


South Asian Voices

ORAL HISTORIES OF SOUTH ASIAN IMMIGRANTS IN CHAPEL HILL AND CARRBORO, NORTH CAROLINA





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ORAL HISTORIES OF SOUTH ASIAN IMMIGRANTS
IN CHAPEL HILL AND CARRBORO, NORTH CAROLINA

Compiled and edited by Asian Voices



CHAPEL HILL
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Project conceived, designed, and funding obtained by Andrew Jilani.

Interviews conducted in Punjabi, Hindi, Urdu and Sariaki were translated and edited by Osmond Solomon and Andrew Jilani.

Serigraph image in Introduction: "...De las identidades y las interferencias" copyright 1992 Jesus Romeo Galdamez. Used by permission of the artist.

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South Asian Voices is an oral history project documenting the immigration stories of South Asians in Chapel Hill and Carrboro, North Carolina. The project was conceived by Andrew Jilani and funded in November 1998 by the North Carolina Humanities Council. Between April and July 1999, Asian Voices' team members conducted fifteen interviews, fourteen of which are documented in this booklet. Due to technical difficulties we regret that Shantanu Phukan's interview could not be included in this selection.

The fourteen stories in this book are narratives distilled from the in-depth interviews conducted with each participant. Half of the interviews were in English, three were in Hindi, three in Punjabi, and one interview was in four languages—English, Hindi, Urdu and Saraiki. During transcription, interviews con-



ducted in native South Asian languages were translated into English. Due to privacy concerns and at the request of a few of the interviewees, some of the names in the stories have been changed. Copies of the tapes and transcriptions are archived in the Southern Oral History Collection at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Asian Voices members Rajika Bhandari, Aravinda de Silva, Andrew Jilani, Deepak Shenoy, Rashmi Varma, and Amy Weil interviewed the fifteen participants. Interviews conducted in

Punjabi, Hindi, Urdu, and Saraiki were translated by Andrew Jilani and Osmond Solomon. At a later date, they were transcribed into English by Osmond Solomon. The interviewers, as well as Asian Voices members Vinnie Melomo and Rani Gill, edited the interviews and composed the stories in this book. The layout and design of the book was done by Rani Gill with assistance from other members of the group.

We experienced many changes through the course of this project. Our number increased by one with the birth of Amy and Aravinda's son Priyan in September 1999. Our number also decreased when Rajika moved to California and Andrew left Chapel Hill to work for an international relief agency in the summer of 1999. Deepak then took over as the director of the project.

There are many people we must give thanks to for their contributions to this project; first and foremost, to the people who were willing to share their lives with us. Without their stories there

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We are grateful for this opportunity to learn more about the community around us. Our ears have been opened by these remarkable stories which we might not have otherwise heard. We hope that you, too, will enjoy reading, discussing, and learning from these stories.

Introduction

The last time I was returning from India back to my job in Chapel Hill, the immigration officer at the Raleigh-Durham International airport stared at my passport for a long time. He was focusing alternately on the blue document in my hand whose letters stated “Passport of India” and contained my H1-B visa, and my face, made browner than before by the searing Delhi heat. Under his gaze, I blurted out nervously in my Indian English accent that I taught English literature at the University. Sullenly he muttered, “Why on earth would they get someone from India to teach English literature here?” At first I was angry at his ignorance and what seemed to me to be an underlying racism. Later, however, I sensed the confusion my presence must have caused him. I was born in a part of the world



Serigraph “...De las identidades y las interferencias” by Jesus Romeo Galdamez, 1992

that had been colonized by the British, and that was now a major developing country of the global South. He was a state functionary performing his duty of policing boundaries in the American South, a region with a complicated history of race relations. Now we were both at the crossroads of what is increasingly referred to as the “trans-national South”. Our encounter represented only some aspects of the transformations taking place in Chapel Hill and the Research Triangle Park (RTP) area as a result of new inflows of people, labor, technologies, cultures and knowledge in the larger region of the U.S. South.

South Asian Voices, a collective oral history project, is an attempt to bring together the stories of some of the relatively new immigrants to the Chapel Hill area from one of the most populous regions of the world known as South Asia, consisting of Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. The region is also characterized by vast differences in languages, religions, cultures, politics and economic development, though its members share a common history of colonization and uneven economic development. The project documents the stories of these immigrants, whose everyday experiences not just convey the emotional aspects of migration, but mark the ways in which vast historical and geographical shifts are reflected in the

seemingly ordinary lives of people. Immigration of South Asians to North Carolina began in the 1970s, but the more significant wave of South Asians began coming to the area since the high-tech boom of the 1990s. The 1990 census of this area enumerates 10,540 South Asians living in the Triangle, the fourth largest group after Whites, African Americans and Latinos. The 2000 census figures, when analyzed more fully, might well reveal further the rapid growth of this community. As the population of South Asians in the U.S. grows, reaching more than one million, the booming high-tech economy of the Research Triangle Park has been a significant draw for the mostly upwardly-mobile and highly-educated South Asian immigrants. The University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill, along with other area universities, attracts many students of South Asian origin. Research institutes and trans-national companies in the area such as IBM, Nortel and Glaxo have been magnets for technologically well-trained South Asian professionals. Along with these professionals have come small businesses such as South Asian grocery stores and restaurants to serve the growing community, bringing more working class South Asians who work in these establishments. Of course, the economic aspects of immigration do not tell the whole story. Family reunification, educa-

tional ambitions, economic responsibilities towards families in South Asia, political persecution and civil wars in the home countries, and most of all, hopes for a better life are reasons that remain outside the scope of the forces of globalization that are fuelling the U.S. economy.

The public and media representation of South Asians in the area has often focused on the “model minority” image: hard-working, technologically-savvy South Asian computer programmers working for trans-national corporations in RTP who nevertheless maintain their own culture, emphasize discipline and education to their children, and blend in comfortably with American multicultural ideals. Largely absent from conversations on race as both actors and subjects, South Asians in America have tended to make use of class privilege in order to counter racial marginalization. Now, as North Carolina, and the Chapel Hill area, witness an increasing influx of both high-tech labor, a group in which South Asians have a dominant presence, as well as construction workers and migrant farmworkers, many of whom are Latinos, we are poised to witness an increasing complication in our notions of race and community. “Black and White” will no longer be the primary axis along which “difference” will be understood, even in the American South.

Existing in what is still a “white” campus town and its surrounding areas, one of the salient questions we had before us as we embarked on this oral history project was that of community. Were South Asian immigrants constituted as an enclave community, forever rooted elsewhere, or were they finding and creating community here? There is no doubt that South Asian American community activities have focused on religion and culture. North Carolina now has four Hindu temples, two Sikh gurudwaras, and four South Asian Muslim mosques. Nation, religion and language have been focal points of community building here, as evidenced in organizations such as the India Heritage Society, the Pakistani-American Association, Bangladeshi Society, the Hindu Students Council, etcetera. South Asians have also been involved in the politics of the homeland. Events such as the Tamil separatists’ war in Sri Lanka, the 1984 massacre of Sikhs in India, the demolition of the Babri mosque by Hindu fundamentalists in December 1992, the India-Pakistan Kargil war of June 1999, and the looming nuclear race between India and Pakistan have had a significant impact on the relations among South Asians in this area and have shown once again the fractures and fissures that mark the cartography of South Asia. But recently new groups

have begun to be formed as well that aim to go beyond linguistic, national and religious differences. Among them are a young professionals' association based in Chapel Hill, and a women's social group. While the ostensible nature of these groups is social and cultural, there are also groups of a somewhat more political intent: Association for India's Development, a group concerned with economic and political development in India, the Progressive South Asia Forum, a group of academics and community members concerned with promoting a secular and democratic culture within South Asia and in its diaspora, and Kiran, a shelter for South Asian women who are victims of domestic violence, are three recent examples.

Most of the interviews presented here, however, reveal that by no means is there a given religious community. In fact, as one interviewee, Aravinda de Silva says, his identity is forged from "pieces from different communities." We interviewed Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims and Christians from South Asia, and each group member had a very different relationship to religion. While some sought community at the area temples and mosques, others said religion was a purely private affair for them. The Christians we interviewed also seemed to suggest that their relationship with religious community was deeply compli-

cated by the fact of their minority ethnic status within mainstream churches.

Many voices in our collection speak of the impossibility of finding community here and the difficulties in forging friendships with Americans. "Life here is just work" and no one has time for the slow elaboration of bonds. Thus, memory becomes yet another instrument of constructing community for these South Asians. Whether it is the watching of Hindi films on video here, or the remembered fragrances of street foods in Pakistan, or the lush landscapes of Sri Lanka accessible through old photographs, or the devotional music tapes played on car stereos, or simply reminiscing about old friendships, community often seems like it has been left behind. Yet, the challenge is to make place here, to create hope here. Often memory can play tricks, too, as it constructs an idyllic life of communal harmony back home, erasing some of the historical pains, or not fully acknowledging the negative effects of economic and cultural globalization in South Asia.

The voices we have collected here tell us that no stereotype and no media image even begins to approximate the lived realities and diversities of South Asians in the Chapel Hill area. If most people seek a community of South Asians, the process of

finding it remains an undeniably painful and difficult one. The pain emerges not just through the differences among South Asians, but also in the process of settling down in a new and alien culture. This is a struggle no matter how “global” cultures have become. The voices also reveal important class issues. Poorer, more working-class South Asians sometimes appear to be differently invested in cultural boundaries, often forging intimate relations with other minority groups. Yet, their struggle is against language barriers with the dominant English-speaking society, and their life is focused on making ends meet and saving enough to make the trip back home. In spite of new technologies of the internet, many still spoke of communication with loved ones back home through letters and phone-calls. These voices also point to new challenges that South Asians in the area will be facing in the coming years. As the second generation comes of age, their relationship to South Asian culture and religion will be increasingly complicated; as new waves of less affluent South Asians move into the area in the service sectors, popular images will of necessity have to deal with the group’s diversity; and as a larger though poorer Latino population also moves in, racial and cultural boundaries will be in flux.

We set out to listen to a community, and realized that the voices

need to speak for themselves; the histories and conditions are too diverse and multiply positioned to provide any easy summation. The oral histories of these immigrants tell us how they negotiate issues of identity and how they have adopted diverse strategies to live and to succeed here. These voices belong to different religious affiliations, class locations, regional sites, languages, genders. Unlike the media celebration of this model minority, there are voices of both joy and sorrow, community and isolation. Like a patchwork quilt of disparate elements (to borrow a rich metaphor from African American tradition) that nevertheless forms a pattern and tells a story, there are recurrent themes that these voices articulate: differences between “here” and “there”, the thrill of newness that immigrants experience, the dogged focus on work, the frustrations and isolation of life in America, the insistent inner call for a return and the fear that it might signify failure, the hope engendered by opportunities, and above all, the contradictions of living in several cultures at once.

*****Since I first wrote this piece, much has happened to alter the political and cultural landscape of South Asians in this region of North Carolina. The horror of the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City and on the Pentagon,

and the subsequent U.S. bombings in Afghanistan have led to a “backlash” against “Middle-Eastern looking” people, which has included South Asians of all religions. In fact, among the first victims of the post-September 11 fallout in the U.S. was Balbir Singh Sodhi, a Sikh gas station owner in Mesa, Arizona. Since then, there have been numerous incidents, including in North Carolina, of harrassment of South Asians. Model-minority South Asians now find themselves victims of “racial profiling”.

These new racial configurations have been accompanied by the economic recession and downturn both nationally and in North Carolina. As more and more high-tech companies lay off high-tech workers, many South Asian families in the region are experiencing economic distress and cultural displacement. These rapidly shifting political, cultural and economic alignments make the task of finding home and community an ever more challenging task for South Asians in the region.

Rashmi Varma
Chapel Hill, March 2002

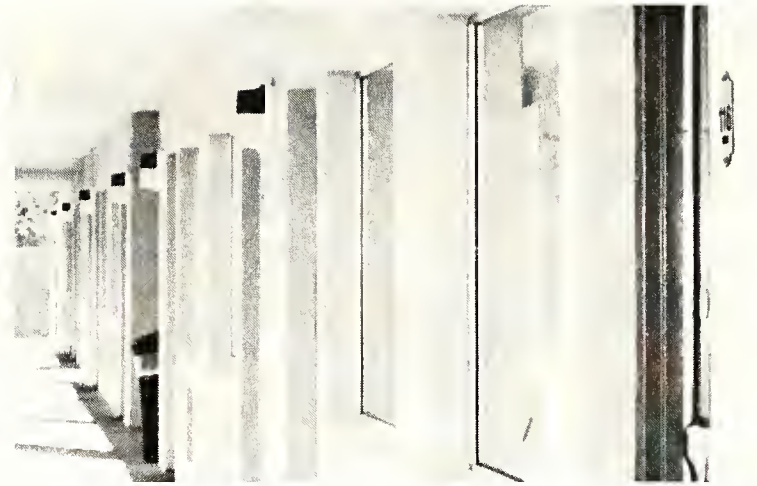
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This is a free country

Chandrika Dalal immigrated from Bardoli, Surat district in Gujarat, India, to the United States twenty years ago. In Bardoli, she was a teacher, making four hundred and forty rupees [about ten dollars] a month. She taught Gujarati, Hindi, Social Studies, and Science. Friends suggested that she join her brother in the United States so that she would have a chance to make more money and “make a better life” for herself and her daughters. At the time she was leaving India, one daughter was two years old and the other two months old. She brought the eldest daughter with her, and in subsequent years tried to bring the other daughter. However, she was told that the job she and her husband were working—managing a hotel in Pittsboro—did not provide enough income to support bringing her younger daughter.



Motel by the roadside

PHOTOGRAPH BY RANI GILL

“Every time we tried for her, they say you can’t afford another child, because we have a small business, only ten unit we have, and two rooms, we use it. One as a office, and one, my daughter stay in that room. So, I decided to take this job in UNC [University of North Carolina] as a housekeeper, because my husband work here, but—every time he—buffer on the floor, he has a back pain. So, three times, he work here, and then back pain, doctor told so, sometimes stay home, come back to work,

Indian Americans, and particularly Patels from the state of Gujarat, have been very successful in the motel/hotel industry in the United States. By pooling the money and labor of extended families, they initially specialized in acquiring and operating smaller roadside motels, but now may own many larger luxury hotels. Families operating motels in more rural areas may find themselves isolated from a larger Indian-American community. The film "Mississippi Masala" by Mira Nair depicts the experiences of a family of Indian descent operating a hotel in a small town in the American South.

it is same problem. So, three times he try, and then he quit. After, he don't work in, he visit India. So, I applied for this housekeeper job, and I take it. When I interview, they ask me, your husband quit three times and come back three time, and go back, what about you? I say I have to raise daughter, so, I keep my job. And, they hire me, in nineteen eighty-six, July twenty eight."

Life was not easy for Chandrika, either in India or America. She described her husband as an alcoholic. She had tried to leave him behind in India, "But, my father-in-law blackmail me—if you don't take my son, you can [not] go! So, I don't have a choice, so, I bring him here, with me." Over the years, her husband became more violent, and eventually had even threatened to kill her. She described how she had felt when he was alive: "I'm scared for myself, and for my daughter[s]. It's not safe." He passed away two years prior to her interview. She said she was glad he had died, because she had lived in fear of her own life when he was alive.

Her husband was not the only one to threaten her life. When she and her husband first began operating their hotel in Pittsboro, they got threatening phone calls. "We [will] kill you! That's it. Same words! Keep calling you, keep calling you! If you pick up the phone, and sometimes hung up, and sometimes they say 'we kill you'. ...So, that's why I think, it's prejudice. We don't do anybody anything wrong. We just come here, take business,

YOU COME HERE, YOU MAKE MONEY, YOU WORK HARD, YOU WORK TWO JOBS, OR WHATEVER YOU DO,
YOU JUST MAKE YOUR MONEY. IT IS A FREE COUNTRY, ALL OVER THE WORLD PEOPLE HEAR.

make money, to make our daughter better life. We don't do anything wrong."

