

RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH DEEPAK KHARE

FOR THE

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INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

SHAUN ILLINGWORTH

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TRANSCRIPT BY

SHAUN ILLINGWORTH

Shaun Illingworth: This begins an oral history interview with Deepak Khare on November 19, 2024, with Shaun Illingworth. Thank you very much for sitting down with me. To begin, can you tell me where and when you were born?

Deepak Khare: So, Shaun, I was born in India.

SI: Where in India?

DK: I was born in Central India, in a state called Madhya Pradesh, which literally means "Central India."

SI: What year were you born?

DK: 1966.

SI: What were your parents' names?

DK: So, my father's name was Krishna Bahadur Khare and my mother's name is Prem Lata Khare.

SI: Starting with your father's side of the family, what do you know about where they came from, if they always lived in that area of Madhya Pradesh or if they moved there at some point, whatever you might know about his parents, that sort of thing?

DK: Okay. Yes, my father moved from a northern state called Uttar Pradesh. That's where he had grown up with his family, with my grandparents. My grandfather, he was a doctor in a small town in Uttar Pradesh. That town is called Bahraich. It is a town which nestles on the border of Nepal and India. It was a very small town.

My grandfather used to run his medical practice there. In fact, my grandfather had graduated--I think he was in one of the initial batches of physicians who had graduated from King George Medical College in Lucknow.

After graduating as a doctor, he had started his practice, because my grandfather's father wanted him to come back and serve the community where they were originally from. So, that's why my grandfather moved to that small town called Bahraich. That's where my father grew up, along with his brother and with his three sisters.

My father, he completed his postgraduate education in mathematics, and then, he decided to move to law. He completed his degree in law and he practiced law in that town for a while, but, then, after that, he got an opportunity to become a judge, join the judiciary as a judge in Central India. That's when he moved, along with my mother, to Central India, yes.

SI: Tell me a little bit about your mother and her side of the family.

DK: My mother's parents, they were also from Uttar Pradesh. They were from a city called Ayodhya, which is well-known. It's a small city, but it has a strong religious significance for Hindus. That's where she grew up.

My mom's parents, my mom's father was a teacher, a high school teacher, and he passed away when my mom was in her high school. Then, she basically grew up with the rest of the family, with her elder brother who took care of the family and who took charge of the family.

SI: Do you have a sense of how far she went with her education?

DK: Yes, my mother completed her post-graduation in psychology. So, she did post-graduation psychology. Then, she was very interested in learning about a different and alternate medicine called homeopathy. So, she studied homeopathy.

She became a homeopathic doctor, much later on, after we (the children) were born and we're growing up. So, she continued learning on her own. Then, finally, she joined a school and she graduated as a homeopathic doctor much later in her life.

SI: Wow. That would've been when you were a teenager, somewhere around there, that she did that.

DK: Yes, almost a teenager, yes. So, I'm the youngest of all, and so, there are four of us. I, my brother, we have two sisters--there are four of us and I'm the youngest one. So, when I was in my, I think, early teens, that's when she graduated. She went back to school, she completed her education in homeopathy and that's when she completed that.

SI: Before that, had she worked outside the home?

DK: No, she was a housewife all along, yes. She was a housewife all along and it was quite a step for her to go out and complete her education. It was quite a step for my father to back her up, to go out and encourage her to go out to do that, yes.

SI: Where were you living for the first few years of your life?

DK: My father was in the judiciary and that was a transferable job. So, what that meant was, he moved from town to town, wherever the job took him. We were in some very small towns, villages, almost villages and very, very small towns in that state called Madhya Pradesh.

Many of his postings were just for, like, six months or a year, because, back then, I think there was a lot of political interference also and pressure on judges in India. I think he went through all that. He was an upright man, so, I think he got transferred a lot. Along with that, every time he got transferred, we moved along with him--so, six months here, a year here, a year there, and so on, lots of places, yes.

SI: Do you have any memories of some of these places you lived?

DK: Yes, yes, lots of very sweet memories of these small places, meeting people, very simple people, very nice people in all those places, not flashy places, but very close to nature and nice places, yes.

SI: Moving around so much, did your parents try to maintain any kind of home culture from where they were from?

DK: I think my father always tried to go back to his parents' place at least once in a year, along with us children. So, that was one way for him to stay connected. Then, whenever he could find time, he would take us back to meet with his siblings and things like that. That's how I think we stayed connected to his family's culture in growing up, yes.

SI: Would you say that there was a particular ethnicity that you belong to or cultural background that, again, your family tried to maintain ties with?

DK: So, my religious affiliation, I'm a Hindu. When we started, as we grew, that was the atmosphere that we had in our family--so, not a very religious atmosphere, not strictly religious atmosphere, but spiritual. So, there was a spiritual leaning, but not a strict religious atmosphere.

Yes, we celebrated all the Hindu festivals with the family. In fact, we celebrated all kinds of festivals. Because a lot of my father's friends were from a Muslim background, from a Christian background, from different backgrounds, we actually got to celebrate lots of different festivals, like Eid, for whenever the Eid happened for Muslim culture. Christmas was always a fun time, New Year's, right, things like that, yes.

