

A TEI Project

Interview of Mitali Datta

Contents

1. Transcript
 - 1.1. Session 1 (August 29, 2010)
 - 1.2. Session 2 (August 30, 2010)

1. Transcript

1.1. Session 1 (August 29, 2010)

Hampapur

It is August 29, 2010. This is Veena Hampapur, and I'm here today with Mitali Datta. Thank you for joining me today.

Datta

Oh, you're so welcome.

Hampapur

I really appreciate this. So I'd like to start off the interview by talking a little bit about your childhood. Can you tell me where you were born?

Datta

I was born in Bombay, in India.

Hampapur

And did you have any brothers or sisters?

Datta

Yes, I have one sister older than me, two and a half years older, and that's it, no brothers.

Hampapur

Okay, so pretty close in age.

Datta

Yes, yes.

Hampapur

Were your parents originally from Bombay?

Datta

No. My parents are Bengali. They're from Calcutta. My dad used to work in the Indian navy, so he traveled a lot all over the country and so did we. Every couple of years we moved. So I was born in Bombay, but I grew up pretty much all over the country. In fact, everywhere except for Calcutta.

Hampapur

So your mother started traveling when she married your father, then.

Datta

Yes, yes, yes she did, yes.

Hampapur

Did your mom work as well? Or did she stay at home?

Datta

No, no. She was a stay-at-home mom.

Hampapur

Okay. So you were born in Bombay, and how long were you there before you moved?

Datta

Maybe a couple of months and then we moved to Delhi, and then we pretty much traveled all over, north, south, everywhere, so I grew up everywhere.

Hampapur

That must have been an exciting childhood, then.

Datta

Yes, it was. It's like you just get used to the moving, and it's not a big deal. It's nice. You see different places, meet different types of people, because, as you know, in India every region is totally different. Languages are different, culture is different, so you get to meet a lot of different people and experience different cultures, and it sort of opens up your mind. You see what's out there.

Hampapur

Right. Wow. When you were traveling around, were people in various regions of India familiar with the other states or other regions?

Datta

No, no. That is something very interesting that I found, that people who basically grew up in one state, they were very focused on--they sort of knew what their state was all about. There were a lot of misconceptions about people from other states, because they hadn't seen them, and they hadn't really experienced it. Languages were different, very difficult to understand, because a lot of times if we took the bus, where the bus was going was written in the local language, and so for people coming in from the outside it's very difficult, because you don't know where you're going. You've got to ask somebody, "Is this going where I want to go?", because you can't read. So that is one thing I really found in India, that different people from different regions, who have not traveled, have a lot of misconceptions. And I find that even today, when I meet people from different regions who really have not experienced people from other states, they have certain ideas which are so not true.

Hampapur

Can you tell me about some of the misconceptions you would hear while you were growing up and traveling around?

Datta

Wait, let me think. Okay. It's like a lot of people even now, I mean Bengalis, they think people from the South are a certain way, they eat certain types of food. "Oh, they don't eat anything else. All they eat is this," and that's not true. And it's vice versa; it's the same, that people from the South think, oh, Bengalis are people--first of all, I noticed one thing in the South, and this is there in other parts of the country too. Everybody from the South is lumped into one, like everybody thinks, oh, they're from the South. But there are different states in the South, and every state is different, okay, so it's not all one. When I lived in the South, everybody who was not from the South is a North Indian, and they're all lumped as one. All North Indians are like that, and that's not true too, because there are people from different states who are so different. There are people from the East, from the West. Everybody's different. But that is something I found, and it goes through all over. It's not just people from one state who feel that way; it's all the states. They feel, oh, oh, that's the way they are. So, you know, "Oh, they eat the same thing," and not everyone eats the same thing. "Oh, all South Indians are vegetarian." They are not all vegetarian. You know what I'm saying? So that sort of thing is definitely very much there in India.

Hampapur

Okay, so it sounds like there are some pretty big generalizations between North and South. So when you were traveling around, where do your memories start from? Where were you living?

Datta

I would say it starts from Delhi, Delhi, because I started there. I mean, after traveling when I was younger, I sort of remember--I think I was in the fourth grade first in Delhi, so stayed there for three years, so that's pretty much where it starts. And Delhi is very cosmopolitan, and because we are from a military background, it's a more Westernized culture. So we went to convent schools, which is, once again, a very Westernized culture in India, and so we did that for about three years. Then we moved to Vizag, Waltair in the South, in Andhra Pradesh, and lived there for a year and a half. Then we went to Pune, which is on the west, Maharashtra; we lived there for three years. So pretty much, yes, that's the way, and then we came back to Delhi again.

Hampapur

Okay, so a few years here, a few years there. Well, I'll ask you about Delhi. Can you describe to me--do you remember the neighborhood that you lived in?

Datta

It was a military kind of an area, pretty much like a gated community here, okay, where you actually have to go through security to enter. It was all military officers and their families, so it was pretty different from the Delhi outside. It's very quiet, total security. Everybody has to have like a gate pass to get in kind of thing, so it was very different from just living outside in Delhi. So, yes. We had a school bus took us to school and came back, so that way it was kind of very sheltered, because we didn't really--other than school, where you have people from everywhere. But we lived, basically, within the military area.

Hampapur

Did you have a house, or an apartment?

Datta

It was their housing. It was an apartment, but it was the military housing.

Hampapur

Do you remember what it looked like, how big it was?

Datta

I think it was like three bedroom, just like a regular three-bedroom apartment with maybe a couple of baths, two or three baths and a kitchen, living room. We don't have family rooms, at least not then. We didn't have that in India, so it's more like just a living room and kitchen-dining area and three bedrooms; I think pretty much three baths. Most of the houses in India, I think even now, every bedroom has its own bathroom, the newer ones, like more Westernized culture. Yes, they do.

Hampapur

I see. Did the military also provide servants for the living quarters?

Datta

No. But there were just the whole bunch of servants who were certified to come into the military base, and you'd just hire from there.

Hampapur

Okay. So did your family have servants at home?

Datta

Yes.

Hampapur

What kind of things would they do?

Datta

Basically, just a regular--my mom used to do the cooking and everything with the kitchen other than the dishes. Dishes, the servants would do the dishes, wash clothes, sweep the floors, do the cleaning, dusting, pretty much that sort of--it wasn't like a full-time person at home. It was more part-time, just come do that stuff and then leave.

Hampapur

So they didn't live there, then.

Datta

No.

Hampapur

I see. Did your family have a refrigerator at home?

Datta

Yes, yes.

Hampapur

Okay. So how was food shopping done? Did you store food?

Datta

Food shopping was done pretty much the way we do it here. It was almost like once a week, because the reason being that in the military base, there were just a couple of really small shops, and if my mom needed something suddenly, she would go to the shops. But to do the major grocery shopping, my dad would take her in the car once a week to a market outside, and then they would pretty much shop for the whole week from there.

Hampapur

Oh, that's very different from what I've been hearing.

Datta

Yes. [laughs]

Hampapur

So you mentioned your father had a car. How did most people get around in those days in Delhi?

Datta

In Delhi, I really don't know, but as far as the military people, most people had a car. Because there were a lot of foreign postings for the military people, so they would go out and live for a couple of years abroad, and then when they came back, they would bring a car in. So a lot of times it was that, and then a lot of times it was they would just buy the local Indian Fiats and stuff like that, which were there running at that time. Yes, but a lot--most people did have a car.

Hampapur

I see. And while you were growing up, when you were in Delhi, did you know your neighbors?

Datta

Yes. Yes. It was a lot more--and especially, my mom was extremely social, so she knew everybody.

Hampapur

Were there children?

Datta

Yes, yes. And then in the evening, we used to play with other kids in the neighborhood and go for walks or whatever. Yes, we did know.

Hampapur

Can you tell me a little bit more about that? Where would you and the other neighbors' children be playing?

Datta

Just outside, because like I said, it was a very secure area, so we would just play outside, just like hopscotch or little stuff, basketball and things like that, but just stuff like that. There were times when the military, they had like a clubhouse kind of thing, where there would be ping-pong and badminton and stuff like that, so sometimes we would go with our friends and play over there.

Hampapur

Okay, so kind of like a recreational--okay, I see. What about your parents? You said that your mom also knew all the neighbors. Did they have any social activities?

Datta

Oh, yes. There's a lot, because when you're in the military, it's a lot of parties. Like I said, it's a very Westernized culture, a lot of parties at the clubs and stuff like that, and then there was a lot of social activity within the military. Like they have certain protocol, like if somebody comes, joins your group, is a new person, you have to invite the family over. Then they do a return thing, they invite the family over, and then there's a lot of protocol. It's more--it comes from the British, because that's the way India used to be, right, and a lot of the stuff has carried over. I don't know what it is like now, but at that time it was closer to right after we got independence, right, so it was like within twenty, twenty-five years that we had got our independence, so there was a lot of British culture within the military. So there were a lot of parties. There were a lot of people coming over to eat and my parents being invited over to their place. So, yes, there was a lot of social life that way.

Hampapur

Did you feel the British influence in any way aside from the military culture?

Datta

To a certain extent in the schools too, because we went to convent schools. We had a lot of British nuns there. They were all-girls' schools that we went to, girls' convent schools, and there were a lot of British nuns. A lot of times the principals were British.

Hampapur

So they were people who had stayed?

Datta

Yes, right, right, right.

Hampapur

That's interesting. I didn't know that.

Datta

Yes, yes, yes.

Hampapur

Okay. Well, I guess moving to your school a little bit, so it was a convent school. Was it coed?

Datta

No, it was girls. We always studied in girls' schools, because that's the way the convent schools were, at least at that time. There weren't very many that were coed. They were mostly just girls and then boys were separate.

Hampapur

And what language would they conduct it in?

Datta

English, English, yes.

Hampapur

Did you have to learn any other languages in school?

Datta

Yes, yes, we did. We had a second language, which was Hindi, and then we had to learn Sanskrit for a few years, like two or three years, most schools. Like I said, we traveled a lot, we went to different schools. Different schools had different requirements, but pretty much Hindi was always the second language for us, because that was common to all the schools that we went to, and the Sanskrit was also pretty much common. We learned that in every school. But the requirements were different. Some schools required you to have it for three years, some schools, no, two years is fine, but we did learn it for at least two, three, to four years.

Hampapur

Okay, and then you spoke Bengali at home?

Datta

Basically, a lot of English, actually, because like I said, the military is also a very Westernized background. I spoke to my mom in Bengali, but to my dad and my sister it was always in English.

Hampapur

Okay. And was that common with the other children?

Datta

It differed, I think, from family to family, it differed a little bit, but pretty much with all our friends too, even if they were Bengalis or other Indian, we always spoke in English, because in convent schools the language was always English, and that's the way we communicated. That's the way we were more comfortable.

Hampapur

When you were moving around the country, did you have to pick up any other languages? Or how did you--

Datta

No. Convent school pretty much it's always English, so you don't have a problem. You do tend, after staying there for a year and a half or whatever, you do tend to understand what the local language is, because you hear people talking, and then the maids who would come in--so you sort of pick up a few words, but I didn't really pick up the language per se. I wouldn't say that I picked up the language.

Hampapur

Okay. So you were able to get around with your English and the Hindi?

Datta

Yes, yes, yes.

Hampapur

Did you have any patriotic activities in school or in the city, since you were in the nation's capital?

Datta

Patriotic activities is basically, like when we were in Delhi, they have a huge Republic Day parade, and it goes on for like three days, the different things, different activities that go on, and because my dad was in the military, he used to get free passes, so we used to go for all those. [unclear] Republic Day parade, it starts like early in the morning, so you go at the crack of dawn, and it's in January, so it's really cold in Delhi at that time, so it's dark and foggy and cold, and you're sitting there on the bleachers to watch the parade, and we pretty much did that every year. So you go with your sandwiches and snacks and stuff like that, so yes, so pretty much we did that. And in school, the usual thing, like you always had to sing the national anthem in the morning. You always have like a prayer assembly, and because it's a Christian school, like you say prayers for church. We also had to go to church a couple of times, maybe once a week, something like that, and at that chapel in the school. But we were not required--being Hindu, we were not required to take catechism classes, which was more for Catholics, so it was an optional thing. Most of the Catholics took the catechism classes, where they were taught about the Bible and stuff like that. We had more what was called a moral-science class, where it was a religious thing without being denominational, in the sense of it's not geared to any particular religion, but they just sort of teach you about values and ethics and moral situations and what you would do in a situation like that. It was more like a discussion kind of class, but every school did have a moral-science class, and when we would do the moral science, the Catholics and Christians and stuff, they would go for the catechism classes. So we did that.

