybe I was seven or eight or something, and some of us were served food separately from everyone else. So that was the first time when I became conscious that I was different. So it's kind of interesting that I was in India and I compare immigrant stories, but I was always different. Even within India I was different and I was the other.On the other hand, I mean, mostly very happy childhood, no unpleasant memories. Even with the relatives, no specific problems or anything. They came to our houses. I don't think there was ever a summer when we didn't have guests, so we were almost never able to go anywhere, because we always had guests. We would have something like up to sixteen to twenty people every summer. At the same time, I remember once we were like sixteen people. My grandmother and my youngest uncle would spend all their--every summer they would spend their summer break with us. My grandmother would travel between her different sons, so summer, since my youngest uncle is only two years older than me, so we got along great, so they would always spend the summer with us.

Hampapur

So were you close to your extended family, then?

Mahajan

Oh, extremely close, especially on my father's side. My mother's side, they didn't visit as much from Madras, but from my father's side constantly we had a whole stream of people coming to Delhi. We were the only people in Delhi, so anyone--people used to come from Banaras or from Calcutta, and we have some relatives in Udaipur. So anyone traveling anywhere, Delhi was the hub, and so they'd go through, so we always had guests. Or they'd come to spend their summer in Delhi, and my father's sisters--so he came from a big extended family, and they didn't really differentiate between, quote, unquote, "real sisters" and the cousins. In fact, some of his brothers, he's closer to people who were closer to him in age than real brothers who might be more distant in age.

Hampapur

Right.

Mahajan

So, and we were not conscious of whether these, especially the aunts, the brothers--my father had this responsibility of paying for their ticket and bringing them over for vacations, and so we constantly had people. I also had my cousins, so we're talking like second or third cousins, but again, we weren't conscious of this at all. Some of them went to study in a different town, like I have two or three cousins who grew up in Udaipur, but they went to engineering college in Allahabad or in Bhopal and all, so they would just go through Delhi and if they had a shorter break then from their college, they'd just come up to Delhi and not even go to Udaipur, so they would spend their--if there wasn't enough time, they'd spend their time with us. In any case, Delhi was a very attractive place for young people, so, yes, I have these memories of a very full house, very loud and always full of fun.

Hampapur

Okay. So backtracking a little bit to when you were a small child in Bihar, do you have any memories from those days?

Mahajan

I remember a little bit from Patna. I mean, we had a compound where I grew up. It was what you could call today a duplex, so it was a big house and we had half the house, and another family had the other half. Again, this is, I guess, a very typical Indian thing, but they're like relatives, they're like family, and so this uncle, we considered him to be my father's older brother or something. They are Biharis, so very different from--well, there is no us, because my mother was different from my father, but anyway, so they were a third factor, third type of ethnicity, etc. But we were very, very close to them and so I have very strong memories of them, also fed in by the fact that we've maintained contact over the years, so you tend to, you know, the lines get blurred. I mean, I'm not sure if it is real memories from Patna or because I've known them all my life.And I have memories of my first school that I went to. Again, anecdotes get repeated, being repeated, so I'm not sure if it's a false memory or a real memory, but I do remember my first day of school, and I did not like it. I remember that. And I remember the main school that I started attending, which is St. Joseph's Convent, and so some of my earliest memories are--so it was a Catholic school and we had nuns teaching us, and some of them were indeed very, very strict. But I remember this mother who used to be in the bus that used to come, the school bus that used to come to pick us up. They used to have one faculty member, the one teacher in charge of the bus. So that mother could never pronounce my name, so she used to call me Gynum or something, and so once again, this is growing up in India with a fairly Indian name, but even then people couldn't pronounce my name. So here, I mean, it's not a big deal for me if people can't pronounce my name. I'm used to it ever since I was five years

old. It doesn't matter. It's not a big deal.So I do remember, and I remember the church I used to attend at the school, and I remember, I have this really very strong memory. One day I forgot to take my lunch, and I remember sitting in a corner and a sister asked me what happened, and I have this memory, she took me into her office and she gave me--I still remember--she gave me a slice of plain cake, and she gave me a banana, so I have these weird memories from there. But after that, I mean, most of my other memories are all from Delhi.

Hampapur

And do you have any brothers or sisters?

Mahajan

I have an older brother and an older sister, and that is the only stereotypical part of me. My brother is an engineer and my sister is a doctor. [laughs] So that much was very, very typical, I guess. They probably have better memories of Patna, because they're older than me. My sister is four years older than me, and my brother is six years older than me, so they are closer to each other in age than me. I was the youngest, and okay, another typical part is I'm the spoiled one. Everybody spoiled me and so I basically got away with a whole lot of stuff that they weren't allowed to do.

Hampapur

And at this time was your mother working?

Mahajan

So when we were in Patna, when we were young, she actually didn't take a steady job, but she used to work out of our home in Patna and then whenever--but nothing serious, like no fixed hours where she would sit in the clinic or something. And again, the pleasant memories are that any time she got two or three patients, we would go out for dinner that evening, so that's how we'd know. She'd say, "Oh, we're going out for dinner." I was like, "Oh, you got some patients today." It was just a room in the house, and things used to be open, like the door and all, which she stopped. After a while she started closing the door, because apparently one day she was giving a shot to a patient and my brother walked in and said--he made some joke about--in Hindi he said, "Zor se lagana," which meant, "Give it to him," like really stick it into him or something like that. And this patient, he panicked, so my mother started locking the door to her clinic. But, yes, it wasn't a regular thing.But when we moved to Delhi, Delhi was also a far more expansive place, and I think by then we were slightly older and certainly my brother was older, so my mother felt more free in being able to take up a good job. So when we moved to Delhi she took a job again with the government, and that's how we--I grew up in government quarter is what we called it, so these were allotted by the government, so we stayed in government quarters.

Hampapur

Okay. And was she working as a doctor?

Mahajan

She was working as a doctor in E.R. [emergency room] in a hospital, Saptajang Hospital, and then she moved to something called CGHS, which is Central Government Health Scheme. Talk about central government health scheme today. Anyway, so this is where all the government employees go for their healthcare, and these are small clinics in every neighborhood, and so for a while she worked at this E.R., and then she moved to these clinics, which the closest was just behind our house, so she would open the back door and just cross diagonally across and enter the back door of the clinic, so she was really close by.

Hampapur

Okay. So going back a minute to what you were saying about your parents being from different parts of India, do you feel like it affected your upbringing in any way, like linguistically, like practices at home, anything?

Mahajan

Yes. So I grew up with at least four languages. But one of the major impacts was that although my mother did learn Hindi, because we were in the North and it's difficult for her to be a doctor and communicate with her patients and all in English, but you can do a lot in English, and so for us the language at home was--I'm a really true bilingual between Hindi and English, which is standard English but with slightly different pronunciation. I'm very, very--I can give like native judgments and all in English. In fact, there are some spheres where we use just English. I mean, all argumentation ever took place, arguments and argumentation, everything happens in English, so newspaper at home, magazines at home, any serious discussion was in English, but otherwise we functioned in Hindi.And as you know, the schooling, of course, for most of us is completely in English. So I'm a native speaker of Hindi, because I learned--I grew up in Delhi area, so I'm a native speaker of Hindi, but learning how to read and write, I learned English reading and writing before I learned Hindi reading and writing, and all the kiddie books to anything else, everything was in English. So any Hindi material that I read was only for my Hindi classes. I had never read a novel in Hindi until I got to doing it in the Hindi class in grade, I don't know, nine or something I read some Hindi literature. But otherwise, I had never read any magazine or any articles, nothing, even though I was a voracious reader, but it was all English books.My mother was also a voracious reader, so we clearly shared this love of books, and in India what we used to do is the library was kind of far away, but we used to have a satellite, a mobile library stop by, so we used to get books from there, and sometimes we would actually bother to go to the library. But otherwise there were two main ways of getting your hands on a good book. One is your local bookstore has a

used-book section, so you buy the used book and then when you're done you sell it back and then you get another one for very little money difference. So it was almost like renting with a small amount of money, so that was one source.The other is, if it was some book that they didn't have, friends that I grew up with, we would each buy like a book or something, and then we'd share, and then we'd go and sell it. But then we would have access to four or five really good new books, and then again we'd pick up with the old books and classics and things like that. And anyone's birthday we tended to give each other books, because books were expensive. New books were expensive, as they are here too, right, so most of our reading in any case, the language part, most of it was in English.On the other hand, I'm fairly good in Gujarati, with the relatives visiting. But it's the U.P. [Uttar Pradesh] dialect of Gujarati, so it's slightly different features of--it's modified Gujarati. It's Gujarati mixed in with Hindi. And then I used to have a lot of relatives, Gujarati relatives from Calcutta. So I don't know, I have a pretty good understanding of Bangla, and then Gujarati, Hindi, mixed Bangla. And then sometimes my Tamilian relatives would visit, so I had a pretty okay comprehension of Tamil. We call them heritage learners today, like my kids that I teach here and my students that I teach here are called heritage learners, and I associate like that's what I was. I was a heritage learner of Gujarati, I was a heritage learner of Tamil, and then growing up in Delhi I am quite okay with Punjabi.And later on I started teaching in Gujarat, so it was easy for me to pick up Gujarati, real Gujarati or something. Although I must say I'm not a very good speaker, its comprehension is not bad, especially with Tamil. I'm okay with low-level comprehension. If they speak fast or something, it was and is a problem. The other thing was, most of my relatives, especially my Tamilian relatives, everybody spoke in English. So I think I had only one mami, one aunt who didn't speak English, but then if we spoke in English, she had no problem with her comprehension of English, so even that gets pushed aside. And since we were growing up in the North, where Tamil is made fun of, we never bothered to speak it, and today I regret it, and I feel really, really bad, and this is what I try to convey to my students here, that right now you may not think that Hindi-Urdu is a big deal, but you'll regret it later if you don't learn it right now.And I really feel bad. I mean, I had a great chance to be completely fluent in Tamil or Gujarati and all, and I'm not. I'm not completely fluent. In fact, Tamil is a problem. But I had the heritage connection definitely and a link to culture. I'm completely comfortable. Even at that time growing up I could just easily move from one to another, never had any problem with the foods or anything. In our home we ate all kinds of food, so we had typical North Indian food, U.P. food, we had Gujarati food, we had Tamilian food, we had Bihari food and no problem except that we were very strict vegetarians, so I grew up in a very strict

vegetarian home, to the extent that--you know, I was telling you about Nagars. They don't eat--no onions, no garlic, no turnip, no red lentils, so again it goes beyond some definition of vegetarianism. It's even within that there are certain foods that are not allowed. It's something to do with sattvic and tamasic foods, foods that supposedly arouse passion, although I can't see why garlic would arouse passion. Anyway, but so I grew up in a home never eating onions and garlic and all, until today I'm kind of okay with onions, but garlic is a problem for me. It's really tough, and I remain a very strict vegetarian.

