A TEI Project

Interview of Meena Garg

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1. Transcript

1.1. Session 1 (June 7, 2010)

Hampapur
: This is Veena Hampapur. It is Monday, June 7, and I'm here with Dr. Meena Garg.

Hampapur
: Thank you for agreeing to do this interview. I'd like to start off by asking about your childhood. Can you tell me where you were born.

Garg
: I was born in New Delhi in India.

Hampapur
: Okay, and can you tell me a little bit about your family and your childhood.

Garg
: Yes, I was the firstborn child of my parents, so I had the usual lot of showers of whatever you say. And I had a younger sister who was one and a half years younger to me, and I think there was a lot of jealousy issues which later on took a really serious turn, because she ended up dying of cancer when I was seven and a half. I think I was in grade school, first or second grade. So it was quite a difficult childhood in which so much attention was on me, and then it was diverted to a child that was dying in the family. And then I became again the oldest and the only child again until my parents decided to have more children, which was much later.

Hampapur
: Okay, and can you tell me about where you grew up. Was it in a house or an apartment or--

Garg
: My father worked for the government of India, so we lived in the government housing for a while, and then we had our own house, which was in just like a

private house. But we ended up having to move out of the house and move back into the apartment because of my sister's treatment. We had her stay closer to the hospital because of communication and travel time, and she had to go for daily or three-times-a-week radiation therapy, and so we had to actually move out of our house to be in the apartment so she could be--so we lived both ways, you know, sometimes in apartment. And the apartments, there is government housing, so probably if you are at a certain level in the government, so all the people in the neighborhood will be in the same level of housing, you know. So socioeconomically you are sort of grouped in the neighborhood, wherever, how your father's position is in the government. So there is like one-bedroom, two-bedroom, three-bedroom government housing, which is like flats, subsidized housing for government workers. So we work in a socioeconomically equal [unclear] neighborhood is how we grew up.

Hampapur

Okay, and what did your father do for the government?

Garg

My father, actually, he worked in the Home Ministry, they call it, and he worked on the--it's very interesting, because he worked on the Foreign Assignment Section, in which--the government of India was very poor, so they would do--they couldn't buy things for money, because the government didn't have enough money, so they did a lot of exchange of personnel. So some electricians or engineers or even doctors who would go to the developing countries, so in Africa, for example. So he would organize for the people will come in; they will do interviews; and he will organize the people from India, and he will travel with the team all over India to interview people. And they would get a two-year or a four-year contract. So it was a constant cycle, so he would go through one cycle, and then the next cycle would start.

Garg

So he did the administrative work in that area, so when the delegation comes from Nigeria, for example, they say, "We want teachers, high school teachers." So he would have the list. I don't know how the government probably has the list. He would send out these letters. Then he will go through their CVs and he will select people for interview, arrange the interviews, and then go over from there. So it was a very interesting job, I thought.

Hampapur

Yes, it sounds like it.

Garg

But he, for his job, he had to actually--back when, you know, so many years ago--he had to learn computer programming in order to--and computers were like archaic back then--and he had to learn computer programming as part of

his job training to be able to do this kind of work, I guess, now I think about it. So yes, that's what he did in the government.

Hampapur

Okay, and what about your mom? Was she at home with you and your sister?

Garg

Yes, my mother stayed home. She was married early, so she did a master's in sociology, and it was really a hardship for her, because we were little; there was not much help in the house. But she never worked, you know. She took care of us. But she had her master's in sociology, so she mostly--we actually didn't think that mother's supposed to work. We just thought she's supposed to take care of us. So she was always at home with us.

Hampapur

Did you see your extended family much, or did you have extended family in New Delhi?

Garg

Yes, we have a lot of family, actually, in Delhi, and we did grow up very close to our cousins, and many of them were in the walking distance. It seems very different from how our kids grow up here, because we would be practically--you know, every week we were--and, of course, there was no phone. You just go there and they come over anytime. So, yes, a lot of meeting with the cousins.

Hampapur

What would you do when you met with your cousins?

Garg

I guess we played in the front yard or, you know, had some food together. My mothers will always be in the kitchen, cooking, and we were just playing outside. You know, I would say maybe summer is pretty long, and that's when we have more time. That's what memories I have, that we would be playing games outside, which were--it was really interesting, because we had this self-made game, and we called it Pittu. I don't know anybody ever plays that here, but we would collect the stones from the yard, you know, that would stack, and we would make stacks of stone on a piece of brick. All we needed was one ball, and after that you could have twenty players, ten players, two players; it doesn't matter. And you basically have a distance from this mound of stones, and you hit the stones, and then your job is to remake your pile of stones, stand them one on top of the other, and the other person has to hit with the ball, anybody on your team. So you run around. One team is hitting. And it was like nothing. It costed nothing. [laughs] One ball is all it took, and that ball was--half the time it didn't have enough air, so it wouldn't bounce very good. We didn't care. That was one of the most popular games we had, and you didn't need any preparation. You just take off your shoes and start running.

Garg

I told you we lived in these housing, which are government housing. So the houses could be small, but there was government regulation of open space between the houses, so if you lived in a quad, which was four--eight houses was one quad in the smaller quad--in the middle was a playground, always, that was enclosed for kids, and had the swing, had the slide, and had the grass area. And that was how the planning was done for the government housing, so we always had a front common playing area, and a little backyard, where you would usually have some vegetable garden or something. So we always played in the front. So when you get out in the front, other kids might join you from whoever lives on the quad.

Hampapur

Okay, so you knew your neighbors and--

Garg

Yes, yes, yes.

Hampapur

What were some of your hobbies when you were growing up? What were some of your interests?

Garg

You know, I always liked to play, but I was never good at anything really, so I would say, you know--and the other limitation was that you didn't always have memberships to clubs and all that. So I think at school and in college I did swimming, because there was always the swimming pool. I played badminton, because that didn't take much, you know. You put a net and--and then I played tennis as a kid. Again, tennis, you know, I would go to this place where they had the rackets and the balls so I could play there. But it's not necessary that every child can afford a tennis racket, and then go to the store and buy, you know, twenty-four balls. No. [laughs] It was not a priority. So I think I would say badminton was the cheapest sport. But I really never played team sports. I was good at volleyball, actually, but didn't play much of that, either.

Garg

And somehow I think--I don't know. I think in our kind of environment or when we were growing up, if you were good at studies or if you thought you wanted to study, then there was not a lot of emphasis on learning other things. For instance, a lot of my cousins were learning music and dance, and I never had any interest. I was like, "Why would I waste my time in dancing around when I could study?" [laughter] And I really honestly thought it was a waste of time, and I wish now that I didn't think that way, you know. I wish I learned something more. So I didn't have any serious hobbies.

Garg

But my grandfather always lived with us, and he would take us on these long walks, and so all summer we'd wake up five-thirty in the morning; we walked with him. I don't remember. I think we must have been going two miles, three miles one way. We'll run and we'll walk, and he would walk with his walking stick. But he never stopped walking. He walked, I think, till the day he died in the eighties. But we used to do a lot of walking and running with him or whatever that was. So he would wake us up in the morning; say, "Okay, get up," and we'd go walking. But I really honestly didn't do any team sports or anything like that, no.

Hampapur

Did anyone else live with your family besides your grandfather?

Garg

So my grandfather and then my father's youngest sister also lived with us, so that would be my aunt. But she was only four and a half years older to me, and growing up, I didn't know. I thought she was my older sister. I didn't know that she is my aunt, because my father's mother passed away, and when he got married, this was my grandfather's second marriage, so this was his half-sister, you say? What, I don't know. Back then we didn't say anything like that, because it wasn't considered a good thing in the family. So I grew up thinking, even though I say I was the firstborn, that she was my older sister. But when I grew older, then I found out that she's my aunt. So my grandfather and my older sister, so to say, was always with us. We went to like the same school, so she was always four, five classes ahead of me. And then my mother and then my father. That's it.

Hampapur

Okay. So you mentioned having an interest in studying, so can you tell me, I guess starting with your grade school, do you have any memories from then?

Garg

Yes, grade school I changed many times. I was in this English Medium, they call it, private school. And then we had to move two, three times because of my sister. First we tried to move to our house, and we moved back, and we had to move one more time for her; I don't know why. And so I ended up in what we call as government schools, after starting in private, which are, again, subsidized. You know, you don't pay anything. But if you are a good student, and then there were all these exams you could take, so you got snacks at school, and I'm sure we got some advanced placement classes, which I don't remember. So starting from my third, fourth grade I would always get the first prize or whatever, and then I would go to all these competitions and I would do these exams, and then I would pass, and then they'd get a bottle of milk in the lunchtime, you know, only for the advanced students, or we'd get some snacks, you know, some snacks. And these crates came, and only certain kids in the

class. [laughs] So I was one of them. Like right from the beginning I was getting those things in the class, which makes you feel very special. Now I feel stupid, like, you know, you have a student, twenty-five kids in the class, and two of them get a bottle of milk. [laughter] Extra energy for the brain, I think. I don't know.