SI: It sounds like a very cosmopolitan way to grow up. Tell me a little bit about how that affected your education. You'd obviously have to leave school every six months to a year. How did that affect your education?

DK: I think I did not suffer for it, like, I don't think it really affected me. My mom and dad, they used to take an interest in teaching us at home. So, we did not feel--I did not feel--that much. Probably, I did not feel it at that point. You have to meet new friends every time you move, but, I mean, I don't recollect anything like that; yes, nothing special about that. I mean, I think it did not affect much in my education and things like that.

SI: What did you enjoy most in school?

DK: In school, I more gravitated towards STEM subjects. I think it also came some from my father's side, also from my mother's, because of seeing her going back to school later in life and that, to see my father always putting an emphasis on the education. I think that helped a lot. I was attracted more towards STEM education.

SI: Would you also have opportunities to do things like sports or belonging to different groups, like a Boy Scout equivalent, that sort of thing?

DK: Yes, I participated in Scouts, Boy Scouts. That was available in the school there, participated in some sports. It was not very organized. It was not organized sports, because those schools were small.

In fact, until I reached the high school, which was the tenth grade, in all the schools that I studied in, we didn't have chairs and tables. So, we always sat on the floor, on the rugs. We never felt anything, any lack of it, because we didn't know any better.

There were no organized sports, but we played sports outside. We played cricket growing up. We played hockey growing up, field hockey. We played soccer, we played local Indian games. There was hide-and-seek, and then, different variations of local games, marbles, things like that, yes.

SI: Was there a point where your father stopped doing the circuit, moving around, or was he always doing that up until when you left?

DK: Yes, I think he always kept moving around.

SI: Okay.

DK: Yes.

SI: Tell me a little bit more about your siblings. You said you're the youngest of four.

DK: That's correct, yes.

SI: Okay.

DK: Yes, my older brother, he's two years older than me. My brother, we had a very close bond while growing up. Being in small places did mean that there would be bullying in school and things like that. I'm glad that I had my elder brother, because he would come out to protect me. That was something that I appreciated very much.

Then, I have two older sisters. My oldest sister, she went on to become a medical doctor. She's currently a practicing gynecologist. She's a gynecologist in India, in Central India. Then, the other sister, she did post-graduation in botany. Then, after that, she studied law. Now, she's also living in Central India.

My brother went on to become a mining engineer. He recently retired from his job and he moved back to Central India. Then, yes, so, that's about my siblings. Growing up, I remember my sister, my eldest sister, she used to teach some of the subjects that she was good at. So, she used to teach me chemistry. My brother, he used to teach me math. That was the culture that we had at our home, that they used to teach me, yes.

SI: What languages did you speak at home?

DK: Hindi. So, we always spoke Hindi, yes.

SI: Okay.

DK: That was the only language I knew back then. So, I spoke Hindi. All of my education was also in Hindi. Up until college, all my education was in Hindi.

SI: One of the things I'm interested in is how people learn about the world. Did you follow a lot of news, a lot of TV, growing up, either on a national or international scale?

DK: Yes, we didn't have TV growing up. We didn't have TV until we got into college, but we knew about the world through newspapers and through what we heard our elders discussing about it, from their conversations and things like that, but mostly through newspapers and through hearing their conversations.

SI: Was that something that you enjoyed, learning about the larger world?

DK: I think, for a very, very long time, my world was limited to the places that we were growing up in, and at the most northern part of India, where we used to go back once a year to meet with the rest of my father's family and my mother's family. So, that's what my world was for a very, very long time, because I only knew about the Central India and the Northern India. That was my world.

SI: Did you have any exposure to beyond India, either the Western world or the Eastern world?

DK: A little bit. From newspapers, from whatever we read in newspapers, through those newspapers, I knew a little bit about that, but that was a very much foreign land, a foreign concept, didn't understand much about that, but, yes, some exposure.

Since we didn't have TV, we did not have any exposure through that. I did not have exposure to English music until I got into the college; so, yes, just had very little exposure, other than the newspapers and maybe some magazines and things like that.

SI: Did you have any hobbies?

DK: Some literature.

SI: Oh, go ahead.

DK: Yes, and some literature. Yes, we enjoyed reading books, reading novels and things like that. I read classic Indian writers like Prem Chandra, Rabindra Nath Tagore, RK Narayanan, Sarat Chandra Chatterjee, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee. I had exposure to the external world also, reading comics and other books by Enid Blyton. She was an English author. She had some books. So, through those books, I had some exposure to the world, yes.

SI: Tell me a little bit about your high school years. Did you move around at that point to different high schools or were you able to stay at one high school?

DK: My high school was until the eleventh grade. We had eleven plus five--so, five years of undergrad and eleven was the high school. I spent my high school in two different places. For the ninth grade, I was in one place and, for the tenth and the eleventh grade, I was in another place. We did move around a bit, not a whole lot, during my high school years.

SI: Where were the two places?

DK: The ninth grade, it was a very small town in MP. There's a place called Tikamgarh. It was kind of cutoff. That place was kind of cutoff. It was not very well connected to other places because there was no railway line going through that city. In India, most of the travel was through railway lines back then. There was no railway line there, very few buses. It was a very small town.