Hampapur

Okay. You mentioned that speaking Tamil was made fun of. Can you explain that a little bit more?

Mahajan

Oh, yes. So in the North, first of all, any part of India, they love to make fun of people from a different region. So my Tamilian relatives used to call us Hindi-wallahs, and so they had their own set of jokes about us, but it was much milder, because the politics in India, certainly at that time and all, everything was controlled by the North. The major participants in policy making or politics or even at that time major bureaucracy and everything was controlled by these North Indians, so people always made fun of South Indians, and they would say that Tamil is like taking a glass, putting some stones in it and if you shake it up, that's what Tamil sounds like. I never understood that thing, but anyway, so they say [imitates sounds]. When you're young, I mean, yes, we would actually join in and make fun of Tamil, because you didn't--now I think back about it. At that time, I don't think I was even conscious of the fact of what I was doing, but I would make fun of Tamil also and Tamilians and their practices. I would make fun of their English. They speak English in a slightly different dialect. It's kind of funny. It's all Indian English, but one part of Indian English is making fun of another type of Indian English. It's kind of amusing.And Bollywood, right at that time there was a very famous movie called "Padosan," where the main source of humor is via this Tamilian that they're making fun of and the way he talks or behaves or his Tamilian-ness is made fun of. So everyone in the North, we tried to move away from that identity and tried to be a good North Indian.

Hampapur

Okay. So did you hide the fact that you're half Tamil, or did you not understand, or how did your peers treat you?

Mahajan

Well, I don't think I ever--if I went to school or something, aside from the fact that they'd find my name a bit weird, I mean, people wouldn't know, right? Sometimes they would. But I don't look South Indian, so it doesn't come up. It didn't come up. And the place where we were growing up, everybody knew that

my mother is a South Indian. I mean, she spoke Hindi with an accent, and she looked South Indian, which we can tell, by the way, in India. Like we're very good with this, "That's a South Indian, that's a this," and all. But maybe because she was a doctor and all, so there are these overriding factors. Everybody needed her. Everybody needed her help, so people would--she was also a very, very strong woman. She never had any problems with who she was, and I think it's also because of her social status or something, so, no, we never had any problems or never felt it or something. Yes, I don't think anyone was ever--no one ever made me conscious of the fact.

Hampapur

So going back to moving to Delhi, can you tell me about your neighborhood that you grew up in there?

Mahajan

In Delhi?

Hampapur

In Delhi, yes.

Mahajan

So when we first moved from Patna, we rented a house, and when we first came from Patna, we used to find Delhi very strange and different, and we weren't used to the Punjabi dialect of Hindi. They, of course, used to make fun of our Hindi, because we sounded like Bihari Hindi, so I tell you it's not just South Indians. Everyone makes fun of the other person. So we had a very sing-song Hindi drawl, if you'll believe it, and we would find Punjabi Hindi very crude, and we'd say, "Oh, my goodness. Look at the way they speak to the teacher," or something, because people were far more direct in our school, and they had a slightly different agreement pattern, which we used to find very weird in Hindi. They would use the aap word with the tum agreement, so they'd say things like, "Aap jao," and all, which sounded very rude to us.But we were there for a year in this rented house before we moved into government quarters and again very pleasant memories. It was close to our school, and we had a little dog, and that dog was a constant source of fun, because in the Delhi houses they had a separate entrance for someone who used to come to clean the toilet. There was a back entrance. And so the families and all, people used the front entrance to go upstairs, but there were a different set of stairs in the back going up to the bathroom and the toilet area and all. So our dog had discovered these stairs, and the dog would constantly go up. We didn't know about it, but we used to find like strange things and strange fruits and vegetables that my mother would say, "I never bought that. Where--?" We'd find these strange vegetables, and it turned out that the dog was sneaking upstairs and bringing these vegetables down from their basket, and they didn't like that.And we thought it was like the cutest little sweetest dog, but they were very scared of

this dog. People in India usually--dogs aren't as common as pets, and then so one day we heard the kids upstairs, like, crying, hysterical. They were yelling in Hindi. They were calling out to their mother that the dog bit us or something like that and all. And then my mother was like, "Oh, no," and she's like, "Go run up and get the dog." So I remember running up yelling at my dog to come down, and I entered this room and this little thing was sitting there wagging its tail, and these two stupid kids were up on the bed and they're like crying and they're like with their backs against the wall and it's like, "The dog bit us," and they seemed completely okay. It's like, "Where did he bite you?" Anyway, they were just terrified of the dog, and the dog somehow just loved them. Told the dog, "Let's go down," and he's like still wagging his tail and didn't want to come down.Anyway, so very pleasant memories of that place, but we weren't there for too long, just a year or so. And then we moved to these government quarters, which are arranged like a block, not the American block but a hollow block, so there are houses on three sides and there's a big yard, shared yard in the middle, huge big shared yard. So once we move there, you had just a constant stream of friends that--well, usually we played in the common yard. Only if it was very hot or something that we would be inside someone's house. Otherwise we would all collect. As soon as I came home from school, I'd dump my bag and I was out, and we used to play and play or chat, sit and chat and talk. It would be like late evening, and then apparently, I mean, it was really difficult to get me to go back home, and then so we'd sit there. Usually we used to play a lot. We used to play all kinds of games, and then we'd go home and do some homework and then eat and go to sleep.

Hampapur

So it sounds like you knew a lot of your neighbors and there were a lot of children around.

Mahajan

Oh, yes. Almost every home had, or every other home would have children. I would say the range was about-- within a five-year difference we'd all play together. So there were some people who were slightly older, some people who were slightly younger, or maybe four years or something like that, and we would be out playing every single day, something or the other. The neighbors were very, very close, and it's really like a very close community.For example, our house--you know, one very popular thing to do in India in the winters is they sit out in the sun. So the women who are at home at that time, they all get together and, for example, they'll shell peas or something, and they'll do it for each other also. So there'll be a big mound of peas, and they'll shell the peas, and when they're done with their own mound, they'll do someone else's mound. Or they're knitting sweaters or something like that, and they all sit together, and they'll have, like if it is oranges and all or peanuts, they'll shell peanuts and eat

with each other and something. Then they started this kittie system. They have this kittie where the women--most of them were actually stay-at-home moms. My mother was one of the few people who worked, but my mother worked at--her clinic was morning and evening, so she was home in the afternoon to interact with these women.So we had a west-facing home, so the sun would move, right, and these women would move with the sun. So by the time that my mother was home and free, the sun was on our patio. So these women would come over, even if my mother isn't there and even if we weren't there. I mean, it was just they were free to just sit on our patio. We call it verandah. They would sit in the verandah. So we knew our neighbors very well, and if my mother had to do emergency duty or something, then these neighbors would take care of me. Like the house would be open, there'd be someone there outside or inside or whatever, and if she didn't have time to make lunch for us, no problem. I wouldn't even know where the food came from, but there'd always be food and all.In fact, one of my neighbors knew far more about our kitchen than my mother did. Like she would come to borrow something and she'd say, "Oh, I need this kind of lentils," or something or the other, and then my mother would say, "Oh, I'm not sure. Let me check." And she'd say, "Oh, it's on the third shelf. It's on the right-hand-side corner." Like, "Oh, really? Okay." So she knew about everything. The neighbors were part of your growing up. It takes a village is what they say, right? So it really was like that. Everybody looked out for each other. My mother would do the same thing for them, in different ways.Like my mother was--we were one of the few people who had a car, and my mother would drive.

Hampapur

Oh, wow.

Mahajan

Yes. Again, it's very atypical. My father never learned how to drive. Till today he doesn't know how to drive the car. But my mother was the one to learn how to drive the car, because my father had a nine-to-five job and so he didn't need the car. It was my mother who had morning and evening things and then she was home in the afternoons, so any bank stuff or buying things, everything my mother took care of that. So she had the car and she used it, learned how to drive. But then she would drive the neighbors if they needed to go somewhere.Or one incident that I remember is our upstairs neighbor, her daughter was very late coming back from college, and she was really, really worried. So she came to my mother and she was almost in tears. She was very worried that, "My daughter hasn't come home," and all. So then my mother went looking for this girl and took this neighbor and then we went looking for this girl. We found her, and she and--again, being a neighbor like my mother, now I think back and my goodness, my mother--if you look at it from the point

