

Interview with Vimla Patel

Interview by Polly Sonifer

**Interviewed on June 16, 1994
at Mrs. Patel's Maplewood home**

PS: Tell me what part of India you came from?

VP: Bombay.

PS: What year did you come?

VP: 1957, I was a student.

PS: And you came with who?

VP: By myself, I was a student.

PS: And tell me what that was like. How did you decide that being a student in the United States was something you wanted to do?

VP: Well, you want to go and see a new country, you want to experience something new and it was exciting.

PS: How old were you then in 1957?

VP: Twenty-one.

PS: And you finished college already then in India?

VP: Yes, I was a college graduate from Ahmedabad in India.

PS: Tell me a little bit about your family.

VP: I have parents; I have one brother and two sisters, I'm number three. I had one older sister, one younger sister and the last one is my brother.

PS: And did your sisters also come to the United States?

VP: No. My brother came here once. He was a student. He stayed here for two years for part of his education and he left. He didn't like it here.

PS: But you did obviously. Tell me how old you were when you first thought about coming to the United States?

VP: Not until I was done with my college and everything.

PS: You were already 21 before it occurred to you? And how did your family react when you told them that was something you were thinking about doing?

VP: Well, they were farming and I used to know this guy here from my hometown and he was here, and my parents knew that it's not like I'd be quite lonely here or I'd be upset. What would I do in an emergency. There were some friends here, and they were fine. If I didn't like it here I could always come back.

PS: You came on a student visa, and which college did you go to study?

VP: Ahmedabad--that's the name of the city; it's a university. I went there and did my graduate work and my major was Sanskrit. It's an old ancient language, so I did my major in that. My minor was psychology.

PS: So when you came to the United States to study what school did you study in here?

VP: I was in Philadelphia at the Temple University?

PS: Temple? Can you tell me about your journey? What time of the year it was and how you traveled?

VP: It was a hard journey. I was scared. I tried to be brave but I was scared to go far away and leave my family behind. I knew English. I did write and I did read, but I didn't speak. You don't speak English there. The school I went to had an English medium so if you want to talk to a professor, you had to use medium, but we would try to avoid going to professor there. We wouldn't like to speak in English because it wasn't very good. But at least we could read and write. So when I came and on the way, somebody asked me some question, I knew what I was going to say, but I knew it wasn't going to come out right. First, because of the accents. They wouldn't understand me and I wouldn't understand them and half the time you finished the whole sentence and then you realize you could have used that

grammar or that grammar. I still remember someone asked me, "How are you?" and I said, "I'm nice". (Laughter) Because nice was good and nice was fine. But now I remember, and now I laugh it. That's the way my English was. We know what we mean but half the time it doesn't come out. So that was the biggest worry; what if they don't understand me, what if I don't understand them?

Food was a problem but I was a complete vegetarian. As long as I was in India, it was fine, but as soon as you come out, it was hard. When you don't eat meat at all you say "Okay I don't eat meat," and you don't eat it. But when you are with somebody else eating, it bothers you. And now it's a different story. This was 30 plus years ago. The main problem was language and then the food. Once you come here you realize how everything is so different. You knew it was different, but until you come here you don't realize how different. First of all everybody looks different. We are almost 99 percent all brown people, more or less. Here you come and almost everybody is white. And then clothes are different. Language is different. Religion is different. Food is different. You feel like you're on a different planet.

PS: Was the climate a lot different for you?

VP: Yes. Bombay is not as cold and as extreme as Minnesota.

PS: But Bombay does get cold?

VP: No, Bombay does not get cold. Bombay is very hot and humid and the winter time is like the spring time here. Bombay doesn't have cold weather. So, Pennsylvania isn't as bad as Minnesota. The snow was the first one for me. I didn't know how to walk on it. The guy I told you I knew about him? He said, "You have to buy shoes and warm coat and stuff like that," and I said "No, I don't like those coats and I'm not going to buy a coat." Eventually, I bought a coat and he said, "You might have to buy snow shoes," and I said, "I don't like snow shoes. They are so big and ugly with my sari." I used to wear saris for a long time. But eventually I bought snow shoes and it was hard to walk, I thought one day it is going to snow and it's going to be cold and it was going to be different. I thought it would be exciting to see something new. I was at school and it was a big, nine story building, and I was taking my class. When I came out, it was snowing. And, geewhiz, how

do you walk? I had my Indian slippers on. I was so scared, and I was waiting at the subway station. And a policeman was there and he came down. He knew my problem. Here I was with my sari and my slippers and I don't know how to walk and he said, "You know what you should do?" and I said "Yes, I should buy my snow shoes." So I did buy my snow shoes. It was interesting, exciting, and scary at the same time. Everything was new. You come here. You miss your home so much. You realize you are 10,000 miles away from home. So if I got letters I cried because I remembered them. If I don't get letters, I cry because I miss them. I used to cry a lot.

But it was nice. I was surprised. The people were very, very friendly. Back home everybody don't have the same impression of America. We just think it is the richest most powerful country. We are no power; poor people, poor country. So you wonder, what kind of people are they? Maybe they're happy, maybe they're proud, maybe they won't care for you, maybe they won't talk to you. So you think about all of this. I was wonderfully surprised at how people are very frank, sometimes they are too straightforward, blunt which we aren't used to in India. But they meant well and they are very nice; professors were very, very nice; students were very, very nice. They ask all sorts of questions. They were very frank. That's one thing I found out. Back home we think about asking something whether we should ask or not. Here everybody is blunt or straightforward and I like that, they say what they mean. I like that. People are very, very nice. It was wonderful.

PS: Did you travel by airplane, or did you come by boat?

VP: I came by airplane.

PS: How was that? Had you been in an airplane before?

VP: No, it was the first time.

PS: What was that like?

VP: Very first time was not a good experience. I didn't know what to expect. First of all I got sick because I was nervous. They said "Don't eat," then I got hungry. They said if you don't eat you are not going to feel good, so I ate. The very first time I ate, I threw up. That was the worst experience. So now I learned my lesson. So now I go

every three years I'm fine. I don't get seasick. I'm fine now. But that time it was hard.

