

A TEI Project

Interview of Padma Narasimhan

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1. Transcript

1.1. Session 1 (May 8, 2010)

Hampapur

This is Veena Hampapur. It's May 8, 2010, and I'm here with Dr. Padma Narasimhan. Thank you for joining me today and agreeing to do this interview.

Hampapur

I'm going to start off by just asking you one basic question before we jump into the oral history. Can you tell me where you were born.

Narasimhan

I was born in the state of Karnataka, country of India, in a rural village near Bangalore called Melkote.

Hampapur

Okay, and then I'd like to start off by talking about your childhood. Can you tell me about your family when you were young.

Narasimhan

Sure. Let me start with my birth. I was born in my grandmother's house--

Hampapur

Oh, wow.

Narasimhan

--and my parents, who were married for five years, were praying to all kinds of gods, the relatives also, that they get a child, because it was five years and they were even saying maybe my father should remarry. So I was a very wanted child, desired and awaited child, probably they know accurately my date of birth, but they made a horoscope of me at the time of birth. And, well, my childhood, the earliest memories were in Calcutta. My father had a transferable job, so we were in Calcutta, and I still remember my earliest memories of my father making me and my younger sister, who is one and a half years younger

to me, march up and down Dum Dum Airport because that was his way of showing love. You have to be fit and healthy, and that was the way we interacted. I had a ayah who used to call me Padma. My real name was Padmasini, and she used to call me Badmashi, Badmashi. So we changed it to Padmini, and then later on Padma.

Narasimhan

Anyway, so my childhood was very happy-go-lucky. I was the oldest. At that time in Calcutta I had only my younger sister. I was very protective of her. I used to go and beat up children ten times my size to protect my sister. Things like that. It was fairly happy-go-lucky childhood, nothing out of the ordinary, and very nuclear family, mother, father. No joint family, because my father's parents had passed away when he was eleven years old. So I didn't have the benefit of the extended family, which I think has a lot of benefits. Then I went back to Bangalore, stayed there till I was ten. My father wanted us all to have the best of education in English medium, he had a transferable job. So he put me in--a private school which was called convents, and it used to be taught by nuns in those days. So I went to a private convent, which is pretty famous, called Bishop Cotton. It has branches all over India.

Narasimhan

Then at the age of ten my father was transferred to New Delhi, so I went to another private school in New Delhi called Summerfields School; finished my Senior Cambridge. The papers were sent to Oxford, and so I got a Senior Cambridge certificate from Oxford. But the problem was, this was in December. They have a December calendar, whereas the non-private schools had a June-July calendar. They would finish in June and start in July. So I had to sit at home for six months after my Senior Cambridge, which is equal then to your higher secondary. So I was dreaming that I'll go to Delhi University and live it up, and all my dreams were dashed because my parents--I, being the eldest, did not know that there is an age limit. I was fifteen and a half when I graduated from Senior Cambridge, and Delhi University said there is a sixteen-year age limit, so I could not get into college. And my father said, "You have already sat at home for six months, and it's a bad precedent for the other three children, so you have to go to college somewhere."

Narasimhan

So the only place they would take me was pre-medical, because there was no age limit for pre-medical. Then I went to pre-medical, but again not in Delhi University but to a nearby college, which I thought was not cool, and I cried buckets of tears, but, you know, it turned out that that college that I joined had the highest entry from pre-medical to medical, so it was a good batch that year. Then, you know, my parents said that, "You have done pre-medical, and the only place you can go is New Delhi, because you're too young to go anywhere

out of town." The medical school competitively--only the top 10 percent merit-wise would be taken, and there were at that time only three medical schools. One was called Lady Harding Medical School, which was open only to female students. The other one was a coed, which is Maulana Azad Medical College, and the other one was All India Medical Institute, where they would take candidates from all over India after an entrance exam.

Narasimhan

So I applied for an entrance exam, and I went to the interviews in both the medical schools, but looking back, I think youth is very foolish. I went to Lady Harding, and I didn't like the atmosphere. It was dark and dingy, and all females, very catty atmosphere. I was always in a coed since childhood. So what I did was, without my parents' knowledge, I didn't apply there, and I applied to medical college in Maulana Azad Medical College, and then appeared for the entrance exam. As luck would have it, the first results were from Lady Hardinge, so they posted the merit list, and my name was not in it. My father went to look at the merit list, and he said, "How come you're not in that list, because you had enough marks to be included in that list?"

Narasimhan

And here I was, trembling. I had not told anybody. I always tell everything to my mother, but this one I had not told her. So I didn't know how to cope with it. I said, "Maybe, you know, they have taken me in Maulana Azad, so let's wait for that list."

Narasimhan

And he said, "But merit is merit, you know. This is such a corrupt place." Then the second list came out of Lady Hardinge before Maulana Azad [laughs], and then I was in real trouble. Then he said, "No, no, no, this is nepotism and the corruption, and I'll probably go to the principal and talk to her." [laughs]

Narasimhan

I was praying all kinds of gods and shivering in my boots. "Please, please let the Maulana Azad's come, and let me be there." Otherwise, you know--anyway, finally somehow my father calmed down and did not go to the principal and say, "How come you have merit lists so flawed that my daughter's name was there?" Anyway, and then they did take me in Maulana Azad, thank God. Then I also got into the All India Medical Institute with the entrance exam, and that was the nearest from my home. But we were so naive and sheltered. We didn't know much, and the moment that they told us that, you know, "You have to live in a dorm. It's compulsory for All India Medical Institute," I was barely sixteen and a half, something like that, and I said, "No, no, no, I want my mother." And also it's additional money, you know. My father is a government employee and civil [unclear] engineer, but, you know, he had four children to educate, so cost was--although, you know, compared to medical school here,

which I put my son through it, Ravi [phonetic], that was nothing; that was peanuts.

Narasimhan

Anyway, so I did not choose to go the All India Medical Institute. I chose to go to Maulana Azad Medical College. So it was not like a big dream or ambition that I had to be a physician, but I just fell into it, and I had a lot of problems coping with medical school.

Hampapur

I'm going to interrupt you just for a minute. I had a couple of questions I wanted to ask you about your childhood, and then we'll jump back into this again. So you mentioned--

Narasimhan

Maybe I'm telling you too much.

Hampapur

Oh, no, no, this is all great. I just wanted to ask you before I forget. So you mentioned your father was a civil engineer, and it sounds like you moved around--

Narasimhan

Civil aviation engineer, aviation.

Hampapur

Okay. And then you moved around a couple times during your childhood. How did you like that? How did you like living in Calcutta, and then you came back south, and then you went to New Delhi, is that right?

Narasimhan

Correct. I'm glad you brought it out. See, I was too young to feel any trauma. I just went with my parents. I was too young when I went to Calcutta. I think I was three, and I don't know; either it sounds like boasting, but I was a precocious child, and my father stated, and I don't have any recollection of this, that I used to sit in his lap and read the newspaper. Amongst all the four children, I had developed most, fastest at a very young age, and read English newspapers, and to the point that he told his American colleague who used to come to sell the planes and my father had to inspect, that, "My daughter is fluent in English, and she reads newspapers, and she's three years old," or two and a half; I don't remember.

Hampapur

Oh, wow.

Narasimhan

The American guy said, "That's impossible. I'll come and see it, and if you are right--," and so they had a bet, it seems. So sure enough, I sat in my father's lap and read the English [unclear], and he gave me a huge wooden doll, which I dropped on my right toe, and my nail root was damaged, and my father took me

to the local physician at that time. I don't know how qualified the physician was. He took out the toenail with the root. It never grew back.

Hampapur

Oh, wow.

Narasimhan

So that's a memento of my being a fast developer, I guess.

Hampapur

Did your parents have any expectations or responsibilities for you as the oldest and as someone who was clearly a genius at a very young age?

Narasimhan

Well, that brings me down to the story.

Hampapur

Yes. No, this is great.

Narasimhan

Well, you know, my father definitely said, "All my children,"--by the way, all his children were intelligent, I think, looking back. But I was the one who was a precocious child in the sense I learned everything faster than other children. I did my chores like at the age of one and a half. Because you were from the same community [Iyengar] as me, you know that we did not like to keep our plates that we ate out of in the sink. We would immediately wash it, because it's actually healthy to do. So at one and a half I used to go and clean my own plate.

Hampapur

Oh, wow.

Narasimhan

That's what my mother says. And at three and a half, we also have a system in India, which is also very similar to Jewish people, I found out, that when my mother had periods, she could not enter the kitchen and the place where the god is. Since there was no joined family and there was nobody else who was an adult, and my father used to go to work--he used to go to work in the morning and come home late in the evening. So he used to make me go and put a pressure cooker together with rice and pulses that we eat. I don't recall all this, but that's what she says. So in that way they thought I was a very precocious child, and I developed my milestones much faster than others.

Narasimhan

And then my father did have an expectation, in the sense when I was eleven and a half years old and I was playing with my maternal uncle, along with my younger sister, who was probably ten, and at that time, as you know, we are very protected and naive, and we didn't know what anything is, including having menstruation or having a married life, what it entails. So my grandmother, my mother's mother, had a son, and in their family there was only one son for the last seven generations, so she wanted her son to marry me so

that, you know, that she can get along with the daughter-in-law, because the son was the supreme being there, and also to keep the wealth in the family, the lands and everything.

Hampapur

Right.

Narasimhan

And I was blissfully unaware. I used to be very playful with my uncle, sit in his lap, listen to his stories, bedtime stories, what have you. And at that age, she told my mother, and my father found out, and he said, "What nonsense. My daughter is so brilliant, she's going to be like Padmaja Naidu or something. She's not going to get married at the age of twelve and be a housewife." So he did have expectations of all his children, that all his children should be educated and self-sufficient, which they later became. I'm a physician. And my father also had another desire for his two daughters--the other two are sons--that he didn't want us to do menial work like a secretary or a typist, which was a little humiliating, he thought. So he wanted his daughters to be either a physician or a teacher, and it was just pure coincidence that I became a physician, and my sister was a teacher.

Hampapur

Okay. He must have been happy then.

Narasimhan

So, you know, but they did not push me, though. They did not say, "Oh, you must do this. You must do that." I just fell into it. My parents, the beauty of it is, especially my mother did not push us into anything or did not vehemently say, "You must do this. You must do that." They were very clever parents, I think, looking back, especially my mother, because, for example, I would go to medical school, and everybody had cut their hair, and I said, "I'm going to cut my hair," because in India we usually have long hair, and it was very thick and curly and very hard to manage. And I said, "Oh, all my friends in my group have cut their hair. I'm going to cut my hair."

Narasimhan

So if she had said, "No, you cannot do it," I would have probably rebelled. Instead she said, "Look, you have thick, curly, beautiful hair. You can put it up. You can put it down. If you cut it, you will look like Sai Baba, you know, and there will be no style or anything. So think about it, because it will be permanent, you know."

Narasimhan

And same thing, she applied those rules. She trusted us to be good children, and she did not push us, and she did not say, "You must do this, or you must--," but she would say it in such a subtle way that we would be brainwashed into what she said. I would go to movies with my friends, and I found out all my friends

would tell lies to their parents. We were really innocuous in those days in India. We don't have a dating system. We didn't have boyfriend, girlfriend, or anything. So we would go as a bunch. A bunch of us would go to a movie, sometimes even absconding those lectures, you know. But I would come and tell my mother, because she said, you know, whatever she--so she had instilled in us some values, which she made sure that we didn't rebel. None of us did, and that's a great thing.

Hampapur

How long did you have your ayah for? You mentioned her earlier, the nanny.

Narasimhan

Oh, the ayah was just when I was in Calcutta, which was three years, I think. So every three to four years my father was supposed to have a transferable job, because he was in the civil aviation government sector, so it was a transferable job. But when we went to Delhi and I was at the age of ten, then I got into medical school, so he gave that as the reason that, "I cannot pull out my children from their studies." So we stayed the longest in Delhi. In fact, I stayed in New Delhi till I came to this country.

Hampapur

Oh, okay. I had no idea. And can you tell me about your neighborhood in New Delhi where your family lived?

Narasimhan

Yes. In New Delhi, all the places, even in Calcutta, we--in Bangalore, I don't have memories of that, but my mother says they lived in a rented place near their relatives, and the relatives would come, and my mother had to serve them hand and foot. I don't know whether you want to know that story. The custom was that--my mother was married at the age of fourteen. Although she was brilliant in her own way, she was not allowed to study, because once the woman attained puberty or had menstruation, they were supposed to be married off. Otherwise, they would be left behind on the shelf. So it was an arranged marriage. My father--you have seen my father. Everybody says now, after he passed away, that he was the most handsome man on this earth. We didn't realize it. He was just "Dad" to us. Have you seen my dad? You don't recall.