She thinks the people who have threatened her do so out of jealousy. "They are jealous about you, they are working [at] minimum wage, and you have a property. You have a small business, and then you are happy." This was a very different life than people in India and around the world imagine. They are told that, "This is a free country. You come here, you make money, you work hard, you work two job[s], or whatever you do, you just make your money. It is a free country, all over the world people hear."

Chandrika also contrasts the idea that it is a "free" country with everyday experiences of discrimination. "You know, they don't like your skin, they don't like your dress. If you speak in your language, they don't like. They make jokes on you...if you talk with two Indian people. If they heard, they make jokes and laugh on you. You know, they don't respect our culture, or our language, you know. They say it is a free country, but I don't think they treat as a good person to us."

Even her daughter, who she brought to the U.S. for a better life, has been treated badly because she is seen as different. "Her supervisor treat her bad. Sometimes she come and cries, she

hate this job. She work for money, but still, their treatment different than other employee because she is not black or white, she is Indian."

A value important to Chandrika is a kind of "morality"—which she describes as the feeling that there are consequences for one's actions. She believes in the Hindu tradition that one's actions determine how one is reborn in the next life. Chandrika worries about the morality of her daughters—that they might have sex before marriage, and that once they are married, that they might divorce.

She feels a gap between herself and her daughters. She feels they have different values: "My both daughter[s], my older daughter, here, when she [was] two years old. So this culture, and that American friends, changed the values. They don't respect Indian culture or Indian values, because they are thinking American way, because they [are] raise here."

It was after a long time in America—fourteen years—that Chandrika could visit home again. She was struck by how different her social life is here from India. "[In America] people stay far away, and you know, people are so busy in their job or business. And children, there is no extra time like India, after dinner

you sit outside and talk with [family] members, you know. After fourteen years when I visit India, I sit outside, and sit with my neighbors, and talk a fourteen years talk [laughter]—what happened in the street, what happened in this all neighbors' family, bad things, good things, everything." In America, between her two jobs of housekeeping and managing the hotel, she barely has time to sleep. She has a much more lonely existence.

Chandrika tries to visit the Hindu Bhavan temple in Raleigh and a Hare Krishna temple in Hillsborough. But she is so busy

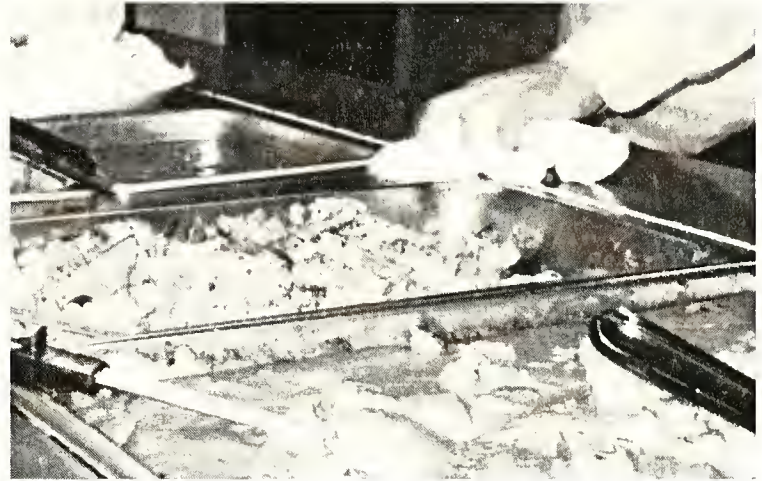
that she often just recites mantras to herself: "I speak my God's name in my mouth, all the time." She mentions one mantra that is very dear to her, given to her by her family priest in India: "Shri Krishna sarna mumma." It means, "I belong to God." She explains that "if you completely devote your[self] to Krishna, then Krishna help you out."

At the end of the interview, the interviewer asked if she'd like to recite the mantra again into the tape recorder. Chandrika said, "Shri Krishna sarna mumma," and began to weep.

I came here with this hope

This interview with Prashu Ram Bastola, originally in Hindi, was translated and transcribed into English by Asian Voices. Mr. Bastola, a teacher in Nepal for over twenty two years, works as a cook at a local Indian restaurant in Chapel Hill. He had been in this country for just over a year at the time of this interview; his wife, young son, and daughter remain in Nepal. Mr. Bastola tells how he decided to come to America.

"Now Nepal is the poorest country in the world. And the condition of the economy is very low... Right now, this, the teaching job, was not sufficient for even my small family. The salary I got from the Nepal government was not enough to sustain even a small family. For the education, food, etc., of the children. The lifestyle there became very low, so, I thought it was necessary to go abroad and work hard for two or four years will help improve the economic condition of my family... So I came here with this hope."



Working at an Indian restaurant

PHOTOGRAPH BY RANI GILL

Navigating the systems here, quite literally, is difficult for Mr. Bastola. The lack of a car prevents him from connecting with others in the Nepali community. Working more than eight hours per day, seven days a week does not allow him enough time to learn or use the bus system. This severely limits his ability to see American culture, get information or make connections that would enable him to improve his living and working conditions, and to ultimately improve the living conditions of his family in Nepal. Living in America is not as easy as he imagined.

Though Nepal has elements of the cultures of the surrounding countries, it has its own distinct identity. The official language is Nepali, with Tibeta-Burman, Munda, and other languages and dialects spoken as well. Nepal's literacy rate for those over fifteen years of age is about 59% for males, and 24% for females. In terms of religion, 90% of the country is Hindu, with significant minority populations of Buddhists and Muslims. The life expectancy in Nepal is 60.1 years for men and 59.6 years for women. These numbers are considerably lower than those in the United States, where men can expect to live 74.6 years on average, and women 80.4 years. Nepal's form of government is a constitutional monarchy, featuring a king as the executive and an elected legislature.

He used to imagine that "in comparison with Nepal, America would be very big, everything here would be much better, you know, the people would be very good, the systems here would be very good also. That's what I felt. So far, I have not been able to take a closer look at the political system here, so I cannot comment on that, but the social, social system here, is very different from our country, so every thing looks new to me.... But I will say that I found things to be quite different from what I had imagined it would be."

"I used to think it's very big, everything is available here, you know, easily available... For local people here, those that are citizens here, it's very good. But foreigners, those that come here for two or four years, have a lot of problems. That, if one doesn't have a car, he can't do anything. To acquire a car, to move around, the whole system is new, and it's difficult to adapt to...and...considering the exchange rate of the dollar and other currencies, it gets very expensive here. Like, in Nepal, one American dollar is equivalent to about sixty-eight rupees... And if you bring rupees from there, doesn't amount to much when you exchange it here [laughter]. That is why, spending is also a problem here."

When asked to compare his teaching profession in Nepal with his work as a cook in Chapel Hill, Mr. Bastola says:

"I feel that an exact classification of this [the difference] is very difficult... Where [the] teaching line is concerned, it's very good

LIKE, IF A FLY ENTERS A BEEHIVE, IT GETS SWEET HONEY TO EAT, BUT IT ENDS UP
GETTING STUCK INSIDE AND DIES THERE. AMERICA IS LIKE THAT.

[as a profession], because your relationships are with the educated and it's a job of reading and writing... And the restaurant work has to do with utensils [laughter]. And with food, so it's different. Very different...it's a necessity. A necessity. Because when you are in America, you do a lot of things out of necessity."

"I get up at nine, and get ready to go to the restaurant. Then, from ten to three in the afternoon, or three-fifteen, or sometimes even till three-thirty, I stay at the restaurant. Then I come home and rest for an hour. At four thirty, I have to get ready for the restaurant again...I work till ten, sometimes I have to stay on till ten-thirty, or even eleven. So, when I get home, it's time to sleep, and that leaves no time to go anywhere else."

By coming to this country to work many immigrants have the potential to earn much more money than they ever could have in their home country because of the value given to the American dollar and the strength of the American economy. As Mr. Bastola says, "You work hard, but, because this currency is more powerful than other currencies. So, I think, that's why a lot of people have come here. There are also some that come for education, or maybe a few for tourism, to look around. The economic condition here is good, for those who come from other countries."

But not all people who come to this country want to live out the rest of their lives here. Many come with the idea of going back one day. If he were offering advice to another man coming to this country, Mr. Bastola says he would tell him, "come if he wants to just look around. America is not at all like the image we have of it in Nepal... Just to look around for some time, or wants to work for a couple or four years and go back, then it's not bad. But I would not recommend immigrating here for good. To explain it better to my friend, I will give this example. Like, if a fly enters a beehive, it gets sweet honey to eat, but it ends up getting stuck inside and dies there. America is like that [laughter] because those that come here abroad, gradually get stuck here." Yet in his next statement, he is sure this will not happen to him: "No, sir. I don't have plans to settle here. Now, I have come here, but for at the most, four or five years, to save some money, look around the country, and then go back. That's my plan."

Mr. Bastola, like many South Asian immigrants, views family relations in his home country as being very different from life here in America. In Nepal, "it's very different from here, the difference is, whatever the father earns, or the mother earns, is for their children. They save for the children. Over here, the lifestyle

is quite isolated in my opinion. Like the children, wife, in Nepal from the youngest child to the oldest member of the family, all live in one family. First, the elders take care and raise the children, and then when the elders grow older, the children look after them. It happens this way there. It's different here—doesn't happen like that."

He misses his family quite a lot even though he can call or write to them. He is afraid, though, that if he starts to "miss them too much, then I may think of going back [laughter]." Mr. Bastola and his wife, who is also a teacher in Nepal, had what he calls a "love marriage", where they chose each other as marriage partners.

His wife sends him necklaces of prayer beads from Nepal to wear. One is from Birkram Baba "who is worshipped by the Tharu caste in the Tarai belt", part of the plains region of Nepal where Mr. Bastola is from. Another is from the mountainous regions of Nepal where Manakamana, the god who grants your desires, is worshipped. The third one he brought from the temple where the god Pasupati, who is also known as Lord Shiva, is worshipped. Many temples are devoted to the worship of Pasupati, particularly in the city of Kathmandu. The name Kathmandu, says Mr. Bastola, comes from the Nepali words "kashta" meaning

wood, and "mandak" meaning temple. So "kath" and "mandu" means the place of wooden temples.

"Actually," says Mr. Bastola, "I am not a very strong believer in religion. Now, in the modern world...I believe in modernization also. Now, like, worshipping stones, I am not a very strong believer in that. It's just that since my wife sent them, I wore them, and cherish them. She would be heartbroken if she knows I did not wear them."

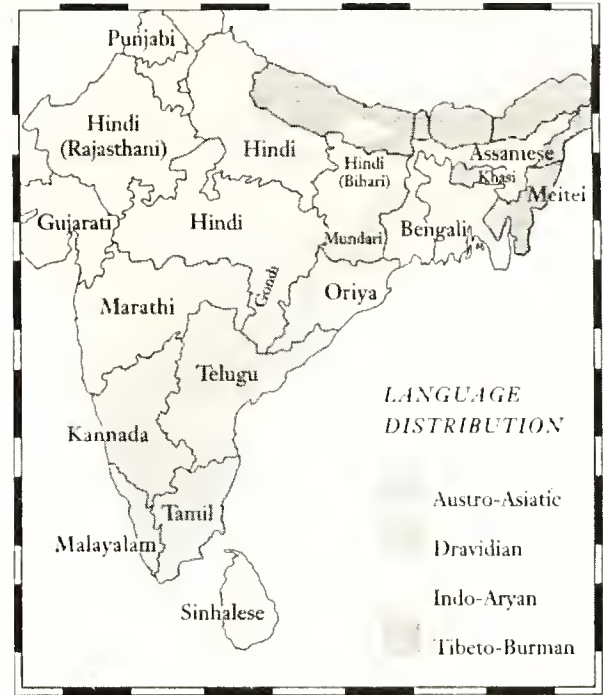
When he calls his wife in Nepal, she asks him about his life in America. He shares with her his difficulties in understanding the system here, difficulties with work, and the times when he is most happy. But overall, he does not find life in America difficult. He ends his interview by saying, "it takes a lot of time to know the system, to learn the ways. One has to conduct a research, like you are doing on this project, to find out what there is over here. For that you need a lot of time, a lot of money also. On the surface, looked at generally, all seems to be well, and good. But when you analyze all the factors, you find out whether it's good or not. You can't just make a comparison and draw a conclusion... So far, living here, I have not faced any major difficulty. Most difficulties are work-related, not much else."

America, the sweet jail

Arjan Dev Singh's interview was conducted in Punjabi, and translated into English by a member of Asian Voices. Arjan Dev Singh hails from a farming family in the village of Jalandhar, which is in the state of Punjab in India. At the time of this interview he had been in the U.S. for about a year, and he was working as a cook at a restaurant in Chapel Hill. He speaks little, or no English.

Growing up in Jalandhar, Arjan Dev Singh was a part of a large extended family that consisted of his immediate family and his father's four brothers and their families. The extended family worked together and cultivated potatoes on about two hundred acres of land. Regarding his extended family, Mr. Singh said,

"Whenever they needed assistance, we would go there and help them out, and if we needed help, they would come to help. All of it, I mean, all expenses were shared, and all income was shared



Language map of India

Some of the earliest South Asian immigrants to North America were from the Punjab, a geographical area that spans eastern Pakistan and northwestern India. Between the late 1800s and 1920, about 6,000 Punjabis (mostly men) arrived on the west coast of the U.S. and Canada, in what was pejoratively referred to as a "tide of turbans" (referring to the head-cloth worn by Punjabis belonging to the Sikh faith). They came to work on the farms of California and in the timber industry of the northwest. Many married Mexican women, and in response to the racial onslaught against them, formed the revolutionary Ghadar Party in 1913. After the passage of the discriminatory 1924 National Origins Act, South Asian immigration came to a virtual end, and new low-wage workers from Mexico and the Caribbean replaced Punjabi workers under the bracero program. Immigration from South Asia resumed only in the mid-60s, and the 1970s saw another resurgence of immigration from the Punjab as families displaced by the Green Revolution in India headed westward, and others came to join family members already in the U.S.

also." He is very proud of the quality of the potatoes they farmed. "If you look at the potatoes, they look like eggs. Farmers from Bihar, UP, Gujarat get potato seeds from our area."

Mr. Singh spent two years in college but did not finish because "the family business is a better option, so we did not emphasize much on studies. Family business is so much better." However, as the family grew bigger it became more difficult to sustain the potato business: "there's a limit you can stretch things to, a piece of thread will go just so far." An additional hardship was imposed by some members leaving the village. So about two years ago, the family began to give up potato farming. "We gradually began relinquishing the lands we worked on contract. Because our, about two to three members from each of the families had moved to foreign countries."

Before coming to the U.S., he got married to a cousin of his aunt's husband. His marriage was unusual because it was not arranged by his family. He saw his bride-to-be at his aunt's house during frequent visits there. "I took the first step. I asked my aunt's daughter, I had her deliver letters to my wife. Well, gradually, we fell in love. But we, we talked face to face on very rare occasions. Most of our communication was through letters. And we had never touched each other." His aunt's husband did not agree to their partnership. "He said that your dad is a brother-in-law to me, how do you expect me to be your brother-in-law?

ONLY, BECAUSE OF THE DOLLARS, ONE GETS STUCK HERE. IT'S A 'SWEET JAIL'... IT IS REALLY A SWEET JAIL,
WE CAN'T GO BACK, AND WE CAN'T LEAVE IT. THE DOLLARS DON'T LET YOU LEAVE THIS PLACE.

Because she is his first cousin." However, the family gradually brought his uncle around and he agreed to their marriage.

