Mafat Patel

Oral History Interview

18 April 2017

Interview summary: Mafat Patel, born in Vhandu, India in 1945.

Interviewer: this is an interview with Mafat Patel as part of the Indo-American heritage museum's masala chat oral history project. the interview is being conducted on April 18th, 2017 in Mafat's workplace. Mafat is being interviewed by marina Labarthe of the Indo-American heritage museum.

Int 00:37: please state and spell your first and last name

Mafat Patel: m-a-f-a-t p-a-t-e-l

Int: when and where were you born?

MP: I was born 17th of January, 1945

Int 00:54: did you grow up in the town and city where you were born?

MP: no... oh yes. there yes

Int: where were you born exactly?

MP: name of the town is Vhandu. v-h-a-n-d-u, India.

Int 01:26: what languages did you speak growing up?

MP: oh there I was speaking only one language. Guajarati. g-u-j-a-r-a-t-I

Int 01:35: where did you go to school in India?

MP: until high school we finish in my home town

Int: oh, so you lived in Vhandu until high school?

MP: yes

Int: oh wow okay, what was school like there?

MP: there was a small school. we had around 200 students and seven classes.

Int 02:07: so did your family practice a particular religion at all?

MP: we are basically Hindus. no particular religions. we believe we are Hindu... I’m Hindu but I am not strong Hindu. I believe in everything.

Int: that’s really interesting. could you tell me a little bit more about that?

MP: well I do believe in the old severe lot of lot of religion-- Jainism, Hinduism, Muslim, Christian... I believe everybody. I go everywhere and [???] because in this kind of business, here, we need everybody... and I’m not a strong religious man.

Int 02:55: were your parents really religious?

MP: they were Hindu but they basically were the Hindu religion yes that's it.

Int 03:07: so what did your parents do for a living in India?

MP: they are farmers

Int: oh really? could you tell me more about that? did you grow up on a farm?

MP: I grew in one place and we had a farm. it's not like here where you are living there or no. we are there separate, so in the morning, get up in the morning, go to farm.

Int 03:37: and how far away was the farm from your house?

MP: oh it's a different. 100-200-acre land we are one or two acres five acres. so we used to go there a lot.

MP: we had animals. like cows, buffalo, ox, and horse.

Int: did you like growing up on a farm? did you like growing up with parents who farmed?

MP: yes

Int: did you help them out a lot?

MP: oh yes.

Int: that's wonderful. I also grew up on a farm actually, in Peru. I loved everything about the farm! the animals and waking up early and getting the milk, eggs. it's a great lifestyle.

MP: yup

Int: so, do you have any siblings?

MP: we are six. three brothers, three sisters. including me. three brothers including me.

Int 04:58: oh okay, what are their names and their ages?

MP: I’m oldest brother. we are three brothers, I’m the oldest. the second brother Talashi. I think you know Suzy? Susan?

Int: I have not met Suzy I don't think. has someone else interviewed her?

MP: no, no... Susan is my niece. [points to woman in the lobby] [points to photograph] that's my precious daughter and her brother Amrit. a-m-r-i-t Patel.

Int: ok. so there's six of you?

MP: and three sisters. those are older than me. one is-- they all are India right now. their names?

Int 05:46: what are their names?

MP: my oldest sister, her name is Sharda. Sharda Patel. second name is Sare. s-a-r-e. third name is Mangu. m-a-n-g-u. Patel. all Patels.

Int 06:06: so they all live in India?

MP: they were here. but looking this kind of life, they don’t like it so they leave for India.

Int 06:18: wow, when did they move back to India?

MP: oh they coming out. they come and go. because everybody there, everyone’s own families are here.

Int 06:27: are you ever like, I wish I was in India instead of here?

MP: see right now if you think what we are doing... my body's here but my soul is there. I was there two months I just came back.

Int: ah, so where is Vhandu. in what part of India?