Then, we moved to another place, which is called Betul. Betul was another very small town. It was better connected, but it was a very small town of about, I think, twenty thousand people back then. It was a beautiful place, though, because it was in the middle of mountains and lots of nature. It was kind of cut off by the mountains, but it was a very nice place.

When I was in tenth grade, that's when we moved to Betul. That was the first place where we got, in the school, we had tables and chairs and benches. So, that was a big improvement.

SI: In high school, were there any teachers that were trying to guide you along your way, served as a mentor, that type of thing?

DK: Yes, my math teacher was very good. He was quite helpful and quite interesting. He took an interest in students. Similarly, my chemistry teacher, also, he took a lot of interest in the students. These two teachers were kind of instrumental in helping me learn and getting my interest in STEM subjects.

Also, that town was very small, Betul town. That town was very small, but the teachers there were very good and they actually took an interest in children, I think. They encouraged students to participate in science fairs and things like that, which got me interested in those science fairs.

As a part of the science fair team, I traveled quite a bit within the state, participating in different levels, the district level, county level, state level. So, we got a chance to move around quite a bit to participate in those--not move around, but, actually, travel to different places as a part of the school group.

SI: When it came time for college, what was the process? Was it just assumed that you would go to the closest one or did you choose between different institutions, that sort of thing?

DK: In India, at that time, there were very few jobs. So, it was assumed that when you graduate, either you would go and work for the government or, if you're not working for the government, then, you have to be a professional.

So, what that would mean is that either you need to study to be a doctor or you need to study to be an engineer or you need to study to be an accountant. These were the only two or three professional lines which were available to students. I chose to be an engineer. My goal was to get into an engineering school.

There were very few engineering schools back then, which meant that I had to work hard. There was a competitive exam that they used to hold. To get into the engineering schools, you had to get through those competitive exams. That was the path that was available and I followed that path.

SI: What school did you wind up going to?

DK: I went to a school, engineering school, called MACT. That's how it was. The name was Maulana Azad College of Technology. It was a regional engineering college. It was a very reputed engineering college, in fact, in Central India. That college has been renamed. Now, it has become a national institute of technology and, now, it is called Maulana Azad National Institute of Technology.

SI: What city is that in?

DK: It is in MP.

SI: Okay.

DK: It's in Bhopal. Bhopal, MP.

SI: What year did you enter college?

DK: I entered college in 1982.

SI: What were those early years like, getting adjusted to the engineering curriculum?

DK: I think when I got into the engineering college, first of all, it was a big relief, because I knew that at least I'm in a line where I could get a job, hopefully, at the end of the education. Also, it was the first time I was away from home. It took a little bit of getting used to. There was a lot of freedom, because I was away from home. I was in the college.

It was a very small college, they took only two hundred students each year. Only, like sixty students from my state, and rest were from all over India. They also took 20 students each year from rest of the world. So it was a very diverse population, There I got to make friends from all over India and also from many parts of the world. English was the common language, which was difficult for me, because I had studied in Hindi all along until then. I had to work hard to adjust,



but then, I think everyone was in the same boat and everyone was working hard to adjust and to get to know everyone else. College was five years. So, the total college population was only a thousand kids, right. So, it was a very small college, but a lot of freedom, because it was a fully residential college, which meant that everybody was expected to be in the college itself. So, we got to build close friendships. It was wonderful. So, I started my college in 1982.

In 1983, towards the end of 1983, I was in Bhopal. In Bhopal, there was a big accident in 1983 December. There was a chemical plant; it was a Union Carbide chemical plant. They used to make fertilizers there. There was an accident in that chemical plant and there was a poisonous gas which leaked, methyl isocyanate. That leaked in the middle of the night.

[Editor's Note: On December 3, 1984, a methyl isocyanate leak at the Union Carbide India Limited pesticide plant in Bhopal caused more than half a million injuries, over 2,200 immediate deaths and over sixteen thousand deaths in the weeks and years to come.]

We were away from that. Our college was on the top of a hill away from the city. So, we did not know about it. The next morning, we went to the college just as normal. We did not know that something like that had happened in the city, but, then, as the day went on, we came to know the seriousness of what had happened. Then, the college was closed and we came to know what had happened.

A lot of us, a lot of students, we went to volunteer in nearby hospitals. So, that was an unfortunate incident that had happened, very, very unfortunate, in fact. It was a horrible time to see what was going on, what's happening to people and things like that, yes.

SI: Yes. That was the worst industrial accident in the world, I believe. You actually went to the hospitals and volunteered.

DK: Yes.

SI: Does anything stand out from that?

DK: I mean, a lot of chaos. There was a lot of chaos. People were afraid. Nobody knew what to do, how to do things, just to maintain order, to maintain cleanliness, to maintain a hygienic environment. So, that's what we did. We just tried to keep things as hygienic as possible; so, yes, a very difficult environment, yes.

SI: How long did that affect the city? Do you get a sense that things went back to, more or less, normal within a couple weeks, or was it months or years?

DK: After that, my college was closed for about a month.

