

RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH SURESH KUMAR

FOR THE

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INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

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Shaun Illingworth: This begins an oral history interview with Dr. Suresh Kumar on July 29, 2024, with Shaun Illingworth. Thank you very much for sitting down with me today. I really appreciate it. To begin, can you tell me where and when you were born?

Suresh Kumar: My name is Suresh Kumar. Thanks for this opportunity, Shaun. I was born on December 18, 1962, in Kochi, India.

[Editor's Note: Kochi, formerly named Cochin, is a port city within the Indian state of Kerala in southwestern India.]

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

SK: My dad's name was Velayudhan--it's V-E-L-A-Y-U-D-H-A-N--and my mother's name was Baby--B-A-B-Y. Her last name was the same name as my dad's, so, it's Baby Velayudhan. My dad was an officer in the Indian Navy. He joined the British Indian Navy before India got independence, then, continued, retired as a commander. My mom used to be a teacher before, until after she got married to my dad. Then, she retired and became a homemaker.

[Editor's Note: From 1858 to 1947, India was a colony of the United Kingdom. This era was known as the British Raj. In 1947, British India was granted its independence and was partitioned into the countries of India and Pakistan due to religious differences. The Royal Indian Navy can trace its origins back to the 1600s, shortly after the British arrived in India. It was then officially established in the 1800s when the British enacted direct rule over India. In 1950, after Indian independence, it was renamed the Indian Navy.]

SI: From your survey, both of them were from the Kerala area. Oh, no, your mother was from Punjab, right?

SK: Both my father and mother were from Kerala.

SI: Okay.

SK: And Kochi is a city in Kerala.

SI: Okay, yes.

SK: Right. It is my wife who's from Punjab.

SI: Yes, I am sorry. I read the survey the other day and I mixed them up.

SK: Okay.

SI: Has your family always been centered in the Kerala area?

SK: Yes, they have always been. I was one of the first to [move away]. My dad, of course, traveled around the world, being in the Navy, but I was the first to the US.

SI: Did your father ever tell you anything about his career, his time in the service?

SK: Yes, he did, many years ago. He passed away in 1998, but, before that, growing up in India, he used to tell a lot about [the Navy], especially the stories during World War II, because he was fighting with the Allies in North Africa. That included, of course, the British troops who went to North Africa, and then, fought their way up Italy, all the way to Germany. That's General Patton's forces, George Patton's forces.

So, he interacted with some of these sailors and soldiers from the United States. He used to tell me about the story of things that he learned from that experience. Because of that, he had a very positive opinion about Americans in general, American soldiers in particular.

[Editor's Note: During the Second World War (1939-45), over 2.5 million Indian soldiers served on the side of the Allies. General George S. Patton was a US Army general during World War II. He was well-known for his command of II Corps in North Africa, the Seventh Army in Sicily and the Third Army in Europe.]

SI: Do you happen to know what ship he served on in World War II?

SK: No, unfortunately, I don't have the details of that, but, after World War II, he had served on a ship called--it was a British Indian ship--called *Talwar*, I-N-S T-A-L-W-A-R, *Talwar*, which means "Sword," in English. So, after the World War, he served briefly with the British Navy, continued so, but, then, after independence in 1947, he then continued in the Indian Navy for an additional, about, twenty-five years, retiring in the 1980s.

[Editor's Note: The INS *Talwar* (F140) was a *Whitby*-class anti-submarine frigate that was commissioned by the Indian Navy in 1959. It was decommissioned and scrapped in the 1990s.]

SI: Did he ever talk about any of that service? He must have been in during the wars with Pakistan. Were there any stories about that period?

SK: Yes. So, when he was serving, there were three wars with Pakistan, including the 1971 war, which is the one that I am more familiar with, just because I was with him in a naval base when that war was happening. Many of his friends and people known to us were serving on Indian ships that were involved in the war. So, that's a war that I recall more intimately in terms of the Indo-Pakistan conflicts.

[Editor's Note: There have been four major conflicts between India and Pakistan, occurring in 1947, 1965, 1971 and 1999. The Indo-Pakistani War of 1971 grew out of the Bengali nationalist movement in East Pakistan during the Bangladesh Liberation War, wherein Pakistani forces carried out genocide and human rights abuses against the Bengali people. India, which supported the Bengali nationalists, quickly defeated the Pakistani forces and assisted in the establishment of an independent Bangladesh.]

SI: Tell me a little bit about your mother's background and what you know about her early life.

SK: Certainly. So, my mother, she came from quite a progressive family in the State of Kerala. Now, Kerala, in general, is a progressive state. It's got one of the highest rates of education, women's rights are pretty strong and there is complete [religious acceptance]. You have three religions--that's unlike other parts of India, which is dominated by Hindus. Here, you have Christians and Muslims, also, in fairly large numbers.

So, she comes from that kind of a family. That's helped me and my brothers, etc., get a good education and get opportunities, like working for larger companies, getting opportunities to go overseas, etc. She'd gone to what we call as the twelfth grade here, equal in education in India, and then, she became a teacher.

So, she served as a teacher for many years before she got married. So, she came from a family that believed in education. That was a primary focus for all of us, me and my two brothers and one sister. So, all of us are having a master's or equal in degree, or higher degree.

SI: Do you know how your parents met?

SK: What I've heard is that they were set up by some of their friends. So, my dad was serving in a naval base close to where my mother's home was. Over the weekends, he used to come and spend time with his friends who were nearby. Then, his friends kind of set it up for them to meet. That's how.

SI: Once they married, was your mother mostly traveling with your father to the different bases or would she stay at home and he would go off? Do you know anything about that?

SK: Yes. For the most part, we traveled and lived with our dad, so, different bases in India. We lived in Chennai, in Mumbai, in Goa, in Calcutta. These are all the major naval bases in India. So, we actually lived in all those parts for a few [years]. Usually, it's for, like, three, four years, and then, you move on to the next one. By the time my dad was ready to retire, we came back to Kochi. Most of my education happened in Kochi.