Hampapur

I see. What was the religious background of most of the students in your school?

Datta

It was mostly Hindu, because India is a predominantly Hindu country, so it was always mostly Hindu. There were a couple of Muslims, and, of course, there were Christians, Catholics, stuff like that.

Hampapur

So just stepping back a minute, you mentioned for the Republic Day parade there were different activities. Can you tell me what some of those activities were?

Datta

Yes, okay. Republic Day parade--I don't know if you've ever had any sort of--it's like different states and different parts of the country would be represented, and they would march across a huge--it's called Rajpat. It's in front of the president's mansion there, the Rajpat. All the ministers would come, and they would all do a sort of a march. So this would go on for a couple of hours, different floats and stuff. It's like what we have, the New Year's Day Rose Bowl kind of thing.

Hampapur

Oh, like the Rose Parade. Okay.

Datta

Yes, Rose Parade kind of thing, so it was like that. Then the next day there would be folk dances from different states, so we would go to watch that too. Then the third day would be like, it's called beating the retreat, where basically it's a very military thing. They would all march in formation and stuff, and that would basically signal the end of the activities, so it was pretty much like that.

Hampapur

It sounds exciting.

Datta

Yes. It was a big thing for us then. [laughter]

Hampapur

It's like I kind of want to see it.

Datta

No, actually, it looks really nice if you see it. I mean, it's really nice, I mean, when they march in formation and stuff, it looks really very colorful. And then you have different schools represented and school kids singing and that kind of thing, on floats, the way that you have here. Yes, it's a similar thing.

Hampapur

That sounds like a lot of fun. Were there any big religious holidays that were celebrated in the city?

Datta

Yes. Now, different states have different religious holidays. Their major holidays are different. Diwali is big in Delhi, Diwali is big in the South. In Calcutta, of course, I didn't live there, but the Bengalis did celebrate in different cities too, apart from Calcutta. It was Durga pooja, which is in October usually, end of September until the middle of October; it's somewhere around there, and that is a huge thing. So we did do the religious Durga pooja thing, celebrations, wherever we lived, because most places have it. The Bengalis, the local Bengalis, they arrange that. And, of course, Diwali is like the big thing. Then there's Holi. India is the country of festivals, right? There was always something going on, so Holi is big. It's really big in Delhi. It was really big in our house, because basically what happened is when you're in the military base, everybody gets together for Holi. They put the color on each other, and they eat sweets and stuff like that. And my mom would make like a lot of sweets, because everybody would come, and every time they come, the whole group comes in. You have to feed everybody, give them sweets and stuff like that, so my mom would make a whole bunch of sweets for everybody. And then they would all get together in like the rec center, and they would sing. It was like a big thing. Diwali, of course, you know the firecrackers, stuff like that. Always we used to light the little [unclear] outside and stuff like that, so, yes, we did that too. So pretty much you participate in--wherever you are, you participate in all the festivals.

Hampapur

Right. Do you remember the types of sweets that your mom used to make for Holi?

Datta

Yes. It's a lot of Bengali sweets, which you're probably--just different.

Hampapur

Oh, you can tell me what they are, yes.

Datta

Okay. It's like sandesh, jilli-milli, luvungalathika. It's like a whole bunch of stuff, jelabis, everything. My mom used to make really good sweets. [laughter]

Hampapur

You mentioned singing in the rec center. What kind of songs would people sing?

Datta

A lot of times it would be like on [unclear] type of situations, where just movie songs and there would be the women on one side and the men on one side, and there would be that sort of competition going on. It was just like a lot of lighthearted fun.

Hampapur

Aside from the big religious holidays, did your family go to the temple, or worship at home?

Datta

Yes. My mom used to do certain poojas at home, not a lot. I mean, I wouldn't say--it varies. A lot of people do stuff all the time. My mom, every day she would do a little bit, a little pooja, give the gods food and change the water and stuff like that. But basic poojas she probably did a couple of times a year. It's not a lot; major poojas. We went to the temple, yes, sometimes we did, but it was not on a very regular basis, just once in a while for the religious holidays, of course, and apart from that just once in a while. Maybe once every couple of months we would go and go to the temple, yes.

Hampapur

Did your family have a specific deity? Or was it just you went to whichever.

Datta

No, no, just whatever. And it also depends. Like I said, because we lived everywhere else, the temples are different, so whatever was close by and--

Hampapur

You had to adjust?

Datta

Yes. Yes, you adjust to the food. You adjust to everything, because everything was not available at that time everywhere. So Bengalis are fish eaters, but a lot of places in the South at that time, a lot of the fish was not available, so you sort of become more vegetarian. But that's fine, you just adjust to the food and you get used to everything.

Hampapur

With moving around and all that, did your parents try to teach you anything about Bengali culture or customs?

Datta

The customs, I would say, it sort of seeped through more, but no, not really. Like I did not read Bengali, I didn't know how to write, still don't know how to write, I can read now but I can't write, and I didn't read a lot of Bengali literature or anything like that, okay. I mean, I was more conversant with Hindi, because we had to read that for school. So, no, I wouldn't say that they really spent a lot of time teaching us the culture. Part of it was also due to the fact that because we moved around a lot, every school had a different syllabus, and you had to cope with that. So there's so much of academics involved, and we went to like the convent schools, which are pretty, like, competitive schools, so you have to come up to the standard and you have to come up right away, because otherwise you'll fall behind. And there were different subjects you had to learn in different schools; different schools had different requirements. So we were

always kind of busy catching up and keeping up with that, and then you are ready to transfer out again and go to some other school. [laughter]

Hampapur

So did you have any time for extracurricular activities?

Datta

Yes, actually, we did. My dad--my parents, both of them, were very, very into--because we were Bengalis and music and dance is a very big thing, so my dad always found somebody who'd teach us Indian classical music. So wherever we went, he would look around and find a teacher for us, and Indian classical dance too. It's just that there's Bharatanatyam, there's a lot of Mohiniattam, there's a lot of Kathak, Kathakali, different types of dances, and in different states, wherever we transferred, whatever my dad could find we would learn. So I sort of know a little bit of a lot of different types of dances, yes, because somewhere he found a Kathak teacher, okay, so the guy teaches us Kathak. Bharatanatyam we started off with. That was the first thing we started off with. So I'm sort of familiar with the different dance forms, Orissi, everything. We learned a little bit of everything.

Hampapur

Wow. Was music the same way too?

Datta

Yes, music was. It was pretty much Indian classical. That's what always my dad focused on. But, yes, it was different teachers and different styles, basically, of the Indian classical, but, yes, we learned music all the way through, all the way since I was I think six or seven, I started music and dance, all the way through high school, and then once we went to college and stuff, that was done.

Hampapur

And when you say music, you mean like vocal singing?

Datta

Yes, yes. We also learned, in fact, a couple of instruments; I don't know a couple, I would say one. We learned the sitar. I learned the sitar, my sister and I, for a while. It's like my dad is very into music, and music, dance, all the cultural stuff, so he would find whatever and we would go with that. [laughs]

Hampapur

Right. Wow. Had your mom done those things too, when she was growing up?

Datta

Yes. She used to sing when she was younger, but she never danced or anything like that. But my dad wanted us to do everything, so. [laughter]

Hampapur

Did you play any sports while you were growing up?

Datta

Yes. Basically badminton was big, and ping-pong. Those were the two like big things; not team sports. We didn't really play a lot of team sports, but yes, basically it's just those two.

Hampapur

Okay. Were those popular for girls, boys, or both?

Datta

Both. Pretty much, yes, both.

Hampapur

All over India, or was that in Delhi?

Datta

Yes, yes, all over India, that's standard. Then otherwise, it's just the usual hopscotch and stuff like that, you play with your friends on the street. But proper sports, it was just like ping-pong and badminton.

Hampapur

Did you follow cricket while you were growing up?

Datta

Yes. Cricket was a big thing, because at that time we used to have the cricket commentary. We did not have television at home, so it was always the commentary on the radio, and we were always hooked. Especially as I got older, like towards high school and college, I was like a cricket addict. So I used to listen all the time. I knew everything that was going on, so, yes, cricket was a big thing. But not hockey or football, they call it in India; soccer is called football in India, and, no, I didn't follow that a lot.

Hampapur

Okay, but those sports were also popular?

Datta

Yes, yes, they were. But I think cricket was the bigger thing. It was a more glamorous sport, yes, so I followed that a lot.

Hampapur

Was that something that was year round, or was there like a cricket season?

Datta

Usually during the winter months, not during the summer. Summer too, actually, because the cricketers used to go to like other countries and play during the summer, and those would be broadcast on the radio to the commentary on that, so pretty much most of the year, I would say, whenever the Indian team was playing.

Hampapur

Did most people you knew have a radio when you were growing up?

Datta

Yes. Radio everybody had. That was a big thing. Television, no, and then when it did actually come in and a lot of people did have televisions, my dad was

very against the television, because he thought that it would distract us from our studies. So, in fact, till I got married we never had a television at home.

Hampapur

Oh, wow.

Datta

Yes, because my dad was totally against that. [laughter]

Hampapur

Well, with the radio, was there anything you listened to besides cricket commentaries?

Datta

Yes. There were music programs on the radio, and we would listen to that. My mom would listen to some, like, ghazal, bhajan programs, so just listening to that you'd get used to it and you would start appreciating that kind of music. We did listen to classical music on the radio too, because there were a lot of programs on that, some movie music too, so, yes, so we did listen to a lot of music on the radio.

Hampapur

Okay. Did you go to the movies?

Datta

Yes. When I was younger, my dad would not let us watch the movies, but once we got a little bit older, we started watching, and so, yes, we sort of caught up and started watching. My sister and I would watch a lot of movies.

Hampapur

And they were in Hindi?

Datta

Yes, in Hindi. English movies too, but English movies were not--it's not the way it is now, like everything gets released in India. In India at that time, not all Hollywood movies would be released. So whatever was released, we would watch a couple of them, a few, and a lot of Hindi movies. But we did not watch Bengali movies. I still don't watch them. [laughs]

Hampapur

So it sounds like your father was pretty--he thought your education was quite important.

Datta

Oh, yes, absolutely, very, very--I mean, he's extremely into the education. It's a very big thing, and he still is. I mean now, even with my kids, he's like so into their education, you know, "Where is Sanjit going? And what is Sarmistha doing?" He's very into their education. He's eighty-six years old now. He still--
[laughter]

Hampapur

So while you were growing up, did you know that you would go to college one day?

Datta

Oh, absolutely. I mean, there was never a question. As a matter of fact, as far as my dad was concerned, there was never even a question that we would do our master's. To him, up to a master's was a basic degree.

Hampapur

I see.

Datta

Yes. I mean, to him that was a basic education. There's no question of whether you would do your master's or not. So we knew that and both my sister and I, we had master's degrees when we were in India, before we got married.

Hampapur

Okay. Was that common with your other friends, or was that unique to your family?

Datta

A lot of my friends, yes. Yes, I would say that a lot of my friends were into higher degrees, or even if they didn't do master's, it would be--in India, you do your undergrad and then if you want to become a teacher, there's a B.Ed. It's called a Bachelor of Education program. So a lot of my friends did that and went into teaching. But most of my friends did something after the bachelor's degree. We all had some advanced degree, and then some of them did their Ph.D.'s and stuff, so that was there too.

Hampapur

Okay. Do you think that came from being in that military culture? Or was this friends who were outside of that as well?

Datta

I would say, looking back now, a lot of it is not necessarily the military culture, because a lot of my friends were not from a military background. But I think, I don't know, I guess living out--a lot of my friends, like, for example, the ones that--I went to college in Delhi. So Delhi is very cosmopolitan and my friends were like from the South and stuff like that, but they had grown up in Delhi, and I think once you live in a place like that, there are more opportunities. You just aspire to be more. You're not into the culture of, oh, I just did my degree, I have to get married now kind of thing. You're not in that culture. It's more like you want to actually think about having a career and stuff like that, so I think that was what it was. And just with a bachelor's degree in India, you really can't have a career, I mean, not much of a career. You can, but it's not that much, and it definitely wasn't that much at that time. Now there are a lot of different careers available for people. At that time, it's more like--it was very limited--like either you're a doctor or a scientist or a teacher or an engineer. It was very

limited. It's not the way it is right now. Otherwise you would go work for a bank or something, which you could do with an undergrad degree, but you have to go through all the testing and stuff like that, and there were people who did that too.

Hampapur

Okay. So you knew you'd be going to college, so did you also know you'd be having a career, then?