PS: And you were traveling all by yourself.

VP: All by myself.

PS: What was it like saying good-bye to your family in India?

VP: It was not nice. Everybody knew I was going. I was getting ready for a long time. But then, you know parents, they say, "Oh, she's going far away." There's a tiny bit of worry, "What if the plane falls down . . ." Or, "We are old, what if we are not here when she comes back?" Stuff like that. It was scary. It was exciting.

And that when I was here it was hard. You are a foreigner. But then I was a student and you are very busy. Here they keep you busier than back home. Back home we didn't have this many tests. You can take it easy for awhile. Then you find out there is a test you have to start to read and do the test. It's not like here. There are so many tests. One after the other. Keep on studying. Keep on studying.

PS: What major were you studying here?

VP: Psychology. That was my minor there so I took it as my major here.

PS: You were doing your master's program here?

VP: Yes.

PS: And did you complete that?

VP: Yes.

PS: When you first came, the plane landed in Pennsylvania.

VP: First it landed in Boston. Then I took the local plane to Philadelphia. I didn't know anybody in Boston, so I just got off, I had my customs then I took a local plane. I didn't know they were going to ask for my student visa at the airport. There are so many papers. And everybody says, "Put it nice so you don't lose it," so I put it under my bag and put all my clothes on top of it. I thought somebody will

ask when I go to school or something and I come to the airport and that's the first thing they to want to see. Here I am again, nervous! I found the papers and gave to them. But I was okay at that time. I knew the guy who was from my mother's home town.

PS: What was his name?

VP: He was my husband now, Kalyanji Patel. And then we have so many other friends. His most of the friends. They came to the airport. I didn't know any of them but they are all from India. It was nice to speak Indian language.

PS: Gujarati is your language?

VP: Yes, Gujarati is my language. It was nice. Then we went to school. My husband was in Michigan, in Ann Arbor and East Lansing, He got his Ph.D. in chemical engineering. He was a big help at that time. He knew my problems.

PS: He was in Michigan while you were in Pennsylvania?

VP: He was in Philadelphia. He was finished with that. He got his degree some years ago and he was working at Borden Company. So it was nice, he was a big help.

PS: Where did you live?

VP: I lived right close to Pennsylvania University which wasn't too far from Temple University. But afterwards when we were married, we lived closer to Temple University.

PS: You lived in an apartment?

VP: Yes.

PS: By yourself?

VP: Yes.

PS: Did you set that all up by yourself?

VP: No. I had a friend. Most of the time I would stay with my friend. They'd come and I'd go. But it was nice. And like my husband, since he was the only one I knew very well, the rest were all friends but they were all new. This guy I knew from my hometown. He was here for eight years, so it

wasn't like I knew him that well. But at least he was from my hometown. We could speak Gujarati. He would take me to restaurants, show me what not to eat and all that.

When we got married, we moved to Temple University close by, so we were there for three years and I came here to Minnesota in, I think, '59. My husband got a job at 3M so we came here. Then we raised a family. We have three boys.

PS: Tell me how it is that you ended up getting married.

VP: First of all he was from my hometown. And since he was a Ph.D. and I was going for a master's and everything. Back home at that time, even now sometime, you had arranged marriages. My mom was hoping, "Wouldn't it be nice if you married somebody from our hometown, our language our caste, and stuff like that." We'll see, we'll see. And, he also knew I'm from his hometown. It was a nice friendship, a close friendship. Probably because I didn't know many other guys right away anyway. So it worked out fine. He was a nice, gentle and kind person. Because he was here for a long time, he was a big help. We spent lots of time together. He helped me to study, if I had problems, he helped me.

PS: It sounds like you were almost dating each other which isn't how most people do it in India.

VP: Back home we weren't dating. I knew him. But when I came here, I was a student. I had to go to school. It wasn't dating. He was the only guy I was seeing. He was the only guy I knew from my hometown. All the others I met for the first time and I had to know them from the beginning.

PS: But you spent time with him getting to know him more before you decided to get married.

VP: Yes.

PS: So your marriage wasn't arranged in the traditional sense.

VP: No, no.

PS: Did your parents think that the two of you would be well-mated?

VP: They were hoping, that since that was the only guy I knew maybe we will marry. When we told them, they said, "You don't have to decide right away. Take your time. Just because we are hoping that doesn't mean it has to be." But he was a nice, gentle guy and we liked each other.

PS: Tell me about your marriage then, your wedding.

VP: We were planning to get married in Michigan. He knew so many friends because he went to school there. We had a friend there who wanted us to get married with an Indian ceremony but then we couldn't have it there. But then this guy who was a minister said, "I can perform the ceremony, church or private or whatever". He's a friend and a minister both and he was willing to do it.

PS: Was he a Hindu minister?

A No, he was a Christian. He was one of his friends. But then he said there is a law that you have to do a public notice that we are going to get married so if anybody has an objection let us know. He said it's just routine, just a formality, nothing is going to happen. But, we had to wait three months.

Then we thought, do we want to wait? It's not like we had a big group or that our relatives or families are going to be here. Why don't we make it short? So then instead of going to Michigan, we just went to Camden, which was close to where we live. So we went there to the court and we said "I do," you know just like you guys say. And then we say eventually we are going to get an Indian minister and we'll get married if it works out but if it didn't work out. But at that time there were no Indian ministers around here. Since we didn't have relatives or family anything, it was just exciting to do what we wanted to do, so we just went to the court.

PS: Did you even have a party afterwards or anything?

VP: We just got together and visited.

PS: When were you married, what year and what day?

VP: It was September 19 in 1957. Actually, I came here in the very beginning of September. We were married in three weeks.

PS: So this happened real quick?

VP: Ya, ya. (laughter)

PS: You must have liked each other?

VP: Yes, we liked each other! He was the only guy I was spending so much time with, other guys who came to the airport, his friends would come and say, "Bye, how are you?, what can I do for you?" But since Kalyanji knew I was alone, I'm from his hometown, he decided to help me. I'm from the school. I don't even know what to cook, how to cook, and he helped me.