SI: Okay.

DK: When that happened, the college closed down. We were there for, like, about three or four days, and then, when college closed down, there for three or four days. After that, I went to my parents' place. For the city to get to normal, I think it took about four to six weeks.

I mean, it never got back to normal, but at least for people to return to their lives, because, even after that, even after the accident happened, like two nights later, again, there was some rumors that there was another explosion and things like that. There were always those rumors, and people didn't know, every time it happened, people would just run out of their home. They didn't know where to run, where to go. Everyone was very unsettled all the time, right. I think, at least for those rumors to stop, I think it took maybe like four to six weeks.

SI: Getting back to school, was there a particular area of engineering that you were looking for, civil or mechanical or so on?

DK: I graduated as a mechanical engineer.

SI: What interested you in mechanical engineering?

DK: I think it was more--well, it felt like, at that time--to see heavy industries and to see the automobile industry, those machines always looked marvelous to me. I mean, they looked like something amazing, out of this world, how these things could happen, how these things could work. So, that's what attracted me towards mechanical engineering, because I saw that it looked like something very marvelous.

SI: Were there any projects that you worked on in college, internships or anything like that?

DK: Yes. I worked on an internship for a company called BHEL, which stood for Bharat Heavy Electricals Limited. I did an internship there, but, before that, actually, I did an internship for another company called Gwalior Rayons. That was a textile company. I did an internship there first.

During my internship, while I was doing the internship in Gwalior Rayons, unfortunately, there was an accident that happened there in that company at that time. They had a boiler which burst, because I think the safety valve did not work. So, that boiler had burst. Fortunately, there was not much damage. I mean, people got injured, but, fortunately, it was not a huge accident. But, I felt that the security standards were very poor.

So, I did my first internship at Gwalior Rayons and then, after that, I did my second internship at Bharat Heavy Electricals Limited. In the second internship, I was exposed to computer design for hydraulic turbines. That's where I got to learn about computers and learn all about the new things which were coming up back then.

SI: Were computers a big part of your undergraduate studies or did you really not have anything to do with them until that internship?

DK: No, my college did not have any computers until we were in the fourth year of my college. That's when my college got its own minicomputers. So, they got computers when I was in my fourth year of the five-year course. That's when I got exposure to computers.

SI: While you were at college, did you get involved in anything like politics or clubs?

DK: Some politics, but not much politics. It was not a very political place, college. So, we saw there were some movements at that time which are going on, to protect the rights of students. So, there were those movements which are going on. So, we got involved in those movements a little bit, but not too much.

So, yes, I remember participating in maybe one or two demonstrations and things like that, not even demonstrations, just walking through with the signs. I mean, I don't know, maybe we would call it a demonstration, yes.

SI: I am also curious, after the terrible accident, were there any demonstrations against the company? Were students involved in anything like that?

DK: No, actually, there were really no demonstrations against that, because, initially, I think what happened is that--it's my understanding and I may be completely off here--the government thought that it was their responsibility. Because it was their mistake that this accident happened, I think that's why they didn't want to create much noise about it. Whatever the reason was, for a very long time, there were really no demonstrations. I think people were also kind of scared, hurt, didn't know what to do, yes.

SI: As you got towards the end of your college years, what did you see for yourself in the future? Was there a particular area you wanted to go into or did you have interviews?

DK: I wanted to get into the automobile industry. So, that was something that I was working towards, I mean, like, I wanted to do. I had read an autobiography by Lee Iacocca. That's something that I really enjoyed, reading his autobiography. So, I wanted to get into the automobile industry, but, as I started interviewing, back then, the computers were also coming up quite a bit.

I got an opportunity to interview for an automobile company. At that time, it was Tata, Tata Engineering and Locomotive Company. It's an automobile company. It was the biggest automobile company in India at that time. I got an opportunity to interview with them. I remember, they were interviewing me, and they had two kinds of roles.

They had roles for automobile engineers and they had roles for computer engineers, for software developers. In the interview, the interviewers asked me about my experience with computers. We started talking, and then, he asked me-- back then, the computers were just coming up. Everybody was concerned whether the computers were going to take away their jobs or how will it affect their job situation and things like that.

So, I remember, the interviewer asked me, "What do you think? Do you think the computers will take away the jobs, or what will happen?" He asked me that, "If you're a politician, what would you say? What would you say about the computers?"

I told him that, "It depends upon which party I belong to, right. If I belong to the governing party, I'll say, 'Computers are good. It will help with the jobs.' If I belong to the opposition party, I'll say that, 'Computers will take away your jobs.' So, it's mostly political and the technology would help everybody eventually."

Eventually, the company offered me a job in computers. I had some hard thinking to do about whether I should move to computers at that time, because I had very little background in computers. All my studies were in mechanical engineering, but, then, after some thought, I decided to move to computers. That's how I got into software development.

SI: What kind of computer work were you doing for this automobile company? Was it logistics, design? What did you do?

DK: It was management reporting. It was basically management reporting, inventory management, sales reports, manufacturing administration, machine maintenance, scheduling, things like that.

SI: Did you enjoy that?

DK: Yes, I enjoyed it very much, in fact.