Datta

Yes. I mean, pretty much. I mean, I wasn't really studying, geared for a particular career, because my master's is in physics. It was more because I enjoyed it. My dad said just do it and then if you want to go into teaching or something later on, or if you want to do your Ph.D. later on, that's up to you. But for him, more than the career, I think it was more the education aspect. He just wanted us to have the master's and then it wasn't like he actually necessarily wanted us to be doctors or engineers or anything. And then he said, once you have the education, you have the options. You can decide later on what you really want to do. That's the way he thought.

Hampapur

And what about your mom? What did she think about this?

Datta

My mom was very supportive. Like I said, she was not a career person, and she had an undergrad degree too. So she, till there it was fine, but it's not like she had a master's or she had a career or anything. But she was extremely supportive of whatever my dad said. My dad was more dominant. [laughs] He pretty much ran the show.

Hampapur

Right. [laughter] How important was it to you to do well in school?

Datta

Oh, it was very important, because, like, in India you're actually scared of your parents, so especially I was scared of my dad, not my mom. But the thing is that you knew you had to do well, and it was very competitive, the schools that we went to, and especially because we moved around so much. It was kind of hard to sort of keep up all the time, but we knew we had to do it. We were scared if you did badly on a test; my dad would yell at us or whatever. So you are very much--you try to be on top of everything, and you try to do the best that you can, basically. And we knew that we had to go to college. We knew we had to have a master's, so you'd just go from there.

Hampapur

Okay. What about in the convent schools themselves? Were your teachers very encouraging?

Datta

Yes. I mean, encouraging, I don't know. But it was just like, you just had to do it. There's no question of whether you want to do it or you don't want to do it or how you feel about it. It's more like a robot kind of situation, where you just have to do what they tell you to, and you have to do it the best that you can. Yes, and most of the schools we went to were pretty much the best schools in that particular city, because that's the way my dad wanted it. He wanted us to go to, like, the top schools, so we went to the best schools. So naturally, when you go to the better schools, it is a lot more competitive, and everybody wants to do well.

Hampapur

I see.

Datta

So it was a big thing, the results. When the results came out, your rank and stuff, where you stood in the rankings, all that is like really big, so it was a lot of pressure.

Hampapur

Yes, yes, I bet. When you were growing up, did you ever see much of your extended family, or other relatives?

Datta

Yes. Yes, we did. Of course, my grandparents--everybody lived in Calcutta, from both sides, both my mom's side and my dad's side, so we would go pretty much once a year to visit. For a couple of weeks, we would go to Calcutta and visit. As we grew older and we went into high school and college, it started getting a little harder because of school requirements, and then we're catching up with stuff and we don't have time to go and take time off and stuff like that, so it became a little more infrequent. But we sort of, yes, we went every couple, two or three years; every couple of years we went and visited them for a week or two, and that was it. But we were not really very close to extended family, because we lived apart and they all lived in Calcutta, so we were really not very close to them. It was just like during that week, whatever, that was the interaction that we had with them, and that was pretty much it.

Hampapur

And what kinds of things would you do when you went and visited?

Datta

Nothing, just go and visit them at home and eat. That's it. And chit chat and come home; that's it. Because we went for very short periods of time. And then, of course, we stayed with the grandparents, so that was it, yes.

Hampapur

How did you travel there?

Datta

By train. Yes, it was by train pretty much. At that time we did not fly a lot, so it was by train.

Hampapur

Was the train open seating or private compartments?

Datta

Private compartments, yes, because my dad was in the military, so he would get like discounted rates and stuff like that, to travel first class, so that's the way we traveled. It was always like, because it was four of us, my parents and my sister and me, so we had one of those private compartments with four bunks, and that's the way we traveled.

Hampapur

When you traveled, would you take food from home, or was there a dining car?

Datta

Yes, there was a dining car, so we would pretty much eat on the train. We wouldn't really take--other than little snacks or stuff like that, we wouldn't really take--and then sometimes we would buy food from the stations and stuff, when the train would stop. At that time we could eat all the junk and not get sick. [laughs]

Hampapur

When you were moving around India, did your family move by train then as well?

Datta

Yes. We moved by train, except when my dad got a little bit--he was in the military, so the seniority, those rankings, once you get a little bit senior, you are allowed to take your family and fly; they pay for it. So that's when we started flying. But prior to that--but that was a lot later. But when we were younger and we were moving, they would give us free first-class passes when my dad was transferred from one place to another, and then we would send our luggage separately. It would go in one of those huge cargo train--by train, but in a huge cargo kind of train. That would go separately, and then we would travel by the regular train. Yes, but it was in trains.

Hampapur

I guess when you moved from place to place, the military always provided housing?

Datta

Yes, yes. It was totally furnished, yes.

Hampapur

Okay, that's what I wanted to ask you.

Datta

Yes, furnished also, yes. So we didn't have to buy any furniture, we didn't have to do anything, and then even if a light bulb went out, you just go--they have a

maintenance unit, so even if the light bulb goes out, you call the maintenance unit, they'd come and change the bulb. So they took care of all that.

Hampapur

Okay. And of all the places that you lived in India, is there any place that was your favorite or that stands out in your mind?

Datta

Yes, Pune. I was there from pretty much the high schools, because I graduated high school from Pune. We were there for three years. It was a military kind of base, a little bit in the suburbs of Pune, not exactly in the main city. It was in the suburbs. It was very pretty. There was a very pretty lake out in front. And since I was older then, my sister and I, we could actually appreciate that kind of thing. It was a really nice military base, really laid back. We had a huge house. It was like a bungalow kind of house, two stories with like five bedrooms and five bathrooms; it was huge. I would say that that was like the best place we lived at. Because in Delhi and other cities, it was mostly like apartment kind of living, your flats, different levels for the different officers and their families. But in Pune, it was like a standalone bungalow, and it was huge. We had a huge garden, and you had a backyard, and you had trees, mango trees in the backyard. It was like really nice, and it was all paid for, and it came totally furnished and everything, so yes, so that was nice.

Hampapur

And how old were you when you were living there?

Datta

Like between twelve and fifteen, three years around there, twelve to fifteen.

Hampapur

And that was before you went back to Delhi.

Datta

Delhi again, yes. After Pune, we went to Delhi, yes.

Hampapur

Was life in Pune very different from life in Delhi? Were there any differences you experienced?

Datta

Differences, yes, because I think Delhi is kind of more cosmopolitan. However, Pune was too, because a lot of people in our schools, a lot of the kids came from Bombay, which is also a very cosmopolitan background. So they came-- they used to stay in the boarding in the school, so it was pretty much, pretty cosmopolitan. Pune, the area, like I said, that we lived, it was so quiet and so serene and so nice. Delhi it's more--I mean, yes, the military base was nice, but once you get out, it's like a big city all over again, and you have to get out to go to school and stuff. Pune, also you have to go to school. It was in the main city, and it was a long drive, because we were kind of far away from the city. But we

had buses and stuff to take us, school buses to take us, so it wasn't a big deal. But yes, that's basically the difference that I would say, that I can remember.

Hampapur

While you were growing up, were you close to your sister?

Datta

Very, because, first of all, both girls. We're two and a half years apart, and because we had so much of movement in our lives, like we were the only constant in each other's lives. So we always went to the same school, and right at the beginning when you just join the school and don't have friends and stuff, we would eat lunch together and stuff like that, because you have nobody else, so we were extremely, extremely close. Yes, we were.

Hampapur

I know your family already traveled from moving quite bit, but did you ever travel for vacations or holidays?

Datta

Not really. Apart from going to Calcutta, we really did not do a lot of vacation travel. We didn't, because like I said, we were always busy moving into someplace and trying to catch up, and then we would see that particular city and around that, but we wouldn't like go to some other city just for vacation. No, that it didn't happen.

Hampapur

Did your family have any activities that they did together?

Datta

Not really, because we were always so busy with school and extracurricular activities and practicing our music and just homework and doing stuff like that. We never really did stuff together, per se. No, we didn't, rather than just chit chat, sit out on the terrace and chat and stuff like that. That's it.

Hampapur

So you'd mentioned in Delhi that you were familiar with your neighbors, your mom was familiar with all the neighbors. Was that the same in all the other places that you lived?

Datta

Pretty much, yes, because military bases are very close. Everybody knows everybody, because they are kind of small bases, and like I said, my mom's very social, so she knew everybody, and a lot of the women were stay-at-home too, so they would just like chat from one house to the other, they would chat kind of thing, or they would just come out and chat in the front yard and stuff like that. So, yes, we knew a lot of people that way, the neighbors living around us.

Hampapur

Okay. So eventually you moved back to Delhi and you finished high school?

Datta

No, I did high school in Pune, and then I went to college in Delhi, and then I did my master's from Madras.

Hampapur

Okay. So when you were in college in Delhi, what did you study then? Was that also physics?

Datta

Yes, yes, I did my undergrad in physics. Yes, I majored in physics.

Hampapur

And how did you end up picking physics?

Datta

I was very good at math, so I, in fact, thought about going into math, majoring in math. Then I discussed it with my dad and he said, "I don't know when you go into higher-level math how it might start getting really boring. It might get really dry, so I think physics is a good option for you," and that's the way I did it.

Hampapur

And you were living at home when you were attending college?

Datta

Oh, yes.

Hampapur

How did you like college in Delhi?

Datta

It was good. I mean, it was like the usual college life within the constraints of our parents are a lot more strict than the way we are right now. You live at home, so you have a certain framework, but within that we had fun with our friends. We went out and saw movies too. We cut a couple of classes too. We did everything. And that was my first experience with coed too, because I went to girls schools all through, and it was kind of a little scary, because the thing is that I never grew up with brothers either, so it was kind of scary to have all these guys in the class. But you just get used to it, and you just know that they're different from us. [laughter]

Hampapur

You mentioned you liked to go to the movies. What other things would you do with your friends for fun, if you had time?

Datta

Nothing, just sit and chat with them and go to a movie, and sometimes go to each other's houses or whatever and once again chat, and that's it, because at that time there was no clubbing and there was no going out on the weekends or anything like that. So it was pretty restricted to that. Movies were like the big

source of entertainment at that time. There were not very many other things going on.

Hampapur

Did your family, or with your friends, did you ever eat out?

Datta

Yes, we did, ate a lot of dosas, because that is the big thing there, and ate a lot of ice cream. You'd go to the ice cream parlors and eat ice cream. The food at that time was not as--I mean, there were different things. Now it's different. I mean, you have pizzas and burgers and stuff which was not available then. But, yes, we did eat out, not with my family a lot, because at that time, eating out with friends is one thing, because you just eat things that cost a couple of rupees and it's not a big deal. We actually didn't go out to dinner or anything like that. In India at that time it was more of a luxury, eating out, so a lot of times we couldn't afford to be eating out all the time. You would just eat out for occasions. And my mom cooked at home, so she cooked pretty much everything at home. She was an extremely good cook. And because she lived in different parts of the country and she had so many friends, she would pick up all the cooking tips for all the different types of food, from different people, so she would make all the stuff at home. So we never felt the need to eat out that much, and it was expensive to at that time. It was a luxury. So once in a while, like if it's a--even birthdays, my mom, she would make the menu beforehand and she would cook special food on that day. So we really never felt the need to go out and eat all the time. And then, of course, it was an affordability issue too. We never had money to go out all the time.

Hampapur

Right. Well, it sounds good if she can make all that food. Was there any particular cuisine that you liked while you were growing up?

Datta

Chinese, a lot of Chinese, and I loved the South Indian food, dosas, [unclear], and stuff like that; somosas. Just pretty much everything, nothing specifically. And at that time Italian food and stuff was not available in India, so we were not exposed to all that. Chinese was always available, everywhere. Chinese is always like a big thing, so, yes, if you really want to eat, it's Chinese food. It's like the big thing, "Oh, we're going to eat Chinese food today." But apart from that, no. And then my mom, because she lived in England for a while, and I actually lived in Nigeria for a year and a half when I was growing up, so my mom could make a lot of, like, Western-style desserts and stuff like that, truffles and puddings and stuff like that, so she used to make a lot of that too.

Hampapur

Okay. Wow. Why was she in England?

Datta

Because my dad was there. He did like a training for a year and a half, and this was before we were born, both my sister and--this was right after they got married, so she was in England for eighteen months at that time, a year and a half, during my dad's training. And then when I was like, I think, four years old, my dad was posted to Nigeria, and we lived there for a year and a half. I don't remember very much about it, but there was some collaboration with the Indian navy and the Nigerian navy, and the Indian navy--my dad was training the Nigerian navy on certain aspects, so we lived there for a year and a half in Nigeria.

Hampapur

Okay. Had any of your friends lived abroad?