Garg

So yes, we got--so right from the grade school. And my father was very fond of teaching me, so I remember that--I was actually probably a very difficult child because I saw my parents grieving a lot over my sister's illness and her death subsequently. Some people came to our house in India. That's how they grieve. I still remember this. As a child, I was sitting there, and my mother would be just going about, you know, taking care of us, whatever, and then all these people, family people, would come. They will sit in the living room, and they all start crying, and then my mother starts crying. So I told--in the living room, I went there and I told everybody that they should leave, because every time they come, my mother cries. Then I got scolded. I got punished. [laughs] I wasn't supposed to say that to the relatives, but I was like, "What do I care? They make my mom cry, so I want them to leave."

Garg

So my father would take me away from home, because I couldn't get along with my mother because--I never got along with my mother during those years, because I think it was so hard for her to deal with me and my feelings. To this day I don't think she understands how I felt. I felt like, "This is ridiculous." And I also said in public that, I said, "Why are you sad? It's a good thing she died, because she was always in pain." I saw her vomiting blood in the house, you know, and she was always in pain. Like, "Why are you sad? It's a good thing she died, because we could never celebrate anything while she lived, in her last year." So I was like, "Why is everybody crying now, and what is going on?" I was probably six or seven, you know.

Hampapur

Yes, you were very young.

Garg

Death didn't really register to me as a really sad thing. To me it was like--I don't know what it was. So my father would take me out of home on weekends, and then we would go to the garden, and he will say, "You can eat whatever you want today," because I hated eating Indian rotis every day. I loved to eat just fruits, nothing else. And then he would teach me, and we would go through books. Sometimes it would be storybooks. Sometimes it would be any books. Sometimes we would just be playing some game. And we would spend like four or five hours outside the house in the park, and he taught me a lot. He put a

lot of spirit into me in terms of competition and learning, and I think it went from there on all the time.

Garg

Of course, then I grew up. When I was in high school, he didn't teach me ever. But it was in grade school that he taught me how to study, how to sit and concentrate, how to solve a problem, how to look for what's your weakness. And he would teach me, as a little kid. I don't know why he taught me. I think he taught me to divert my attention from what was going on in the house, which he thought was too stressful for me. And the houses were not so big, you know, as a three-bedroom or two-bedroom house, so it's not like you can go and lock yourself in your room and turn on your TV or your radio, nothing. So that's why I think he did that.

Hampapur

Did your parents encourage you to do well in school, or was it, like you said, more just a distraction from what was going on with your sister?

Garg

Yes, you know, it's funny, because in the grade school I didn't feel pushed to do anything more. I just did it, I think. I don't know if I was bored at school or--I think I was very inspired, because my father would take me and make it fun for me, and you know, the competition thing really became big for me. I would finish these competition exams and come out all wired up, and I'd tell my father, "I know I did this right. I did this right. But I'm not sure about this thing."

Garg

He'd say, "Just calm down, and we'll see." And I would be so anxious to see if I win it, like I get it or not. I was very, very competitive then. Then when later on as I'm going to higher classes, I realized that my mother, my mother really wanted me to become a doctor, and my father actually tried to pull me out of medical school. He said, "You know what? It's not worth it for women to go into this profession. There's so many things you can do." So I think I kind of got pushed in some way, but not really seriously. My father always told me, "Do home economics. Become a CIS officer," the Central--it's like the CIA here; it's something--I forget what it's called. He said, "Oh, take the exam and become a government officer. Life is easy and it's good." [laughs] But I guess I just ended up becoming a doctor after--but there was not a lot of push for me, and I don't know, because maybe the push was for my brothers; but I didn't feel it. I didn't feel that way very much, no.

Hampapur

Okay. And these competitive exams that you mentioned, can you explain what those are.

Garg

Those are in the--up to fifth grade for advancing students, so you get a stipend if you pass, so these are like scholarship exams. If you are considered a grant student, based on your scores and that, you get a monthly stipend. Schooling was free anyway, and on top of that I got some money for books. I don't know; it was not much. I mean, it may have been something like fifty rupees a month. In some of the exams you get like a hundred rupees if you pass, you know, you get towards you. And then you get the food every day in the school, all the school year. But those were like probably internal by the school's organizations. I don't know who organized it. I should find out about those. I don't know. [laughs] But I always got a little money or a prize. I even remember getting a school bag and a water bottle once, you know. So you get little prizes and little perks for being good, you know. That's about it.

Garg

And they really finished in the--they were just in grade school. After sixth grade, I didn't do those exams at all. After that was regular studies. This was very early on in like second grade, third grade, fifth grade I would always do these things, which I don't see here at all. We have some gold somethings here, but I have never heard of this. I guess it was to help the regular poor people, you know. I mean, we weren't poor like we don't have food to eat, but we were not, you know, rich like we have five servants or any [unclear]. There's no such thing. So we're just like ordinary people.

Hampapur

And then did your neighbors, did they also attend the same types of schools?

Garg

Yes, a lot of the neighborhood. We actually--you know, this is why--we moved so many times, and we ended up just going to neighborhood schools, which were government schools. So we all walked, so when you got up, you get to school in the morning, so many kids are walking with you, because we all went to the same school. So yes, most of the times we were walking to school with all the kids from the neighborhood.

Hampapur

Oh, that sounds nice. Do you have any memories from when you went further in school, maybe in middle school or high school? Were you still competitive?

Garg

I think I kind of slowed down, I think, a little bit. So when I got into these government schools and when I was in--so in government schools, you know, the primary language is Hindi, and so I learned English grammar and ABCs and how to read and write in English in my first grade, up to my first or second grade. And then I went into the regular school, so my English was behind. By the time I came to sixth or seventh grade when they start teaching English again, I was ahead of my class, because I had already learned those things. So

in so many ways I was a misfit. So at that point I tried going to a private school again, and I actually didn't do so well like other kids in private school. It was quite a shock to me, because I was always used to being on top. And then the private school told me that I was so young and I was not really fitting in their grade level, so I could go to private school one grade behind. And so I said, "No, I'm not going to no private school one grade behind. I'm fine where I am."

Garg

So I ended up staying in the government school system, which was a little bit more crowded and less one-to-one. You know, it was probably good teaching, but it was not as good as in private school. So I stayed there, but I really started really, really admiring a lot of my teachers, and I think in the high school, by the time I went to eighth, ninth grade, how my father was my idol, now my teachers became my idol. I think that's how I see myself.

Garg

A person I still remember, one of my chemistry teachers, I liked her so much. She always wore saris, and her hair was always done perfectly. So even now to this day I wish I could meet her somebody, but Mrs. Vashnay was her name, and I don't know where she is. Sometimes I wish--but it's a funny thing, because one of my teachers from grade school I have actually kept in touch with him, and I actually saw him three, four years ago when I went to Delhi.

Hampapur

Oh, wow.

Garg

Yes, I saw him once, and then again I have lost touch with him. But some of the teachers really became my good advisors in high school. But high school was hard, because I did the science pack [phonetic] and there was no time for anything. That's why I say I don't have any hobbies, because if you wanted to score well and you want to go into good colleges, you just had to work, work, work. So I think from--back then the high school for us was only to eleventh grade, so we did--ninth, tenth, eleventh was tough. It was tough. You just had to study, study, study. And there was not a--if you went to science major, then you had to choose in eighth grade, which I did, and then you have physics, chemistry, biology, all three, and it's like they are three heavy subjects to learn and to score well. And then math you have to do, and English you have to do well, because we didn't have advanced books in Hindi, so if you want to go to college, your English had to be strong. So believe it or not, in ninth grade I dropped Hindi. I never studied Hindi after ninth grade, because I figured it's not going to help me to get ahead. It's probably not a good thing. I can still read, but I didn't read Hindi or study Hindi after ninth grade, because I wanted to focus on science, you know, and like go one way.

Garg

But I think a lot of it was self-driven, not so much that my parents were pushing me at that point. They were happy I was never failing any exams, but they weren't pushing for me to be on the top. And I didn't really stay on top, like, I mean, I would score well, but that thing of always, you know, being the first in the class, I think kind of went away. [laughs] It's just weird.

Hampapur

In choosing science, did you choose to do that, or was it because your mom wanted you to go towards the medical field, or--

Garg

You know, I don't know. I did have more interest in science and math; that I know. Math I always liked. I mean, even to this day, if I don't do my L.A. Times sudoku in the morning, I haven't had my coffee. So math I liked, and then I thought physics was good, because it also goes like math sort of. So that's what pushed me. I'm not sure I was so much into biology in the beginning, but later on I had more interest in biology. But earlier on, I think it started with math. When I look at the books, you know, I looked at books, my older sister, my aunt, she was not in science at all. I would see these fat, fat history books and stuff, and I didn't like it at all. I thought, "No, let me stay with science; few words and it's to the point." I think a lot of it was my own decision, because my older sister was not in science, and I don't think my parents would have really pushed me to do science. But I liked it, I think.

Hampapur

What did you do after that? So you did science through high school, and you said you finished in eleventh grade?

Garg

Eleventh grade, yes.

Hampapur

Okay, and then where did you go from there?

Garg

In India we were like the post-war children, you know. We got independence in '47. I was born in '54. So there was a big shortage of specialists and, you know, experts, so there was a lot of push in India back then to push people into professional schools, so whether it's engineering or medicine. So you know how they do here is you always do undergrad first and then you go to medical school. But in India if you excelled, you could do one year of college, which was premedical, so you'd do, you know, more biology and stuff. You'd have the prereqs [prerequisites] in the premedical part, for one year, and if you scored or you passed the exams, you'd go straight into medical school. So basically, like after twelfth grade, you can go in medical school, and that's what I did, because I was like always in this competition mode. So I did a lot of courses and prepared for whatever. Like MCATs [Medical College Admission Tests] here,

we have entrance exam there, and I got into medical school after the first year of college, so it was very early. It was very early.