SI: How old were you? Oh, go ahead, sorry.

SK: So, most of my schooling, apart from my primary schooling, most of my middle and high school was in Kochi. Then, my college also was in Kochi.

SI: What are your earliest memories? Do you know which base you were attached to? What was it like growing up on the base?

SK: So, it was a very cosmopolitan atmosphere, because you had people from all over India. So, there was not a distinction of north Indian and south Indian. Everybody served on the base. It was a fairly, I would say, disciplined education, because it was under something called the Central School System in India, which was administered by the federal government (or the central government) in India.

It is meant for children of Armed Forces [members]. So, Army, Navy, Air Force, etc., that was the primary [constituency]. So, all students came with a similar background, but they were from all over India. So, you had that feeling of being part of India.

It was quite distinct from the education. Normally, if you are not belonging to the services and you're having a state-based education, that experience is different from this one, because you're interacting mostly with local folks, not so much with people from all over India.

Also, there is an impact on the language. The primary languages were English and Hindi, as opposed to the local languages, where the state education system was based on the local language or the state language, whereas we were taught in Hindi and English, were the primary education languages.

[Editor's Note: Hindi and English are the official national languages of India. Additionally, each Indian state possesses an official language which is widely spoken within the state.]

SI: What languages did you speak in your home?

SK: So, we spoke Hindi and English. Now, Malayalam, which is the language of Kerala, also was spoken, but, in terms of communicating with Mom and my brothers, it was mostly in English or Hindi.

SI: How old were you when your dad retired and you settled in Kochi?

SK: So, my dad retired when I was, I think, in the eleventh grade, eleventh grade, approximately.

SI: Okay.

SK: So, I must have been about, oh, sixteen years old, fifteen.

SI: Okay.

SK: Yes.

SI: How do you think that experience of being what we call here a military brat shaped your personality or what you wanted to do in your life?

SK: So, I think one big advantage you got was, you had that English education, which automatically opens up more opportunities, I think. So, that was definitely [a benefit], because English was almost de facto the primary language. So, that was a big advantage we had.

Then, the quality of education was also considered to be one of the best in India. So, you got the advantage of that education. Then, you had a lot of infrastructure that was available in the defense [system], like sports and other facilities, stadiums, a lot of extracurricular activities, like sailing, etc.

All those things, you got access to, which you could only [really access] if you're part of this set-up like a Central School System. So, those are all things [to note]. I really had a fun time growing up, interacting with friends and enjoying all these activities.

SI: Moving around a lot, did your parents try to keep up any home traditions in your family, anything from where they had grown up?

SK: Yes, so, my mother did. She followed most of the religious customs, festivals, of the State of Kerala, festivals like Onam, etc., that wherever we went, we had some celebration of that. My dad was not overtly religious, but my mom was. So, she was the one who kept the tradition going in terms of informing us of things, etc. Then, when we came back and settled in Kochi, then, you got integrated with the local festivals and community things happening, etc. So, there's more of a regular integration into local things in Kochi.

[Editor's Note: Onam is an annual Hindu harvest festival celebrated in the State of Kerala that occurs in August or September.]

SI: Do any examples come to mind of traditional celebrations or ways of doing things?

SK: Yes, so, a tradition generally would be having or attending the temple festivals, which was quite a big thing, especially in the '80s and '90s. That was a big entertainment that people got involved in. So, they went in there not just to pray, but, also, a lot of interaction, commerce.

There was also a lot of learning that is happening, because there was a lot of plays and dramas that happened on the temple grounds. So, a lot of those stories inspired me in terms of my learning. Even now--I just finished writing my first book--a lot of the stories I take are drawn from what I learned in some of those dramas that happened in the temple setting.

SI: Wow.

SK: Yes.

SI: You said you were in about eleventh grade when you settled in Kochi.

SK: Actually, I settled earlier than that. I think it was in seventh or eighth grade, I settled there.

SI: Okay.

SK: But, my dad retired around eleventh.

SI: Oh, okay. The family settled, and then, he came later.

SK: Yes, correct.

SI: Tell me a little bit about what the schooling was like in Kochi.

SK: So, as I mentioned, it is called the Central School, or, in Hindi, it's called Kendriya Vidyalaya. It means "Central School" and it is within the naval base. You had to kind of, coming in--no, we were living outside the base.

[Editor's Note: The Kendriya Vidyalaya was established in 1975.]

SI: Okay.

SK: With my dad at the time. So, I had to take a private bus. Usually, we had to climb on a bus and travel about twenty, twenty-five minutes in order to get to the naval base. Then, there was a walk to the school, because there are security checks and this and that happening. So, you had to walk in there.

Then, you had a morning prayer, usually at about eight-thirty in the morning. There was a morning prayer, which everybody came to the [prayer]. We had a uniform, a white-and-blue uniform, was required. You had this morning prayer, and then, you had the classes start. We had periods of about, I think, forty- or forty-five-minute periods, of different subjects.

One of them that I looked forward to most was the sports period, equivalent to the physical education that you do here, but that was the time when you really got out into the field. The two most popular sports were cricket and soccer. Those are the two things that we played out in the fields.

So, I think what is unique about it is that some of the bonding was really strong. Some of the friends I had from there, we are still in touch, various Facebook, WhatsApp groups, etc. We are still in touch. All of them, all the people who grew out of there, have done very well in life. They are all over the world--many of them, of course, back in the Army, Navy, etc.--but others who are in the corporate side, business side, etc., are all doing pretty well.

SI: When your father retired, did you have to leave that school system or were you allowed to continue in it?

SK: You're allowed to continue until you are twelve [in twelfth grade].

SI: Okay.

SK: So, once you are done at twelve, then, you have to get into the college system. We are joined in a university and continue with education. So, there's only until the twelfth. After that, everybody's out of that school system and they have to enroll in a college or join the defense, etc., a few options.