Hampapur

I was probably a kid.

Narasimhan

Yes, just a kid. Anyway, so my mother was also very pretty and fair and very petite and tiny. My father was six-foot tall. So my mother never looked at him. She just married him [laughs], which was their norm of the day. And then so she brought us up in her values, and looking back, you know, she never taught us that not only do you develop your professional career, you have to develop your personal life, too. But she didn't know, and, I mean, she just said, "Okay,

when you get older, you'll get an arranged marriage," and that's how I was brought up.

Narasimhan

Anyway, so in my neighborhood, in Calcutta we lived in the government quarters which is allotted for civil aviation engineers. So all along they were middle class government quarters, servants; they're called government servants. And same thing with New Delhi. In the beginning, as soon as we landed in New Delhi, we lived in southern Delhi in a rented apartment, which was nearest to my school, which was called Summerfield School, walking distance. My parent tell me that I was the boldest of the lot of all the four children, so I took my sister in one hand and my brother in one hand and went and got admitted to the school myself--

Hampapur

Oh, wow.

Narasimhan

--without my parents, which I think is unheard of. And then I had problems, because I was transferred from Bangalore to New Delhi, and there was this class, a Hindi class which was advanced Hindi class, because everybody in New Delhi spoke Hindi. But as I was not exposed to Hindi, it seems I would speak at that time English, Kannada, Tamil, and a little Bengali that I was exposed to. So I had to learn Hindi from scratch. We requested a basic, not advanced, Hindi, and they said, "No, we cannot just do it for one girl, one student."

Narasimhan

So I joined the advanced class and suddenly they told me--they called my father and mother and said, "Your daughter is not doing well in Hindi," and that was a very humiliating thing for me. If I am challenged, you know, [unclear] I accepted the challenge, I guess. So the next time I came first in the class, but I put in hard work. And there was a biology teacher called Mrs. Thomas from Kerla [phonetic], and she would nurture me, and that's why I started liking biology and science. Never liked maths. The trigonometry they taught me went over my head.

Narasimhan

So, anyway, but I did see the thing is, the stigma was never to fail. You cannot fail. So we would, unlike here in America, in India they would have a semifinal and a final, and we would all be cramming, you know, [unclear] like our life depended on it. This same continues till today in India. In fact, I heard on the news that the children are so pressurized that if they fail, they commit suicide. Have you heard that?

Hampapur

Yes, I've heard that.

Narasimhan

So the trend continues, so you cannot fail, because of so many reasons. That was the pressure. So when I heard that I wasn't doing well and I had an F, and that was the first F in my life, so it was very humiliating, and so I put in extra efforts. I didn't have a private tutor ever, because we couldn't afford it.

Hampapur

Did your parents speak Hindi?

Narasimhan

My parents, you know, picked up Hindi very well, to the point that my mother, when she went back to Bangalore eventually, she used to say, "Acha, acha." They used to call her "Acha mami." [laughter] So yes, my parents--actually, without the formal education, my mother had the most common sense. She read Shakespeare on her own. She taught all the four children, the grandchildren, and also she used to teach on the side after my father retired, to supplement their income. So she was self-taught, and she knew fluent English. That's one of the reasons that we did not learn Tamil, I think, because I told my parents, "Please teach my son our language," and he would answer them back in English, and they would switch to English, because both my parents knew fluent English. Anyway, so--

Hampapur

When you moved to New Delhi, like I know that you had the issue with the language. Was it diverse there in terms of the Indians you encountered, or were people mostly from the north, or were there other people that you were exposed to who had come from the south as well?

Narasimhan

In school there were mostly North Indians. I can't even recall one South Indian in my school. There was not a single South Indian in that bunch. You know, like you form groups, in my group I had a Sardarni or a Sikh lady, and a Rajput lady and a Punjabi. So in my school days there were no North Indians. So I was always an outsider all my life, but at that time, when you're young, you can blend, so I did blend. I didn't feel left out or like stick out like a sore thumb. And looking back, even then there were boys who would look at me, but I wouldn't talk to them. And then the premedical, there was one or two South Indian. But, you know, I blended. I blended. And then in medical school, there were again a handful of us. Out of the two hundred and fifty in the class, there were two boys and three South Indian girls. Another one was an Iyengar girl like me. Yes.

Hampapur

So did your parents have then a mixed circle of friends, or did they have South Indian friends when you were growing up?

Narasimhan

My parents, my father had a circle of his own, and they were from the work, and my father and mother both used to play cards, excellent bridge, so they had a bridge club, and they were mostly a mixed ethnic group. I don't think there was a South Indian in the bunch. But we did have in the neighborhood, the opposite neighbor was a South Indian. But, you know, we mixed; children mixed a lot. I mixed. Among my school friends, I made my own school friends, my sister. We didn't have great neighborhood friends except later on, much later when I was in medical school, I found out there was a South Indian family, and they kind of started socializing with me.

Hampapur

What did you like to do for fun with your friends? I know you mentioned you went to the movies occasionally.

Narasimhan

Well, you know, I had to study day and night. But whenever I used to participate in all the athletic activities, we used to play--I don't know whether you know that Frisbee--it's not quite Frisbee. It's called tennis koit [phonetic] in India, and I used to participate in all the athletic events, whether I was good at it or not, like three-legged race or potato sack race or whatever. But I didn't do anything on a regular basis, didn't have time for that. And we were not encouraged.

Narasimhan

I used to sing. Oh, that's another thing. My family is very music oriented. In fact, my mother's auntie was being a musician of the Mysore Maharaja Aztan. So she was very well known, and she was also a AAR radio artist who settled in Madras. And then, so my mother also was a vocal musician, and she also could play harmonium. So my mother wanted us to all learn music, but we were in Delhi from the age of ten, so we did find a Tamil musician who used to come and teach me at home, South Indian classical music. But the problem was, he wanted me to get up early morning at the crack of dawn and practice, and he finally discharged himself. He said, "Listen, God has given you a good voice, which, you know, unless you practice, you're wasting money."

Narasimhan

But for him--this is another interesting story. I had to learn how to--he could only write in Tamil. Although Tamil is my mother tongue, I didn't know how to read or write Tamil. I could speak fluently, so I thought. So in one day I learned how to read Tamil, read and write Tamil, not because I was interested in learning music, but because my mother used to get these magazines, Tamil magazines, that she used to read with soap opera-like serials, and we used to say, "Mom, mom, what is the story now?"

Narasimhan

And she would say, "Oh, nothing. He just came and she went to that place."

Narasimhan

I said, "What is this? There are nine pages, and you're just giving me two sentences."

Narasimhan

So I wanted to read those daily soap op--I was a prolific reader. I read like nobody's--whatever I laid my hands on, I read. I was totally indiscriminate. Whatever I could get my hands on, in whatever language, I would read. And so did most of the Indian girls, because in those days there was no television, and then when the television came, it was rudimentary, black and white, government channel, with news. Nobody was interested in that, so the main way of entertainment was going to the movies, the Bollywood movies. And since I was from South India, I could go to any movies, South Indian movies, English movies, Hindi movies. So we would also go as a family almost once or twice a month to the movies, so that was our main recreation, yes.

Hampapur

That sounds nice.

Narasimhan

Well, it was a happy-go-lucky period. Whatever we had, we never thought that we don't have this, we don't have that, even though in my medical school years, I realized that most of my other medical friends, school friends, were probably richer than me, had more saris. But I never felt envious of them, because--this sounds very smug, but I had everything. I had a good family. I had youth, figure, and I was fairly good-looking then. I should have brought the photograph. And then so I was very contented and happy-go-lucky and too immersed in myself to bother with others, and never envious. In fact, I have a friend who is now here, who was my classmate who came back from England, and her husband was here, so she had an apartment and a servant and a car, and she would bug me, you know, "Padma, I can't read alone. I'm married, and I miss my husband." I didn't have a clue as to what those things are.

Narasimhan

Then my mother would say, "Go with her and study," and I didn't want to. I wanted my mother or the dorm. Things like that. So I never felt jealous of anybody or anything, and my goals were very clear, and we didn't have too many distractions, thank God. We didn't have what we have today, like computer. I mean, distractions, you have it, unbelievable, you know. iPad, iPhone, MP3 computer; I mean, what else? Everything, right? Clubs, bars, TV. But the only thing I had was a radio, and it was a constant companion of mine. It would blare in the back and I could multifunction and study.

Hampapur

Did you listen to music on it or--

Narasimhan

Yes, constantly, all the waking time. So that was a point of friction in my family that, "Oh, Padma has her own bedroom and her own radio, and we have a shared radio," and that kind of thing. So they all thought--my siblings thought, and I didn't know till it recently, that my parents were more partial to me because I was going to medical school, and they were all put to--like, you know, my mother would send food through my youngest brother in bus to be carried to my dorm. Things like that. But I did not know they resented me. In fact, I thought just the reverse. I thought I got the most discipline from my parents because I was the oldest. By the time it came to my brother, anything goes, and I can give you an example.

Narasimhan

My mother's younger sister, my aunt, was getting married, and she was my best friend. I would sleep with her, listen to stories. She would comb my hair the way I wanted it and not--my mother would put too much oil in my hair, something like that. And she was my buddy, and she was getting married, and she was, I think, probably twelve years older to me; I don't remember. And I was like twelve years old, and she was getting married, and I wanted--the marriage in India, as you know, although in those days, not like the olden days, it used to go on for a month. But in her age, I think it was probably--I don't even--early sixties. So it went on for three days, and I wanted to participate in all the three days, and my father said, "Nothing doing. You have a test."

Narasimhan

I had a crummy in-house test, which I could have easily missed. He said, "Education is more important," and he wouldn't let me go. He was that strict with me. I cried buckets of tears, and he would punish me verbally as well as--you know. He would threaten us. "Oh, I'm going to take out my belt," and we would all be petrified. And my father was supposed to be the disciplinarian, and my mother was supposed to be--she would say, "I'll tell your dad when he comes home," kind of thing. But then I think later on for me, after four children and two brothers--I mean, I went away very early to dorm and medical school, so I really don't know what happened with my younger brothers, younger sister and brothers. But then now I hear stories that my mother also started disciplining them, the boys especially. But I didn't know that.

Hampapur

Okay. So you had mentioned earlier that you had wanted to go to Delhi University but that didn't work out. So when you had wanted to attend there, what did you want to study? What had you seen yourself doing?

Narasimhan

Oh, just a college BSE degree maybe. I mean, I had no clue. I was fifteen and a half, and you're supposed to be educated, and then you are supposed to learn--then I also learned Bharatanatyam, which I didn't tell you. Anyway, so, you

know, in those days the girls used to be taught a little music, a little singing, a little dancing, and some culture and some slokas. Slokas since my childhood I used to learn, because of my grandparents. In my grandparents' house they were very, very--how do you translate muddi [followed purity rules] into English? It means you cannot enter my grandma's kitchen.

Hampapur

Yes, I know what you're referencing.

Narasimhan

And then, you know, especially if you didn't have Samashrayanam, I don't know. You know what that is? You know what Samashrayanam is?

Hampapur

I think I do. Maybe you should explain it so I'm thinking of the right thing.

Narasimhan

Well, in the olden days, we come from a priest class family, you and I both, and women were thought to be not clean till they got married and they went to their guru or swami or whoever. Some of them were Suahim [phonetic] swamis, like my grandfather was. And then go to their swami and then literally burn their forearms, upper arms, with Shanka and Chakra. Shanka and Chakra are the-- Shanka is the shell, and Chakra is a wheel, which is the same symbols that the gods, most of the gods that we worship, hold in their hands. So they would be burned, and the boys also. The boys would have it done after their thread ceremony. And this is called Samashrayanam. That means you are now going to God and surrendering to him and stating that you are going to dedicate your life to--not only your life, which is divided into four sect, which is, you know, Balashram, which is childhood, then Grihasthashram, which is marriage and family, and then--the last one is Sannyasashram, which is to attain God you give up everything. But I don't know the third one. [laughs] Shame on me.