PS: Did you have a feeling before you married him that you were in love with him, or not? Or wasn't that important?

VP: At that time, 35 years ago, in India and when I came here, it was like love follows marriage. And even now, all of them, my sisters and brothers who marry in India, it was marriage first and then comes love. So we like each other. But you say, "You love this guy?" But I don't think in the beginning, the first few weeks, you know what is love. You know what I mean? You say okay I like this guy, oh, I love you. It takes years before you really can say, "Oh, I can't live without him." Do you know what I mean?

PS: So you got married three weeks after you came and then that's when you were in an apartment together then?

VP: That's when we went into an apartment very close to Temple University, and I go to school and sometime I had evening classes and sometime I had morning classes. He had a job, 8 to 5. He was very competent. Sometimes if I was late, he'd come and pick me up. Sometime he'd cook for me. You didn't even find everything you wanted to cook with. Half the things weren't there. But we got by with what we had. There were a few friends. Life could be fun. Nowadays there are so many Indian people and so many groups and so many programs. At that time, there wasn't that much. But basically the main idea was study, because there wasn't much going on at that time. It was a beautiful city, very clean for a big city. I was scared because I never saw the colored people before; back home we are all brown, more or less but this was sort of a new experience for me. I was scared in a way, you know. In Philadelphia,

60 percent are colored and only 40 percent are white. And I never saw them before, and I was scared.

PS: African-American people you're speaking of?

VP: Yes, colored people, yes. Then I met some who were in my school, and I knew they are very, very nice people. You have to just know them. Just not being with them before and one guy was 6'5". He was a big guy and I was scared.

PS: So his size was what was scary?

VP: Yes, and like I said, I had never met people like this before. But then when we moved into here, there were some others who were colored. They are very nice people. Then I met some through mutual friends in school. You get a wrong impression talking to people. I had heard, "oh these people aren't very educated or they are backwards or very violent and you want to stay away from them," but then I realized they can be nice people. You got to just know them and they became friends. I was surprised. I could talk with them, sit down and have coffee with them. I like them.

PS: Where had you heard those things that colored people weren't safe?

VP: Not safe but like I said, we had very few Indian friends. I said, "Gee these people are different," You know in India we are all brown more or less; some are dark, some are not but these are different people. You see their hair, and you see their big size and their accents are different than white folks and I said, "Gee, I'm scared."

PS: But you weren't scared of the white people?

VP: No.

PS: Where had you heard that black people could be scary?

VP: The very few Indian friends that I knew that had also come from India they said, "Because they were poor, they get more involved in violence. They didn't have jobs so they don't have choice but to go and do bad things and stuff like that."

PS: So it was the Indian people who were already here who were telling you to watch out for the blacks? You hadn't

heard that before you left India?

VP: But then I found out they were nice people. Some of them are in school and I can sit down and talk with them and have coffee. People in general they are very, very nice. I found out that.

PS: Tell me now about your children. When were they born and what are their names?

VP: Okay, I have three boys. I didn't have kids for six years. One was born in '63, one was born in '64 and one was born in '70. And they were all born and raised here. One got a Ph.D. in chemical engineering from New York. One is almost ready for master's degree in computer science and the last one just got a BS in computer science last summer. So they are all highly educated, very smart, intelligent kids.

My second one got married first, he married American girl. Again from a different background, I was wondering how this was going to work out. They were dating for five years, she was a wonderful girl. We knew her well before they got married, and she's my daughter-in-law for seven years now.

I can't ask for a better girl than that. And people still wonder how it will work out. She being from here; it's just knowing the person. That's what I say. People wonder, you have a different religion, different language, different clothes, different everything, how does it work out? I think it's just knowing the person. Everybody's not nice here, and everybody's not nice there and it's just the individual.

My first son he got his degree from New York. Then he came here and he married an Indian girl. She is also pursuing a Ph.D. for mathematics. But it wasn't an arranged marriage either; they talked and they know, they talked and they know, and then after a few months, they got married.

My last one, he's still a student. He has a girlfriend, but he doesn't have a steady girlfriend yet. So they'll do fine, they all have their education; partly Americanized, partly Indian. Working through both cultures, I think it must be hard on them, too.

PS: I'm curious to know how you raised them. What kind of things did you do as their mother to teach them their Indian

values and how did you balance Indian values versus the American values they were picking up in the school?

VP: It wasn't easy. Until they go to school it was easy. At home they were speaking their language, me and my family were speaking our language.

PS: So did they learn to speak Gujarati?

VP: When I take them to India for two or three months they would speak perfect Gujarati but when they came here and started playing with the American kids they would forget, they would know the words but they wouldn't put them in a sentence. So they would not speak here Indian language but they would understand what I'm saying. Same with Indian food. I cook Indian food at home. Until they went to school, everything was Indian food. Once they went to school, then they would rather have hamburger, they would rather have hot dogs. We keep up both. My older one, he was more for Indian food. The other two, they tended to eat both. Now with the other two, when they have choice, the last one he would rather have American food; he likes Indian food once in a while. My first one he likes Indian food most of the time. The second one likes both. So everywhere, whether it's the food or the clothes, in your home, you have more influence. After they are born, you have choice. It's like so many Indians said, "Here in house we are Indians but when we go out we are with Americans." So they go to school, they learn those things they come home and you tell them, "We have two languages, we have two nations, we have two everything", and then they have a choice what to do. So like I said, one married Indian, one married American. It's their choice; food is their choice.

And even now it's hard for them. I think for the kids, for the second generation, it is harder. We are trying to teach them something. As soon as they are twelve, most of the friends are white and they spend most of their time outside.