Garg

But, you know, I think it has good and bad, because I think if given the choice, I would--I should have done undergrad, studied some more. But I stopped reading, and I stopped paying attention to other subjects, like languages and stuff, because I was like get into the medical school. So you just study, study, studied, pass the exam, get into school, and go. But I was very inspired by my medical school teachers, too. I always wanted to be in medical school. [laughs] After I went to medical school I really liked my teachers in medical school, also.

Hampapur

And is that because of what they did, or because they encouraged you, or--

Garg

I don't know. I thought it was very inspiring. It's funny, because I even liked the way they dressed, you know, very professionally, and I'd still wear these saris. And, you know, medical school class would be a hundred and twenty students. That was a huge classroom, and for a professor to command the classroom, to keep us silent and have our attention, and we're all taking notes--of course, everybody's motivated in medical school. You know, it takes a long time to get there, and you want to be somebody. You want to do something. But still I thought it was amazing, and they were always so poised and--I just was very inspired by most--not so much the clinicians, but the professors that came to teach us. I was always very impressed by those professors. I was like, "Can I ever hold a class of a hundred and twenty people and keep them silent, listening to me, for one hour?" [laughs] So, yes, I liked that very much, and it was very inspiring for me.

Garg

But I think when I was studying in the medical school, my father told me many times, he said to me, "You are so young, and if you don't like it, if it's too much work, don't worry about it. Just quit. Do something else. You're a bright student. You can go anywhere. You can do anything." And I never heard of any other parent telling them--because I told him I will be crazy after working so hard getting into medical school, and now quitting. And he says, "No, there's nothing wrong with that. You should only do in life what you like." To this day I think like he must have been something, you know, to say to me like, "Quit if you don't like it. Quit it now." I think he had more of an understanding that I was very young to decide and get into a profession than I had at that point. Now I can see why he said that. He probably saw me so young in the medical school. "Does she even know what she is going to do?" [laughs] But, yes.

Hampapur

Okay. And just going back to something you mentioned earlier, you mentioned that you were part of the post-war generation and how that affected the professional schools. Were there any other effects you could tell from that time because of being in the post-war generation?

Garg

You know, I think there was a--the whole political system at that time was very geared towards raising children that will be something for their country, because I think the sentiment and the excitement of independence was so fresh. I know my own uncle, my mother's brother, who would tell me stories about how they would do these protests, you know, against the British government, and he told me that they had a lineup. They would have, you know, seventy-five young students of his age, like seventeen and sixteen years old, and they knew that they are going to be shot at or whatever, and they would say [unclear], and they would walk. And so they had four people standing there. One by one, they would walk, and they knew they were going to be hit with latis. You know, they wouldn't shoot. They would have these sticks they would hit the students [unclear] fall down.

Garg

He would tell me all these stories. And the prime minister of India at that time, he always had a special day. His birthday was celebrated in the whole country as Children's Day, and then you would have so many free things for the Children's Day. There was so much energy put in the education system, and I think that's probably why these scholarship programs were there--I don't know if they even exist today or not--that we all thought that you have to be somebody. In 1947 when they realized there was such a shortage, so a lot of good jobs went--like electricians were practically treated like they were engineers, because there was such a shortage of engineers. And then in 1952 they passed this thing that all the pharmacists were given M.D. privileges in India. I know one of my own aunt's husband, who was a pharmacist, became a doctor. I don't know how their license was. I don't think it was restricted. But they knew enough about medicine, and there was such a huge shortage of medical doctors that a whole number of them were made into MDs. They got doctor degrees instead of being pharmacy school.

Garg

So there was not only from our parents, from the whole generation thing was that time for children to excel and do something and help the country. Of course, I didn't help the country by coming here, but there was a lot of push and a lot of programs to push kids into professional careers so they will become something educationally and everything. You know, up until that time, farming was bigger, but I think after independence is when more push went into education.

Hampapur

Were there any tensions at that time when you were growing up, between different communities in Delhi?

Garg

You know, we didn't see that very much. I'm sure there was, but we didn't see that, because I think Delhi is such a cosmopolitan city and it's an international city. All the embassies are there, and I'll tell you, when my grandfather used to take us for walks in the morning, it was the Embassy Lane, and because they had the most beautiful gardens and the streets were pretty. I knew every embassy, you know. We would memorize names of countries and their capitals just by walking through the streets with him. So in Delhi we didn't have much tension. Actually, there is more tension now, I think, than it was. I don't know if we were naive, but I think Delhi was very cosmopolitan and very secure. You know, security and stuff was amazing in Delhi, so we didn't feel any kind of threatened feeling or whatever, nothing. And the government colonies were very safe. You always knew your neighborhood. You knew people. We always left our stuff outside, and nobody stole anything. I don't know.

Hampapur

So going back to medical school, were there a lot of women in your school? Was it common in that time for women to go into the medical profession?

Garg

You know, you're right, it wasn't very common back then, but I went to a all-girls medical school. It's the only one in Asia, actually. I don't know how many there are now, but I went to an all-girls medical school, so we were a hundred and twenty girls. And then since this was the only school, the school had a thing. They had reserved seats for every state, so if ten girls from Gujarat, ten girls from all the states, so they were ten prior--but they had to go through the same competition. They had to score the same way like Delhi students did, but the seats were reserved. So we even had girls of Indian origin from foreign countries, so like, you know, some of the Indians live in Mauritius, and so we'd always have ten girls from Mauritius. So they had kept their Indian citizenship or whatever, and they were coming from Mauritius. They would come from Mauritius to compete, and they could get into our school.

Garg

And then, for whatever reason, we had some seats for Iranian students. We always had Iranian students. We had Indians from Mauritius, and we had girls from all over the country, from Andhra [phonetic], from whatever. And I think they have changed that now, because--so all the other medical schools, the career medical schools, were 100 percent boys, so all the girls usually ended up in the Lady Hardinge Medical College, so it was only a girls' college at that time. For me, I didn't put that as a preference. I just want to get selected, and I

think you're right, girls were so few that all the girls ended up, if you were in Delhi, you end up mostly in those schools. Then if there is more girls--there were much fewer girls in other medical schools. So that's how we would go meet students at the other schools, to go meet other medical students.

Garg

But our hospital was also women's hospital, so then we were affiliated with one more hospital that had both men and women as patients. So we had to go to two hospitals. And then our hospital, one end was general hospital; the other end was children's hospital. As medical students, you don't go much in children's hospital, but it was--you know, in India--here we have so many children's hospitals. In India, we don't have children's hospitals. But mine was a unique one, that we had a--children's hospital was a separate entrance, but inside the services were connected for the two hospitals. So that's where we went for the training.

Garg

I'm probably giving you more information than you need.

Hampapur

Oh, no, no. This is great. This is great to hear. After you finished your training there, did you go somewhere else to study further, or did you start working?

Garg

Yes. Actually, my parents had moved away from India when I was in medical school. My father worked for the foreign assignment, and he got recruited himself in Africa. So after doing my internship in Delhi, then I went to Africa to work there for three years. So I didn't work in India at all. I just did one year of internship, and as part of the government programs at that time, young doctors had to work in rural areas, so six months out of that one year I had to work in a village setting, so we lived there as young interns and took care of students. Felt very incompetent, but we were there for six months. [laughs] That was just on the outskirts of Delhi. We were in a village for a six-month rotation, and then six months we'd work in our own hospital where we trained.

Hampapur

Was there a big contrast between--

Garg

It was a big contrast between the two, yes. Services were so limited on the clinic areas that anybody that looked sick to you, you have to send them to the city, basically. So you just kind of took care of regular little things that you can do as outpatient, and that's it. There's no inpatient services in the village at all. But we did provide, like day and nights coverage. We had nighttime clinic, in which somebody walks in with a fever or something at night, we take care of the patient. But there was no inpatient over there, just the clinic. But that's what all the--if you graduated from medical school, all the students, all the graduates

had to do six months of rural service out of one year, and six months in the main hospital.

Hampapur

Okay. And then after that you went to--

Garg

After that you go for residency. But that internship is mandatory. You don't even get your certificate without doing your rural training, because the medical education was subsidized by the government, and for this very reason, so every year when the doctors graduated, they had coverage in the village areas. And then the village areas were distributed amongst medical colleges in the country, so you couldn't pick where you want to go. You have to go wherever you get sent, so you have to go there for six months, unless you go to private schools, which back then there were hardly any. Now there are many, but back then most of the medical schools were government subsidized. Nobody could afford to pay so much money for medical school.

Hampapur

And then after you did that, that's when you moved to Africa?

Garg

Then I went to Africa for three years, yes, three years.

Hampapur

How did you feel about moving there?

Garg

I think that was another very exciting part of my life. I really enjoyed working there, and I thought that was real medicine, because, you know, in India there was such a hierarchy. When you are a student, you are just a student, and you have no responsibility. You come in, you go out, you come in, you go out, and nobody expects you to really do anything other than learn and pass your exams. But in Africa there is such a shortage of doctors that you're really treated like a doctor, and [unclear] say, "I'm just an intern. What do I know?" [laughs] But so much depends on you, and so many decisions. You have to really work.