Narasimhan

Anyway, so my grandparents, they would make me get up in the morning, early morning, take a shower, and then chant these slokas for an hour after touching the feet of all the elders. Same thing in the evening, when the sun goes down and the sun goes up. This is what we were taught from the beginning, so we used to do that, but not so much in New Delhi. It became very lax and less and less. But you would do all the festivals and special meanings of the festivals, and we would perform all that. So it was a very culturally ingrained family. We would do all the things that were supposed to be done, as opposed to me never doing those things in America, which is sad but true. We would celebrate Diwali, Navratri, Krishna Jayanthi, all those main festivals, as well as small ones like Ramanujaacharya's birthday, which is a big deal in Melkote where I was born. They would bring the god in a procession with a diamond crown,

which came once a year from Mysore, and stuff like that. It's called Vairamudi Seva. You should go and see it once.

Hampapur

Okay

Narasimhan

Anyway, so we kept our identity as a South Indian, although we grew up in New Delhi, but we also amalgamated their festivals like Holi, and so I think we got the best of both worlds, because most of our festivals are feasting festivals, eat, eat, eat, right? So my childhood was pretty happy-go-lucky. My college days were also happy-go-lucky. I used to participate in everything, in Little Dah [phonetic] cultural ceremonies and then--or be thrilled--you know, like I went in a fancy dress competition as a Rajasthani girl. Till today I don't know where I got those things. I look at the photograph, and then only I remember. They're very vague memories. Anyway, so they were uneventful and very busy, very goal oriented, family oriented.

Hampapur

Then when you went to medical school, you mentioned you didn't want to live in the dorm at first, is that right?

Narasimhan

No, I never wanted to live in the dorm, but later on I realized that during the exams that I told you about, you have to--like we would have an intense period of studying just before the exam, and like cram it all down and vomit it out. [laughs] So for that I had to be near the campus, so I ended up being in the dorm, and the first two years--I did not tell you that I almost dropped out of medical school because, as you know, we are pure vegetarians, and I was never exposed to any carcass or anything. In fact, my grandma, it seems, one day saw a cracked eggshell and fainted because she had never seen a cracked eggshell and said, "Oh, my god, that is an animal which died."

Hampapur

Oh, wow.

Narasimhan

So I was brought up like that, and I was never exposed to--suddenly my father and I went to Maulana Azad Medical College to fill in our tuition. We were supposed to go through this door, and there was this pregnant woman, which I thought was a statue of a pregnant woman lying down, you know, in a horizontal position. And I told my dad, I said, "Dad, doesn't it look very lifelike?" and I touched it. It was a dead body, and I just fainted. It was a dead body I did not know. We were going through anatomy. So then I went home, and I scrubbed myself, and I could still smell the formalin. The anatomy years were the most terrible years of my life, two years of anatomy. I have blocked it out till today. I don't know who my partners were, and I almost flunked,

because, you know, I did not want to do it. I did not want to be there, especially in the first few days, it was formalin-soaked, and I would come home, and I could not eat. I could not take my hand into my mouth and eat. And my mother, on top of it, would make me come from the back door--there was a back door and a front door to my house--from the alley. She would make me come to the back door and go and take a shower, because I had gone and touched a dead body. And then only she would let me inside the house.

Narasimhan

So it was a great struggle. I almost dropped out, but for a friend of mine who was in the pre-medical. She was also from a similar background like me, a South Indian Brahmin, and she and I said--you know, she used to tell me, "Padma, we are high achievers. We scored so high, and we are not going to just drop out." We used to talk to each other, and somehow made it through, although she was in Lady Hardinge. I still don't remember how we used to talk to each other, because we did not have phones in those days again. Most middle-class families in India in those days did not have telephones. And I still don't recall; maybe we used to meet. And so somehow we went through that. It was the two most terrible--I almost dropped out, and I just could not eat. For two to three months my mother had to spoon-feed me, because I couldn't eat.

Hampapur

Wow.

Narasimhan

It was terrible. And that's why in our community there were not many doctors--

Hampapur

I see.

Narasimhan

--because we were against cutting up dead bodies or being interacting with, you know, animals or dead bodies or something. So in fact, I was one of the very few first female physicians from the Iyengar community that I know of, because in those days, the men used to be--engineering was number one in that country at that time for our community. There were not many physicians in our community, either in the south or in the north, that I know of.

Narasimhan

And how do I know? Because later on when I was of marriageable age, my parents had a tough time. They were in New Delhi. They didn't know anybody from South India. I always thought that I'll grow up and my parents will have an arranged marriage for me from my community, Iyengar, and I would prefer a physician. I thought, "What's wrong in that? I'm not asking for the sun and the moon." Didn't happen.

Narasimhan

Couldn't happen, because they could not find anybody from my--first of all, they were away from the South Indian community, so they didn't know anybody. Second of all, people knew about me, and there were some people from here, America, who had come, and they wanted a physician from our community, and I was one of the rare commodities. They would come and offer, and as you know, in our community in those days the boy's side had the upper hand, and it's the girl's parents who would go and seek the boy's hand and request it and then pay dowry and what have you, or be exhibited like a vegetable in front of the boy's side and their relatives. I told them--I was a feminist by then, and I said, "I'm not going to do all that crap," and thank God, I didn't have to, because the boy's side would come. For example, they would say, "Oh, you are Amayla's daughter." That means my mother was so soft-spoken and well thought of in the community. They thought I was like her. I was nothing like her. [laughter] But I was more like my dad, I think.

Narasimhan

Anyway, so they would come to New Delhi. They would send, you know, offers. "This is the boy's photograph, and he wants a physician," and I would say, "Oh, no, I want a physician. He's an engineer." I was kind of very foolish, I think. I didn't know what I wanted, to be honest with you, and whomever I rejected ended up marrying my relatives, who were all very happy. Anyway, and my mother believes it's fate. Whatever is written here will happen.

Narasimhan

Then so after my medical school graduation my father was told bluntly, "Hey, we waited so long. Either you transfer to the city you want, or we'll transfer you to--you have no choice--to the city we will transfer you to. So we are giving you a chance, but you have to be transferred." So my father chose to be transferred back to Bangalore, so he by that time my sister was studying in Chandigarh, and so the family got scattered. My father and mother and my youngest brother, Anand, went back to Bangalore. Anand didn't know a word of Kannada at that time. He still doesn't know much. He doesn't know how to read or write, like I can read and write many languages because of what all I was exposed to.

Narasimhan

So I was left with my younger brother, Rajgopal, who was also in New Delhi, and the problem was that the government quarters are a very sought-after commodity, and once you get into a government quarters, till you die or you retire, you stay there, so there is a long queue or a wait for getting your turn into the government quarters. They're subsidized housing. So there was a twelve-year wait for that government quarters.

Hampapur

Wow.

Narasimhan

But I said--and I was very naive, I think, looking back, you know, naive and very brash and didn't know anything. So I said, "No, I'm not going to vacate this house. I mean, where are my brother and I going to live?" Because by that time I was going to finish my residency, and my parents were looking for me for marriage. You know, that's what happens usually. And then started a struggle which, looking back, I mean, it was a miracle. So I applied, and I said, "My father is retired, and I'm getting this government job. So the quarters should be transferred to me." I thought it was a simple process.

Narasimhan

I would go to, you know, the government--I don't know what building every day by bus. We always used to travel by bus. My parents had a scooter. My two brothers had a scooter, but you know, my brother would--and I fell off one scooter because my brother took a steep turn. But anyway, I preferred the bus. So every day I would take off time--not every day; once a week. I would go to the Ministry of Building or whatever it was called, I don't remember now, and say, "What happened to my application? What happened to my application?" And there was no response.

Narasimhan

Then finally a janitor took pity on me, and he said, "Did you put Pava on it?" Pava in Hindi means, "Did you put wheels on it?"

Narasimhan

I didn't understand. I was in my twenties. I knew the government was corrupt, but I had no clue. I had never bribed anybody in my life till then. So I started learning things. Anyway, so I said, "What do you mean?"

Narasimhan

So he said, "Listen, if you want something done here, you either have to bribe them or you have to know the home minister. Do you know the home minister?"

Narasimhan

And I lied, and I said, "Yeah."

Narasimhan

Then he said, "Go and see him."

Narasimhan

So I said, "Okay." Then I went to the Home Ministry, and I said, "I want an appointment with the home minister," and they're looking at me.

Narasimhan

"Why do you need to see him?"

Narasimhan

I said, "Well, it's personal and urgent."

Narasimhan

"Does he know you?"

Narasimhan

I said, "Yeah, he kind of knows me." He didn't know me from Adam, and they gave me an appointment finally, without bribing, and so then I don't remember, it's so long ago.

Narasimhan

I gave him a very impassioned speech, and he said, "Listen, we cannot give you that government quarters. First of all, after retirement there is not a rule to accommodate a transfer to the child, daughter or son. Second of all, you are working in a place called Chatarpur, and it's out of zone for that government quarter to be assigned to you, because you are working in another zone."

Narasimhan

I said, "I don't care. I mean, my brother and I will be homeless. Where will we go? I'm serving your government, and I need a shelter. I'm unmarried and a single girl." So I don't know what I said. I said, "Charity begins at home." I gave him some speech. And finally it happened, and nobody would believe it. They gave me the government quarters.

Hampapur

Wow.

Narasimhan

But then in the meanwhile I wanted to be again with my parents. That's how we are brought up. So I went to Bangalore and applied for a job, government job again, and got an interview. And I'm sitting in the interview, waiting for the interview, and these other candidates are looking at me and saying, "Your name is M. N. Padma." At that time I used to be known as M. N. Padma. It stands for Mandayam Narsiwadiyar Padma. Mandayam means the community, Iyengar community they call it. Anyway, so they said, "It sounds like a Brahmin name."

Narasimhan

I said, "Yeah."

Narasimhan

There is a lot of anti-Brahminism in South India and a lot of discrimination against Brahmins in South India that I luckily escaped. So I wasn't very familiar with that, and I said, "Why are they asking me all these questions?"

Narasimhan

Said, "Oh, so do you know anybody?"

Narasimhan

I said, "No, I don't."

Narasimhan

"You came from New Delhi. Why are you coming from New Delhi to here, taking our jobs?"

Narasimhan

I said, "Well, because my parents are here, you know."

Narasimhan

"Oh, so you know some home minister or some minister?"

Narasimhan

I said, "No." Same conversation.

Narasimhan

And they said, "Huh, you will not get a job in a million years. Are you kidding? Either you should bribe somebody or you should know some minister, and you're a Brahmin on top. You will not get a job."

Narasimhan

So before I was interviewed, I was like completely lost all hope of ever getting this position. But I went in, and he asked me same questions. He said, "Why do you want to come from New Delhi to here?"

Narasimhan

And I told him. I said, "My parents are here, and I need to be with my parents." That's understood in our culture, because you are unmarried, you stay with your parents.

Narasimhan

So he said, "Okay, but you know, what makes you think that you can get it?"

Narasimhan

I said, "Because I'm competent and I'm a physician and I had this much experience. This is my resume."

Narasimhan

And he said, "Well, the best I can do is to give you a job in a small village, which is,"--they call it in kilometers, not miles--"which is nearby Bangalore, but it's not in Bangalore."

Narasimhan

So I got very incensed. I said, "No, the main reason I'm moving all the way is to be in Bangalore."

Narasimhan

So he said, "Listen, kiddo, the fact that I'm giving you employment in a village so near Bangalore, they will suspect that you gave me a bribe, and that's why I'm giving it to you. If I give you a job in Bangalore, I'll be fired, and the minister will put an enquiry as to why you gave her this most sought-after--first of all, we don't have any jobs in Bangalore to give you." So he said, "Will you be willing to take it or not?"

Narasimhan

So I took it. But then when we went and inspected, my mother had the common sense to say that, "You know, these villagers will--you don't know the way of the villagers. You've never lived in a village. You were always in big

cosmopolitan cities, and their ways are totally different. I don't think you will last too long here." So my mother advised me not to take the job. [laughs]

Narasimhan

Then came the fact that, you know, they tried to have an arranged marriage for me, so it was a very tedious process. I had to take off from work, from New Delhi; fly down to either Bangalore or where they were. For example, there was a boy from Madras. They wanted me to fly down to Madras, and I said, "I cannot do this. It's too hard," and it was very traumatic, you know. The boy is a physician from America, but he wouldn't talk to me, and the mother of the boy is trying to brainwash me and say, "Listen, he saw two hundred girls, and you are the first one that he said yes to. His father has a nursing home here." Nursing home is a private hospital; that's what it means in that country. Nursing home here is totally different. You know, "So you should marry him and bring him back somehow from America to here so that he can settle in Chennai and take over his dad's lucrative practice."