SI: How long did you work for Tata?

DK: I worked for about a year-and-a-half in a small city in the eastern part of India. That was the city called Jamshedpur.

SI: At that point, according to your survey, you came to New York. How did that come about? There must be a story there.

DK: Yes. When I was working for Tata, Tata had Unisys mainframes. Those were Unisys mainframe computers. So, I had programming experience in Unisys mainframe computers. There was a company back here in the US, they had won a project for the State Insurance Fund of New York. The State Insurance Fund of New York also used the same Unisys mainframe computers.

I think they knew that, in India, I think there were two companies which were using Unisys mainframes. Tata Engineering was one company and the second one was Air India. So, they came to Jamshedpur and they basically interviewed people, right. They interviewed, and then, they selected me to come and join that project in New York.

SI: Was that something you were looking forward to? Had you thought about immigrating, or at least going over for a few years for work? Tell me about your mindset then.

DK: Yes, I had known about the opportunity, because this was not the first time that the companies here in the US--they knew that there are these companies in India who have those kinds of computers and experienced talent working on those computers. It was kind of a known fact that, like, there will be companies coming here and interviewing people and offering job opportunities and things like that.

So, I knew that this was going to come, sooner or later, and the opportunity was going to come. I was looking forward to it, because the US had a tremendous attraction for us. We had heard a lot about the US and the opportunity that America offered, in terms of freedom, in terms of being able to do things, like, learning opportunity, freedom, economic opportunity.

So, those are some of the things that we had heard a lot about during my college years and afterwards. So, I was looking forward to it and I knew that it was going to happen sooner or later.

SI: You said freedom a few times. What could you not do in India that you might do in America?

DK: For example, starting a business or operating your own business. In India, there were just all these restrictions, like all these licenses that you have to get and all these government requirements, especially back then.

I'm talking about back then, because it was not an easy thing. Just to get through that government paperwork and all those things, I mean, it was very difficult for people to even imagine that they could start something on their own and things like that. So, in terms of economic freedom, I felt that was the thing.

We had political freedom in India, so, that was there. That was not the problem, but, about America, there was something, that, here, I mean, there was something, that you could become anything in America. Then, in India, I don't think--I mean, like, it was kind of difficult to imagine that kind of mindset, that you could become anything that you wanted to be.

SI: Tell me a little bit about the actual process of coming to New York. What was that journey like for you?

DK: It started by first going to Bombay for my visa interview. That was the first time I took a plane ride, because the company was paying for it. After getting the visa, I went back to my home to be with my parents for a couple of weeks.

My family was concerned whether I'm doing the right thing, whether I'm taking the right step. I remember that my uncle, who has a lot of influence on me and on the family, right, he also came to the town where my parents were living. He also talked to me. My brother, he took time off from his work, he came. He wanted to make sure that I'm doing everything okay, whether it's all right or not.

Then, when it was time for me to fly from Bombay to New York, my brother, again, came with me all the way to Bombay, which was a long journey from Central India. He wanted to make sure that the people that I'm working with, they were representative of the company which I was coming for.

There was a representative of that company in Bombay. So, he went and met with them, just to make sure that there was no scam and things like that, because they were concerned that this could be a scam or some dangerous situation or whatever.

I took a flight from Bombay to New York. I landed in JFK. The company here, they picked me up from JFK. They drove me, they put me up in a motel in Edison, and they were paying for the first few days of the hotel. They said that they'd pay for one week of hotel. So, they put me up in that hotel. Then, I think two or three days later, I started my job.

SI: Can you tell me a little bit about that job, what it entailed?

DK: The job was, they were developing a claims management system for the State Insurance Fund. The job was to understand the requirement of that claims management system, and then, do the programming. So, that was my job, to meet with people who were running those processes. Most of those processes were manual at that time, to understand those paper-based processes and develop the computer system to automate that.

SI: In your first few days and weeks in the States, does anything stand out as particularly surprising or shocking? Did you have any difficulties in settling in?

DK: Yes, initially, when I came here, I think the company was paying for one week of hotel. So, I had to find a place for myself. I was looking for a shared accommodation. I found that, in Jersey City, there was a shared accommodation available. I went and looked around at a few places, found this shared accommodation in Jersey City.

So, I took that. That was an attic apartment, very small. Somebody had converted their attic into an apartment. There were two people who were living there. So, that was me and there was another guy, and then, we shared that apartment.

That was not a very good area where I was. At that time, there was a lot of crime in that area, in that part of Jersey City at that time, but I didn't know any better. So, I took a place there and that's where I moved.

SI: Why did they initially put you in Edison? The job was in New York, right?

DK: Yes. That's where their company headquarters was.

SI: You worked there for about five years. Were you always working on the same project with the claims or were you moved on to other projects after that?

DK: Yes, I worked on that claims project for, I think, about three or four years. Then, I moved to another project, which is also in the insurance industry. This other project was in Fair Lawn, New Jersey. So, I moved to that other project in Fair Lawn, New Jersey, and I did work there.

SI: All this time, you're going through the immigration process. What was that like for you?