After the potato business dissolved, Arjan Dev Singh decided to come to the U.S. He did not know much about America except what he had heard about skyscrapers, the World Trade Center, the Statue of Liberty, and trains that run underground. His brother, who had immigrated to Germany and started a pizza business there, encouraged him to try to get a visa to America. To get a visa to come to the U.S., he had to first travel to Paris and Bahrain. He traveled to these other places "just to get the visas, and show to the American consulate that I have other visas." The embassy is more likely to give a visa to a frequent traveler who has traveled outside India and then returned. Mr. Singh had to hire an agent who charged him about five hundred and fifty thousand rupees [about \$11,500] to help with getting the required visas. He said that the agents "know the loopholes, how to get the visas, what documents to present, so one gets it."

When he left India a year ago, he left behind his wife and their five-week-old son. He first arrived in New York and looked for work there. About his first few months in America, he said, "I liked America, and I thought it was beautiful." Mr. Singh was enthusias-

tic about the prospect of starting life here and later bringing his family over. "It takes some time, but one can make a life here. Over there [India], no matter how much you do, we have worked at a pretty high level, but still, we were not able to save much over there. You can barely meet your basic necessities there. And, here if we work one day, we can earn enough to last us a week. If you have your family here, you can have a good life here."

Mr. Singh's first job was at a deli in New York where he worked for four months. He found the work exhausting. "So, my workday was fourteen hours. That was a very long time... I don't know English very well, so language a problem there." He contacted a person from his village who was the owner of a restaurant here in Chapel Hill. He came to Chapel Hill to work as a cook in the restaurant. "I didn't know much about this work, and he taught me. And now, I'm an expert." Having no documents or credit history, it was impossible for him to find and settle into an apartment on his own. The owners of the restaurant had rented an apartment to be sublet to the employees from India who worked in this restaurant. Mr. Singh and a few other men share the rent of their apartment in Chapel Hill. At Mr. Singh's suggestion they also all contributed to the purchase of a television. "I had to convince all

the guys. Having a TV, we will be able to understand some of the news. Although I can't understand, but someone from among us who can understand can tell us what's going on."

Life in Chapel Hill for Mr. Singh and his colleagues involves working very long hours in the restaurant. He works ten to twelve hour days and each week he gets half a day off. His salary is \$375 a week and he does not get any vacation or sick time. Any time he takes off is deducted from his salary. Mr. Singh does not complain about his long work week and poor benefits. "You know, I'm here to earn money, so I have to concentrate on my work... What would I do with more time off? If I sit here alone, it makes me sad. At work, we joke around with one another, listen to music, and the time passes quickly. But over here, in the morning, I sometimes have to do my laundry. I do that every other week... Sometimes I go to a store nearby, and just walk around. It's very difficult to pass time for a full day." In Chapel Hill, he does not have any friends or even acquaintances other than the Indian coworkers in the restaurant.

Although he did not complain about his poor work conditions, he is envious of most Americans who live a good life after working only forty hours a week. "Now, you see that they don't work more than forty hours a week... And then, they have their week-end on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. They enjoy life also. That's good, and one should do that. You should not spend your life in

work only. You should work also, and save some money for the future also, and should have some fun also. That's what life is all about. Have some enjoyment, and work also." When asked how he would spend his time if he had time off from work, he said, "Me, I would head for the beach... There are many things that look beautiful to the eye, and I'll enjoy them." If he had the money and time he said that he would "travel to learn more about America."

Mr. Singh has conflicting thoughts when comparing life in the U.S. and India. He said that "in comparison with the American life, life is much better [in Jalandhar]...there is a lot of love among the people there. It's a fact that one always like one's birth-place...we gather in the evenings, talk about all things, and share jokes, etc. also. Only, because of the dollars, one gets stuck here. It's a "sweet jail"... It is really a sweet jail, we can't go back, and we can't leave it. The dollars don't let you leave this place." However, he went on to say that, "if I have the opportunity, I would prefer to bring my family here [U.S.]. There's a lot of inflation there. There are much less difficulties here. And if I get a chance, I'd like to bring all my family here." In fact, Mr. Singh feels that the most difficult aspect of living here is being separated from his wife and child who was only five weeks old when he left India. "When I got here, I began to realize that we're far apart. I began to think that we will not be able to meet [in the near future]. So, I control my

feelings." He said, "You have to place a stone on your heart, what else can one do?"

He likes the polite, friendly nature of Americans. "I like this about the people here. When passing by, not only while walking, but even when someone is driving by in a car, the 'hi' or 'hello', or just wave of the hand... They treat you like a human being." Mr. Singh also felt that other aspects of American culture are different from his own. For example, "most people say that [Americans] don't wear too many clothes. ...Like, they say, girls from here. Very few clothes, they go around in shorts. In comparison, our people wear a lot of clothes." Mr. Singh also said that it is possible to live "according to our ways and standards" in America.

Mr. Singh has been to the gurudwara in Durham two or three times. He wishes that he could go more often but he cannot afford to take the time off from work. He said, "My wages will get deducted. And it's understandable, if anyone takes times off, his wages will be deducted, because the one whose business it is, has

to look out for his interest... When I'm a little more stable, then I'll definitely go." He also likes Punjabi and Hindi music and sings a lot. "I play the tapes to pass time...and I sing along." And the time does pass. He also wishes that he could get a Punjabi newspaper in Chapel Hill, "even if it's weekly. At least we can read our news."

Mr. Singh does not plan to work in the restaurant indefinitely. His immediate goal is to get his green card so that he would be able to visit India, bring his family over, and also start his own restaurant business in the U.S. He feels that America will only benefit by granting permanent residency to illegal and temporary workers. "For one thing, people were working without papers, so they must be dodging taxation also... And the other is that all those people are also happy. They can now go to their country and visit their loved ones. I hope it happens here also. I would be very happy if today Clinton says whoever wants can be issued papers." He said, "I have heard from many people that Clinton may do something."

Slowly I am moving away

Dr. Sivashanmugam (Siva) is a post-doctoral fellow in the Cell Biology Department at UNC-Chapel Hill. He lives in Carborro with his wife, Latha, and their three year old son, Arvind.

Siva grew up in Sankagiri, a small, close-knit, farming village in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu. The village had about ten houses and everyone in the village was related and lived as one family. "Because almost we are in the same family, so we always very close and we can always talk, we used to go to the other family house and we used to, sometimes we used to sleep over there. We get all kind of assistance if we need something." Siva's family owned a small farm and they raised buffaloes, cows, goats, and chickens in their backyard. His father worked for the railway, and his mother took care of Siva and his younger sister, the house and the garden.



Busy street scene—Madras

PHOTOGRAPH BY ARAVINDA DE SILVA

Siva's journey from home began at an early age, as each stage of his education took him further away. His elementary school was half a kilometer, and the secondary school two miles away from his house. His college was about fifteen to twenty miles from home. Initially, he commuted from home, but later he moved into the college hostel. After finishing his B.Sc. in 1986, he did graduate work in Zoology and Endocrinology in Trichy and Madras in the state of Tamil Nadu. However, the

employment prospects for science graduates were poor and Siva decided to go to Delhi in 1991 to join a Ph.D. program at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences.

Going to big cities like Madras and Delhi was a big change for Siva and was met with some resistance from his family. He recounted that, "Initially they—my families and all—they don't want me to go outside... They don't know much about the city life and I may get lost somewhere." Meanwhile, Siva's sister had gotten married and left home to live with her husband's family. His parents were now living alone and it was expected that he live with them. "Their interest is they want me to live with them, because I'm the only son... Most of the people in our culture they will take care of elders in the same family." Siva was also anxious about the cultural changes, "Delhi is almost foreign place because they speak different language, so almost their culture and most of the things are different compared to Tamil Nadu because India has a large number of languages and cultures."

Meanwhile, his parents wanted him to get married and his horoscope was being matched with that of a prospective bride. But her parents in Tamil Nadu did not want to send their daughter

to Delhi and they were also concerned that Siva did not have a steady job. "I'm ready to get marry that girl and my parents also said okay. But the problem is they said you're still studying, you don't have a decent job." Finally, the girl's family agreed to a marriage because their horoscopes matched and they were both from the same community. Latha and Siva got engaged in July 1995 and Siva started to look for a job to support his family. However, because of the poor job prospects, he decided to go to the U.S. for further experience. "When I was doing my Ph.D., I informed to all my family and relatives I want to go for U.S. for some years to get some experience. So that may help, to get good job in India." Two days after they got married, Siva had a job offer from UNC-Chapel Hill.

When Siva left for the U.S. in August 1996, his wife was six months pregnant. Siva said that his wife stayed behind because, "we have people, parents and relatives. They're not...afraid of pregnancy, you know. If something happens...I cannot take care all the things." They were also worried about her medical care in the U.S. because of "the insurance problem" and the short hospital stays: "this country is difficult. Only 48 hours stay in hospital."

IT IS POSSIBLE TO MAINTAIN OUR CULTURE AND INTEGRATION, LEARNING SOME NEW THINGS FROM THEIR CULTURE...
IN TERMS OF OUR CHILDREN I THINK, IT IS BETTER, BECAUSE AMERICA IS GOING, I THINK ALMOST MULTICULTURAL...
EVERYWHERE YOU CAN SEE LOT OF PEOPLE COMING FROM DIFFERENT PARTS OF THE WORLD AND LIVING TOGETHER.

Chennai, formerly known as Madras, is the largest city in South India and the fourth largest city in the country. It is located on the Caramandel Coast of the Bay of Bengal. Chennai, as the present gateway to South India, is the main city of Tamil Nadu and is a comparatively new city — only 350 years old. It was the bastion of the British East India Company, which came to India in 1639 A.D. The city is well known for its booming movie industry and is the ideal starting point for visitors to the South.

Siva found his first week in the U.S. difficult, "because totally a new and different environment and different culture and different people." One of his professors was very hospitable and took care of him until he found an apartment. Soon after he moved into the apartment, Hurricane Fran hit Chapel Hill. "No electricity, no power, nothing for four days. My God!"

After Arvind was born, Latha joined Siva in the U.S. The family maintains contact with the local Tamil community and has joined the Carolina Tamil Sangam, which organizes cultural events. They also visit the Hindu Bhavan temple in Morrisville.

However, Siva feels that, "for religious point of view...we normally worship in the house itself... In terms of religion, we don't have any problem in this country."

Siva also said that "it is possible to maintaining our culture and integrating, learning some new things from their culture... In terms for our children I think, it is better, because America is going, I think almost multi-cultural... Everywhere you can see lot of people coming from different part of the world and living together." In their neighborhood, they socialize with a family from Bangladesh and another family from Mexico. Siva and his family have not had much opportunity to socialize with Americans, except for the annual Christmas and Thanksgiving dinners hosted by his professors. They also feel a little isolated because of cultural differences such as the lack of strong connections that keep families close to each other in America. Siva said that unlike India, in America, "After their son gets I think eighteen years age, he is independent. He can go anywhere." But Siva and his family do appreciate the open, friendly nature of Americans. "Whenever you see some people in street or university they are more friendly...so that way I think, it's okay."

For now they feel that Chapel Hill is their home. But Siva also said that "in terms of our parents and relatives, in India...sometimes I think still we want to go back to India... But still we have not yet decided."

Our heart beats for Pakistan

“If you ask us today what we have achieved in America, and how much money have we saved, we say that we don’t want to make money, our aim is that our children get a good education. And our reason for coming from Pakistan is that we got our education with a lot of difficulties. And now we have come here with the aim of giving our children a good education. There are universities here, if you want to get education here, you can...if you can’t study in America, then you cannot study anywhere in the world.”

Mr. Khalid is a doctor who works for a multinational pharmaceutical company in Research Triangle Park. His wife has a Masters in Education from Pakistan, and comes from a family in which the men and women have both been well-educated for



Postcard from Pakistan

generations. This interview was conducted in English, Urdu, Punjabi and Saraiki. Mr. and Mrs. Khalid spoke about many topics, including Pakistan and its politics, and Islam. However, most of the conversation circulated around the topic of education.

Many South Asian immigrants experience what is known as "downward mobility" when they come to the U.S. They often have to find jobs in the U.S. that are less prestigious or rewarding than the jobs they held in their home countries.

Arabic is a sacred language to Muslims, as it is the language of the Prophet Mohammed and the Quran (Koran).

Eid refers to the festival of breaking the fast at the end of Ramadan.

Ramadan, or Ramzan, is the lunar month of fasting from dawn to sunset.

The Imam is responsible for leading prayer at a masjid or mosque.

The azaan or adhan is the Muslim "call to prayer". It is uttered immediately before each of the five daily prayers by the muezzin or crier, and can be heard in many neighborhoods in South Asia, broadcast over loudspeakers from the local mosque.

"Insha-Allah" and "Pakistan zindabaad" mean "God willing" and "long live Pakistan!"

The Khalids discussed education with regard to what is wrong with Pakistan, what is right with the U.S., and what their concerns are about raising children as Muslims in the U.S. The Khalids' focus on and concern about education is shared by many South Asian immigrants, particularly those of a professional class. If it were not for the educational and related employment opportunities here in the U.S., the Khalids say that they, and most Pakistanis, would not come to the U.S.

While Mr. Khalid had been in the U.S. for about nine years, his wife has only been here for a year and a half. Mr. and Mrs. Khalid came to the U.S. separately, each after several of their family members had already moved here. Mr. Khalid's elder brother was the first from his family to come to the area in the early seventies, then a sister, then his parents, then he came, each one helping the other to immigrate. Mrs. Khalid had an uncle who came to the U.S. in the early seventies, and much of her family then followed. According to Mr. Khalid, in the early nineties it was difficult for doctors to find satisfactory positions in Pakistan. Faced with these employment prospects, and already having family members here, Mr. Khalid immigrated to the U.S. in 1991. Having lived here now for some time, Mr. Khalid feels that he really has no other options but to stay. "And now the situation is that circumstances do not allow me to do anything but stay here."

Mr. Khalid quoted a Punjabi idiom translated as, "I wish to leave the blanket, but the blanket wouldn't leave me."

Mr. Khalid was very excited when he first came to the U.S., initially struck by its cleanliness and the politeness of the people. "When one gets on a plane and gets off at New York airport, I can't ever forget that one thing that first impressed me most was to see the cleanliness here... At that time, I recalled a verse from the Holy Quran, 'cleanliness is half your faith.'...The other important thing that happened immediately was that people treated you so politely, even [though] you're a foreigner. You're coming to this country for the first time, and how the people deal with you, like 'thank you', and 'we apologize' for this or that, and this kind of stuff, [that] we never hear in our country. I mean, over there you have to fight to get your rights, if you don't fight, you get nothing."

Mr. Khalid did not have an easy time after he came to the U.S. Before finding jobs more suited to his educational training he had to deliver pizzas and newspapers to make ends meet. Mr. Khalid was also disappointed to find that after all of his years of studying to be a physician in Pakistan, he had to do even more schooling here. Overall, Mr. Khalid feels that his life in the U.S. has been quite hard, and he has at times even considered returning to Pakistan.

"The biggest hardship for me was, that despite being a physician, I had to study here again. I mean that, I couldn't go to a school here, because I had studied under a different system. In the library, just imagine, that ten hours to twelve hours I had to study, and privately, on my own initiative. I would appear for examinations and was not able to pass them. That became a hardship, and I became very tense, wondering where I should go, and what I should do. At times, I even considered leaving everything and going away. I used to feel like going away to where my family wouldn't see me."

Adding to Mr. Khalid's struggles in the U.S. was the fact that there was so much of Pakistan that he missed. "And, the other big hardship was that I missed my friends a lot... I used to think how we used to go around on our motorbikes, how we used to go out to eat 'nihari', and how, at times we'd go out to eat 'haleem'. I mean, we'd be just sitting around, and would just on an idea, to go and eat something. I remember that, another big thing is that over there, the sound of 'azaan'." Other things he and his wife miss include the sights, sounds and sensations of Pakistani streets—horns honking, dust flying, and vendors selling varieties of fresh foods: mangoes, sugarcane juice, "nihari from Waris," karelas, and teendas.

MY MOTHER USED TO SAY THAT THE PLANTS THAT ARE SOWN BY GOOD PEOPLE GROW VERY WELL.

THOSE THAT ARE SOWING THE PLANTS ARE VERY GOOD HERE, BUT WE DON'T KNOW HOW THE PLANTS WILL COME OUT.

Despite all of his hardships and all that he has missed, Mr. Khalid says that he never got disheartened. "I always hoped for the best, and kept my faith in God. God has brought me this far, and all other needs—, I mean, one's needs are never fulfilled, and everyone is not fortunate enough to have all needs fulfilled, but one should thank God to have brought us this far."

While living in the U.S., the Khalids have had very limited interaction with neighbors and colleagues. The Khalids instead define their community in terms of family, other Pakistani professionals, and other Muslims. Unlike others we spoke with, the Khalids are very lucky to have over fifty people in the local area whom they consider family. Showing how important this family is to them, Mr. Khalid remarked, "And, I mean, our brother is no more, but his children are like our children. In fact, we love them more than our own children... I mean, even, whether they're living in Raleigh, or Cary, my preference is that I spend as much time as possible with my children, my brothers and sisters and their children, and our parents."

There is also a large community of Pakistani professionals with whom the Khalids associate, and also participate in a large and

active Islamic community of various nationalities in the Triangle Area. Mr. Khalid was very proud of the fact that the community was able to generate enough money (\$1.4 million) to build a new Islamic Center, as the space in the Raleigh mosque had become too small for the growing population. He was especially proud that the building was financed with cash since Islam forbids earning money from interest.

Mr. and Mrs. Khalid have two daughters, a three-year-old named Fatima and a nine-week-old named Mariam, whom they hope to raise within this community. They say they want to raise their children as they were raised, and feel hopeful that their children will retain a strong Muslim and Pakistani identity. They are concerned about American society and its influences, but they feel that children are shaped mostly by how they are raised in the home. Mrs. Khalid, however, expresses some of the anxiety of immigrant parents: "My mother used to say that the plants that are sown by good people, grow very well. Those that are sowing the plants are very good, but we don't know how the plants will come out."

Mr. Khalid expressed some of his own concerns about the influences of American culture, revealing his Pakistani Muslim values. "My opinion is....okay, this society has some traditions that are alien to our culture, but the thing is, that it's quite natural that whenever you go to a new place, you will find things that are good and bad, right? So, it depends upon how you establish yourself over there. And...once you get here, one thinks what is this? I mean, liquor is available openly, women are going around in shorts, I mean, kissing is a commonplace, I mean, you name it! ...Like...my daughters...I would definitely want them to follow the teachings of Islam. Islam doesn't forbid you from going to another society... Although I think...I've read this, and I'm not sure if what I'm saying is correct, that when you go into a different society, you have to adopt some traditions from that society. But the thing is, sir, that I would never say that my daughters go to clubs, and do this or do that. That, I don't think I would ever want that. For that matter, I wouldn't want that for anybody's daughters. This is my opinion, that it depends on what kind of atmosphere you create in your home."

The Khalids are optimistic though. They try to teach their children about their Pakistani and Muslim culture, and they are inspired by how other young people in their family and the Islamic community have grown up. They feel that many young

people they know in the area know more about Islam than Pakistani children.

Mr. Khalid explained, "We place emphasis on the effort to keep them from forgetting our language... The community organizes functions on fourteenth of August [Pakistan's Independence Day], so that they know the importance of that day. Similarly, we celebrate Eid. They get to take day off for Eid. And for Ramzan, our kids here are more enthusiastic about it than those in Pakistan. I mean, even, my six year-old niece, even she observes fast on two or three days. I mean, the thing is, what you teach them and how you teach them from the beginning."

The Khalids are especially pleased with the role of the Imam in the local Muslim community, and his close relationship with the young people. Mrs. Khalid explained, "The child will not go to his parents to ask for an answer to their questions. They all go to the Imam. Like it is over here, like, when girls and boys grow up and they want to find a partner for themselves, they go to the Imam even for such things." The Khalids are very happy to see some young Pakistanis in the area having arranged marriages. Each year, their family attends a national Muslim convention at which many marriages are arranged.

Though still quite young, the Khalids' daughter is already taking an interest in their Pakistani Muslim culture. Their daughter

likes the qawwalli cassettes the parents play. As Mrs. Khalid noted, "She thinks of it as dance music. The 'Allah, Allah' cassette, she calls it."

Although the Khalids have many members of their family in the Triangle, and are optimistic about how their children will grow up in the U.S., they still think of returning to Pakistan. Mrs. Khalid commented, "The whole family may be here, but our roots are there [in Pakistan]." Mrs. Khalid seems to want to return most, saying that she does not see much Islam here and that she often finds America "depressing," citing the recent episodes of violence in American high schools.

Mr. Khalid feels that he owes his existence to Pakistan, and he still takes an active interest in the nation's affairs. "We are because of Pakistan. And the way things are now, if something happens in Pakistan, all our attention is there. You believe me, we go to the office and first of all read Pakistani newspapers, to find out if everything is okay in Pakistan... But what I mean to say is that our heart beats for Pakistan."

Despite their nationalism, the Khalids are, however, critical of Pakistan and particularly its educational policy. They feel that the Pakistani government is not doing enough to educate its children, which they say is why many of their future leaders are studying abroad. The Khalids feel that if Pakistan is to become a

great nation, it has to emphasize education, as Muslim nations have done in the past.

Mr. Khalid went on to say, "When you don't have education, how can you make progress?" Mrs. Khalid added, "You can see in the Hadith, the Holy Prophet Mohammad (peace be upon him) said that I have been sent to earth as a teacher. If we make education our base, we can lead all nations, we Muslims did that before, didn't we? Today America is leading, what do they have? They have education. They have knowledge. If you ask me to compare, education is the only field that they are ahead of us, otherwise we have all the qualities they possess. We also have two eyes, two hands, two feet."

So the Khalids think about returning to Pakistan, and discuss the issue, but always come back to the question of education and their children's future. Mrs. Khalid said, "We have a lot of discussions amongst ourselves about going to Pakistan. Since both of us talk to-the-point, and then, when all things said and done—, the final question that remains is, if we go back, where do we educate our children?"

The Khalids seem resigned to staying in the U.S., missing Pakistan, and trying to raise well-educated Pakistani Muslim children in an American context. They look to their Islamic teaching, and the experience of their relatives' children for guidance, and feel that wherever they are, they can be Muslim.

Mrs. Khalid explained, "When I was taking Arabic lessons, I read that 'the love of your country comes with your faith'. But, we, now see what Islam say, 'Al-mulk mulke-maat, mulk-e-khuda-e-maat' [in Arabic], meaning that 'every place that you call yours is God's'."

The Khalids were happy to be interviewed, and grateful to have the opportunity to educate other Americans about Pakistan and Islam. Mrs. Khalid said, "And...if any American students, if they

see, or read these, they will find, good, that there is another country in this world that was created for religion, and what is happening there. They will get good information." And, "god willing", they hope that even though they may live in the U.S. now, and their children will grow up here and become well-educated, their Pakistani homeland will still live forever. To end the interview, Mrs. Khalid said, "Insha-Allah. Pakistan zindabaad."

Not as American as apple pie

Durba Ahmed is a Bangladeshi woman in her mid-thirties who has been living in the United States for the last nine years. She came here to pursue higher education, and joined a graduate program in Public Health Policy and Administration in the School of Public Health at UNC. In Bangladesh, Durba had worked with the Ministry of Health as a dental surgeon involved with public health in rural areas.

For Durba, the biggest struggle here has been “living alone...doing everything alone with very little help.” The first semester was especially hard, but persuaded by her father that she stay and complete her degree, Durba decided to stick it out, “not really liking it, very depressed.” In her first three months she had “no contact with any other sub-continental, or Bangladeshi



Solitude

PHOTOGRAPH BY RANI GILL

person”, making her feel “like an alien.” Coming here, Durba was, in effect, leaving “the family, the support...the ease of living and comfort of something known, for something totally unknown.”

She attributes the fact that she stayed here to her “wanderlust.” But her heart she says “still wants to go back to Bangladesh. That’s where my home is... America will always be a home: a second home, but never my first home.” But going back would have meant, “Oh, she couldn’t make it in America.” And there was the political angle, too. “Bangladesh has always had its political problems...and I thought if I could stay here, and make my life worth living, I may be able to do something in public health there.”

THAT'S WHERE MY HOME IS...AMERICA WILL ALWAYS BE A HOME—A SECOND HOME—BUT NEVER MY FIRST HOME.

She believes if the situation was better in South Asia (in terms of job opportunities and political stability), most South Asians would “rather be there.”

At home, Durba grew up in a family of five sisters, with her father as the only male role model. He was a prominent film star, director, producer and writer, who was also physically handicapped. Durba, like her sisters, juggled the world of her father with trying to “grow up like everybody else, go to school, excel in studies...nothing creative.” Durba, unable to go home, hasn’t seen her family in eight years, but has kept in touch over the telephone, about once a month. Meanwhile, her father has had two strokes, and this has brought feelings of regret in her mind.

Regarding the issue of community, Durba said that “the community feeling is very strong among most Bangladeshis.” However, she acknowledges that she has not “been much in touch with my community, only because there are certain limitations right now: not having a car, not having the time, not being in my field of work yet, as I wanted to be.” So at present she interacts more with Americans. At first she resisted spending much time with her American friends, “maybe because I was new in the country and I wanted to retain myself in my culture and I was

staunch about that... But now I have friends from all walks of life, from bus drivers to cafeteria workers to sometimes, even people who ask money in the streets”. But notions of friendship also change with age for when “you are younger...closeness and bonding with people are much stronger. Because of the busyness of life as you grow older, you realize that you have to not expect or demand more.” But still, she has to “explain a lot about myself... I’m still an outsider.” She thinks there is always “that one final barrier,” which “isn’t anything to do with race or people,” but “the Americanness”. She says that there are key cultural differences, of course, for this is “a more independent culture...independence is taught from childhood” here. She feels she can never be American because she wasn’t born here, “because you relate to your childhood experiences.”

As a woman, she feels that she has found a strength in herself that eight years back she did not think she had. In South Asian cultures, “girls or daughters of relatively upper middle-class families, or upper-class families, are sort of encouraged to be...dependent. You are not allowed to drive because your father forbade you, so you come to the United States not being able to drive. You can’t go out grocery shopping because you have never

The U.S. Census Bureau reported that there were approximately one million "Asian or Pacific Islander" students enrolled in undergraduate or graduate study in the United States in the year 2000.

There are a substantial number of foreign students enrolled in UNC-Chapel Hill. In the fall of 2001 the university reported an "Asian/Pacific Islander" enrollment of 2,714, which was about 8% of the total enrollment for that semester. Of those, 906 were non-resident aliens, 342 were resident aliens, and 1466 were U.S. citizens.

done it, so you have to learn that. You have never cooked in your life because somebody had always cooked." A lot of her American friends find her "pretty liberated, even by American standards", but for her it is not about liberty but about "basic human rights." Even though Durba does feel that she may have gained some new freedoms, she still feels that as a single woman in America, she lacks "a support system," making her feel insecure "for the future, or for anything."

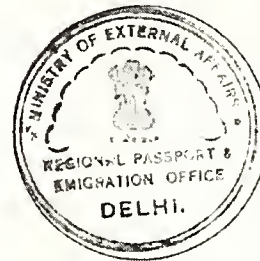
Community had far more meaning for Durba when she lived in Bangladesh, with her parents. She feels a special bond with other South Asians because of what she sees as a "common cultural basis." However, she sees the Triangle as an area where South Asians will keep coming for work and educational opportunities, making it more cosmopolitan. Durba says that if she ever has children she would want them to get the best of both worlds, Bangladesh and the U.S. Right now, she says her search is for a meaningful life—for a career, a family—a search that transcends geographical location while rooted in it.



इसके द्वारा, भारत गणराज्य के राष्ट्रपति के नाम पर, उन सब से जिनका इस बात से सरोकार हो, यह प्रार्थना एवं अपेक्षा की जाती है कि वे वाहक को बिना रोक-टोक, आन्नादी से आन-जाने दें, और उसे हर तरह की सहायता और सुरक्षा प्रदान करें जिसकी उसे आवश्यकता हो।

These are to request and require in the Name of The President of the Republic of India all those whom it may concern to allow the bearer to pass freely without let or hindrance, and to afford him or her every assistance and protection of which he or she may stand in need.

Given at *Delhi* में
the *3rd* day
of *October* 19 *19* का
भारत गणराज्य के राष्ट्रपति के आदेश पर दिया गया।
BY ORDER OF THE PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF INDIA



Public Relations Officer,
Regional Passport Office,
Delhi.

Indian passport

I'm an Indian, but one adapts

This interview, originally in Punjabi, was translated by a member of Asian Voices. During the interview, Gobind recounted a poem told to him by an Indian cook he met after coming to the U.S.:

"Go back [to India], return even now

What is here in America for you?

This is a sweet jail

And remember you're being warned before you are trapped."

"Well, I'm stuck in the 'sweet jail'. I don't know how many years the sentence will last! [laughter]"

Gobind Singh has been living in the U.S. for almost a year now. Like many immigrants, he sometimes feels that he is living in a "sweet jail." He is making money, he has a car, and he has dreams

North Carolino experienced tremendous populotion growth between 1990 ond 2000. The populotion increased from about 6.6 million people to 8 million, on increase of more than 20 percent. Most of this populotion growth was with-in the African-American ond White populoce. While Lotinos ond Asions comprise only a smoll percentoge of the totol, the rates of increose for those groups exceed those of the general populotion.

In 1990, there were 52,166 people in North Carolino clossified os "Asion or Pocific Islander", about 0.8% of the totol state populotion. Thot number more than doubled to 112,690 in the year 2000, which constitutes 1.4% of the populotion.

In 1990, there were 76,726 people in North Carolino clossified os "Hispanic or Latino" by the Census Bureou, representing about 1% of the totol stote populotion. Thot number increased almost five-fold, to 378,317 in the year 2000, representing about 5% of the totol stote populotion.

of a career; however, he also feels trapped in a place where he does not feel quite at home, and he is afraid to return "home," fearing that he will be viewed as a failure for doing so.

Gobind seems quite cosmopolitan, and simply wanted to come to the U.S. to see the country, after having already been to Europe several times. Gobind can speak five languages, Punjabi and Hindi, as well as English, Spanish, and French. While in India, he had worked as a travel agent; in Chapel Hill he has worked as a cook, and he hopes some day to work with computers. Gobind came directly to Chapel Hill through a contact his father had with a restaurant owner.

Gobind sees the restaurant jobs he has held simply as a way to help him achieve his greater goal of furthering his education. He studied computer engineering in India and would like to continue his studies here in the U.S. He feels that education in the U.S. is very expensive though, and he is not sure when he can afford to enroll. Gobind has been considering buying a computer with the money he is earning. However, he recently decided to first buy a car, deciding it was more important for him to have mobility to explore the area on his days off and to go out at night.

Gobind faces many questions about his future, questions to which he does not have ready answers. He does not know how he will be able to get an education here; he does not know how he will deal with "the nightmare" of getting a green card after his

schooling; he does not know when or how he will marry; and he is not sure where he would want to raise his children.

Gobind is aware that a large part of his adapting to life in the U.S. is the process of learning independence. He feels that he is on his own now in fashioning his new identity and lifestyle in America, and in finding answers to the questions that lie ahead.

"Like they say in Punjabi, 'according to a new country or place, you change your behavior'. Now I'm in America, so I have to live like an American. A little bit, I mean—India is in my blood since I'm an Indian, but one adapts...[to] American life. I don't know if I'm adapting the American life, or a new life is being formed for me [laughter]. I mean, just kind of intermediary, I don't know. There are no more changes. I mean, one's thoughts mature. I mean, I've never lived on my own before. I always lived with the family and never very far from them, and there one is interdependent in the family. Over here I'm independent and I have to take all decisions for myself, whether they're good or bad. And—that's it."

Undoubtedly, the decisions Gobind makes will certainly shape, and be shaped by, his experiences in and attitudes about life in America. Right now, Gobind has mixed feelings. He finds that the U.S. can sometimes be even more beautiful than India, and he finds life attractive here because it does not have the problems of "poorer countries," such as harassment, corruption, and fear of

the police. However, he is critical of American notions of friendship, and of the racism that he has witnessed. He simply misses the people and places he called home.

Gobind feels that many Americans, although polite, do not have a strong notion of friendship. For Gobind, "Friends are the people who have time for you when there's no time," and with whom "you can share all your thoughts, your life, and they'll listen to you... I don't know much people here, but all the people I meet, I think, they're busier, I mean, the whole system is like that. They're busy with their works...and...I don't know, maybe they don't have time for other people. And, I've been living here in this apartment for more than six months now and I don't even know the names of my neighbors... Well, we just see each other, we just walk across. We say 'hello, how're you doing?' and that's it."

He feels that even when Americans do talk to him, "That's all their purpose [is]. Purpose—I mean, maybe they want to know interesting people. Maybe they were interested in you and they knew you, but as we South Asian are, tender of heart, tender-hearted, we make attachments quicker. You know. And, we tell everything about ourselves. We are, you're just, you are just like an open book, and they're reading it. And—But—That's why we build up expectations from the other person, but the other person wakes up the next morning and goes about his own way [laughter]. I don't know why, but they are unable to become friends."

WHEN I WAS IN INDIA, I USED TO FEEL THAT I WAS AHEAD OF TIME, BUT NOW I FEEL THAT TIME IS AHEAD OF ME...

I FEEL THAT TIME HAS LEFT ME BEHIND.

Gobind also does not like the racism he sees in America. He notices how Latinos are looked down upon, and how Whites and African Americans with the same Bible and the same religion still go to different churches. He also sometimes feels racism directed at him. "I feel that the youth here sometimes don't feel comfortable talking to, because of my color or, my race. I mean, they think I'm Hispanic or, I don't know. Sometimes I feel that. Maybe they are right or wrong. Because of this...I think that if I were an American or White, I would have known more people than I do now... Everyone says that everything is equal and there is no racism or anything like that, but there is."

Adding to his dissatisfaction with life in America, there is much that Gobind simply misses being so far from home. "My family, my country, my friends. Everything and everybody. I mean, I've spent twenty-five years of my life there. So I miss all those my twenty-five years." When Gobind does miss home, "Sometimes, I mean—I mean, you can cry [laughter]. No, I don't cry."

Gobind seems to feel that he has left India and things Indian behind. He does not participate in any South Asian communities in the area, and unlike most immigrants, he does not even have

with him any Punjabi or Hindi music. A Sikh by birth, he always thinks that someday he will go to the gurudwara to meet other Punjabis, but he is yet to go, and he admits that he is unlikely to go. In discussing his religious views, Gobind reveals why he does not feel that going to the gurudwara is very important.

"If one wants to find God, we don't need to go to the gurudwara. When you go to the gurudwara and listen to the sermons, more effective than that is God's 'radio station' that does not let out of its range at any time. And, I feel it's good like this. In order to be a good human being, it's important to implement the Granth Sahib's sayings in one's life, one can be a good human being. And that, I think, is the motive of every religion. And, I don't endeavor to find God, but I do my best to be a good human being. And, if you can be a good human being, you can be a good Hindu or Christian, or whatever [laughs]. That's my philosophy."

However, despite his inability to have a South Asian community here, and his dissatisfaction with finding friends, he has adapted to life in the U.S. in a relatively unique way, creating for himself a new community of people, a Latino one. Gobind lives with three Latinos, and does much socializing with them,

primarily by attending local Latin dance nights. He believes that Latinos and Indians have much in common, seeing similarities in culture, in eating and living habits, and in their skin color. He also loves Mexican food.

Gobind came to know the Latinos he is living with through his work in the Indian restaurant. One of the Latino men used to visit and Gobind would try to communicate with him in Spanish and English. Gobind knew some Spanish from having studied the language, from living in Spain for six months and through some Spanish girlfriends. Eventually he moved in with the Latinos he met at the restaurant, and later one of them helped him to find a job in another Chapel Hill restaurant through other Latinos who worked there.

By going out with the Latinos he lives with, Gobind has enjoyed learning Latin dance. "I mean, when I went there [to a Latin dance] the first time I did not even know how to dance. You know we don't have such things over there [in India]—we do have night clubs, etcetera, in New Delhi now—but there was no Latino dancing at all. I went once with a friend and liked it. After that, I tried to dance also, but girls won't dance with you unless you know how to dance [laughter]. The girls who know [how to dance], they don't want to dance with boys who don't know. And the boys who know, they want to dance with the girls who know and also with girls who don't know. And the boys who don't know

how to dance, they don't dance at all [laughter]. And I was the last one [to find a girl to dance with], and after that I took classes. I really liked it, and I go to classes regularly."

In addition to having gotten to know some Latinos, Gobind also recounted one interesting story of his meeting a Canadian bus driver in Chapel Hill, whose family had ties to India. "I really don't know any family that well, but when I did not have a car I used to get around on buses. There was a driver of a bus that used to meet every day on the same route, and he once even gave me a bus pass that he had found on a seat. He used to like Indian food, Indian culture. His parents, his father, had at some time been posted in India with the East India Company...during the British times. He was quite impressed with India, and when he gave me the pass, he said I could use it... And, he used to meet me every day and he talked to me... It was in the Christmas days, and he gave me his phone number saying that if I feel lonely at Christmas time, to give him a call and if I felt comfortable, I could join them for Christmas dinner. And, after that I forgot all about it. I forgot about it, and did not go. And, he was the only one."

Aside from these few positive social interactions, it appears that Gobind would be happier returning to India. He has had some interesting experiences here, but he does not think of it as his home. "My home is still there, in India. When I go out over here—if you go somewhere and find it nice and more beautiful

than India, you look at things and appreciate them but feel that these are not mine, in a way... And thus, I think of India as my home. My family is there, my parents are there and I still owe a lot to my parents."

But for Gobind, as for many immigrants, going home again is not that easy. "And, I mean, our society over there is such that people would talk about each other. For example, my mother would say such and such family's son has also gone to America, and if that person was to quit from here and go back, she would have negative comments about him, saying that people here are dying to go to America and this one has been there and come back [laughter]."

Toward the end of the interview, the affable, laughing Gobind grew more somber, reflecting on his prospects for life in the U.S.,

on his prospects for going home, and how his life seems to be passing him by.

"For the time being I don't see any light in that long, dark tunnel... I mean, till the time one has achieved something, you feel restless. I mean, I'm growing older and my life is passing by and I'm not being able to do anything. Till the time I was in India I used to feel that I was ahead of time, but now I feel that time is ahead of me... I feel that time has left me behind. I mean, I had a very good...life in India. My parents gave me good education, and if I tell that to someone here, he'll say, 'you can go back, what's wrong with you?' But you know why I cannot go back now. And, I know that I cannot do too much here because if you want to be somebody, you have to start very early."

Where is home?

Vasantha Mutucumarana is a post-doctoral fellow at UNC-Chapel Hill. His wife, Deepa, stays at home with their eight year old daughter, Charmaine. Vasantha mostly spoke during the interview and his wife participated a little towards the latter stages.

Vasantha and his three sisters grew up in Colombo, Sri Lanka. He comes from a Buddhist family, although he does not consider himself to be committed enough to be considered religious. "We used to go to these Buddhist temples. But on a day to day life, I don't know that I could call myself a very religious person." His time in Sri Lanka was spent mostly on his studies; for recreation he enjoyed watching cricket and rugby matches.

Vasantha entered the Science faculty at the University of Sri Lanka in Colombo and completed B.Sc. in Chemistry. "I was at the university after I finished my studies for one year just as a



PHOTOGRAPH BY UBHAYA DE SILVA

Vasantha, Deepa, and Charmaine Mutucumarana

Sri Lanka is an island nation that is a mere 18 miles from the southern coast of India with approximately 18-19 million people living on this small island. Sri Lankan history and culture are strongly influenced by mainland India, as well as 500 years of European colonization. The two major communities on the island are the Sinhalese and Tamils, who arrived from India about 2,500 years ago. Buddhism also spread from India to Sri Lanka over 2,000 years ago. Although Buddhism is no longer a dominant religion in mainland India, most Sri Lankans are Buddhists. The religion plays a dominant role in shaping culture and politics in Sri Lanka to this day. Given the strategic location of the island on the spice route from Europe to the Far East, Europeans continuously colonized parts of Sri Lanka, starting with the arrival of the Portuguese in 1505 and ending with the departure of the British in 1948. The institutions and infrastruc-

ture developed during the period of European occupation have had a profound impact on modern Sri Lanka. For example, the British developed tea and rubber plantations in the country and oversaw the building of highways, hospitals, and schools to support the plantations. The plantations growing export crops continue to be a mainstay of the economy. After independence, Sri Lanka became a functional democracy. The health and education systems were expanded to develop a very effective welfare state that has resulted in Sri Lankans having the highest literacy and life expectancy in South Asia. However, the departure of the British also saw the beginning of conflict between the Sinhalese and Tamil communities on the island, which escalated into a full-scale civil war in the early 1980s (see side bar on LTTE on page 58).

teaching assistant... After that I worked at an institute called Atomic Energy Authority for three years. It was during that time that I started applying for universities [in the U.S.].” He was not particularly keen on going abroad due to the family obligation he felt after his father died of a heart attack, but his mother encouraged him. She felt that “it’s usually better to have a higher education in terms of finding, getting a good job or, at least continuing to working in the same field... So, in fact, I still remember this, she’s the one who went to the U.S. Information Agency to get the form for applying for the TOEFL [Test of English as a Foreign Language] exam.” TOEFL exams are required of all foreign educated students for whom English is not the primary language.

Although Vasantha had mixed feelings about leaving Sri Lanka, he decided to go abroad and arrived in the U.S. in 1984 to attend Bowling Green University in Ohio. After one semester, he left Bowling Green and entered the University of Alberta in Edmonton where he completed his M.Sc. in Chemistry. From Canada he returned to the U.S. and joined a Ph.D. program in Biochemistry at the University of Oklahoma. During his studies

in North America, groups of expatriate Sri Lankans have helped him adjust to life here. “There [were] some other Sri Lankans living, rather studying, at the same University, who had come the previous year... They came to airport and then, brought us to town and helped us to find an apartment.”

At times during his life abroad, Vasantha has been lonely. Due to the pressure of his studies he did not have much opportunity to interact with those outside of the University. “It was, lonely... I mean, some friends here, who were in the lab and also in the department. But outside that, not really any friends.” And, “most of the time” he misses Sri Lanka. He feels that in Sri Lanka he had a better social life outside work. “Whenever we felt like we used to gather about three-four of my friends in a group...just go and spend some time. Just watch a film.”

When Vasantha was in Oklahoma he married Deepa, whom he knew from his days working at the Atomic Energy Authority in Sri Lanka. Deepa felt their marriage “was a good match for me and for him,” because they liked each other and worked in the same field. Deepa joined Vasantha in the U.S., but their plans

SOMETIMES WHEN I THINK OF THE FAMILY, I WISH I WERE THERE [SRI LANKA]. BUT THEN AGAIN, WHEN I THINK OF HER [CHARMAINE’S] FUTURE, I THINK IT WILL BE BETTER, STAY HERE...WHERE IS HOME? IN MY MIND, IT’S SRI LANKA.

were to eventually return to Sri Lanka after his Ph.D. However, the birth of their daughter in 1991 in Oklahoma made them rethink their plans of returning. "After that we began to, I mean, think about her future also...could be nice to, for her to get an education over here."

Soon after Vasantha's Ph.D., the family moved to Chapel Hill where he currently has a post-doctoral position in the Biology Department at UNC. They don't consider themselves to be part of a larger local community here because they are reserved people and also find themselves too busy with their daily lives to find time to make many new friends. "Really after work, I mean, I don't think of going to any other place but, other than coming home and, trying to spend some time with them [his wife and daughter]. Because as it is...I don't spend enough time with them. And on top of that, we are also not very outgoing people."

Even though they do not feel that they have been subject to racism or different treatment as recent immigrants in this area, the Mutucumaranas have conflicting thoughts about which country is their "home" and about where they would like to live. "Sometimes when I think of the family, I wish I was there [Sri Lanka]. But then again, when I think of her [Charmaine's] future, I think it will be better, stay here... Where is home? In my mind it's Sri Lanka."

Although they have talked to their daughter about life in Sri Lanka they feel moving back is not a real possibility. They are concerned about how difficult it might be for Charmaine to adapt to studying in a language other than English. "Now we have to, base most of our, decisions...on her."

Finding America

This interview with Amar Das Singh was originally conducted in Punjabi then translated and transcribed into English by Asian Voices.

"I had a desire in my heart to go to America, see the country, what kind of people live there, and what their lifestyle is like—I just always had this desire in my heart. I had no intention of coming and settling down here, or working here—no. It was just a desire to go abroad once in my life and see for myself."

Amar Das Singh is from the Punjab region of India. He was the first of his village, and of his relatives, to go abroad. While growing up he had heard of young men from other villages who had gone abroad, and he had heard their tempting stories of "luxurious lives." Amar Das wanted to experience, to explore, and to see the world, and so came to the U.S. on a one-year visa. He is now, however, ready to go home. In talking about his experience in the



Durham gurudwara off Roxboro Road

PHOTOGRAPH BY RANI GILL

U.S., Amar Das speaks little of exploring and adventure, and like many immigrants, speaks much of loneliness and hard work. He fondly recalls an India of close family and friends, of working, playing, and worshipping together—a life he left behind, a life to which he is anxious to return.

In his village, Amar Das worked on his family's farms, where they grew wheat, corn, sugarcane, and vegetables. He drove a

THAT'S THE BIGGEST THING, IF YOUR HEART IS NOT HAPPY HERE, WHAT GOOD ARE ALL THESE THINGS?

combine and earned Rs 15,000 (about \$350) per harvest for his labor. To get to the U.S., Amar Das spent Rs 42,000 (about \$1,000) on a round-trip ticket. He now works in Chapel Hill as a cook in an Indian restaurant, having ended up in Chapel Hill through the contact of a friend who also drove a combine in Punjab. The friend told him that he could get work in a restaurant here. Amar Das recalls his friend telling him about the job:

"He said that all that's needed is someone who's willing to work, there's a lot of jobs. I asked what kind of work I'll have to do, and he told me there's dishwashing, baking, and that I could work as a waiter. But since I cannot speak English, so the waiting job.... He said, look, the person who works at the counter is one who is fully trained, and can speak good English. Other than that, you don't need anything—, like cleaning the tables, arranging glasses, napkins and spoons... It's not a difficult job, you can do it. So I came here and started working."

Unfortunately, Amar Das has not found the transition from his village in India to working in a restaurant in Chapel Hill to be an easy one. He works for 12-hour days, 6 days a week. He came to the US to explore, to see something new, and now his work defines and limits his experience in the US.

"When I came here, I liked America. Then, after coming here, I stayed for some time and saw the way things worked here, saw their lifestyle—, and in the end, I did not like things here very much."

When Amar Das first came to the U.S. he was impressed with many of the material aspects of American life. He noted the carpeting, the central heat and air conditioning, a regular power supply, subways, and the number of telephones, bridges, and cars. "In India, you can't buy a car easily, and if you do buy one, the whole family uses one car... Over here, every person has a car. That's for sure. There are as many cars as the members of a family in every home."

Amar Das also remarked that in America there is more "freedom" than in India. He says that in America there is "a lot of freedom. Too much freedom. If you look at it, America is about one hundred years ahead of India, and India is a hundred years behind." Yet, he says, "Now see here, if you think about these facilities, you like it, but my heart is not happy here. That's the biggest thing, if your heart is not happy here, what good are all these things?"

One of the major difficulties Amar Das has faced in adjusting to life in the U.S. is due to language. Amar Das' native tongue is

Punjabi. He also studied Hindi in school, and even learned a little English, but not enough. "Everyone here speaks English. I don't know much English... If I could speak English, I could talk to everyone..."

Interviewer: "Do you ever feel that you should learn?"

"I do feel like it, because I know it'll be good for me, but how do I find the time?"

Amar Das' unhappiness in the U.S. also stems from his lack of mobility in a country that prides itself on freedom through mobility. His lack of mobility is a product of his having to work so much, as well as his difficulties with English and his concern about his visa. Furthermore, in India he drove all kinds of vehicles—his combine, cars, buses, trucks, motorcycles, but in the US he has not driven anything at all, and has never gotten a driver's license.

"In India, where we lived, you can go anywhere you like—, there's nobody to stop from going anywhere. And then you have your relatives, brothers/sisters, etcetera. You can go and visit them whenever you feel like, and, there's home. And now I am here."

Interviewer: "But nobody stops you here. Can't you go anywhere you feel like?"

"I could go anywhere, you're right. But—, I mean to say, I have no relatives here, no brothers or sisters. Who would I go to?"

Aside from Chapel Hill, Amar Das has only been able to visit New York and Kentucky. He remembers New York fondly

because of the large population of fellow Punjabis there. "Over there—I mean to say, I liked it because that there are a lot of Indians Punjabi, Pakistani Punjabis, Indians... So, there—, my heart was very happy. I was happier there than here."

If Amar Das was offered a job in New York, he would be happy to go there to work for about six months, but he would not want to stay there. Feeling that he has now seen as much of the U.S. as he wanted to see, Amar Das looks forward to when he can return to India and the life he led there. Without his family and friends, and working all of the time, Amar Das finds himself lost and lonely. "I keep saying to myself-, I'm away from my family, my brothers and sisters, what am I doing here?[laughter]"

Like many immigrants, Amar Das' greatest unhappiness with life here stems from missing his relatives. Amar Das came to the U.S. with four friends, but left behind a close network of relations, including a wife and a son. "They wanted to know how I was finding America, and I told them that I didn't like it. I am here without my relatives, brothers and sisters, friends, well-wishers. Over there you have all of these, you can visit them, talk with them, attend readings of the Granth [Sikh holy book] with loved ones, and weddings, etcetera. You can enjoyed their company and talk... The thing is, in India we live among our family, brothers/sisters, friends, you can talk with them, or visit relatives—over here I am all alone, with the exception of a few friends that

I interact with a little bit. And that's all. It's not a fun life like we have in India... In my opinion, the good life I can have in India is not for me here. Personal opinions do differ, and a lot of people find America better than any other place, even better than India. It's one's own understanding of things."

Of course, Amar Das' family misses him too. He tells of talking to his son on the phone: "He says he wants to go to daddy. And he cried for many days when I came here. He said he wanted to go to daddy and sleep with him. And he wouldn't sleep at night, saying that he wants to go to daddy. And they say if I was somewhere close by, they would have brought him to meet me, but this is too far. And—I mean to say, my son misses me, and so does my family. My mummy misses me a lot."

Like many immigrants, South Asian and otherwise, Amar Das finds comfort in his religious community. He is a Sikh and has been to the gurudwara several times. "At the gurudwara, there are our brothers, the Punjabis. When we go there, we do not feel that we are so far away from India, my home. Whatever we do in the gurudwaras in India, we do here. We have our family attending with us, and there are many people here also. At such times, I do not feel any difference between India and here."

But still, even at the gurudwara he has not been able to make any friends due to his infrequent visits. Amar Das does not feel

any of the closeness to those around him that he felt in his village. He has never been invited to anyone's house in the U.S., "American" or South Asian, and has had little interaction with others. Talking about his interactions with his neighbors in Chapel Hill he says: "When I leave my apartment, I run into someone, I greet them, and they greet me. That's about all."

Shedding light on the life in the village he left behind, Amar Das shared his memories of his youth. "And till the time I was going to school, we did have responsibilities at home, and we did then also. In the morning, I had to cut hay for the cattle... I used to cut hay for them in the morning, wash, have breakfast, and then go to school. After school ... have lunch, tea, etc., and then go out to play. While playing, I'd get late coming back home, and I had to be reminded of my chores-, like-, feeding the cattle, milking cows... I used to forget all that and keep playing ... daddy and mummy both got angry that I kept playing and forgot about coming back home. They didn't stop me from playing, because one must play... When I was playing with friends, we'd continue to play and forget everything else [laughter]."

Unlike many immigrants, Amar Das is not interested in staying in the US, and does not want to get a green card. "Even if a Punjabi girl living here was to offer to marry her and get a green card that way... I mean to say, that I will never agree to getting a

green card. People tell of a lot of different ways to get a green card, but I have no intentions of staying here, so what do I need to get a green card for? Even if someone tells me that the culture, lifestyle here is okay to live in, I would say it may be okay for him, but not for me."

Even if he were to bring his family here, he still feels that he would not be able to recreate the familiarity he knew in his village. "If all my brothers and sisters were to come here, even then the heart will not be happy, because once my family is here, they in turn will miss the other relatives, friends, etcetera, that we all visit and talk to frequently."

Although many immigrants have a fear of feeling like they have failed if they return, fortunately for Amar Das, he feels he can go home to India without any stigma attached. "And they say, sure, come back. It's okay, you went to look around, and when your heart is not into staying there, you should come back any time."

Interviewer: "Okay. And, have you ever thought of going back to India, and to return again after a visit?"

"No. Once I go back to India, what am I going to return here for? I have seen America now, I do not feel like coming back once I go."

Symbols of hope

Andrew Jilani, born in Pakistan moved to the United States in the early 1980s. In the last twenty years, he has lived and worked in number of countries, including Pakistan. Andrew met Cara Siano in 1993 while he was studying for his doctorate in Education at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst. Cara was born and raised in the United States. Together, they have traveled to several countries and have worked in El Salvador and Sri Lanka. At the time of this interview, Cara was studying at the School of Public Health and the couple had lived in Chapel Hill, NC for two years.

Andrew left Pakistan after his older brother was released by the army in 1979. He recalls, " My brother, Peter worked in Pakistan People's Party [PPP]. After the 1977 military coup by General Zia ul Haq, the Prime Minister, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto was arrested and later hanged in 1979. During Bhutto's appeal to the Supreme



Postcard from Pakistan

Court, my brother worked very closely with Bhutto's senior lawyers. While Bhutto's appeal was being heard in the Supreme Court, Peter was arrested under Martial Law regulations, and when he was in jail, he was tortured also."

It was due to Andrew's efforts that his brother was released. He submitted his case to Amnesty International in London, which treated Peter as a political prisoner and also newspapers in Pakistan that carried the news of his arrest. "It was lot of running

I GREW UP CHRISTIAN IN PAKISTAN...CHRISTIANS, AS YOU KNOW, ARE NOT, ARE NOT TREATED VERY WELL IN PAKISTAN. ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES...SOCALLY, THEY'RE NOT TOLERATED WELL...IT REALLY FELT GOOD TO BE IN THE UNITED STATES.

around, from military courts to the High Court in Lahore—we tried everything. Luckily, we succeeded. General Zia was a tyrant and many political prisoners suffered much. The Amnesty International's [AI] local group in Hannover, Germany played a great role in getting him out of the country and in assisting him to get asylum in Germany." Peter now lives in Germany and works with political refugees who come from Asia, Africa and the Middle East seeking asylum in Germany.

Soon After his brother's release, Andrew came to the United States on a student visa and later applied for political asylum. His application was approved in 1984. When Andrew arrived in the U.S., he missed his friends and family, and he missed Pakistan, especially the city of Lahore. But he was determined to make the best of opportunities in the U.S.. As Christians in Pakistan, Andrew and his family had faced difficulties. "I had nothing to go back to in Pakistan, the experience of my brother's arrest and his torture was still fresh, and this made me determined to do something in the U.S.. I had heard in

Pakistan that there are many opportunities in America. I decided to get higher education in the States, which I could not do in Pakistan. For me life in the States was a welcome change. I got my Bachelor's degree in Business Administration at Union College in Nebraska. My first job in the States was in bank in Omaha, Nebraska. I was thrilled as I was among the eight selected for a management training position, and I was the only minority in the group. This would have been almost impossible in Pakistan. I loved the opportunities which came my way. I bought my first car, and I was in a honeymoon stage."

After two years at the bank, Andrew did not find the job very fulfilling and he decided to leave the job. "I decided to work for the Amnesty International's local chapter in Omaha. I knew about its work personally. I volunteered for the local chapter and I waited on tables in an Indian restaurant. I liked the combination of these two jobs. The AI work provided me with an opportunity to look at the society critically, while the waiting job provided me an opportunity to speak my tongue, Punjabi, and to eat my food on a more regular basis".



Andrew as
young boy

The state of Pakistan became independent from the British Empire in India on August 14, 1947. Since that time, it has had several constitutions and has experienced several military coups. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's government was overthrown by General Zia ul-Haq on July 5, 1977, and Bhutto spent several months in jail, and was executed on April 4, 1979.

Pakistan has four provinces, Punjab, Sindh, Northwest Frontier Province, and Balochistan. Urdu is the official language and people also speak Punjabi, Sindhi, Pushtu, Balochi, Sariaki, and Barhui. The majority (about 96%) of Pakistanis are Muslims. The remaining are Hindus, Christians, Ahmedis, Sikhs, Parsis, and Zikrees. The founding father of Pakistan, Mohammad Ali Jinnah ensured that all minorities be protected in Pakistan. However, lately Christian villages have been attacked and blasphemy cases have been brought against them.

In 1988, Andrew got a Master's degree in Intercultural Management, which provided him with an opportunity to work with different cultural groups. He got his U.S. passport in 1988 and that made it easier for him to travel back to Pakistan. He returned to Pakistan to visit his family and work with the Peace Corps, Afghan refugees, and with a Primary Education Project in Baluchistan. Coming back was both difficult and rewarding. "I had changed in the States, and people back in Pakistan had also changed. In particular, my behaviors had changed. I remember one incident. When I arrived at my brother's house, I took a shower and afterwards I put on tennis shorts. My eight-year-old niece started giggling and she informed her mother that 'Chacha' [uncle in Punjabi] is showing his legs. I did not realize to what extent I had changed in the States."

While in Pakistan, Andrew enjoyed his work as a cross-cultural trainer with the Peace Corps and Volunteer Service Overseas [VSO], a British organization. He kept getting contracts with different international NGOs (non- governmental organizations) in Pakistan. "Working with Peace Corps and VSO provided me with an opportunity to re-learn Pakistan culture with greater appreciation. Later, I worked as an Education Manager for 10,000 Afghan refugees in the province of Baluchistan. I enjoyed this work tremendously".

THE PAKISTANI WAY, OR THE SOUTH ASIAN WAY, GENERALLY OF DROPPING IN SOMEBODY'S HOUSE, UNANNOUNCED...PEOPLE JUST SHOW UP YOU KNOW...AND HERE, INITIALLY, I REALLY STRUGGLED WITH...PEOPLE...HAVING THIS EXPECTATION THAT YOU CALL THEM.

Having worked in Pakistan for four years in cross-cultural and refugee education, Andrew was motivated to get his doctorate in Non-Formal Education. In 1993, he returned to the U.S. to start his degree at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst. While completing his course work, he did consulting assignments in Armenia and Sri Lanka. In 1996-97, he did his field research in Sri Lanka. He got his degree in 1998.

Andrew reflects on his being an immigrant in the U.S. and on his experiences working in different countries. When asked, "Where is home?" he says, "I have several homes. My two brothers live in Germany and one brother in Pakistan. I have also become culturally adept. Lately I have learnt Spanish, which helps me to communicate with Latinos here. I have also traveled in Guatemala and El Salvador and enjoyed this experience of a new culture and a language. Even though, there are different homes for me, there are times I miss my home from Lahore and my friends, brothers and their families. I am a Lahori and I miss it very much."

He also feels that immigration has contributed to his growth. "I have achieved a lot as an immigrant. Now the whole world is

open to me. I came to this country with \$30 dollars, and with my education I have been to travel and work in different countries and in different ethnic communities. I think it is important to understand the immigration process and the changes which one goes through. I can no longer be a Pakistani the way I was in Lahore. I am learning to contribute my talents where I am and that helps me to create a home where I am."

Andrew agrees that he picks up a little bit of the character of each place he goes to. Cara recalls that when they lived in Sri Lanka, "they thought he was a Sinhalese. They got angry when he did not speak Sinhalese. I think Andrew has the ability to blend where he goes [laughter]. I think he learnt just to create these kinds of wider networks you know of staying in touch with family who is spread out, staying in touch with friends who are spread out, and, that is maintaining some continuity in people in our lives."

Andrew's view of life as an immigrant in the United States has changed over time. "Initially, I did not feel that being a South Asian makes a difference. But now, I do think it does make a difference.

I HAVE NEVER FELT IN THE UNITED STATES THAT THIS IS MY PLACE. I HAVE NEVER FELT IT.

South Asians are treated differently. I have unique experiences. When I call on the phone and if there is a white person on the other end, he/she will keep asking if I understood what he/she has said. It is just they see accent in my voice and they do this."

When asked, hypothetically, what he would feel about language education if he had a child, Andrew said, "I would like my child to not only speak one language, but learn more. I hope that

a society would encourage this and would not make fun if a child speaks different languages other than English."

Near the end of the interview, Cara asked Andrew to talk again about his comment that there were no symbols of hope in Pakistan. "I think now, symbols of hope, one has to create. For me, they are not static any more. At the time I left Pakistan, my brother's arrest and being a Christian did not provide me with any hopes in Pakistan. My brother, who lives in Lahore, also struggles because he is Christian and many Christians would like to leave Pakistan after recent attacks on Christian villages and blasphemy cases against them. Opportunities are limited in the society overall and for minorities they are even more limited."

"I am learning wherever one lives one has to create hope for himself or herself and for others. My brother Peter shared with me that leaving home is one of the most difficult things in life. But once we have done it, we need to stand on both feet. I feel as an immigrant, I have gifts to share with others and that is my hope. I know that even if I leave the States, I will be able to create hope where ever I go."



Andrew (center) with brothers Peter and Paul

Within this life span, you need to do a lot of things

Mr. Sohrab Ali, an accomplished academic, holds a Masters of Arts in Economics from Bangladesh; a diploma in Computer Science from Germany; and a Masters in Public Health from UNC-Chapel Hill. After completing his studies in North Carolina in 1994, Mr. Ali returned to Bangladesh. Then in 1997, he came back to the United States, bringing his wife, son, and daughter to live in Carrboro. Currently working at Duke University and specializing in “data analysis, statistics, health policy research, [and] outcome

পঁচিশে বৈশাখ

নিশীথ তমসা বক্ষ বিদারী প্রভাত রবির কর
আসিতে আসিতে আজিকে প্রভাতে হয়ে গেছে মন্থর।
মাধবী কুঁড়িরা বারে গেল আজ প্রবল প্রভঞ্নে,
কষঃচূড়ার রক্তিম কুঁড়ি তবু যে সে প্রাণপণে
বিকশিতে চাহে সাথে
হে কবি ! তোমার জন্মের ক্ষণে এ পঁচিশে বৈশাখে।
আজ বাংলার ঘন দুর্দিন, আকাশে বাতাসে বাথা
এই বাংলার মানুষ আজিকে কহিতে পারে না কথা,
গাহিতে পারে না গান।
না বলা কথার বাথার পাত্র ভরিয়া করিছে দান
তবুও তোমারে স্মরণ করিয়া বাংলার গৃহকোণে
তোমারি রচিত তব বন্দনা—সব মানুষেরা শোনে।

আর এ অনামা কবি
অক্ষম হাতে তব বন্দনা রচিতে চাহিছে। ‘রবি’—
রশ্মির ধারা লহরে লহরে নামিয়া আসিবে যবে
যত অপরাধ অক্ষমতাও সব সার্থক হবে।
আজ জননী সন্তান নাই, সাথী নাই কারও পাশে,
ব্রহ্মহত্যা হাহাকার শুধু আকাশে—বাতাসে ভাসে।
আকাশ ছেঁয়েছে যক্ষদানবে, বেয়াকর বিমান উড়ে,
গ্রাম-জনপদ মেশিনগানের অগ্নিশিখায় পুড়ে।
পুড়ে গৃহ, পুড়ে মানুষের দেহ, পুড়িছে পাখীর নীড়
মা-র কোলে শেঁখে শিশুরে পোড়ায় দানব—বলে সে বীর।
বিষ্কার ! পিকার !

বাংলার মাটি পুড়ে হলো ছাই, শব্দ শোভা নাই আর।
কী দিয়ে সাজব স্মৃতির বাসব ? কাহারা গাহিবে গান ?

“Twenty-fifth Baisakh”
(Birthday of Rabindra
Nath Tagore) by Sufia
Kamal, Bangladeshi poet

Bangladesh is a South Asian nation that once formed part of Pakistan. From 1947 to 1971, the region that is now Bangladesh was East Pakistan and more than half the people of Pakistan lived there. Bangladesh gained independence in 1971 after a nine-month civil war between East Pakistan and West Pakistan. The people of Bangladesh are predominantly Muslim.

Bangladesh shares many cultural and geographical features with nearby West Bengal, which is a state of India. The northeast part of India borders Bangladesh on three sides. Bangladesh and West Bengal form a region that is known as Bengal. Bengali literature has flourished in this area for hundreds of years in the form of stories and folk ballads.

research," Mr. Ali is also pursuing a Ph.D. and a Masters in Information Science with the inter-institutional program between UNC-Chapel Hill and North Carolina Central University. When asked about his hobbies he jokingly replied, "most of the time, my hobby is study."

Mr. Ali says that life in America is busy with educational pursuits, spending time on the children's education, and with work. The difference between Bangladesh and here, says Mr. Ali, is with how people spend their time.

"I think people of the developed [nations] like America, Europe, they're very busy with their work, with their education, with their different sort of activities, so this is the basic difference between Asia, an underdeveloped country or developing country, and [a] developed country. Because people of the developing country or underdeveloped country like SAARC area [South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation], Southeast Asian regions, they don't have many thing[s] to do. They have lot of time to spend in their home, and talk to the relatives, neighborhoods. They spend lot of time with them. But in the developed country, people are very busy, and they use their time, utilize their time properly for particularly their education, their training, their children, their vocations, their service."

Even though life here is busy, Mr. Ali says sometimes he misses his brother in Canada and his mother and father in

Bangladesh. "Because in our culture there's [a] one-family tradition. We live together, we eat together, we sit together. We're habituated like that. But for me...I don't find any difficulties and I don't miss very much, but sometimes [when] we talk to our parents..." Mr. Ali paused, leaving his sentence unfinished.

Making friends in their neighborhood in Carrboro is easy for him and his family. The people are "very friendly and I have lots of friends... They're very helpful and supporting." The Bangladeshi community in Chapel Hill and Carrboro has "very few famil[ies]. But most of them are living in Raleigh and they're working in that area. So, yes, sometimes we have some cultural functions or like that and we try to participate, but not regularly... Sometimes we attend in the mosque but not regularly."

Moving to this country created "a lot of change in specific areas. Like, my wife is working. Before she was in housewife, in our country. This is one major change, I should say." But for Mr. Ali "it is not very much different," because of his previous educational and work experiences abroad.

For his son and daughter, living and going to school in Carrboro is also not so different, "because we live[d] in Dhaka, capital of Bangladesh so they also have very good school system over there. My daughter was in the English medium school [and] the standard is very high...so basic difference is, there most of the staff in Bangladeshi school system [where his son went to

school], they're reading in Bengali language, and maybe English is one of the subject[s] for my son." Even though the transition between schools was fairly smooth, the children are still, "getting lot of new things here, which [are] absent in Bangladesh." But Mr. Ali is not concerned that his children might be losing their Bangladeshi culture since they have moved to America. He says his son was in the twelfth grade and his daughter in the seventh grade when they came here, so they already knew and understood Bangladeshi culture, and "they also spend most of their time with us in our family." And the time they do spend away from the family, he sees as a positive influence.

"I think they're also getting some very good things...in this culture when they spend most of their [time in] school, and they're talking with teachers, they're talking with students, and they're getting lot of good things from this culture. They're learning lot of things. I think it's okay."

Mr. Ali describes Bangladesh proudly, saying it is a "very small country and it's a developing country," but some areas like the "sea beach in Chittagong, Nanga Mati" are very beautiful, and the "capital Dhaka is also a very good and big city compared to any other city of Asia." Dhaka, because of its size and location, says Mr. Ali, is a very international city with many opportunities in sectors such as tourism, higher education, and healthcare. In addition, Bangladesh has a thriving sports culture in football

[soccer] and cricket, recently winning the Asian cricket cup in the youth group category. And culturally, says Mr. Ali, there are many functions going on, "like songs, like dance, and like, you know, poetry, citations, drama."

Bangladesh shares many cultural features with nearby West Bengal, a state of India. Bangladesh and West Bengal form a region that is known as Bengal. Bengali literature has flourished in this area for hundreds of years in the form of stories and folk ballads. Two of the most famous poets to come out of this region were Rabindranath Tagore, who was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1913, and Nazrul Islam, the "revolutionary poet." Nazrul Islam's poetry inspired the freedom fighters during the struggle against the British, and also during the Bangladesh liberation war in 1971. Many of his poems and songs were banned by the British administration in pre-partition India.

Rahat, Mr. Ali's son, joined in on the conversation and shared some Bengali-language quotes from Nazrul Islam and gives us his translation and understanding of the poem: "It means...he doesn't wanna stay in the home, he wanted to see the outside world... And, he wanna see the universe and the outside world, and he

doesn't wanna stay home and be, know nothing about the world. That's what it's about." When asked if he was following the advice of the poet Nazrul Islam, whom he quoted, Rahat simply replied "Not really."

Mr. Ali also spoke about English and Bengali literature and quoted Rabindranath Tagore's poem, *Shonar-Tori* (The Golden Boat), first in Bengali. In translating the poem into English, it is as if Mr. Ali is giving us a translation of his story, and of his understanding of the world:

"Rabindranath Tagore it's a 'shonar-tori' that means golden boat, and he tries to say, there is a lot of crops, and there is a flood. Flood is coming, and we have a very small boat. Like farmer, they grow the crops and they need to take all the crops before the flood comes and damages, but the boat is very small. We cannot put all the crops in the boat. He tries to compare the things with the human life in this world. Because people can do a lot of things and their life spans is very small, so within this life spans you need to do lot of things, you need to do, finish lot of mankind stuffs, lot of stuff you need to do within small spans of time."

The happiness of the heart

The food here is no good [in Indian restaurants]... Over here, I just work to pass my time... The chef's position is— people here don't even know what a chef is... Chef is the head of the kitchen...just like a dining room has a manager. Similarly a chef is the kitchen manager. And, he creates new dishes, and removes the bad qualities of food."

Ravi Sharma came to the United States in 1989 to work as a chef. Originally from Patpargunj, a suburb of Delhi, India, he first worked in Maryland for eight years before moving to Chapel Hill to work in a local Indian restaurant. At the time of this interview he had just become a U.S. citizen. This interview, originally conducted in Hindi, was translated to English by a member of Asian Voices.

In India, Mr. Sharma trained three years to be a chef specializing in North Indian Mughal cuisine, and worked for several years in a five-star hotel. When asked about his favorite foods he



Sacks of food

PHOTOGRAPH BY ARAVINDA DE SILVA

replied, "I like chicken qorma [curry]. Among the lentils, is 'daal maharani' [queen's lentils]...it's made with cream and butter. And for flavor, you add dried 'methi' [fenugreek]." But he does not make this quality of food in the restaurants here. About his work he says, "I don't like it here, but I like it very much in

A person who has received permission from the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) to permanently reside in the U.S. is said to have a green card, although the document that is issued is no longer green. The term used by the INS to describe someone who has permanent residency is "resident alien." Obtaining permanent residency is a long and complicated process that requires legal assistance. The main avenues for obtaining this status are usually based on one of the following: 1) relationship to a U.S. citizen; 2) employment and special qualifications; 3) political asylum; 4) a special visa lottery.

India...but for money—for dollars, I like it here... for the position [of chef], I like it better in India."

In the years that he has lived in the U.S., Mr. Sharma has returned to India several times, once to get married. His wife of six years and son remain in India, waiting for their America visas. "They're coming here in about one or two months. I'll be going to

bring them here... The reason I miss [India] so much is that I have no relatives here, and no neighbor; there is nobody from even close to where I lived. I am all alone here."

Once his family arrives Mr. Sharma hopes to remain in the U.S. for only another five years—work hard, make good money, and return to India to live the good life. "Because life here is—just work. You go to work, come back and sleep. Then go to work again in the morning. But with work, you have money also. But then, money is not everything."

Working at least seventy hours a week, Mr. Sharma has only one day off. On his day off, he occasionally watches "a Hindi movie at home, which consoles the heart." He enjoys the ghazals that he hears in Hindi movies, especially those by Mehdi Hassan and Ghulam Ali. Once, when he lived in Maryland, he even had the opportunity to sing in the presence of Mehdi Hassan and Ghulam Ali. He says he often used to sing and play the harmonium, but he stopped singing after he was married. When asked why, Mr. Sharma replied, "I don't feel like it. I think of my family all the time."

He met his wife on one of his visits from America, at a wedding of a sister's friend. He asked his sister to introduce them, so that he could "talk to this girl—about marriage." He continues: "So my sister talked to her. And, her family were not in favor of her marrying someone who was living in America... They thought

THEY THINK OF US AS PEOPLE FROM POOR COUNTRIES, MAKING MONEY HERE, RUNNING BUSINESSES HERE—
BECAUSE OUR PEOPLE HAVE GONE AHEAD IN RUNNING BUSINESSES HERE...AND NO MATTER WHAT, WE WILL ALWAYS BE CONSIDERED
AS SECOND CLASS CITIZENS....I AM AMERICAN, BUT THEY WILL ALWAYS ASK ME WHERE I AM FROM—FROM INDIA.

American people are not good... Someone spread the rumor that I had another wife in America... Then, my sister assured her that [I] was not already married. She agreed to us getting married in court if her family would not approve of the match. So, that is how we ended up getting married in court. Later on, after we were married, we went to her family's place and everything was okay."

Mr. Sharma sponsored his wife to come here on the basis of his green card. It takes much longer for a green card resident [a permanent resident, not a citizen] to sponsor a relative. "The families of citizens are preferred over those with green cards. Now a lot of people are getting their citizenship. Earlier, not many people liked to do that."

Mr. Sharma looked forward to his wife joining him in the U.S. "So when my wife gets here, then we'll do some planning. Our life will begin then. Without your wife and children, life is very boring here. In India you can pass the time with friends. Over here, friends also don't have the time, so one feels bored... Friendships here 'with white people' do not develop easily...they develop gradually." Mr. Sharma believes there are several reasons for that:

"One is the English language problem that Asian people have. Because of that they fail to mix up with them. The other factor is time. Nobody has time," neither the Americans nor the Asians. He continues, "some people interact with Asians just for appearances sake. But deep inside them, they don't like Asians... We see that they like our food, when they come to the restaurant, but don't like the people very much."

When asked why he thinks people act this way, he replied: "They think of us as people from poor countries, making money here, running business here—because our people have gone ahead in running business here. And no matter what, we will always be considered as second class citizens... I am American but they will still ask me where I am from—from India."

Reflecting upon the differences between America and India, Sharma continues: "But all told America is a good country... Every country has its good and bad things. But the government here is good. There's not much party politics here. There are not state-wise differences. There's no language problem. There's no caste system also. These are the things that are destroying India—

taking her backward. There's not much of a visible divide here between the rich and the poor. It doesn't matter how you dress up. Water, power, their service here is very good... Food is not a problem. No shortages, like sometimes there's no sugar, sometimes no [cooking] oil—no milk—everything is available here to fulfil your physical needs, but to make you heart happy, nobody can do anything."

"You think of your country, when you think of the happiness of your heart. There's everything [here] to fulfill your physical needs—from sex to fruit... There is nothing for the happiness of the heart." In India, "you have relatives. In times of need, they stand by you, you meet frequently. Over here nobody has time. Everyone is so busy, so you feel those things." He tells his wife to temper her expectations of life in America. "I tell her that we will have to work very hard here—there's very little other than hard work here. But she says she will work hard. But when one gets here, one thinks that all you get is work."

After a brief pause, Mr. Sharma continues along another line of thought—about how Asian people here mistreat other Asians. In his experience, if all the workers are Asians working in a place owned or managed by another Asian, the owner will make the workers work very hard, long hours. "And they will not pay well. So, what do these people have to look forward to? Then they miss their country." He says that this mistreatment is happening in every Indian restaurant. They overwork the workers and there are no inspections or checks from the government. Nobody asks the workers, "how many hours they work or whether they have health insurance or not."

He finishes his interview with this thought: "I would like to say, in the end, that the government here does keep an eye on the labor, but there should be a system whereby the laborers are asked about their conditions, and they should be able to tell [their problems] without any external pressures. That's all."

A dual life

Aravinda de Silva came to the United States from Sri Lanka to study for his undergraduate degree in 1982. He then went on to complete his Ph.D. in Cell Biology and a Masters in Public Health at Yale University and currently works as an Assistant Professor of Microbiology at the University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill. Aravinda is married to Amy Weil, a medical doctor at the University of North Carolina Hospital. Amy is originally from New York and studied for her undergraduate degree at Yale, in New Haven, Connecticut. At the time of this interview, Amy was pregnant with their first child, Priyan, who was born a few weeks later. Both Amy and Aravinda participated in this interview.

Amy relates the story of how they met: “Well, we met in 1990. He was in graduate school, and I was working in New Haven.



Water pouring ceremony at Aravinda and Amy's wedding in Sri Lanka.

IT MIGHT SOUND STRANGE, BUT I REALLY MISS THE LANDSCAPE OF SRI LANKA. YOU KNOW, PEOPLE OFTEN THINK IT'S, IT'S RELATIVES, FRIENDS, BUT MORE THAN THAT IT'S THE LANDSCAPE ...THE LANDSCAPE, TO ME... TARGETS MYSELF, HEART AND SOUL. IT IS VERY, VERY...PHYSICAL....THE RELATIONSHIP I FEEL WITH...THE GROUND, THE TREES, HILLS.

And we used to ride on the same transportation to go to where I worked and where he studied.... We lived about a block apart from each other for all four years that he was in graduate school, and the four years that I'd worked after college...and never knew each other.... Three months before I was moving away to medical school, he started talking to me on the bus. And asked me to lunch, and I said, very nice to meet you, I'm moving away. And he was—."

Aravinda interjects. "No, I asked you for coffee. To go for a coffee in the evening. She said why don't we meet and have lunch at work. Going out, in the evening was too adventurous—, sort of a date." Amy clarifies, "I wasn't trying to have dates, I was moving away. I was reading books, trying to forget about my personal life."

Although it remains unclear whether they ever went on an official date, they both agree they did have several "conversations" before Amy moved away to attend medical school. Aravinda eventually followed her to Rochester, and then they both lived in various places in New York and Connecticut before moving to Chapel Hill. They have been married for more than seven years and still laugh at the idea that you can ride a bus in New Haven, meet someone, and marry them.

"But actually, the fun and interesting thing about it, perhaps, what our impressions of each other were before we met, which was I remember seeing him standing at the bus stop and wondering 'where's that guy from'. I can't quite picture where he is from, from looking at him."

For Aravinda, coming to America for education was a result of several factors.

"I came to know of the America college application process by a friend of mine....Most Sri Lankans in the past, in the seventies, they went to England for their higher education, but in the late seventies, England really started to make it difficult for students to come there. They raised fees, different tuition scales for foreign students than for British citizens. So, a lot of people started looking at America for college."

"The education system there [in Sri Lanka]...—I felt quite confined by it. It's a highly specialized, a continuity of the British system, so my last four years of high school, I only studied science subjects, and then I entered university, then I was only studying biology and chemistry, in...in university. I was also getting much

more interested in humanities, and English, and literature, so a liberal arts education sounded like a great idea."

Amy interjects, commenting on how hard it was to study in Sri Lanka at that time. "Because of the war there, you know, the university was closed a lot. So their chance of getting through university in four years was almost zero. The university was closed for months at a time, because people were fighting and killing each other."

"Yes, I know," Aravinda responds. "It was not, not because of the war, though. The war came after I left. The war had started after I left. But before that, the universities, they are all very involved in political life in the country, quite different from here. The students are very involved in politics, which is very good, but the negative side of it was, the campus was frequently on strike, and, so because of that, we didn't meet a lot of classes...but that was not the reason I came. That was...at-, at that stage I didn't even realize how bad things will become later on. Because my brother who went to campus later on, had a difficult time finishing. But I was not concerned about finishing. I was just bored with Sri Lanka.... And, here was a college, offering to, almost, pay for my entire four years of education in the US, so. It was a long shot—. I really wasn't expecting it to come. I sent out a couple of applications, then forgot about the whole thing. Got a bunch of

rejections. And then finally there was a letter in the mail...it was giving me all this money to come."

"I was leaving my home for the first time, leaving my family. So it was not just coming to a different country, but it was the first time I was, living, on my own I went straight from leaving my parents' home to being independent in America."

"When I left, it was going to be a temporary thing, so, purely for education, it's a wonderful, wonderful adventure, to go to the West..."

Aravinda noted that Sinhalese and Tamils whom he met in the United States tended to discuss controversial political topics more often than in Sri Lanka. "Because so many of the people, especially among the Tamils who have come here (U.S.), having in some way been affected by the civil war. When you get together at social gatherings, you can discuss in ways you wouldn't discuss in Sri Lanka. For example, if you're a Tamil person who's a strong supporter of the LTTE, in a social gathering in Colombo, you're very unlikely to come and openly say that." Whereas, in America, both Sinhalese and Tamils are more open to such discussions.

The contact they have with Sri Lankans in America, Aravinda says, "is not a community. It's more, a group to get together to celebrate certain holidays....I never have really been a part of a community that's been defined by...particular region or origin."

LTTE is the acronym for the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelaam, a group that has been waging a violent campaign to establish a separate nation for the Tamils of Sri Lanka. The Tamils who make up about 19% of the population live throughout Sri Lanka. In parts of the North and East of the island, Tamils are a majority and many Tamils consider these areas their "traditional homelands." The departure of the British in 1948 and the election of a Sinhalese-dominated parliament led to racial, political, and linguistic tension between the two communities. The early phase of the conflict was marked by much political maneuvering and agitation by both groups, and occasional violence when Sinhalese mobs attacked Tamils. The LTTE emerged in the 1970s with the goal of taking up arms to establish a separate Tamil state in the North and East of the Island. The LTTE, led by its leader, Prabhakaran, has developed into one of the most ruthless and effective terrorist organizations in the world. The Sinhalese-dominated Sri Lankan armed forces and the police have also abused human rights and resorted to terror tactics to suppress both violent and non-violent Tamil movements. This conflict has raged as a full-scale civil war for the past 19 years and devastated the lives of many Sri Lankans on both sides.

Amy, whose own background is Jewish, says that, "And I guess we've just done, Jewish cultural things with friends, sometimes, but we often have, you know, given party or meal like that, we'll invite our friends who are Turkish, and, all kinds of backgrounds that are not necessarily Jewish, to that gathering. So, even a gathering that is supposed to be about one or the other of our cultures, there's a lot of mixing. I think, also, for both of us, more of the things are cultural rather than deeply religious, because we eat a lot of Sri Lankan foods, or a lot of Jewish foods, or have friends who know about the culture of each of the places, but we don't go to a lot of their religious ceremonies.

Aravinda continues, "There are many ways in which you can, continue your, roots...keep in touch with your past. But not necessarily practicing a religion or going for a certain...ceremonies...or celebrating holidays, but in my, my case I think the way to do it is by involving my work with things, things relevant to Sri Lanka."

"The way I have done it, more is to have my, my research interest, my academic interest in Sri Lanka. I did my masters in public health research project in Sri Lanka. I set up some connections there....I've gone back two years in a row after that and worked at research institutions in Sri Lanka. I also am regularly in touch with people there, people from there write to me. So hopefully,

with my lab here, I'll be able to bring over from Sri Lanka, students, post-docs to come and work on public health problems."

"I miss Sri Lanka a lot. A big, big, source of sadness to me.... that I don't—I don't live in Sri Lanka.... And I guess it's been some source of tension between Amy and me, also. Where are we going to make our home, where are we going to live?"

"It might sound strange, but I really miss the landscape of Sri Lanka. You know, people often think it's, it's relatives, friends, but more than that—it's the landscape. Before I left Sri Lanka, I used to travel widely. I get a sort of a certain spiritual solace from, from the landscape, and I, I miss that a lot. You know, it's a country with a lot of problems and...before I came here I was very involved with friends in the environmental movement there....we wanted to change things. I miss not being able to be a part of that, even with all the education and...opportunities that I've had, I feel frustrated that, that—that I believed in all these causes so much. Now I'm probably in a even better position to do something about these things.....Another source of frustration is to work in academia, to do science, but to be so far removed from some of the causes, problems that...I've felt strongly about."

"I have many people in Sri Lanka, many friends in Sri Lanka who have come and who, sort of, look at me—they're quite baffled when I say landscape....The landscape, to me...sort of, targets myself, heart and soul. It is very, very...physical....The relationship I feel with... the ground, the trees, hills....And I think it's also more than the landscape, maybe there's, there could be a biological basis for it."



A lake by the roadside near
Hembarawa in Eastern Sri Lanka.

PHOTOGRAPH BY AMY WEIL

At home in America

Mary Mathew, an Assistant Professor of English at North Carolina Central University, began dreaming of coming to America as a young girl in Kerala, India, while reading books: "I have always been an avaricious reader, and all the years I was growing up, I stayed in a girls' school which was founded by the British and I read so many books about the snow, and things happening in the West and I just developed this great appreciation for seasons, and their changes, and all the things that I read about in the books. That's why I began to be fascinated with the idea of immigration from an early age, never really thinking that I would one day come."

Now she has lived in the Triangle for twenty-five years, during which time, like her husband Ravi, she received a Ph.D. from UNC-Chapel Hill. Though she followed her husband to the United States, she says that "practically all my life I wanted to go



FAMILY PHOTOGRAPH

Mary Mathew's mother

the West, myself." She describes herself as "a very fulfilled and happy professional woman", whose life requires "strict planning and regimentation of time" as she takes on the challenge of balancing her life.

Mary has two grown-up daughters, and her youthful look belies the fact that she is also now a proud grandmother. She comes from a Syrian Christian family background in Kerala, though here in North Carolina she is an active member of a Baptist church in Durham "because the friends from whom we bought our house were attending that church." Soon her children joined the youth program run by the church, and she began teaching in their academy and did so for two years, then she began to pursue her own education. But she still sings in the choir and attends church every Sunday. She has made many friends in the church whose congregation is largely white. But that has never been a problem for Mary and her family:

"The fact that we are from a different country only endeared us to them even more... We felt very welcome and were heartily accepted and I don't remember a single time when we even felt we were different from anyone else." But Mary says, "we don't socialize with them outside of church for lack of time, but we have known these people for many years and our children have grown up with the people in the church, and so they have become a second family."

Daughter of a pastor, Mary had grown up in a religious atmosphere. But coming to America provided an opportunity in which her "spiritual life has deepened a great deal" because "there are so many more avenues to learn from... There is a break with tradition that is possible here, and when you break with tradition, you always learn more and you come out of some ignorantly-held customs, the kind of things which take away from the beauty of true religion."

Among the many breaks was a significant philosophical departure from her church in India which reflected, ironically, the Hindu notion of renunciation, so that her "church would see poverty and illness as blessings! But after coming here, and studying the Bible on my own, I realized that what the Bible is saying is not that lack is blessing. It is saying that when you discipline yourself and walk in God's ways—these are the ways in which you will be blessed (financially, health-wise)... It changed my entire perspective on life." It was her faith that also made her husband participate in church activities "with equal enthusiasm."

For Mary, community life beyond the church centers around her family. Mary says, "interactions with the neighborhood is minimal because we seem to have so little time...and maybe very little inclination also... We have very cordial relationships with all of them... We're not socialites as such, but we've always had a very good circle of American friends. The South Asian

community are mostly friends from our very early days in the country when we did give and go to a lot of parties. Many of them continue the same practice whereas we have quit, just given up that kind of social life. So, we are close to them, but we hardly know what's going on in their lives." The early days were the early 1970s, when "anyone from India was basically a friend. But those days the community was small."

Now Mary's typical day is spent interacting with her colleagues at the University, and her evenings at home are spent with her family. Once or twice a year Mary and her husband host his family—his parents, brothers and sisters. Back home in Kerala, Mary was an only child whose father died when she was five months old. Childhood meant spending vacations with her five uncles. Now she visits every summer to see her mother, and gets to see them as well. Her mother lives in an old age home, where there is no phone, so communication is kept up through the old-fashioned way of letters. Besides, "it frightens her if I call her because she thinks something dire has happened here."

But apart from those familial connections, the truth for Mary is that she doesn't "miss anything." In fact, "life in this country has been a simple process of one dream after the other getting fulfilled—educationally, socially, in personal development in terms of the family... What I greatly like in my life in this country is that there is a great deal of freedom. I like the fact that I am any-

mous, and I like the fact that I can wear the clothes I like...comb my hair the way I want to—in other words manage my own life, and not have to justify my decisions to society in general." Her community in Kerala "was a very traditional, very conservative society from the north of Kerala, in the areas around Tiruvella." There "everybody dressed the same, everybody did the same things, and to be different was considered wrong and bad." Restrictions came in all sorts of ways.

"When I was growing up, I asked my mother if I could wear a short skirt and a top, that I wish I could cut my hair. And my mother would say, don't do any of this now, let me just find a groom for you and after that do what you want." In defense of that community, Mary adds that "they had very strong moral and social, religious values and in every way it was exemplary, but if you were different you paid a cost."

In contrast, in America, Mary found that "if you were different, you faced friendly curiosity, and not judgment... That has been my experience... I was always surrounded by people who appreciated the kind of culture, the kind of values I represented."

Being at home in America was a sense Mary had from her first moments in this country. "The strange thing was the second I disembarked in New York in 1970, I felt I had come home, because I had thought about that moment, thought about this country so much." But it wasn't a smooth ride necessarily. The first ten years

THE STRANGE THING WAS THAT THE SECOND I DISEMBARKED IN NEW YORK IN 1970, I FELT I HAD COME HOME BECAUSE I HAD THOUGHT ABOUT THAT MOMENT, THOUGHT ABOUT THIS COUNTRY, SO MUCH. WHAT IS IT THAT DRAWS PEOPLE TO A CERTAIN COUNTRY? HOW DOES THAT KIND OF AN ATTACHMENT DEVELOP?

"were filled with tremendous anxiety because we did not have the right visa... In those days I did not have the visa to work and study, and for all these reasons I always felt like I was not a part of the ongoing life. I had my little sphere with my small children and my household duties and that defined my existence. Many times I felt bored when my work in the house would be done and there was nothing to do."

"To me the breakthroughs came from four different things. One was we got our visa and the second was I began working. A third was that I stopped wearing all the time the traditional sari, and I changed and started using Western clothes. And the fourth one was that I started to drive. These four things took me out of my limited sphere completely and I began to really feel like this is a new life, and that I was a part of it. That's when it really began to be a home in the sense you felt so fulfilled and so comfortable in it."

During the early growing years of her daughters, Mary and her husband were "mentally still firmly rooted in the cultural expectations of typical Indian parents... It was unthinkable to us that girls would wear shorts. It was unthinkable to us that our children would think of dating boys...go out on dates and return after

nightfall. All of these are expectations that we had so firmly implanted in us that we could not get reconciled to how our girls were changing before our eyes. So when our elder daughter who was the guinea pig in our child rearing went through these stages, she and us had encounters when we would try to explain our respective positions... It took us time and a few years to realize that our children were not extensions of our personalities. Even though they were Indian in terms of having Indian parents, they had grown up here and were, in the real sense of the term, Americans. We could not package them into a predetermined cultural entity." It took the family "a few tough years when the girls felt we were unreasonably strict with them...that we didn't understand what their needs were in these social areas."

But their daughters' "friends loved coming to our house and having dinner with us, so they found their cultural background to be a social advantage." Back then, "neither of [our daughters] would wear a sari or things like that—now they would." Now, "they're more confident of themselves as persons, they see it as a way to look more attractive. They see it as exotic, what once they would have seen as different, you know, in a bad way."

Approximately 19 million Christians live in India, with the largest number found in the southern state of Kerala. There have been Christians in India for as long as there have been Christians in Europe. Syrian Christianity has been in India since the early centuries after Christ, and was reportedly first brought by the Apostle St. Thomas. Since the 16th century, Portuguese and British missionaries have introduced other Christian denominations.

Bringing up their daughters thus meant a constant balancing act. As Mary started allowing them to date, she also made sure that “these were young men of good character...[she was] carefully counselling them. Both girls have benefitted from our relaxing that stern grip on their social life and they have both been very responsible. We are proud of the choices they have made.” One of the choices involved her elder daughter marrying an African-American, a controversial choice for the South Asian community. But it has worked out beautifully for Mary and her family, in spite of initial anxieties when “we thought it would end up in a big catastrophe.”

Mary’s daughters are also making their own choices to maintain aspects of and connection to their parents’ culture. Although

the language spoken at home is English, the daughters understand Malayalam (Mary and her husband’s mother tongue), though they are not fluent speakers of it. “Yes, I do think knowing a different language—not in the sense of just making out what people are saying—but being able to communicate does add a wonderful dimension to your relationships. Our older girl, she understands Malayalam and can read some of my letters, in fact, letters that come to me, that is, but to her it is not important.”

Mary’s younger daughter, Susan, spent last year in India, working in maternal and child health. She volunteered in one of the mission hospitals where a relative was the chief doctor. Susan has always been drawn to the underprivileged sections of society, but her education at UNC had also exposed her to many young women from India, who she felt were “culturally more advanced than she was... They knew so much about India, they spoke some kind of Indian language fluently... So she decided that this trip would help reacquaint herself to her roots.” Besides, in her work environment “there were people from other countries who felt passionately about their own countries, and so she would come home and say to me—what is it that draws people to a certain country? How does that kind of an attachment develop? And so then she kind of figured that she could go back and learn about our society and our culture, and that would be something that would enrich her own heritage.”

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Asian Voices Collective

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South Asian Voices

ORAL HISTORIES OF SOUTH ASIAN IMMIGRANTS
IN CHAPEL HILL AND CARRBORO, NORTH CAROLINA

South Asian Voices is a collective oral history project that brings together the stories of some of the relatively new immigrants to Chapel Hill and Carrboro in North Carolina from one of the most populous regions of the world known as South Asia. South Asia consists of Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. The fourteen stories in this book are narratives distilled from the in-depth interviews conducted with each participant.

Asian Voices, a non-profit organization based in Chapel Hill, was founded in 1998 with the primary purpose of documenting these stories and bringing them to the larger community. Financial assistance for this project is courtesy of the North Carolina Humanities Council.



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