Narasimhan

But the boy never spoke to me, and then I said yes, and then they are asking, demanding--every day there is a phone call from Madras saying, you know, "We want you to arrange for a hol[iday] in fifteen days," which was impossible, and my father didn't know anybody in Chennai. And then, "Two thousand, five hundred people will be coming because we are big shots in Chennai." Their demands kept going up and up and up, and my father is a government servant with four children. He doesn't have a stash of money to--and then, "She should have diamond earrings," although they said no dowry, you see, and then, "You should pay for her flight to America." And then it went on and on, and when I found out, I said, "Forget it," you know. "I don't want to marry this guy." He was kind of short and, you know, and nerdy looking, and I never spoke to him. There was no--although I didn't know the word "chemistry," in those days, okay? We were so naive and sheltered.

Narasimhan

I told my dad--I was surrounded by--now I'm looking back, but it didn't strike me in those days that my father was very good-looking, my brothers were very good-looking and tall, six-feet and above, and this guy was like five-feet six inches at the most, or five whatever. And then so I said, "Ma," so my mother and father said, "Oh, it's not the appearance that is important, you know. It's how happy he can keep you and all that." So I would listen to whatever my parents said, although in my heart of hearts I didn't feel anything. Although I looked at the boy, unlike my mother, who never looked at the boy, and she lucked out. [laughter]

Narasimhan

Anyway, so then finally I said, "You know, nothing doing. I want to--." Since childhood I was an Anglophile. I used to read all the English books and see all the English movies, including American and British, which were hard accents to understand in those days, because--and the theater sounds were also very gargled. Anyway, so--but I always wanted to come to America. Most of my classmates, in fact, 50 percent of my classmates from the medical school, are in America, and about 30 percent are in England.

Hampapur

Oh, wow.

Narasimhan

Yes.

Hampapur

And they came at that time, too, or did they come later?

Narasimhan

Yes, actually I came much later than my classmates, because I finished--most of them did their internship, which is a requisite to get the degree and then came here. I did not only internship; I did residency and post-graduation, and then I came here later.

Hampapur

What was the attraction for all of them to go to the U.S.?

Narasimhan

I think for them--I can't speak for them, but most of them for money, for bettering, getting better--in those days also it's a supply and demand. When they came in the early seventies, there was a huge demand for foreign medical graduates. They would cater to them. They would send them air flight tickets. They would give the exams in India, the ECFMG [Educational Commission for Foreign Medical Graduates]. It used to be called the ECFMG. I don't know what it's called now. It's equivalent to the FLEX [Federal Licensing Examination]. I don't know how familiar you are with medical--FLEX is--what does it stand for? I think Federal Licensing Exam. I don't know. So FLEX is a mandated exam every medical student has to take, and there are three parts. But all those three parts were consolidated and given to us, and it used to be called ECFMG, which is Educational Council for Foreign Medical Graduates. I think it's called something else now, but I'm not aware. I mean, I am aware, but I can't remember what it is.

Hampapur

That's fine.

Narasimhan

And they would then give them free boarding and lodging, and they would employ them. In other words, there would already be employment sitting available, and they paid much more than what they paid in India. So most of

my classmates probably came for that. But by the time I came, like the story of my life, it's 1976. They had stopped giving exams in India, so I finally ended up going to Frankfurt, Germany. I mean, they're all big, big adventures. If I start talking about them, I'll be here for the rest of the day.

Narasimhan

Anyway, so my classmate and I, I had a classmate who wanted to go with me, so we decided we'll go to Frankfurt, Germany, and give the exam, which is called ECFMG, which is a requisite to pass and get a--so another requisite was to get a green card. By this time I was employed in police hospital, and I was called the lady police surgeon, and it entailed a lot of--it was a very powerful post, although I did not know that.

Narasimhan

But I hated it because I would be sitting there, and two people who fought, and this is how naive I was. Although I had studied in medical college all the effects of alcohol on your body, different stages, whatever, I was never exposed to alcohol. So when two people came and fought and brought--there was a stamp that said, "Alcohol on breath, yes or no." What the mind doesn't know, the eyes don't see. I did not know how the alcohol smelt. I had an assistant who was not a nurse, who was not an educated woman.

Narasimhan

This is how it works in India. She was a servant in the mayor's house, and all she knew was how to put a thumbprint. She didn't even know how to sign her name, but she buttered the mayor up to get this post as my assistant. What she used to do, which I was clueless about this, was that she would go and tell the patients who fought and who would give--they would bribe her. They would say, "Oh, tell the doctor." For example, if I wrote, "This wound is from a sharp instrument," they would get automatic jail time. But if I said, "This was caused by a blunt instrument," it wouldn't be that bad. Things like that. Or if I said, "Alcohol on breath, yes or no," it mattered.

Narasimhan

So this woman knew my weakness, and she would go--I would tell her to go and smell them. So she would go and tell them outside, "Oh, I have told the doctor what to do. Don't worry. Don't worry," and they would give her the money. I never saw one penny of it, and I was clueless. [laughs] While I was there, all this was happening.

Narasimhan

And I would have gotten much more bribe money if I had agreed to do postmortems. My male counterpart, who was the police surgeon, came from a small village in Uttar Pradesh with one suitcase, and suddenly he has built a mansion and has three cars because of bribe money, and I was clueless. But I did not like working there, because these police constables would come and

stare at me with their teeth out, and I was in my twenties, and all these people who fought. Then I had to go to court to give my medical expert--as a medical expert witness, which was very nearby, but still. And they would give me charges, taxi charges and all that. So there was a lot of money in it, but I didn't like it.

Narasimhan

So then I--well, I met somebody. This is like I don't know whether you know Reader's Digest, "My Most Unforgettable Person in My Life." You know, they used to have, and--have you ever read Reader's Digest?

Hampapur

Yes.

Narasimhan

Okay. They used to have a regular article, "My Most Unforgettable--My Most Unforgettable--." What am I looking for? I think I'm not saying it right. Anyway, the person who influenced most your life, something like that. "My Most Influential Person in My Life," or somebody who came into your life and without planning and with out knowledge, changed your life forever, things like that. So that's whom I met as a lady police surgeon.

Narasimhan

I had a lot of clout. They used to send me a jeep and a driver, and I used to go to the premiere openings of all the movie theaters, and free film cricket finals and all this were all very sought-after events, and I was invited to all those with a driver and a jeep. Yes, it goes to your head when you're in your twenties. So I would take my mother and, you know, whoever, my family also.

Hampapur

Were you in Bangalore at this time or still in New Delhi?

Narasimhan

New Delhi. New Delhi.

Hampapur

New Delhi, okay.

Narasimhan

I never went to Bangalore.

Hampapur

Yes, that's what I thought. Okay.

Narasimhan

So then my personality is such that my mother would advise me that, you know, "Padma, you have to know how to talk to people differently. You talk to the janitor and the prime minister in the same tone, same way. No, you have to talk to the janitor in a different way and the prime minister in a different way." But I didn't know that. I used to treat everybody the same. Well, looking back, maybe it was helpful, I don't know.

Narasimhan

So one day I'm sitting there. There are many times many of the--they used to call them STPs, sub--I don't know what it stands for. IAS officers. They are very highly trained. IAS is Indian Administrative Services. They're very highly sought after education, and people who had done IPS and IAS would come to me and salute me, but I wouldn't know who they were. I didn't know they were big shots. Later on I found out. And I would be just sitting there, and I said, "Okay, what do you want?"

Narasimhan

So one day there was a whole commotion, and everybody salute--getting up and saluting. And somebody came and that person was a short, middle-aged personality with an aura of authority around him, but I didn't know who it was, surrounded by a couple of other people. He came and saluted me, and I said, "Okay."

Narasimhan

He said, "Can I have a seat?"

Narasimhan

I said, "Yes, please."

Narasimhan

And he said, "Oh, I'm Mr. P. R. Rajagopal."

Narasimhan

I said, "Oh, how do you do? My name is Padma, Dr. Padma, M. N.."

Narasimhan

And find out that he is the inspector general of police, IGP, who is so powerful that he is second in command after the mayor in New Delhi, which I did not know, and I was thrilled that he is another South Indian gentleman.

Narasimhan

So he started talking to me, and he said, "Oh, how do you like it here?"

Narasimhan

I said, "I don't like it. I want to go to Irwin Hospital, which is my base." Irwin Hospital is part of Maulana Azad Medical College, which is where I was before I was transferred.

Narasimhan

So he said, "Really? What do you want to do?"

Narasimhan

I said, "I want to go to America, you know, eventually."

Narasimhan

So he said, "What's preventing you?" And suddenly he took a liking to me, and later on I found out he is a very powerful personality. He said, "I'll make it happen."

Narasimhan

I said, "Huh?" [laughter]

Narasimhan

And then I just thought he was jesting with me. I didn't know how powerful he is. So he took a liking to me, and he came to my house. Suddenly he appears in a jeep, and ten people saluting him, and my mother says, "Who is he?"

Narasimhan

Then he says--he had two sons. And so anyway, he told me that he will make it happen. I said, "Really?"

Narasimhan

He said, "Yeah." At that time I had already applied to go to Frankfurt to appear for the exam, and I wanted a sponsor, somebody from here to sponsor me to say that, you know, I won't be indigent and be a burden to the government, that if that happens, then there is some sponsor has to say, "No, I'll support her." So I didn't have anybody at that time, so he said, "I have a nephew who's a colorectal surgeon in Shreveport, Louisiana. He's going to sponsor you for the green card."

Narasimhan

So I applied for the green card, got it, and he paid for it. I was like very obligated, and I said, "How will I repay you?"

Narasimhan

And he said, "Padma," he said, "now, you know, learn to take favor graciously when it's given to you, and when you can, pass on a favor graciously without expecting anything in return." Then he would shower me with gifts, call me to his house, and, you know, I was really overwhelmed, and I didn't realize what all he did for me. But of course, my parents--most important, how many parents in India in those days would send an unmarried girl to a foreign country?

Narasimhan

All I had was--I passed ECFMG exam. If you want, I'll tell you all the--that's a different adventure I had, because my girlfriend who was supposed to come with me to Frankfurt and stay in the youth hostel said, "No, I'm marrying my classmate, so I'm not going. I'm going to America to give the exam." So I had to go alone, and I had to--anyway, it's a different story. There was diverted, and I could not get into the youth hostel. Then I had met somebody in the plane who was from Mumbai, and she said, "Why don't I ask my hosts who are putting me up to,"--do you want to hear all that story?

Hampapur

Yes, yes.

Narasimhan

Okay. This is the first time I had gone on a plane. I had never been on a plane, although my father was a civil aviation engineer. He refused us to get free lessons to fly a plane because he had seen airplane crashes. He said, "You can't

even salvage bones sometimes." So he didn't want any of us to take that risk, and it's still an unfulfilled wish for me, to learn how to fly.

Narasimhan

So that was my first flight anywhere. I had never sat in a plane. Or maybe I did; I don't remember. And then it was an international flight. I had bought a ticket from Lufthansa because they used to give youth fare, which is half the price, and I had gotten visas for Germany and Paris, in the hopes, you know, I can visit Paris. And then I had gotten a youth hostel, which was twenty dollars or something. I don't remember. But, you know, see, rupees into marks--in those days it was German money, whatever it was. Now it's all euro.

Narasimhan

So I had very little to play with, and then I suddenly had to go alone, and then my mother was very nervous, and then our flight was diverted to Paris. So I was thrilled. I said, "Oh, I'll see Paris," but no. They said, "You can go to the airport while the plane is waiting," because there was bad weather in Frankfurt to land, "and then when we are ready to re-embark, you can re-embark--disembark."

Narasimhan

So we disembarked, and we are just in the airport. They wouldn't let me re-embark, the Paris people. They were speaking in French. When I spoke in English, they didn't like it, and they said, "No, you cannot go back."

Narasimhan

I said, "We just disembarked because of the bad weather in--." Anyway, finally they saw my Paris visa, and they stamped it, and I had to get back on that. Till today I haven't gone to Paris. That's another story. Anyway, so by the time we'd landed in Frankfurt, it was after midnight, and I was too scared. It was still blizzardy. This was, I think, March or--I don't remember the month. Anyway, and it was 1975. Dating myself. Were you born then? [laughs] I thought not.