MP: hundred fifty miles south west of Pakistan. from Bombay there's a 400 miles north of Bombay, 400 miles south of Delhi. so if you have this part of India. [shows on map]

Int: oh cool, I spent a few months in Mysore.

MP: south

Int: yes, it's down south. I really want to go back! I love it so much

MP: I was watching today there’s a [???] number three. Mysore they say the fifth. I mean, security and everything.

Int 07:47: that’s really interesting. so, tell me a little bit about your life in India.

MP: my life, I came at age of 23 here. after I graduate from high school, I graduate from there, then college, I major in electrical and chemical engineering. I came 1968. I did my masters MBA here, worked for 16 years in this country and we had a business.

Int 08:35: so when you started the business that was when you started this business? [referring to travel office]

MP: business across the street. the Patel brothers.

Int: oh, the food one across the street?

MP: that's ours.

Int: wow, I saw on the business card, that's you! wow, cool! that's fantastic.

Int: so tell me why did you come to the U.S?

MP: I came for the study

Int: to get your MBA...

MP: my MBA yes

Int: what did you study?

MP: first I studied engineering, then I start working towards MBA.

Int: what was that like? coming from a different country to the U.S to study, what was it like?

MP: well there was a strange people to come here. when I came here we had only 350 families here

Int 10:05: that’s a common theme it seems with the people that I’ve been interviewing... when they came here there weren’t that many people from India living here and it was hard for them to find communities. what was it like finding a community here where you felt comfortable? what was that like?

MP: we used to get together every weekend, see the movie, get together for dinner

Int: aw, so you got together with people that you had-- how did you meet these people?

MP: if I know you, you know somebody, somebody, somebody, somebody, somebody...

Int 10:33: when you came to the united states what did you expect your life would be like here?

MP: I wasn’t expecting anything. I’m here. I’ll stay here five, ten years, then I’ll go back. but then you cannot go back

Int 10:55: how come?

MP: because we are all settled. I brought my wife here, she came here. my sons came here. and we started 1974, we started the business. then my brother came, his wife came, his whole family came, so nobody wants to go back.

Int 11:18: so you're saying you didn’t have that many expectations coming here and you didn’t mean to stay that long but then you got comfortable right? what would you say was the biggest challenge when you first got here?

MP: to settle here... accommodation.

Int 11:45: talk to me more about that... what kind of things do you have to accommodate to?

MP: we have-- basically I’m vegetarian. we didn’t have a way to find the food. so we were looking something something somewhere and find the restaurant food, cook ourselves...

Int 12:11: what else?

MP: making friends, go to movies, go for-- we didn’t have cars at that time.  we were traveling in the CTA, in the mini bus, in the train.

Int 12:29: how about the language, was it difficult at all?

MP: it would’ve been difficult but I came where the education was in English over there. college education was in English. I could do reading and writing but not speaking. so after coming here we start speaking also. we had a problem but not that much.

Int: that makes sense. since you learned English in school and you were-- okay. was it a culture shock? a very different--

MP: very different culture, yes

Int 13:11: yeah, and the vegetarianism, I’m sure that was very different. can you think of any other things that may have been different at the time?

MP: not really

Int: and how about today? do you feel like-- what do you miss about India the most?

MP: I miss, generally I don’t miss anything in India. I lived there but I don’t miss anything. if you have family, you miss the family, but I don’t have anything I’m really holding.

Int: when you first came from India what was the most painful thing you had to leave behind?

MP: parents. I was calling every day. not calling, but when you calling their time, it was calling three days. you book today, you were getting a line in three days. crying with mom, dad, every night. me and my friend lived together, we were crying together and writing letters, we sent letters

Int 14:34: yeah, you missed them a lot. so that was the hardest part.

MP: hardest part.

Int 14:37: when you first moved here were you able to go back and visit sometimes?

MP: oh yeah, I went up '72... and my wife they came '71.

Int 14:59: oh okay, so your wife came in 71 with your son and you guys-- you left to come to do your MBA here and they came three years later.

MP: yes.

Int 15:18: what did you first notice, or what was the most striking thing upon your arrival here?

MP: striking? you’ll be surprising... because we had very culture. when I came land here I land in Boston. so people are kissing on the road, I say what is this... I got surprised. because it’s very difficult to in India there’s very little people kissing. so that was surprising.

Int 15:54: [laughter] that's really interesting! what other kinds of things?

MP: other there's cars, everything there was different roads and cars and everything. there was a different world.

Int 16:11: where and how did you find your first place to live?

MP: I had my distant cousin used to live in Pittsburgh so from Boston I came to Pittsburgh and in Pittsburgh I studied there and in summer time I came for job here. then I start here.

Int 16:39: so why did you move from Pittsburgh to here? what brought you here?

MP: I went to college in the (???) university, Ohio. and then I came here in summer job. my two friends they're working here in summer time. so we moved here

Int 17:03: what experiences or individuals since you moved to the U.S have had a long lasting effect on your life?

MP: life changes, totally changes

Int 17:19: did you meet anyone that you met here when you first moved here that you still talk to?

MP: oh no, still we are friends. my roommate, he was in India also roommate, here also roommate, and I am still with him.

Int 17:31: he was your roommate in India too! wow, okay! and you guys are still friends. can you tell me a little bit about him?

MP: well we are all good friends, he had motel business. he lives in St. Louis. one other friend lives in Atlanta. one lives in Memphis. so we all were together we came over here, but a lot of other friends they live surrounding sometimes they call. if you go anywhere in this country, everybody knows me because of Patel brothers. so they say, oh... I was studying with you. he was my good friend. so we’ve known each other, a long time.

Int 18:22: wow, that’s really cool. how do you spend your leisure time?

MP: meet the people, go to some kind movie, go to social meetings

Int: do you have an anecdote that represents what you had to deal with as you learned the ropes of living and working in the U.S?

MP: no

Int 18:55: can you think of any stories from when you first came here that you’ll never forget?

MP: no... I don’t think so.

Int 19:14: we can come back to it-- if you think of anything let me know. so what were the challenges that you faced when trying to make friends here?

MP: I don’t have any problems to make friends. here also. I got man, woman, all friends. don’t make a difference.

Int 19:38: you mentioned your cousin was living in Pittsburgh... did you have-- I’m sure your cousin was very helpful when you moved. did you have any other people that were helping you and how did they help you?

MP: well, financially, before he was helping me financially... because we cannot transfer the money at that time from India. so he supported my tuition and everything. and they used to drive pick me up to stay in their home.

Int 20:16: that’s a wonderful support system... so tell me about your first job in the U.S.?

MP: my first job was; it was very bad job. it was when I was going to college here. I was going to college from 7 in the morning to 1 o clock afternoon. and from 4 o clock to 10 o clock I was working part time as a molder. molding machine. lots of molding

Int: wow, tell me about that job

MP: oh plastic molding you have to put in this bowl and carry the dye. sometimes it touches here and sometimes it touch here and there’s a lot of dots on the hand.

Int 21:15: that’s the typical first job huh

MP: but I needed it

Int: exactly, exactly. how were you treated in terms of opportunities in terms of advancing in your work?

MP: after their arrival I just got a job in electrical engineer. I had a good job, no problem at all. because at that time they think they had a problem in the country. had some minority. I was a minority so I don’t have any problem, we are working nearly 1200 people in the company. no problem at all. but page to page no problem, behind the back, problem. is it everywhere? everywhere is same thing. you may be facing same kind of problem

Int 22:14: that’s a great way of putting it, definitely. so what were your interactions like with your bosses when you first came here?

MP: my boss was very nice. he was Jewish. and very nice. he was taking care of me properly. he knew that I didn’t have anybody here so he was nice and taking care of me.

Int: that’s wonderful. sounds like you had a very good support system.

MP: but it has to be two ways...

Int: so you supported them too, can you tell me more about that?

MP: I was working hard. they know that in this country Indians are working out of (???) and they work six and a half hours, whites working five hours. black working three hours. you know that. so, they love us, they don’t love us, they love our work. but don’t have any problem. so you come here to work. if you don’t work hard you don’t get anything to make yourself success you need to work.

Int 23:39: that’s true, exactly. so you changed careers a few times... why did you?

MP: oh after fifteen, sixteen years, my sister came here, my brother came, his wife came, my wife came, then we thought, we don’t have food here. we cannot find the food. I mean, vegetarian. so I said let’s start some food business. so we started 1974, we started food business

Int 24:17: wow that’s very cool. I actually, after our interview I think I’ll go across the street and grab some groceries... so, are you a U.S. citizen?

MP: yep.

Int 24:33: what prompted you to become a citizen?

MP: because if you become a citizen you can bring your relatives here and be secure for yourself you have to be citizen.

Int 24:49: so what was the process like for you, becoming a citizen?

MP: oh you have to study the presidents of the country, you have to read and write in English, and you are to know the constitution of the country. how to live, who’s the president, who’s the alderman.

Int 25:11: I took the test like four years ago, so I remember I listened to the cd in my car every day. but, was it pretty easy for you, was it difficult?

MP: it was very difficult for me.

Int: and you did it so you could bring your family here?

MP: yeah, my time... it wasn’t that much but reading and writing they say what is your name, write down where do you live? that’s it. now it’s very difficult. they’re asking a lot of questions

Int 25:52: in what ways do you think that you as an individual have contributed or had an impact on American life?

MP: I know a lot of things. a lot of organizations... really just social. I mean we already know all the social kinds of associations and work can be that.

Int: yeah, you’ve made a huge impact, with your business as well. that’s wonderful. what do you think the most important contribution is that the Indo-Americans have made to Chicago?

MP: Indo-American center or totally Indo-American?

Int: in general, what kind of impact do you think Indian Americans have made to Chicago?

MP: see that if you know whether you know or not, there’s a majority income is Indian. highest income. Indians. maximum doctors are here. my generation via doctors, accountant, we are 3 million people here, Indians. most of the people there are well to do.

Int: do you maintain connections with your Indian heritage? how so?

MP: the whole group is coming from India and I’m going to work with them

Int 28:17: what kind of work?

MP: they come just for this community work. the social work they’re coming here. so we all get together

Int 28:32: that’s fantastic. so what do you find rewarding beyond work? work seems to be very rewarding to you, but beyond work what is rewarding to you?

MP: peace

Int: tell me more

MP: peace no problem, I’m peaceful, I’m happy life, helping the people, I much help here, I guard the people here 300 plus families from India. so that’s my peace. god gave me that (???) all the good is settled

Int 29:30: that’s very cool. what do you think are some contrasts between India and the U.S.?

MP: politics? I don’t care. politicians, politics, any politicians, they're all dirty. even in India, Pakistani, they’re all politics so if were not enrolled in the politics

Int 30:11: what else? what other contrasts?

MP: economic. before Obama came they were considered 8th in the country, they know their own. India is part of the growing country

Int 30:39: so does anything stick out in your mind as a defining experience in your life or a special significance in your life as an Indian living in America?

MP: no, I don’t

Int 30:59: so, are there any memories that you would like to make sure future generations know about?

MP: future generations knows their own career, good work. you have to work hard. honesty and hard work it pays in the long term.

Int 31:37: honesty and hard work.

MP: yes. that’s the best you could be. work hard, be honest. so god will help you anyway. so whatever you do here you are to finish here. you are not taking anything with you. once you die, you are going empty handed.

Int 31:56: is there anything else you could like to add that we haven’t talked about?

MP: nothing else. you asked me everything. so that’s fine.

- [End of Recording] -