Garg

So I worked in the--I stayed in the medical school, so it was the only medical school in the country, in Zambia where I worked. So medical students were there in the medical school. It was sixteen per class, sixteen medical students, and they didn't have enough people even applying to that medical school. That's how the education was so much behind, and there were fifteen or sixteen students per year. And then the hospital was huge. This hospital was bigger than--so there was a maternity section. There was medical-surgical, and here the children's hospital was huge. It was a children's--a huge setup. And the outpatient walk-in clinic were different for children’s and for main hospital.

Garg

It was a great experience, and that's where I really started liking pediatrics more than doing anything else. So that was a very good part of my work. And you work hard. You really work hard in that place. I think it's like--I always say that as a young kid I was probably so full of myself. "I'm so good. I can do anything. I'm the king." [laughs] And then I think as I went into the middle school, I realized that I really was not the best. I need to work on stuff. And then coming out of medical school, again I felt pretty good, but when I went to Africa, I said like, "God, you're not good enough. You've got to learn a lot." And that's when it inspired me to go into more education, because, you know, it's not enough to go to medical school. That's the one time I realized like, "You've got to get better. You've got to learn. You've got to decide what you want to be in the future."

Garg

I think so much responsibility falls on you as a doctor in Africa at that point, because you don't have the luxury of, you know, seven seniors looking after you and saying, "Hey, just take this blood work to the lab. The rest we'll take care of." No, you have to do it all. You're responsible for those patients. Then suddenly you realize, "God, I need to know more than what I know." So I started working towards my--I started planning about how to go about getting more education when I was in Africa. I felt that I needed to know more. The good thing was that because your basic training is good, and you get so much practice, and you do have some guidance, so you learn more, because you see so many patients from then on. Doctors learn by practice, so you learn a lot, and you learn very quickly because there's no choice. You've got to go do it. There's a hundred patients outside in the queue, and you have to do it.

Garg

But there was no scope for training in Africa, so I had to decide, because I didn't want to stay with just my basic medical training. I had to go someplace to learn more, and that's where I decided that I want to do pediatrics, and I was making plans where to go. Most of the people from Africa will go to England to do their master's program in medicine, so that's what I was planning at that time. But I couldn't stay there. I realized that. I always thought, "I will come back when I know more," but I've never gone back. But I always thought, "When I know and I can really help these people, I will come back someday to do that." But I was still very young at that time to know everything, but it's still a service to do whatever, you know.

Hampapur

Right. And were you in the city there in Zambia?

Garg

Yes. Yes, I was in the capital of Zambia is Lusaka, and it's the only medical school. So it's really a nice--actually, in some ways that hospital was more

modern than where I trained, because all the senior doctors there were all from England most of the times. Mostly from Europe, so they were French, Swiss doctors, and English doctors. They all came. And there's a lot of missionaries in that time also in Africa, and so we had a lot of mix of people again in there. So your seniors were mostly never trained--there was no training programs for advanced training in Africa. So they will be your guide to tell you, "You know, you can go to England and take this exam and do your training over there if you're interested."

Hampapur

Were there many Indians there at that time?

Garg

Indians were there because they were mostly on those contracts that I was telling you, but there was not that many Indians in the medicine, for whatever--I guess maybe doctors were still short in India, I don't know. Also maybe because there is not advanced training in Africa, maybe they didn't come. There were very few people like me over there. There were some of the Indian families that were there as merchants or, you know, in the business, that had stayed there for a long time. In Africa there's a lot of Indian families, and some of those kids who were there, they had been raised there. There were not that many kids from India that would go there at that time. So most of them were local people we worked with. And there was a lot of South African doctors, French doctors, other doctors, but not that many from India. Very few, very few, a small percent, yes.

Hampapur

Okay. So what happened with your plans with England? You said you were thinking of going there.

Garg

I took the part one for doing my--they said that I could go for a diploma in child health with my two years. I did two years in pediatrics in Zambia, and then I did my part one, and I passed it, but then for part two you have to actually find work there in England and live there, and I was in the process of doing that, but then I decided to come here, because we got married and I had a better chance to come here. Otherwise I would have gone to England to finish my--diploma child health is not as good as doing a full residency in pediatrics, but it's a start, so you can go for a two-year diploma and then--so I thought, "I'll start with that, and then I'll go and decide what--." You go from there. But I knew that I couldn't live in Africa for longer, because otherwise I will be just here where I am. I wouldn't learn any more than this. So I had to make some plan to either go to England--so either go to England and learn and then move back to India, or stay in England, whatever. I hadn't really not decided what I would do at that point.

Hampapur

Okay. So when you got married, did you go back to India to get married?

Garg

Yes, and then I came here from Africa.

Hampapur

Okay, so you went to India and you got married, and you came back to Africa.

Garg

Yes, because I was just on vacation, like I had taken time off to go to India, and I was not really planning for a marriage, but it happened. So I had to come back and finish my duties, because I have to formally resign and then move. So I came back to Africa. But I went from Africa, went to London, took the exam, then I went to India. So I had planned to do this vacation thing and come back to work, and that's what I did. After marriage I worked there for, I think, six, seven, eight months, more, to finish my time period that I was assigned, rotations [unclear].

Hampapur

Okay. And had you heard anything about the U.S. while growing up or had any expectations before coming?

Garg

Yes, you know, I never even thought of going outside of Delhi, let alone going to United States. But, you know, I don't know; I never thought. I think in the school time, the time is so little, and you're so preoccupied with just doing your studies, that I think until I went to Africa I didn't start thinking what life was going to be for me, what am I going to do. I think until that time you're just goal-driven, like pass the exam, pass the exam, make sure--and then you've finished the medical school and you realize you need a lot more. It's really a birth, you know. It's the beginning of your career when you graduate from medical school. That's how I felt when I went to Africa. I said, "Gee, you really have to plan your career now," and that's where I started in to thinking, you know, working and thinking like, "What am I going to do now? Now I have to decide." And I don't know.

Garg

I always liked pediatrics, but I never made any long-term plans at the beginning, you know. In the medical school it was just like pass the physiology, pass biochemistry, pass this, pass that; now I'm in third year, now I learn about clinics. So I think I was just information gathering, but when I see medical students, they're always already thinking. But I don't think I was thinking that seriously. I don't know. There must be some subconscious thinking, like you go to a rotation, you really like it, and you think this is what you want to do. But exposure to pediatrics was very limited in medical school in India, and you could not change your rotations. Here I see medical students coming and doing

sub-I's [sub-internships] with me and things. But we were not allowed to change. Your schedules were set. You just go like clockwork. You pass your exam. You go to your rotation, and it goes like that.

Garg

So I think later on when I went to Africa and I saw pediatrics, I really liked it. I don't know if it was the childhood experience that comes back into the mind or what. Something probably clicks. And that's when I started to make plan that I was going to do pediatrics. In fact, when I was in Africa and I finished my--you had to do a basic rotation of rotating through all of the--it's called rotating internship. After that you can decide. So I decided to go to pediatrics then.

Garg

There was not one woman faculty or doctor in the whole of pediatrics department in Africa. So I went there. I talked to the chief. He was from Pakistan, Professor Khan. And I said, "I want to join your department."

Garg

And he said that, "You know, we don't have any women--do you realize that?--in our faculty."

Garg

I said, "Yeah, I'm noticing that."

Garg

And he says, "You know why?"

Garg

I said, "No."

Garg

"It's a lot of hard work, and we don't think that women are cut out to do that."

Hampapur

Wow.

Garg

And I'm like, "I really want to do it." [laughs] And so my first interview, I thought, "He's not going to take me." So I said, "You know, in any case, I--." So from intern you go to senior medical officer. I said, "You could give me--." Usually this rotation is six months. "You could try it for three months, and you and I will both find out if I am cut out for this job or not." But I was scared. I was like, "What am I up against?" You know, we'd have faculty meetings. People would give me their seats. There was no other woman in there, and I was like just the senior house officer. I was not of any position.

Garg

But I ended up sticking it out, and I did my two years with Professor Kahn. He actually worked for Dublay Cho [phonetic]. That was his primary job, World Health Organization. He was very resourceful. He actually ended up putting me in touch with a lot of people in England and saying I should go for pediatrics if

that's my interest. But that's where it really started, but up until that time I wasn't sure that I'm going to do pediatrics. But by the time I left there, though, there were two other women in pediatrics. I was happy. [laughter]

Hampapur

You paved the way.

Garg

Yes, I paved the way. More people were excited once they saw there is one woman in there, and she's sticking it out. No, more people came.

Hampapur

Were there very few women overall, or was it just in pediatrics there was no women?

Garg

There were very few women, but, you know, even from England and other places, more women were in OB. Yes, more women were in OB/GYN, and pediatrics there was nobody. So in general there were few women, but it was not a--but in India there were a lot of women in pediatrics, but when I was in Africa, there was not one woman in Africa, not one woman. They were OB, and there was no surgery. There was no surgeon women, no orthopedic women. There were some in general medicine, and then there were women in pathology and other--microbiology. But not many women in the--so, yes, that's where I started with my pursuit of pediatrics, was when I was in Africa.