Datta

Not really, no, no.

Hampapur

You mentioned birthdays, so how did your family celebrate birthdays?

Datta

Oh, birthdays were always very special, and both my sister and I would get new clothes on both the birthdays. Like her birthday I would get new stuff too, and my birthday she would get new stuff too.

Hampapur

Oh, nice.

Datta

So it was both of us would get new stuff on our birthday, because that was the big thing. As far as clothes and stuff, because we were always in school uniforms, we did not have need to buy a lot of civilian, regular clothes, because we don't go anywhere, pretty much. So I think those were the two occasions during the year when we actually got new clothes, I mean nice new clothes, and then beforehand my mom would make the menu, and she would bake the cake herself, and she would make--like right from breakfast through dinner, it would be a special menu, basically the stuff that we liked, and she would cook, and so that was a special day. And, of course, if it was like a school day, we would still go to school and stuff, so it's just whenever. But we never had birthday parties. I think my sister had one when we were in Nigeria and she was turning like six or something like that, six or seven, and that was the one birthday party that we ever had in our lives, so that was it.

Hampapur

So when you weren't wearing your school uniform, what type of clothes did you wear?

Datta

Basically home clothes, because most of the time if you're not in school, you're at home. And when we went out, yes, it was depending on what the fashion was

at that time, like bellbottoms with a top, with shirts on top, or dresses and stuff like that, so it just depended. And basically, like I said, we probably had two or three sets of nice clothes, not a lot, and that's what we wore, because there weren't that many occasions to wear nice clothes.

Hampapur

So you had Western clothes while you were growing up?

Datta

Oh, yes, yes, yes, absolutely.

Hampapur

So after you finished your undergrad, your family moved to Madras?

Datta

Yes. Yes. My dad was working there, so that's when we moved to Madras, yes.

Hampapur

Okay, and you did your master's there.

Datta

My master's in Madras, yes.

Hampapur

And how did you enjoy that?

Datta

It was a very different experience, because, first of all, I went to a girls' college, and because it's a master's in physics and it's a girls' college, we would have twelve girls in the class, okay, because not a lot of women, girls, did physics. But whatever, so we had twelve girls, and eleven of them were girls who grew up in Madras, extremely traditional, so they were all in saris or the half saris, okay? I was the only one in pants, because I had come from Delhi, so they sort of knew I was kind of a little bit different because I had come from Delhi. And then I told you that there was always this North Indian-South Indian divide.

Hampapur

Right.

Datta

And I had to sort of train them on, you know, North Indians are really not all from the north, and they're all not like this. But they were really nice, and they really accepted me. And we had--I mean, wherever, if you went to see movies, all twelve of us would go together, kind of, so to them I was more like something--they would take me home and introduce me to their parents and stuff, that, "This is the one who doesn't belong here," kind of thing. [laughter] But it was nice. I enjoyed it, and then we became really good friends. And after a while, it was like after a couple of months, when they used to speak in their language, Tamil, because they all used to speak in Tamil--they would speak to me in English, but amongst themselves they would speak in Tamil--they would speak in Tamil, and I would respond in English, and they are like, "How do you

understand what we are saying?" But after a while, you just keep listening to it, and you sort of kind of know what they're saying. I even used to go and see Tamil movies with them, and then they used to explain to me what's going on, the parts that I didn't understand kind of thing. And then in front of our college we had the marina beach. Have you ever been to Madras?

Hampapur
No.

Datta
Okay. So there's the marina beach, which is supposed to be the second-largest beach in the world or something like that; the coastline is huge. So it was right across from our college. College was right across from the beach. So sometimes after college, after classes, then we would all go to the beach and sit there and just chit chat and stuff like that, so it was really nice. But it was very different, because once again, I was in a girls' college, and even though the girls sort of thought I was different--but we all really got along really well. We had a lot of fun and they really accepted me and it was nice.

Hampapur
What was your sister doing during that time?

Datta
My sister, she graduated from Delhi her undergrad also, and then she went to--no. As a matter of fact, she did her master's from Delhi also. And then she did a post-master's degree, postgraduate degree from Madras at that time.

Hampapur
Okay. So she was also in school.

Datta
She was also in school.

Hampapur
What did she study?

Datta
She has--her master's was in statistics, and then she did her postgraduate degree in operations management, and then she has a Ph.D. now from here. She did her Ph.D. and she is a professor in a college; she teaches.

Hampapur
So after you finished your master's, was your family staying in Madras? Or what happened next?

Datta
No. Then we got married. Both my sister and I got married. We both had arranged marriages, so while we were studying, my dad was looking, basically more for her first, because in India there is this tradition about the older one gets married first, so he was looking for her. Then right after she got married, within five months I got married, so we got married the same year, five months

apart. So after we finished our master's, both of us--I mean, she finished her post grad thing. She got married and then I had finished my master's and got married, so that was it.

Hampapur

Where did you get married?

Datta

Both of us got married in Calcutta, because we got married to Bengali guys and their families were there, and our family also was all in Calcutta. It's just that we lived outside, but they all lived there, so we both got married in Calcutta and then we both came here. My sister lives here in New York also, so we both live here.

Hampapur

Did the wedding take place in a temple or a hall or?

Datta

It was in a hall. Actually, we both got married in like a military base kind of place, which had a huge rec center or mess. It was called an officers' mess. That's where both of us got married, at the same place.

Hampapur

Oh, wow. Then after you got married, did you come immediately to the U.S.? Was Ankul already here?

Datta

No, no. Both our husbands were here already, but it takes a while to get the visa, so my sister had to wait for nine months before she got the visa--no, I think it was eleven months, something like that--to get her visa. I had to wait for thirteen months. So during that time, we both lived in Calcutta. That is the only time we lived in Calcutta, and so she lived with her in-laws till she got the visa and came here, and I lived with my in-laws and then came here.

Hampapur

Okay. So you guys were there at the same time.

Datta

Pretty much. There was a slight overlap. She came, I think, six months before I did, so she came and then I got my visa and I came in. But both our husbands were here already.

Hampapur

Okay. So when you both got married, you both knew you'd be coming to the U.S.?

Datta

Oh, yes, yes, yes, because my dad wanted us to marry guys from here. The way he felt is, he felt--and this was actually part of a lot of what my mom felt too--and in the meantime, my mom passed away when I was sixteen. When I was doing my undergrad, at that time my mom passed away. She had cancer. She

always wanted--she used to say that--my mom, in spite of the generation she grew up in, she was extremely liberal minded in the sense, she didn't care whether we married Bengali guys. So long as it was a good boy, it was fine. It didn't have to be a Bengali. It could be from any other part of India. She was pretty liberal, especially for those times and she always felt that, "I think you guys have seen the best of what India has to offer." You know how the culture is always--and it's there for us too--we always want our kids to do better than us. And she felt that since we had seen the best over there, "I want you to see what is better, and the better thing is coming abroad." So she really wanted us to marry guys who were living here and who were more progressive thinking, that kind of thing. So when she passed away, my dad said that since that was what she wanted, "That's what I want too." And he always felt that the parents are not going to be there forever, "So if both of you marry over there--." And at that time, the impression they had was if we were in the United States, we were living close to each other, which we are not, because she lives on the East Coast, I live over here. I go to India more often than I see her. We talk on the phone, but pretty much that's it. But that's the way he felt. So his thing was, he was looking specifically for guys who lived over here for both of us, and especially once--sometimes when he was looking for my sister, he would think, am I doing the right thing? Maybe I would find a better boy who lives in India. But once she got married, he didn't think about it again, and his thing was that for me it would definitely be a guy from here. So, yes, we both had arranged marriages, but we both, right from the beginning, knew that we were pretty much going to be coming here, and we were going to live over here.

Hampapur

And how did you feel about that?

Datta

It was fine. I didn't have any problem with it, because like I said, that we came from very Westernized backgrounds. To me it was not an issue at all. It was not a big deal. I was quite excited about coming here, and, actually, what I wanted to do is after I did my master's, I wanted to do my Ph.D., and I wanted to do it here. But my dad, in spite of his liberal thinking, he was very conservative about that, and he said, "I'm not going to send you abroad alone until you get married." So I figured that if I came here, I could get married and make him happy and do my Ph.D. and make me happy, you know, kind of thing. So that was the reason. Both my sister and I were pretty excited. I mean, we had no problems with coming over here, so we were mentally prepared to be here.

Hampapur

Did you know anyone who had moved to the U.S. at that point?

Datta

In our families, no, not really, not really. We didn't have friends--none of my close friends that I actually grew up with got married and came here, so not really, no.

Hampapur

Did you know anything about America or have any ideas of what you thought it'd be like?

Datta

My dad had visited a couple of times, so from whatever he had told us--no, actually, not a realistic thing, impression about that, because it's whatever you see in the movies and stuff, and apart from that, at that time--like now you have a lot of stuff from here, a lot of shows from here on television there in India. But at that time there weren't, so you don't have a very good idea of what life is like in the U.S., so it's pretty much a crap shoot.

Hampapur

Okay. But it sounds like there was a positive idea of what the U.S. would be.

Datta

Yes, yes, yes, yes, definitely.

Datta

And then for your paperwork to come, did you just have to apply for the visa?

Datta

Yes. Well, I had a passport prior to that, because I had traveled with my father. Prior to that, we had traveled to Singapore and to New Zealand with him, so I had my passport, so that was not an issue. Of course we had to change it once we got married, because we changed the name and stuff like that. Visa paperwork was actually filed by--for both my sister and me it was filed by our husbands, because that's when they filed the support, because it's for the spouse. Yes, so they pretty much--I mean, we went to the consulate in Calcutta, and we filed all the paperwork there to come here.

Hampapur

Okay. And then when you were in New Zealand and Singapore, you guys had moved there as well?

Datta

No, no. What it was was my dad--at that time he had retired from the Indian navy, and he was working for the merchant navy, which is like cargo ships going all over the world with cargo, and he was the chief engineer on the ship. So during one stint that he did from Madras, he went to Singapore with cargo, so he took us with him on the ship, so we actually traveled on the cargo ship with him, and then from Singapore to New Zealand, and then back from New Zealand to Madras, totally on the ship.

Hampapur

Okay. Had you been to any other countries besides Nigeria?

Datta

When we were coming back from Nigeria, when we were young, we did a mini kind of European tour. So I'd gone to London, Switzerland, Germany, but I don't remember.

Hampapur

You were too young to remember.

Datta

Yes. I do remember, though, that I was in Switzerland for my fifth birthday, so my dad--Swiss watches were the big thing at that time, so my dad bought both my sister and me two watches. I still have the watch. [laughter] And it still works, because it's not the battery-operated. It was analog type where you wind it up kind of thing, and Swiss watches are always very well made, so I still have it. I mean, I don't wear it anymore, but I still have it.

Hampapur

Oh, wow. So you said your sister waited nine months, and you waited thirteen months for your visa.

Datta

Right, right.

Hampapur

Was that typical of that time?

Datta

Yes, it was. It was. It was slowly getting longer and longer. Like I said, my sister got married five months before I did. When she got married, the waiting time was nine months. She came here in eleven months. And then when I got married, it extended a little bit more. I think now it's like five years, the waiting time, yes, yes, if you don't have citizenship. Because both the husbands had green cards at that time. They were not U.S. citizens, so green card holders, their spouses--yes, that's the waiting time right now. It's five years.

Hampapur

What were your husband and your sister's husband doing in the States?

Datta

My sister's husband, he's a researcher. He has a Ph.D. too, and he's a researcher, so he was doing his research at that time, and my husband was working for Northrop Grumman at that time. Yes.

Hampapur

And what did you do in that year that you were waiting?

Datta

Nothing. Just sat home and sort of bonded with the in-laws. [laughter] Which was kind of fun. The reason being, my husband comes from a very large family, and I come from a very small family, and I didn't grow up with extended family either, so it was kind of very different in their house. And also,

I come from a very Westernized background, as I told you, and theirs is a very typical middle-class Bengali family. The house, everything is like really, really middle class, so it was very different for me coming there. I used to be in pants all the time, in jeans all the time before I got married, and after that I had to be in sari all the time, because you're living with the in-laws. There's a certain protocol. I mean, they were really nice people, my mother-in-law especially. She was such a nice lady, and she was so liberal about a lot of stuff, in ways to care about a lot of stuff. But so I had a good time during that year, but basically just bonding with them and go out with my sisters-in-law, watch movies and just go shopping with them, stuff like that. That was it.

Hampapur

Were you able to keep in touch with your husband during that year?