SI: What was your favorite classroom subject? What did you gravitate towards the most?

SK: I believe, in terms of [classes], the sciences have also been an interest to me, especially physics and biology. They were the two, and physics was my favorite subject. Maths, not so much, but, so, the sciences is where I continued the interest.

When I went to college, I focused on physics as my main subject. Physics, chemistry, were subjects that I continued into college. So, that interest was sparked by the college school experience, especially because the teachers in the subjects were good and, therefore, that interest was sustained. We were able to take it forward.

SI: Outside of school, did you do anything like work or get involved in any community activities?

SK: So, working was not a tradition in India. I believe it still is not, just because, unlike the United States, you really do not have that many job opportunities for school students. College, maybe there is more, but, in school, that is not an option.

You just didn't have an opportunity to work, but you did have an opportunity to get involved in activities like what I mentioned. It's called the National Cadet Corps, equal to Boy Scouts, kind of roughly similar to Boy Scouts, but it's more focused on the Navy, getting people ready for the Navy, kind of giving them the basic steps of sailing and marching and those kind of things.

SI: Okay.

SK: So, we did that. There was, of course, many sport activities, both in school and outside, that we were involved in. Also, in terms of volunteering, it was more in terms of going into events, getting involved in events at a young age, because there were no restrictions, unlike in the US, for example, where somebody had to take you to an event. There, you actually just walk to an event.

SI: Yes.

SK: Usually, things happened very close by that you could walk to, and you do not have, really, security issues. So, parents were okay with sending kids, letting the kids free on their own. No, basically, on the weekend, we did things completely on our own. That kind of enhanced the learning, because you actually walked across and [were] experiencing a lot of things.

That, I find, for example, [in] the US, kids don't get that opportunity, right, because they need a parent to take them, to drive them to a particular event, etc. All those constraints were not there. I think that really opened my eyes to a lot of experiences that I would not have otherwise gained.

SI: Tell me a little bit about your college years. What was it like going to your college? Did you live at home or did you live on the campus?

SK: So, again, in most of India, the tradition is people go to a college in their town. So, they're mostly day scholars, in the sense they travel by bus and, usually, it's a private bus, that they go

into a college or university and they come back in the evening. It's only in a few higher-end, private colleges that you can stay on campus, etc.

Generally, in my case, my college was completely [day-based]. I used to travel from home. Both my undergrad and my grad, I used to travel from home, attend, and then, come back in the evening. So, that was it, but I feel it gave a good balance between getting involved in things there as well as keeping in touch with what's going on in your local community.

So, I think that balance was important. At least in my case, I feel it mattered, because I was involved in a lot of local activities in my community. For example, I was involved in the student political movement in college, but, also, with the political activities happening in the community where I lived. They were not necessarily integrated. They're different activities altogether, but you could do so only if you lived [there], if you had that kind of multiple location going on.

Just to answer your question, I was completely a day scholar, as was, I think, a majority of my friends. There were a very few who stayed, who came from out of the state. This usually happened only at the master's level, for your graduate, if you're doing a master's, like when I did my MBA. Out of my class of about thirty-five, forty students, I think we had about ten who were out-state. They were the ones who stayed on campus in the dormitory. The others were local, just travel in and complete their education.

SI: Tell me a little bit about these activities you were involved in, this activism, maybe first starting with the school. What were the issues you were fighting for at the school?

SK: So, in school, it was not so much issues as it was what is called here as extracurricular activities, where they divide you into a few clubs. All through the year, you're doing events under the banner of that club, right. So, whether it is sports or things like in a song-dance entertainment and all those things, it's just usually a kind of friendly competition between, I think it's about four different clubs.

Our school is divided into that and you get involved, depending [on] your interest, on what you want to do in there. So, that was one set of activities, but the other one that took a lot of my time was, I was involved in two sports. One is soccer and the other is athletics. So, once I got involved in that, around eleventh, ninth, tenth grade, that took a lot of my time, because you need to get into these coaching camps.

It did take a big chunk of my time, especially for multiple sports. Then, you need to attend that almost through all the year. So, these were the two activities that I think took the majority of my time in school.

Now, in college is where I got involved from a political standpoint.

SI: Okay, yes.

SK: So, that one was kind of a new [aspect], because we did not have politics in school. It was only in college that you could do that. Eventually, I ran for elected office in my final year, so that I could play a more active role.

So, that was an enjoyable experience for me, getting involved, and then, getting into elected office, because that was around the time, also, there was a lot of political upheavals happening in India, in terms of there was the emergency declared in 1975 in India. That resulted in a lot of political upheavals, and resulting, ultimately, in the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. So, all that is happening in the late '70s, early '80s.

[Editor's Note: Indira Gandhi served as Prime Minister of India from 1966 to 1977 and again from 1980 until her assassination by two of her bodyguards on October 31, 1984. The bodyguards, Sikh nationalists, sought retribution for her order of Operation Blue Star, the violent clearing of the Sikh-occupied Golden Temple in Amritsar.]

That was a time of tremendous political upheaval, but, also, the State of Kerala has an interesting tradition that, unlike other states, it was one of the few states that also had a Socialist movement that is pretty strong. So, you also had a very strong Socialist student movement in the State of Kerala.

So, [in] India, there were only two states, Kerala and Bengal, West Bengal, at that time, which had this tradition of a Socialist moment, with students being very vocal and very involved in the whole thing. So, you had this conflict between that left-leaning and the right, which was the Congress, Indian National Congress and other parties, which is more right-leaning. You had constant conflict between these two groups.

[Editor's Note: The Indian National Congress, an Indian political party established in 1885, played a key role in the Indian independence movement under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi. In 2024, it remains a major political party in the country.]

SI: Were you on the more left-leaning side?

SK: No, I was actually more on supporting the Congress.

SI: Okay.

SK: Youth wing of the Congress.

SI: All right.