Garg

It's funny, because Africa, we had like--so, you know, here isolation wards are very special, but we just had different buildings, so we had a building for measles. We had a building for diarrhea/dehydration. We had a whole ward for sickle cell. So we had all these wards, and so, you know, like your specialties were divided up there very nicely, so that's why I liked pediatrics very much, because I felt very good about doing pediatrics.

Hampapur

Well, we've come to--[End of interview]

1.2. Session 2 (June 14, 2010)

Hampapur

This is Veena Hampapur here again with Dr. Meena Garg.

Hampapur

Last time we left off just about to talk about when you moved to the U.S. So I was wondering, at the time you came to the United States, did you know many people who were moving here?

Garg

No, I didn't know many people. My husband was here. He was a student here, and then he was doing his first job after coming out of school, and he had some friends. But I knew very, very few people here, yes. I have a cousin who was in Indianapolis. He's a doctor. And not many people really at that time.

Hampapur

Did you have any expectations of what you thought it would be like after coming here?

Garg

I guess I did. I mean, I was looking forward to being here. When I came here, I wanted to go for my postgraduate training in pediatrics, and that was my goal. As expected, it's really hard for foreign graduates to get into programs for training here, and I had to go through my thing of taking examinations and passing the exams and securing a position. But nothing unexpected. I mean, I enjoyed being here, and I wanted to enjoy more than--I had to study more. I was trying to balance the two. No, I think it was as expected.

Hampapur

Okay. What kinds of preparations did you have to make to move here?

Garg

I guess for one thing, I was working in Africa, so I had to resign and I have to wait for the resignation to go through, because you cannot just quit and leave your position. And other than that, I took my foreign graduate exam in Africa itself, so when I come here I would have to not worry about that. So I did the first part. And then I had to wait for my visa papers, because then I was sponsored by my husband, so I have to wait for almost six months for the visa papers to come through. Then I have to whatever, do the health checkup, and then they ask you--because he lived here, and we got married in India, and then I applied from Africa for my visa, so they were very suspicious, and they actually asked me to bring wedding photographs. We had a court marriage certificate and then our regular Hindi marriage. I had to bring a lot of evidence, and in fact, when I went to the embassy, they told me, "Do you have any handwritten letters from him or anything?"

Garg

I was like that was kind of strange, to give somebody your letters. I did have letters, but I didn't want to really show it to them. "Yes, I have letters," you know. [laughter] So, yes, that takes a little bit of time.

Hampapur

So did they just look through the documents? Did they ask you questions or--

Garg

You know, I took a letter, and I showed them the envelope, because it was handwritten and everything, and they didn't open the letter. "Thank you," I said. [laughter]

Hampapur

How did your family feel about you moving to the U.S.?

Garg

They were excited and sad. I think they were excited because it's something that I think all parents want their daughters to get married and do whatever. But they were excited in the sense that I was going to pursue also my further career and to be with somebody I really liked, so they were happy. They were probably sad to see me go that far, but at the same time they were happy for me to move into the future.

Hampapur

When you came, where did you first arrive?

Garg

I came to Los Angeles, and actually, we have continued to live in Los Angeles. I think we both like it very much, so haven't lived anywhere else.

Hampapur

What year was that when you came?

Garg

That was--god--1979? Yes, '79, I think. Yes.

Hampapur

Okay. And do you remember any of your first impressions of Los Angeles when you first arrived?

Garg

Oh, I thought it was beautiful. I landed in the evening time, and the lights of the city itself were really amazing as you land. Then we went straight from here to have some drinks just to celebrate my arrival, and this was--I don't even remember. It was near airport, only somewhere, and there was--women were wearing all these playboy costumes and bunny cos--and I thought the whole of L.A. was like that, you know, because Hollywood and L.A. So I had a great, amazing impression. [laughs] And then we lived in Hollywood, too, in the very beginning, and we would go to Hollywood Boulevard to have ice cream and stuff. So I really, really enjoyed the city very much, and I was in love with Los Angeles. San Diego was another--my favorite place is San Diego. And then we went to San Francisco, and everything was just amazing here.

Hampapur

What were some of the things that you liked about the L.A. area, or California in general?

Garg

I think in general I thought the people were very open, and they don't necessarily look at your skin color or whatever to say that you may not be educated or--to be judgmental, you know. People are open to listen to whatever you had to say, what your impression was. And of course, the climate is

beautiful, so I think given all those things, for me, this became the home because I didn't know any other place in U.S., and my husband had a lot of friends here, so we kind of mingled with friends mostly. And I think amongst his friends he was the first one to get married, so everybody would come over to our house expecting to eat, and I didn't know how to cook, so--[laughter]

Hampapur

Were people familiar with Indians at that time when you moved to L.A.?

Garg

Well, you know, to some extent, but really not that much. I don't think there were that many Indian people. There was like one Indian restaurant, and it's not that many. As a matter of fact, when I started working at Children's Hospital in Los Angeles, they said, "Anybody who speaks another language, you know, you get on the employee language list in case they need somebody."

Garg

So I got a phone call one day from this post-op surgical nurse, and she said, "Dr. Garg, you are Indian, right?"

Garg

I said, "Yes."

Garg

And she said, "We have a patient here. Can you speak Navajo?"

Garg

I said, "No, I speak Hindi." [laughter] So yes, there is always the confusion. But, you know, a lot of people in the universities, very much they understand what Indian is like and what the culture is like. But then every now and then you'll get people who have no clue, you know, what does it mean to be Indian. But I think overall, I didn't feel much discriminated in the educated groups, that, you know, you are not American.

Hampapur

Were there any adjustments or things that you had to learn after coming to live here?

Garg

Yes, I think there is a lot of differences, I think, in how you are perceived here and how you really have to present your case, so you have to present yourself. Actually, when I first came here, I was studying for my board exams, and then I thought I should get some experience, so I worked with this pediatrician in Beverly Hills to figure out. And I used to take histories and write down in the charts and get the patient ready for the doctor to see. I thought that gives me some experience. And then the office manager--it was a big office in Beverly Hills, like on Linden or somewhere. And actually--oh, was it--Diana Ross' kids used to come there. I go like, "I see some famous people in there."

Garg

The very first week I was there the office manager called me, and she said that I smell, and I have to use deodorant.

Garg

I was like, "Oh, really?" Because I never thought--I had never used deodorant in my whole life. I didn't think I smelled that bad. But I guess people complained. So, you know, it's things like that that you don't think about when you were living in Africa. Everybody smells. You sweat every day.

Garg

But, you know, some of the things which meant much more here, and then it makes you conscious of how you present yourself and how you talk to people. People, once you present your case, they understand you, but you have to go out there and tell people who you are, what you are going to do. So I think that was kind of different, because when people came to see a doctor, you know, or any healthcare professional in Africa or India, they didn't question their authority. They didn't question who they were. They were just expecting to be treated and leave. But here the expectation was different, and that's kind of a learning thing. But it makes more sense. It definitely makes more sense, and now I feel upset if people don't explain to me what they're doing. So it's a change in the psychology, I think, how you deal with people, because, you know, I think education level is higher, people's understanding is higher, so people come prepared to ask you questions, and you can be surprised sometimes what they'll ask you.

Hampapur

I'm wondering if you can think of any differences in L.A. when you first came here and now, since you've lived here for quite a while now. Any changes that stick out to you in terms of living here?

Garg

I guess the changes are--I think the people are generally the same. I have to think about that. That's a tough thing to answer. I think I have changed so much living in L.A. Now I have to think how L.A. has changed. I think in general--L.A. has changed. Well, I don't know. I don't know what to say about that. I mean, I think L.A. has changed a lot in the sense that Hollywood is no more as glamorous as Hollywood was thirty years ago when I came, and the fabric of the people is generally always changing, I think, in L.A., so, I mean, for now I see so many more Indians to be in it, which I never used to see before.

Garg

And then I think in general the population shifts have been there, like, you know, how the Spanish--when I first came, and we lived in Fairfax area, in Hollywood there were a lot of Jewish people living there, and now there's more blacks there. You know, population moves you see a lot in L.A. When I first came here, I was not so impressed by the Spanish culture in here, but I think in

thirty years that has evolved a lot more. It's become really part of the fabric of L.A. But I don't know if I was not perceiving it, but I didn't feel so exposed to the Spanish culture at that time. It almost felt like you had to go to Mexico or San Diego to really feel that, but you don't have to do that anymore. It's right here. So I think that has changed, but I can't think of many other things that have changed. In my personal interactions I think the biggest change has been the Internet and computers, but in terms of how L.A. has changed, these are the only things I can think of.

Hampapur

You mentioned that Hollywood was more popular when you first came. Do you mean a lot of people liked to visit there or--

Garg

Yes, the people would walk around there in the evening. It was kind of fashionable to walk around there, but nobody goes there anymore. It was also very fashionable to walk in Westwood, and there would literally be a stampede of people around UCLA, so we would park our car, then take the bus, and then walk all Friday evening in Westwood. But it's not the same anymore. Now it's moved to more like Santa Monica, I think. I can't remember what year that was. It must have been mid-eighties somewhere, when there was a big shooting in Westwood. Some guy went crazy and shot a lot of pedestrians.