of view here, she crossed a boundary, because she was the one yelling at the girl, like, "How dare you not inform? You're just hanging around here. How could you do that?" So she was yelling at this kid and calling her all kinds of names and things. That kid's real mother--I shouldn't say kid, because she was in college at that time, and her real mother was, maybe she was just too worried and just relieved to find her daughter, but she wasn't saying much, but my mother was. "You made me late for my this," and, "How stupid can you get?" So that's the kind of neighbors I had.Once I remember when my grandfather passed away, my father had gone first and then my mother went later. In the meantime, we had some unexpected guests arrive, and my neighbor literally took care of them. There was no one home, and they had to catch the train the same day or something, so they had come to our house only for a few--like half a day or something. But my father was at the office, something like that, and so my neighbor, she realized they had come from outside and they were from some other city, and so they took a shower and everything. They were fed. Not only that, when they were leaving to catch their train, she packed lunches for everyone and she took care of them. This was my uncle. In fact, he used to call that neighbor poodivali, the one who gave them the lunch, poodi, so he always called her, "How is poodivali?" So it was that kind of thing. People were really nice to each other.I don't even think that they thought that they were being nice or something. It was just assumed it was part of your responsibilities or your duties as a neighbor, and you just did these things for each other. And my mother, since she was a doctor, I mean any time of the day or night, people would just come, ring the doorbell. Even if it was like, oh, some child is not feeling well, so it may not even be something very serious. But no problem. My mother would reassure them. It was just quite amazing, I guess, very secure, and everybody felt very loved; wasn't a problem. We'd share our resources, like whoever had what. Because I was a kid and my friend, we were the same age, but my mother was the only one with an oven, which was kind of rare in India, right? So my friend and I would try our baking skills in my home, and we'd use this oven and create rock-hard cakes that no one could eat, but we had a great time doing it.And similarly, things that someone else had. For example, we didn't have a TV for very, very long. So there was one particular show that everybody used to look forward to. It was called "Chitra Har". It used to be every Wednesday at eight or something like that. So no problem, you just go to your neighbor's house. Or some special parades or something, we didn't have a TV, or if there was a really good movie on, I'd just go to my neighbor's house. And initially when TVs were really rare, this neighbor had put her TV in a window so that the whole verandah was full of other neighbors who would just do and sit and it was like communal TV watching. But we didn't get a TV until

very, very late, so even when a whole lot of people had TVs, so I'd just go and watch with them.

Hampapur

Were your neighbors longtime Delhi residents, or was it people like your family who had come from elsewhere?

Mahajan

They were all government servants, as we call them, so they all worked for the government. But I think my mother was the only woman to be allotted the house. They were all men who were working for the government, so most of them, I think, had been there, though not necessarily in those apartments. But most of them were--yes, I think most of them had been in Delhi for a long time. Yes. Although since it was working for the central government, there were all kinds of people, so it wasn't just Delhi-ites. So we had people from Uttar Pradesh and then there were Bengalis there. There was a Kashmiri upstairs and there were mixed in other senses, like there were Sikhs and Muslims and everybody, and most of them, of course, were Hindus. And everybody--there was one Christian family.So actually, festivals used to be a lot of fun, no matter what festival it was. Like for Eid our neighbor would give us samiya, and then for Christmas we used to get donuts, homemade donuts, so all these different--for Guru Purb, people would just share, and we had this really very strong community sense, community identity.

Hampapur

Okay. Did the kids in your neighborhood go to the same school that you attended?

Mahajan

Oh, no, actually. So most kids did go to private schools, which are called public schools in India, so the public schools in India are actually private schools. What you call public schools are called government schools. But government schools are really, really bad in India, so most people went to private schools, and we didn't have anyone else who went to the same private school as we did, but just similar, similar private schools.

Hampapur

So can you tell me about the school that you attended?

Mahajan

So I went to a school called the Frank Anthony Public School. So, see, again, it doesn't sound like a school in India, but it is, actually. For someone like me, there is nothing typical about India. So people have all these stereotypes or whatever impressions they have. Well, certainly it doesn't hold for me. So my school was run by so-called Anglo-Indians, so these are Britishers who stayed back after independence, and some of them were actually born in India. It depended on some of the older ones were indeed early on when I was in lower

grades, and if that person was older, then they would have been Britishers who had come to India. But by the time I got to eleventh grade and the younger Anglo-Indians were people who were born in India, but of mixed heritage.

Hampapur

Oh, so they were British and--

Mahajan

Maybe their parents were maybe all kinds of mixing, maybe one, a British parent or a British grandparent and an Indian parent--

Hampapur

I see.

Mahajan

--or two British parents who had moved to India but stayed on in India. So they were Anglo-Indians. They were Indians, but they were Anglo-Indians. There were some non-Anglo-Indian teachers at this school, but the school was founded by Mr. Frank Anthony, who was an Anglo-Indian and a member of parliament. But he was a member of Rajya Sabha, which is--you know House of Lords? So it's a similar system. So Rajya Sabha had not elected representatives, but representatives put in there for other reasons, and he was the Anglo-Indian representative, so he was chosen by the government to represent Anglo-Indians.So he started this school and so most of the people hired there were Anglo-Indians, but we did have some non-Anglo-Indian teachers. They were mostly, I guess, people who taught Hindi or Sanskrit or something like that. Otherwise, everyone else--so my teachers were--the principal was Mr. Mare, and my favorite teacher, and I was her pet, her name was Mrs. Brave, yes. And so I grew up with these, you know--her name was Dora Pansy Brave, and Mr. Mare, and then Mr. Kennedy was the vice principal, so they all had these--I don't know. I mean, one wouldn't associate these names with India or Indians.But then for someone like me, see, as we talk later about my transition here, there's very little transition for me, right, whether it is names or this identity or language or different dialects or looking different or something, I mean, I've always had, like, short hair or something, or the status of women or something, it has always been like that for me. I had a very strong mother, so this whole name thing also. All my teachers were--and they wore dresses, so they didn't wear--some of them wore saris, but it was nothing to notice or something. Some of them wore saris, some of them wore dresses, and some of them were Christians, but then some of them, like the Hindi teachers and all, were non-Christians, and there were some Sikhs.On the other hand, come to think of it, maybe I don't know of a Muslim teacher, but I had friends at school who were Muslims, but much fewer. Maybe we'll get into it later. It's probably linked to economic class. So I went to a school with usually very wealthy people, and the school was--so we learned the Lord's Prayer and

things like that, so I'm very comfortable. We didn't have a Bible period, but then we had something called moral science. Every Indian school has a period called moral science. Anyway, from there we would read stories from the Bible and then so our morals and ethics and all the questions raised in this moral science period were a combination of different cultures and different religions. So they would pick up myths and stories from any culture and any religious background, it didn't matter.So it was in some sense a very broad-based wonderful education, very happy times, had a lot of fun. I was heavily into something called elocution, which is you memorize whole passages and go and recite it and something, so I won a lot of prizes in elocution. I won a lot of prizes in debating. I used to debate a lot, and then we had two kinds of debates. One were the prepared kind, and the other was ex tempore, so they'd just give you a topic and you have to speak, and I was pretty good in debating. We had houses, like Harry Potter, so we had four houses and I was house captain and so very, very happy and wonderful productive school, almost all just pleasant memories.I was also very lucky because I went to the same school as my brother and my sister, and they were just excellent students, so I got by with doing very little, because some of their aura was passed on to me, so I was kind of lucky. They weren't as tough on me. I think I had a whole lot of teachers who I got along great with.One of my favorite stories is there was this dreaded Hindi teacher. All Hindi teachers were very, very strict, and everyone was very scared of them. But I had this Hindi teacher who was an especial terror. I mean he was very strict, and at that time, before they passed laws which they now have, they used to hit students and all. Anyway, this person was widely known as being a very mean a very strict teacher, and when I started teaching Hindi here, one day in my classes I was just talking about how Hindi teachers are hated in India, and I was telling them how I was actually a linguist with a Ph.D. in linguistics, and Hindi isn't how I got where I was, and something-something. I was making fun of something. I mean, I was actually trying to encourage them to do Hindi for the sake of doing Hindi and all, and then I mentioned that I wasn't one of these teachers, and then I happened to mention the name of my school. So I said, "I'm from Frank Anthony," or something, and I went home and I opened my e-mail, and I had an e-mail from a student from the class, who turned out to be the grandson of this Hindi teacher. It was unbelievable. So he said that after class he went and called his grandfather, and his grandfather knew me by my name. [laughter] It was so funny. It was freakish. Then he came to see me the next day and he said, "You know what? He's changed a lot." [laughs] I never in my dreams expected that someone would actually know who I was talking about. And he said that, "He's actually changed a lot, and he really wants to see you," and all. I still maintain contact with him. Anyway, it was kind of strange.But my school was--my principal, again, he was a terror until he

took a sabbatical of one year, and then he came back and he was a totally different person, and everybody was wondering like what happened. He'd actually come to this country on, I don't know, a Fulbright or something like that, for one year, and he went back and he was a totally different person. So I think he learned from the American education system that you're not supposed to hit your kids. We used to have caning in our school, which is they have a thin cane and if you did something, they would hit you with that cane; not the girls. The girls didn't get caned, but the girls were given other punishment.I used to talk a lot. So we used to have assembly every single day, and then we used to walk, the class would walk in twos up to their classroom, from the assembly back to their classroom. You were supposed to walk in this file of two, and you would maintain that order. You were supposed to be very quiet, and, of course, I couldn't keep quiet. So I remember I was like talking and laughing, and then suddenly I felt this stinging sensation behind my ear. I had just gotten clipped behind my ear by my principal. Anyway, so for girls they used to do that. They used to clip you or something like that.But anyway, he changed after he visited this country, so my association with America started a long time ago. But it was a really good school. We had good labs, good lab assistants, and we were tracked, very typical Indian system where at the end of eighth grade, depending on your scores they placed you into sciences or into arts. I had made it into the sciences, and then they give you a choice about whether you wanted to take the engineering track or the medical track, and the third choice was arts, and that was it. I mean, you had no choice--you never thought about what do I want to do or something. It's just that if you were good enough, you just got tracked into the sciences and that was it. You wouldn't dream of being good in your studies and going into the arts, just did not happen. So there was just no question involved, either on your side or your parents' side. Nobody ever thought about what are you going to do.So you got tracked into the sciences. Then you had the choice, do you want to go into the physics, chemistry, math, PCM, physics-chemistry-math track, or did you want PCB, which is physics, chemistry, biology. Then they gave you a choice with the level of math you wanted to do if you went into the PCB track. You did have to do some math for med school, but if you wanted to go into engineering, you had to do higher math, but you didn't need to do any biology. So I actually went into a combined track where I did both higher math and biology, so keeping your options open. And since my scores were good enough, they let you do it. So I never discussed, or my parents never raised any question, because, you know, you're tracked, you're okay. As long as you're there and you made it to the science track, that was all that mattered, so that was basically my schooling.I did everything that was offered to me, so I wrote for the school magazine. I wasn't very good in sports, so I didn't have any stamina for running