DK: Fortunately, the immigration process was very quick back then. I got my green card in about two years after applying, at that time, which was very fast, fortunately. I mean, I did not apply for my green card for the first couple of years. I applied for my green card after being here for a couple of years, because I was not sure if I was going to stay back here, but, once I applied for it, the process was very quick at that time, fortunately.

SI: You said you were on the fence for a little bit about whether you would go back. What made the difference to keep you here?

DK: I think what made the difference was the opportunity to learn. I felt that I was learning a lot here. The second thing was that I saw an opportunity that, one day, I could have my own company. I could have my own business in the software industry. I could do some work and build a business.

After being here for a few years, I felt that there was an opportunity here. I could start a business and I could run a business and I could do things on my own. I didn't think that that opportunity existed in India at that time.

SI: You also studied at Pace University for a little bit.

DK: Yes.

SI: What did you study there?

DK: I did. I studied information systems. I took an admission at Pace University to do my master's in information systems. Well, I was working at the same time and going to school at the same time.

I studied for two semesters in Pace University for my master's, but, then, I realized that I was not learning anything new while I was doing my master's. I felt that the work in the course was very, very bookish and very theoretical, while what I was working on was a lot more cutting edge.

For my work, I felt that I was already working at a thing, but, when I was going to school, I was learning some things which were, like, three or four years older than what I had been working on. So, then, after a while, I felt that it's not much value addition I was getting. So, after two semesters, I left.

SI: Particularly at this time, but even up to today, computer technology has moved so quickly, you have to constantly learn new things. Was that built into the job? Would they have seminars or would you, mostly on your own, have to keep up with the technology?

DK: Yes, on your own, you have to keep up with the technology on your own. Yes, so, we had to keep it up on our own.

SI: Around this time, you also got married. Is that right?

DK: That's right.

SI: How did you meet your wife?

DK: It was an arranged marriage. My parents, they had made arrangements when it was time. So, when I was here, I wanted to go back to India once a year.

I think I was following the same pattern that my dad had when we were growing up. We used to go back to his place once a year. So, that's something that everyone tried to do, going back once every year. That's what we had been doing. That's what I had been doing, going back to India once every year.

Back then, we had a saying that, "We work for Air India and AT&T," [laughter] because all that we earned used to go in the air ticket, Air India, and with phone calls through AT&T. So, yes, my parents had seen a few girls. They wanted me to meet them.

I met my wife, Arti. She was the first one that I met and I felt connected. I felt that I felt that connection, I felt that we were made for each other. This was, I think, for love at first sight. Then, we decided to get married. From the time we met, we got married within a month.

SI: Did you get married in India?

DK: Yes, yes.

SI: You came back. Around '94, you start your own business. Tell me, what goes into that? How do you plan for that? What motivates you to do that sort of thing?

DK: Back then, the Internet was very new and those were the dialup days. CompuServe was the only internet provider, I think, at that time. I could see that the world is changing and I felt that the Internet had a great potential. I felt that there was something that I could do and I could contribute towards. So, that led me to set up my own company.

SI: You mentioned it was easier than in India. What went into setting it up? Is it just a one-person operation at that point?

DK: Yes. It was just a one-person operation at that time; it was just me. So, I set it up and, actually, I didn't even incorporate. I just started working. Then, afterwards, after a few months of working, that's when I incorporated.



Somebody told me that I should incorporate and things like that. So, I went ahead and incorporated the company. It was basically a one-person operation in the beginning. Then, after, pretty soon, I think there was some friends joined, and then, some more people joined. Then, the company grew from there.

SI: What kind of software were you producing? You mentioned it had to do with the Internet.

DK: We were working on different projects for a number of clients--Hoffmann-La Roche, did some work for, that was a pharmaceutical company; did some work for Scholastic Publications and did some work for J.P. Morgan; did some work for Warner Systems. That was an insurance company--for multiple insurance companies, in fact--so, did some work for many, many different insurance companies who were working on different types of projects, developing different types of software, yes.

SI: What were the biggest challenges that you faced in those early years?

DK: I mean, I can't recollect any specific challenges that I felt, but I don't think I knew how to run a business. I knew how to write programs, I knew how to build software; didn't know how to run a business. So, we tried lots of different things, but I don't think we felt any specific challenges as such.

SI: At what point did you feel like you were running the business well?

DK: Not until now. [laughter]

SI: Okay, fair answer. As the years went on, what kind of software was your client base looking for? Was it logistical type stuff?

DK: They were all different kinds of software. Each client had their own special, custom software that they wanted to build. So, for Scholastic Publishing, they wanted to build software which would assist their telemarketing team to reach out to different school districts, things like that.

J.P. Morgan wanted to build profitability reporting software which would calculate and report profitability for each branch, each ATM location, each region, and things like that. The various insurance companies that we are building for, they wanted to build either a claims management system or a policy management system or things like that. The pharmaceutical companies, for Hoffmann-La Roche, the one that we had been working on, they wanted to build a system for the promotional items that they offered to the doctors and things like that, to track those.

So, they were all very different types of systems, but, basically, we were not specializing in any specific type of system. We're just specializing in the technology. We built whatever the client was looking for.