Hampapur

Oh, I don't know about that.

Garg

Yes, and then since then Westwood has become less of a walking place, and Santa Monica has become more. So that definitely shifted over time. But I can't remember the year it was. I think late eighties somewhere.

Hampapur

Okay. Yes, that's interesting to me. I had no idea. Well, I guess on that note, were there other places you liked to visit or things you liked to do when you first came to this country?

Garg

Yes, I actually really, really like the coast, and I have always lived in the middle of the land, you know, like in Delhi it was completely--there is no--there's Little Ganges on one side. You never went there. Zambia is totally landlocked. There is nothing. So I really, really enjoyed going to the coast to go to the beach. I'm not a great swimmer, but I still enjoyed going to the beach, walking on the beach, running on the beach. So every vacation, every time we got, we'd go to San Diego. We'd go to San Francisco. We'd go to Pismo. We'd go to Santa Barbara. Always at the beach we would go. Even when our kids were born and the first one was only six weeks old, and first time we took her out on a trip, we went to Santa Barbara. Stayed on the beach and dressed her up

nicely so she won't be cold, but we're on the beach. So that was really, really nice, and often we would pack our lunch in the evening. Even after work we would just--in summer days we would just take whatever we're going to eat at home and go sit at the beach and eat it. So that's something that I have always enjoyed, and I think that's going to be hard to part from if you have to move. That's why we decided to live in Santa Monica, because we are close to the beach.

Garg

In California otherwise, you know, I really love San Diego, Del Coronado, right in the middle of the--and then San Francisco is always a passion. It's a passionate city. You want to be in San Francisco. [laughter] So I think that's what I like about California, that it's not just one place, you know. It's so many power cities. I mean, there's Hollywood. There's Los Angeles. There's Westwood, Santa Monica, but then there is--up and down the coast, there's so many great cities to go to. So that's why I like living in California. And also, I think it's a nice blend of cultures. You know, you do see everything. You see Japanese. You see Chinese, Korean, and Indian, of course. And then there is very good Spanish influence on the culture, so altogether it feels really good.

Hampapur

Were you homesick at all, or did you ever go back and visit your parents or have people visit?

Garg

Well, I was always homesick, actually, in the beginning, very much, and until I started working and made my own group of friends, I was very homesick. I tried to go once every year to visit, but that was not enough. In the beginning I was very homesick, and in fact, I still have a couple of letters. I wrote a letter to my mother how homesick I was and how lonely I was and how this I was and I had nobody to talk to. And I hadn't finished the letter. It was just sitting on the dining table, and my husband came home and he read the letter, and he was so angry with me. He said, "What do you think your parents will think, living thousands of miles away? They can't do anything about it. Why are you writing such a sorry letter? They'll think you're sitting here and crying all day while you're having fun."

Garg

I said, "That's true. I'm having fun." [laughs] I said, "Most of the times I'm having fun, but I wanted to tell them that I miss them."

Garg

He says, "No, you don't write letters like that when you're so far away from your family."

Garg

I said, "God, he's right. He's been here longer than I have."

Garg

And he said, "You don't want your parents to have a heart attack reading this letter, like, 'Oh, my god, what is my daughter doing?'" So he didn't let me send that letter. I had to change my wording, had to make it more cheerful to send it home. So yes, in the beginning it was hard, but now when I go to India or go away from here, I'm ready to come back home in two weeks. I feel like I'm done; I'm going home. [laughs] So it's shifted quite a bit that way, and there's more family here too now. But even so, this just feels home now.

Garg

But when we came in the beginning, we both just wanted to finish our education and then go back to India and work in India. So initially I did pediatrics, and then I thought I should do some specialization, but I really, really liked to work in the newborn medicine, but there is absolutely nothing in India in newborn, at least twenty-five, thirty years ago. And I kept thinking, "How am I going to be employed? How am I going to use my skills if I--?" And I figured, "Who cares? I'll just do what I like and then figure that out later, how you use it."

Garg

All the appliances we bought that were moveable, like a new TV or, you know, our car was a diesel car. We bought a diesel Mercedes, because all these things we could ship to India and use them there, and diesel is very cheap in India. So every year we were here in the first like almost ten years, we were planning that in two years we will move to India. And all our friends make fun of us, because the first nice car we bought was a diesel Mercedes. They say, "Why do you buy diesel?" We couldn't tell people why we bought diesel, because everybody told us if your Mercedes is two years old, you won't have to pay duty on it. You can ship it to India. And we figured, "This is great. We'll have our Mercedes in India, and diesel will be cheap." [laughter] And then I ended up keeping that car for some fourteen years, and I was like, "Such a pain to have a diesel car in L.A." [laughs] But we used to buy 240-volt. You know, voltage is different, so my mixer is 240 volts. I'd buy all these 240-volt appliances so I can take them with me.

Hampapur

It's so interesting.

Garg

But then we gave up the idea of moving back, slowly. But in the beginning we both thought, "We'll go back to Delhi, and then we'll set up both our practices there in Delhi. We're not going to stay here."

Hampapur

So was it a conscious decision to stay in the U.S., or just gradually you ended up--

Garg

I think it--gradually we both liked it so much here, and we just didn't think we should go back, and we kept living here. Now we think of retiring in India. [laughs] I think the plan moves on. The plan is still there. I think the opportunities are more here, and you are able to build yourself up, ground up. I mean, we came here when you were only allowed to bring eight dollars of foreign currency, that's when--if you would come from India. So there was a movie in India called Around the World in Eight Dollars, because by Indian government you're only allowed to bring currency of eight dollars' worth out of the country, and then you have to work it out here.

Garg

So I actually remember that the--you will laugh, probably. First time there were ATMS in bank, and our bank opened an ATM, and we got this card in the mail, and "Now you can go to the ATM day and night and take out money." And I was just like, that must be like just a few months after I came here, and both of us, we took our car, and we went to the ATM on a Sunday. Said, "We're going to draw money." And we found out that you had to draw a minimum of twenty dollars. We just wanted to take out two dollars to s_____. [laughter] And we came back home. We didn't draw any money. We said, "Oh, who wants to take twenty dollars out of the bank?" Because my husband was working his first job after school, and I don't know, he probably made around twenty thousand dollars. And I wasn't working at that time, and we couldn't take out twenty dollars just for fun out of the bank. [laughter]

Hampapur

You'd have to put it back in.

Garg

That was so funny. And, you know, the first trip we made, one of Sat's friends was getting married in San Francisco, and he was the best man. So we had the oil, and the gas was seventy-five cents a gallon. For ten dollars' worth of gas in our Honda, we went to San Francisco. And then those days was a gasoline shortage, so if you had an odd license plate, you could buy gas on an odd day, and if you had even, you had to buy it on an even day. So we drove all day, and we stopped everywhere on 101, and so we got there late at night. And the next day was the day we couldn't get gas, so our car had no gas the next day. [laughs] We were sitting there. "Why didn't we fill up on the way?" We were so happy. "For ten dollars of gas we are here, San Francisco," and we couldn't--so, you know, we never stopped enjoying ourselves, but, you know, things had changed a lot for us.

Garg

Our first time my husband had booked honeymoon for us in San Diego. It was in La Jolla Beach at a tennis club, and our car was so shabby. It was so broken

up, because he drove it from Chicago. Sat had this car in Chicago, and it was all rusted, and the driver's seat literally was dragging on the--on the slope you could hear it, you know. So we drove into this hotel. You know, they had people of L.A. and all that. And we looked at our car, and we kept driving. We drove it to the parking lot. We said, "We're not stopping here with that car." It was such a fancy place, and so we drove our car, and when we took our bags out of the car and we walked over, because we didn't want anybody to see our car.

Garg

So the guy said, "Can I help you?"

Garg

And I said, "No, we are checking in." [laughs] They're thinking, "They're crazy. What are they coming from, bus stop?" So we so didn't want anybody to see our car that we were driving in, so it was funny. But, you know, I enjoyed being here, and I think that's the difference, because I think we were very poor, really speaking, can't take twenty dollars out of the bank; can't even think of doing that. And at the same time we were very enriched with our education and everything, and we were able to move forward just based on that. We had no money. We had no family. We had no support. We had nothing, just the two of us, you know, in this world. So I think that gives you a lot of faith and confidence in the system in general, in the place and the economy and everything. And I think the opportunities we both got here, we probably wouldn't have gotten them someplace else. So that's, I think, the main reason for staying here, and, you know, we both love our work and we love working hard. But it's nice if it's appreciated or you gets paid off and feel more secure in your job or whatever. So yes, at this point I wouldn't be anywhere other than where I am now. I love my job. I love my house. I love the city.

Hampapur

Good place to be then.

Garg

Good place to be, yes.

Hampapur

So I know you mentioned you missed your parents, and then obviously you were planning on moving back. Were there specific things in India or like about life in India that you missed when you first came here?

Garg

No. I think one of the things is a general familiarity with the system, knowing people, and it is very strange, because, you know, whenever you see people, you are--if you are raised in India, 99 percent of the people around you are Indians, and so then you come here, and 99 percent of the people are not Indians. And even though we didn't have an issue with language, you know, we

could speak good English and everything, still you feel kind of a difference in culture or, you know, what people think about you. You don't just feel like you can be part of it, and then you feel a little bit distant, you know. But then at the same time, when you go back to India and then you see thousands of people but you don't know one person standing in the neighbor of you, then also it's the same thing. So I think that was--it's the people, mostly, and I think in general everything else is about the same, I think. But mostly you miss family, you miss people. And then, you know, as you become adult, your parents are getting older and they're getting sicker, and every time they fall sick, you feel really bad that you're not close to them.