SK: The Congress is called the Kerala Students Union, KSU, but, again, no, it's not so much ideologically driven as your friends are involved and you get involved in one of those things, one or the other.

SI: What kind of activities would you do, like go to rallies?

SK: Yes, so, there's the organized rallies. We had an election, a true election, where every student could vote. You had different levels of leadership within the college community. So, that was then an activity, which it drew in a lot of students, in addition to, of course, what they normally do. Again, with the studies and sports and other activities, you also had this going on.

SI: Do you have a sense of which side was more popular among the student body at that point?

SK: I think it depended a lot on who ran for office.

SI: Okay.

SK: If you had a popular person running on the left side, he or she got elected and the campus also became more left-leaning, and so is the [opposite] case. So, it is not a consistently "left" or "right." It depended a lot on the charisma and the following of the leadership, one or two senior leaders who [were] on campus.

SI: When did you graduate from college?

SK: So, I passed my undergrad in 1984, and then, I enrolled for my MBA the following year. I finished that in 1987. It was a two-year program.

SI: Where was that?

SK: It was the same city.

SI: Okay.

SK: In, it is called the Kochi University of Science and Technology. It's a higher-education-focused institution. So, it was a little bit further from my home. So, I had to travel about an hour to get to that college. That's where I did my MBA.

[Editor's Note: Kochi University of Science and Technology (CUSAT) was established by the State of Kerala in 1971.]

SI: What were you hoping to do at that point in your life?

SK: Well, initially, my focus was mostly to join the civil services in India. So, in India, you had the elite civil services, called the Indian Administration Services (IAS) or the Indian Police Services (IPS), etc. So, my focus was, during that time, to join one of these elite services.

That was, of course, one of the most highly-competitive exams in India. At that time, the private sector being very weak in India, the government jobs, especially these, the civil services, were the most prestigious jobs in India.

[Editor's Note: The All India Services (AIS), the civil service system of the Indian government, is comprised of three branches: Indian Administrative Services (IAS), Indian Police Services (IPS) and the Indian Forest Service (IFS).]

SI: Once you graduated from your MBA program, did you start looking for jobs? What was your next move after that?

SK: So, I did get some job offers, sort of off of campus interviews and written exams and things of that sort, but I left those jobs in order to come back and focus on the civil service exam, even after I did my MBA. So, I think my second attempt, I was successful in getting through the civil service exam. I had interviews.

I had a challenge, though, because I had had an accident a few years earlier which had injured my eye. So, I had a problem with my what's called (bilateral?) vision. Therefore, the services that I wanted--that is the IPS, the Indian Police Service--I was not able to qualify for that. I was able to get many other civil services.

In the meantime, I did an interview with a foreign bank called the ANZ Grindlays Bank. Grindlays is a British bank. It was later taken on by ANZ, Australian New Zealand Banking Group. So, they gave me an opportunity right in my town as management trainee in marketing. So, that was an area that I liked to do. It was a good salary and other things. So, I decided to take that.

After working with them a couple of years here, they selected me for an international opportunity, sent me to the US. So, that's how I came here in '91. It was the bank that hired me in India, decided to send me on an international assignment to Wall Street, Wall Street office. So, that's how I came here.

[Editor's Note: Grindlays Bank was a British bank with international operations, primarily in India, that can trace its history back to 1828. In 1984, it was acquired by Australia and New Zealand Banking Group and renamed ANZ Grindlays Bank. In 2000, it was acquired by Standard Chartered Bank and the Grindlays name was no longer used.]

SI: Can you describe for me a little your work before you came to the United States? You mentioned, in general, it was marketing, but does anything stand out that would give me an idea of what you did regularly?

SK: Yes, so, it was mostly I was in the retail banking section or segment. It was mostly getting depositors to put money into the bank under various programs, mostly fixed deposits that would yield them higher interest rates. We did this mostly through providing a much higher level of service than the traditional national banks in India were doing.

So, for example, at that time--now, it may not seem so revolutionary--but we used to go out and meet with customers at their homes and their businesses, give them locker facilities, and then, to take paperwork to them. So, we essentially made banking much more friendlier. As a result of that, the branch was able to grow rapidly.

You also had a large number of people from Kerala working in the Middle East, usually in Dubai, Abu Dhabi [capital of the United Arab Emirates], Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and all those places. So, they used to send a lot of money back home. So, that one was one of the first operations for non-resident Indians that we set up.

That exploded the growth of the branch, which was maybe partly the reason why they looked upon me to send me overseas to the United States, because they found that that's the model that could really make the bank grow fast. So, essentially, they wanted me to do a similar operation for non-resident Indians who are in the US.

That was the background. So, it was mostly, I would say, sales, marketing, promotion, public relations, those kinds of things were what my activities were.

SI: Tell me about coming to the United States and what it was like getting settled here.

SK: So, coming to the US actually was more of a surprise. It was more of just getting a call from my general manager one day and asking me to meet him in Mumbai, where he was.

So, when I went in there, he asked me about, "What do you think about an opportunity for you in the United States? We are considering setting up an operation at our New York office." So, he also gave me an option that, "If you are interested in Melbourne, that is also a possibility," but his advice was that New York is where the action is, especially in the banking field, "And that's the place you want to go."

So, in my case, I really didn't have much to think [about]. I was single, ready to look for my next adventure. So, for me, it was an easy call to decide to come to the United States. I was, I think, about twenty-eight years old at the time. So, that's how I came here in October of 1991. Initially, the goal was to come here for a term. Usually, it's a two- or three-year term that you serve, when the bank sends you overseas, and then, come back to India (or any other place).

After I finished that stint (it also happened to be a successful stint), I did get a couple of offers from American investment advisory companies to kind of stay back and leverage the relationships that I had with the community, business owners in the community, to help grow their business. I decided to take up one of those and stay back in the US.

SI: When you were doing that job, was it mostly focused on the city itself or were you working in a larger region?

SK: I was working across the US, actually.