It is hard for them what to choose what to do. They might want to please parents, but they also want to please themselves. Some things are okay in India but they are not okay outside. Some things are not allowed in our culture, but they are here. I think for them it is harder than for the parents. Parents may or may not like it, but for kids, it's a tough choice. My older one he's sort of more Indian, mainly because he went to school in New York and his roommate was Indian. I think that they were together a lot. So many of his friends were Indian. He was more

Indianized; he ate more Indian food, he was more toward Indian culture. But he had American friends all the time. He had Chinese friends.

Yes, I can see it is tough on them. Do we go on dating? Do we marry Indian girl? Do we go for an arranged marriage? If we do this, will that one like it? It's hard on them. For us, it took a long time to learn to accept or sometime tolerate things. People who come new for instance, four or five years ago, when they find out our views of marrying Americans or our views about eating meat or do our kids don't speak our language, they ask, "Why did you come here and lose your culture?"

PS: How does it feel when they accuse you of losing your culture?

VP: Then you have to talk them about what you are going through. In the beginning we tried to teach them, then afterwards they picked up this one. It's not their fault. If you are in India, then India is my country. If my parents came from America, I am going to be different because I am Indian. So we are here for them. They are born here, it is their country. Whatever they learn, they want to do what their friends want to do, they want to eat what they do, they want to wear what they want. But you have to be fair and accept the thing that you came here and now you gave your lot to this country. So we let them learn both cultures and let them decide. That's what they are doing. Whether it's clothes or food whatever, it's their choice; they have to pick.

PS: How about regarding religion? Did you raise them to be practicing Hindus?

VP: No. When I came here there was not Hindu temple or Hindu anything. There was nothing. Now we have Hindu Mandir and Geeta Ashram and discussions and everything. At that time, there was nothing. So at home (under five years of age), we tell them what we believe in, what we do when we go to temple, we worship, we do this and that. We teach them on an elementary basis. Then as soon as they are five or six, they said, "My friends are going to Bible school, how about us?" and we said "Fine, go and learn." So they did and they learn a few things. And then they said, "Why don't you come and learn with us?" And then we tell them, "This is our religion; we are doing this one. All religions

say 'Whatever road you use, the final goal is the same.' You want to reach God whether by Buddhism, or Christianity or whatever, it is your pick." So they went to Bible school for awhile, they went to church for awhile. And afterwards they realized that Hinduism is different. Like my older one, he'll come to temple with me. Now they're all mature; we don't tell them what to do. We taught them our things and they know what it is. We hope they will pick up a bit from each culture and grow up that way, as long as they respect both cultures. Just realize we are all from different countries. We all have different things. God made us that way. Maybe God wanted us that way. So you see and you accept and you learn. That is the main thing we do.

PS: In India then, the parenting roles are fairly distinct. The man does this and the wife does this. They are very traditional, pretty stiff. Did you see any of those changing in your family here?

VP: Yes, when I was growing up and it was 50 plus years ago, the parents were very strict and you did this and you had no choice. Even now, the parents (in India) are more strict than here. Parents say, "You go to school. You do this." You don't have a choice. Here we give them choices from the beginning and we discipline them and everything. But here parents are not as strict as there. Here it was harder in so many ways. My boys used to tell me, "American moms wouldn't say that," and I'd say "Ya, but I'm not American." (laughter) But now they realize more. We would say, "Okay, we worked very hard to get our degree, education is very important to us." Then they would ask, "Well, everybody don't go to college here, why do we have to go to college?" This is just to start an argument, just to talk about it. Then they are learning to talk about it. When you are from those countries, China or India, life is harder. There's a main thing you can do. Work hard, get education and go ahead. Here there are so many ways people go by and that's different. You have choices. If you are smart, get an education. So now they have education; they are happy. At least also they are learning there are all sorts of different people, all sorts of different jobs; you admire everybody, you respect everybody, you need everybody. Whether they're making clothes or they're making shoes. If you don't get an education and you do those things, that's fine. But if you are smart and you have the opportunity, do it. We were brought up in a very strict way. We got more spankings than our kids did. They were very strict, "Do

this!" We were not supposed to go out at dark. No dating at all. Dating is still not allowed in India. So many things were learned from there. It took me years before I learned and accept and compare. It's a new life. You chose to come here. You brought kids here. It is their country. You learn to accept, and you like it, too. Like it made me be friends with individuals. The people are nice and everything is fine. Like I said, my daughter-in-law is American and no problem. It is very interesting to see the kids growing up now because their kids also have an American mom and Indian father. They are doing just great. They are learning both cultures. They pick up everything so fast.

PS: Do you think it would have been different raising a girl here if you had had a daughter? Would you have been more protective?

VP: Some people say that I am so relaxed because I have three boys. They tell me that if I had had a girl, I would have been more scared. I didn't have girls, I can't say what I would have done. Like they say, if a girl makes a mistake, her life will be ruined. But what if I had a boy and he made a mistake? I'd be worried anyway. But raising girls is harder here than raising boys. Raising kids is harder in this country anyway.

PS: Raising kids is hard in any country, right? Not an easy job.

VP: Yes, yes.

PS: Did you see any change in how you divided the labor in your family, like what tasks your husband did and what tasks you did within the house?

VP: Yes. He was here a year before I came, so I was really surprised he was willing to cook and do the dishes. He would do everything helpful when I was leaving the house. But I was a student and I had to study, too, and he was done with school. When he came from work he's done with his job; he's free. And then I had to study. He was helping me all the way. I was surprised. There were no fights over who would do what and I didn't expect him to do anything, so I was surprised. Even after the boys were born, he took his share.

PS: Good man.

VP: Yes, yes.

PS: Your husband worked for 3M for many years here in town?

VP: Yes.

PS: How did you and he get connected to the Indian community here in town? Did you start any new associations?