SI: Did that change at all over the years? Did you go to a different model at some point? Is it still that the clients come to you with a need, and then, you try to fulfill it?

DK: Along the way, I think in terms of the approach, it has definitely changed over a period of time. Now, we try to look for solutions that we can present to the clients. So, I think that's changed over the years.

I think we have grown over the years, like in terms of our thought process, in terms of our understanding. So, now, we are able to provide more solutions, able to think of a problem and suggest solutions, what solutions can solve their problems, instead of having the clients come first with a solution, and then, implement that solution.

I think we learned that, but, while I was growing the company, I also started up another company. Like around 1999, when the dot-com was a big craze, I started a dot-com company. That company was called Greetingtown.com.

The concept was that if you wanted to send a paper greeting to somebody, you could just send it through the Internet at that point. You could send greetings, greeting cards, to your relatives, friends, or you could, if you're a company, the HR department could set up greeting cards and things like that, and gifts and flowers, bouquets for their employees or their customers. So, that was the idea.

So, back in 1999, we started that. I think we were probably, initially, the first one, maybe like first one or two companies who were doing it at that time, through the Internet. We made some good progress, but, when the dot-com burst happened, along with that, we couldn't sustain it. So, we ran out of funds. We realized that we were putting in a lot more funds than the company was generating revenue and we couldn't sustain it. So, we had to close down the shop.

SI: You mentioned on the survey that when you first came here, you had to deal with some racial discrimination. What form did that take?

DK: So, some incidents, like lots of small incidents that happened over time. I was living in an area in Jersey City which was crime-infested. There was a lot of crime in that area. At that time, there was a gang called Dot Busters. They used to target Indians. I think that gang was quite active in Jersey City at that time.

[Editor's Note: Established in Jersey City, the Dotbusters hate group targeted Indian and especially Hindu Americans between 1975 and 1993 in New Jersey and New York.]

In the area where I was living, I went through, that happened to me a couple of times, incidents that happened. So, one time, I was coming back from the laundromat, then, there were some group of young kids, right. They were standing there and they hurled eggs at me. That was traumatic, but I just kept walking.

Then, another time, I was in New York in the night, in the train, subway. Then, like, a bunch of young kids, they came and they were shouting things at me. They were telling me, "Gandhi, go back," things like that. So, that was also a traumatic experience.

So, I felt it was traumatic, it was scary, but I think it was mostly because of the crime area that I was living in, because it was not a safe area. In Jersey City, the place where I was living, I bought my first music system when I came here. It was a nice music system I bought. I was very proud when I did that.

I took it home and, the next day, somebody broke into my apartment. They took everything that I had, along with the music system. I think, probably, they were just watching, that I had bought this music system and I was walking with that music system proudly to my home. [laughter] So, then, they knew it. So, they had broken into my home.

They took everything that I had at that time, like broom cleaned it, pretty much. I had my passport and everything, all my documents, in a suitcase. They took that suitcase with them, which meant that I was without a passport, without any papers, without any documents.

At that time, I think, the Indian Government, the Indian Embassy, they were very slow. So, I went there, reported this to them. They gave me a runaround and it took me a while to get my passport and everything. So, those were some of the incidents that happened, which were scary. Now, when I look back, those are some of the things that register.

SI: Wow. Where did you move after Jersey City?

DK: After Jersey City, I moved to a place called Rahway. Once I realized that there's a lot of crime in that area and those incidents that happened, after that, I decided it was time for me to move, because, at that time, my biggest fear was about when I was living alone in Jersey City.

After a while, the other roommate had moved out. So, I was living alone in that attic apartment. I realized that I did not know anybody. I did not know my neighbors, I did not know anybody there. So, my biggest fear was, at that time--and, also, like, there were a lot of opportunities in computers at that time and people used to just disappear. Like, they would get a job offer and they would just disappear from their job. Nobody would know where they went. They would just disappear the next day.

So, my biggest fear was that if something happened to me, nobody would know. My biggest fear was that, at work, everybody would think that I've got a job, so, I ran away. I had no neighbors, no friends--nobody would know what happened to me.

So, after a while, then, I moved to Rahway, I met some friends. I found some other friends and moved with them. So, from Jersey City, I moved to Rahway. I was in Rahway for about a year or two years, and then, I moved to Edison after that.

SI: By that point, there was probably a large Indian American population in Edison.

DK: That's right. So, that was the reason that I moved to Edison, because I felt that there was a large Indian American population. I felt safer being there, yes.

SI: Were there any groups, cultural or religious groups, that you got involved in?

DK: I used to volunteer at a temple. They were building some temples. They were just coming up. So, I used to volunteer at one of the temples, to do some carpentry work and things like that, some handywork, basically. Then, yes, that's about it.

I tried to become a volunteer firefighter back in Jersey City, but, at that time, I didn't have my green card and things like that. So, they wouldn't let me become a volunteer firefighter, but that is something that it felt cool, when seeing all those firefighters. It felt very cool, yes.

SI: Did you ever pursue that later on?

DK: No, I didn't pursue it afterwards, after that.

SI: This comes up in a lot of the interviews, that there was a spike in anti-South Asian, more generally, hatred and racism after 9/11 [the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks]. Did that affect you at all?