and all. However, at our school they divided you up into divisions depending on your height and weight, not by grades. So I was in eleventh grade, but I was a real scrawny kid. I was stick thin and I was very short, so I got placed into some division where I was competing with like sixth graders and seventh graders or something, because otherwise I was really terrible in sports. I really couldn't run for more than a small distance and all. But since I got put with these sixth and seventh graders or something like that, I actually won a prize in javelin throwing, of all things. So I had pretty good upper-arm strength, apparently, and I was probably the only one whose javelin kind of went in somewhat of a straight line, because the others had no practice at all with the javelin. Well, neither did I, except that my javelin went straight, and so I ended up getting first prize, and it became a joke in the family. They couldn't get over it. Everybody would laugh. Anyway, I got a first prize in javelin.I got a prize in--I was the best debater at school. I was the best in elocution contests. I was the house captain. House captain gets to lead the marching squad. And we had this very weird British-type sports and education, etc., or the whole school was very British-type activities. So we had marching squads, and as house captain I was head of the marching squad. I'm laughing right now, because it's a joke. I was really, really bad in sports. But you know, in marching, big deal. And I had a really loud voice. I've always had a very loud voice, so I used to train my team in marching, which basically meant you went, "Left, right, left, left," or something. Anyway, so we won the first prize. My team got the first prize in the marching thing, so slowly all these things--and I was a good student. I wasn't the best student, but I always made sure that I did the minimum possible to make it to that she's a good student.So in the end, I ended up getting the award for most outstanding student of the year. So I have all these--my daughter looks at these things and she just laughs, that how can you be like the most outstanding student, how could you be good in sports, and how could you do all these things? But again, I was in the school play. I did everything possible, and some of my happiest years were at my school. I had lots of friends. I was well known, and I had a lot of fun.

Hampapur

I'll pause it.[End of interview]

1.2. Session 2 (March 1, 2010)

Hampapur

This is Veena Hampapur here again with Gyanam Mahajan. So last time we ended up talking about your tracks in school and how you ended up doing a joint math and science track because your grades were good enough. Yes, so I

was wondering if you could tell me where you went from there in terms of your studies.

Mahajan

All right. So as I said, it's not a matter of, like, choosing. It's just done by your grades, and so nobody puts any thought into it. So my grades were okay, so I went into the math and science track. But once I completed high school, I went into economics, because the choices basically are that you become a doctor or you become an engineer or you go into what's called IAS and IPS and that branch. It's civil services, working for the government, but very high bureaucratic jobs. You take a set of exams for those, so you can do your undergraduate work in anything. So then I joined economics honors, because we didn't actually have--we don't have linguistics at the undergraduate level, or didn't have it at that time.So I did my economics honors and, well, two things happened. One, I found out that I wasn't specific enough for economics. I would like go off on these rants, trying to figure out so more like policy, which is not really a choice in India, rather than economic theory, etc. And the other thing is I started reading a little bit about [Noam] Chomsky, some of his political things and some of his linguistic things, and I knew someone who was doing linguistics at Delhi University, and he was visiting the United States as part of his graduate work or something, and I found it very fascinating to listen about or come to know about linguistics. It just sounded something extremely interesting to do.And my sister's a doctor, and my brother's an engineer, so they had kind of satisfied the typical Indian tracks for my parents, and I was the youngest in the family, so by my time I think that pressure was off, both on them and on the kids, because they had a daughter who was a doctor and a son who was an engineer, and so I think no one ever put any pressure on me. So after I finished my undergraduate work in economics, I went to Department of Linguistics at Delhi University.

Hampapur

So just to clarify, when you entered college it was your decision to go into economics? Or was that something you talked about with your parents?

Mahajan

No, it was actually my decision, because I didn't want to go into medicine. I think I was--you know, up till then I'd been kind of cruising in my classes. I think I might have mentioned I was a good student, but I wasn't a very hard-working student, and so I'd been cruising throughout like my high school and all. And then later on in college, I realized you have to actually put in work, and I just wasn't ready for--I don't think I could have put in the work needed to become a doctor. I had seen how much my sister worked, and I don't think I had that kind of math skills and the diligence to become an engineer like my brother, so I think by that time I was--and the other thing was, I was a very

good debater and all.So I loved to talk, and language was a big thing, and even in my undergraduate college I ran for the student council, so I loved that I won. I was on the, what do they call it, student government or whatever. So I used to love giving speeches and doing these kinds of activities, and I think that's how I realized that I wasn't suited to be--and I feel today that had I put in work, perhaps I would have gone in that direction, but then I'm kind of happy that I ended up where I did. So I started looking into different things to do, and that's how I got into linguistics.And once I joined the Department of Linguistics, at that time we started off in linguistics at the postgraduate level, so it's almost like a clean start for everybody coming in, and I was very good in linguistics, and so it was fun, found it very, very interesting, did well in linguistics, and kind of realized I had found my calling. It was a very good experience.

Hampapur

Going back to what you said about Chomsky, did you read him in school, or did that go with--I know you mentioned in our last session you really liked reading a lot, so--

Mahajan

Yes, but you know, I used to read fiction and not really nonfiction things. I was slightly what I would call an aware person politically or socially, but nothing like some of the kids here, because in India you're just steered into your tracks, and you do your studies and you do well in your studies, and you don't really read nonfiction not related to your field. I mean, you don't read people that I now love to read or people that I encourage my daughter to read, even though she's in high school. Like she has a government and politics class and things like that. We didn't have things like that. You did my math and science, and our family was a little bit more conscious of political development, etc.It was also the time when emergency was imposed in India, and the so-called Janata Party came into power after the emergency, so Indira Gandhi had clamped down on the country and basic rights were taken away, and freedom was threatened. No, I'm making it up, but anyway, but so we used to talk about these things in our family, and when some of the Janata Party leaders--at that time there was someone called Jayaprakash Narayan. We used to actually go out to see these people, or if they were giving smaller speeches somewhere, if it was accessible, we would go. I remember when they came into power in 1977, we all went to Rajghat where all these leaders had come, and I got to see all these people at that time, some people who I think are really vile people today. I think that some of them are really bad people. But at that time--Jayaprakash Narayan, I still respect him, and there were others at that time that we were conscious enough to kind of go and participate in history being made in India.

Hampapur

And when you say we, do you mean you and your parents and siblings?

Mahajan

Yes, that's right. I went with my parents and my brother and my sister, and we went to Rajghat. It was very crowded; that's what I remember. But I mean, I remember seeing all these people.

Hampapur

Do you have any specific memories from those times, anything that stands out to you?

Mahajan

So I know that during the emergency that we were discouraged from speaking out, and so I remember those times in 1977, and I think that's why when Janata Party won, then we were all celebrating in our own way. There were silly things like chasing Coca-Cola out of the country, and the Indian cola came in. There was Thumbs Up became really popular, and there was Campa Cola, so it was considered patriotic not to drink Coca-Cola and to promote these brands that were Indian colas.The other thing I remember is I guess from discussions is how the press was more free and all, and just at that time probably I didn't really fully understand what one meant by that. But there was something in the air, and I remember repeating things I'd heard at home. For example, when Janata Party came into power, I remember we used to have--one of our neighbors was actually the auntie, the woman, her brother was a congress member of parliament. But when Janata Party won, they actually put lit candles in their house. So I remember asking my friend, "Wait a minute. Your mama, your uncle is a congress M.P., member of parliament. Why are you celebrating? Didn't he lose?" And she said, "Yeah, you know, but we're just scared of persecution, so we thought we'd put this." And I had remembered repeating what I had heard in my home, which was that, "Oh, this is the difference between congress and Janata Party, you see. Congress and Indira Gandhi did things like persecuting people for not supporting her. That's the difference. Janata Party is the people's party. You don't need to be afraid." I mean, now I think back, and I was probably repeating a different type of propaganda.

Hampapur

Right. And you're still pretty young at that time.

Mahajan

I was, yes. I was about seventeen or something, so, yes, kind of young but at the same time old enough. But now I think back and realize that on the one hand, I think I am politically or whatever, slightly more conscious or I read more today because of my childhood and at least some introduction to involvement, if not direct activism, but some involvement or reading. I remember my brother telling me that by reading and participating, you can contribute in the same way as direct activism. I fell for it then, and I still believe that, although I'm at a university and I'm not an activist. But I still read

a lot and I still talk to my students a lot, so that thing is ingrained in me that by reading and being informed and discussing issues and educating younger people about it and encouraging them to read, that there is a contribution to be made. I think that part stayed with me. And at the same time, I realize that how shallow in some sense my knowledge was, and it was mostly a repetition of what I had heard at home. It's both useful and dangerous.

Hampapur

Okay. So going back to your graduate school and getting into linguistics, you mentioned you thought you had found your thing. What did you enjoy about it?

Mahajan

Well, part of the thing, I think, was that going to a postgraduate department in any case was different. There were no undergraduate students there, so the level of instruction, the involvement, the structure of the classes, everything was very different. Often we had seminars and things like that, and far more participation was encouraged between the faculty and the students, and the faculty were just so different. They were very relaxed, and they were all very well known in the world, so you could find their names on international journal articles and all, so you realized that these people were very good in their fields, and it gave you a sense of confidence to be able to interact with them.We always had guest lecturers, people coming from this country, where linguistics was indeed most developed here, and being able to interact intellectually was very interesting, something one couldn't have done in economics and all. It could also be that I had moved on as a postgraduate student, so it gave me great confidence to be able to participate. I think that was the most exciting thing. And as I said, the faculty was very, very nice, and it felt like a family. They'd invite you to their homes for occasions, people getting together, or if they had a guest lecturer they would hold dinners and they'd invite some students also, so it was that way very interesting.