VP: When we came here, one of his friends knew one family here. They were Patels, too. Actually, when we came here there were so many bachelors. When we came here, we were so surprised that there was hardly anybody here. In Philadelphia, there were a few more. But here there were three or four families. Somebody gave me the address of some Patels here. When we came here we thought we would stay in a hotel for two or three days, and then we would look for an apartment. But as soon as we called those guys, they were so happy to have some family that speak the same language they said, "No, no, you come to our house and stay with us." We were surprised; we hardly know them and they are asking us to go and stay with them. Then we realized why. Because they had three or four families who spoke Gujarati and they were very happy to have us. Because of those four families, we knew other bachelors. And, of course, now there are more than 100 families here so we can't even keep up with everybody. But at that time, when we want to get together, we got everybody together. It was nice. More and more people are coming and settling down. So now there are so many. Now we have temples and ashrams (they are called church.) We have so many festivals and celebrations and so many activities where we are now. Now we have a whole big family here.

PS: When you get together with other Indians in the community, do you prefer to be with the Gujaratis?

VP: No. Anybody. Especially when we go to temple, like we have brought them--- people from all over. As you know, every state in India has different language. So half the time they don't even know what we are speaking. We get together and half the time we speak English because many of them are not Gujarati. We are all Indians.

PS: Do most of you share the Hindi language though?

VP: Hindi is a national language.

PS: Do you speak that?

VP: Yes.

PS: You also speak Sanskrit because you studied it.

VP: You don't speak Sanskrit. Sanskrit is a very, very ancient language and actually Sanskrit is supposed to be mother of all the languages. But it is not a spoken language. The scriptures were written in Sanskrit and you learn all that. But it's not a spoken language.

PS: Nobody talks in Sanskrit.

VP: No.

PS: But when you chant, it's Sanskrit.

VP: Yes, we chant in Sanskrit. Scriptures are done in Sanskrit.

PS: You were part of forming Gujarati Samaj?

VP: Yes, samaj is a society. We came here and there were hardly five families and maybe eight or ten bachelors. After a few years we thought, "Gee maybe we should have some sort of organization where we can get together and celebrate festivals and do something." So what do we do? So we thought and thought and thought, and one time, they said "Well, where do we meet?" And I said, "Well, why don't we meet in my basement?" So we went to meet in the house and the very first holiday celebration we were in our basement. We celebrated our new year there. Everybody liked it and it happened a couple of times. Then we decided, now we are more people, let's get a hall and get together. This was only the Gujarati people. After six years or so, only a few people were organizing and getting everything together. Then after six years or so we made it sort of official. We laid out this and this. In the beginning there were only 40 or 50 families, now we are 124 plus families. And now we have everything. We meet on every holidays. We have all sorts of functions; sports, picnics, get-togethers, and it's nice now. Now we have a minister. He's not Gujarati but we have one Indian minister here. He can perform any

rites or rituals if you want to, so that's very nice, too. Back three years, we didn't have any ministers here. We had temples and people like all of us. Whoever know something, we'd have to get together and do it. Now it's nice we have a minister who performs ceremonies.

PS: Is he your full-time minister?

VP: Yes.

PS: And you have your own temple with him?

VP: We have a Hindu Mandir and we have a Geeta Ashram and they are both temples.

PS: Is your minister associated with one of those temples?

VP: Yes. When he came, Geeta Ashram sponsored him, so he was from there. For awhile he worked for Hindu Mandir too, but now he wants to be independent. So the way I hear it, he is an independent minister. Whoever wants him, can have him.

PS: And what's his name?

VP: Tawari.

PS: So he's not connected to Geeta Ashram anymore?

VP: No.

PS: Or Hindu Mandir?

VP: No. He wants to be independent.

PS: Have you seen any times when there were conflicts in the Indian community?

VP: In a way, not that there were fights or anything. But I think that it's a tendency when there are thousands of people at a picnic parties since we celebrate different at picnics. If there are thousands of people you tend to go and find out who are friends, why people are there, who might be Gujarati or Punjabis and things like that. But there were no fights or anything. We all get together at the Mandir, so there are no fights or anything.

PS: How does the community display it's pride? What are the activities?

VP: Mainly, we have an India Club here. India club means it's a whole India; and not Gujarati, not Punjabi, it's a whole India. And they do lots of things; independence day, picnics, celebrate national holidays. They help out poor people in India. That's the main thing when we get together. There are other organizations, too. But the India Club is the main thing, it's for all India.

PS: And you belong to India Club?

VP: Yes.

PS: Have you seen India Club changing over the years or have you seen any changes in the Indian community over the years?

VP: It's changing. First of all, it's getting bigger. Because now there are more people, there are more organizations. Geeta Ashram and Hindu Mandir are the religious ones, but you have so many other small groups where you want to learn your religion. There's a SILC school if you want to learn all your languages or whatever. So there's so many things like that (sports, actions) it's multiplying everywhere. People are doing all sorts of things.

PS: What do you see as the major advantages of belonging to those Indian associations or groups?

VP: The main thing to keep up the people with the culture. It is easier if you are doing your worshipping (we worship everyday.) But it's nice to go once a week and worship together. You can take advantage of whatever other people know. Like I say we didn't have priest until recently, so whatever we knew, we taught each other. I was teaching religion at Geeta Ashram for 15 years, every week, I was a volunteer and I taught. At the Hindu Mandir also there are three or four volunteers. We aren't an official priest or anything but we share. So it's nice, because whenever we get together we share. It's nice to have our own clothes, see the kids who are learning new things and it's nice to know that. It's like a family.

PS: Like an extended family?

VP: Yes.

PS: Do you see any disadvantages to belonging to an Indian association?

VP: No disadvantages, unless, there is one drawback. For the newcomers there is one disadvantage. If they have a language problem, there is a tendency to stick by only Indian group. It's nice that they are exposed to all these things and they feel comfortable and everything, but then they have a tendency not to try too much or not to try enough to be with the non-Indians. And that's a disadvantage, not only to your kids but to yourself too. In my case, I had an advantage. First of all since I had kids in school and everything through PTA and conferences and whatever, I meet so many Americans. And then I went to YMCA and I meet Americans everyday. Neighbors are Americans. So you say, "My God, you get to know what kind of people they are." Before I came here, I didn't know very much. You don't have very good feelings about Americans people, because first of all you don't know them so you are wondering, how, what. So you wonder, "Maybe they are rich, maybe they are not very educated, maybe it won't work out," but once you know them, everything is wonderful. It 's surprising how frank and how nice they are. My husband died a year and a half ago. It was such a surprise how everybody, not only Indians, but even Americans come to help me and be there for me like a family. Very nice, very nice helping everywhere. You know to me, sitting with you or sitting with an Indian, I don't feel anything special with Indian. We say, what's in the person. And that takes a long time to know. In the beginning, its a tendency that you want to share, you want to talk about India, but then it grows on you. The more you know the more you like them.