Narasimhan

Anyway, so then what do I do? So I met somebody from Mumbai who was also going to Frankfurt to take the exam, so we became friendly. God works in mysterious ways. And then I told her, "Listen, I'm too scared to go take a public transportation to this youth hostel. I don't know where it is. What should I do?" I was really fearful.

Narasimhan

She stated, "Oh, okay. You know, I have a couple of people who are hosting me, a husband and wife, who are coming to pick me up, and I'll ask them if they can help you out." So I forget this lady's name, the Mumbai lady. She was a Maharashtrian, but she was much more savvy and much more Americanized than me. If you can imagine, I was in a long hair up to here in a plait, and a sari

or a salwar kameez, very slim, fifty pounds lighter than this. I should show you photographs.

Narasimhan

Anyway, so she asked--his name was Carl Blume; I don't remember the wife's name--Mr. and Mrs. Blume--that, you know, "This lady has come, and she's alone, and she had to be--." So the lady turned to me and said, "You know, what we are putting her up in the attic, where there are two beds, and since you are both studying for the same exam, why don't you come and stay there."

Narasimhan

I couldn't believe my luck. I said, "Do you really mean it?"

Narasimhan

She said, "Yes." Then later on I found out--I don't know whether I should tell you this story. Later on I found out there was a reason behind it. Her name, the girl's name, was Sunita. Sunita's friend had come earlier and stayed with this couple, who, in a place called Biebesheim, which is a suburb of Frankfurt. Germans are very similar in culture to Indians in that the family stays next to each other or together. They're very family oriented. Anyway, so Sunita's friend had come earlier and stayed with them, and it seems the husband, Mr. Carl Blume, had a wine cellar, and they would drink every day a new bottle. I mean, the friend of Sunita was having either an affair or flirting with the husband. So the wife thought that if there are two of us, the chances would be much less. I mean, I came to know this much later.

Narasimhan

But I was really very grateful that they put me up there, and we studied. Every day Mr. Carl Blume would say, "Oh, Indian princess, would you come and taste this wine which I have opened in your honor?"

Narasimhan

At that time I thought I was representing Bharat Mata, and you know, I had never drunk in my life, and I said, "One sip would take me to sin city. " And now I regret it. [laughter] I would say, "No, no, no," and Sunita and she would drink the bottle up, and because the wife was on a diet because, you know, the Germans eat meat morning, noon, and night.

Narasimhan

That was another problem. So every day the poor lady would get up and say, "But now what can I make for you?" Because Sunita could eat meat and drink, and I said, "Just give me a toast and cheese, whatever," you know, so that's what I lived on, and water. Everybody drank beer. So I had to learn this German phrase saying, "En glassa vassa vitae," because whenever I went out, I wanted water but they would serve me beer and wine, which I could not drink in those days.

Narasimhan

Anyway, so that was my story, and also there were other interesting stories. Then they were very nice to me and Sunita, and after the exam they took us up and down the Rhine River, sight-seeing. There was a Rhine Museum, and this German gentleman comes to me and says, "Oh, lovely Indian princess, would you marry me?" [laughter] And then, you know, I mean, it looks foolish now because I'm old. So then I went running to Mrs. Blume and say--she said, "Yah, he means it, and he's the owner of this museum. He's very rich. You'll be very happy." These folk--Germans speak very little English, but there is broken English. So that was another weird experience. I could have been in Germany, right, but I wasn't--my mental makeup was totally different.

Narasimhan

So anyway, then I came to this country, and the person who sponsored me told me that, "Don't come to Shreveport, Louisiana, because there is a lot of discrimination against foreigners." So I came to this country with a return ticket, a green card, and an ECFMG certificate. I had no money. I came with eight dollars. I could have smuggled in more, but I was very uprighteous and stupid, I think. I just brought eight dollars, and I was told by Mr. P. R. Rajagopal that he has a friend in Washington, D.C., who will loan me some money if I need it. And I was told to go to New York City and stay with this Indian physician couple in training in Elmhurst Hospital, who were a friend of that colorectal surgeon, Dr. Gopal [phonetic], and the name of this couple was Dr. Dayanand and Gita Nayak. Gita was from Bangalore. Both of them are from Karnataka. But they also had a child, and they were living in a small apartment, and they warned me that my life depended on this, that I cannot take more than one suitcase, because there is no space, and I should then get a job.

Narasimhan

That was another mistake I made, is for a July 1st job, I landed here in this country on June 15, 1976, and all the residencies are matched. I wasn't aware of it, or I wasn't thinking right. So I land there in the airport in New York City. Oh, I was traveling three days. In those days in Lufthansa there was no vegetarian meal. Three days I haven't eaten anything, so finally I told them, "I'm very hungry. I need to eat something," and they gave me a boiled banana.

Hampapur

A boiled banana?

Narasimhan

A boiled banana. They said, "We have nothing, you know, no vegetarian food." So I land here three days later, I mean, a thin lady with a long plait and a sari, supposed to be received by somebody whom I've never met in my life. And you know what happens? When a flight comes from India, the people who are going to receive you are all Indians, so how do you recognize? I had not thought about it. And they didn't know how I looked like, and I didn't know

how they looked like. So I'm standing there, very anxious. Oh, just as soon as I alighted from the flight, I heard the name, "Dr. Padma to report to Lufthansa booth for a message." But I ignored it, so I'm looking at all the people. All the people came and took their visitors and went till there was nobody. Now what do I do?

Narasimhan

By this time, because of hunger and panic--and panic-stricken, landing in a strange country, I knew nobody. I had no relatives, no friends, no job, and I have eight dollars. So I start calling this Gita and Dayanand Nayak's phone number, and as soon as it goes to the answering machine, it starts swallowing my money and says, "There is nobody. Please leave a message." So I leave a message, but then I have now only five dollars or something. Then I ask them, "What does the youth hostel cost?"

Narasimhan

"It costs twelve dollars." It's still [unclear], but you know, I didn't have twelve dollars to go to youth hostel. I had only five dollars. Then I called somebody in Washington, D.C., because I couldn't think straight, and then again there's another answering machine, so I hang up so that the money doesn't go away. Now what do I do? Suddenly I remembered there is some message waiting for me in the Lufthansa ahbud. So I go to the Lufthansa booth and I say, "Do you got a message for me?" So then they give me a message saying somebody called. I don't know. "Ram Kolluri has left a message that if you need him, you can call him at this number." And I vaguely remembered that he had come to New Delhi. He is my brother's friend's friend, and my brother had taken him around on his scooter and helped him out. So I call him. By this time I'm completely demoralized, and I said, "My name is Padma, and I'm here, and nobody has come to receive me, and nobody is picking up the phone," and I think I start sobbing or something.

Narasimhan

Then he said, "Okay, just relax. Take a deep breath. Go upstairs and have a glass--."

Narasimhan

So I, "I haven't eaten in three days."

Narasimhan

"Have a glass of milk. Anyway, you know, these stupid Indians, when one Indian comes, there are ten Indians to receive, so I thought that if you need me, you can call me. There is another Air India flight in two hours, and one of my friends is supposed to come there, so I'll come there in two hours, and you just relax and wait for me."

Narasimhan

So I don't drink the milk, because I have no money, you know, so I just wait for him. And I don't remember now how long it last, and anyway, he's there, and somehow--until today I don't know he recognized me and how I recognized him. Maybe we had met each other in New Delhi. I don't remember all those details. It's all a blur. So he says, "Okay, no problem. Dayanand and Gita Nayak live a couple of blocks away from me. I also live in Elmhurst,"--no, "I live in Jackson Heights." I don't know whether you know New York, but they're all--

Hampapur

I know Jackson Heights, yes.

Narasimhan

They're next to each other. "So I'll take you, and then tomorrow you can contact them."

Narasimhan

I said, "Okay." So I'm going, and I say, "So how is everybody in your family?" I ask him.

Narasimhan

He said, "Oh, I live alone."

Narasimhan

That's it. A dam broke, and I'm sobbing inconsolably.

Narasimhan

"What happened now? You didn't eat anything or drink anything." So he first thought I was sobbing because of--and then he realized, he said, "Oh."

Narasimhan

I said, "I cannot stay with you," because I come from a very conservative place, and I was not Americanized yet, and how can I stay with a man who is unmarried? You know, that is unthinkable.

Narasimhan

So he, "Oh, okay, okay. You know, don't worry. Don't worry. I have a friend who is a nurse, female nurse. I'm going to call her and--," you know. So he calls her, and I'm not going to tell you what happened between them. That was a trauma to me. But then anyway--and then these people, they did things to me which was very traumatic. They went through my stuff.

Narasimhan

And anyway, the next day I call Dayanand Nayak, and thank God he picks up the phone, and he says, "Oh, we never got your telegram." They said that they're only free on weekends, so you have to pay extra surcharge on flying on weekends, and I had paid that extra surcharge to land on a weekend, and they had never received that telegraph. We had sent a telegram to them. What had happened, later on I found out, was both the telegrams were telephoned in to Ram Kolluri.

Narasimhan

So God has helped me in different ways. I said, "Okay, I'm going to go back. I have a return flight. What else can I do if I can't find a place to stay?"

Narasimhan

And then Dayanand Nayak said, "You know, it's your lucky day." Again God was working in his mysterious ways. He says, "I have taken off one week vacation to go to Chicago to spend with my buddies, my internship and residency buddies, and you are really lucky. I'm going to not go to Chicago, and I'm going to spend time with you to get you a job." So he came the next day, took me, and to my horror, I found out that 99 percent of the jobs had been already matched. There is a matching program. I did not know this, and Dayanand would say, "Oh, my god." He's a famous cardiologist now, and Gita is a famous oncologist. They are now probably even retired. And they had a small child who is now grown up and is a physician himself.

Narasimhan

Because they told me to bring only one suitcase, I brought my one suitcase with my heaviest silk embroidered saris, and then my mother said, "If you settle down, I promise you we will send the rest of your stuff." These were very beautiful to look at, but they were very inappropriate for medical interviews. So I would wear those, and Dayanand would say, "But you look very glamorous like, you know, going to a party. Do you have anything less glamorous to go for these interviews than that?" I would cry, because I had no money.

Narasimhan

And in the meanwhile, the Washington, D.C., person was contacted. That's when I realized I was in a different culture, and it was a cultural shock. For example, I would go for an interview. Although I was trained in internal medicine, I went for any job that was available, and one of the jobs was, for example, a psychiatry internship in Maimonides, which is a famous Jewish hospital. So I went there, and they had interviews with several different physicians, one hour each lasting. So from nine to twelve, three interviews, and lunch, and then two to four, two more interviews, and each one of them I thought were a little odd. One of them would go like that. Another one would twitch. And they would all ask me the same questions. "Oh, are you married?"

Narasimhan

I would say, "No."

Narasimhan

"Do you have a boyfriend?"

Narasimhan

I would say, "No."

Narasimhan

And then say, "Do you have plans of having a child?"

Narasimhan

And I would feel very offended. I said, "No." I mean, I don't have a boyfriend. I'm not married. And then they just went on. Every single one of them asked me the same questions. So after lunch, between one to two, that's when I was so--I felt humiliation or I felt insulted. And so I got really upset, and tears were floating in my eyes, and the guy could see it. He said, "Why is this upsetting you?"

Narasimhan

I said, "You know--," and then they would ask me, "Oh, so how would you treat this sexual dysfunctions if you are not exposed to it?" And everybody would ask me the same question.

Narasimhan

So finally at that point I had it, and I couldn't care even if I didn't have the job, although I thought I would even sweep the floors to get a job. I said, "Listen, you know, you don't have to have tuberculosis to treat tuberculosis. So you don't have to have experience to treat sexual dysfunctions."

Narasimhan

And that time I was so upset that tears started flowing, and he said, "Why are you so upset?"

Narasimhan

And I said, "People are asking me the same questions. They're saying that--you know, I said I'm not married. I don't have a boyfriend, and they ask me, 'Do you have a child?'" I mean, now I'm Americanized enough to know.

Narasimhan

Then one of them said, "You have four F's against you."

Narasimhan

I said, "What is that?"

Narasimhan

And they said, "You're foreign. You're female. You are fertile, and you are under forty."

Narasimhan

So I said, "Why is that important?"

Narasimhan

And they said, "Oh, because, you know, you can get pregnant and ruin our residency plans--program. You will not be able to work." When they sat me down and explained to me, I understood, and they said, "The reason--." The psychiatrist is telling me, "Oh, don't get upset," you know.

Narasimhan

I said, "Why are they asking the same questions? And when I tell them no, they keep--it's kind of an insult and humiliating to me, you know, that--I said I was

not married and I don't have a boyfriend, and they say, 'What kind of a boyfriend do you want?'"

Narasimhan

Wrong answer. It was a wrong answer. I said, "I would just like somebody like my dad who can take care of me," and that's called the Oedipus complex, it seems. It's a wrong answer. [laughter] You know, I had no image of anybody.

Narasimhan

So anyway, then this psychiatrist explained to me the reason that they ask these questions is that most of the physicians who come to take psychiatry residency have some problem of their own and they want to self-treat, so they want to exclude that. And second thing, that, you know, to make sure that you join the residency and then you take off for pregnancy, and then that screws up their residency programs. Once they explained it to me, I understood.

Narasimhan

And then finally I got into internal medicine, but they told me, "It's a pyramid program. We only promise you this first year. Next year we don't promise you a continuation." I was so desperate, I would have taken--then the discrimination started.

Narasimhan

So it was in Flushing Hospital, which is a private hospital, and surprise, surprise, almost 50 percent of the interns and residents were Indians. One of them was a resident who was my junior in Maulana Azad Medical College, called Dr. Lata Nayar. She was my resident; she was my boss. Internship is the lowest of the low in the hierarchy, and you get dumped upon the most. And I was unlucky enough to do one internship back home. That was not bad, actually, because of friendships. But this one was terrible. They made me go on call every other night. They made me sign a note stating that I will not complain to National Residents and Interns that it's illegal to put me on call every other night, and they also made me man the emergency room, because, they said, I'm overqualified for the job because I had already done my internship and residency. So in other words, they paid me the lowest salary, which is the internship salary, but they made me function as a resident, at a much higher level, because I was trained.

Narasimhan

Can we take a break?

Hampapur

Yes. I'm actually going to stop it here.

[End of interview]

1.2. Session 2 (May 9, 2010)

Hampapur

This is Veena Hampapur. I'm back today with Dr. Padma Narasimhan.

Hampapur

Thank you again for doing the interview and joining me today. We left off talking about immigration experience to the U.S. and landing in New York and your difficulties finding a job. Before going on with your story, I want to just ask you, go back and ask you what were your motivations for coming to the U.S. Why did you want to come to America?

Narasimhan

Oh, I thought I touched upon it. Like I told you, I was an Anglophile since childhood. I went to so-called convents taught by Irish nuns and had extensively read mostly English books, all kinds. So I thought, "I'm an Anglophile." I identified with the culture. I always wanted to come and practice in the most advanced, most medically advanced, country in the world. And I think part of it was because most of my classmates were also coming here, and also being the eldest in the family, I wanted to see if I could supplement my father's--was the sole person income-wise supporting the whole family of six. So I thought maybe I can come and make some money, help my parents also financially. But my main motive was to come here--since childhood I had that in my head. It was not like a big dream or anything. I said, "Oh, I'm going to go to America." I don't know; I never thought of London. I always thought of America.

Narasimhan

When I was, I think, fourteen or fifteen, I read *Gone with the Wind* in two days, because I had borrowed it from somebody and she wanted it back in two days, and I don't know whether you know, *Gone with the Wind* is this thick.

Hampapur

I've read it, yes.

Narasimhan

So I read it in two days nonstop. I was a speed reader, I guess. And my friend wouldn't believe. She said, "You read this in two days, along with going to school and whatever?"

Narasimhan

I said, "Yeah," and she wouldn't believe me. So I was identifying myself with southern culture, and I said, "Oh, Rhett Butler and Scarlett O'Hara," and stuff like that. I don't know whether you have seen *Gone with the Wind*.

Hampapur

I read the book, actually.

Narasimhan

Oh, you have read the book.

Hampapur

Yes, yes.

Narasimhan

It's one of my most favorite books of all the books I have read. So I always identified myself--I used to say, "Okay." Then I used to read these detective novels and where they would say "Sunset Boulevard" or what is the other one, the famous one? The Malibu. I always thought that, "Oh, I'll go and visit it one day." I just thought like that, so I always wanted to come to America.

Hampapur

Okay. And did you have certain expectations of the U.S.? What were you--

Narasimhan

You know, that's what is strange, that I never planned ahead or I never thought there would be such huge cultural differences, and there is nobody here, no relative, no friend, nothing. I had no job. I never thought those were obstacles. I said, "I'll just go there, and I'll start working." Didn't think beyond that, and I don't know why. I mean, my parents were very worried, and that's why they sent me with a return ticket. They said, "If it doesn't work out, you should always come back," and I had the government quarters. I had not resigned from my government job and kept my government quarters.

Hampapur

Oh, okay.

Narasimhan

I had just gone on a leave.

Hampapur

Right.

Narasimhan

Right. And so I had things to fall back on if this doesn't work out, and it almost didn't. Again, I think God works in mysterious ways. For example, nobody came to pick me up at the airport, and this person who was a friend of my brother's friend, whom my brother obliged by taking him around. My brother had sent him as an afterthought a telegram stating, "Hey, my sister is going to arrive in America. If she needs help, please help her." And that's what saved the day. Otherwise I didn't know where to go. I didn't have twelve dollars to go to a youth hostel, and I couldn't contact anybody that I knew.

Hampapur

Right.

Narasimhan

So looking back, of course it seems like my god, how could I be so bold and not planning for all the contingency situations? But I never thought ahead. I said, "I just want to go," and I just came. [laughs] Looking back, I think, you know, I dare not do this now. I think youth was very shortsighted.

Hampapur

Were you homesick at all after you came?

Narasimhan

Definitely, yes, and that's why I brought one by one first my mother, then my father, then my brother and my sister. I had only one brother who was left behind, and he said, "Don't waste your money on filing forms for me. I'm not coming," because he was in a very good position by then, and he didn't want to come.

Hampapur

Okay, so going back to New York, your experiences in New York, you mentioned that you got an internship that sounds very grueling. So what happened next?

Narasimhan

As I told you, that I was exposed to this culture, and, you know, now, of course, I am very familiar with it. I would have even swept the floor, because I was ready to do anything, and thank god, I got a job in internal medicine, which is the subject I liked and specialized in, although I did not know then that the next year there would be no job. I was so relieved that I got this job and, you know, strangely again I count my blessings. As I told you, there were 50 percent of the residents in Flushing Hospital, which is a private hospital, were Indians, and they would go in Indian costumes, like salwar kameez or even sari, to work, so I didn't feel the huge cultural shock that I'm supposed to feel. And then my resident was my junior in medical school, whom I was a student counselor, so she used to say, "Oh, Dr. Padma, please sit down. I'll do the arterial blood gases for you."

Narasimhan

I said, "No, you are the resident. You're the boss. I have to do it. I'll do it." So that really eased me into this, and then I fell into a group of fantastic friends, all Brahmins, just by coincidence, but all from Andhra, except one girl from Karnataka who was an Iyer girl. And so we formed a group. We were all physicians except one. His name was Mr. Shastry, Shankar Shastry, I think. Velluri. He died in 9/11, and I didn't know about it for three months. That was a real trauma to me. The most giving human being I ever met, and again, he wouldn't have died except for the fact that he went back to help somebody. That was his nature.

Narasimhan

So I had a good group of friends. The problems I faced were tremendous. As far as good was concerned, I was a pure vegetarian, and in 1976 there was no vegetarian food available in the hospital, and I was on call every other night. So I would be on call starting from today, eight o'clock, throughout the day and night, and then I would get off tomorrow at five o'clock, go home and just sleep, and the next day again I'm on call, eight o'clock to--twenty-four plus

twelve--thirty six hours, again the next day. Every other night. But then we realized we cannot last that long, and although the housing was subsidized and the food was free in the hospital, so again when you come from India, you know, you still count in rupees. Oh, this many rupees, and anyway. So I could not eat any of the food, and I used to end up eating salads. So I have developed an aversion to salads and coffee. Salads and coffee, and so I would go home and eat lunch, because I didn't have time to cook, and I didn't know how to cook when I landed in this country, and then I learned very fast, to the point that when my mother came two years later, she was very highly shocked and impressed that I was cooking Greek falafel.

Narasimhan

So that was another thing that, for foreigners, you know, it was the food was different. You know, everything was totally--culturally, it was totally unfamiliar. Then there was another interesting phenomenon, which was I was clueless. So I thought to know me is to love me, but whenever I was on call, the nurses would call me--I mean, nowadays, because my son is doing the internship, they have phlebotomists to draw the blood; they have other people. But in '76 we had to draw the blood. We had to put in a Foley's catheter. We had to even give enemas and disimpact the bowel and all those meanly tasks. And because I was the intern in the lowest hierarchy, I had to do it, and the nurses would call me in the middle of the night to do this. So it felt like they did not like me for some reason and they were harassing me.

Narasimhan

For the longest time I had no clue why. Then my friend, who was a married Indian physician, she said, "Don't you know?"

Narasimhan

I said, "No. Know what? Why don't the nurses like me? What have I done that they harass me like this?"

Narasimhan

So she said, "That's because you are a single, attractive female, which is a threat to them; a physician. Because they want to catch single male physicians. And you're a threat to them."

Narasimhan

But I said, "But I'm not looking for any single male physicians. I'm going to have an arranged marriage."

Narasimhan

"But they don't know that. They see you as a threat, and that's why they don't like you."

Narasimhan

And then all the nurses--when I came to this country, as I told you, I was very naive and protected and didn't even know how the alcohol smelled. But the

nurses would, every two minutes they would go, "Oh," and use a curse word, and I would like shudder. You know, they would say, "Oh, s____" and "f____" and all those four-letter words. Now I'm so Americanized I might even be known to do it once in a while when I'm really frustrated. [laughter] But that's not my favorite. My favorite is "b____."

Narasimhan

Anyway, so I had to adjust, and it was a huge cultural shock. I'm blessed in that sense that although I had nobody, I made friends, and to this day they are my friends, and I somehow made it. And then second year--as I told you, that my Washington, D.C., there was somebody who was known to Mr. P. R.

Rajagopal, who, as promised, delivered. He came with a van truck full of furniture, which was Italian marble, but it was all embassy furniture, which I can never even afford till today, and then a mattress and some money that he had promised, and I rented an apartment nearby.

Hampapur

Is that when you moved out of Dayanand and Gita's place?

Narasimhan

Yes, of course. As soon as I found a job, and this is, remember, I came only fifteen days before the residency started, so it was--so I think after one and a half weeks, I found this Flushing job. So I immediately looked for an apartment, and Dayanand helped me in looking for it. And then I had an L-shaped apartment, which--now my bathroom is just like Jyoti Aunty's. It's big. My current bathroom is bigger than my L-shaped apartment in New York.

Hampapur

Wow.

Narasimhan

But I was blissfully happy, you know. I mean, I was starting, and I had enthusiasm of the young. Like I'm sure when you went and you had your first apartment, I'm sure you were enthused about it. I still remember, I went and shopped on my own and bought like fifty pounds each arm. I carried it in New York, you know, there is public transportation. As long as I was in New York, I never had a car, because you don't need one, because the public transportation is so good. That was my first apartment in this country, L-shaped in Flushing. I don't remember the--I used to remember the address.

Narasimhan

Anyway, then--but I was so busy, like I was telling my son, I said, "I didn't see the sun or the moon for days," and although I was in New York, I had heard of Empire State Building and Statue of Liberty, but I could not go till five years later, I think.

Hampapur

Wow.

Narasimhan

I was that--yes, they really made me work. Then suddenly we realized, so amongst our residents we came to an understanding that we cannot survive with every other day. Nobody can, and now it's illegal in New York. So we decided that we should do one in four. Amongst ourselves we agreed, and we somehow survived that.

Narasimhan

And then my next challenge was that--and in the meanwhile, I'd formed a good group of friends who were all local so whenever we could get away, which was very rare because all of us used to work on weekends, and we were all residents, and we used to go away to Washington, D.C., or Philadelphia or even as far as Niagara Falls, yes.

Narasimhan

Then the second year was a challenge, so I started looking, and my sponsor, whom I had never met in my life, who was Dr. Gopalkrishna, who's a colorectal surgeon in Shreveport, Louisiana, he told me that, "Padma, you know, if you do family practice, you can earn right away fifty thousand dollars, but it's a huge challenge because they don't give family practice residency easily to foreigners." So he did not know my nature, that once you throw a challenge at me, I want to prove you wrong. So I didn't know what I was thinking; I didn't think it through. So I immediately applied for family practice, which was the best program there was in Brooklyn. So I applied for it, and luckily, I got it. But then once I got it, I hated it, because in family practice you have to do everything. You have to see children. You have to do OB/GYN. You have to do internal medicine. You have to do a little surgery. So you have to be what do you call that--a master of none but--

Hampapur

I know what you're getting at.

Narasimhan

Yes. I forgot the saying. Anyway, so--

Hampapur

Jack of all trades.

Narasimhan

Jack of all trades, but master of none, and I did not like it. So I somehow requested [unclear] to switch me back to internal medicine. So I switched back to internal medicine, and although they were paying me second year internal medicine, they saved a lot of money, because they put me in second year internal medicine although I was third year, even by American training. So they were happy to do that, and so I did it. Again it was a very peculiar circumstance, in that the residency in internal medicine in Brooklyn at Lutheran, almost 75 percent of them were all from the same medical college,

Tirupati Medical College. They were all Reddys. So Reddys are very clannish, and they hardly spoke any English, so they didn't like--they perceived me as a very independent, aggressive physician. [laughs] So although the females liked me, the men did not, because I was not subservient like their women, I think, looking back.

Narasimhan

And then I made some friendships there also, but I must say that I was given in Lutheran Medical Center, the Brooklyn--there were subsidized apartment, which was, I think, Building 1800 maybe, and it was roach-ridden and rat-ridden. Yes, but I must tell you one thing, that there are rats in New York today are greater in population than--they outnumber human population by four to one or three to one, if I'm not mistaken--

Hampapur

Wow.

Narasimhan

--and roaches are very prevalent. So I wasn't very happy with the accommodations, and somehow I went through that. Meanwhile, my mother had come and joined me to help me out. She would come and go. Then my friends took full advantage of my mother. She would cook homemade food, and they had time to go and enjoy it, but as I was working hard in the hospitals, my mother would take off in the subway with them, and she was also very happy, discovering New York, and we had a good group of friends. Slowly we tried to establish and, you know, accommodate and adapt to this country, although, you know, we come to this country and we work amongst Americans. I don't know whether it is the Americans who don't socialize with us or we, but there was not much socialization, except in Flushing Hospital there was one doctor called Dr. Shialis. So he met me, and somehow he liked me, and he was an internist and his wife was a pediatrician, and they had like twelve or thirteen children because they are Catholic. They are from--not Naples; what is that Mafia country?

Hampapur

Italy?

Narasimhan

In Italy there is an island. What's it called?

Hampapur

Sicily?

Narasimhan

Sicily. He was a Sicilian, yes. So one day he told me, "Padma, if anybody gives you any flak, tell them you know Dr. Shialis, a Sicilian." And I didn't realize what he meant. What he meant probably is "I have mob connections, so be careful." [laughs] He used to call me for all the festivals like Lent or all the

Catholic festivals, which I was very familiar with because I went to a convent and dealt with Irish nuns. So that's probably the only socialization that I had with some Americans. Most of the other friends were all Indians.

Hampapur

So it sounds like Indians and non-Indians were pretty separate.

Narasimhan

Yes, because Dr. Shialis told me once, he said, "You know, I see this. See, we-- I'm a Sicilian, so when I meet with a northern Italian, we fight amongst ourselves. But, you know, we are one. We are all Italians in front of an American. But you Indians are so stupid that you fight amongst each other not only when you're alone, but also in front of Americans. Why do you do that?" So he was very right, you know, that we are not united. We always say, "She's from south. He's from north. He's from this. He's from east," and all these languages and cultural differences we carry on here. Fortunately, the future generation, that is the next generation, is not that much into it, because they were not exposed to it that much, I guess. So we were not a very united front, and that's why we are still a minority in this country and not well represented in many, many spheres, you know, like politics, for example. We have no clout.

Narasimhan

So that was my residency, and then I decided to do a fellowship in hematology-oncology. The reasons--they keep asking me, "Why did you choose that?" Again, you know, I can't--I didn't--subconsciously I thought I don't want to be in anything acute like, you know, which makes me get up in the middle of the night even after I finish my residency. For example, like OB/GYN. I loved OB/GYN. I did a residency in OB/GYN in India. But I didn't think it was practical for me to do OB/GYN here, because then for the rest of my life I will be getting up in the middle of the night to go deliver babies.

Hampapur

Sure. Yes.

Narasimhan

So I didn't want anything acute, and hematology-oncology, I felt, was a budding field with a lot of new things coming along, so I applied for hematology-oncology. I wanted a combined program, which I got. Looking back, I think I'm very lucky, so I got what I wanted most of the time without putting extra efforts or without struggling too much. So I got into a private hospital called Beth Israel Medical Center in New York. It's in First Avenue and Seventeenth Street. My accommodations, which were subsidized in Manhattan, which I cannot afford even now, and they were not rat-ridden or roach-ridden, so it was a big relief. But again, you know, there were three Indian girls. I was told that my fellows were Shenikar, and it turned out her name was Shaninder Kaur, who is a Sikh girl from India. The other one, I'm

forgetting her name. Anyway, but they pronounced it such that it sounded very American.

Narasimhan

It's a very Jewish hospital. New York is, I think, run by Jewish people. So I did my combined hematology-oncology fellowship. Again, I felt I probably was the most hardworking fellow there, because anybody who didn't want to do anything just put it on my head, and I did it. In one way it's good that I learned the most, because that's the learning curve. But in other ways I felt that, you know, I was kind of discriminated against. But then again I was unlucky enough that--in those days we didn't have a chemotherapy nurse, so we had to take all this poisonous chemotherapy drugs by the bedside. If it was high dose, then I would take hundred of ampoules and do it by the bedside, spill it on myself. Now they have found it's very dangerous, and they have a hood where they mix it.

Hampapur

Oh, wow.

Narasimhan

So I was very concerned that maybe, you know, it affected my health and my fertility. So I worked in those days where we didn't have this many additional support and help like now. So I learned a lot. It was hands-on. Then my mother said, "You know, you keep on studying and studying and studying, and your younger sister is there, and there are some offers which have come for her. But we don't want to marry her off, because then they will say, 'Oh, look at it. The older girl was sent off to America to be educated and earn money and send it back home, so there must be a problem with the older daughter. That's why she didn't get married, and they married off the younger daughter.'"

Narasimhan

So I told my mother, I said, "Go ahead and marry my younger sister. I have no problems. I don't care what they say." And, you know, "Please don't hold her marriage off," because she had finished her education. She was B.A., B.A. Actually, she has more degrees than me. She had B.A., B.A., and M.A. in ed[ucation], in teaching, master's in education. I said, "If you find a nice match, you know, please go ahead and marry her off," which they did, and I couldn't attend my sister's wedding, but I tried to send as much money as possible for the marriage to take place, which my parents said--my father would never say anything, but my mother said that really helped.

Narasimhan

My father was a very self-made man. I haven't told you about my father. He was a very unique personality. His parents died at the age of eleven, and his father was the biggest landowner in Mandya, but the cousins and everybody cheated my father, who was eleven years old, and they gave him pennies on the

dollar that they collected, and said, "This is all we got." My father studied under street lamps. The father owned the land where the Mandyam hostel--dorm was built. But he couldn't get into the dorm because he didn't have the money, and he knew at an early age that education is the way. He not only educated himself, he educated his younger brother, my mother's brother, and then he married off his one sister and the other sister, who was married, her daughter he married.

Narasimhan

So he was a self-made man, and education was important to him, and that's why he made sure that all his four children are educated. I was a physician and a teacher. My sister was a teacher. My younger brother, who is in India, his name is Rajgopal, is now the director general of civil aviation. He climbed the ladder from the bottom rung to the top. And this brother is in computers now. So two brothers were engineers.* * * [This portion of the transcript has been sealed at the request of the interviewee.] * * * Before all this happened I was in private practice, and once I was a single mother, I had to give up my personal career choices, and I chose to be in the county hospital so that I can be there from eight to five, and I can look after my son, so I can have some free time to be a good full-time parent as much as I could. And my mother came and helped me out for the first two years. It's very hard to be a single parent without any help.

Narasimhan

In the meanwhile I found my classmate, who was here, I knew him all along. She was somewhere in south Bay Area, and somehow I located her, and I left a message for her as soon as I got married. Then she called my ex's wife--ex's house, and then they said, "Oh, there is nobody like Padma living here." They didn't want me to have any contacts. Anyway, so then, you know, that was my personal life.

Narasimhan

Then I started in Martin Luther King Hospital, and I was fine, and then I became an associate professor at UCLA, so I thought that was at least on track. But then, you know, there was a problem in Martin Luther King, and my boss, who was also Indian, was saying to me, "You are outshining me." He would never show off for [unclear], and then he would accuse me of outshining me. So that wasn't working out, so I transferred to Harbor-UCLA.

Narasimhan

So I was coming from Bellflower, then finally I said, "The best revenge is to live well, right?" I suffered a lot. I suffered a lot during those times. In fact, my pregnancy was very, very hard for me. I would be sitting in a hotel room, and saying, "Please, God, let my baby be healthy." Really tough times. Anyway, so--and then, you know, my pregnancy, the lady--I used to go to Kaiser, because I

used to work in Kaiser at that time, so I had a Kaiser insurance, and they said, "Small for dates, difficult pregnancy." So they got me a perinatologist, which is a doctor for difficult and complicated pregnancies, and she was suffering from breast cancer, so we had a real relationship, and she passed on. And then she told me that, "You will have to have amniocentesis," which is when you are an older or a bad history like schizophrenia, and I was like in my thirties, but not thirty-five. Thirty-five is the cut-off age where you have to have amniocentesis.

Narasimhan

So I don't know whether I should reveal this to you, but anyway, although I was a physician and I was in private practice in White Memorial Medical Center. That was a teaching hospital. So she scheduled me for an amniocentesis, which is a test that you do to make sure that the child is normal. You put in a needle after sterilization and suck out some fluid, amniotic fluid, and test it. So she had prepped it. She had opened the sterilized instruments, and I didn't want--I said, "My grandma didn't get it done. My mother didn't get it done. What if it hurts my child?" Because there is a possibility, you know.

Narasimhan

Then the moment she told me, she said I'm B-negative and my ex was B-positive, so once they go in and invade the sack, they have to give me something called Rogan [phonetic], which is an antibody, so that I don't develop antibodies, because it's B-positive, and I'm B-negative. So I said, "How long does it take?"

Narasimhan

They said, "It will be in the afternoon."

Narasimhan

So I got that excuse. I said, "No, no, no, I've scheduled patients in the afternoon. I can't stay here." I just walked out, and my perinatologist had a--I was a very bad patient, looking back.

Narasimhan

Then, you know, I developed something called preeclampsia. That is high blood pressure, swelling of the feet, and they said, "You have to be on bed rest."

Narasimhan

I said, "How can I be on bed rest and start a new practice? I can't do that. They don't go hand in hand." So I decided to give up my private practice then, and they made me lie down on the left side, bed rest. And I wasn't very compliant, but somehow, thank God--and then when my child was born, he was a pre-Christmas baby. So I go to Bellflower Kaiser, and everybody is having a Christmas party, and nobody is attending to me. They said, "Oh, we are going to induce you," because they are worried if you go into full eclampsia, you

might die as well as the baby. So they said, "We will induce you, and if it doesn't work, we are going to do a C-section on you."

Narasimhan

So my mother was with me, and she would--it was hilarious. So I said, "Mom, I'm not going to have a C-section. I'm going to have normal kids just like Grandma and you, and if they want me to go into C-section, just pull out the Swayne [phonetic] and I'll pull out the scalp monitor, and we'll go out." I think I was out of it during it. And then my mother was saying, "Nurse, nurse, nurse. See this [unclear]? Get it out." [laughter]

Narasimhan

Anyway, you're not there yet, so it's maybe premature. So I had a bad time. And then finally I had a normal delivery. He was five pounds, six ounces, and now he is six feet, two inches tall, you know. So they said, "Oh, he is small baby," and then, you know, then I was a single parent since then, and my mother was there off and on to help me. It takes a village to bring a child up. Then I moved to Palos Verdes in 1986.

Hampapur

What was it like then?

Narasimhan

You know, I was not apprehensive. I said, "I want to buy a home for my child," and this was a good school district very near to Harbor-UCLA. And although I didn't think I could afford it, I somehow bought one after looking at homes for one year. Again, my real estate lady had breast cancer, and so I was overly concerned with her, and they took me for a ride, because I had never bought real estate in my life. I had nobody to ask advice. In my family we are all brought up like "Don't bother anybody; don't ask anybody." So I never asked for help. I didn't know how to ask for help. I should have, and advice, because, you know, so in real estate sales also I was taken for a ride, in the sense that although my income qualified, they sent me to a mortgage broker who took unnecessarily 1 percent of the whole sale price and gave me an adjustable rate, which is a rip-off. I did not know any better, so I just took it.

Narasimhan

So I learned a lot being on my own, but I would have preferred if there was somebody to share the burden, and also to share the work. But, you know, that's how it is. Whatever is put on your head, you survive. My classmate says, "I don't know how you could do all this."

Narasimhan

I said, "Well, what can you do? When life throws something at you, you have to survive." I'm a survivor. Most of the first generation have to be survivors, and we are, and I don't know whether the second generation realizes it. For

example, the other day Ravi was--when he was very young, he said he wanted a pair of athletic shoes, and he said, "Mom, it's just a hundred dollars."

Narasimhan

And I said, "Did you know that I didn't have twelve dollars to go--?" Anyway, but my son is a good kid compared to other kids. When I see the other kids, he was a very easy kid to bring up. He didn't demand--for example, any food I put in front of him, he would eat, unlike his cousin, who was brought up by an American nanny, and he wanted only meat for breakfast and McDonald's for lunch. I mean, so it was an easy child, and I'm really lucky that, you know, I got an easy child. And also being a single child of a single parent, he also faced some problems, I'm sure.

Narasimhan

For example, I put him in Indian Peak Road Nursery, and there was not a single Indian kid there, so he would say--and he was like three or four. No, he was five, and he would say, "Mom, why isn't my skin like John's, and why isn't my eyes blue like Harry's, or why isn't my hair blond?" And he hated yogurt, and he would say, "Maybe, if you put yogurt, will I become that color?"

Narasimhan

So I was worried, and I said, "How do I make sure that he knows he is Indian?"

Narasimhan

And one of my friends, who is an oncologist, called Dr. Prasad, told me to put him in Chinmaya Mission. I was very reluctant, because I had only one--I mean, precious weekends where I had to catch up with my housework and, you know, keep up with my career. But still, I think it was one of the best decisions I made. In those days there was nothing local. I had to go to Long Beach, and I put Ravi in Chinmaya Mission, which is age appropriate. They match up age. And he really blossomed there. Why? Because the children all need love and attention, and so he would participate in all the cultural activities and dramas. He understood what India and Indian festivals meant. It was not very religious, and it's mind-body connection. And also he--am I rambling?

Hampapur

No.

Narasimhan

So I'm talking about the second generation, what they're faced with, and how to bring the cultural identity to them if you don't have, you know, a nuclear family and supporting relatives. So in my case, this really helped Ravi, I think, to identify himself as an Indian. But I don't know. Anyway, so and then he won the first prize in Gita-chanting competition, and I think he went in Palos Verdes and chanted the Gita. [laughs] And then he said, "Mom, don't make me ever do that again, because they were all laughing at me."

Narasimhan

I said, "No, they were admiring you," you know.

Narasimhan

Anyway, and then came a heart-stopping moment for me. I think he was like middle school, probably; I don't remember. He was probably twelve or thirteen, and suddenly he announced, "I am a--."

Narasimhan

I said, "Listen, you are born to Hindu Brahmin parents, and you are a Hindu Brahmin, aren't you?"

Narasimhan

He said, "No. I'm not an atheist, but I'm an agnostic, and just because I was born to you doesn't mean that I'm one. I'm going to study all the religions and decide for myself what religion I choose to be."

Hampapur

Wow.

Narasimhan

So I cried buckets of tears, and then, you know, maybe I should have been more religious and spiritual and set an example to him. But you know what? My mother had saved the day. It's not what you tell the children to do, it's what they see you doing. And my mother would get up in the morning and before she entered the kitchen, she would go take a shower and then light a lamp and do the puja, worship the god, and then only take her first sip of morning tea. He had seen her do that, and he sought blessings from her for all the major events of his life.

Narasimhan

So then he took this summer class, which I paid for, comparative religion, and so they asked him to write an essay on it, and it seems--again, you know, Ravi doesn't like me to tell this, but the teacher said, "Ravi, I have never seen anybody write an essay and a take like this. So do I have your permission to keep this essay and show it to the future classes?"

Narasimhan

He, of course, said yes, and so I said, "Okay, now you have taken the class, compared all the--."

Narasimhan

"Mom, there is so much good in all the religions, Kinto and--," I don't know what all religions he told me, Islam and Christian Bible. "So I'm still undecided."

Narasimhan

And I said, "Oh, my god, what do I do now?" I mean, when I was born into my parents, I had no such questions, or I never questioned who I am, what I am. I am what I am. In fact, I took a pride in it, to the extent that I sacrificed many

opportunities for that. I didn't want to marry a non-Brahmin, things like that. Anyway, so I didn't know what to do.

Narasimhan

So he said, "I'm still an agnostic." But then it's not what you say, what you do is what counts. So next came final exam for him, and he gets up, he takes a shower, he lights an udbathi--agarbathi, and then he goes and seeks the blessings of his grandma. "Grandma, bless me today." Falls at her feet and says, "Please bless me." No, before that he chants a sloka, "Saraswati namastubhyam varade kamarupini." That is to pray the goddess of knowledge to bless him with success in his exam. And then he asks my mother's blessing.

Narasimhan

So I said, "Okay, you can say whatever you want, but action counts more than words." So those were my concerns of bringing up Ravi as a second generation. Now I think, as he is growing older and more mature, I think he is identifying himself as an Indian, second generation albeit; American Indian, first American and then an Indian.

Narasimhan

And then he went recently to India with his dad. Although the Indians did not treat him as an Indian. Anyway, I think I have strayed a lot further than maybe you are--

Hampapur

No, no, these are the types of questions I was going to ask you, so you've already like answered them without me having to ask. We're coming towards the end of our time, so I just wanted to ask you a few last questions. So did you visit India much after you moved to L.A.?

Narasimhan

That's a good question, because when my parents were there, I used to. So from 1976 to '81 I visited almost every second year. After that my parents came here. Then I brought my brother here, who was single at that time. Now he's married and has two lovely children. All my siblings married arranged marriage. Then I brought my sister, who was already married with two children, and that's another story. Within three months of coming, my brother-in-law passed away at Harbor-UCLA. So my sister also had a rough time, and she had different experiences. But I did bring them here and keep them as long as they needed to be, till they were on their own.

Narasimhan

So I started going less and less to India, and the last I went was as a lecturer, invited lecturer for a panel of Indo-American Cancer Society.

Hampapur

Oh, wow.

Narasimhan

And I went in '92 and '94, and those were the last two times I went, and I haven't gone to India since 1994, which is sixteen years. And I'm itching to go, but the thing is that I have only one younger brother in New Delhi, who is so busy at his work from morning to night, and if I go, I hate to go alone for such a long distance. And second of all, knowing India--I don't know whether you know India. It's very--they advise against a female traveling alone. So I'd kind of become a prisoner wherever my brother is, and my sister-in-law doesn't like to go anywhere without her husband. So last time I went, '94, I went with Ravi, and we stayed--at that time my brother was in Mumbai, and we stayed in--I stayed in the Taj Hotel.

Hampapur

Oh, nice.

Narasimhan

You should stay in Taj once. It's a beautiful experience. Then, of course, I went to my brother's house, and from there we traveled to Bangalore, and they put me up. They said they are going to put me up in a five-star hotel, because I was one of the invited panel lecturers. And they put me up in, I think, Marriott. I said, "When did it become five-star?" [laughs]

Narasimhan

And they said, "No, [unclear] in India. In Bangalore it's five stars." [laughs] Anyway, so that was the last time I went to India, and I really want to go back to India, but I haven't had time. Another thing is, I don't want to go alone.

Narasimhan

So I've been waiting, and Ravi kind of went with his dad, and I was very upset. I said, "You should have taken me, you know. I need an escort, basically, a big, macho man."

Narasimhan

It was hilarious. He was telling me that his father is right next to him, and the merchants are coming to him. "Sir, sir, how many dollars you give?" So the father is saying, "He is my son. Leave him alone," and they won't listen to him. They treated him like he is American, you know. And he said, "Mom, I felt like they were very puny in front of me." They're all very slim and thin, and then this guy was a giant of a man, you know. He thought he looked Indian, but he stood out like a sore thumb. But he likes India and Indian culture, and he liked meeting all his relatives in India, including my aunts.

Hampapur

Do you have an Indian community here in L.A., or do you go for any cultural-type activities, religious activities?

Narasimhan

Yes, somehow, you know--I don't know, people say that, "Why are you so clannish?" It's not; it's just I like those things. For example, as I told you, we

are into music, my mother especially. So we used to go regularly to South Indian Music Academy, which your uncle goes, along with your aunts. So I used to go very actively. Now my mother doesn't go, so I lost interest. And I usually seek out mostly Indian cultural programs. But I do go to American live shows. I go to American movies, like, you know, I went to Iron Man 2 yesterday. But somehow, like for example, in Palos Verdes I have a nice, small group of friends who all happen to be not only Indians but South Indians and mostly Brahmins. I don't know how that happened, but it did.

Narasimhan

But, you know, why blame me? Palos Verdes has a huge community of Indians, but then the North Indians socialize amongst themselves, and they hardly mix, although there is one or two exceptions to the rule. And we have Indian Medical Association groups, several of them, Indian Medical Association of Greater Los Angeles, Southern Orange County, Tri-Valley, and so on and so forth. I can't be a member of all of them, but I am a member of IMALA [Indian Medical Association of Los Angeles], which is Indian Medical Association of Greater Los Angeles. But I'm also a member of American Society of Clinical Oncology, American Medical Association, American College of Physicians.

Narasimhan

But although I do have some American friends, but my close relationships tend to be Indian for some reason, unlike the second generation, which is my son has both Indian and non-Indian close friends.

Hampapur

Okay. So I've actually come to the end of my questions. Was there anything that you wanted to add or felt like you wanted to mention?

Narasimhan

Maybe I should edit my personal life out of this, because other people are going to listen to this.

Hampapur

Okay. Well, we can talk about that after.

Narasimhan

Yes.

Hampapur

Okay.

Narasimhan

You want to ask any questions? People ask me whether you regret coming to America. I don't regret coming to America. I don't regret coming and doing oncology, like my patients, my residents, all they ask me, "Isn't it depressing?"

Narasimhan

And I tell them, "No, it's very fulfilling, because cancer is one disease where we have started talking cures. You can't cure high blood pressure, heart disease, or other chronic diseases, but we have started curing cancers, and every day there's a new development." So that part of it is very challenging and fulfilling. So I have no regrets, except maybe one, that I should have planned my personal life as carefully as I had planned my professional life. You know, as you get older, it's harder to be--it gets lonely, and you know, in this country--I think in most of the countries--the elderly are neglected in society.

Hampapur

Do you think you plan to stay on in Los Angeles?

Narasimhan

Well, you know, I feel this is home. You know, I have lived in this house and in this community from 1986. I love living here. I have given up many lucrative offers to stay here. I had many lucrative offers to go, for example, to New Orleans, where one of my co-residents from Brooklyn invited me to be the only oncologist there. I would have made certainly three times more money, but I gave it up because I didn't like the weather. I had some excuse or other. But I don't have any regrets. You know, money is not everything. I could have made much more money if I was willing to move, and my mother even told me, you know, "Go to New Orleans, make the money, and come back here. You can retire earlier." So financially maybe it was a bad decision, but overall, I like living here. It feels like home. I have friends, family, medical group, cultural group, and children I love, like you.

Narasimhan

So probably--I don't know. Who knows the future? But most probably I'll probably live here.

Hampapur

Okay.[End of interview]

1.3. Session 3 (May 9, 2010)

Hampapur

Okay, so can you explain to me what you were saying about the glass ceiling.

Narasimhan

Yes. I thought that once I did residencies and I was so highly accomplished, in that that I did double training, two internships, two residencies, that I would have equal opportunities, but to my dismay, I found a glass ceiling exists and discrimination exists. Discrimination exists in this country because I'm a female and a foreigner, so I had a double whammy. But, you know, overall, I guess, I still am a proud American, but I just want the future generations to know that

the first generation had to endure. Hopefully, your generation, that discrimination should not continue.

Hampapur

Right.[End of interview]

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