Datta

Yes. At that time, calls were very expensive. We didn't have a phone in my in-laws' house, so I had to go to somebody else's house to call, and we would talk like maybe once a month, because it was very expensive at that time. And letters, we would write letters to each other and that.

Hampapur

Did your husband tell you anything about the U.S. before you moved here?

Datta

Yes, yes, even after we got married and right before we got married. I mean, we got married within seven days of seeing each other, so we didn't really have a lot of time, and then he told me about life over here, pretty much, which I wasn't really surprised, because even though nobody from my extended family or my close friends lived here, there were people--my mom knew people who had lived here, so they sort of knew like you don't get servants over here, and you'd have to do everything by yourself and stuff like that, so certain basics I did know. And he told me about life over here and what it would be like, but, yes, so pretty much he did, yes.[End of interview]

1.2. Session 2 (August 30, 2010)

Hampapur

This is Veena Hampapur here again with Mitali. Thanks again for joining me for this interview. It's been really interesting so far. So we left off talking about your life right before you moved to the U.S., so I wanted to ask you, in that year you were preparing to move, what kind of preparations did you make to move to the U.S.? What kinds of things did you pack?

Datta

Basically, a lot of clothes and that's it. I was not going to bring anything else from there except what was typically Indian and at that point it was just the

clothes. There was nothing else. Everything else I figured I would get over here, so it was not like I was bringing dinner sets or anything else from India. So it was pretty much clothes and books, because I had always wanted to go into higher studies over here, so I brought some of the books that I was using at that time for my master's; I brought some of my books over here too.

Hampapur

Do you remember what airline you took to come?

Datta

Yes. I think it was Northwest. I think I flew Air India from Calcutta to probably Hong Kong, I think, and then from Hong Kong to L.A. by Northwest.

Hampapur

Can you tell me about when you first arrived, when you first got to L.A.?

Datta

Really, because I had traveled abroad before, it was like getting on the plane was not a big deal, because a lot of times when women come here for the first time, that's probably their first plane trip too. For me it wasn't, so because my English is pretty good, so I didn't have a communication problem or anything like that, so there was really nothing spectacular coming here. It was fine. Came to LAX, went through the formalities, Customs and stuff like that. The only difference was this was the first time I was flying alone. I had usually always traveled with my parents or whatever, so this was the first time I was coming all this way alone. But it was fine. I mean, I went through the Customs and Immigration and everything, and my husband was waiting for me at the airport, so then we came to the apartment that he was living at. But the thing I noticed was, oh, my god, the roads are so clean, and it's not as crowded, and it's really nice. But since I had been abroad before, I sort of knew that that is the way it's going to be, yes.

Hampapur

Okay. Where was your husband living at that time?

Datta

In Lawndale. Yes, so he was living in a two-bedroom apartment there, and that's where I started my life over here.

Hampapur

Can you describe to me the neighborhood you lived in there?

Datta

It was an apartment building with, I think, six or eight apartments. The neighborhood was a fairly mixed neighborhood, but it was quiet and nice. I didn't have any problems with it. It was close to stores. I could walk and go, because I didn't drive at that time. So there was nothing spectacular. It was just a regular middle-class neighborhood.

Hampapur

When you said it was mixed, did you mean ethnically?

Datta

Ethnically, yes, yes.

Hampapur

Okay. So what were some of the other ethnic groups that you saw there?

Datta

There were Caucasians, there were African Americans. There weren't that many Latinos, but there were a couple. But basically, yes, that's what--and I guess the Caucasians stood out more because I had just come from India, so that was something--you notice them more. Now you're just used to everybody, so you don't really notice that much. Yes, that's the way it was at that time.

Hampapur

Did you initially like where you were living?

Datta

Yes, yes. I had no problem where I was living, because it was a two-bedroom apartment, so there was enough room. It was just the two of us, and it was easy to keep clean, because it wasn't that big. Yes, and the neighborhood and stuff, I mean, it was fine for my purposes. I wasn't very much of an outgoing--I never used to go out a lot. I would stay home when my husband went to work, and I would read and stuff, watch TV and do stuff like that. I was not the adventurous kind to go out exploring on my own, so it was fine for me. The neighborhood was fine for me.

Hampapur

What kinds of things did you watch on television?

Datta

Oh, at that time just a little like "Three's Company" and "Lucy" and just stuff like that and then a lot of the news, and that was it. Oh, a couple of soaps too. I started watching "All My Children" and stuff, to see what soaps were like at that time. Yes.

Hampapur

What year was it?

Datta

In 1985.

Hampapur

Were there any new skills you had to learn after coming to the U.S.?

Datta

You had to learn to drive, for one thing. That was the major thing, because I did not drive and over here I felt I couldn't survive without driving, so that was what I started doing. I was also--like I said, I was planning to go in for my Ph.D., so I was studying for the GRE, so I did a lot of studying at that time. So basically, that was it. I didn't know how to cook at all when I came here, but

my husband is a very good cook, and he had always told me that you don't have to worry about the cooking, because I know how to cook, and I'll teach you whatever you need to know. And even now he is like the primary cook in our family.

Hampapur

Oh, wow.

Datta

Yes, so he does a lot of it. I, of course, help with everything, cutting and cleaning and everything, and I cook a few things, but still, he's the major one, and he does more cooking, a lot more than I do. And to him it was always, his thing was, "You didn't come here to cook, and you need to get on with what it is you want to do. That's not the reason you came over here. There are a lot more opportunities than just cooking and eating." So he used to encourage me to study a lot more and take the GRE and do whatever I had to do at that time, so I spent a lot of my time doing that.

Hampapur

Were Indian spices and groceries available at that time?

Datta

Yes. Not as much as it is available now, but they were available, so we would buy the stuff from the Indian stores, and we basically eat Indian food. We used to eat it then too, and we still eat it now, so it was a lot of Indian food and everything was available, and we used to buy that from here.

Hampapur

Okay. What did you guys do for fun when your husband wasn't working and you weren't studying?

Datta

Yes. What we used to do is because I was new over here, so I did all the usual, San Diego Sea World and Disneyland and all those places, and we would go out to the mall or whatever on the weekends, go and just walk around, browse around and, yes, basically that was it, and then visit with other--he had people he knew from before he was married, so just go and visit with them. And we also have family over here, his brothers, so we'd visit their families, so pretty much the weekends were a lot of it was that. And even, I mean, we used to cook during the weekends so that we didn't have to cook during the week, so we would do a major cooking spree on the weekend and warm up the food during the week and eat it, which is pretty much what we do even now. So the weekends passed pretty quickly doing all that.

Hampapur

Were people familiar with Indians at that time? Were there any Indians around?

Datta

Not, I would say, in the immediate neighborhood. But then, like I said, I really am not that friendly. Like I never used to go and talk to the neighbors. I knew them because I'd see them and they'd say hi and just sort of chat, but I never used to like actually visit with them and have them over or anything like that. I didn't do that. So the Indians I knew were more people that he knew before, and, like I said, and the family.

Hampapur

How long were you living in Lawndale?

Datta

In the apartment we lived for a couple of years. Actually, Sarmistha was born while I still lived in that apartment, and then we bought a house, also in Lawndale, and that's where we moved two years later--actually, three years. Three years I lived in the apartment, and then we moved to the house and we lived there for almost ten years, nine and a half years before we moved to P.D.

Hampapur

Okay. Were you staying at home too, after Sarmistha was born? Or did you start working?

Datta

For two years. She was born in '86, and I started working when she was two years old, in '88, so for those two years, yes, I was pretty much staying at home, and I also took some classes at El Camino at that time. In the evenings when my husband was home to take care of her, I used to go to school at El Camino, just to get some computer skills and stuff, because that I did not have. When I was growing up in India, we did not have a lot of computer exposure, and I pretty much knew nothing about programming or anything, so I just took a few classes at El Camino at that time, to catch up with that.

Hampapur

Okay. Were you homesick at all when you first moved here?

Datta

When I first moved here, I was homesick to the point where, because I had lived for a year in my husband's family, and there was always a lot of people in the house, and people coming and going and stuff, so I kind of missed that the first--when I just came here. And it was a little bit lonely, because my husband used to, naturally, go to work, and he was out all day. But the thing is that I sort of knew what it would be like. The other thing is also that because I grew up without extended family, it was pretty much the way I grew up, except that at that time I had my parents, I had my sister. Here I had nobody else. However, I adjusted to it pretty soon. I didn't really feel the tremendous homesickness to the point where, oh, I really want to go back. I didn't feel that.

Hampapur

Okay. Were you able to keep in touch with your father and your sister?

Datta

Yes. My sister I still talk to on the phone all the time. But my dad, it was more letters at that time, and phone calls maybe once a month, once every couple of months, but yes, letters, a lot of letters at that time.

Hampapur

So did you end up going back to school? Or did you decide not to?

Datta

No. What happened was I took the GRE and I wanted to go back, but I got pregnant with Sarmistha, so that put--naturally, at that point I couldn't go in and take on a big undertaking like a Ph.D. or whatever. So I just stayed home with her for the first couple of years. Like I said, I went to school, and then I got this job, the one that I'm working at right now, for the last twenty-two years, so that was when she was two years old. So I started working and then after that it was just like the family stuff, one after the other. I never, ever went back to school.

Hampapur

Right, very busy. So when you moved to the U.S., did you know that it would be a permanent move?

Datta

Yes, yes, it was definitely--I knew it was going to be a permanent move. I had talked to my husband prior, before we got married too, and I really did not want to go back to India. Really, I was mentally prepared to be living here for the rest of my life.

Hampapur

Okay. How did you feel about raising children in the U.S.?

Datta

I felt that they would have a lot of opportunities here, a lot more than what I had over in India, even though I pretty much had kind of the best of what we had in India at the time. I still felt that they would definitely get a lot more opportunities here. And apart from that, I felt that if we could sort of balance it with our culture and the opportunities they had here, I think I felt we would do fine.

Hampapur

So what job did you start working when you were in Lawndale?

Datta

I still work there, in a government agency. It's an environmental agency. We do air-pollution control, and I work there as an inspector, so I work out in the field a lot, going to different companies, manufacturing, and inspect them for any violations of air-pollutions rules and stuff, enforcement of any violations and stuff like that. That's what I do. That's what I started as; I still do that now.

Hampapur

And how did you get into that job?

Datta

It was just advertised in the paper. The requirements that they needed was what I had, so I figured that it's a good place for me to start; why don't I start there. And then I liked doing it. I like the flexibility of where I work. I work four days a week, so I'm off on Mondays, so I like that, and because it's a government job, it's a little bit more secure than working for a private company, and I'm just used to it. I've done it for so many years. So I enjoyed what I did, and for me, family was always the priority, so I didn't want a very high-powered career job where I would have to work extra or anything like that, so the job works for me. For what I want to do and what I want to accomplish, I think it worked for me.

Hampapur

Okay. Did you visit India at all in those early years?

Datta

Right at the beginning, actually. My dad used to come here a lot, and he used to visit a lot, so I really didn't go very much, maybe once every five or seven years. It was not very often. In the meantime, my husband's parents had also passed away, and since my dad used to come all the time, I didn't want to go with kids, because it was a big hassle to take them, and they would get sick and stuff like that. So, yes, so I visited. Now it's a lot more frequent, because my dad can't come that often.

Hampapur

Did you know anybody else who was moving to the U.S. after you and your sister moved, any friends from home?

Datta

No, no, not really. None of my close friends ever moved here, so I didn't really know--no, not really. I mean, subsequently, my brothers-in-law, my husband's brothers, they got married, the ones who were younger. They got married after I did, and their wives moved here too, but none of my friends per se.

Hampapur

So it sounds like socially you were busy with your husband's family and then friends he had had. Did you make any friends when you started working?

Datta

Yes. I have a lot of friends at work, especially since I've been working there for so long. I know a lot of people. Our agency is--there are a lot of immigrants in our agency, so you have people from different parts of the world, like Filipinos and people from Egypt, and it's like from all over, and Indians, of course. So I made a lot of friends, and even now it's like I have a lot of friends at work. I like that, because it gives me a chance to do what I used to do before I got married, not just interact with Bengalis. It gives me a chance to interact with

people from different cultures, and I enjoy that, so I have a lot of friends at work.

Hampapur

And that diversity, was that there too when you first started?

Datta

Yes, yes, because we're a government agency. You didn't really need to be a U.S. citizen, which a lot of the private companies require you to be U.S. citizens, so there were a lot of people with just green cards who had immigrated and stuff, and at that time, when I started, government agencies were not high on the list of very high-achieving people, so people wanted to go into private companies. Especially people who had very high career goals wanted to go in there. So a lot of immigrants ended up working for the government agencies, so there was a lot of diversity there, a lot.