DK: Yes, so, there was an incident that had happened. I was with a friend in a rural Pennsylvania town. We were just sitting there, just talking. This is a good friend of mine. Somebody just came and he just started shouting at me. I mean, it was unsettling. So, it was that he just started shouting, shouting racial slurs and things like that. It was unsettling. That was one incident that happened. So, after that, for a while, I stopped going to rural areas and things like that, but I think that was also a passing phase.

SI: Did the 9/11 period affect your business at all?

DK: Yes, the business definitely took a downturn, just as the broader economy took a downturn. So, that was a tough period, like around the dot-com burst, the 9/11, the economy going through a phase. Just the whole technology sector was changing. The technologies were changing. So, yes, it took a deep hit for my company, yes.

SI: Do you think you faced any discrimination from bankers and others that you might have to go to for funding at any point?

DK: No, not really. In the work environment, I think I never felt any discrimination as such. So, in the work environment, in the corporate environment, in the professional environment, I mean, that is something which is, like, truly amazing, what we have here in America.

So, that is truly, truly amazing, that, in the work environment, I felt supported, always, I mean, like, receiving good advice. I think, lots of times, we have received very, very good advice from a lot of people of all backgrounds, and good support, I felt, very encouraging, people going out of their ways to support you in what you're doing and truly helping them, yes.

SI: Your business has grown. You've had to hire people, obviously, over the years. Have you seen any changes there, particularly in terms of if you had to hire people overseas? How has that affected your business?

DK: I didn't understand the question; say that again.

SI: Just in talking with some other business owners, they've talked about changes in the immigration system affecting the business, having to get visas for people taking much longer, that sort of thing. I was wondering if that affected you and your business.

DK: Not really, because, in my business, we don't have people on the visas. We have a team in India, which does a lot of work for us, which is an offshore team, which does a lot of work offshore in development and back office. They do a lot of work there, but, here in the US, no, we don't have many people on the visa.

So, I did not feel that kind of affecting us, but I have seen people going through a long process, the visa process and things like that. I've seen people going through a difficult time, nephews, nieces who have come here and did their education, working now, things like that. I've seen them going through that, yes.

SI: Have you helped any family members come over?

DK: Yes, help them in terms of giving them advice and things like that, my wife's side of the family, my friends, things like that, giving them advice, referring them to companies which are hiring in that area, things like that.

SI: You've had the business for thirty years. What is the current state of the business and where do you see it going in the future?

DK: Currently, we provide solutions in Oracle, ERP [enterprise resource planning] and EPM [enterprise performance management] managed services. So, that is one of our solutions. The second solution that we've focused on is developing custom AI solutions, using Microsoft AI technologies and open AI technologies. The third one that we do is build custom software for companies. So, these are the three different areas that we have been working on.

In terms of [the] future, our focus is to stay current with the technology, to build high-tech solutions, to build solutions which use the latest technologies, which solve complex problems and give our customers a strategic advantage over their competition. So, that's what we see in the future, the future for my company, for my business. I see a future which is we continue to be specialized. We want to be known by our clients for providing great service and solving their problems.

SI: How did the pandemic impact, first, your business, but, then, also, you personally, your family, that sort of thing?

DK: Yes, so, in the pandemic, my son had a study abroad at that time. He had a study abroad semester in Singapore. He was in Singapore at that time, when the pandemic broke out. So, it was a scary situation, because that's where it started, like in that part of the world.

So, for him, he had to leave his school, the semester, halfway through. He came back here. Then, it was a scary time, because we didn't know where the business is going, we didn't know what's going to happen.

At that time, I mean, I could see the leadership that we have here in our country. That leadership is truly amazing, because I felt that the country, as a country, we can withstand it. As a country, we can handle it.

We didn't know how it will be handled, what will happen, but I saw people, they're trying to do things to help people and to help everybody. So, I felt optimism because of that. I felt that, "Yes, we can live through it. We can overcome it."

Yes, so, my younger son, he was in high school at that time. I saw him struggling through some of the stress of remote learning. Seeing him through that, stress of the environment, I felt that I experienced that, but, above everything else, I felt optimism. I felt that, "We will overcome this," and I felt supported. I felt that, "We can overcome it. We'll come out; we'll be okay."

SI: Are there any other aspects of your life that you'd like to talk about or anything we missed?

DK: I think we've covered pretty much everything.

SI: Okay. Have you been involved, more recently, in any kind of social or cultural activities?

DK: So, I volunteer at the Red Cross and just small things here and there, but nothing major.

SI: What do you do with the Red Cross?

DK: Mainly the blood donation, and try to encourage other people around me to do the same. I tried to organize blood donation drives, support those, and things like that.

SI: Good. You've answered all my questions. I really appreciate that. It's been very interesting learning about your life. If there's anything you want to add later, feel free, but, for now, you've satisfied my curiosity and I really appreciate that.

DK: Thank you, Shaun, I really appreciate your time, thank you very much.

SI: Thank you so much.

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Reviewed by Shaun Illingworth 6/6/2025

Reviewed by Deepak Khare 8/14/2025