PS: So are your closest friends Indian or American?

VP: Both. Our relatives are American, so they are both.

PS: You said you went to the 'Y' and went to school PTA meetings etc. What other kinds of community activities were you involved in as a mother?

VP: When they are in elementary school, right away you start going to PTA and conferences and all that. Then they joined the Boy Scouts so it was a family; father and son.

So the whole family goes. All three of them were Boy Scouts. And then we all joined the YMCA as family members, so then you take them for all sorts of things. And then they're in soccer and baseball, you go for that. That way you get involved and you know your neighbors and more people. They could be asking lots of questions. They want to know everything about you. And most of them are very, very nice. I was really surprised with the schools. There no prejudice or no looking down to the foreign people. I noticed it right away. My kids are very smart, above average. They were in advanced classes always with four or five students - -- half classes in second grade, half classes in third grade. That went on through seventh grade. Both kids were in there. I never, never thought that because we were foreigners they were put behind. They were always with the white people. Even when they went to high school, they were offered opportunities just like the other kids. And then when they went to college, minorities are always looked down on - - - I never felt that way. I think it all depends on what a person's education, and what you are doing. My kids had degrees and they were smart, and they were offered jobs, no problems. If you were at schools when whatever was going on, there were scholarships. No prejudice at all.

PS: Did you work outside the home at all, for money?

VP: No, I didn't. First of all when I came here I was a student, so I was going to school. Then we wanted to start a family. Then, here is an Indian tendency, my husband say, "It would be nice if you would be home when the kids come. That's the main thing we want." He said, "If you need money, its a different thing, but we don't need money that way. It would be nice for them to come home and you are here for them. That's the way we had it back home, and it would be nice." So eventually that's what happened. Each time they grow bigger and more and more time with them. Then I got involved with Geeta Ashram teaching religion, so I was busy with that. And then the Gujarati Samaj started, so we were busy with that. There were so many activities going on we are very busy, and if you are a housewife, you know that a house keeps you busy. (laughter) I'm busy. Life is never boring.

PS: Never boring. That's good. What were the specific things you did to teach your children about their Indian heritage?

VP: First of all we take them to India. That's the best thing you could do.

PS: How often did you do that?

VP: My youngest one, I think he went three times. My oldest one went three times. I took them to India. The main thing is they know their grandparents and to see first hand what everybody is doing. Oh, and here's India, it's the world. We are not with a different people; we are in a country. It's not like we are from somewhere where nobody knows you. We are here. Just like here. We are in a different part. I think the main thing they learn is, that just because you are from a different part, it doesn't mean you are higher or lower. Everybody should learn that. We are all different.

If God wanted the same way, He would have made same way. But He made a different way, because He wanted that way. That's the one thing we have to learn to accept, "Okay, we are different but we are all God's children." If we read Bible or read Geeta, eventually we are going to go to Him. Same with education. We give example, my husband was a farmer's son and I was a farmer's daughter. And we both came out from that and got our degrees here. We are all fortunate here. So we are teaching them that you have to make your own life.

The main thing you take them to India and expose them to everything and then they'll know. They have lots of questions. You come here, they ask lots of questions. We wear very different clothes there, so you tell them why we are wearing different clothes; partly weather, partly different culture. Religion also, we tell them we are doing this way, but you can do this way and it's okay, as long as you live there. Now there is no force on them that you have to go into Hinduism. We never say Hinduism is better, we never say Americanism is not as good. We say we are all in line and we are trying to reach God. I think it is good to be exposed to both cultures. We hope and pray we pick the best one and not the worst one. (laughter)

PS: Are there specific values that are real important to you that your children have?

VP: Yes. First of all, to make the best of yourself. I keep on telling them the Scout motto. The Boy Scouts have a motto 'Do your best'. Whatever you do, do your best. That

's what I keep on telling them. Whatever you are doing, whether you are studying or whatever you are doing, give yourself a chance. Don't do just a little bit there and say "Oh, I wish I could have done better." Whatever you are doing, do your best. And that's what we taught them. And I think they realize that in education and in Boy Scouts. They are going good.

PS: I hear you saying it's important to work hard.

VP: I think all the Asian people, whether it's China or India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, because we are not only poor country and sometimes things don't work out . If you are farmers, you might work hard, but things (because of the weather or whatever) don't work out. So then you have to learn to have faith and work hard. Hard work is the main thing. Keep on going. Nothing comes easy. We keep on telling them, we left the country and came here for education for better opportunity but at the same time we tell them "You should learn not only about India and America but about all the cultures and make all kinds of friends." They have Korean, Vietnamese friends, so now they know that there is different type of people, different type of skin, different type of everything. You learn to respect everybody. They are all God's children.

PS: You talked a little bit about your grandchildren growing up with an American mother and an Indian father. How do you see that working for them?

VP: Beautifully. Wonderfully. The five year old, he's just beginning to notice "My father has black hair, my mommy has blonde hair. I'm sort of Indian half?" I say, "Yes." It's very nice to see how they are typical kids. The other day I bought a purse for myself and he said, "You bought an Indian purse." And I said, "What do you mean? How do you say Indian purse?" And he said, "Look at the design, it has Indian design." And I was surprised. He's only five. How did he know Indian design? But he said you bought an Indian purse. But it's nice. Because they are close to both families. Her family is all American so they go to all of those American culture, Fourth of July, whatever, and then they come here and they know what we do. So they are learning about our cultures. It's nice to be exposed to both cultures and learn from both cultures. Hopefully, when they grow up not only there won't be prejudice but I hope we can explain why there is a prejudice and why there should

not be and why God made all these different countries, different people, cultures. Hopefully it will be easier here when they go to school and go to work.