Hampapur

So what were you goals in being in school? Did you want to teach one day? Were you just enjoying the learning experience? Did you have any future plans at that time?

Mahajan

No. I hadn't thought so much about a career in teaching, but I knew that I'd be, of course, working, and I still hadn't given up on taking the civil services exams, as we called it, because you could still do it with any subject. But I thought I would just try out linguistics for a little while, enjoy the university. I had finished both my high school and my undergraduate work slightly early. I finished high school, I was barely sixteen when I finished high school, and by the time I had finished my undergraduate work, I was barely nineteen. So kind of I knew that I had time. So that's why I think I wasn't quite clear what I would

do, but I had many options before me. But I knew that I'd be fine, never really worried too much, and I don't think my parents ever worried too much. They were always faced with, "What is linguistics?" which they themselves, they never knew how to answer others who were saying, "What is linguistics?"One of my father's colleagues used to say, "What is she doing? What is linguistics?" and something. He used to make fun of me, like, "What are you going to do with this?" They were always fascinated that I had chosen something so different. But I don't think I ever heard my parents ever worry about it, or they weren't distressed or anything. Again, I think that's because I was the youngest and they did have their required quota of the doctor and the engineer, so I was kind of off the hook. It was okay. And they knew--I mean, I was a real rebel. I was quite a handful. So again, at the same time I'm sure they knew that I'd be okay and didn't really worry.

Hampapur

So did you go on to do your Ph.D. in India, then?

Mahajan

That's right. So I completed my master's in linguistics, and then I did a master of philosophy in linguistics. So in India, before you join the Ph.D. program, you need to have this M.Phil. degree, master of philosophy, in the subject that you're going to do your Ph.D. in. So I, after finishing master's, moved on to M.Phil., and then as soon as I finished M.Phil., I joined the Ph.D. program.But then I got a job to teach as a lecturer in South Gujarat University, and actually, the parallel story is that Anoop [Mahajan], my husband, he was also a linguistics student, and that's where we met, in the master's program. And both Anoop and I got jobs together in the South Gujarat University, so we left Delhi. We were registered Ph.D. students, but we had done our required courses and then so we moved to South Gujarat University, and we started teaching there, and we got married in Gujarat while we were teaching there.And then--so I'm going to jump to how I came here--

Hampapur

Sure.

Mahajan

--which is that we attended a series of lectures by a very, very famous linguist. His name is Richard Kayne. There's Chomsky and then there's Richard Kayne, and Richard Kayne was giving a series of lectures on current syntax in Hyderabad, and so we had gone to attend his lectures, got talking to him and realized that there was a whole fascinating world of current linguistics, where especially syntax was progressing or changing at a very rapid pace, and it felt as if we were behind or out of touch with the new changes coming about in modern syntax and linguistics. Phonology also was changing very fast. There was a different way of looking at syntax and phonology and all.So we were

talking to him, and he had moved to Paris, Paris VIII, University of Paris VIII at Saint-Denis, and he was teaching there, and we became very interested in working with him. So we applied for some--my husband applied for a French fellowship, and then we went to France to work with Richard Kayne, and there were a couple of other very well-known people working in France on Chomskian linguistics or generative linguistics. So we started our work there. Over there, before you do a Ph.D. you have to get a [unclear]. It's a diploma that you do before you join the Ph.D. program, so we both completed our [unclear] in Paris, University of Paris at Saint-Denis.And then Richard Kayne moved, and he joined MIT, so we were kind of left there. We didn't know if we wanted to continue there without Richie there. There were a couple of very good people there, but we really wanted to work with him, and then so he said, "Well, why don't you move to the U.S.?" Then we applied to programs here, but he did say that, "For both of you to end up in the same place will be really tough." Then so he suggested that, "You apply here and you apply there." By that time sort of my interests were shifting from syntax to phonology. In any case, I think it's just too boring for both husband and wife to be doing the same thing, so Anoop, my husband, did go to MIT to work in syntax, and then I came to this country.I actually came to USC [University of Southern California] first and I joined the Ph.D. program. Again, very fascinating because first of all we just thought, oh, it's the same country, but it's really, really far away. Even then, I mean, the department here was very well known, so the linguistics part was great and I had full support and everything, so financial support. In fact, they hired me to teach English here, so my first day in this country or the first time that I entered this country and I come in and I joined the American Language Institute at USC, teaching English. I mean, they spoke to me on the phone and all, and our written English, it's, of course, pretty good. And as I said, I am a native speaker of Indian English, but it was kind of fun to teach ESL classes with a slightly different accent.Now, I was a linguist and I was a phonologist, so my accent was never really very heavy, or it wasn't really like Apu from the "Simpsons." I don't think anybody has an accent like that. But you know, I didn't sound like that, and I knew certain phonological rules of stress and all, but it was somewhere in between, something similar to what I have today, which is somewhere in between. It's not really American Standard English, but then on the other hand, I think I'm slightly more conscious than other Indians of stress patterns and certain pronunciation of "the" or whatever, because my linguistics helped me. But at the same time, I always find it quite amusing that I came in and I started teaching English here.I didn't really have a problem listening or comprehension of American English, except in interesting places like, I don't know, I think I came here in the first few days or something I ended up at McDonald's, which is a big thing if you come from India. At that time we

had no McDonald's in India and, I mean, I had grown up with the word and the history behind McDonald's and all. It always seemed like a very fascinating place. And in France people look down at--it's like American culture and uncouth people go to McDonald's. So when I came here, I remember going to McDonald's and ordering something. I'm a vegetarian, so I can't really eat much there, and at that time they didn't have veggie burgers and all, so I used to buy like fries or something, which I found out later is not really vegetarian.But when I came in here and I remember buying something there and this guy saying, "Fear to go?" and it took me forever and like I stared at him, and I knew my English was fine, but I didn't know "fear to go," it's like, fear? Why should I be afraid of him? He was saying, "For here or to go?" and you know how when they see that you don't understand, they just say it louder? He didn't change a thing. He just kept saying, "Fear to go? Fear to go?" and I was like standing there trying to parse his for here or to go. Even after I understood for here or to go, it really meant nothing to me. For here or to go? To go where? Who goes, what? It meant nothing, because we don't use the phrase to go. We say take away or something like that. We don't even say take out, we say take away, and he kept saying fear to go, and I think he asked me--I think I bought some Coke or something, and he said, "Diet?" And I used to be stick thin, and it's like, why is he asking me to diet? We didn't have two different versions. Today we do, but at that time we didn't have the light versions or the diet version.So it was kind of interesting and the fact that I was teaching English or American expressions that I didn't use myself was kind of funny.

Hampapur

How did your family feel about you I guess progressively moving further and further from home?

Mahajan

Yes. So there are many people in India who just are waiting to go to the United States or come out here, and my family was never one of those. I think some, like my brother thinks that--he takes that whole brain-drain thing very seriously, where he seriously believes that India spends so much money educating you, and then you leave and you go and you're a traitor to the country. I don't know if he's changed or not, maybe a little bit, but not much, and so I think most people were--some of them must have expected it, that--did I tell you this, that when I was young, you know how in India they look at your hands or your feet or something, and they had predicted that, "This girl will travel a lot." And at that time I had barely left Delhi ever, so I was like, "Going where?" and all, so it was kind of something that maybe I was looking forward to.But I'd lost my mother by that time, actually, unfortunately, so my father must have felt lonelier or something that his daughter was going so far away. But on the other hand, the typical Indian thing. I was already married by then,

so for them it's like, she's not going to be with us in any case, so they'll just come and visit, whether it is from one part of India or from outside. I don't think it mattered that much. And now we are very careful. We go back at least once a year, sometimes in between. We used to go back more than once a year when we could afford it. Now we can't. So I don't think--after a while, people didn't mind, and maybe they were--I know that my husband's parents were almost happy for us that they thought that--not almost happy; they were certainly happy for us, that they knew that this is what we wanted to do, and they think that we have a good life and we're happy, so they're definitely--both sides of the family were very happy about that fact.And then over the years everyone has come and visited us. Like my father came to visit, my sister and her family came, my brother and his family came, my husband's parents came a couple of times, and then unfortunately again, I lost my father-in-law. But my mother-in-law came, because we told her it's a change of spry for you, so she comes. We hope she'll come again and spend time away. So in that sense it's kind of nice, and my husband's brother and his family also visited. The kids--his son came out alone once and spent some time, so it's kind of nice for them also.My brother actually still isn't very fond of coming to this country, and now he actually has an opportunity to do so as part of his job, but he doesn't take up that opportunity. He'll pass it on to others, and he still doesn't like to come. But I think everybody else is--we've had cousins and all also coming, other relatives coming, so we're okay and they're okay.

Hampapur

And how did you feel about moving to the U.S.? Did you have any expectations, anything you were nervous about?