Garg

That was the hardest thing, because my father passed away when I was here on vacation, and nobody could even get in touch with me, where I was, and he died so suddenly, and I didn't see him, you know. I didn't even see him dead. They had to cremate him before I got there. My father-in-law was sick for a long time, and we tried to go every six months. And sometimes it's not even enough to go every six months in the family. So I think all of the adults have to face that. When their parents get old, their health is not good, and then you feel really bad that our parents raised us, and we're not close to them when they need us. So I think that's more than anything else. It's not the climate. It's not the food. It's not that. It's just mostly the relationship you have with your family.

Garg

And the same thing, I think, was with brothers and sisters. My husband is the youngest in a very big family. He has three brothers and two sisters, and he is the youngest, so anything happens, everybody wants him there. They want both of us there. And we are so lucky. When we go back to India, we don't know where to go and where to not go, and who to visit, who not to visit, because they have so many relatives and a very close-knit family. And that's what you miss more than anything else. Everything else is good here. If you could just put the family together, then I think it would be fine, totally fine.

Garg

For me it was hard because my family was in Africa, so we had to make two separate trips all the time. So I always had to go to India one time, and then we both have to go to Africa. so that made it really hard to stay with the family. And then sometimes your siblings tell you that, "You should be here. Your father is ill."

Garg

I'm like, "Okay." So that makes--pressure from the family is there, and then you yourself are feeling that you are missing them. So that was the hardest part, I think. Everything else--and here it seemed that life was a lot easier to move on.

As long as you did your job, you work hard, you can move on. So that part seemed easier than dealing with the family.

Hampapur

So you mentioned in our last session when you were living in Africa, your interest to learn more in medicine and you felt like you had a lot of progress you wanted to make. So after coming here, do you feel like you got to address that?

Garg

Oh yes, yes, definitely, and I think that is one of the things that really--professionally you feel very, very satisfied in achieving what you want. When I came here, I went into pediatrics for a three-year training at the county hospital. When I was in Africa, I really, really liked the newborn medicine. I thought that was neat. Every day was excitement. Every day you see a new baby come into the world, you know. But when I came to U.S. and I did my residency in pediatrics, I was really taken aback by neonatal medicine, and it seemed really sad. So many babies died. So many babies were so premature.

Garg

The thinking is very different here, because when we were in Africa, we didn't have resources, so if a baby was born premature or was less than one kilo, we would just let the baby be warm and be there, you know, until the baby dies, because we didn't have resources to support this baby. And here we were saving six-hundred-gram babies, seven-hundred-gram babies, and they had devastating and painful life, and I said, "I can't take this. Even though I like it, I can't take it." So I finished my pediatrics. Then I worked for Kaiser for a year and a half, and I had the kids during that time, and I said, "I'm not sure if I want to go into pediatrics." But then that's what I like. I mean, if I want to go into newborn.

Garg

And then during that one and a half year I'm doing general pediatrics, my conviction got stronger that I do want to do the neonatal medicine. So after taking the break, then I came back to start neonatal medicine. The reason I like neonatal medicine, because I think a lot of people don't know that there was not a lot of emphasis on neonatal medicine up until like in the seventies, when John F. Kennedy's little baby died. It was a three-pound baby, and the baby died because there was no neonatal care in United States, or in world in general, and there's a lot of emphasis. If that baby was born today, it would never die. It's impossible for that baby to die today, but in 1975 that baby died because there was no treatment available to save that baby.

Garg

So newborn medicine is a very young field of medicine, and there's always new stuff coming, and there's so many new programs. And we are always on the

cutting edge of technology. Something new comes, and it's unreal, because even in like year 2000, one of the UCLA scientists got a Nobel Prize for developing a treatment which we use in newborns. Saves thousands of lives every year. And so we are always moving on, and there's always new things.

Garg

And that's the exciting part of working here, being at UCLA, is, like I say, in 2000 we had the Nobel Prize winner, whose treatment we are using every day in the newborn. And right now in the last two years we have started another new treatment of cooling newborn babies. We give them hypothermia to save their brain if they, you know, sustain some damage. So there's always new stuff happening, and I stay with the current. I go to the research conferences at least once or twice a year to learn new things. We try to participate in nationwide trials and bring more and more newer treatments to the bedside. That has not stopped in all these years, and that's really, really the fuel that keeps you going and wanting to do more and more and more. But that definitely is why, I think, I definitely want to stay here. I don't want to be anywhere else.

Garg

I want to go other places to teach them, and in fact, in the last three, four years from UCLA I have gone to India. We go to Pune, and there is a hospital in Pune where we go and teach people how to do some of the things. So we actually set up this inhaled nitric oxide for which the UCLA scientist got the Nobel Prize. We've set it up in India, you know. Of course, it's very, very expensive here, so we had to be very creative in making this program happen in India. So in Pune now they have a very nice center, and we have gone back there, and they get babies from other places for the treatment. And, you know, two, three days of treatment with this gas--you just put it in the ventilator and the babies get better. So many babies get better with this.

Garg

So we have a kind of a continuous thing when sometimes their doctors come here and sometimes we go there, and so something new comes up, they ask us. Now they want us to set up their brain-cooling program for there for newborn medicine, and we haven't had time to go. But probably by the end of this year or early next year, we're going to go and do a teaching session for them. So we tried to bring the vendors even from the United States and tell them, you know, that--which is very difficult, because if an equipment here costs a hundred thousand dollars, you can see how much it costs in rupees. But many, many companies have been very accommodating in trying to bring the technology to outside world. SO I would much rather do that at this point, to help other people by education or resources that I can help them bring, as opposed to working there full-time, is how I feel at this point. So I don't think I want to

move back to India to work, because I think I can do much more service being here, and learn more and stay very excited.

Garg

My field is very exciting. I have learned to live with the fact that many babies don't make it, and it's very difficult, you know. It's not something you ever learn or--it never gets easy in your whole life, I decided. It's the hardest thing. That was one of the things that at first I was taken aback. My kids were young, and I see babies dying. It's really hard to see that. But then I realized this is what I like, so I'm happy with my decision. And it's hard work, and I still have to stay up many, many nights, and I get called for emergencies all the time. So in some ways I feel like I'm still an intern, because I'm not [unclear] physician who sleeps all night at home and gives a lecture in the morning. That's not true for me. But it's a choice I made, and I love doing it. I really, really enjoy it.

Garg

So I think professionally and education-wise, it's what is so stimulating, so exciting here. And I worked for Children's Hospital, Los Angeles, for so many years, but then I came to UCLA ten years ago because UCLA has more research and more technological advances and more chances for faculty here to move ahead and do what it is that their passion is. So I have been really, really fortunate to be here, but--it's not an advertisement for UCLA, but I really, really think that the university has been a great place for me, and I would want to stay as long as I'm productive. Of course, if I can't do anything, I won't be here. I mean, I love doing the teaching part, teaching the postgraduates, teaching the students, and then taking the technology to other places that need it, too. So since we are from India, so this is one little thing we do. We go back to give them the--and they are really thankful for the education and the progress they make. So we have stayed with only one state usually as we do it. And then we do some teaching programs in Pune, and then they are advertised before we go. So usually eight or nine UCLA faculty go, so we make take different specialists from UCLA and go, and go do a three-day teaching session or something like that.

Hampapur

Oh, wow.

Garg

Yes. And then we bring vendors. If there's a new technology, like for nitric oxide, we ask them to come, and then they make whatever. They negotiate to see how they can make it happen in India. Now more and more places are doing that with different universities. UCLA also has a international program, at least in pediatrics, where the pediatric residents can have different exchanges, sort of like exchange. Some can go to Africa, some can go to India, to do a small rotation, to see how the medicine is over there. So, you know,

here in the field of medicine in the United States it's still different, because pediatrics in the developing world is so many infections, because people don't get vaccines or vaccines are not available. And here it's different. It's like everybody is--90 percent of the population is vaccinated, so we don't see babies dying of preventable causes. The medicine is quite different here. So the marriage of the two is good. You take some of your knowledge about preventable diseases over there, and then you take some of the newer technologies over there. So it's a good mix. So yes, I really enjoy doing what I do. I wouldn't do anything else.

Hampapur

Well, it's interesting, in your first session, how you mentioned you like really looked up to your professors, and then some years later you're a professor yourself--

Garg

That's right.

Hampapur

--and doing the research.

Garg

No, and I have to tell you the fact that my fellows, my postgraduate fellows, they are looking at my schedule trying to schedule themselves sometimes with me, and then I sometimes change my schedule with a colleague because I have a conflict or something, and they say, "But you were supposed to be on service. I'm supposed to be working with you. Where are you now?"

Garg

And I say, "No, I changed it."

Garg

And they say, "Well, you didn't tell us." [laughter] So they kind of [unclear], "I'm so disappointed you changed your schedule."