SI: Okay.

SK: Because the two main categories of people who had interest and who we were going after, one is business owners--so, people who are wealthy and doing well in the business and wanted to have a better return than what US banks offer generally. That was one.

The second was professionals, like doctors, lawyers, etc., many of them of Indian origin, I would say, a bulk of them were of Indian origin, but doing well in the US. So, that was the second group of people that we focused on.

So, this was across all the major cities, so, across the country--Chicago, Los Angeles, SFO [San Francisco-Oakland], Boston, Atlanta. So, we went in there, organized seminars, usually in a hotel setting, and met with groups of thirty, forty, fifty people, lots of sponsored community events. So, that happened, of course, again, all over the country.

So, a lot of travelling was involved. Our offices, we just had the one at Wall Street, but, because of the fact that [the] bank is already a well-established entity in India--the Grindlays Bank was a British bank--so, that made it easy to do business.

SI: What about for you personally? Was it difficult to adjust to life in the United States? Did you face any challenges or was it mostly smooth sailing?

SK: Initially, there was, I think primarily because of weather. I mean, I came in here and Kerala, the weather is usually warm throughout the year. It's a tropical place. So, coming here and getting into a winter--and that particular first winter was a bad one in '91--so, that one was what I found to be difficult, especially when you had to come in early morning and take two trains coming from the city.

I was living in Queens at that time. Fortunately, I had known some people that I then could stay with. We had a shared apartment in Queens. So, that made it a little bit easier, but the weather was difficult. Also, the pace of things was much faster than in a city like Kochi where I had worked until then. So, these were the two things, but, in terms of the acceptance, professionalism, writing, I had no issues with those things. So, it worked pretty well.

SI: What did you find the most surprising about the United States when you got here?

SK: Well, I think, generally, growing up in India, and Kerala particularly, America was generally painted as the "anti-India country," especially because America did not stand [with India], was, at that time, a bigger supporter of Pakistan than India. India was supported more by the Soviet Union, right. So, that was the background we came from.

So, you came with a little bit of a different perception about America, but, over time, I've found (like most people do after living here) that Americans are good people. It was a country of rule of law, values, democracy, etc., and many things compatible in India, much more than other countries like [the] Soviet Union or other places.

What I also found was that you had this large, thriving Indian community, which is continuing to grow, do well--early stages, but, even in the '90s, they were getting well-established. So, you could kind of fall back on that community also, for friendship and preserving your culture, cultural aspects.

Things like restaurants, food, etc., all that was available. Especially in [the] New York-New Jersey area, there's no shortage of that. So, I think, mostly, the surprises were on the positive side in terms of discovering that India had more in common with the US than with other countries.

SI: You left the ANZ Bank and went with a United States-based company. Tell me a little bit more about that era of your career. You were also, later on, a professor at NJIT [New Jersey Institute of Technology]. You were involved in founding different businesses. How long were you in the banking industry before you moved on to these other things?

SK: So, after I left ANZ, which was in late '93, in '94, around the time I left, I did get a few opportunities. I decided to take on one of them, mainly because of the fact that they also agreed to do my visa, my green card, etc., all those processes, they agreed.

My job was mostly as an investment advisor. So, it was kind of a little bit [of an] extension of what I was already doing. I could leverage the relationships that I'd built in the bank to get this career off well. So, the career started off fairly well. I did not have much challenges in order to get established as an investment advisor.

[Editor's Note: "Green card" refers to a Permanent Resident Card, which allows an immigrant to permanently live and work in the United States.]

So, to answer your question (regarding "How was the early stage?"), I think there was some learning involved for me, getting some licenses to sell securities and this and that. Also, getting into the stock market side of things also required some work.

There was some learning involved in that period of time to make this shift over, but, largely, I depended on the marketing skills that I'd learned the previous few assignments in order to grow my business, establish myself as a leader in that group. In parallel, I also got my green card done. It took about five, six, seven years, but that happened in parallel.

That is the period in which I also got interest in entrepreneurship, because a lot of my customers were entrepreneurs. Interacting with them, talking with them and seeing their success, it kind of rubbed off on me. I decided that, "As soon as I have my green card, I would like to pursue something on the entrepreneurship side," and that's what I did.

That was in '99. So, I had to wait until I got my green card to do it, although I would've liked to have done it sooner, but I had to wait, make sure all that process went well before I started my venture, my first venture.

SI: What was the first venture?

SK: So, the first venture was a company called NexAge Technologies, N-E-X-A-G-E. So, that company, it was a technology-based company. So, we built software that helped particular industries, like the garment industry, the dweller [real estate?] industry, fast-food industry.

So, those days were the early days of software. Most businesses were kind of manually handling their operations, using spreadsheets and other things. So, we kind of automated the processes by taking a lot of those businesses online. So, we helped them kind of get into the Internet age across multiple industries.

So, that started off in '99. Over a period of five, six years, it kind of steadily grew. We hit a roadblock in 9/11 [the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks], when that happened. We had a blip in there, but, after that, we recovered and did fairly well.

SI: Was that just because of the general economic downturn after 9/11 or were there other reasons?

SK: Well, it was because the industries we served were mostly in New York.

SI: Okay, yes.

SK: The garment industry was there. We had built the software for the fast-food franchise of Subway at that time. All our customers were in the New York area. So, when they closed down--the downtown did not operate for months--therefore, that was a big impact. That's where I kind of learned more about entrepreneurship during those difficult days than the days before that. So, I think, overall, it ended up to be a good experience for me.

SI: You have done five ventures now.

SK: Yes.

SI: Tell me about the others. Did you start the second one right after the first one?

SK: No, it was mostly done in parallel. When this company stabilized, in about 2005-'06--it took about five, six years for it to turn around and become profitable--then, I was able to expand the team. That gave me the flexibility of doing other things.