Hampapur

It sounds like that's something that you enjoyed.

Datta

Yes, I enjoy that, I really do. It gives me a break from just talking to the Bengalis over here.

Hampapur

Right, right. And was your social group mostly Bengali, outside of--

Datta

Work? Yes, yes. I would say mostly it was, because that's how--we go to the Bengali, you meet friends of friends kind of thing, and then you go to the religious things over here, and they're all Bengali again, so it just ended up being that way, where when I socialize outside of work, it's mostly Bengali.

Hampapur

And when you started work, was that your first opportunity to really meet people and make friends? Or was that happening?

Datta

Yes, yes, I would say that is my first. I mean, it is my first job, because I never worked in India, so when I came here and I started working, and that was my first job, and it'll probably be my last. But, yes, that was my opportunity to make friends, yes.

Hampapur

Okay. When you first moved here, were people familiar with Indians, even though there weren't many around?

Datta

I think a lot of the Caucasians probably were not. They're getting a lot better now. A lot of people from different countries, the cultures are kind of similar, so especially a lot of people came like from the Philippines or China, whatever, and the cultures are kind of similar, so they sort of know, "Oh, it's like that for

us too," kind of thing. As the years go by, I do notice that people are a lot more, even Caucasians, African Americans, they're a lot more open to different cultures, and they know a lot more now than they used to. They eat a lot more different types of food, and that is one thing even at work, where we can all go to an Indian restaurant and eat, whether you're Indian or not, because the Caucasians here love the Indian food too. And you can go to like different Thai restaurants or Chinese or anything, so I think, yes, things are changing a lot now. Like when I came, it wasn't so much, but I think southern California that way, there is a lot of diversity compared to other parts of the country, and people are definitely more open to different things.

Hampapur

Okay. Did people ever ask you questions about India?

Datta

Absolutely. They do. When people at work get married or whatever, I wear the sari and go, and then we have the bindi that I wear, and I wear the vermilion that we wear in the parting of the hair, because it's the sign of being married. And they question me about that a lot of times, "What does this mean?" "What does that mean?" "Oh, your sari is so beautiful. What is it made of?" stuff like that, and even about cultures. The way we raise our kids is definitely different. Our priorities are different from a lot of other families, and they do ask a lot, and they really want to know. It's how we live here, so, yes, that's definitely there.

Hampapur

And were those the kinds of questions you got too, when you first moved, as well?

Datta

Pretty much, yes, I would say. Yes, it's pretty much the same type of things. They would ask me, "How do you guys eat?" And, "What do you eat?" and stuff like that. Now it's a lot like I cook for them. I take it to work, so they kind of know what we eat. [laughs]

Hampapur

Right, right. I guess that goes that trajectory you're kind of talking about.

Datta

Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes.

Hampapur

I see. What kinds of activities did you do with your friends when you started working?

Datta

Actually, I did not socialize a lot with them outside of work, other than if it was, like I said, somebody getting married or something, a big occasion. I did not go out with--we used to do, like we still do, lunch and stuff like that from

work, so during the work hours, but after work I felt was totally my family time. So if I socialized, it would be with the people that I would socialize with my family, and otherwise it would be just family time. So even now, I kind of got out of socializing after work with people from work. My work life is my work life, my personal life is my personal life, and the only time it interacts is like if there's a big occasion, a big personal occasion in somebody's life. Then, of course, we go out to celebrate that with them, because they are my friends. However, my time after work is pretty much predominantly for my family.

Hampapur

Family, okay. And then what about the Bengali friends and relatives you had when you were first here? What types of things did you do together?

Datta

Basically, nothing much, except that you get together almost every weekend at somebody or the other's house, and you just sort of chat and stuff like that. It's only when you have like the religious--basically Durga pooja, which is our big thing, and there are a couple of other things that happen during the year, throughout the year. That's when we get together as a community, and we just sort of celebrate as a community. But otherwise, it's more like you go to people's houses for their kids' birthdays or whatever. It's just more of a social--just an interaction, basically. It's not like you actually go out and travel with them or go on vacation with them or anything like that.

Hampapur

You mentioned that aside from the Durga pooja, there were other big events. What were some of those?

Datta

Yes. We have like the Saraswati pooja, which is in February, and then we have a Lakshmi--it's a lot of religious different poojas at different times of the year, and then you have like Rabindranath Tagore is one of our big literary writers, so on his birthday in April, there's usually a sort of a celebration. It's more like of a literary thing, where they might do one of the--he was a playwright, so one of his plays might be performed. Sometimes kids do little plays, they perform stuff, so little things like that throughout the year. There are little things that go on, and that's when we get together as a community and you interact as a community.

Hampapur

I see. Did you join any sort of association?

Datta

Yes, the regular Bengali Association of the South Bay, we are members of that. But basically, all their activities are just the ones that I told you. It's different poojas and different like a couple of literary things. Sometimes they bring in musicians from India and there's a concert, so stuff like that.

Hampapur

Okay. It's mostly religious and some cultural.

Datta

Yes, some cultural stuff, yes.

Hampapur

Did you put your kids into any sort of--

Datta

No, no, not any of the Indian schools or anything. I mean, they went to all the festivals and stuff with us, the community programs, and Sarmistha still does. She still goes to do her pooja every year with us, but apart from that, no. There are, where they teach the language, they teach Bengali, there are little schools and stuff that are here, but I never sent my kids to them.

Hampapur

Did you enjoy these community events?

Datta

Yes, it was nice, where you actually meet everybody from them, because a lot of times when you are just home, it's hard to interact with people. You're always so busy at home. You don't have time to call people and chat or whatever, so that is one occasion when you can get together and sort of actually catch up with people, you know, what are you doing, what are your kids doing kind of thing and catch up with them. So it's nice. I enjoy that. Once in a while, that's fine that I enjoy that.

Hampapur

Is there a big Bengali population in southern California?

Datta

Yes, actually, there is a pretty large one, growing bigger every day. But, yes, it's pretty large. I mean, if you ask me numbers, I wouldn't be able to tell you exactly, but it is very large.

Hampapur

And was it like that way when you first moved here?

Datta

No, it was a lot smaller, but it's slowly just getting bigger and bigger. So it was really a lot smaller. Even Indian stores and stuff were so few when I came twenty-five years ago, like I think we had like one or two jewelry stores and one or two sari stores and one or two grocery stores. But now it's like almost at every corner there is an Indian restaurant, an Indian grocery store. I mean, there are a lot of them all over, and everything is available here now. It wasn't that way at that time. But right now it's like from food items to clothes, everything, jewelry, everything is available here.

Hampapur

When you first moved, you mentioned that there are just a few groceries and stores and things. Were those in Lawndale, or did you have to go somewhere?

Datta

There were, I think, one or two maybe, I think one, basically, in Torrance I remember, where we used to pretty much shop from, and otherwise we had to go to Artesia, where there were a couple more. But even there, Artesia, I think there were like, when I came, it was like two stores, maybe two grocery stores and maybe like one or two restaurants and a few of those fast-food places and a couple of the sari stores, two or three. It wasn't a lot, not the way it is right now.

Hampapur

Okay. So were those on Pioneer Boulevard too?

Datta

Yes, pretty much. Yes, the same area.

Hampapur

Did you see these places gradually increase, or was it kind of all at once?

Datta

No, gradually more stores started coming up and mushrooming, and then they actually started carrying a lot of like more of the trendy fashions from India. And the thing is also, I think, when I came here twenty-five years ago, a lot of us, because we have family back there and we used to go there a lot more frequently--slowly, our parents have all slowly started passing, and we don't go as often as we used to when our parents were alive. We used to do most of our shopping there, because it was so expensive here, and we didn't feel the need to spend that much money over here, okay, so it was always like, oh, it's a lot cheaper in India, so I'll just get it when I go there. Nowadays, things have changed. I think people, in general, tend to spend a lot more money than they used to before, so people are willing to buy, pay the premium prices and buy clothing and stuff from here, and that's the reason why, I mean, we've got so many stores. I'm sure that somebody is buying. Otherwise, they wouldn't be there. And if you compare the prices, they're definitely a lot more than what you would get the same item for in India, which is acceptable and understandable, because they bring the stuff here and they're paying the rent and stuff like that, so they have to increase the prices. But it is also true that I think people are willing to spend--I think as our kids are growing older, they are willing to spend more money to do that, which we were not. We were always like more frugal, because we came here, we struggled setting up our lives. We didn't have anybody here, whereas for our kids, they know their parents are there. So it's a lot different in this generation, and I think that's why they are buying a lot more, as a result of which there are a lot more Indian stores now, I mean, way more than what we had at that time.

Hampapur

I see. That's interesting. It's hard to imagine there only being a few. So you mentioned that when you first moved here, not everything was available?

Datta

Yes. I'll give you an example. It's like Bengali fish. The Bengalis are fish eaters, and fish was really not available, other than what was available at the regular grocery stores like Ralph's or whatever, and the fish here is different from the typical Bengali fish. Now what they do is the fish actually comes from Bangladesh. They sort of do an overnight and they quick freeze it, and I know there's some way of doing it. I don't know, because even though I'm a Bengali, I'm not much of a fish eater, so I don't buy a lot of fish. But they quick freeze it and they send it here, so it is available over here. So stuff like that. Even groceries, I think the variety--when I came here, the stores were a lot smaller. They carried a lot less items. Now if you go to grocery stores, even vegetables from India, everything's available here. A lot more vegetables, a lot more packaged goods from India are available which were not available at that time. And then, of course, like I said, the clothing and from bindis to sari blouses, petticoats, everything is available here now, sari falls, like everything, which wasn't as prevalent twenty-five years ago.

Hampapur

Wow. Okay. So you mentioned that you primarily eat Indian food at home, so is that mostly Bengali food?

Datta

For the most part I would say, yes, for the most part. It's just become regular routine. It's a lot easier to do. For me, even though Indians, especially Bengalis I would say more than just regular Indians, Bengalis, basically, they live to eat. They eat a lot and when we go back to India, it's more like the whole day revolves around every meal, what we're going to eat, just finish eating breakfast and they're thinking about what we're going to cook for lunch, and then we're going to think about what they're going to cook for the snack. For both my husband and me, eating is really not that big of a deal. It's like you just eat to survive. You really don't need to be cooking that extensively every day. So it's just a lot easier with the Bengali food. We have a routine. We sort of know what we want to eat and just go with that, and change the routine, of course, every week. But it's primarily the same backbone. It's rice, a couple of veggies, and one or two non-veggie, some chicken, some fish, whatever, and then you just do mix and match for the whole week. You just do multiple vegetables and stuff, and you just mix and match for the whole week. That's the way we eat here. We're just trying to make our lives a lot simpler, because I don't want to be sitting in the kitchen all day long. I have other things to do.

Hampapur

Okay, I see. Do you have any other religious activities besides the Bengali community activities?

Datta

Not really. I don't do poojas at home, so, no. So it's basically whenever we have a pooja outside, that's where I go. I don't do anything at home.

Hampapur

And when you visit India, where do you usually go visit?

Datta

I usually go--my dad lives in Delhi, so I go to his house and I stay with him while I'm there, and when I go to Calcutta, I stay at my in-law's place, because my sisters-in-law, they're still there, my husband's family. He comes from a very large family, and about half of the family lives here and half lives there, so we go and stay with them, and that's basically the way. And we don't go for very extended periods of time, so it's always usually for two to three weeks, that's it, not more than that.

Hampapur

And what kinds of things do you like to do when you go back to India?

Datta

Basically, it's all shopping and like visiting with relatives, because it's like once you go there, everybody invites you, and they feel bad if you don't go and eat at their house. So it's like every morning and evening, you're eating at people's houses, and literally you feel like, okay, when is this going to end, because I can't eat this much. But I guess in India, the way people show their love is by feeding you, so it's a cultural thing. So when you go and the whole table will be full of food, and they'll be feeding you, but you just can't eat that much, and you think, I wish I could take this back home so I could eat this later on, and you can't. [laughter] So, yes, that's basically what we do, just eat and shop and just interact with the relatives, because you're seeing them after a while and see how they're doing and stuff like that. Yes, that's it.

Hampapur

Okay. Do you still watch Hindi movies?

Datta

Yes, yes, but now it's on DVD or whatever. Yes, yes, but we watch a lot over here on the Internet sometimes. You can watch the movies on the Internet, so sometimes, yes, we do watch Hindi movies.

Hampapur

And did you ever get your citizenship?

Datta

Yes, yes. Both my husband and I are U.S. citizens. I mean, he got it right away, as soon as he was eligible, and actually, I got it as soon as I was eligible too, so

I've been a citizen for over twenty years now, twenty-one years, and my husband has been a little bit over that, maybe twenty-four years, I think.

Hampapur

Why did you choose to get your citizenship?

Datta

Okay. For my husband, it was because he was working for Northrop. He had to be a U.S. citizen for the security clearance and stuff like that. For me, it started off being because he worked for Northrop; it would be a lot easier if I was a U.S. citizen too, for security-clearance reasons. I didn't need it for my job, like I told you, because in my job, they don't require U.S. citizenship. Then it was also because I figured we are never going back, okay, so I sort of assimilated in the culture over here. I love it here. I have no regrets whatsoever about coming over here. I have no intentions of ever going back to live there, so I figure if I'm going to live over here, I should assimilate, become a U.S. citizen and be part of where I live.

Hampapur

What kind of process did you have to go through to get that?

Datta

Oh, it's basically the process is, like you apply for your citizenship and then they do a test, they take a test. It's an oral test. I don't know if they have anything written now, but at that time it was just an oral test. You have to study a little bit, because you have to know about the U.S. Constitution and certain things about the Constitution they're going to ask you, and so we go through the test. And then subsequently, once you pass that, they call you for taking the oath, and then you go and take the oath and you become a U.S. citizen.

Hampapur

How long did you have to wait before you applied for citizenship?

Datta

I think I applied in 1988, and I got my citizenship in April of '89. So around '88, yes, that's when I applied, because I think I was eligible three years after I came here, because my husband was already a citizen. So since I came here in '85, I was eligible in '88, so that's when I applied.

Hampapur

And while you've been living in the U.S., are there any American customs you or your family had picked up?

Datta

Thanksgiving, Christmas, because basically we never celebrated Christmas there. Thanksgiving, absolutely, a no-no. I mean, we never had Thanksgiving. Christmas at least there were people celebrating Christmas there. It wasn't a big thing for us. Here it is definitely. We do--my sister-in-law does the Thanksgiving dinner every year at her home in San Diego, and the whole

family, we all go there, and she actually does turkey and stuff like that. Okay, it's not Indian food. Christmas, most of the time I do it in my house for our family, so it is a big thing. We do the typical exchange of gifts. I decorate my house with all the lights and the trees and everything, and then we eat. So those are, I would say, the two biggest traditions that we do. Fourth of July fireworks and stuff, yes, sometimes. Sometimes we get to go; sometimes we don't get to go. So it's not like a big thing where we are absolutely barbecuing every Fourth of July or anything like that. We do sometimes, depending, or one of my other sisters-in-law, they do it and we all go over and we get together there, but the biggest thing, I would say, is the Thanksgiving and Christmas. It's like our big holidays for our family.

Hampapur

Did you start celebrating those before you had kids, or after?

Datta

After, after. It was actually more the kids sort of push you into that, because everybody's doing it in school, and then slowly you start getting into it, and slowly you start, okay, we did it one year and then the next year somebody invites you, you go to their house. Now we are to the point where, because all the kids are grown, all my cousins and everything, now we are to the point where it is a family thing, and we do it every year with the family, so if anybody else invites me, I wouldn't go, because it's a family thing, and we will get together and do it.

Hampapur

Do you have any other family customs or traditions?

Datta

Not really. Once a year--our new year is in April, in the middle of April, so one of my sisters-in-law, she does a pooja every new year, and so we all go for that. It's a family thing and then she invites some of her friends and stuff too, but that's an--every year she does that. Apart from that, it's just the Durga pooja, which is like a community thing more than a family thing. We don't get to do it, celebrate anything as a family, because it's always in the middle of the year. Everybody's in school. It's hard to sort of coordinate. We tried to do it a couple of times when the kids were younger, but now with all the kids being all over the place, it's so hard that we just stopped doing that. Whereas for Christmas and Thanksgiving, everybody is home, so it's a lot easier to do that, yes.

Hampapur

Right. Okay. Does your family do any trips or holidays, vacations, things like that?

Datta

We've done it a couple of times, depending on with the different members of the family. We've done it. Sometimes we can't coordinate it between the

families, so then we just do our own, they do their own. But we have gone on trips together at times, yes, we have.

Hampapur

Okay. Then you mentioned in the first part of your interview these perceptions that people from different parts of India have of one another. Is that something that you've seen in the U.S. as well?

Datta

Absolutely. A lot of times--this is my feeling. It might be just my personal feeling--having friends who are Bengalis right now, and like I told you, I didn't have any Bengali friends before, I find that they are just basically transported from India to here. The mentality has remained the same. Even in spite of being here for many years, there are certain things that they think of which I find very--like I said, even my mom was more liberal than a lot of the women over here, okay. They still think the same way, with girls versus boys, and, yes, all of us have a very overwhelming--the education is a very big thing for most Indian families over here. I mean, I think almost all Indian families, education is a very big thing. So things like that, definitely, I'm assuming has changed, and most of the people who come here are very educated people, so education must have been a big thing there too, for them, and that's why they're here. But a lot of them, I feel, they are still very, very tunnel vision. They still have a lot of misconceptions about people from the other parts of India, much less people from the other parts of the world. Because, basically, they grew, for example, as Bengalis, with Bengali friends. They came here; they have friends who are Bengalis. So they didn't really seek anything any different.

Hampapur

I see.

Datta

I am assuming when they work--I don't know how they interact with people at work and whether they really have friendships there. I do, where I actually interact with people I work with, in the sense that we have discussions about culture, we have discussions about different--the way they live, the way I live. I like to learn about the way different people do different things, and we actually--they are not just a hi, bye, oh, this is work kind of thing. I actually interact with them. I don't know how many other women do that. I wouldn't be able to say. But I do notice in my interactions with the other women here, most of them still have a very, very narrow mind. Even now it's like, "Oh, I wish my daughter would marry a Bengali, or my son would marry a Bengali." And for me, in fact, it was more like I wish--I mean, it's nice if they marry Indian, because the culture is kind of similar, so it's a lot easier, but the overwhelming thing is that the guy has to be nice, number one, and the second thing is, I really didn't care if he was a Bengali. My daughter is marrying a Bengali, but that was

not because I wanted her to marry a Bengali kind of thing. So it was more that--in fact, I think I am a lot more comfortable with people who are not Bengalis, so I would interact a lot better with them. So to me, it's not, but I do notice that definitely it's very much there within the women over here. I mean, still, some of their mentalities, I keep thinking, my god, my mom wouldn't say something like this.

Hampapur

Right, right. So it sounds like the different communities kind of stick to themselves.

Datta

Yes, I think so. I don't know how it is--I think in the other communities, it is pretty much the same, like Gujaratis, they stick with the Gujaratis, and Punjabis stick with the Punjabis. I think that's the way it is. But for Bengalis, pretty much, even though they do have friends--I know Bengali friends of mine do have friends who are not Bengalis--somehow I feel the mentality is still very, very like a very middle-class kind of mentality. So I wouldn't say that I really have a lot of close friends here. I mean, I have a lot of acquaintances, a lot of friends. I interact with all of them, but it's all to the level where they're friends, like I talk to them, it's fine, we share each other's joys and sorrows, but it's not where mentally we have the same place.

Hampapur

Okay. So it sounds like your upbringing and your moving around, having more Westernized parents, has affected your--

Datta

Absolutely, that's absolutely. I would definitely say that, because I know what it's like out there in different parts of the country, and it's not the way they think it is. Even racism, I've noticed that. We talk about racism over here, where white people treat brown people differently and stuff like that. It's there in India, where people of one part of India, they sort of have derogatory terms for people from the other parts. They don't want to--it's like they are different, "I am different," kind of thing. That's very much there. So nobody can tell me--I will not believe that there is any more racism over here than there is back in India amongst the Indians living there, because over here now, especially if you read the Indian newspapers and stuff like that, you will see that Indian, the next generation, they are doing so well, a lot of them. Even now in Obama's administration, we have a lot of Indians working there, so they are mainstreaming very much. And to me it's not a question of--I mean, racism, to a certain extent it's a very personal thing. There are some people who are that way, and there are some people--you can't generalize. You can't say all whites don't like browns; you can't generalize. And I think our kids are doing very well. They're all mainstreaming very well. It's not to the point where we can say,

"Oh, my kid didn't do well because he or she was discriminated against." I don't think that flies very much. I think it's the way you look at stuff, and like I said, racism is there, but it's there everywhere. So it's not like I would have been better off if I was in India amongst my own people. That's not true at all, okay. I didn't see that over there. Growing up in different parts, I didn't see that. Everybody is very discriminatory against other people. So I think I'm happy the way we are here. I have no complaints. I think we've done pretty well as a community too, as an Indian community. We've all done--per capita, our income is pretty high. We've all done very well. Kids, for the most part, have done very well over here. All have good careers. They're all self-sufficient, independent kids, so I don't see any reason for us to complain.

Hampapur

Okay. When you first moved here, did you see or experience any racism?

Datta

I personally did not. The reason why--like I said, because of the place I worked, which was my first interaction, really, with people, is I worked in a place where we had a lot of people from different countries. So I didn't ever feel I was discriminated against because of my race. And I tend to not look at things that way also, in the sense that if somebody doesn't like me, say, at work, and let's say that that person is Caucasian and I'm not, so I don't automatically assume it's because I'm brown that they're treating me this way. It might be just that person doesn't like me. It's a personality issue. Or even if he or she is racist, then it's just him or her. It's not everybody, okay. So I don't look at things that way. I don't ever automatically assume if something happens to me that's negative, I don't automatically assume that, oh, I'm being picked on because I'm brown. I don't look at it, and that's the way I raised my kids too. So I have never had an issue where either Sarmistha or Sanjit came home from school and told me, "Oh, this happened to me because I'm brown," or, "This happened to me because I'm Indian," or, "Somebody picked on me because I'm Indian." It has never happened, and they know I wouldn't go for that, unless there was really a case of--and I'm not saying it doesn't happen. It does. I have personally never experienced it. So unless something really--a teacher doesn't like you, there may be something wrong with the way you're interacting with the teacher. There may be a problem with that particular teacher, but it's not automatically because, oh, the teacher is white and you are brown that they don't like you.

Hampapur

Okay. What about the Bangladeshi community in L.A.; do you see any mixing between the Bengali and Bangladeshis?

Datta

Yes, there is a lot of mixing. They do come for our poojas. They actually have a Durga pooja of their own, run by their community, which we all go to also, so

we do support each other, the Bangladeshi community, and then they run all the Bengali grocery stores. So if you want anything typically Bengali, you go to one of their grocery stores for that. [laughs]

Hampapur

Okay. So there are specifically Bengali grocery stores?

Datta

Yes, there are now. Yes, there are, there are.

Hampapur

I didn't know that.

Datta

Yes, there are.

Hampapur

Where are they?

Datta

A lot of them are in--do you know where Koreatown is, near downtown?

Hampapur

Oh, yes, yes. That's where Little Bangladesh--right.

Datta

Because a lot of Bangladeshis live there, and a lot of the stores are there. There's one, I think, in Pioneer. It's called Little Takka. I don't know if you've seen it. There's one there, and there's actually one in Torrance also now, I heard, in north Torrance, that there is one there. So they're slowly opening up different stores because of the large Bengali community too, and that's where you get a Bengali fish and you get the Bengali sweets and you get Bengali food.

Hampapur

Okay, so the different culinary items. Okay. You had mentioned that at work you really interact with the people that you work with and have discussions, so what are some of the things that you guys discuss or talk about?

Datta

A lot of it is actually about our kids, I think, different ways that we've raised kids. And now over the years as there are people coming into work who are the same age as my kids, so I like talking to them to see how they grew up. To me it was always a very big thing when my kids were growing up, is I used to talk to people from here, who actually grew up here and were originally from here, because I always felt that this is where I'm raising my kids. I need to know what's going on out there. So I need to know what a rave party is, I need to know what's going on out there, because this is where I'm raising my kids, so I can't have the tunnel vision that I had before and think everything is fine just because I don't know what's going on out there. So I need to know what's going on, what actually goes on in high schools, what actually, like I said, what the

rave parties are, so that if my kids come and tell me, I sort of know what is what, even if they don't tell me what it is. And the culture is over here, because the culture is very different. For people who grew up over here, they're a lot more liberal, and there are certain--and while I am willing to give up certain things--I know my kids are not going to be the way I grew up--but there is also a boundary that I cannot cross. Having come from India, there are certain things I just cannot accept, and I felt that I need to know where my boundary would be, so for that I need to know what's going on on the other side of the boundary.

Hampapur

Sure.

Datta

Which is why a lot of times when my kids were growing up, I wanted to talk to people, just what their lives were like over here, how they grew up, and people from different ages, people who were like in their twenties at that time, people who were a lot older who had raised kids over here, just to see what was going on out there. I just wanted to have the knowledge of what was happening out there. So basically, we would talk a lot about kids and just cultural issues, just different cultures, how they grew up, how we grew up, how we raise our kids, how they're raising their kids, just stuff like that. It was more--then, of course, other cultures, they would ask us, "Arranged marriage, do those still happen? How does it work? And how could you marry somebody you didn't know, and how does that work out?" Just stuff like that.

Hampapur

Oh, yes, because you mentioned everyone was kind of from different places.

Okay. Did you ever have any concerns about raising your kids in the U.S.?

Datta

Yes. I mean, it's always a moral concern, because some of the morality is different, and it's not a question of whether it's right or wrong, it's just different, okay. And like I said, there are certain things I just cannot accept. Maybe if my kids did certain things I would accept it because I don't have a choice. Okay, what else can I do? They are my kids. I can't banish them from my life, and I would be the loser if I did that. So there are certain things you just hope that you raised them right for them to sort of have the same values that you have, or at least as close as possible. But there are certain things, like you have to let them go out and watch a movie at night or whatever, which my dad would never let me do. But there are certain things where you sort of know where they're at, and within a certain framework, you have to operate. But there are certain other things I just would not be able to take, but again, if they did it, at that point what would you do? You have to accept it. So that's the thing.

Hampapur

Okay. Did your kids grow up with any other South Asian kids around?

Datta

Yes. They interacted with a lot of--in school too, as well as in the community they had friends. And, yes, once they go in school and I think also once they go to college, they sort of tend to gravitate towards people from similar ideas, because it's a lot easier where there's not a lot of peer pressure then to be pressured into things you really don't want to do. So, for example, I've seen with Sanjit he doesn't have a lot of friends, but his best friend in Hopkins is a guy who's actually from India. He came here as an international student. So I think what happens is that they sort of tend to gravitate towards what they're familiar with, and whether the cultures are the same, and where they probably will not be pressured into doing things they are not comfortable doing.

Hampapur

Right. Do you think your kids will continue to visit India in the future as they get older?

Datta

For my daughter, yes, definitely, because she loves going there. My son, I don't know, because he really doesn't like--and he's not into the shopping scene anyway, so it's like he doesn't care, and it's too uncomfortable for him, like the bathrooms are different, the food is different. He gets sick, so for him it's not even worth it. For my daughter, it's worth it to do the shopping and to see people. She doesn't mind going there once a year or once every couple of years.

Hampapur

Okay. So you mentioned earlier that you really have enjoyed living in L.A. Can you tell me some of the things that you like about living here?

Datta

I like the diversity. I don't know how it would have been living--maybe I would have gotten used to it, I don't know, because my sister lives in Buffalo, which is a pretty much a very, very all-American kind of town with more Caucasian stuff like that. There's very little Indian interaction there. I like it here because there's so much diversity, both in food, people, everything, so it's a lot more comfortable for us, where you're not the only Indian person in the grocery store or whatever, and everything is available. I love the weather, so that is a good thing, and I'm settled in. I love where I live. I love this area. I don't think it could get much better than this. I like my job, I'm comfortable with it. I'm comfortable about the structure of my life right now. Everything is--I have nothing to complain about. Yes, it's always it could be better. I could live in a better house, a bigger place, but for the most part, I'm happy the way I am. I have no complaints at all.

Hampapur

Was it difficult for you, after moving around so much while you were growing up, to stay put in one area?

Datta

Actually, yes. That's interesting that you ask me that, because sometimes I think about it and I think, I wish I could move somewhere else just for a change, because half my life--I got married when I was twenty-four, and I'm fifty now, so half my life I moved everywhere, and for the last twenty-five years I've been here, and it's like, I've been here. That's it. So sometimes I wish we could move, just for a change, nothing else. But then I've gotten used to it, and then there are so many other issues here, like we have our home here, we have everything here, my kids are here, and it's just I feel like now it's not as easy as it was then, back when I was growing up, to uproot and move.

Hampapur

Do you ever miss living in a city, like a major city like Delhi?

Datta

No, not really, because it's just too crowded there. Here in L.A. we kind of have the best, because we live here, kind of outside of L.A. proper, but on the other hand, like if you want to go for a musical, if you want to go for a show, everything is available here, both Indian shows and shows from here. Like you want to go see "Phantom" or whatever--everything is--there's constantly something going. You can always do what you want to do, and I love that. That's the nice part with living here.

Hampapur

When you moved from Lawndale, was that when you moved to P.V.?

Datta

Right, right.

Hampapur

Okay. And when was that?

Datta

In '97.

Hampapur

Why did you decide to move to Palos Verdes?

Datta

The reason we moved is when we lived in Lawndale, my kids went to private schools, because the schools were not what we wanted. So at that point, we figured that let's move to a place where they can go to the public school. Instead of putting the money into the private school, we'll just pay it towards the mortgage, and we can live in a nicer place, and they can go to good schools. And for my husband, there was just one option and that was P.V., because the schools are the best in the South Bay over here, and to him, the focus of his life is, I want to give my kids the best. Because he comes from an extremely

middle-class family, where they really were not very well off, and they didn't go to the best schools or anything like that, so that's what he wanted to give his kids. So that's when we decided to move to P.V., and we started looking and it worked out and we came to live here. And so I can-- predominantly, more than anything else, more than living in a more upscale area or the ocean or whatever, it was the best schools. That was our predominant reason for moving to P.V.

Hampapur

So it sounds like education is important again in the next generation.

Datta

Oh, yes, absolutely, absolutely. For us it was. That was the biggest thing. Our whole lives have been geared towards the education of the kids.

Hampapur

Right. And you mentioned your father is still interested.

Datta

Yes, exactly, is exactly like that, and he still is, and he still is very interested in what--Sanjit is going to graduate next year. What's he going to do after that? And has he started applying? And like I said, he's eighty-six years old. He's still on top of all that. [laughter]

Hampapur

How have you liked living in P.V.? Is it very different from Lawndale?

Datta

Yes. It's very different, because first of all, the demographics is very different over here. It's away from--Lawndale, it was more crowded and like in the heart of the city kind of thing. Over there, stores everywhere, there's more graffiti, stuff like that. This is a more upscale area, so I feel a lot safer. And because it's kind of a little bit away from everything, it's more quiet, it's more calm, more serene. I like that. And I don't know whether it is because my dad was in the navy, I did all those cruises on the ship, or whatever, I find the ocean very relaxing. So to me, when I look out and I see the ocean, I mean for me it's a personal thing, I find it very relaxing, so I'm happy that I live here where I have the opportunity of living by the ocean, and I have the really good fortune of having an ocean-view house. Like I said, I have no complaints. I love living here.

Hampapur

When you moved here, would you say it's as diverse in P.V. as it was in Lawndale, or has that changed?

Datta

Lawndale, I think the demographics is changing a little bit now. It is more Hispanic, more blue-collar Hispanic, whereas over here it is more professional people here and definitely a lot more Caucasian and Asian. I think that that's the overwhelming majority over here, so it's definitely different from

Lawndale, definitely, especially towards the end. I lived in Lawndale for about nine and a half years, and when we first started living there, it was more Caucasian. But slowly it started becoming more of a Hispanic neighborhood and a more like blue-collar Hispanic. It's not professional Hispanic, so there was a little bit of a gap there. And that's why, like I said, the kids never went to school there. I didn't know the neighbors there. I never interacted with anybody over there, and I was busy with my work, because I used to work full-time, and busy with my kids and stuff like that, so I really didn't. Here it's not that I interact really a lot with the neighbors, but, yes, the demographics is definitely different, and it's a lot more calm and serene over here and quiet over here.

Hampapur

Okay. Have you kept in touch with your sister? Or do you see her much?

Datta

Yes. I see her--actually, I don't see her that much, because just the issue of when she's on vacation, I'm on vacation, going to the East Coast, stuff like that. I see her every couple of years. I do talk to her on the phone all the time, but as far as seeing her, actually, I think I see my dad in India more often than I see her.

Hampapur

Okay. Then kind of making a switch to more present day and present times, so what do you like to do when you're not working?

Datta

When I'm not working, first of all, the house keeps me busy cleaning and just the regular doing household stuff. I do read a lot, and I do a lot of sewing, because I sew my own, like, sari blouses and stuff. I do my own sewing, and that takes a lot of time, because since I work, it's not like I can just sit and do it for a whole day, and I'm not a professional, so I can't churn it out in like two hours. So it takes me a long time to do it, but I enjoy doing that. For me, that's sort of a creative thing, where every time I make it, it's never perfect the way I want it to be, and then I think next time I'll change it this way and stuff like that, so that is a hobby I have. And like I said, I read a lot and just with a full-time job and keeping the house, that's a big thing, because I don't have any help. I don't have a cleaning lady or anything. So whatever I have to do, I have to do it, and just generally paperwork stuff, just things running a household and things I'm busy with. My husband and I, we watch Hindi movies. Sometimes we watch movies, and I still have a social life, where I go to people's houses and we always have one right after this, so there's always interacting with people, inviting people over; things like that keep me busy.

Hampapur

So those Bengali community activities, you've continued with them?

Datta

Yes, yes, absolutely, yes.

Hampapur

Where did you learn to sew?

Datta

I learned to sew in India. My sister taught me. She's very artsy craftsy. Like she's very good in painting or crafts, sewing and everything. So basically what happened was she used to sew all our clothes, and when she got married, I figured, oh, my god. Once you have somebody sew it at home, you don't like what the tailors do. So I said, "Oh, my god, who's going to sew my blouses?" So she said, "Okay, I'll teach you." So after she got married, she taught me how to make it, because I was never good at sewing. I hated sewing in school, but I figured it was a survival thing, and now I actually enjoy it. I mean, that's my hobby, and considering I used to hate it at school. It was like the worst day of the week, when we had the sewing class. And then I would take it home and have my mom do the stuff for me before I had to turn it in. But now I really enjoy it, and I love going to JoAnn, buying the fabrics. It's such a big part of my life now. It's my major hobby now, doing it, and I enjoy doing it. I can do it by myself, so I don't have to depend on the tailors, I don't have to depend on paying that much over here to get it done, and I do it all myself.

Hampapur

So mostly you make sari blouses?

Datta

Sari blouses and then sort of falls on the saris and stuff, and I make Sarmistha's blouses too. And it takes up a lot of time, because I can't do it in one shot and there are so many other things, and sometimes there are weeks I can't sew. But when I do have time, I enjoy doing that. I find that relaxing.

Hampapur

Do you sew by hand, or do you use a machine?

Datta

I have a sewing machine, yes, yes.

Hampapur

Okay. Wow. So do you foresee yourself staying in Los Angeles in the future?

Datta

I think so. The reason being, I'm so used to the weather and stuff now. I don't know where I would move. I can't think of anyplace I would move. The second thing is, I definitely want to be close to my kids, and Sarmistha, I think, will be here. Sanjit, he wants to be here, so I don't know how things will shape up in his life, because it's too early to tell, but he definitely wants to live here. I mean, he misses southern California. He hates being where he is. So I have a feeling that they will probably end up living here, and I definitely want to live close to my kids, because I've seen that with my dad. He has two daughters;

both of us live here. When he was younger, we had told him to try and get an immigration visa and stuff to come here, so at least he would have the option when he was older. He didn't do it then, because he loved his independence, and he didn't want to come and live here with us or anything. I think he kind of regrets it now as he's older, and I'm sure he's extremely lonely. But the thing is, I can't take up and leave all the time, so we try to do it where my sister visits separately from when I do, so that he has two occasions to look forward to. He misses the grandkids. He's very close to Sarmistha and Sanjit, extremely close, especially to Sarmistha, because she's his oldest grandchild. So he does talk to them on the phone and stuff; it's not the same. And I feel I don't want to miss out on my grandkids and stuff when they are here. I really want to be an active part of their lives and not just on the phone. So that's why I don't foresee going anywhere else unless there's a major change, they move somewhere else or something like that. I do foresee living here, close to where my kids and grandkids will be.

Hampapur

Has your father thought of moving here?

Datta

Now he does say that, but now there are a lot of issues where he can't because of medical reasons, that it's hard for him to come here; medical insurance he cannot get now, so I can't bring him here with no medical insurance. So that is-- but he should have done it way before, but at that time he was too headstrong. He didn't want to do it, and now it's too late.

Hampapur

Okay.[End of interview]

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