Garg

I say, "I'm sorry." So yes, you're right. I never thought of that. Yes, I mean, yes, I never thought of that. Yes, it's now the--we have fun. We have a lot of fun working together, and in fact, right now today I have two meetings planning the sessions for incoming fellows that are going to come July 1, because I take on a portion, a significant portion of teaching them, especially the programs that I run. So I run--actually, I run the whole body-cooling program for newborn medicine, and I also run the heart-lung bypass for babies, which is also a very new thing--not so new, but yes, in the last fifteen years. So if there's nothing else we can save the baby, we can put them on heart-lung bypass. Like when adults have bypass, we have for newborn babies, too.

Hampapur

Oh, wow.

Garg

So those are special programs that I run both of those programs, so I teach that to the incoming postgraduate doctors. So I plan my teaching sessions ahead of time so that when they come in July I can spend the time in teaching them. And then through the three years of their training they can become expert in doing that. So that's part of my teaching hat in addition to my clinical work that I do. And when I stay up all night, that's not when I'm teaching. That's when I'm just taking care of babies, yes. No, I really enjoy what I do.

Garg

You know, there's always some things. You have to fight with the administration, and you want more equipment, and you don't have money, and you keep wanting to do stuff. But in general, I think we are able to do what is needed to take care of babies, so that's good.

Hampapur

So shifting gears a little bit back to outside the university, so after your children were born, did you used to take them to visit India or do any sort of India-type cultural activities, things like that?

Garg

Yes. It's funny. You're right. We took them every year, and we thought to us--you know, we thought to us family is most important, so we made sure they knew all their cousins, and we stayed with all of my husband's brothers and sisters, my brothers and sisters, too, so they knew all their cousins. And, you know, in this day and age they are sometimes making plans when we don't even know, that, "I'm coming," and, "They're coming." So that has been successful. But I think we didn't emphasize maybe enough about our cultural kind of aspect. We carried on with some of our cultural things. You know, we do some prayers and we go to the Indian temple. But we didn't push it on our kids, because we thought they will take from it whatever they want. And they ask us now. They say, "How come you didn't tell us what our customs are or what our culture is and what our belief is?"

Garg

And I feel deficient and negligent in that respect. But both of us are very open-minded in that area. We don't feel that we have--we figured they will adopt whatever they want. But they complain about it now. They say, "How come you didn't tell us this was required?"

Garg

And it's like nothing is required, you know. You do what you like to do, and you do the right thing. That's what you have to do in life, be morally correct. But that's something that I didn't think about it, and it's interesting that the children who are growing up here, who were born here, are finding out these things themselves and are more aware of it and coming back to ask us, you

know, "How come you didn't tell us this?" And that's something, I must say, that I think where if they were raised in India, they would have been exposed to it a lot more than what we chose for them, and we just let them be. They kind of know they are Indian, and they know that there are certain things we do differently or whatever, but not enough, I think, not enough, because we didn't impose on them those kind of values that we grew up like.

Garg

For instance, when I grew up, you know, it was really, really bad for me to go and date people. You know, like we'd talk to people and meet them socially, but to really go out and date, that was not acceptable. But we didn't impose that on our kids. And so that's a social thing, but even culturally there's so many things, fasting and this and that we do, which we never imposed on the kids. So I think that's something that's different in raising the kids here.

Hampapur

What about in terms of language? Did you teach them Hindi and--

Garg

Yes, I taught both of them Hindi, but they quickly forgot. They quickly forgot, and again I must say I didn't emphasize that much, and they spoke more Spanish than Hindi, unfortunately or fortunately, I don't know. But they both understand Hindi, because they were both taught Hindi, but they are not good at spoken Hindi. And then even when they tried to speak, then a lot of times people laughed because of the accent or how they pronounce things, so they stopped talking. [laughs] Just let me be in English.

Garg

But lately I have had my mother, who's had not good health and for the last few years she's spent more and more time with me, because my father passed away and I take care of my mother quite a bit, so they talk to her in Hindi, and they are more open with her because they are not shy if they have a good accent. Talking to Grandma, they're fine. [laughs] So they have been talking actually more in Hindi, so, you know, I think that's what makes a difference, because they grew up here with no grandparents, and just go visiting, it's not enough probably. But I think you learn all your life, so they still have time to learn.

Hampapur

Since you've been here for a while, have you had any more friends or relatives come from India or Africa to come settle here?

Garg

Yes, that really has changed a lot, because I think it was not that common for people to travel outside the country back then. But now I have many of the next-generation kids, like the nephews and nieces have come here, again looking for the--you know, there's a lot of opportunity in computer sciences and medicine. Not that much in medicine; not that many people came. But mostly

came for the computer, the Internet and the computer technology. And then the kids that grew up here are also now, you know, a big part of the fabric here for the Indian community. So yes, now it's a lot more people that I know. And then my children's friends and our friends and friends of friends. You come to know a lot more people, so you develop a good network here. So now it's a lot more people.

Hampapur

And do you go visit as often now back to India?

Garg

No, actually less and less now, less and less. But we still try to go at least once a year, and I think it's still persisted with that. Now our kids go alone to India, because they miss it now if they don't go. So when the cousins are getting married, if we cannot go, they will go, because it's a good thing that they were very close to their cousins growing up, and they love to stay with their family, participate in family stuff, which is very good for us. But we do go less than before now.

Hampapur

I know you said when you first came here that there weren't that many Indians, and that's something that's changed throughout the years, so has that changed like what type of Indian things are available here? Like I think you mentioned there was just one Indian restaurant when you first came. I wonder if you can speak towards changes you've seen in terms of, you know, Indian stores or restaurants or whatever that's available when you first came and what's here now.

Garg

Yes. Oh, no, definitely. The grocery stores have really evolved. There's a lot of stores and restaurants and food and culture. And I think what is different also now is that, you know, okay, there is like I had a lot of Jewish friends when I was here, and we always knew when some Jewish festival was coming up. But then our some big festival comes up, like Diwali. Nobody knew about it. And, you know, I would try to change my calls or do something so I can celebrate with my family or my home, and I couldn't always do it. But I could not openly go and say, "It's my right, you know. It's Diwali. I have to be off. I don't want to work that day." And I saw that the people like, you know, from other faiths could go out and say that, you know. "I have this. I have that." And even some Iranian people, you know, "It's Iranian New Year. I'm not going to work." "It's Jewish this." And I felt very embarrassed to ever admit that I also had some special days or holidays that I wanted to be off, and I could never ask. I couldn't even approach anybody at my work and say, you know. I would try to change my call, but I wouldn't tell them why I wanted that day off or whatever.

Garg

But now it seems to me it's more acceptable. Now I have realized that if I say--and maybe if I said it back then, it would be okay. But now more people are more aware that there is some, you know--I'm surprised, and [unclear] say like, you know, "I really want that day off. It's our Diwali."

Garg

And they say like, "Oh, yeah, I know about Diwali, Festival of Lights."

Garg

And I say, "Yeah," and people are very open to, you know, to letting you take off or celebrate it however you want to celebrate. But I think I was so reluctant to even mention it that I would just kind of do a private thing with myself, you know, my own belief and my own thinking, and it's nobody else's business, and I don't expect anybody to accept it. But I think now there is more awareness. There's more people, and there is more acceptance of the fact that we do have a little bit of different belief or we have some religious holiday which is different from everybody else. But I wouldn't expect anybody to grant me that, even though, you know, that's what it says in the Constitution. [laughs] But it still takes more courage than just having a Constitution on your side.

Hampapur

Right.

Garg

And so I think it has become more acceptable as people around you know more about the culture and are accepting to the culture, as opposed to how it was before. And I think that's a very big change, because people didn't know much about India or Indian food, but now it's popular, and now you see--I don't know if you see the food channel, but this Indian girl won the first prize for making tandoori chicken. [laughter] Amongst fourteen contestants, she's the only Indian girl in the program, Aarti. Did you see that?

Hampapur

No, I haven't heard that, no.

Garg

The next food channel star or something like that. It's a competition. I was like, "Okay, tandoori chicken is winning." [laughs] Yes, she served a hundred guests tandoori chicken at the Santa Monica pier. So she won the first.

Hampapur

Wow, that's a big difference.

Garg

So, you know, it's not just food. I think food is a way of getting into a culture. Your first introduction to a culture is usually through food, and then more things will come out of it. So I kind of think that having other people appreciate Indian food means they are embracing the Indian culture in some way, eating spicy food. So I think it's changed a lot that way. And it's a good change. I

think it's a very welcome change for me. Of course, like I said, I never thought of doing it as a one-man mission, you know, myself, but with more people around, the awareness is definitely more, yes.

Garg

And I think more of it comes from the children who were born here. I think they saw themselves as being same but different in some way, and they were seeking more in terms of finding out. So I think the credit goes a lot to the younger generation. The older generation kind of lives by themselves in their households, but I think it's the younger people who bring this energy. Or this part of this awareness, I think, comes from young people like you. [laughter] No, it's true. I think it's very true. It's very true. I mean, like I said, I didn't even try to do anything about it. I mean, I was just like happy to survive. I have my training. I have my job. I have my house, you know. I have my family, and it's kind of a first-generation survival instinct is what we had. But I think it's the younger generation that brings the new perspective in the Indian culture and life and take it to the next level.

Hampapur

Okay. I think that's it.[End of interview]

Date: