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AN INTERVIEW WITH KAMLU GULRAJANI
FOR THE
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INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY
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Shaun Illingworth: This begins an oral history interview with Kamlu Gulrajani, on October 25, 2021, for the Rutgers Oral History Archives and the Indian-American Club of Rossmoor. Thank you very much for joining me. I am Shaun Illingworth. To begin, can you tell me where and when you were born?

Kamlu Gulrajani: I was born on December 8, 1946, in Karachi. At that time, it was a part of India. Now, it is in Pakistan. [Editor's Note: Karachi is a city located in the Sindh Province of Pakistan. Karachi was located in India prior to the 1947 partition of the Indian subcontinent into the independent nations of Hindu-majority India and Muslim-majority Pakistan.]

SI: For the record, what were your parents' names?

KG: My mother's name was Devibai Gulrajani, and my father's name was Vishindas Gulrajani.

SI: Starting with your mother's side of the family, what do you know about her family background and what her family was doing in that area of what was then India and is now Pakistan?

KG: My mother had only one sibling, elder to her. Her mother was the second wife of her father. My mother's father passed away very soon. My mother's mother passed away around age forty-six. They owned a lot of property and farmlands and fields. When my mother's mother passed away, she had already prepared a will. At that time, my mother's sister, Ruki Mirchandani, who was elder to her, was already married, so she made my mother's sister's husband, Santdas Mirchandani, as the executor of the will.

SI: Tell me a little bit about your father's side of the family as well.

KG: My father had seven sisters, and his father also had passed away very soon. So, he was living with his mother and seven sisters. Some of them were married, so not all of them were living together. But you can say about four sisters were still unmarried when my mother was married to my father.

SI: Did their families know each other?

KG: Excuse me?

SI: Did your parents' families know each other? Were they from the same area?

KG: Yes, in the same area. My mother was born in Hyderabad-Sindh, and my father also was from Hyderabad-Sindh. They are from that same community, Amil is sub-caste, which is Sindhi Hindu. We follow Hindu religion. Since we were from that same "Amil" community, my mother had an arranged marriage with my father. [Editor's Note: Hyderabad is a city in the Pakistani province of Sindh.]

SI: For the record, do you know what year they were married?

KG: They married on November 9, 1942 in Hyderabad, Pakistan. Their first child was born in 1943; my elder brother Ramesh was born on November 25, 1943.

SI: Where were your parents living at the time?

KG: They were all in Karachi.

SI: Okay.

KG: I was born in Karachi. My brother was born in Karachi. All of them, my father and his mother and his sisters, they were all living in Karachi.

SI: What was your father doing for a living?

KG: He was in the British Army as a cadet. Off and on, he used to go on the duty, and mostly it was, you know the customs, where you check contraband and alcohol, that was part of his duty to confiscate alcohol.

SI: Okay. Was it all in the Karachi area, or would he have to travel for work?

KG: Who, my father?

SI: Yes.

KG: He used to take the train. He was in the part of the Army, so they had their own mode of transportation. He would be away for a while but be back after a couple of months or so.

SI: During the Second World War, was he always in the Karachi area, or was he sent elsewhere?

KG: Mostly, in that local area, where he was. He was not sent far away but was on duty for a few months at a time.

SI: Okay. Did your parents ever talk about the impact of that period on them, what it was like living through the Second World War and the end of British rule a few years later?

KG: Oh, they didn't get a chance to make any small talk. Most of the time, my father was away, and whatever little time he came there, they didn't have much conversation. My mother had already a rough time, because when my mother's marriage was arranged, they had demanded a dowry. In India, they used to have a dowry system, where they demand money and gold and ornaments from the girl's side, when she is getting married. They knew that my mother had been owner of a lot of property and all that, so they had demanded 100,000 rupees as dowry, which was a princely sum in those days. My mother's sister's husband, Santdas Mirchandani, agreed to give 100,000 rupees as a dowry for my mother's marriage. What happened was, as soon as my mother got married, the very next day, my father's sister, Tikki, got married, so they used my mother's dowry to pay for his sister's dowry to get married. Then, they thought that, you know, we can put more pressure on my mother to get more money because now they used up her

money and now they want more money, so then that's when all this trouble started. They kept harassing her and beating her, and she had a miserable time. She suffered a lot. My father used to beat her, and one time, he beat her, her wrist got swollen. She had to go to an emergency [room at the] hospital for treatment and all that. When he used to go to work, then my mother's mother-in-law used to give her a hard time and unnecessarily pick quarrels with her. When my mother's mother-in-law went out to purchase grocery and all, they used to lock her inside the house, so she should not go anywhere. So, she was held like a prisoner. My mother suffered a great deal, and since my brother had just been born in 1943, she used to take care of my brother and focus on that.

SI: How many children did your parents wind up having?

KG: Total only two. I only have one brother, Ramesh, elder to me, and me, that's it.

SI: Okay.

KG: Subsequently, he divorced my mother and he married again, but by that time, they were very old, both of them, the second wife, Vishni, so they didn't have any children.

SI: How old were you when they divorced?

KG: When they divorced, I was eighteen years old. The court process takes a long time. They must have started filing papers about five years earlier.

SI: Okay. Was that considered unusual at that time?

KG: It was very unusual definitely, because it is frowned upon. People prefer to suffer in silence and it's like an insult or degrading for any woman to be divorced, because they find fault, like maybe something is wrong with the woman, that's why she's divorced. When my mother was being beat up and all that, one time it was raining very heavily, and in the nighttime, they had some kind of argument because of my mother's mother-in-law. She instigated something to her son. My father started quarreling with my mother, and at that time, my brother had jaundice, and so he was sleeping at home. What Father did, he pushed my mother out of the house, and I was in my mother's arms. He kicked her out of the house in the middle of the night, and it's raining heavy and she doesn't know what to do. She went to neighbor's house to ask for help and they let her stay that night there. [Editor's Note: Kamlu starts to cry.] Then, in the morning, that neighbor, he called my mother's sister Ruki and he said, "If you will value your sister's life, you'll take her away from here because she's getting beat up." My mother had to suffer a lot. My mother's sister, she came and then they picked up my brother--he had jaundice, he was in that house, so they picked him up--and met my mother, she left for good from there. She left her ornaments and all her belongings and just left.

SI: Wow, that was very brave of your mother to leave at that point.

KG: She had no choice, because several times, they made an attempt, they used to send her to get more money. Mother's sister's family didn't have more money to give or anything more.

Previously, my mother's sister, she used to send food and soap and utensils for my mother's use, just to pacify, just to make them happy, that, "Okay, we are giving you something." Toothpaste, regular toiletry items, my mother's sister used to send to her, just to patch up and say to her, "Deal with it, deal with it." But they just wanted more money because they had to spend for dowry for other daughters also. So, that's why they thought, "We can milk her." These people, they thought that my mother, you know, will continue to be ill-treated and she'll keep coming back, and then finally, she didn't go back.

There used to be a system in India, if you are a widow, that is, if your husband died, then you cannot live in that same community, like you're ostracized, because you cannot remarry. That was their culture. A widow is not allowed to remarry at that time. Her life is over. They used to burn the women alive with the husband in the funeral pyre. Then, that Sati system, which is called Sati, they cannot burn a live woman with a dead husband, they had outlawed that system. They said, "Okay, then she's not allowed to mingle with the same community." So, they used to live on the outskirts of town, these widows. My mother found a place to live in one of those barracks, in Kurla widows camp, where those widows are living, and that area was very close to cremation grounds. So, she used to hear these people carrying dead bodies on the way to burn the bodies and they used to chant "*Ram Ram Sat Hai*," which means "God be with you," like that. She used to hear all these men carrying dead bodies on their way to the funeral pyre.

After a few months, then she made contact with some charitable organization (Bhai Bhagwandas Trust), and then they arranged for her to get one room in an area of Bombay, in one small town called Bandra. It was like a sixteen-foot-by-twenty-foot room, inside which there was a kitchen and one bathroom, everything included in that room. We two children and her, we got a chance to move out of that Kurla widows camp area, where the widows were living, and then we got a chance to live in this town Bandra in Bombay. That was around 1950, when we moved to Bombay. Then, we did our schooling over there (27 Gopal Mansion, Turner Road, Bandra). My brother Ramesh and me, we went to English parochial schools and I had British nuns teaching me. My brother had British fathers teaching [him]. Because that room was very tiny where we were living, when we came from school, my mother used to give us tea and snacks, and then we used to walk to the local park. On the park bench, we did our homework under that lamp in the park. Then, we sat on the swing and slides and passed the time there, and then we came home. That was early childhood, between '50 and '58.

Then, after 1958, we moved to another apartment, which was like a two bedroom and one living room/kitchen, in the same area, but like one mile away. That was much more comfortable, more space, because we were both growing tall and big and that one room was very tiny. We couldn't handle that place. Then, also, my mother's [sister's] husband, Santdas Mirchandani, he helped to purchase that, and we got some inheritance from some land which was still remaining in an area of Pakistan for us refugees. So, the government of India had given us some compensation money, so they added that, and that's how we were able to get a little bit bigger area to live in.

SI: Had your family moved to India prior to 1950, or were they still in Karachi when your mother left?

KG: No. My mother, she used to visit India, because that Pakistan area, it was not partitioned. It was undivided India, so they were freely moving in and out and visiting, but not for stay, just for visit, for fun. But when this partition took place, all of a sudden, people were being murdered and everything. During that time, my mother, again, had been sent to my mother's sister's house to get more money and all, but since suddenly these riots took place, everybody had to run for their life. My mother, with her sister and her sister's family, she took both of us with them, we boarded the train and we went to Ahmedabad, where my mother's sister's husband's brother, he was holding a high post. Santdas Mirchandani's elder brother, Mr. Udharam Mirchandani, was the commissioner of Bombay State and was allotted government quarters in Ahmedabad. They called it commissioner of Bombay. Bombay, at that time, was big. Now, it is Maharashtra and Gujarat, but at that time, Maharashtra and Gujarat was one big state. He was the commissioner of Bombay State, and he had a big government bungalow. So, we could stay there until we can figure out what to do. When Mahatma Gandhi was shot and died, his ashes were displayed in this bungalow for public viewing.

SI: Were you aware if your family, being from a Hindu heritage, faced any prejudice before the partition?

KG: No. In fact, my mother tells that we used to have very good Muslim friends, and there was no animosity at all. They shared fruits and vegetables from their harvest. Before 1947, Hindus and Muslims used to share the vegetables and fruit from their harvest with each other. Also, they used to prepare pickles and share with neighbors. This all happened because of the politics in the end. All of a sudden, Jinnah, he decided, "No, we have to make this separate and all that." But before that, it was Jinnah and Mahatma Gandhi and everyone, they were united to just get the freedom from the British rule. Nobody had an idea that this is what is behind their back, that Jinnah at last minute says, "No, we want separate." My mother says we had very good relations with the Muslims. We never felt that they are separate from us all or they are following a different religion. There was no hatred, no nothing. [Editor's Note: Muhammad Ali Jinnah headed the Muslim League in India and successfully advocated for the creation of the Muslim-majority nation of Pakistan during the partition of newly-independent India. He then served as the first Governor-General of newly-created Pakistan from 1947 until his death in 1948. Mohandas Gandhi, known as Mahatma or the "great-souled one," led the movement for Indian independence from Great Britain through the use nonviolent disobedience. Gandhi had wanted a united India with both Muslims and Hindus but was unsuccessful. After the partition on August 15, 1947, millions of displaced Muslims and Hindus migrated to their newly-formed countries. Over one million migrants were killed in the bloody clashes and riots that ensued.]

SI: When you and your brother and your mother were living in Bombay in the smaller apartment in the '50s, what was that area like?

KG: That was a nice town, a very nice town, good neighbors, and most of the neighbors were Sindhi Hindu refugees. Most of them were just like us, but they had more rooms because their family was larger. It was like one big large family, and all the main entrance doors used to remain open. Then, most of us followed, because we were Hindus, we followed similar customs. Once a month, when they used to have a full moon, and during the full moon, we had special prayers and we fast. Then, the neighbors, they used to rotate in whose house, we will pray all of

us together. Satyanarayan Puja is a prayer service, which is observed on Full Moon Day. We fast and recite the prayers and break the fast by a feast of a vegetarian meal, fruits and nuts. Sindhi Hindus used to bring something to share, and we all feasted on Full Moon Day after the Pooja or Puja. It was like one big huge family. We never felt separated or a need that, "I don't have a father" or anything. Later on, after eight, nine years, I'm thinking, "In every house, there is a man. How come there is no man in my house?" Later on, I got it, but before that, the neighbors were so nice and helpful. My mother used to show our report card to a neighbor and the neighbor will tell, "You have to improve in this and you have to improve in that." Or, "Your handwriting is not good," and they will take the time to sit me down and show me how to do calligraphy, because we used to get five marks more if our handwriting was neat when we gave that test in school. There were no typewriters and computers when we were growing up, so emphasis was laid on legible handwriting.

SI: Did your mother work outside of the home at that time?

KG: She did try one time to sell door to door the cleaning products for Dextrolax Company, and what that man did, that boss of hers, he didn't pay her and he told her that, "I'll give you a commission and all that," and she brought very large orders because people felt sorry for her that she's taking care of two children. Everybody placed a lot of orders and all that, and that guy, he didn't pay her the full commission, and so she quit the job. Then, she was just sewing at home with that Singer sewing machine. She will do alterations and all that, but her eyes got strained because we were not having good lighting in the house. At that time, we used to use kerosene oil for cooking. It was too much strain and so much damage to her tear ducts in the eye that after that operation, tears just flow down her eye and she cannot stop it. So, she had a lot of eye strain, so she couldn't do any work. We had good charitable organizations who found out our situation, and then some of them used to help to pay our school fees. Some people, they will every month give over thirty rupees for us to meet our expenses, e.g., K.T. Shahani Trust and Gidwani Trust Families.

My father, he was not paying, like every month you pay maintenance allowance for the children, he was not paying anything. Then, somebody told my mother that, "He should be paying for the children and he should be paying for you." At that time, she was not divorced, she was only separated, so she did not know anything. Then, she found out. But then we need money for the lawyers and all that, so we didn't do anything about that.

Then, what happened, my father, he fell in love with this woman. They used to travel by train together. This woman was a teacher in a school, and she also belonged to the same Sindhi Hindu community. She was about forty-five years old and not married. So, he fell in love with her and so he wanted now to remarry, and so that's how this divorce process started. Then, he said, "I'm giving you one more chance if you want. I will not divorce." My mother said, "No, go ahead and divorce." That woman, she belonged to a very respected Sindhi Hindu family. Her father was a famous lawyer and had been a mayor in Pakistan. When he found out that she's going out with this married man with two children, he was not in favor of his daughter maintaining a relationship with this man. That woman, Vishni, she came to my house and spoke with my mother, and she said, "I heard that you don't want to stay with your husband and your husband, Vishna, wants to marry me. What is your opinion on that?" My mother said, "I had my

experience and I don't want any more bad experience, and if you want to marry him, you go ahead, marry him, and get your own experience." She came and she took permission, and that was very nice of her that she did that. Then, she went and told her father that, "I went in person and I asked her, she doesn't want anything to do with him." Then, they went ahead and got married. My father divorced my mother on July 28, 1965. After two weeks, he remarried Vishni Bhojwani, on August 12, 1965.

SI: Had you really had any contact with your father in that period between when you left and when he got remarried?

KG: He never visited us and never bothered to check on us. That's a very good question you're asking, because all these years of our development stage, when we were in school and all that, he never ever came to visit us and see us or give us birthday presents or anything, nothing, no contact, nothing. Then, the first time I saw him was in the courthouse, where he's telling the judge that, "I would like to have custody of the children," because he didn't want to pay a maintenance fee for the children, so he thought that, "I'll ask for custody." So, I was just sitting there. My brother was about fourteen years old. I was about eleven. The judge took us in his chambers and he said that, "Your father wants that you stay with him." Then, my brother said, "No, we are not interested. All these years, he didn't care for us. Never bothered to find out how we are, and we don't want to leave our mother now and go and live with him." So, my father was saying, "[How] will an uneducated woman educate you? If you are with me, I'll give you good education," this, that. My brother said, "No, no, we are fine with my mother." So, it was a big slap on my father's face that we are now, both of us, very well educated and we can get a job anywhere in the world. We were able to show him that it's not just education that counts; some compassionate way of treating human beings is much more important.

SI: You said in about 1958, you moved to this new neighborhood.

KG: Yes.

SI: Tell me a little bit about that area.

KG: Very nice area, it was developing. Some new roads were being built, new schools were being built. Very nice, it was very comfortable. Both my brother Ramesh and me, we shot up because we had more room. When we went to school after two months, because in the month of May it is very hot, so we'd get about a month, one-and-a-half-month vacation, we went to school, and both of us had grown so tall. The teachers were wondering, "What happened? Suddenly, within two months, you shot up like that." It was a very nice, friendly neighborhood. We didn't have any problem at all. It was very good neighborhood, no problem.

You know in India, it's like Europe, different languages. It's not just one language. So, we'll have somebody speaking Gujarati or Marathi or a local language, a regional language. In our school, it was mandatory to learn the local language. So, we had to learn the national language, which was Hindi, and then the local language, it was Marathi. Then, we come home and we speak mother tongue, which is Sindhi, and then English is the medium in which we are taught all subjects because it's an international language. From a young age, we got familiar with all these

languages and customs of different people, and then their dress, their uniform is different. We get to know what customs and what festivals they enjoy and we would exchange our food items with them. They'll exchange their snacks with us. It was very comfortable. Even the Muslims who lived there, they lived in harmony, even though they didn't visit each other. Muslims did not visit the Hindus, Hindus did not visit the Muslims, but they were cordial. They never quarreled or anything. They lived in peace and harmony.

I remember that the 26th of January, they call it Republic Day, where they light up all the government buildings, and all the trains are also illuminated. On that day, in all of India, on all the trains you can travel for free because they want you to see how Indian public buildings have been decorated and, in the nighttime, all these lights are lit up beautifully. It's just like how you do Christmas here, but that one is on a larger scale. All big huge buildings, huge train stations, [were] all illuminated, and we used to go to see. One neighbor, he was Muslim, and he had fourteen children because he had more than one wife. What he used to do, he used to rent a truck and all the children used to pile in. There was so much space there, that he let the neighbors' children also pile in, and we also went on that trip together to enjoy the illumination and all that. Even though they were Muslims and we were Hindus, they didn't quarrel with us or have any animosity or anything like that. [Editor's Note: Republic Day, held annually on January 26th, is an Indian national holiday that commemorates the Constitution of India, which went into effect on January 26, 1950.]

SI: As you were going through school, did you also have to work after school or during breaks? Would you have a job as you were growing up as well?

KG: No, we didn't have any job like that. None of the children, except those who were boarders who were living there in the convent, only they clean the rooms and wipe the desks and blackboard and sweep and mop the classrooms, but we didn't have any [jobs]. Our school was a whole day, eight in the morning to four-thirty in the evening, a whole day, and only one hour lunch break, you'd get. By the time you come home, you're half dead. You don't do anything, no work, no nothing. Over here, the hours are less, the school system. Over there, it was a whole day. You travel forty-five minutes to go to school, at least a minimum of forty-five minutes going, coming. You don't have time to take up any job.

SI: What interested you the most in school?

KG: What interested me the most was that I just enjoyed being with other people and having fun and just playing around. I was good in studies only because my mother forced me to do my homework, because, originally, I was not interested in studies. I mean, I used to just get a passing grade. Then, one time, I was about eleven years old--and I used to come home and have tea and run off to play, I would not do my homework--so one day I came home and I'm getting ready to go to play, and my mother sat me down. Then, she said, "You know, you can sweep and wash dishes very well. That would be a good job for you." I said, "Why are you saying that?" She said, "Because you're not doing the homework and you're just passing through, getting passing grades, and that's not good. If you focus, you do your homework first, and then go out to play." I said, "But you're telling me, 'Before sunset, you come home.'" She says,

"Then, it is up to you what you want to do with your future. You cannot go on like this." That woke me up. Then, I started studying seriously.

I was not good at math, and then my brother Ramesh, he was three years older than me, he sat down and he taught me how to do trinomials and algebra. He showed me an easier way compared to what in the school they were teaching me. Then, I remember, one time, when we were in school and we were given one algebra problem, our teacher said, "Who finished?" I put my hand up and she was shocked, because I was the one who was just not that good. She came to look at my answer. It was right, but she says, "This is a very short method. I didn't teach you this." I said, "I know you did not teach me. My brother taught me that." Then, she started having argument with, "You have to do how I told you, step by step by step." I said, "But if the answer is right, it does not matter." I had an argument with her, and then she took me to the headmistress. Then, the headmistress said, "Just leave her alone. If her answer is right, don't bother her." But she wanted like you do step by step, but that takes more time. My brother took an interest in me, and he taught me that.

Then, when I was in the eleventh grade, where you have to pass with a good percentage to go to college, that time, I was going to take eight subjects and he says, "No, you take seven subjects and you'll get a higher percentage." I was afraid to do that because if I don't get a good percentage, I will fail. He convinced me that, "No, I will teach you this geography. Don't take social studies." He decided what subjects to pick and he coached me, and that's how I got a very good percentage in school. At school leaving time, I got a very good percentage (First Grade is over sixty percent). I got admission in Sydenham College, which is the best in Asia, at that time, for commerce and economics, and I did my Bachelor of Commerce [in] Bombay.

SI: Before we go on to college, beyond the classroom, were there other activities or clubs that you would do in high school?

KG: This was a convent. We didn't go to clubs, but I remember that one time, our school took us on an excursion and I got the opportunity to get into the Boeing 707, which was the first time that it was in existence. They had selected very few students from each class in the whole school and I was also one of them to be selected. I got a chance to go see inside the Boeing 707 and I looked and I was so amazed at that plane. I was thinking, "I don't think that I'll get a chance to fly because it's a money problem. We are having a hand-to-mouth existence. I'll never go." Later, I was shocked. The first time I took that plane, I came straight to America!

SI: What other experiences do you see as being formative during those years growing up in high school? You mentioned religion played a role in your life. Were there other aspects of your life that were important?

KG: We had a variety of festivals, like a spring festival. We will apply a powdered color on each other and put watercolor in a syringe, so that will be like a whole day and playing with the kids and all that. There will be another one like during monsoon season, Teejri festival, mainly women and girls. We will have another festival, where they eat fried snacks (samosas and pakoras) and all that, and they played cards and then they apply mehndi or henna. Do you know henna? H-E-N-N-A. It's a color and they make designs on the hand and on the palm of the hand

or on the feet. It was very cooling also because the weather is very warm there. So, they used that as a cooling agent but also as a color. We enjoyed playing card games, like Rummy. Then, you have Diwali, which is the new year, Indian New Year. At that time, they'll have a variety of sweets, a variety. Then, they exchange gifts just like Christmas. That's what they do in Diwali. Somewhere in November 4th or something, it will be. Every year, they'll wear new clothes during that time and exchange gifts. Then, they used to have Christmas carols, those are Christian, so they'll go from like one area to another, they have a big crowd and they'll go singing carols. [Editor's Note: Holi is a major annual Hindu festival that celebrates the Radha Krishna as well as the arrival of spring. It is known as the "Festival of Love" or "Festival of Colors."]

We have another Dussehra festival, where--you know how you burn that old man for that New Year, before New Year, you burn crackers and all. We used to have like a big dummy and we put crackers [firecrackers] in it and then we burn it. We used to call it Dussehra, a ten-headed dummy, and they used to put crackers in it. The idea was that you were getting rid of all the evil and then you're ushering in a new year for Diwali. These were a variety actually based on the different seasons of the year, to usher in the New Year. During spring, they will have something different, and not only a different color of uniforms, what we wear, but also a variety of food, snacks. We know that now this is like a South Indian festival. India is just like Europe. Different parts of the country, they have different ways of celebrating. They'll give it a different name, Cheti Chand, Ugadi, Gudi Padwa, Baisakhi, etcetera, and then they'll celebrate during the same time, usually early April, but with a different name, but their variety of food is different, snacks is different, the way they wear their clothes is different. It used to be very interesting to interact with them and have exchange of ideas and gifts and culture. We lived in harmony, basically in harmony, even though we did not understand some people's language because it was very difficult, but just smile and be able to manage. But if you speak English, then you can speak with more people from different parts of the country. In South India, they speak Tamil and English, no Hindi.

SI: When you went to college, were you living away from home then?

KG: No, I wasn't living away from home. I travel one hour by train to go there to college.

SI: What was the adjustment to college like? Was it difficult?

KG: Yes. When I was in school, I was studying in a convent. There were no men, no boys, just girls. All of a sudden, you're going to school and then you're sitting with some men, some boys, you're sitting. It was an adjustment because we did not know how to conduct ourselves. The nuns used to tell us, don't laugh too loud, talk softly, walk this way, wear modest clothes, walk gently, and be ladylike and stuff like that. Then, I come here to college and I feel that the women are so free. There were no uniforms; some wore sleeveless tops. They're sitting comfortably laughing and talking loudly. Everybody didn't go to a convent. I went to a convent. For me, it was a little bit different. It took me some time to adjust, to feel that, okay, this is normal, to sit next to somebody who is not a woman and you can talk and laugh freely. It took a little bit of time. But I wore modest clothes. I kept my nails short and did not paint my nails.

SI: What led you to study commerce and banking?

KG: Yes, originally, I wanted to study pharmacy, but what happened, being that my brother Ramesh is very protective, he wants to see where I'll go, which college, what is the location, what is the safe area? He goes to see the pharmacy college, but he doesn't like that location where I will pass through that area. He didn't feel [it was] safe for me to be in that locality. So, he comes home and he says, "Forget it, you are not going to study pharmacy." [laughter] I said, "Then, I don't know what to do." He says, "You go for arts." I said, "I don't want arts." I felt like those people have no brains, so you go for science, engineering, pharmacy, something like that. Then, there is a college behind that arts and science Jai Hind college, which is Sydenham College of Commerce and Economics, Churchgate. So, I said, "Okay, I'll take commerce." Destiny took me into commerce, and then I took banking and finance. Luckily, after I graduated, I was able to get a nice job in Indian Overseas Bank. Then, I studied, appeared for more exams, Certified Associate of the Indian Institute of Bankers, and I became an officer over there. I was thirteen years working as an officer at the Indian Overseas Bank. I guess fate brings you there whichever way.

SI: You were in college from 1964 to 1968. Is that correct?

KG: 1964 to 1969. I received my degree in 1969.

SI: Aside from your studies, were there other activities in college that stand out?

KG: Just taking part in some plays and some dramas and playing Carrom, like that. Nothing much. Just participating in debates, like that. [Editor's Note: Carrom is a popular Indian table game.]

SI: You mention Carrom. What is that?

KG: Carrom is the square [board]; wooden Carrom board with a set of checkers or discs. I don't know what you call it over here. It's like a square board and then you have a striker. Maybe I will look on the internet and tell you. We call it Carrom, C-A-R-R-O-M. It is like a wooden board and they have four holes in the corners. There are checkers or discs, you play like that. I don't know what you call it over here. It is all over the world but a different name.

SI: Okay, I can look that up. I was just curious.

KG: C-A-R-R-O-M. See, because I am educated in the British language, sometimes I use British English. My pronunciation also will be different sometimes. I noticed that one day I said, "Dupley," and my niece Deepa corrected me and said, "That's duplex." British English is different. We call it schedule [pronounced she-dyül], and you're calling it schedule [pronounced ske-jül]. So, my pronunciation will be different.

SI: You mentioned after you graduated, you worked as an officer in a bank.

KG: Yes, India Overseas Bank for about thirteen years.

SI: Where was the bank located?

KG: See, the bank was nationalized, so they had a lot of branches all over India, but luckily this was walking distance to my house, like hardly one block. That bank, where the first time that I joined, it used to be two sessions. The morning was open for three hours, and then in the evening, it was open for four hours. In between, it was closed. [It was] very difficult to have anybody to come and join. Who's going to come all the way from somewhere and just whittle their time between twelve and four, when it is closed. They wanted somebody locally. Luckily, what happened, I got appointed to work there. I know that I went for my interview for that, and those people who were interviewing me, interviewers, they asked that, "Do you read a newspaper?" I said, "Yes." They said, "What's so important that you read today?" I told that General [Charles] de Gaulle passed away. They said, "Who?" I said, "He was President of France, he passed away." So, they knew that I'm reading a newspaper and other questions they asked me, and they were very impressed. They said, "Okay, we'll get back to you." I come home. It takes me one hour to come home, because where I went for the interview was more than one hour [away]. I got [on] the train fast and I came home. That peon, what you call a messenger, P-E-O-N, he came to my house and he said, "You come to the branch." I said, "I just came from the interview." He said, "Yes, my manager wants to speak to you." So, I went there, and [he was] telling [me], "Sit here." He says, "Yes, we want you to start now." Can you imagine? They were short on staff, they needed staff, and they said that I passed the interview and I had to start immediately. [Editor's Note: Charles de Gaulle (1890-1970) led the Free French forces during World War II and served as the president of France from 1959 to 1969.]

SI: When you first started at the bank, were many women working there?

KG: No. At that time, it was only me, and then there were like four other men. Like I told you, it was a ridiculous type of timings. Morning, it was like eight to twelve, and then evening, it was like four to something. Which women will come there all day, hanging around? Luckily, my house was like across the street, so I can go and come back, like that. I remember that I had no experience [in] this type of job, because I just got out of college, so still I had no experience in work. One day what happened, eight to twelve, I had that job, and I know evening, I had to go at four o'clock. When I went home, I had lunch and I went to sleep. I overslept and I didn't show up for work. [laughter] It was like four-thirty, five. Then, the accountant noticed that my space is empty, "Where's this girl gone?" So, he sent that messenger to my house. He said, "They want you at the job." I went there, and the accountant said, "What happened?" I said, "I went to sleep." He said, "Don't do that. You have to come back to work." That's how I became more serious, because I still had to learn the ropes.

SI: Wow. Were you still in the same apartment with your mother and brother?

KG: Yes. We were in the same house for a long time. Then, every three years, I used to get transferred, because in the bank, that is their system. They don't allow you to stay because of corruption and stuff happening, so they'd transfer you from one branch to another and stuff like that.

What I want you to know is that all these years, even after my father divorced, he never bothered to contact us or see how we are doing, what's up, nothing. When he married, he's traveling with his wife, all over the world, this, that and all. Then, what happens, we come back to like 1978. In 1978, he gets in touch with my brother and says that, "I would like you to join me in the States." Can you imagine, after all these years? Then, my brother, he didn't want to go; he was having a nice job there in India. But I was looking at the political situation and all this, and I thought that, "Let him go to America because he had so [many] opportunities to go." When his other friends from college went, we didn't have the money to send him there, you know, for plane and where he'll stay and all that. We didn't have that resources. So, I thought that my father maybe changed; the leopard must have changed his spots. Maybe he's getting old and mellow, so let him go and my brother's future will get improved, compared to what the conditions are in India. So, I told him that, "I think you should go." In 1978, my father contacted my brother, and in 1979, all the papers, because you had to collect all the papers to come here, so he got the papers approved and he landed here on June 16, 1979. Father's Day was on June 17, 1979, his first Father's Day in the U.S.A.

SI: What part of the United States did your brother come to?

KG: Oh, he came here [to] New York, in Queens. My father was living in Queens. Mostly, these Indians and all, when they come from JFK, Kennedy Airport, for them New York or New Jersey is very convenient. So, he came to Queens, New York.

SI: Did that lead to you coming a few years later?

KG: Yes, I came in 1981. My father did not want to sponsor me, because he thought I would be a burden on him. My brother told him, "Don't worry, you just give her the sponsorship. I'll take care of her. Just let her come." My brother persuaded him to sponsor me. My brother sent a plane ticket for me to come here, and I went and stayed with my brother in his apartment he had rented in Brighton Beach in Brooklyn. So, I was staying with my brother.

SI: What motivated you to want to come to the United States?

KG: See, what happens, like I told you, in India, in the nationalized bank, every three or five years, they are transferring you. Now, the times that they transferred me, that was for me convenient to take the bus from close to my house and go. Now, further and further away, they transferred me. I don't want to travel by train. It is so crowded. The facilities are not so convenient and safe for a woman to travel, because I used to have friends who used to be transferred to far off places, some of them out of state. I was taking care of my mother. I cannot afford to leave her one place and be traveling somewhere else. I had a responsibility. So, I thought that since my brother is here and I'm getting an opportunity to get out, I might as well get out when the going is good and not to stay there, continue to stay in India, even though my job was very good. I didn't have any problems, but the only thing is that they had the stipulation every three years, five years, they are transferring you. You don't know where you are going and then what to do with my mother. My brother is there, and nobody is there to take care of [my mother]. So, I thought that that's the best thing to do.

SI: Did your mother come over later?

KG: Yes. What happened, my brother was getting married in 1983 or '84, something like that, so she had to come to attend the wedding. When she came to attend the wedding, we let her stay, and then we hired an attorney to tell that we had to look after her here, there's nobody else to take care of her. We got her the green card in that way.

SI: When you first came to the United States and you were living in Brighton Beach, what were the things that surprised you the most about life in the United States or maybe were the biggest challenges to living here?

KG: Yes, first of all, you know that "supersize it" was like ridiculous for me, because I couldn't open my mouth wide enough to eat such a big--everything they say, "Supersize, supersize." Even your regular size soda was big for me, because when I came from India, we didn't have that big; the normal size cup that you have here, even that was too big for me. So that, and then the variety of items that you have in the grocery store. One time, I was told, "Go get milk," and I'm looking which milk to get, such a big variety of milk. Yogurt, variety. I mean, I'm just standing there and looking and spend so much time just looking around because you cannot just pick something up and go. In India, it was not like that because we didn't have a variety of items to choose from. That was something.

Then, it shocked me, that I used to see movies of America and the roads and all were so spick and span and new, and here some parts of Brooklyn and New York, they were so shabby. I didn't like all this graffiti on the trains and all. I said, "This is a westernized world, and how come they are allowing this graffiti on the train and all that?" It didn't sit well with me, because some parts of Bombay were very nicely maintained and here some of the streets were not well maintained. But that's how it was, that I had to accept it, that this is how it is.

SI: Then, you went back into the banking industry?

KG: No, I tried to go into the banking industry, but what happened, when I was in India, transactions were manual. We posted all the entries and tallied the books by hand. I come here, and everything is computerized. So, I did not have that experience of doing things on a computer. I did not have American work experience. I was not getting a good job in the bank. I worked as a teller, and that was like minimum wage, 150 dollars a week, which was not that great. Then, I started thinking, like, "What should I do?" Then I took a job in Congress Factors, where you do accounts receivable and all of that. That's how I learned a little bit to work on the computer. Then, slowly, slowly, I went into the garment industry just doing collections, accounts receivable and all of that. Then, what happened, from that, Ron Chereskin, which was a men's designer wear, from there, they were going bankrupt, so I took that other job in Gitano Group, Edison, New Jersey, which had five divisions of Gitano. Suddenly, that Gitano Group, they went on bankruptcy. Then, through the unemployment office, I got training in computers. I thought, "Let me do computer technology at Lincoln Technical School, Edison." That's how I switched over to the computer field then.

SI: You got a degree from New York University?

KG: I had a diploma in computer technology, and then I did a variety of other programs. I got project management professional certification. So, I did work in very big Fortune 500 companies, like AIG, Citigroup, TIAA-CREF, all Fortune 500 companies I have worked in, and Somerset Medical Center also, in the computer department.

SI: Did you find the corporate culture to be very different from your experiences before?

KG: Yes, very nice, very nice. The corporate culture [is] very professional over here. I was relaxed. I felt safe, not like in India. There, the men over there and the peons that work for you, they are disrespectful sometimes, because in their minds, the woman is not equal to a man, even though their job title is lower than yours, but they don't give you that respect. Here, I felt very safe and nice, very good conditions. Monday morning at work, they discuss, "How was your weekend?" Friday evening, they wish you, "Have a nice weekend!" This was new to me, as we did not observe this practice in India.

SI: Would you say there were more women working in the various levels that you were on?

KG: In America, yes. I noticed that in Human Resources, there were more female employees. But in computer technology and programming, there were more men.

SI: Yes.

KG: In America, yes, yes, and all professional, very nice.

SI: You initially were in Brooklyn, New York. When did you move to New Jersey?

KG: Somewhere in '85-'86, we moved to New Jersey in East Brunswick, because the school system is good and even though my brother was working in Manhattan, New York, he said that you can get to New York within forty-five minutes by bus, by train. It's very convenient and it is a safer area, a good neighborhood. My brother's wife's relatives, also some of them are living in East Brunswick, so you need family or friends to fall back on, in case of emergency. So, it became a very convenient place to move.

SI: I see you have also been involved in a lot of cultural and charity groups.

KG: Yes.

SI: Did you start, particularly the cultural groups, when you first came to New Jersey, or was that later on?

KG: No, only here in New Jersey. Once, Ramesh found out about the Sathya Sai group when he was on his way to work by bus. A fellow passenger told him about it. All these things happen, mostly through word of mouth, you get connected, or the prayer groups you go to, and they tell you, "We need help to prepare sandwiches." Or you give money to make sandwiches for students who during the weekend they're at home and they don't have breakfast, so you help out

like that. It started very slowly, slowly. Then, they said they need gifts for Christmas and we'll pack up some gifts and put under the Christmas tree at such and such church. Then, they said, "We need help for Elijah's Promise soup kitchen." So, we had a big calendar for the whole year, and everybody puts their name to register when you can take sponsorship to provide the raw material or to cook or to [do] service, whatever. We put in our names, so instead of celebrating birthday or anniversary or something, we will book our days and then we will go there. Even if we didn't put our name there, if we are free, then we will take the time to go there and provide our services. This is how we got involved with different groups. Then, you get noticed, and then other people, they ask for your help, how you can help. It's not necessary that every time, you have to give money. Sometimes, you can just give any type of service; whatever skill you have, you can share. I used to teach English as a second language to foreigners who had difficulty with the English language because it was not their primary language. Slowly, slowly, you get recognized and then people say, "Can you help out in this or that?" There was a senior citizen lady and she said, "I need to do yoga at home. Can you do it with me?" Then, from the senior center, I used to go to her house and do it with her because she didn't want to do it alone. Wherever I can help, I can do. [Editor's Note: Elijah's Promise is a soup kitchen in New Brunswick, New Jersey that was established in 1989.]

Slowly, slowly what happened, my vision, I have a vision problem. It's hereditary. I have macular degeneration. So, I have lost vision in my right eye, but in my left eye, I can see, even though not that great, but I can manage to live independently. I cannot drive, but even though I cannot drive, that doesn't stop me from being able to provide whatever help I can give in any other way. This is how I got involved and people [ask for] help how to deep breathe or help how to do meditation or just talk to me. I do whatever I can to relieve the suffering and let them know that I'm there, I [can] help you the best way I can. Somebody picks me up and drops me off at home, then I go there and provide whatever services I can do for them.

SI: You have been involved in Agraj Seva Kendra. [Editor's Note: Agraj Seva Kendra is an Indian cultural organization that operates in Middlesex County, New Jersey.]

KG: Agraj Seva Kendra.

SI: How did you get involved in that, and what have you done in that organization?

KG: What happened, they used to hold a once-a-month meeting in the East Brunswick Library, and I used to go to the East Brunswick Senior Center. So, one day I went there, and then I was invited to go there. That's how I got involved in that activity. The senior center and the East Brunswick Library are in close proximity, within walking distance. Agraj Seva Kendra arranges clean up at the beach or supports South Asian dance groups to keep culture alive. Agraj Seva Kendra partners with various dance schools and brings art to the community. Last year, we conducted Heritage Day, partnering with guru Malini Nair, under the artistic director of Sowparnika Dance Academy. In 2020, due to COVID, the event was virtual by the same school, Sowparnika Dance Academy. My speech was recorded, along with Govinda Rajan and Shanta Bhatia during the event.

SI: They promote diversity and aspects of culture.

KG: Yes. Some people, they just find out about me and they contact me and they say, "Are you interested in providing your feedback?" or this, that. Even YMCA, they contacted me about pandemic, what is your experience? Then, I volunteer, because it is on Zoom, I don't have to drive anywhere, and I give my opinion. This is how during the pandemic, I got involved in a lot of Zoom sessions, and that's how they selected me. I don't know how they got my name, but when they ask me, I say, "Yes, if I have the time, I will do it," because I don't have to drive. This is the best I can do from home. YMCA is holding the ninth annual conference in Atlantic City on December 9 and 10 of this year (2021), and I'm planning to go there to attend the health convention. They contacted me and they select a few people who they feel that they can archive their recordings, and then they contact and they keep in touch with you.

SI: Your work in doing things like the mindfulness sessions, leading classes on meditation, that sort of thing, was that like all kind of self-taught, or did you have any kind of training in that?

KG: What happened, in addition to all I'm doing, I'm a student of the Brahma Kumaris, a world spiritual organization. [Editor's Note: Brahma Kumaris is a spiritual movement that was established in Hyderabad, Sindh in the 1930s.]

SI: Okay.

KG: We get up four o'clock in the morning to do meditation, and then, between seven and eight AM they will tell you a thought for the day. I have been regularly attending these classes since more than ten years. They have a lot of knowledge to give you and explain to you that you are not the body, you are the soul. That interests me a lot. Philosophy and all that is very interesting to me, and I keep in mind that I should not be distracted [by] an outside appearance of a person or what color or shape, size, no. When I talk to people, I know that this is just a costume and that I'm talking to the point of light. This way, I don't have any prejudices because I am grounded.

This is not how I was before, because in India, we had people from different states and they have different shapes, sizes, colors. Then, you have preconceived notions that this person is from this part of the country, so he must be like this and that. But when I came here and I joined this world spiritual organization of the Brahma Kumaris, that cleared up a lot of my misconceptions. So, I have a newfound respect for humans that I come in contact with, because everybody has a problem. Nobody is free from trouble. Everybody has a different kind. Somebody may be having money problems. Somebody has health problems. So, we have to be kinder, show compassion. That is the least we can do, you know, show compassion. If you cannot say anything soothing, just let them know you are with them. It helps a lot.

SI: Wow. Since you have been living in the United States, have you gone back to India with frequency?

KG: Yes, several times. I used to go several times, like every five years, I will go, and then I will travel in different parts of India, because when I was living there, I did not have money to travel. Now that I have money, then I go there and I go to different parts of India and see what all is there in the world. I have seen different parts of India only after coming to America. I

have one family, my cousins are there, so I will visit them. I have friends with whom I used to work, my coworkers from the bank, I'll visit them. I'm in touch with them. India is good for vacation, but I cannot stay there for too long because the air and the water, everything is different, and the doctors are over here. I'm used to the doctors, medications over here. I'm not used to over there. Their spices are too strong, because they are used to it. I cannot handle those hot spices, what they cook. For a little while, it is good. For a vacation, it is good, but I cannot go back, like you cannot step foot in the same water again.

SI: Sure. Now, after living here and having half of your career here, would you say that you ran into any prejudice either at work or in more of your outside activities?

KG: In one job that was in Edison, that I worked for in Gitano, there was one supervisor of mine. Now, he was from Uganda, Africa, but he had Indian origin. Now, because he had Indian origin, even though he came from Africa, now he finds like he can dominate me, because his mind is set, the Indian style, where women are not equal, you can order them about. He used to make me, you know, he'll call me and say, "Bring this file. Bring that file," and make me go up and down, up and down. The file cabinet was behind his chair, and my seat was at the end, at least four seats away.

Then, he used to gossip, because he was my supervisor, he thought that he can push me around because he found out that I had started that job with my salary scale, 29,000. I did not know that I should not tell my salary to anybody. Anybody tell anything, I will honestly tell, "This is what I'm making." Because he was Indian and I trusted him and I talked like he's my friend, I told him. He said, "How much did they start you with?" I said, "They started me with 29,000," so he got upset, "Why did you start with 29,000? Because you should not get more than twenty-five because there are other people who started with twenty-five." From that point on, he now does not want to see me confirmed at my job, because you're on probation for six months. What happened, he was making me go up and down, up and down, and it was an ordinary job, collection, like accounts receivable. It was not a complicated job that I cannot do, considering the fact that I was an officer in a bank in India for thirteen years. So, you're not dealing with somebody who came off the street, but because I'm a woman, he thought that he can push me around.

Now, I was afraid for my job because he told one woman, Felice Pfeiffer, that I was working with that, "I'm not going to confirm her. She's on probation for six months, and I'm not going to confirm her," he told that girl. Felice Pfeiffer came and told me that, "You know, Dan," they used to call him Dan, D-A-N, "he's saying that he will not confirm you and you're going to be out of a job." Now, I got afraid for my job, so I had complained about him to another friend of mine. I said, "I'm afraid for my job because he is spreading rumors that he is not going to confirm me, and what will I do?" So, that man whom I told, he contacted some employment discrimination people somewhere in Newark, and then all of a sudden, the discrimination people, they sent a letter to the head office of Gitano in New York. They called him, and they scolded him or something like that. Everything got cooled off. Then, after that, he stopped bothering me, and I continued with my job. His real name was Dhiren Jani and he called himself "Dan" at Gitano, where he was my supervisor of the collections department. He had migrated from Uganda. President Idi Amin of Uganda expelled the Asians who were a minority in Uganda.

This was in 1972. So, Dhiren Jani landed in the U.S.A. Though he was a lawyer in Uganda, he could not practice here, as he needed a local license, local law degree, to practice.

SI: Wow. You were working in the information technology field for a long time or related fields, as well as the banking industry and that sort of thing. What were some of the biggest challenges you faced in your career, things that stand out as you are proud of having overcome or achieved or just big changes that you recall?

KG: Yes, the main thing was to, first of all, we are coming from a different country and we are so well educated, but to get the first job is a big challenge, because in the initial stage, if I put all my qualifications, they'll say you're overqualified for this job, so you don't get a job. Even an entry-level job, I could not get, if I put all my qualifications. I need food on the table. I'm willing to work for minimum wage, why are you not giving me [a job]? But I understand their point of view now, because they feel that they are going to spend the time and effort on training her and she'll get more money and she'll go, because she's overqualified for this job. But when I'm a new person, I don't understand that, because I'm seeing only from my perspective, that I need a job and I'm willing to work. It was very challenging for me. Plus, I did not have American work experience and references in the beginning, so it becomes difficult to find work.

You won't believe, in the beginning, I worked for some Indian people, Indian people from my community, because I need money to eat food. They gave me the job, but they wanted me to work on Saturdays also. In India, we used to work on Saturdays also, so I did not know that in America, you get Saturday and Sunday off. [laughter] I'm going on Saturdays also. Then, one day, my brother said, "You're not supposed to go to work on Saturday." [laughter] I said, "But they call me; every Saturday, I go to work." He said, "No, no, no, you're not supposed to go to work on Saturday." Then, I lost that job, because I told those people there, "I'm not supposed to work on Saturday. You're making me come here and work on minimum wage." I lost that job because of that. See, they take advantage of you; your own people take advantage of you. Isn't that a shame?

SI: Yes. I was going to ask, when you came to particularly East Brunswick but maybe also in Brooklyn, how important it was to have members of your community around you, but then it also sounds like there were potential drawbacks as well.

KG: Well, in Brooklyn, what happened, we had one cousin living like three streets away. That's how we managed to get this apartment through her reference, so we could spend some time with her. They liked to watch movies. She was raised in Pakistan, so she used to have movies in Pakistan on her TV. So, sometimes on the weekend, we will go there, spend time, or sometimes, all of us will decide to go to the beach. So, we'll go there, sit, chit chat. It was so nice and safe in those days that at night also, you could go to Brighton Beach, sit on the bench and chit chat and talk until ten or eleven in the night without fear of anybody snatching your chain or mugging you or anything. It was so nice, beautiful.

SI: I am curious, coming to East Brunswick, at that time, in the mid '80s, was there a large South Asian community there, because now there is a very significant community? What was it like then, about forty years ago?

KG: It was not too many, and that's the reason why we were encouraged to go to the temple, not because we are so religious, but we go there just to go see our own kind of people, to socialize. People think that we are so religious and that's why we are going, but mainly we are going there to socialize. We will go there, half an hour, we will pray, but mostly you are socializing with people. Usually, there will be food after the service, and then you talk to other people and ask them when you are coming over, this, that and all, because everybody living so far, far, away, you cannot go anywhere without car. So, at least you know that between six to eight on a Thursday or whatever time is fixed for that service, we know that this section of people will be there, to see them and talk to them, that you are free to talk at that time. That's how the children meet their own kind, different friends they made from the same community. Then, you know who your children are associating with and you're able to control their activities and control what they are doing, what their habits are. If they are your kind of people or you approve of the children, then you let them go have a sleepover and not just indiscriminately, because they have drugs or whatever the problems. But if you know the family and the children, then you maintain new friendships, new relationships. That's how they do that, to socialize.

SI: It sounds like you and your brother adapted very well to life in the United States. Did your mother also adapt well, or did she have any difficulty?

KG: No, actually, the main thing was English. Ramesh studied in a parochial school. I studied in parochial schools. I had British nuns teaching me. He had fathers, priests, British priests, teaching. We were very conversant in English. That was the main difficulty with other people. My mother did speak a little bit of English, and she used to go to the senior center, where they used to teach English also. So, she used to help out in stuffing envelopes for veterans or whatever, and she got a proclamation from the mayor for her efforts. So, you can get involved in so many activities if people are patient and they [are] likeminded people you are around. My brother and me, we didn't have problem because we can very well converse in English.

SI: It looks like you retired in the late 2000s.

KG: Yes, that Wall Street crash, you know what happened in 2008 and President Obama, 2009, he came. [Editor's Note: This is referring to the Great Recession, the financial crisis of 2007-2008.]

SI: Yes.

KG: It was the Wall Street crash. A lot of companies, they file bankruptcy, and a lot of companies, they were laying off people. That's how I got laid off, and then I couldn't get back to work, even though I was so well qualified. But the agents who help to place you, they said that they cannot hire anybody who's more than six months unemployed, because in the computer field, all the time, you have to be updating your skills and stuff like that. I lost vision in my right eye. So, I'm having all these kinds of problems, and I'm just not able to get back to work. So, I [retired]. I took a twenty percent cut in Social Security benefits and got early Social Security. I need food on the table. I'm alone, live by myself, so I didn't know what else to do.

SI: It seems like you have gotten more involved in stuff since you stopped working.

KG: Yes, yes, because then for a little while, I was a little bit depressed. Then, I realized that this is not the way to live. I have to help somebody to feel good. Nobody knows your situation, but there are so many other people who are worse off than you, so count your blessings and move on. I'm so glad that I was able to uplift and bring cheer to some other people. Slowly, slowly, I was able to get out of my depression by helping others, and that's how you can be happy, to make others happy.

SI: You mentioned earlier about the impact of the pandemic on some of your activities, but more generally, how would you say the pandemic has affected you and your community?

KG: Well, for me, personally, I was able to learn spoken Sanskrit, which I had never learned before. Online, there were so many courses you could join. There was a concert, a free concert from India, and there is a nine-and-a-half-hour time difference between India and America. So, I used to watch those to occupy myself. Personally, I was happy because I could improve my skills and enjoy. Since I don't drive, all these concerts were available to me, because so many Bollywood film directors and film producers, out of the goodness of their heart, they want to cheer us up and they are providing all this entertainment. For me, the only problem was going for haircut or manicure or pedicure and groceries. But later on, East Brunswick Township had a program with the police department and the senior center. They call it the Blue Delivery Program, and you order your groceries from ShopRite and the police will pick it up and deliver it to your house. So, that was a great blessing.

The other thing I noticed was, I got a chance to meet so many neighbors who used to go to work during the day but now they were forced to work from home. What happened was, on the lunch break, they want to go out for a walk and they go out for a walk and they come in my neighborhood. I noticed that I see people walking at the lunch hour, I used to go and stand at the end of my driveway, and I'll take one bottle, as if I need help to open this bottle, my eyedrops, you know. Then, I say I need help, and like this, I will start a conversation with them and they get to know me and I get to know them. They were neighbors like, they will go pick up their prescription, and then they'll call from there, "Do you need anything? We are already here." So, this way, I got a chance to meet so many neighbors who I did not know before, even though they lived here for more than ten, fifteen years, because they were so busy going to work and coming back. Only because of coming out in the lunch break, I was able to meet with them. For me, personally, it really enriched my life because I got to know [my neighbors]. Especially since I'm living alone, I like other people to know that I'm here, so that in case of emergency, if I knock on their door, at least they know who it is. For me, personally, I was really happy. I was telling somebody that the only challenge I faced was for a manicure, pedicure and get my eyebrows done. Then, my niece, Deepa, she ordered one gadget online, where I can get my eyebrows shaped electronically from home. So, I have a good support system. You have to do the best you can, because change is the only thing that's going to happen all the time. Nothing is permanent except change. So, you have to accept it, this is what it is.

SI: Are there any other aspects of your life that we did not discuss that you would like to talk about?

KG: I don't remember now anything else that we need to discuss.

SI: You mentioned that you like the concerts.

KG: Musical.

SI: What kind of music?

KG: Yes, from India, they were performing sometimes songs, performed in Hindi movies, Bollywood, sometimes music, all over the world. They [were] sometimes impromptu, some neighbors and all, they will start [playing] a guitar or a violin [for] their friends and neighbors, from their balcony, and you see so many people enjoying. It's so nice to see people are sharing their skills for free and uplifting the spirit of everybody. It's so nice. It's a good feeling and a community spirit. It's so nice to see that. We don't have to sit and cry. If you try to focus your mind on something positive and happy, that's the only way you can uplift yourself, because why pull yourself down? Everybody is down, so try to be happy, and change your thought process. Instead of sad, feel happy. Do happy things, positive things. Don't focus on something that is negative, and that's the only way you can come out of it. Otherwise, there is no end to it. I feel that every cell in your body is listening to what you're doing and thinking and all that. If you feed it positive thoughts, then you feel uplifted, and you feel good. Be cheerful!

SI: That is great. Your community that we have talked about, that would be the Sindhi community?

KG: Yes, Sindhi. Sindhi means that there was a state called Sindh, S-I-N-D-H, in Pakistan. So, people in it, they speak Sindhi language. Originally, the State of Bombay was divided into Maharashtra and Gujarat, so in Maharashtra, they speak Marathi. In Gujarat, they speak Gujarati. In Sindh, they used to speak Sindhi. So, that is the mother tongue, Sindhi, and Sindhis can be Muslim also because religion is not based upon the language. We are Sindhi Hindu. So, we are Hindu, but my mother told that you can go anywhere, you can go to temple, church. Ramesh and me, we used to go to church and we used to go to temple, no problem. We also go to gurdwara with the Sikh, S-I-K-H; they have the turban. We go there also. We feel that God is known by different names. Like, you must be father at home, but you must be a son somewhere, or you must be a husband or somebody's brother, but you are one and the same person, right? That's how we feel, that it's a God by different names. We have to respect everybody, all religions, because no religion teaches to hate. All religions will tell you love one another, love your neighbor and all that. Every religion will tell you to do good. So, we shouldn't feel that we are superior to others. At the same time, we shouldn't feel that we are inferior to others and so give everybody respect.

SI: I was curious, once you were living in East Brunswick, if there were other members from the Sindhi community?

KG: When we went to the temple, that's where we found Sindhis. Now, since the last four years, they have a new temple, only for the Sindhis, even though other religions can come there,

but mainly the Sindhi community. They have a new temple on Ryder's Lane for us Sindhis, the Sadhu Vaswani Center. There, you will find ninety percent Sindhis congregating, from your same language. [Editor's Note: The Sadhu Vaswani Center of Central New Jersey is located at 110 Ryders Lane, East Brunswick.]

SI: It has been over ninety minutes, and I do not want to keep you for too long. I was curious, again, if there is anything that you wanted to talk about that I have not brought up? Is there anything that I have missed that's an important part of your life?

KG: I haven't thought about it, but up to now, what I have done recording, can I get a chance to review it? So, if we meet again, then I can tell you if we missed.

SI: Of course, yes.

KG: I can add something like that.

SI: Yes, you can take a look at the interview, and you can either add things to the transcript, or we can set up another Zoom call and record some more. We will get you the material.

KG: Yes.

SI: For now, thank you very much. I really appreciate all your time, and thank you for sharing so much about your life. It is really fascinating.

KG: My pleasure. If it's going to be useful, then it is good to have.

SI: Oh, absolutely, yes. My students and the scholars that I work with are very grateful to have these resources, talking about different backgrounds and how people came to settle in the area. It is very valuable.

KG: Yes, and they get a glimpse of the dowry system that was prevalent and the Sati system that was burning the women alive. Now, even though they're telling it is outlawed, the dowry system is outlawed they'll tell you, but yet and still in the villages and all, they will continue it under different names, under different pretenses. It is important that people are made aware that this type, how it effects the children. My mother, she was not uneducated either. She must have studied up to fourth or fifth grade in school. She went to an English school, but that doesn't mean she's uneducated. It shows you, when you hear me speak, you know that she did a good job.

SI: Yes, absolutely.

KG: That was very bad for my father to put down my mother like that because he beat her up and ill-treated her so many times. Then, my uncle, Santdas Mirchandani, he was an executor of the will, and my father, he wants to justify why he divorced my mother by telling that my mother was influenced by my uncle, and that's why he divorced. That was not true, but, see, he had to

say something evil. Evil he has to say, but do you know what? He got his just deserts in the end!

SI: Wow.

KG: In early 2008, he--Father--had an accident with one van, Time Warner van, while he was crossing the street where he lived, I told you, in Queens. At that time, he was crossing the street, going for some eye checkup, and a Time Warner van hit him. So, he had this hip bone fracture, what they put, like a steel rod in his hip bone.

SI: Yes.

KG: On June 20, 2012, Father was a victim of a motor vehicle accident. This time, he suffered multiple fractures to his body, ribs, hands, legs and several bruises to his face. His neck was put in a brace to keep it in one position, and his eyes were black and blue. He had taken a real beating. He was kept on oxygen and a liquid diet.

SI: Okay. I was going to ask if you had any interaction with him after you came to the United States.

KG: Oh, yes, we did have interaction with him, because after my brother moved out of his house and I was staying with my brother, then a few times I did visit him, even when I was living in East Brunswick. But he always brought up the subject in the sense that, "I was denied my love and affection from my children." So, I told him that, "All our formative years, when we were growing up, you never sent us a birthday card or visit us or anything like that." Do you know what he said? He said, "I thought you all were being well taken care of." I thought, I'm not like an animal, like a dog or a cat, that we are growing up and that we are being taken care of, but that's what he's saying, that you all are being well taken care of, so it was not necessary. How can it not be necessary? In America, he would have got it good, because it's so important that the parents, they have visitation rights for the children. He never visited us even once. No birthday gift, no Christmas, no Diwali, no nothing, this is how we grew up.

These are Father's lost opportunities to make amends for past neglect. No arrangements for accommodation had been made for Ramesh when he arrived in JFK Airport in New York. Within two months of sharing the one-bedroom apartment with Father and his wife, Ramesh moved out. He shared a studio apartment with an acquaintance. Ramesh slept on the floor, lived out of his suitcase, and shared a linen closet. He shared rent, five hundred dollars. Father did not care. Ramesh worked at Frederick Atkinson, 1515 Broadway, New York, earning 350 dollars a week. He joined New York University between Fifth and Sixth Avenue to study computer programming from six PM to nine PM after work. Then, he'd take the train to go to Annapurna Restaurant in Jackson Heights to have a vegetarian meal. He requested that the manager let him in at ten PM as his last customer and called from Manhattan after class to keep the door open for him. Father did not care for Ramesh's wellbeing.

In August 2011, there was Hurricane Irene. My house was not covered for flood insurance. My basement was flooded. I needed to replace the furnace, air conditioner, carpets and furniture,

and the walls were covered with mold. Father did not help, and I had been unemployed since 2009. With the help of three credit cards, Home Depot, Best Buy and Wells Fargo, I gradually paid my bills. Father did not help. Vengeance is mine. In the Bible, it is written, "Leave it to the wrath of God. 'I will repay,' says the Lord."

SI: Thank you so much. I really appreciate hearing your life story, and it is really fascinating. I am going to end the recording.

KG: Yes. I just want to add that, "Tough times do not last, but tough people do!"

-----END OF TRANSCRIPT-----

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