PS: Are they being raised Christian or Hindu?

VP: Right now they are both very busy going to school, going to work and everything. They are exposed to both. If we have something going on like my husband died and we had all the Indian ceremonies and everything. We go there for all those things, they see that. Then when they go to their other grandfather's, they see what is going on there. My grand-daughter was baptized. They were wondering whether they should do it or not being half-half but then they decided, "Okay we won't have her be baptized" and that's fine. Mainly they were saying, "We should do that in case in the future the kids want to marry Catholics, the church would say we won't accept you because you are not Catholic."

So we should keep the way open if they want to marry American. It may or may not happen. They are not forcing American religion on them. We are not forcing Indian religion on them. Hopefully, they will get exposed to both and they can pick when they are mature enough. They should be able to understand these are the different ways to reach the same God. I think that's the main thing I tell everybody. So many ministers come to our door and ask, "Why won't you convert? What's wrong with our religion?" Nothing is wrong with your religion. There are just different ways. You can reach the airport by bus, by taxi, by walking if it is close, but the idea is to go to airport. It doesn't matter how you go. Same with religion. Whatever it takes to reach your goal. Do your best to reach your goal. If you have faith, everything can work out. My husband and me we were both very religious, so that helps quite a bit. It really helps. If you have faith then you know somebody is behind you all the time.

PS: What was it like when your husband died? Did he die suddenly?

VP: Yes. It was very hard because it was a year and a half ago: January 13. I went to India for a visit and it was only five days and he died here. So I wasn't here so it was very hard.

PS: Did he have a heart attack?

VP: I think it was. We are not sure what happened. My daughter-in-law was supposed to come and visit him at 10 o'clock. She came and knocked on the door and no answer. So she used her own key and came in and he was on the floor. The paramedics think it might be heart attack, or maybe he fell down and had a brain hemorrhage or maybe he fell down because he had something wrong. But it happened so suddenly. It was going to be hard anyway. Because I was not here, it was harder. The last thing I remember, he came to the airport and he said "Have fun, see you in two months." That's all I remember. So, when after five days I got a call saying "He's no more," and it was hard.

PS: So you came back right away?

VP: Yes. First it takes time to get a ticket and everything - - - 12 hours - - - and then I came back then next day. It was a very hard journey coming back. It's a long journey (thirty seven hours) knowing where I'm going, and that I'm alone and what's happening and here's what I have to do here. It was very hard, it was very hard to handle. Because the boys are grown up and they have their own life. So everybody asking me 'how do you handle it?'. It's hard. It's not a boring life, it's a lonely life. I like it here. I go to YMCA. Like I say, I am a religious person, so I read a lot. I do my worshipping. Keeping up the house, the yard and everything. The social, religion . . . I am very busy. But it's a lonely life. Because we were married for 35 years and especially because he was retired for five years we spent 24 hours together. That makes it harder. Before (when he was working) I didn't see him all day. I saw him only in the evening and that's a big difference. But since he was home for the last five years, it was harder. We went to the YMCA together, shopping together. So it's a hard life. The boys are close by and they come by the house and help and try to be with you as much as they can. But you know how American life is; you go to work, you go home, you raise the kids, you don't have much time. We try to be together as much as we can. It's going to be a hard life. It's tough. When it happened so early, I didn't have a chance to talk at the end or get ready. Like if you are sick or something, then you see what's going to happen, what are you supposed to do. But, here I didn't have any time. We were watching an Indian movie on TV, and I get a phone call, and the whole thing is changed. It's been a year and a half now. It's tough, but I'll make it.

PS: In the Indian tradition, when you become a widow, if you were in India, how would the family respond differently? Would you move in with one of your sons perhaps?

VP: If I had been living in India, then I would have been with my son from the beginning because the boys live with you. When they get married, they bring their bride to live with you in the same house. So there is no question of moving in with them because they are with you. Here, that's the tough part too. They are separate and I'm set up here. It's hard. In American culture, there's no question, the parents do live separate and the boys live separate. Because they have been exposed to both cultures, they are both telling me I can sell my house and move in with them. Daughter-in-laws are both saying the same things, "You can come in and live with me."

PS: How do you feel about that?

VP: I'm also half Americanized and half Indian. As far as possible, it would be nice to not impose on their privacy. They have their own life. It would be nice to visit them, to have them visit here. I think about going to live with them. It would be easier. It can be easier not to think about anything and just enjoy your family. But at the same time, you think about everything, pro and con. I think right now I'm not making decisions. I think it is easier because one of my sons is here. He's not married yet.

PS: He's living here with you?

VP: Yes. He just got his degree last summer and he has a full time job. He's living here. If I sell the house, then he'll have to find an apartment. We all had a rough time the last year and a half since losing Dad, and being on our own. It's hard on everybody. I don't want him to again go out and find an apartment. It would be nice to be with him for a while and see what happens. If you are in India, there would be no question that I would have been with them. There was no question about moving in with them.

Last year, I was four months in India. I went in January and came back in April. And, I see other widows, and their life is quite different. Like, my older sister-in-law, she lost her husband two years back. But, she's with the rest of the family. So, no problem. She lives with them and besides grieving and missing her husband, her life is

normal. Her whole family is there, no matter what. Here it is different. You miss him and grieve for him, and at the same time, you are alone. There is not a big family around, so you miss that. I think about it sometimes. If I was there, I would be around a big family all the time. It could be nice, it could be not nice. But, it would be different that way. My family in India is terrified that I am living alone. They don't want me to live alone. My sisters and brother say, "Why do you want to live alone? You have the boys. Go and live with them."