Mahajan

Well, I think one of the things was that since our primary thing was linguistics and so we were always--and we came out as students, both of us, so our expectations might have been different from certain other stereotypical cases. For example, when I read the description in "The Namesake" or something, where the wife wasn't working, didn't have her own set of friends or something, for us it was very different, right. I mean, we came as students. We knew a lot of the linguists and then when we came here, we both had a very healthy group of friends and a very different type of interaction, so I think we never dwelled on missing India or missing friends or something. I guess we missed our family, but then again, we'd already been married, so at least the two of us came out together.And although, like, USC was far away from MIT, so I spent a couple of really very--we were really torn during the fall semester was really tough, so I spent a few months really moping around. On the other hand, I was in an apartment with three other people. This was USC housing, and so you really didn't have--between the work and going back to the apartment and

dealing with your roommates, who were of different types, it was kind of interesting, so never really regretted it, or never felt--isn't that strange, never felt out of place, because every other person was similar.Financially, in India we were kind of well off, because you have your family things plus we had started earning, and when you come out you suddenly realize that it's tough, life is tough here. On the other hand, we were coming from France, so that had blunted the shock of like picking up a cauliflower and going, "Whoa, I can't afford this," or something. We were becoming used to it, and, of course, both of us had very good financial grants, so not just financial aid, because both of us had our tuition paid and so we had tuition waivers, plus we were each getting a pretty good fellowship and teaching assistantship and all, so we were kind of okay, and considering.Anyway, so after the fall semester, as soon as the winter break came around, my husband flew from MIT, and then we--oh, at MIT they have something called independent activities or something. So their school doesn't start until end of February or middle February or something like that, so he was here until then. And so it was a question. And then spring break I went over, and then his semester was over in whatever, May or something, mid-May, and he came back here. Then I was teaching the summer at American Language Institute, but we bought a car and then that's when you really get to know more about people and country and situations and everything.And by that time I had realized that it was too far away, so I completed my master's in one year, and I applied to Brandeis University, where we had the best people for phonology. This is where this new type of phonology, optimality theory, was coming up, and we had very famous people there, plus the proximity to the--

Mahajan

I don't exactly remember where I left off. But anyway, I moved to Brandeis. I knew I was moving. So we had a couple of friends from Delhi University who were graduate students at U Penn [University of Pennsylvania], so they also came to L.A. and then we drove across the country, because I was winding up from here, and then so the four of us, we packed into this small Toyota, and then we bought tents and we bought other camping gear, and we went driving across the country. That was just wonderful. It was a great experience, and I think that's how we got to know more about the difference between sort of city people and that the college town or the campus is very different from people outside the campus, which is very different. In certain parts of the town people are different, and you learn all these things very quickly, that there is a big amount of--there's separation that doesn't exist to this extent in Delhi.For example, in India you can have a really, what we call it posh colony [unclear], a pretty upper-middle-class or fancy neighborhood, and you can have slums right next to it, so you don't have these separated areas. Whereas here you realize very quickly how they sanitize certain areas and they're very exclusive, and

then there are these areas that you don't go to or you don't look under the freeway. You have such segregation, demarcation, exclusion or exclusive areas, and sort of you don't move between these boundaries. You stay within your wealth, which is very different in India. I mean, there are these--the demarcations, there's a continuum, and so I came from a pretty upper-middle-class family, again not in terms of money, but certainly we were very well educated and kind of well-to-do, but right next door or the person who comes to do your house, clean the house and all, you're constantly, like it's in your face, and you don't separate it out of your--you cannot separate it out of your life.Whereas here it was very easy to forget that when you're on the campus you watch out for certain things, but then you don't head towards certain areas of downtown. You come out to Santa Monica or something when you have spare time. When we started camping, you realized that the people who are camping with you are of a certain type. I don't think I have ever met another even Asian while camping, certainly not twenty-five years ago. You didn't see colored people like us camping, but people were very nice. People on campgrounds are totally different. We used to go to--sometimes it's really--by the time we got to the campgrounds it was getting late, and so you want to start your fire. It's kind of cool traveling in August and early September. But people will walk over and give you a log, a lit log to get your own fire going, and they'd ask you, "Where are you from?" and all. People were very, very pleasant, so it was a totally different way of getting to know other people and the country.And going through different states, aside from the physical geography changing, you could certainly notice things about states and people and as you moved from one campground to another, although it's always other travelers, people on the road. But still, you can find differences. Local farmers' market and produce being sold, you can tell a little bit the differences. People had told us certain routes and places to avoid, so we avoided the southern route and we took the northern route, and going to places that I had read about and heard about so much, like the Grand Canyon or something. It was kind of fascinating.

Hampapur

Okay. I just want to go back a little bit to when you first moved to L.A. Well, first of all, what year was it?

Mahajan

I came to L.A. in 1986.

Hampapur

Okay. And what were your initial impressions?

Mahajan

Well, see, most of what I knew about this country, you find out later that you know more about New York and the East Coast rather than L.A., and so you

come here and it looks very different from my image of what America looked like. There's something my brother says even today, like when he visits and he's like, "This is not America," or something. [laughs] I don't know what he means by that. But it looks totally different from everyone's image of what America looks like.So that, and I think I had no idea about the Hispanic influence. So it was kind of a pleasant surprise to discover that their foods and all had some similarity to ours. When I was at USC, when I went grocery shopping, people would walk up to me and ask me things in Spanish, because I look--I'm brown and so they would ask me things. It's kind of strange, but I used to be able to figure out what they were saying because of my French, so I'd go back to the Latin words and go, "Ah." But I didn't know how to respond, but I could figure out what they were asking so do it through sign language, tell them where to find something. But so this affinity, the affinity that I felt, brotherhood, sisterhood, with other brown people who were not Asians and not South Asians, but they were brown, they looked like me, they had foods that were similar, and people were mistaking me for them, but I wasn't one of them too, was kind of fun.At the same time, I remember I was a graduate student, went to the department, everybody's very pleasant and all. And then I attended some orientation meetings, and they told us, "Don't go to the library stacks alone. Don't walk out after five-thirty. Make sure you have someone with you. Don't stay alone in your--." They gave us office space, graduate student lounge. "Make sure that you're not working here alone, and if you need to go home after seven or something, call the campus police." So that was my first introduction to the threatening side or the terrible negatives to being a graduate student alone, sort of, because my husband wasn't here or something. It had never occurred to me that it would be this way, and it sounded very strange that they would tell a graduate student, "Don't go to the library," or something. It was something that--and they told you, like, "Before you approach your apartment, keep your keys ready," and things. It was very threatening to listen to all that. I wasn't used to it.Like in India it was never a problem. Crime in that sense was--and in Paris also we were told to avoid certain areas, which we would do in Delhi also after--we wouldn't be out too late or something, but not to this extent that USC gave me this introduction to life in a very different way and being constrained by that. I remember, I mean, like feeling this constraint upon you was not pleasant.

Hampapur

And at that time, in your experience, were people familiar with Indians or South Asians?

Mahajan

So around the campus, actually, they told us not to, especially the South Asians, they would tell them, "You be especially careful, because around USC

it is well known that Indians wear real gold." And so they said that there were a lot of muggings of Indian people, because Indian people carried--were stupid; no, they didn't say that. They said Indian people carry a lot of cash and that they wear real gold jewelry, the girls do, and that they're very--they react in a different way to muggings, which is that instead of yelling out or something, they tend to be complacent or they won't shout out for help, because they're embarrassed, or they won't report it because they're embarrassed, and they don't realize that they should be screaming and asking for help or something like that. So that was the thing about South Asians, and no, I don't think they were very familiar even on campus.I remember at that time wearing--during some orientation or something, wearing my salwar kameez and going for--this whole registration process was a mess again. I mean, it was something nobody explains very clearly. I entered this big gym and they tell you--you're just wondering, oh, my goodness. It was so chaotic, and this is for someone whose tuition and everything was covered, so thank god I didn't have to worry about the money thing. But even going and registering, taking care of all the various forms, and I don't know what all I had to get signed from who all. Like there was a separate health thing, there was another insurance thing, there was some, "Go to the bursar's office," and you keep wondering. They kept shunting you off from one place to another.But I remember finally making it to register for my classes, and I walked up to sign up for my classes, and I said, "Oh, I want to take such-and-such class," and the person there said, "Oh, hi. I'm Doug Pulleyblank," and my jaw nearly dropped, because he's a very, very well-known phonologist. I mean, I had read these people's books and articles, and I knew how famous he was, and he was just so humble, and he was so young, and he was just sitting there trying to help me. It was kind of very interesting to suddenly come across all these names and famous people and you realize that they're real people, and they're trying to help you, and they're saying things like, "Oh, we're very happy to have you here as our student." It was a very pleasant time, except a lot of bureaucratic nonsense to be dealt with.But I remember wearing my salwar kameez, and I don't think that there was anyone I met who didn't comment on the dress. I mean, they said something nice, but now I think back, it's like only because I was wearing the salwar kameez, and they're like, "Oh, is that your Indian dress?" You're trying to find out about what's the next form I have to fill out, and they're asking you about your dress. And, oh, I remember going up and saying, "Can you tell me where to go and how do I get to this place?" and this woman is like, "Oh, hi, honey. You want to know how to get there? I will tell you how to get there." So these were these Americanisms that I wasn't familiar with, like, didn't I just ask you how do I get there? It's like, "You want to know how to get there? I'll tell you how to get there. You look wonderful." It's like, come on! Then I realized that this is part

of the Californian thing of hello, how are you, and have a nice day, and people are smiling at you and telling you you're looking good and I'll tell you where to go, but let's just get it done already or something. Wasn't used to people putting in all these extra dialogues to kind of make you comfortable, but it ends up making you more uncomfortable, because you just want it done, and so it was interesting dealing with different people and different norms of politeness.Now I think back and I hope I didn't come across as rude or impolite, because when you come from India in France, same thing. You don't go, you don't keep smiling at people and all. They'll think you're crazy, you know? And France, of course, is a different kind of mess. But the people here were very open, but they take ten minutes to do something, but you'll get it done.I remember like from the airport also this, "Have a nice day," and you go, what? So I wasn't used to it at all. Took me a while to start saying it to other people, "You too." It was like, what is this you too? [laughter]

Hampapur

Did you ever venture out of the USC area, or did your studies keep you there for the most part?