So, then, I did some joint ventures with other friends, some of them my own employees. So, there were a few other businesses that kind of came off. In-between 2005 and 2013, for five, six years' time, there were multiple businesses. Some of them, I launched and started myself and brought in others. In some cases, it was a friend who had a business, and then, I became a co-founder or investor in. So, all that happened during that 2005-2013 timeframe.

SI: They were all in the tech industry.

SK: Mostly, yes.

SI: Okay.

SK: They were mostly in tech, tech-driven, at least.

SI: What did you find were the biggest challenges you faced as an entrepreneur in business?

SK: So, I think that the first challenge was just with respect to, for an immigrant, to start a business, you really can do it only after you've got your green card, right. So, even though you may have a great idea and you may be perfectly qualified to have a start-up, unless you have this paperwork--and that normally does take ten years for most people, and sometimes more. In many cases, it may take fifteen, twenty, thirty years.

So, you're really missing out--America is missing out--on that and that was a big challenge. Just to get your paperwork to be able to start a venture was one.

The second thing, in my case, I got a little lucky, because I was serving financial clients, so [that] I did have a few people to go back to, but, generally, getting the starting capital. Keep in mind, [in] those days, you really needed to have capital to start a business. These days, it's a little bit easier, because you had to buy equipment in those days, you had to buy an office in those days. So, therefore, you really needed to get at least a quarter million, half-million dollars [in] capital to start the business, just to get it off the ground.

If you do not have access to people--that's one of the reasons why immigrant communities do well, is they come together and raise that capital through friends and family, right. So, they're able to overcome that hurdle that way, but there were a few instances, during a downturn, where I found it difficult when I had to go back and raise more money. That became difficult, because banks would only give you a loan to the extent of your assets in terms of receivables or other physical property that you own, etc.

So, the lending policies were quite restrictive, especially in banks, traditional banks. So, I found that process of trying to get capital or getting capital, a company re-capitalized, especially during a downturn, that was not easy. That was a really challenging aspect of getting [a venture going].

The third aspect was just the whole complexity of the immigration system. We're just getting, for example, in technology, there are some workers who were just not available in the US. They have to be sourced from overseas, but the whole immigration system [works against you].

Initially, actually, in, I would say, the first ten years of my businesses, it was reasonable. You had certain rejections, but it was within control. So, if you have nine or ten visas, you may get about seven, eight approved. After the 2007-'08 downturn, and especially the last five years--not last four or five, the previous four or five, with the Trump Administration--it became very difficult.

It became quite complicated to be able to navigate, because, if a company applied for ten visas, they hardly got one of them, because of the restrictions that came in, the processes being so long and expensive. So, that is a big hurdle that has, especially in the technology field, discouraged entrepreneurship in a big way.

[Editor's Note: Donald J. Trump served as President of the United States from 2017 to 2021.]

So, those are [the negatives], but, on the positive side, I think, in the US, what I found is that, if you can make your case to a business and if you can do it smartly and persistently, you have an equal chance of being considered. So, I think businesses are open-minded to give business to a start-up or a company that is still small.

So, I think that is a positive thing in the US, that the spirit of entrepreneurship is there even in a large company and I think that helps. That is one of the reasons why, maybe, the US is number one in innovation and entrepreneurship, is because of that aspect, that everybody has a chance, even a small company, a new idea. Then, if you're able to hustle and get it across to people, you have a chance of it succeeding.

SI: It is interesting you brought up the changes in immigration policy from one administration to another. Those often can be accompanied by backlashes in the larger society against immigrants or groups of immigrants. Did that ever become an issue for you, either personally or with the folks that you worked with?

SK: Well, since we were in states that are heavily immigrant-dependent, like New York, New Jersey, it was not a big challenge in the larger society, right. So, the backlash was on a political level--maybe, that was there--but I did not find it a great challenge from outside the business. It was just this getting visas done.

In many cases, even if somebody got their visa, their getting a green card took so long that they [would] prefer to go to Canada. So, I've had dozens of employees who, after waiting for ten, fifteen years, decided, "Okay, no, we're going to go to Canada." They had a much faster way of getting citizenship and jobs, etc.

So, those things are big blows to a business. When you have a senior employee who's worked with you for ten years and is managing important projects and clients, suddenly decides that, no, their future is better somewhere else, things like that became big challenges, consistently.

It increasingly became a challenge, I would say, in the 2015 to 2020 area. That was increasingly one reason that I saw a lot of business owners were considering exiting or selling the business, etc., because of these constant challenges that they had to face.

SI: You have also have taught at the New Jersey Institute of Technology. Is that correct?

SK: I'm currently teaching at NJIT, yes.

SI: When did that begin?

SK: It began in 2018. So, after I sold my company (one of my companies) in mid-2005-'06 or so, I enrolled in a doctorate program, which I completed in 2011. Now, that was mostly for me to pursue my interests in entrepreneurship that I did it, but that opened up some opportunities.

I was called in to actually do a program at Rutgers, at the SBDC at Rutgers [The New Jersey Small Business Development Center at Rutgers-Newark]. I created the Lean Startup Program.

This was sometime, I think, in 2013, '12 or '13 or so. They were looking for somebody, a practitioner, who would come and do something. So, I did that course for them. I created and I kind of taught the course for the first three, four times myself.

That got me interested in teaching. Then, I was approached by NJIT, by an outside recruiter for NJIT, too, that they wanted somebody with an outside, hands-on experience, entrepreneur, to come in and create their programs. So, I met with the Dean and he had the vision in terms of bringing in outside, experienced people and giving them free reign to run things. So, I've found that it's a good, challenging opportunity. I took that on and I've been doing that for the last about five years.

SI: What was your doctoral study on?

SK: So, it was on the reason behind the success of high-growth Indian American entrepreneurs.

SI: Okay.

SK: So, I looked at factors that impact--factors related to cognition and behavior--that leads to the success. So, I took a bunch of successful Indian American entrepreneurs and I did a case study approach where I, in-depth, looked into their whole journey in life and what made them successful. So, that was a case [where there] were about thirty-five entrepreneurs that I presented for my Ph.D.