It's a different model. There, we believe that you raise them, and when it's your turn, they are responsible to take care of you when you need them. So, my relatives say, "Go and stay with them, because now it's their responsibility to take care of you." They are disappointed that I'm living alone here. I haven't decided one way or the other yet. Like I said, they want their own life and their privacy, and their life is different. If I go and live with them, it will be really different for me and for them. Right now, I'm here and we'll see what happens. Like I said, it's not boring or anything. It's just lonely. We are used to one life for 35 years. You work with them, and you are with them. They don't need you that much that way. Life is that way -- you have to keep on accepting change and adapt to changes. It's hard.

PS: Was your husband quite a bit older than you?

VP: I am 58. He was 67.

PS: So, he was not that much older. He did die very young.

VP: He did. He did. Yeah, I miss him. It's hard without him. Like I said, it's hard because if somebody had cancer and somebody knew for four years that he was going to die, you have it easier. Then you make plans and you talk about it, how to accept it. The family has time to get ready mentally. But, we didn't have a chance like that. The last time I saw him he said, "Bye, bye. Have fun!" In five days I got a call and the whole thing was changed. So, it was hard.

PS: You said you went back to India for four months last year?

VP: Yeah, I went in January and came back in April.

PS: That's a good time to be gone. You are smart.

VP: Yes, you miss the winter here and there they don't have winter at all. It's nice.

PS: Who do you stay with there when you go to visit now?

VP: I stay with my brother and my two sisters. I've gone to my in-law's place. Some other relatives. That's what most of us do whenever we go. They miss us because we are here, far away, and we miss them. So, when we go there we all are living with brother and sister-in-laws.

PS: Do they ever come and visit you here?

VP: No. My brother was here many years ago for three years. He didn't like it. He went back. Its very expensive to come here. If I go there, its only one ticket to see everybody. If one of them come, they can see only me. It's very expensive. You can't expect that. I go every three years or so. It was more fun when my parents were there, and now they are no more. My in-laws are no more. It's different now. It hurts to go and not find your parents and in-laws. Brothers and sisters and everyone is there, but they all have their own life. Just like we have our own life. Its nice to visit and talk and have fun, but you miss what you don't have.

PS: How was it when your parents died? You were here?

VP: Yeah. That was nine or ten years ago. Then my in-laws died. Even though you miss them, and it's sad and everything, after some years, you learn to live with it. You understand that it was time for them to go. But, I think its harder with your spouse because he was your life. So, now the life is changed. You feel like you have no life, so it's harder.

PS: When your parents died in India, how did you hear about that and did you go back for the funerals?

VP: No, I got a call both times, and I didn't go at that time. Usually we go every three years and that is that. When I went, both in-laws and my parents were older, and everytime I went, we knew that this might happen. Actually, my mother used to talk to me every time like it

was my last visit. Even the last time I went, she said, "All I want is your happiness. You spend lots of time raising your kids and doing this and that for society. Now is your time to be happy. If you are happy, then I am happy." She also said, "If I die, don't cry, because as long as you are happy, then I am happy for you." So, every time I went, we said our final good-byes because she knew I might not be here. So, when it happened, it happened. My in-laws and parents died. But, my brother is in Bombay, so I go spend time with them. My two sisters are married, and they are also retired, so it was nice to spend some time with them.

PS: Does your brother live in your parents' family home?

VP: My parent's home is in Gujarat some hundred miles away. My father had a business in Bombay so my brother is living there. He lives in both houses, actually. My brother lives in Bombay, but he also goes and lives in his own hometown house.

PS: And is he still working?

VP: No, he is not working anymore.

PS: Do you talk with your family in India over the phone?

VP: Sometimes. They just got a phone three years back. Before that they didn't have a phone, so we used to write letters. So, now they have phones, so we phone.

PS: So do you talk by phone?

VP: Yeah.

PS: Is it tempting to talk too long?

VP: It is tempting, but you know it costs money.
(laughter)

PS: I tried calling India a couple times myself, and it is difficult. We called the adoption agency where our son was just to see how he was doing. The last section here is about retirement plans. Are you likely to stay here?

VP: Yes, I would like to stay here. People at my in-law's place said, "Why don't you sell your house and come and live

here (in India)? Now, the kids are grown up and have their own life. Why don't you come and live here?" But, if I go there, my whole family is here. Those are my relatives; these are immediate family. So, I'll go and visit every 2-3 years to visit, but I won't go there for good. I'll stay here whether I live with my boys or I stay here in this house. It's nice to be in close touch with them and be with the family. My life is busy. I'm a religious person, so I do my worshipping every day and I read lots of religious books and go to YMCA and go for walks. I like to keep up with the house and yard work and socializing. So, life is busy. It's not boring. It's just lonely.

PS: The last thing, is there anything else that I haven't asked you about that you think would be important to say to society or to anybody who might be listening to this history?

VP: It's just that especially for the newcomers who may come here with prejudice or opinions or sometimes they don't have the right information. All I can say is, "Take your time and know the person." You'll like American or Indian, or non-Indian. You'll like everybody as long as you know the person.

PS: So, you recommend they take every person as an individual, not as a group?

VP: All Indians are not good and all Americans are not bad. Just know the person, and you'll find good and bad both. If you have faith in God, everything will work out. It did for me. I've been here for all these years. I like these people. They are nice, my neighbors and friends. Maybe because I spend so much time with them. At the YMCA, I go everyday, I see Americans all the time.

PS: And they get to know you.

VP: They know me for a long time. I meet them more than my own family. They are wonderful friends and you share your life. That's what life is all about; sharing and helping each other.

PS: Do you go to each other's homes?

VP: Yes. Its not just the physical thing that we do, but socially we celebrate holidays and each others birthdays and

go out for picnics and such things.

PS: Is this with the people from the YMCA? Is this a group of senior citizens?

VP: Yes. There are seniors and there some classes that are for 50+. Other classes are open for all ages. But, I have gone there ever since my son was eight months old. That was 23 years ago. When you see those people every day, they become like a family. It's nice. Whoever, whether they are newcomers or whatever, the only thing I can speak from is my own experience. Try to know the person. It has nothing to do with Indian or American. Just know the person. That's all it takes. That's what it takes for me.

PS: You've done a great job telling me about your life. I really appreciate the opportunity to talk with you.