Mahajan

Well, until I had a car, you basically couldn't do anything. When I first came here--in Paris we knew a UCLA student who was on EAP in Paris. He was in the American House, and we were in the Greek House. In Paris there's a Cité Universitaire where all the students stay, and the India House didn't have room for married people, so we were in the Greek House. I don't remember how we met him, but we got to know each other, and he--all I know, I mean, basically he was one of the few people we could talk to in English, so we used to go over to the American House, and I don't know how. He would come over, and he loved Indian food, so we used to cook for him and we got to know him quite well. He teaches at Berkeley now.Anyway, so when he found out that I was coming to USC, he was the one, he said, "You definitely go for it," and all that. His mother lived in Santa Monica, so they were really nice. I mean, now again I think back. See, coming from India I don't think I realized what a big deal it is, because in India anybody will do it for you. Like if you get to know someone and you're coming to a new city, if they're there, they'll come and pick you up, and that's--all the things that he did for me, he went way out of his way to make sure that I was kind of taken care of. So he came to pick me up from the airport. He took me to his mother's house, so I stayed with his mother for a few days before I got my USC housing, and so they were just incredible. But his mother lived in Santa Monica, and so I remember taking the bus, and it just basically went down Wilshire [Boulevard], but it took me something like, I don't know, three hours one way, and so that's how I got to kind of see the city and all.But they would come on weekends. He would come and he would--his girlfriend

was also with him, and then he would take me to the beach or something like that, or back to his mother's house on weekends or something. I really owe him so much, because he made me feel at home. Again, it's strange. When we were in Paris, this Greek House where we were, sometimes over the summer they would let out rooms to people if they had previous reservation and all.And I remember there was a pair of sisters who, they were Persians, but they were living in this country, so they were visiting from the United States, and one day we just happened to discover them sitting in the lobby. I don't know, again we started talking, and we said, "What happened?" And they're like, "Oh, we had booked our room until this, but our flight isn't until like next morning." So then again, it's such simple times. We just told them, "Oh, just come to our room," and they--although we had a studio, but then they slept in our main room, so I got to know them. And then they were kind of scared to go to the airport very early in the morning, so my husband went to drop them off in the public transportation, but they just felt better that he was coming with them.So I got to know them, and it turned out they were in Los Angeles. So every weekend, like they would also contact me, and they would take me to their home, and so I got absorbed into the different types of communities through all these initially very casual contact or destiny or fate or whatever, but then I got to see a little bit of the city. And then when I became good friends--my roommate was really, really nice, and then she had a car, and I don't know why, but she hated the grocery stores around USC. She would go all the way to Eagle Rock on Glendale and all, so then I'd drive with her.

Hampapur

Okay. And did you become involved in any sort of South Asian or Indian community here at that time?

Mahajan

So in the same apartment complex there were other graduate students, Indians, but a couple of things. I think one was that they were coming straight from India, and they were different. Also could be because I was already married and so they were younger than me, because I'd already taught in India, and I had been to France, and I was married, so I had a totally different frame of mind from the Desi community, the students on campus who were childish in some sense. I don't know how to put this, but their type of party or something was very different than from me, or my interests were very different. But there were some young girls that I kind of got along very well with, and I used to sometimes kind of--although they weren't that much younger than me, but I used to almost chaperone a few of them. They would request me, "Could you come," and something, so I would go with them. So I did know a lot of the kids.I hung out with people I liked, and there were a bunch of people, mostly engineering, girls who were in engineering, very, I think, nice kids.

Hampapur

Okay. So I guess you finished your degree on the East Coast then?

Mahajan

Yes. I moved to Brandeis and got my Ph.D. from Brandeis University.

Hampapur

Okay, and how did you end up back in California?

Mahajan

So when I was at Brandeis, I guess that was the time--I mean, one of the people who played a very important role or impacted my life in a very significant way is my, I can call her landlady. When we were in Brandeis, we were in Brandeis housing, which wasn't very pleasant, and we were going through the listings at MIT and we found this lady looking for a graduate student or couple. She had this huge property in Weston, which is a suburb of Boston, and she had her own house and then she had a small house. It used to be--she said it was a carriage house that she had converted, and she had made--it was a brand-new house in that sense. It was a small house, but totally redone with new things in it, and so she was looking for a couple who would stay in that house and then help her out. She had two young girls, and she was separated from her husband, and so she was holding interviews and she was selecting people, and we were just so lucky that she chose us.So that was our introduction to being comfortable in a very, very nice setting, suburban America. People are very different from us. I don't think there were any other colored people in the whole area. But then we found out what life is like in a small town, so we could go to the grocery store and just you can buy anything you like, and they know you, they have accounts set up, and you could do things that are unimaginable in bigger cities. She was just a wonderful girl. We still stay in touch, just a wonderful role model, very strong woman, very smart, intelligent, and brought up her daughters, very smart daughters. They did very well. And her interactions with us were, with me especially, were very, very--left a deep impact on me; respect her tremendously. Anyway, so from there--and actually, anybody who used to visit us, our friends and all who used to come over for dinner, they used to look at that place and they're like, "You do know that it's all downhill from here. You'll never be able to afford something like this on your own." But when my husband finished his Ph.D., he immediately got a job at U.W. Madison. So when we'd left Delhi, Delhi is supposed to be--it's colder than other places in India, so we used to say, "Oh, Delhi has really nice winters." But then we went to Paris and we said, "Aah, that wasn't cold. This is cold." Then we moved to Boston, we said, "Ah, Paris was nothing. This is cold." And then he gets to go to U.W. Madison, and, boy, University of Wisconsin, Madison, it was really, really, really cold there, and you'd see these huge big lakes. Actually, even in Boston the Charles River freezes, and it was

quite cold and windy, but Madison is like it's out in the open and it's a very small place and very cold.And then so he taught there for a year, and in the meantime I had finished my courses, and I had my daughter. Ilica [Mahajan-daughter] was born there, and then when my husband was offered a job here, he wanted to come here. At the same time, my thesis adviser moved from Brandeis to UC Irvine, so then it became kind of easy to move here, and so we moved to California. We'd had enough of the cold and all. And just being at USC, I mean the people, we really respect the diversity and the people and the culture and the weather and the universities. Even when I was at USC, we used to come over for colloquium and seminars and talks and all, so I loved the campus, and the area, of course, was better. When I was at USC, they were always talking about how USC was given the opportunity, this land, something like that. The history goes that they were offered this land. They were planning to build a university, USC over here, but they didn't follow through because they thought that much better. At that time, that was the nicer area, and actually, if you drive around that area, they have some beautiful old houses there. Anyway, so we used to laugh about that, and whenever we came out here we used to say, oh, my goodness, look at this area, look at the campus and all. So when my husband got a job offer here, he took it, and so we moved out here.

Hampapur

Okay. Had your impressions of Los Angeles changed when you came back?

Mahajan

Well, so we came back. When I was here, like I was a really, really poor student. Again, it's not fair to say that. Now I try to put it in context. At that time I clearly felt that way, but now putting it in context, actually I wasn't that bad off. I mean, I had tuition waivers and I had scholarships and everything. But after the life in Boston in that house, when we came out here, this whole area is so expensive that faculty, young faculty cannot really afford to live anywhere close to this place, so that way it was a big step down for us.And you also get comfortable, like in Boston we'd been there for a while, so the whole circle of friends or whatever, and this landlady of mine, I mean, in so many ways she was responsible for who I was, and my daughter was born there, and I didn't have any family there, so she was the one to drive me to the hospital. In fact, my husband wasn't there when I had to go to the hospital. She was again--she's just an amazing person. My husband actually was flying back, but he was going to come back the next day, or actually the day that I--wait. He was going to come back the next day, but the day before I went into labor, so she had to drive me to the hospital and then I tried to contact my husband, but he was already flying. And she called--we didn't have cell phones at that time, in 1992. I mean, we had cell phones, but everybody didn't have a cell phone at that time. So she called the flight. She called the pilot, and he announced on the flight--

they sent a message to my husband saying that, "Your wife is having her appendix removed. Go straight to the hospital." It's so funny. And he looks at the having her appendix ; he got it, of course. But that was her way of letting him know that he has to come to the hospital.Anyway, so after getting used to all that, to come here and find a suitable place to live that wasn't too far away from UCLA was a bit challenging, but again, I think we lucked out. We were fine. We stayed in a hotel by the airport, the airport Sheraton, and it was kind of expensive, so we went to the UCLA housing thing and we were looking at housing available, and we found one that sounded really--it was owned by a UCLA professor and he was renting it out, and it was in Encino, which is not so far away. So we went there and he's like, "Okay, so do you have references?" And so, of course, we gave him our Boston references, and he's like, "Okay, I'll look into it and I'll let you know in a week." And I was like, "Week? No, no, no, no, no." He says, "What do you mean?" We said, "We want to move in tomorrow. Our hotel thing ends tomorrow." [laughs] It was so funny.But then when he found out that Anoop would be teaching here, so we did, we moved out of the hotel and went straight into his house, so it kind of worked out. But it was a big transition, and the USC life kind of seemed distant at that point, and things had changed, although it had been only like four or five years. But it may seem different because of our circumstances had changed, maybe because of that. But then very soon we fit right in and have always been very much at home in California.

Hampapur

What are some things that you enjoy, living here?

Mahajan

Certainly love the diversity, although Boston and that area is a big college town, and there are people of all types there. But still, I think there is a difference between being brown and being here, and I think the weather does help people be more civil and civilized and pleasant to one another. I loved the fact that having a child, my daughter could go out and play in the yard any time. Any part of the year it's beautiful. In Boston, you're like closed in for most of the year. I mean, kids going out, you have to put on like ten layers and then you go out, and it's never quite the same. And if you want the snow, fine. Drive out two hours and you can experience snow. We're not really water people. I hate sand, but still, the ocean is there and the beaches are there, and fruits and vegetables, fresh fruits and vegetables. The access to these fresh fruits and vegetable markets is unbelievable, so a whole lot.And academically also, I think people are less snobbish. There's a big snob culture on the East Coast, and it always reminded me of Delhi and Bombay, Calcutta, and all. Delhiwalas are always considered like--oh, Bombay people will tell you, "We're so cultured." Calcutta people will tell you, "We're so cultured." And we

always used to make fun of that, and it was very similar here, that you come to L.A. and the East Coast people have their noses up, and then you realize that, what do you know about culture? It's all far more real. And we love traveling, right, so driving from here, going up to San Francisco or Berkeley or Yosemite, wine country or something, it's kind of really, really nice. We go out this way also. We've been to the Grand Canyon a few times and really like it out here.

Hampapur

Okay. And how did you end up teaching at UCLA?