SI: Have you continued with any of the businesses you started?

SK: Yes, I'm an advisor on some of them.

SI: Okay.

SK: I sit on the board of some of those, advise, etc. Some, I've exited completely. So, one of them ended up being a public company. We sold the company, too. That company went public, so, I helped them in the whole process of the IPO [initial public offering] etc. Now, I am completely out of that.

SI: You have also been involved in political activities here in the United States. Can you give me an overview of what you have been able to accomplish in that area?

SK: Yes, absolutely. So, one area that really fascinated me was leadership as a subjective interest. I was fascinated by people like Colin Powell, for example, General Colin Powell, Senator John McCain, etc. So, there were a lot of Republican leaders who really inspired me initially. When I came to the country (and for the first ten years, etc.), I enrolled as a Republican.

Then, following the shift in the Republican strategy, I was quite disillusioned by the way it was going, becoming anti-immigrant and all that, etc. So, when Obama became President, especially during his second run--the first run with John McCain, I supported John McCain--but second

time around, I thought, "No, Barack is the better option." Since then, I've become a Democrat. So, I have been a Democrat for the last ten, fifteen years.

[Editor's Note: Colin Powell (1937-2021) served as an US Army general, diplomat and government advisor as National Security Advisor, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and Secretary of State during several Republican administrations. John McCain (1936-2018), a former US Navy officer who represented Arizona in the US Senate from 1987 to 2018, was the Republican candidate for President in the Election of 2008, but lost to Barack Obama. Barack Obama served as President of the United States from 2009 to 2017.]

I also am now currently an elected official at the county level. So, I am what is called a county committee person for the Democratic Party for Middlesex County. That's an internal party elected role. In that capacity, I help determine who are the best candidates to run for offices in local [elections], and even for the Congress. So, we kind of vote on candidates who would best represent the country.

Since then, especially the last cycle, when Biden was running, I formed a group called the Indian Americans for Biden-Harris. This was in '19, 2019, late 2019, when I formed that group. That has since now grown to a twenty-five thousand-[member] group on Facebook. Now, it has, again, caused some interest with Kamala Harris running.

So, I've been quite active in trying to convince members of the community who are not yet decided as to [who to support]. Now, the community is mostly Democratic, I would say about seventy, eighty percent Democratic, but there is still a fairly large chunk that is Republican or undecided. So, we're trying to work on them, to give them information that will help them make that decision. So, on the political front, that's what my involvement has been.

[Editor's Note: Kamala Harris has served as Vice President of the United States since 2021. Harris became the Democratic forerunner for the Presidential nomination shortly before the interview took place.]

SI: It is very recent, obviously, but the switch in the Democratic ticket, with Kamala Harris on top, how has that been received among your group, among the communities you deal with?

SK: Very positively, because one thing that Kamala Harris has always made clear was that influence her grandfather, her mother's father, had on her, on the values and the political activities that she's involved in. So, that India connection is very strong and meaningful for her, as is her other connections, too.

So, therefore, the community, in a big way, especially the women, but I would say even among the men, they are very excited to see her on the top of the ticket. We think she's a good candidate regardless, [laughter], but it helps that there is an Indian angle to her. Our roots are something that we are proud of as a community.

SI: Yes. In your role on the county level, do you feel like the party has been good about representing immigrant groups or Indian American groups?

SK: Yes, the Democratic Party has been, as is reflected by, as you may be aware, there are five Congressman who are of Indian American origin. This is all Congressmen, no Senators yet, but five people in the Congress. There's about fifty elected officials, between mayors and county level officials, etc., all over the country, there's about fifty Indian Americans who are in the system. Many of them, over the next five years, will be running for Congress and Senate.

So, I think now, with Kamala being on top of the ticket, you're going to have this new surge. In fact, I was on a few calls over the last [few days], over the weekend, which had thousands of people, first-time people who are excited about this, and a lot of young people, a lot of young South Asians who are getting involved in a campaign for the first time in their life.

So, that energy, so far, frankly, was not there in the Democratic Party side. I don't think it was there in any party side. So, you see that surge of interest, which gives you a hope that there would be more political involvement of the youth and they would actually translate to votes this time. Barack Obama had partly got that youth vote, but I think, now, it is going to be at a higher level this election cycle.

[Editor's Note: There are five Indian-American members in the 118th Congress: Representatives Ro Khanna (CA-17), Ami Bera, M.D. (CA-06), Pramila Jayapal (WA-07), Raja Krishnamoorthi (IL-08) and Shri Thanedar (MI-13).]

SI: What about other activities outside of politics, anything in your community?

SK: Yes, so, I do attend community events because I am also the President of a group called the Indus Entrepreneur. It's called T-I-E; the website is T-I-E.O-R-G. That is an entrepreneurship [group]. It's likely one of the largest entrepreneurship support organizations in the world. I am the President of the New Jersey Chapter.

So, we have about five hundred members, mostly entrepreneurs, people who have done well. So, we support entrepreneurship in a big way, not only in the community, but, also, outside entrepreneurship, could be any[one]. We focus on the diversity of entrepreneurs, so, between black/brown entrepreneurs, we try to help them. So, that is a significantly time-consuming activity that I currently am involved in.

[Editor's Note: The Indus Entrepreneurs (TiE), established in 1992, is an international non-profit professional organization that promotes entrepreneurship.]

In addition, I'm also an aspiring author. So, I just finished writing my first novel, which has been acquired by one of India's largest publishing companies.

SI: Wow.

SK: And it's going to be out by the end of the year, October-November timeframe. So, it's a fiction set in India. So, it's an India-based fiction story, based on a lot of the things that I've

heard from my father, my grandfather, etc. It's trying to capture the sense of things that I know from growing up in India.

So, that, and I'm also working on a few non-fiction books dealing with things related to entrepreneurship, leadership, self-development, etc.--so, a few business book ideas that I'm also looking at.

SI: Do you want to say anything about your family, catch me up on that aspect of your life?

SK: Yes. So, I met my wife here in the United States, although she's of Indian origin. She's from north India. So, that was also, again, through friends. I met her in New York and we got married in 2005. We have one child, a boy, thirteen years old. So, he's just going into high school. We live in Monroe Township, which is in Central Jersey, towards the Princeton area.

So, we do that--we keep a close connection with India. So, we travel to India usually every year, spend a few weeks there. We have family come from India to be with us, etc. So, we have that close bond with India going, which we also have been encouraging our son to maintain.

SI: Yes, I was going to ask, are there aspects of your own culture that you grow up with that you want to impart to your son? What is the balance between Americanization and retaining aspects of your home culture?

SK: I think it's a difficult balance to achieve, because kids growing up here tend to embrace American values, etc., American culture. In terms of values, we're trying to maintain (or at least inculcate) some of the values that we feel that, in most cases, are not in conflict with the American values itself, right--just being a good person, values like democracy, the rule of law, things of that nature. So, we try to educate him on those.

Now, on the cultural side is more difficult--like, for example, if you were to ask my son to join us, let's say, for a religious festival or the board of a temple, so, he may push back on that. [laughter] So, that is a challenge.

SI: Yes.

SK: And we understand that. So, we don't enforce it that much on him, because some of these things, it is better for him to relax rather than being lectured [on] what to do. In terms of values, we are trying to focus on certain things that are important, which will also help him grow in the US.

SI: One last question, how did the pandemic affect you, your career, your community and your family?

[Editor's Note: The COVID-19 pandemic began in December 2019, when the first cases were detected in China. On January 20, 2020, the first laboratory-confirmed case of COVID-19 was reported in the United States. In March 2020, social distancing measures, lockdowns and quarantine orders were issued by the federal government and state governments.]

SK: All right, now, by the time the pandemic came around, I had mostly exited my businesses.

SI: Okay.

SK: I exited between 2015 to 2020. I was out. I was just serving on the board of some of these companies. There were a few businesses that I'd invested in, mostly as an investor and a board member, that I was involved in then, helping them navigate that crisis. So, I was involved to that extent, not as an operator, but more as an advisor and mentor. Some of these are student-owned companies, after graduation, that I invested in. I've been helping them navigate that.

So, I'm, I would say, quite familiar with the challenges that the pandemic posed for business owners. I've been leveraging that by serving--I served for two years on the Monroe Township Economic Development [Committee], where we advised the Mayor on ways how to build a resilient local community and help local restaurants and business owners, etc. So, I've been kind of leveraging my learning and trying to apply it to help the community with that.

In terms of the family side, we did face some challenges with education, because a lot of it turned online almost suddenly. So, that did result in some challenges, just because of the habits of going into school. It suddenly became, most of it, online for an extended period of time, almost a year, year-and-a-half.

So, that did pose some challenges. Just getting kids out of the habit of devices, that has been a challenge. So, we're still, I would say, battling with it in some ways. Hopefully, it will work well, but I think COVID made that, the device dependency, stronger for kids. That impact, I think, is going to be lasting for a while, because many kids have been impacted for an extended period of time.

SI: Is there anything that we did not touch on that you want to talk about or anything that you want to say that we did not bring up?

SK: Oh, let's see, I think in terms of a project like yours, in terms of oral history, I think we talked a lot about my experience. I think it'd be also good to, if we can, incorporate the intersection of an immigrant's life with the communities that they have lived in, sort of what impact that they have done.

For example, let's say, this is my fourth town that I am living in, fourth house in thirty years. Each of that was a different stage of my life, right. So, in some, I was not involved with anything with the community at all. I was just focused on working, and earning a living was my only focus, but, as you grow, then, you're giving back a little bit more, you're spending some more time. You become a leader in those communities, but there is some learning that you had from your earlier stints that is going to help you here.

So, I think that interaction is important, as to, "What did you learn from your workplace, your communities that you lived in?" You may be giving it a lot more, let's say, when you're in your

fifties and sixties to one community where you end up settling, but the community gets the benefit of all your combined experiences over the last few decades, right.

So, I think I found that to be interesting, as to how that flows through and how can local cities and towns get the full benefit of the life experiences of somebody. Now, I don't think there is a deliberate effort to get that. It is mostly out of somebody's own goodwill that they're giving their time back, but I think, if I were mayor, I would look at who are my citizens, especially the new folks who are coming [in], and look at what has been their trajectory of their past experiences and how can that contribute to the growth of my community.

I'd try to kind of get the best out of them, to be able to make it meaningful both for them and for the community, too. So, I think that would be [beneficial], and the other aspect is, "How will future generations access this information?" For example, this conversation that we are having.

SI: Yes.

SK: I know you always said it is going to be available to researchers and students, etc., but that's a very limited group of people, right, maybe a few hundred at the most. How can that be available to every immigrant child?--or may not be only immigrants, but I'm saying that my experience would be most relevant to an immigrant. "How can that be?" which means that, basically, it cannot be a research report. It's got to be in a much more digestible format.

SI: Yes.

SK: That would perhaps be something that can be shared with a larger number of people. They may get some value out of that. This is just a few observations I had as I think about the kind of project that you're doing.

SI: Thank you, those are good thoughts. We do try to work with local communities, yes, particularly in New Jersey. We have now the requirement, in public schools, to teach Asian American-Pacific Islander history. We have been trying to work with schools to get the interviews out, get people to use them, but it is difficult. Like you said, it is geared more towards researchers, but those are good ideas. Thank you so much, I appreciate all your time today.

[Editor's Note: In 2022, New Jersey passed legislation that requires the teaching of the contributions, history and heritage of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPI) in social studies classrooms.]

SK: All right, sounds good.

SI: All right.

SK: Thanks, Shaun.

SI: Thank you very much, have a great day.

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