Mahajan

So when I first came here, even before I'd finished my Ph.D., so I started doing some courses for the Department of Linguistics. Then I taught a phonology course at UC Irvine, but then you find out that it's tough to commute to any other UC. And in '94 they started the Hindi-Urdu program and then so immediately I applied for that, and the first year we offered it, we got like more than ninety students. And then everybody said, "Oh, you know, because there's a backlog and this is going to disappear, and it'll go down to really small numbers," and this year, last quarter when I started the year, I had eighty-five students in first year, another fifteen in second year. So we used to call it the Hindi program at that time. The demand has remained fairly high. We get very high enrollments.And then a few years ago we made it Hindi-Urdu, and it's--very, very proud of my program, I have to put that in--it's the only program in the country where we teach Hindi-Urdu in a real sense. We are truly Hindi-Urdu. We teach both scripts. We don't make the error of associating culture with any particular language and vice versa. It's not that Hindi has a specific, specified culture associated with it, and it is certainly not true that Urdu has a different culture associated with it, or at least we don't see that, we don't believe that, we don't promote that. We actively discuss these issues, and we admit that we are targeting Hinurglish, which is a combination of Hindi, Urdu, and English. And we don't teach artificial language that no one uses, so we don't stay with pure Hindi or pure Urdu.And people have reported that at other places it is impossible. They told me when I made it Hindi-Urdu, they told me that at other places they have found it impossible to teach Hindi-Urdu, and they told me that students fight with each other or something. I don't know. My way of looking at this is that it's how you approach it, what you tell the students, what you teach the students. You're at a university, and it's how you approach this whole issue, and if you yourself have some agenda, then, of course, your students will take it to extremes. Or if you yourself believe that this should be this way or that way, or if you believe in purity of languages or this artificial language, or if you start connecting up to nation states and flag waving or religion or something, that's stupid according to me, and we don't do it that way, so I've never had a problem. Not only that, I think everyone appreciates

kind of being together, and recently I've gotten a lot of feedback from my students and we are going strong. People are happy, and they appreciate the diversity in the class, and slowly my classes are becoming full of very, very mixed people.So we have--like this whole question of, do you have heritage kids or do you have non-heritage kids, and I always reject the premise, because everyone has a heritage, and what do you mean by non-heritage kids? There are no such people, because I have heritage Filipino kids, so I have heritage Khmer students, I have other heritage kids. And even within the class we have heritage Hindi, Urdu, Punjabi, Gujarati, Tamil, Telugu, anything. I have kids who've never been to India, whose parents were from Africa, Kenya and Uganda and all, or Fijian parents and Fiji-Hindi dialect. We had someone from Guyana, so it doesn't really matter except interest and some background, whatever it is that you bring to the class. That's what it has evolved into.

Hampapur

And this time around, I mean, I guess you're settled here now, have you found any sort of South Asian or Indian community you feel like you belong to?

Mahajan

We used to have--when my daughter was younger, we used to have some Indian friends and all. But now it is--you know how it's mostly now your kid decides, like their friends and all? And she really doesn't--she has some classmates, but very few, and we don't--since we are in north campus, there are fewer academic South Asian friends. I mean, we do know our colleagues here, but I think we have more linguistics and Southeast Asian colleagues and all, so we have more non-South-Asian friends than South-Asian friends. And whenever we have a craving for South Asian and South-Asian people, I think we just go back to India and we have enough relatives and enough food or whatever back there.Or maybe it's something that we don't vex over. We're not so worried about these issues and don't give it too much thought. It's just whoever your friends are. We don't add this layer of ethnicity to your group selection or your friend selection or who you're interacting with, so maybe it's just turned out that way. We're also not very religious, so I claim to be spiritual but not religious, and my husband is anti-religious. So probably that's one angle through which, or one access to the South-Asian community that we really didn't pursue.We're also slightly different from some other Indians in the sense that we're not very boxed into boundaries, or we're not boxed into ideas linked to religion. So, for example, like my daughter calls her dad, my husband, "Abba" and all, and, "Amma" and all, so we don't like being constrained in any ways, and we do believe that it's a new generation, new type of community, and so we certainly don't cling to older notions of that. And I was telling you even in the earlier part of my life, in India I was never a canonical, stereotypical Indian. It didn't have any meaning. I mean, these things don't mean much to

me. So we were always free to do whatever.I didn't have an arranged marriage either, so there are so many different types of communities that I feel comfortable with, and so part of me is South Indian, part of me is Gujarati, part of me is I associate with people from U.P., people from Bihar because I was born there. My husband's family was in Pakistan, Lahore, and then they moved to Delhi. They're actually from the hill Himachal, so Paharis, but they speak Punjabi also, so Punjabi's fine, and the foods and all are so mixed. And I'm a vegetarian, but I love different types of cuisine, so we're not even too big on just eating Indian food or something. If anything, actually, my husband doesn't like the smell of Indian food, especially if you are in Boston, where you have to keep everything closed. I was banned from cooking curries and all. In winter, when you can't really air it out, it clings to everything. It's really nasty. After you've had your food it smells nasty. So, you know, we didn't miss the food either. My husband and my daughter will eat anything. They're not vegetarians, but they prefer other Asian foods, stir fries and all, and all children, of course, are Italian food lovers, right. It's genetic, right? They all eat pastas and all. So it wasn't the food, it wasn't the religion.It wasn't--some things link to one regional thing. So I think maybe that's why we were never caught in one particular South-Asian community, either through garba or raas or through Baisakhi or we're associating with bhangra or something. We never had our one particular niche or corner, or having a similar set of people didn't mean anything to us, because we were similar to everyone and we were similar to no one.

Hampapur

And your daughter, does she feel similarly too, you think?

Mahajan

No. So she always went to a school where there were hardly any Indians around, and so all through her elementary school and all, all her best friends were always non-Indians. And, actually, when we moved here, her preschool, she went to a Jewish preschool, so it was kind of fortunate in the sense that growing up in India, I knew a lot about--even if it was superficial, but I knew enough about Hinduism, Christianity, Islam, Sikhism. We were interacting with Jains. Zoroastrians I came to know when I was teaching at South Gujarat University. But most of these religions and ethnic groups were people that I had already interacted with, so it was kind of useful for her to go to a Jewish preschool, where I learned the Jewish prayers. I got to know these people who are still friends with us.And you also find out that even in this country you kind of get tracked in a particular way, so it's really strange, but it's roughly the same set of people that my daughter has dealt with throughout these years. Like she had some preschool friends. When she moved to elementary school, she had some common friends there, and then she moved to middle school, I mean a different elementary school. Some people got left behind, but then there were

others that she hooked up with again, or she found new ones. Then she goes to middle school, finds some people from the same earlier elementary school, goes to high school, finds people from her preschool or something. It's just weird. It's the same people or group that kind of grows up together in one area. We've been in the area now for a while, and so she's never--she's a very social person, made friends quite easily, and then our friends became--her friends' parents became our friends. So I don't think she ever singled out or missed Indian friends or families and all.Again, every single year we went back to India. I think there were only a couple of years when we didn't go back in the summer. We used to go back in the winters also, or we would have relatives come over, so her language and all is fluent because of that. She's fluent in Hindi, and she's actually pretty good in Indian English, so she switches her accent when she goes to India. She knows that if she wants to bargain or something, she needs a different accent. So I think she's completely comfortable. We talk and she's never, ever mentioned ever being anxious about such things. Or the Indian friends at her school, they're friends for other reasons, not because, oh, Indian-Indian. They don't normally just gravitate towards each other just because they're Indians. But some of them were in her classes, and they all get along great with each other, but they don't just single each other out because of that.And, in fact, she goes and tries to talk to some of them in Hindi, and their language skills actually, unfortunately are not as good as hers, so she will sometimes go and yell at them, or show off her Hindi or something, especially if the other parents are around. She loves to show them up, I mean her friends, by talking in Hindi, and then all the other parents go, [unclear]. "Yeah, your son doesn't speak to me in Hindi," and she loves to complain. No, but she's fine with--in fact, she might be conscious to a certain extent in the opposite direction, which is that, like she went for debate camp or something. She finds it funny if two Indians just head for each other just because they're Indian. She always laughs at that. She says, "I might have far less in common with that person if I did it for that reason than with someone who you naturally figure out has similar interests or whatever." And I kind of agree.

Hampapur

Okay. Well, that's actually the end of the questions I had. Is there anything that you wanted to touch upon or mention?

Mahajan

The only other thing I would say is, it's kind of it's a reasoned decision to stay on here, and I'm very, very happy and well adjusted, and I feel that it's so much more meaningful for me to be here. And one last thing is about this complex identity that we have created for ourselves and for my daughter, which is different, right, for me and for my daughter, and this comes up when we travel

a lot. My daughter, she's eighteen and she's been to more than eighteen countries. We always look at it in the context of when we are in a different country and people ask us, "Where are you from?", it's always interesting how we ponder on what answer to give someone, where are you from. You can see them also struggling in how they perceive us, because we don't fit into any category or any particular type.We don't look like typical Indians, and we don't go traveling in places, typical places that Indians go to, or we go to places where they've really not seen too many Indians. Or you go to a place like Australia or England, where they have a lot of Indian immigrants, but who am I? Am I similar to those Indian immigrants? Or am I an American? And there is a difference. There's a difference there. And they can also tell, not just with my daughter. With my daughter, of course, it's far more complex. But even with us they're able to tell that there's something different or in the things that we're interested in or whatever. I just like the way that I also behave like a chameleon, so when we are visiting the wine country in Australia, I tell them I'm from California. [laughs] But if I'm in a different place where I want to overtly impress upon them my Indian-ness, then I will certainly tell them I'm Indian, and I try to even change my accent a bit and something, and I tell them that I'm a proud Indian from American, and then you just watch their expression. It's kind of fun.No, but other than that, I mean, it was fun talking about my experiences. On the one hand, it's always slightly different from someone else's. On the other hand, it may be very similar. So I always love calling myself stereotypically atypical.

Hampapur

That makes sense when you think about it for a second. Okay.[End of interview]

Date: