Vijay Bhargava

Oral History Interview

August 16, 2016

Interview Summary: Vijay Bhargava was born on January 12, 1940 in Ujjain, Madhya Pradesh. The son of a prominent lawyer and civic leader of his city, Vijay expresses the privileges he experienced growing up in a large joint family with a respected head of household. The interview begins with Vijay describing his family dynamics, his parents, and his early education. He then explains his move to Jabalpur in 1960, where he enrolled in Jabalpur Engineering College and began correspondence with Professor \_\_ Smith of University of Manchester who had taken interest in Vijay’s undergraduate work. After moving to Manchester to work under the guidance of his professor friend, Vijay then moved to Chicago to complete a master’s program at Illinois Institute of Technology in 1964. After describing his marriage and life in Chicago, Vijay expresses gratitude for the relationships he has carefully nurtured over the years. The interview concludes with reflections of acculturation and of the importance of interreligious and interracial understanding.

Interviewer: This is an interview with Vijay Bhargava as part of the Indo--

[Recording cuts out during slating and first question.]

    --when and where you were born and maybe a little bit about your hometown.

Vijay Bhargava:  Okay.  I was born in Ujjain, Madhya Pradesh.  It's in central part of India, it's historical town and one time it was capital of India.  And there are still some ruins so that reminds you of that period.  I grew up in a joint family.  By that, I mean my father--they were nine brothers and three sisters.  And all my father's brothers--those who were in town--stayed in the same house.  So, we had a wonderful experience of knowing of our mothers and not knowing them because when you came from school, one of the aunts will be on duty who will make sure you got your milk and two cookies and then they were tyrant to make sure you did your homework.

INT:   Did you have siblings?

VB:   Yes.  I am the youngest of five.  Two brothers and two sisters.  My father was a lawyer, my mother: homemaker, and most of my family and I'm talking about the extended family, mostly consisted of lawyers.  My grandfather was a lawyer.  So, growing up in this town...interesting thing: my father and my family was very well-known and town in those days was small, although I don't know what is small town in India anyway, because 60,000 people or 80,000 people is very common number.  So, because the family was known, there was a lot of pressure on us.  Everybody on the street recognized you, so you couldn't do any mischief and school teachers always knew somebody in the family because my older siblings or my older cousins who went through the same school.  And they could tell me things like: "They were smart how come you waste your time?" And thing like that.  So there was always that pressure.  But I think growing up in joint family to me is what made me what I am today because sharing things, sharing love...being part of a fabric where there are conflict, love, anxiety, depression, happiness, common birthdays--all those things were very important and really all of us who grew at that time are still well connected.

INT:   So does that mean that you grew up with cousins as well?

VB:   That's right.

INT:   Okay.

VB: At one time there were close to 25 to30 kids in the family.  We had--

INT:   So how many people total would you say--

VB:   Well, you see 35-40 people but what happens in those days, my grandfather's brothers--one of them lived in a smaller town.  So his children will come and stay at our house, and there was never any problem, the space was never an issue it seems.  Although if visited our house it was--half was already built because there was a room here, constructed here--there was no design to it.  Because they were built as--as needed, I suppose.

INT:   Was it a large house?

VB:   Oh, yeah.  Pretty large house but totally, you know...You have to see it to...so say that there's no order to it.

INT: How many stories?

VB:   It's a three stories house and we were--in my younger days, we were on the third story.  There were sort of two rooms, boys' and girls' room and...the bath time came, you all went up stairs and one by one of one of the aunts came.  Then, my mother was the oldest of the...my father was the eldest, so she would come last to tuck everybody in.  And then 'til she came there were lot of pillow fights and all that.  For example, you had to have your breakfast time at 7:30, all kids because then adults would come, so there was always that separation.  But, I tell you sharing and all those things, just wonderful and I consider myself to be very lucky.  All my aunts and uncles like me a lot.  Among...I always said to my cousins my older siblings that I was the chosen one, you know.  And I have now two uncles survived and three aunts, okay?  And they still think I am ten year-old.  So...

INT (6:04):   And what languages--language or languages--did you grow up speaking?

VB: Well, we spoke Hindi.  Only Hindi, although I remember my grandfather's older brother who also lived with us, he was the rent collector from farmers for the state government in those days, those maharajas.  And he knew the dialects of the villages and all that, and he also knew all the four letter words.  Because after talking to farmers and all that, to collect rent was never easy.  And sometimes we learned those words from him.  And used them and got beaten up for it, so...So, Hindi was main language.  I went to a, what I call Hindi-speaking school.  There was a convent school in my town where there--where English will start, and all that. Some of my cousins went there.  I remember one day my father calling me in his office--these visits were only when you have something to do about your studies or if you did something bad--otherwise there were no visits like that.  So he called me in, and he said to me: "I want to transfer you to convent school."  I said, "I don't want to go there."

INT:   I'm sorry, what age was this?

VB:   I was six or seven year-old.  So I said I don't want to go there although, I don't know how I could blurt out, you know, I was so scared of him.  He says: "Why?" And I said: "They have uniforms, I don't like uniforms," so... [Bhargava laughs.] I didn't go but couple of my cousins had to go.

INT:   So, maybe you really were the chosen one. [Laughs.]

VB:   My mother later on told me my father thought that I wouldn't make it in the other school anyway.

INT:   Okay.

VB:   Okay!  [Bhargava laughs].  That's... 

INT (7:59):   So, you said your father--you were a little afraid of him.

VB:   Yes.

INT:   Can you describe him a bit more?  What was his name?

VB:   Shankar Prasad Bhargava.

INT:   Could you spell that?

VB:   Shanker: S-H-A-N-K-E-R. Prasad: P-R-A-S-A-D.  And last name is...He was my height.  Intense man, very well-read, spoke very clearly.  Well-respected in town for being a lawyer and also with all his social contribution to city.  He was involved in all kinds of committees, you know the...we used to have this...every 12 years, we have this big fair.  There are four cities that have this fair.  My hometown was one of them and Ranjana's hometown is the other.

INT:   Okay.

VB:   Kumbha Mela, which is a big thing.

INT:   With the river.

VB:   Yeah.  In her town it's the biggest thing but in our town also.  And my father was the head organizing committee there.  My father was also equivalent of mayor of city for some time.  That's the way I can describe it, maybe that was not the case.  The only way...I say that because the mayor's office was located in a building where there was a theater and... [Bhargava laughs.]  And if you go there, you could be put in theater without any problem.  And everybody sort of...respected him.  He was response for creating public library in my town, so he was very well known.  But very busy.  I mean, and...in our culture you see there's so much respect emphasized and along with that is also fear.  It's sort of...but in joint family there's actually no problem.  You don't have to see anybody.  I mean I don't have to see my mother because the food will be on the table...You know, you are hungry you go to anybody and say I'm hungry, but we were all well taken care of.  I mean you have your meals on time and thing like that.  So there was really absolutely no reason to think of any adults, you know, the need of a father and this house was very necessary but over there...But we knew who he was, we knew he knew our principal and teachers and thing like that.  There were no…Then later on he was elevated to estate supreme court--in India they call high court, which is the next step from the supreme court of India, so that is...Like here would be appellate court or federal court or something like that.  So he was...appointed of that.  Good thing about him...In joint family, being a head of the family is very important to keep the family together, and he had the right temperament for it.  In my book, you know, if I have to write something about him.  He worried about everybody in the family.  Actually on his hundredth birth anniversary I wrote letter to family.  Letter to him, but sent a copy to family and I was describing to him what had happened to family and one of my cousin Amar: “Boy…you know, he would have wanted to know what you wrote.”  So, [the letter was] about every member of the family I know where they were and what had happened to them in their lives and things like that.  And he was very concerned about that.  Whenever we got our school results or college results, they were published in newspaper, they were--what we call Board Exams.  He would be up at five o'clock to look at newspaper to find out...So he was very concerned.  He was all for education and thing like that.  I remember him teaching me, you know, but late at night and I didn't pay much attention, but he made effort to teach me.

INT:   Even in his busy schedule...

VB (12:53):   Yeah, he will...Because he...If my mother said, well his grades--I mean, he will get my report card anyway and he'll try to teach me, but...Yeah, so up to seventh grade I was not a good student.  Not that I didn't have brains, I just didn't care.  And...teacher turned me around in 30 seconds and so after that...worrying about studies was not a big concern for anybody.

INT:   So what would you say changed after seventh grade?

VB:   Well, this is a...We had a midterm exam in eighth grade.  In India, 40% is a passing grade.  You solve two questions out of five, you pass!  Which is a 'D', but you pass.  Exams are two and a half hours, but if you want to leave after one hour you can.  So I solve two problems, one hour. I submitted my term in my paper and I'm leaving and this teacher looked at me: "You finished?"  I said, "I finished."  So I leave the room, two minutes later him yelling at me.  He said--I go back, he said: "You solved only two problems."  I said, "I passed!"  [Both laugh.] He says, so he asked me: "What are you going to do now? You have one and a half hour before you go home."  I said, "Bum around."  Which, I'm the only one on the field, but I don't care, you know.  Bum around.

INT:   And what was the name of your school?

VB:   Daulat Gunj Middle School.  D-A-U-L-A-T.  Gunj: G-U-N-J.  Middle School.

So, he said, "I have a deal for you." I said, "What?" He says, "Finish this exam and I'll give you three periods off, which would be three hours.  You only have one and a half hour, finish this exam."  I said, "Okay." I go and finish the exam.  In those days in our school you sat in class according to your rank. So if you're bad student, you sat in the back.  Which in my case, I was always in one of the back benches.  If you were first, you sat in the front.  So when he announced the results for this midterm, my seat moved from there to the front row.  And then I realized what it was, I mean, sending arrows from the back or talking to people and all that...you know what happens, success makes you think differently and that's what happened.  So I credit that teacher.

INT:   Do you remember his name?

VB:   Yes. Mr. Mohanlal.  M-O-H-A-N-L-A-L.  We used to joke about him.  His belly was really big.  And we used to say, "How does he knew whether his shoes are polished?"  [Laughs.]  Now, there is an extension to the story.  So I get my report card, this time I'm happy.  I give to my father to look at, so he see's 100 out of 100 in math and he says, "So, did they allow you to cheat?"  [Bhargava laughs.] So, that's the story.

INT (16:26):   Well, then after that, you probably didn't have an excuse to be anything less than...

VB:   That's right, that's right, that's right.  And getting that sheet and getting 100 out of 100 is different feeling, I mean, I tell you.  Even at seventh, eighth grade level, you know that.

INT:   How about your mother?  What was her name and what was she like?

VB: Mother, her name was Savitri. S-A-V-I-T-R-I, Savitri.  My parents married at the age of--my mother was 13 year-old.  Actually, my son made a movie on my mother.  You should see it.

INT:   What's it called?

VB:   *Amaji*.  We will figure out a way to...because that's...my mother...aggressive, committed, focused.  If--she had her brothers and in those day, they married her early.  She probably be a physician, doctor, lawyer, anything.  I mean, she had that kind of goal--

INT:   --drive.

VB:   Oh, yeah.  And she was...she...13, they married, but they don't move with their husband's house until they are 15 or 16 year-old.  And she married...moved into my parent's--my father's home in 1928.  1928, she got married, I'm sorry.  And in 1930, she moved.  My brother, my oldest brother was born in 1931.  And at that time, my grandmother was alive and my grandmother had all these little children, too.  I mean my uncles and some of them were same age as my brother.  My older brother and my oldest sister, for example, one of my uncles was born and my sister was born at the same time.  But then in 1936, my grandmother died of cancer.  [Phone starts ringing.] And so the burden of the whole family came on me, because she was...the eldest daughter in-law.  And she did a heck of a job with that.  My grandfather had lot of respect for her.  He relied on her to take care of the home and all that.  So, later on...I mean, she was not educated and in her movie you'll see she always regretted not going to school.  But, when my dad was appointed to high court, my mother had to move to a different town.  Now, life in that circles is very different.  You have to throw parties and all that.  Adopting to that for her was no problem at all.  I mean, she change herself from a woman in a small town where you have some small town constraints, for example, you cover your head and those kind of things.  In this new town she had no difficulty changing. 

INT (19:43):   Where was the high court or where did they move to?

VB:   Oh, about 300 miles from a--Those two...in my state there were three places where there were high courts.  So, she--they moved about 300 miles from there.  Big town called Jabalpur.

INT:   And was it just the two of them?  Were you all still--

VB:   --No, at that time I was out of...I was in college.  But there is interesting story.  The town they moved into--moved--Jabalpur.  That's where I was going to engineering college.  There was house opposite of engineering college where one of my father's friend lived.  And my first three years I would visit him from time to time, and I will tell my roommate and other friends that one of these days, I will live in that house.  In my last year of my college, I lived in that house.  My father moved in that house.  So...

INT:   Was it a very nice house?

VB:   Oh yeah, yeah.  Actually my roommate, who was my roommate for all those years and my high school and my middle school friend, in last year, he goes and he doesn't see my name with him and...somebody else.  And he runs me into campus and he says, "Why?  You don't like me anymore?"  I said, "No, that's not case. Let me show you where I live."  And so we walk out of the campus and I enter this house and he's laughing.  He's thinking it's joke, and he come inside and he see my mother and he literally had the heart attack, you know?

[Both laugh.]

VB (21:16):   So, my mom's case, she adopted...very well to that town and then...Thing about her, she was an avid newspaper reader.  She'll read Hindi newspaper from page to page. So, she had more knowledge about things than many people who went to college and all that, because she read.  And people always wondered where she found time in her afternoon hours when my father was in the court, you know, she will take her nap...and then she will read newspaper.  She was also a fan of cricket, which is an Indian...big game, like football here.  She knew the player and she could curse if they were not, you know?  You should hear her commentary when games were going on and all that.  Good leadership qualities...this is where I say, you know, just education...but some other thing you bring with you...In her case, fifth grade dropout person to manage the whole family, to move to another town, be able to work with other judges and things like that.  Adopt in that town to do social work.  All those things...One last thing about her in relation to me...[Phone starts ringing.]  When she moved to that town, in that house--

INT (22:43):   What was the name of the town?

VB:   Jabalpur.  City.  This house...garden was not well kept.  So, we moved in there in July when the college started and they--he was appointed in July, that's when the court session starts.

INT: Do you remember the year?

VB:   1960.  She said to me, "You have to do two things for me. You have to fix this yard because..."  She said, "One of these is days I’ll have to throw a party, and I want this to be fixed."  And the second thing, she was also very religious and in my hometown there were hundreds of temples and she knew them.  And there are days when you will go specific temple.  So she said, "We have to find all the temples in this town. So, after college for next few days, you will travel with me in car and we have to find those temples." Okay? Now, I--In college we had a lot of people who lived in the city, so I asked them where are these temples, I made a list and we--. So, we found all those temples. In return, she said--fixing the yard and that--she said, “I’ll teach you cooking!”  So, what will happen, my father will go to court at 9:30 in the morning.  I will come at lunch break...at lunchtime, she will wait for me and teach me one or two dishes once a week.  So in those 40 weeks, I learned lot of things to cook.  And anytime I said something tastes great, I had to cook it, you see?  So, I also cook for them.

INT: Her rule, or yours?

VB: Huh?

INT:   Was that her rule or yours?

VB:   Her rule.  And so I learn cooking, and she told me that one doesn't have to be fancy.  Four spices and salt can do the trick.  And I still cook with four spices.  Ranjana is, of course...My son and Ranjana, they knew about 100 spices.  I only know four and I can make anything.

INT:   So was that something that you were interested in, you were eager to learn?

VB:   I was always curious about gardening, cooking.  Cooking only in the sense that I was a...one of those guys who didn't eat everything.  I was saved by my aunts who catered to my needs.  If that was my mother, who would probably beat me up to eat cabbage or whatever.  They were sort of in that big house, you know, when you are favorite, boy, you get everything!  It's like, remind me the prisons and the laundry room guy gets you things?  Exactly the same thing, you know? So...[Bhargava laughs.]

INT (25:57):   Do you know how you were the favorite?  Was it that you were the youngest, or...?

VB:   Well, you know my aunt, who's...she's 86, 87 year-old.  I asked her the last time I was in India.  She said...her words: "All others were trouble makers, busy with themselves, you know, lot of things.  In your case, you were nerd!  We call it another word in India, nerd...and listen to us, you were interested."  If she was cooking something, I'll ask questions, thing like that.  She said there was a different thing about you.

INT:   Curiosity...

VB:   Yeah, or whatever that is, you know and so...you know...You get lucky, I suppose.

INT:   What's the Indian or the word for nerd?  Or what was the word that she used, when she was telling you...?

VB:   Well, I translate nerd only, but in India they will say “tumhen seedhe de.” “Seedhe” means you were, you're simple-hearted, or whatever that is.  If you literally...Other people are interested in doing other things creating mischief or whatever those things were.  I didn't participate in none of those things.  Well, for example, they knew things like maybe my cousins, my brother may have tried smoking at one time.  They knew about it. They knew that I never did. Those kinds of things.

INT (27:40):   So you mentioned that your family was religious.  Could we talk about practicing growing up as a kid?  You said you went to temple.

VB:   We had a temple in the home and my...two people managed it.  My grandfather's older brother, who lived with--the guy who collected rent from farmers.  He'll get up at four o'clock.  My mother had to get up at the same time because he wanted tea.  So my mother, doesn't matter what time she slept, she had to be there four-thirty in the morning for his...He took care of the...in Indian temples you go and take each god  and dust them off, and thing like that.  Set them up.  Then you do a ritual puja and all that.  He would do in the morning.  My mother took care of the afternoon around seven o'clock in the evening.  We were not required to do anything except that they were occasions where, like Krishna's birthday, which will be coming now.  Anytime now.  Everybody fast that day and you went to temple and all that.  Shiva's birthday and thing like that.  All the religious days, whatever family observe, you observe.  But in terms of any special requirements in case...we didn't have any special requirements.  In my case, my mom--it's another thing about with my mom which is, to me interesting in the sense that how broadminded she was.  She was born on the day Shiva was born, according to...So we had the biggest shiva temple in our part of the world, you know, and very well known.  And you go to that temple on that day.  You have to imagine whole town go to temple on that day.  But we were privileged.  So we get the entrance to the V.I.P. door.

INT:   Because it was your mom's birthday or because--

VB:   No, no because of father's status and thing like that.  So, we got V.I.P. treatment.  My classmates, I always saw standing in line scrunched up.  And I hated it.  I really hated it.  To go through back door and I would tell every time my mom, "I don't want to go, I don't want to go."  And my best friend who was...he describe...later in his life, to his children, “His shoe polish bill was my food bill,” he will tell them.

INT: His...?

VB:   His--my bill to polish shoes was his food bill.  He was very poor, but we were best friends and we remain best friend.  And he did wonderfully well in life.

INT (30:41):   So, in school, were you with a group of students of all kinds of backgrounds?

VB:   Oh yeah, I went to public school, you see.  I didn't go to convent school.  I went public school and my best friend happened to be this guy who's father was a security guard for a cotton mill.  You know, but we were friends.

INT: How did--did you ever go to his house?

VB:   Yes.  I ate at his house.  His house was this big: [Gestures with hands, mimicking about the space of the sofa and coffee table around the speaker and interviewer.]  This is the room.  Their mother had a little stove in the corner.  At night, the (\_\_\_???) came out of the house, and they laid on that.  He was...one child.  Now, my father knew that he was my best friend.  Although, he would never come inside my house.

INT:   Your friend?

VB:   My friend.  He'll never come inside my house.

INT:   Why not?

VB:   This is where the society norms come into play, you understand?  This is terrible, but that's what it is.  He felt he was kind of crossing the boundary, his parents probably instructed him not to do that.  So he'll come to my house, we'll sit outside...He'll never come inside my house

INT:   Did that come into play when you went to his house?  Or was it a different--

VB:   --His mother became very conscious...what she was feeding me and all that.  After all, they had no resources.  And that's where, you know, you were talking about what my aunt thought of him...My aunt knew that I go to his house, and I will eat anything at his house...His mother was extraordinarily kind and I went to his house because he said, "Come to my house!"  You know, that kind of thing.  I mean--

INT:   --And you're kids.

VB (32:33):   Yeah, and it's on my way to school over there.  He lived close by.  He was, in our high school, he was number one ranked.  I was three in my high school.  When time for him to come to engineering college, he had no money.  That's where my father...helped him. 

INT:   So he got to go to school?

VB:   He went to engineering college, same engineering college I went except he went a year earlier, because I was not 17.  I was 16 and the requirements, so I had to wait a year, so he became one year older--senior to me.  He went on to become head of electricity board for the whole state.

INT: Wow.

VB:   Which is a big thing, you know. 

INT:   What was his name?

VB:   Jagat Palsingh.  J-A-G-A-T P-A-L-S-I-N-G-H.  He passed away three, four years ago.

INT:   Had you been in touch in your adult life?

VB:   We were in touch off and on, because when I went to India he was situated in a city where I had no reason to go to.  But when he retired he came back to hometown, so I did visit his home then.  We will exchange letters from time to time, infrequently.  But he knew where I was and I knew where he was.  And when I visited him last time, his house, he made sure that his children were there.

INT:   So you could meet them.

VB:   And I asked his sons, did you know where your father came from?  One of them did not know.  So I told them.  And then he asked me, "Then, how did you become his friends?"  I said, "Who knows?  Friendship has no boundaries!"  You know?  So, my father took care of him, I mean...made sure that his tuition was covered and college expenses were covered. 

INT:   That's very generous.

VB:   No big deal, honestly.  From my point of view, when I went to my father, I never asked for extra pocket for myself, anyway.  Nothing.  But when I went to him, I was very resolute.  I told him he has to do it.  He has to do it, he has to do it.  You know, that kind of thing.  

INT (35:23):   And what was the name of the university?

VB:   Jabalpur Engineering College.  J-A-B-A-L-P-U-R Engineering College.  It is now one of the information technology places in India.

INT: And so you went--

VB:   --And that was a state university, state college. You know, you hear about in India, IITs and bigger places.  People like me, I was happy to go to my state college, you know, I have no problem.

INT:   And so you went directly after high school--or you waited--

VB:   --I waited a year, yeah.  I waited a year.

INT:   And so how long was that program?

VB: Four year.

INT:   One year?

VB:   Four year.

INT:   Four year. 

VB:   Yeah, engineering program was four year.  Like a degree here.  Exactly the same thing.  And that was recognized by here because when I came here to master program, there were no problems with my engineering degree.

INT:   And so what year did you graduate then, from...

VB:   1961.

INT (36:27):   '61.  Okay, and then, where did you go from there?

VB:   I worked for a year for year in India.  Now here again, my father has influence, so he got me a job.  When I got out of college, I wanted to go on a one month in India trip.  I land in my hometown, my college, my father heard...Although father was living there, but they have their summer vacation so he was in my hometown, and I came to my hometown.  I said to my mom, "Can I go for a month trip?"  She says, "Go ask your father."  And my father said, "Today's Thursday.  Monday you start your new job." He got me the job and I was never happy with that.

INT:   What was the position?

VB:   Well, we--this was a chemical firm.  And it was part of a large conglomerate, actually.  Birla is a big--B-I-R-L-A.  Birla group is a large group.  They have cotton mills, they have all kind of heavy machinery.  All kind of things, so this was one of their chemical plants near my hometown.  That's where I got the job, because my father used to be lawyer for that company.  And everybody started as a assistant engineer, that was the title you get.  You get two months of training and then they give you--in my case, I was working at a department.  There are several departments and you become engineer for that department.  I was never happy there. 

INT (38:21):   And did you get to choose your college degree?

VB:   Yeah.

INT: Did you want to do engineering?

INT:   Yeah, when I went there, I chose mechanical engineering.  And that was not a problem.  When you get there, first two years are common for all engineering,  and then you decide.  And middle of second year, you ask for your preference and most of the time you got your preferred place.

INT (38:54):   And before we move on, one question that we are supposed to get down are the names and the ages of your siblings.

VB:  Okay. 

INT: Just before I forget. 

VB: Ages now?

INT:   Yeah, sure.  Or the year that they were born, whatever is...

VB:   No, I can tell you the age now.  I have my oldest brother.  He is 85.  Then I have a sister--

INT:   What was his name?

VB: Ramesh,  R-A-M-E-S-H.

INT: And your sister?

VB:   Her name is Shashi, S-H-A-S-H-I.  And she is 83.  Then I have sister, P-R-E-M. Prem.  And she is 82.  And then I have a brother, S-A-N-T-O-S-H.  And he is 79.

INT:   And then you were the last one.

VB:   That's right.  And I'm 76.

INT:   Oh, I don't know if I got your birthday. 

VB:   January 12, 1940. 

INT:   Yeah, I think these are just good to have on the record.  Did you have a good relationship with your siblings?

VB:   Yes, yes.  And I still do.  If there is a trend in my life, that is: I am very relationship-oriented. I like to maintain relationship, even my coworkers and people who came in my life, I have...from people in England, of course--I was in England for two, three years, so...They disappear, but if I had their addresses, they always got a card from me, thing like that.  Here, my coworkers, my fellow classmates, I'm more connected than anybody else, you know...My acting community, now my singing community...I'm very relationship-driven.

INT (41:19):   And are your siblings, did some of them come to the U.S. as well?

VB:   No.  None of them--they all settle down in India.  They have visited here.  My brother was--oldest brother--was a president of a company, so he will come here for business.  And my sister, number one, her husband was also--he was the chief technology officer for a paper mill.  He was in paper industry and because of that, he came to this country and other countries.  My next sister, her husband, they were owners of a tractor parts factory, and so he was educated in England.  So he did go to England and they had a collaboration with a company in England.  And he also came to U.S. for business reasons.  My doctor brother, who was trained in India, he did not come here for any professional reason, except he did go to many parts of the world because he's a very well known neonatologist.

INT:   A--

VB:   Neonatologist.  That is the guy who take care of the little babies, premature babies.  And he is very well regarded in that field.  So he has traveled to many countries but in U.S. he never came for business reasons.  His son lived here...and he has visited me, you know. 

INT (43:01):   So you were the pioneer, or I guess the only one.

VB:   Yeah, I'm the only one and I think one of the reasons for my getting out was...Of course, I was unhappy with the job that I got and then I had a...Again, my life is a series of blessings and luck.  That's the reason I really, I tell you, I feel I am luckiest guy on Earth.  Here, I'm in India and I had to write a final year paper on a topic. Our library's meager.  My professor agree I can write a paper on the topic.  In handbook of engineering I find a name of a professor at University of Manchester in England.  I write a note to him and six weeks later I got this many papers from him. [Gestures with hands.]

INT:   Wow.

VB:   And he wrote to me that, whatever paper you do, I will want to grade it first before you submit it to college.  And he wrote that to my professor.  And my professor agreed, he says fine. I send my paper to him, he...In England like in India, they grade--they very strictly--and I got 69 points out of 100.  But he wrote to my professor that I did my work and he offered me to come to do Ph.D. with him in Manchester.  So here, I go to work for this engineering firm, I'm not happy, so I go to England. 

INT:   So, just to clarify--

VB:   --Yeah.

INT:   When did you start corresponding with this professor?

VB:   1960.

INT:   Okay, so a year before you graduated.

VB:   That's right.  I had to write that paper for the final year.  And...

INT:   And then so after your first year of the job you didn't like, did you get back in touch with him?

VB:   Well, he told me and I said to him, can I work for sometime?  He said, sure.  He was really...So, and then I wrote to him and he...In 1962, November, I went to England.  And I was going to start with him in 1963.  In July or August, whenever the semester start.  When I reached in November he had helped me find a--find work.  So, I had no problem.  I visited him in December of that year. 1962.  In Manchester.  He had no children, his wife--they were very warm.  I stayed with them for Christmas time for two, three days.

INT (45:57):   What's his name?

VB:   Mr. Smith.  [Lowers voice.]  Professor.  [Pauses, starts tearing up.] He said--they were very, very nice.  In March I got a call from his wife, "Come visit us."  And she came to pick me up at the bus stop and she said to me in the car, "He's not well."  In this conversation, so I asked her, "What is wrong?" And she said, "Well, he'll tell you."  So we got home around three-thirty, four o'clock.  It was nice, cloudy day in Manchester.  He lived next to a--upon the river...and he said let's go for a walk and we went for a walk, 15, 20 minutes, sat on a bench and he said to me, he has leukemia.  I don't know what leukemia is and all that.  So, walking back...I say, "So you'll be alright?" He didn't answer.  Then he came to drop me at the bus stop and puts his arms around me. [Bhargava begins to cry.] Told him--told me that he had six months to live.  He died in July, that year. Then my heart was not in England, this was a first death I knew what death was. My grandfather died, but they die, you know. This one, there was no--

INT:   Someone you were close to.

VB: Someone who sort of changed my life!  I mean, you know, talk about that.... Then, yeah university said they will honor but, you know, I--you know I’m--I went there because of him; what did I know about that place, honestly? I mean, I wasn't sophisticated enough to...investigate anything, you follow me? About the department, about the university, where or what dorm will I have? You know, all the question that people...I didn't ask any of those question.  I'm relying on this uncle of mine or whatever you call it...university told me--I told them I wasn't ready September because he just died and they said they will wait to December because otherwise they have to make commitment to somebody else...I told them. And then, in '64 I came here.  I didn't want to even stay in England.  My heart was--although, I like the place where I was--I was working for a company where they respected me.

INT: In England?

VB:   Yeah.  You know, he had arranged the job but he was confident that in my own right I will be able to establish myself and I did.  But, then I came here.

INT (49:00):   So, then how many years would that be that you were in England?

VB:   From 1962 through '64.  '62 November through September '64.

INT (49:18):   And from England you came straight--

VB: ---U.S.A., yeah.

INT:   To the U.S.  To Chicago. 

VB:   Yes. [Pause.] Here, also, you know, I, I...had heard of couple of people who were in the chemical plant who come to U.S. so I said, “Let me go to U.S. embassy,” and I went to London to U.S. Embassy in that November...or October, whenever. You know, I used to go to London a lot for plays and things like that.So, I went to embassy and I said I want to apply for master's in engineering and they-- ...I had interest in school, but when I was--went there was a one, Mr. Meyers, was sitting in the lobby and for whatever reason, that day there was nobody around, so he--I heard him talking to the receptionist or whatever it was that he had lost his passport. So, I asked him where he--was he from, and then he asked me, "Why are you here?" I said, “I want to go to U.S.” And he was from Chicago, he said, "We have a great technology institute, Illinois."  So I got a form for that.  I was admitted to IIT, Michigan, and Stanford.  But here was my logic: Michigan started in August, and I could earn another month of money and Stanford and IIT started the same time except Stanford was $150 away by plane and I had no idea what Stanford was anyway.  So I..

INT: And here you are!

[Bhargava Laughs.]  

INT (51:08): So, you mentioned that your siblings had stayed in India.  So, does that mean that you were the first to go abroad to...

VB:   I had an uncle who was at University of Toronto.  So, you know...he was a professor there.  That's the only one from the family.

INT:   It wasn't totally uncommon then, for--

VB:   Yeah, in my case, going to England...England was known to our country, you know, if you want to call it that.  I mean, people going to England was very common.  Two of my, my grandfather's younger brothers went to Cambridge and they got their bar at that law from there.  So, that was...going to England was not.  Coming to America from there was, but since my uncle was at Toronto and thing like that, that was not a problem.

INT:   And for your classmates, too?  Did classmates go abroad?  Was that--

VB:   From my engineering school, there were...perhaps several went but two of them--one came to IIT.  He was actually my roommate in that chemical company, okay?  He came to IIT and the other one who also worked with chemical company was also my classmate in engineering school.  So, both of them were my classmates in engineering school.  He came to University of Michigan.  So, those were two I knew but there were others.  But I was stranded with two, but I connected with them but there were lot of others I wasn't friendly with in college and I was always petrified...Study and that's it, that kind of thing.

INT (53:07): And what were...Do you remember what your feelings were like when you made that move to England?  To Manchester?  From India.

VB: That was honestly, I had no fear because I was going to a support system that I knew well.  I mean, here's a guy.  He didn't have to do me any favors, you follow me?  Why would he send me papers, grade my paper, offer me to come do Ph.D. with him...I mean, what does he know about me? He didn't even see my picture.  Other than what I wrote!  And then, I'm going to England, my sister and her husband who own the tractor...They had been there, they were there.  I mean so it's not--going to England was no big deal, honestly.  And I wanted to get out of that chemical company and I recognized at that time working for the chemical company that, for me, Indian working conditions were not satisfactory. Now let me make...When I went to work for this chemical plant, it was not that I was qualified, I was selected because my father knew the place.  And at three months, when we completed our three months, which was in September, the head of the group came to town, okay?  And I remember vividly people lining up at that, what you call equivalent of a guest house.  In that place, lining up to touch his feet!  And two of us didn't go there.  [Pause.]  And you know what happened?  We did not get a salary increase.  Two of us.  And the other 20 people got salary increases.  And then the guy who was the Vice President of Engineering one day took me and this guy out and we had a big boundary, you know, big wall.  He took us out of the gate and he says, "I'm not your official boss here.  We are on the street.  Get out of here."  [Pauses.]

INT:   Because you didn't--

VB:  --He said, "Look, guys, I had no control over salary increase.  You guys are hardest working people in this group.  I know that, okay?  You are always here.  Your sections run right.  You have created own newspaper systems, when we come to talk to you, can show us things.  But..."  So, year later they'll be promotions and things like that, he says, "I will have no influence."  He was a British guy.  And he said to us that if you need any help, both of us...I...the other guy, his name was Jan, he stayed at that place for another year and a half before he came to U.S.  Both of us left.  So, and I didn't go tell my father, and my father probably didn't find out because he knew the corporate head and will have been very angry if he found out that I didn't go.

INT (56:59):   Where in your education did you learn English?

VB:   First grade on...

INT: Oh, so it was from an early age.

VB: Yeah, I mean, since I went to public school, my English was probably not up to par until I got to ninth or tenth grade.  I mean, you studied English from the first grade.  You learn alphabetical and all those things.  Ranjana, for example, she went to a convent school.  So she probably spoke English much better than I did.  

INT (57:34): Okay, so let's talk about your transition to the U.S.  So you were accepted to IIT.

VB:   That's right.

INT: What was the degree program?

VB: It was a master's degree in industrial engineering.  And they had a sort of combined program in industrial engineering and mathematical model building, those kind of things.  At that time, operations and such and management science became a--fields in their own right, later on.  They were sort of apart of...industrial engineering because they're--all talk about optimization and anything like that.  So...I came with the idea of a degree in operations and such, alright.  Although frankly...in my mind, or to this day, I didn't have aptitude for engineering at all.  I went to engineering school only because in those days, people--my father, for example--wanted me to be lawyer and I didn't want to be lawyer because I saw all these lawyers working whatever number of hours and thing like that.  So I went to engineering school, and I didn't want to be a doctor.  I mean, I had grades, but my brother became a doctor and actually I remember a conversation with my brother.  He said: "Look, if I don't do medical school, somebody--you'll have be--you'll have to go to medical school."  Fortunately for me, he was the last student taken.  There were 1500.  He was the last on the list.  Later on went on to become a big guy.  So, I didn't have to go to medical school and I had good enough grades to get into engineering college.  So...

INT:   And it seems, just from the careers that you've been describing, there is a pretty high expectation or standard in your family.

VB:   Oh yeah, yeah, yeah.  Yeah.  There was--there's still a saying in our family, that if you're born in this family, you're 75% there.  [Laughs.] You know? 20% of your work, and last five percent, who knows?  You know, that kind of thing.

INT (59:41):   So, was your family pretty supportive then, of your move to the U.S.?

VB: Yes. Um, then, with my father, you know, and I remember telling him, you know, writing to him that my professor died and I have admissions here and he knew of my uncle in Toronto, and so forth. There were no problem, really. And he knew, you know, in his mind, I was doing the right thing, going for higher education. You know. And he...had my admission, I mean and my uncle from Toronto said, “He’s going to a fine school,” and thing like that.

INT: Remind me--what year was that, that you would have started the master's program at IIT?

VB:   '64, September. 

INT (60:36):   '64.  And, can you describe your initial reaction to Chicago?  Or your first impression of the city?

[Pause.]

INT:   It was the South side.

VB:   That's right.  I mean, look...[Laughs.]  I land at the airport, somebody's supposed to pick me up.

INT:   At Midway or--?

VB: O'hare.  There were no Midway then.

INT:   Right, right.

VB:   O'Hare.  It was raining like cats and dogs, I mean...and I couldn't find anybody.  I have $42 in my pocket, that was my money.  And that become 31 [dollars] very quickly because I took a cab.  So I get off at IIT, rain had stopped, and he dropped me at State Street at 33rd [Street] and State.  Middle of the block.  And I had a suitcase and a bag and I get out and I see a guy walking a dog.  So, I asked him where the Fowler Hall was, that's where I was going to stay.

INT:   Where was it?

VB: Fowler Hall.  I was going to stay there.  And he said, "Oh, it's next to my apartment building."  There were two apartment building next, he says, "Walk with me, I'll show you."  And I'm walking with him, I asked him, "Do students get jobs here?  You know, to support themselves?" He said: "Write down my name, and call me tomorrow morning."  Alright, I write down his name.  Next morning, I register and go to his office, he is there, and he says, "20 dollars a week, grading job."  I have $80 a month nobody else has.  [Laughs.]  I had paid my room and board and tuition for the first semester.  The second semester, I got a full.  So...

INT:   You're right, you are lucky!

[Both laugh.]

VB: Hard to make it in $31.  No, I didn't worry about south side or anything.  My focus was to study because I really...I felt that I was out of college from 1961 to '64.  You forget things, calculus and all those things, you forget.  And my focus was to study, so I...Really even on campus, other than the people who were in a classmate, I didn't build any other relationships.  In that sense.  You know...

INT (62:53):   Did you have any expectations of the U.S. or Chicago before coming here?

VB:   No.  No, naive that way.  You follow me?  A lot of people think, "I'll be this, I'll do that."  I said, "I'll do master's degree, I'll find a job." That kind of thing.  I'll go back to India, or you know, in those days...at that time, you don't think that you'll stay here.  And, so...there again, I get my degree in January of 1966, my master's.  And around Christmas time, my advisor and I are sitting in his office and he always thought I will do Ph.D. and I said, "Can I go work?"  And at that time I had job offers from IBM, Xerox.  And I said to him...His preference was I go for IBM because the job was in Chicago.  Xerox was in Rochester.  I, for some reason, like Rochester but I was sort of just debating and as we are talking his phone rings.  And, he's talking to somebody and then he leaned back in his chair and he says: "Do I have the right guy for you!"  And he hang ups.  He says, "There's a hospital at 135th Street called Michael Reese Hospital. The president is looking for an assistant and you will--you are the right person for it, go there now."  I said, "In my street clothes?"  He says, "Yes."  So when he saw hesitation in my face, he said "Oh, I have to go home anyway, I'll drive you there."  So, it's five o'clock, he drive me to Michael Reese Hospital, okay?  I...I'm sort of scared of the place, I go to administrative office and there is a woman coming out of one office and she said, "Can I help you?"  I says, "Mr. Silverman is expecting me."  And she says, "No he is not."  She is his secretary.  But, Mr. Silverman come out and he says, "Yes, I'm expecting him."  So, I go to his office.  Here's the scene: he opens the drawer takes out a scotch bottle and puts it on his desk.  He says: "It's five o'clock!"  [Laughs.]  I told him I don't drink.  He says: "Well, in 25 minutes, I have to go to a board meeting...But since Dan sent you, I'm sure you're qualified so you're hired."  Now we haven't discussed job or anything!  We haven't discussed salary or nothing.  And he says to me: "I have three requirements of people who work for me."  He said, "Number one: If you are in this hospital...anytime of day or night, you walk through the place." He's a Executive Director or President of the hospital. I said, "Fine, that's easy."  Number two, he says: "I expect you to come here Saturday morning and I want you to come early, seven o'clock.  And there is a table downstairs, Shirley, his secretary--will show you, and I want you to sit on that table.  It's in a restaurant." I said, "Why?" He said, "That table is next to doctor's table.  And once they know who you are they'll come and curse me and I want you to tell me everything they talk to you about.  And after nine-thirty, you can go home."  I said fine.  Third thing he said was the most interesting.  He says, "You know, we are a Jewish hospital, we have our own culture.  And to be successful in this place you have to understand us little bit.  You have to understand the culture."  He said, "Actually, in fact I expect people who are--non-Jewish people to think at least 49% Jewish terms."  You know, which is nice thing to say, to understand the culture of the place, which a corporation will--general GE will tell you...I said fine.  Then he says, "You have any questions?"  This is now five-fifteen, I said: "I have three requests."  He said, "What?"  I said, "I don't want to be nine to five employee.  Please, if I come late, I don't want people to stare at me.  You'll get more hours from me."  He said, "Why would you come late?"  I said, "If I am in the middle of Symphony #9, Beethoven's symphony...I'm not going to quit."  So he laughed.  He says, "Fine, nobody will bother you."  Number two, I said: "For two months, I don't want any project, I just want to wander around."  He said, "Why do you want to do that?"  I said, "Number one, to meet your requirement of culture."  Number three, I said: "I don't know anything about hospitals."  He said no problem.  Number three, I said, "In about a year's time, I want to go to India to get married."  He said, "Oh, girlfriend there?"  I said, "No no no, my parents will find somebody."  And I said I would like to have three months off, whatever your conditions, without pay or...he said, okay no problem.  I got hired, I didn't know my salary, so this is another lucky thing.  The world's greatest hospital in those days.  

INT:   Mm-hm. 

VB: So, when you talk about impression of America, man, in my case, they were all positive things.  South side never bothered me, like working at Michael Reese Hospital, there were enough African American employees who were aspirations, who were desires, who were aptitude, who were passions were same as mine.  You know, everybody wants to...work, create family, all those things.  I never...so...

INT (68:45):   Were you one of the few Indians--

VB: --In administration, yes.  There were doctors.  Administrative side, I would say even around the country probably: handful.  Okay?  Hospital, who went to work for hospitals when you have engineering degrees and you could go to IBM and Xerox?  I went to work for them simply because, again, I had security of the school that I can do Ph.D.  You know, I was very secure driven that way and I could...I said to Mr. Silverman that day, I said: "Well I need an apartment."  "Oh across the street, we'll get you an apartment."  [Laughs.]  I live across the street for ten years.

INT:   Where, what was the...Do you remember the address? Or the intersection?

VB:   Yeah, Michael Reese?

INT:   Of your apartment.

VB:   Right across, 29th [Street] and King Drive.  And the hospital was 29th [Street] and King Drive.  Hospital was east of us.  The five buildings still exist over there.  I lived in 2951 building.

INT (69:51):   And were you ever homesick?  Throughout these years?

VB:   Yes, in some sense because I was very well connected with my family.

INT:   You kept in touch.

VB:   Oh yeah, I wrote letters everyday, almost.  I wrote a lot of letters.  But, in...I was most homesick when my professor friend died.  Those...that next three, four months were very, very hard.  Very hard.

INT: And that's...That makes sense, seeing as how that was your support away from home.

VB:   Yeah.  And I think, you know the first death experience in the way you think about that.  For grandfathers and others it's natural phenomenon, but for him...[Pause.] And that's the first British home I went to and stayed, the first foreign home that I stayed was his home.  And that Christmas of 1962, so...

INT (71:15): And so when I spoke with Ranjana, she had mentioned how at the time that you were both here and first arrived--or you arrived and then she came later, there weren’t many Indians in the city at that time.

VB: The married, we had lot of Indian students at IIT.  We lived only four blocks from there.  There were very few married couples, okay?  And...I remember my close friends would ask her to cook anything.  They were willing to wash dishes and come and then there were others who came.  And I remember when...The Diwali party of 1967, when we had a studio apartment this size, we had 60 people in that, sitting on the floor.  They were all student from IIT.  So some we knew, some we didn't know...So we were probably the first married couples, you know.

INT:   Was it nice having--

VB:   --Oh yeah, yeah.  As far as I was concerned...That way I grew up in joint family, so there were no problem for me at all.  Now, some other people may have difficulty with that, I had no problem.  I mean, whenever somebody called to come and eat, yeah.  And that still continues.  And we never had any problem with that.  And in that case, the credit really should go to [Ranjana] because she was so accommodating.

INT:   To Ranjana?

VB: Yeah.

INT: So accommodating in what way?

VB:   Well, I mean, to have these people to come and eat and we--

INT:   --I see.

VB: --And open hearted about it and thing like that.  And she would encourage people to come and thing like that.  Between her and me, I was more introvert than she is, she's very...

INT (73:26):   So you had made that time available with that job, so that you could go back to India.  And that was '67?

VB:   That's...I joined Michael Reese in '66, February.  I went to India in 1967, September.  I mean, November.

INT: Could you describe that process of corresponding with your family and coming back?

VB:   You know, you never directly wrote to anybody, or my parents.  You come and they will find someone and you'll get married.  Other than that, there are no other conversation.

INT:   Did you make that--did you reach out to start that process or how did that work?

VB:   This a...there are lot of thing in Indian community work through osmosis.  It's understanding, okay?  You are old enough to get married and you have a job and time settle down, kind of thing.

INT:   Was that kind of the standard?  Have a job, security?

VB:   Yeah, I would say so, because if you talk to other men here who were in similar situation, would say it's same thing.  Once they had job in a year and half time they went home and got married, unless they found somebody here.  But most of us who are Indian at that time went to India.

[Pause.]

INT (75:14):   I'm just looking over some of the things that Ranjana told me.  She mentioned that you wrote letters everyday to describe all of your family.

VB:   Yes.  In our case, I went to visit Ranjana's family with my parents on November 5, 1967.  And this is the process where you visit them, both parties are trying to assess each other and you can decide no or yes.  I mean, that's sort of...In my case, my older brother, the doctor, went with us.  And he was my conduit to my parents and he told me in the train that Ranjana's family was very conservative according to his assessment and that I won't be able to talk to her.

INT:   That you won't be able to...

VB:   Yeah, talk to her.  And so I'll have to make my decision on the basis of the surrounding or her looks or whatever.  You know, I said, "Fine, that's what it is."  And he said to me at that time and my mom, too that we have three people in mind, so if you visit this person and you want to see the others, that can be arranged and we can tell these people that we'll respond in three weeks and that's--or whatever time period it is.  And I said, "Fine."  So, we go to her home.  In India, some other strange things happen.  I had two cousins who lived in that town.  They also joined.  So, now there are my parents and four men: my brother, me, and these two others.  Although, they look little younger, but they are four men.  Of course, I was introduced to her parents and Ranjana came later and nobody introduced me to her, except I knew who she was, but she didn't knew who I was!

INT:   There were too many of you to...

VB:   That's right, there was no introduction.  And my brother's the only one who answered some question and I couldn’t hear and my brother whatever his wisdom, started asking question in Hindi, you know, in our language.  As if she didn't know English or whatever that is.  So, I hear their conversation.  To me, in that meeting, most impressive person was her mother.  Her mother, like my mom, was also fourth, fifth grade dropout.  She had just visited U.S.  And she's describing her U.S. trip to my mom.  Describing her fear of this escalators and these big shopping centers and thing like that.  Here, this person--

INT:   --Where did she go in the U.S.?

VB:   She came to U.S. to New York.  Her son was here, yeah.

INT:   City or upstate?

VB:   Yeah, he's in upstate now; he used to be in New Jersey at that time.

INT:   Okay.

VB: And she's describing him and they just had a child and she--her experience with the hospital--all those things, she's describing.  And she's so enthusiastic.  I mean...and to me, that's most impressive part.  Her father, yes, a lawyer and you know--I've seen many lawyers in my life, you know?  That kind of thing.  And so, I told my brother...so there was this meeting and then there was about ten minute break before we sat down for lunch.  And I told my brother that I will let him know my decision before lunch is over, okay?  Ranjana came to serve, and by time I had all information I needed, because I had no other information coming, so...I knew about family, because they are described to me.  I knew about she's a master student and all those thing.  And I kicked my brother under table, that was the thing that I agree. [Laughs.]  My brother (\_\_\_???) he just goes his hand and he spilled water all over the table or whatever and then he gets up and he says, "Can I talk to you for a second?  Excuse me."  And he tooks me in the little corridor and he says, "Are you sure?"  [Chuckles.]  I said: "Look, I'm sure."  So after lunch, she conveys to my parents who convey to her parents except they don't respond.  We had two hours before we take the train back and her older brother, in his wisdom, say: "Do you want to see downtown?"  I...What are you going to say, you're formal, you say, "Okay!" So make a trip to their downtown, which was--

INT: --In Allahabad?

VB: Allahabad, which is two block this way, two block that way, end of story...Came home, time to have a cup of tea and go so I never got a chance to talk to her.  Her brother--why her side didn't pursue this was mystery to me at that time, because she had met other boys and she had talked to them.  And they lived really in a town that was more forward than my hometown.  And if my parents made the assumption that they are already conservative, in...Which is probably okay, but...And then two days later they called and they said no!

INT: She didn't tell me that.

VB:   Yeah, they said no.  And in India they use a excuse #37: 'The horoscope didn't match.'  Which is sort of...my father's priest said horoscopes are fine.  Well my mom said, "Oh, we will go visit another person."  So we take a trip to visit another person.  Which, was totally mismatch.  That's why I am concern--I don't know why mother agreed to go there because there were no compatibility in terms of family and all that, too...But, we visited other person and we came home in town and I said to my parents, "If you cannot arrange somebody, then I won't waste my vacation. I want to go back.  And I'll come back." I said I have no problem because the missed time I only have taken 15 days, so I can come back.

INT (82:00):   And this was your first trip back to India--

VB: That's right, since 1962.  Yeah, 1967.  So I said to them, I'll come back.  But this is 16th November, Thursday evening and I--we got a call and suddenly agreed.  So in those 11 days, Ranjana had lot of pressure from lot of people to agree to this.  Including her sister--that's another thing, her sister could have met me in Dehli and would have been much better because she relied on her sister a lot.  Why didn't meet me is another...so there were lot of those things.  They agreed.  Then...on 19th, we went to her place.  That's was time I talked to her and then when I came back I wrote her lot of letters between November 22nd and December 11th, when we got married.  I wrote lot of letters, describe to her whole family and thing like that.  You know...so.

INT (83:06):   She also told me about your sense of humor and how at the wedding with--

VB:   --Oh, yeah.  [Chuckles.]  If you go to Indian wedding here, and when they're making those seven rounds or whatever, the priest will--there are seven promises you make.  Probably they are well-written in sanskrit language, but when priest translate it, they botch it up.  They don't know how to translate and I think priest should really write down.  The promises are no different than promises here.  And so, there is a--priest says, "From now onwards, you look at any woman, it'll be your sister or your mother."  I said, I agree to disagree, you know?  That's all.  [Laughs.]  I mean, the marriage ceremony over there, although it has a spiritual sense to it, there is no order.  People are wandering around, people are drinking tea, people are conversing and here, you're getting married.  And all that thing is going on.  It's really a pandemonium in that sense.

INT (84:37):   So, are there...so you grew up practicing Hinduism--

VB:   --That's right. 

INT: --Being religious.  Are you still religious or practice?

VB:   Well let me go back to my mom one more time.  Remember I told you I hated to go on her birthday...So, this is my...they had moved to my town where I was going engineering school.  In march is the Shivaratri, that's the Shiva's birthday that's where...my mom's birthday.  And Mom said, "Oh well, your exams are three weeks later, let's go one day to the temple.  Ujjain, my hometown.  [She] said, "Okay, will you go for a day?"  I said fine.  And then again we have this backdoor.  Now, one of my friend, who did not go to college has two little kids.  And he's standing in line scrunched like that, (inaudible) was always scrunched and he was still scrunched.  And he looks at me funny, you know.  And I feel miserable and...So I'm telling my mom and we were coming back on the train, I said "I really don't like to go.  It's demeaning to me."  Next morning, before we get down Jabalpur train stop, she said to me: "You don't have to do this anymore."  I said, "What?"  She says, "All these rituals and all that, you don't have to do them."  I said, "Mom, are you angry?"  She said no.  She said--

INT:   Sorry, what age were you?

VB:   Oh, I was 20 year-old.  And she said, "You don't have to do this anymore."  I said, "Ma, are you angry?"  She said no.  She said, "I've thought about it a lot, you said to me when younger days, that you didn't want to do this.  And I took you this time because I believed that if you're with god, your exams, your health and thing like that," which is fine.  But, she said, "You got the essence of this, you don't have to do it."  I don't do anything religious.  I was--well my sisters and they do all kinds of rituals and thing like that.  I really don't.  I wasn't religious to begin with.  I mean, I felt the temple was in my case was being used to create preferences and thing like that.  My job getting first job was a preference-related job, I hated those things, you know.

INT:   So that could kind of explain, maybe, your sense of humor at your wedding?  Something that--

VB:   --Well that no...my sense of humor part is...I am, in many ways, a wacko, you know?  I always think on the other side, you know?

INT:   Where do you think--is that, was that common in your family?

VB:   No, actually again, growing up joint family there are two, more point I should make.  One is there's...as much as there's a sense of camaraderie and those kind...there a lot of tensions, too.  There are lot of competitions.  There are jealousies.  You get a good grade, somebody else didn't get good grade.  And things would be said where they're not meant, but they are said.  And in that situation, or...Either one can develop the same attitude, or one can develop the other side.  I loved my aunts and all that, but they said some nasty thing to me or they said nasty thing to my mother or my mother yelled at them.  I mean there were sometime fights between my mother and the aunts and they will separate the kitchen for few days.  And then, with this kitchen separation, there is a line, my aunt's kitchen side is here and then my aunt will say from the other side: "Come, to my side, I'll make your favorite vegetable."  I mean, this is sort of, you tell me...And it happened all the time.  You know, some cases.  And, so we didn't care, we go the other side.  And good thing was, in those days, if there were disagreements at my mom's level, they didn't effect us.  For us, she was my aunt, and there's a fight between them.  Later on, our joint family broke up and the reason was people begin to take it...if two kids fought, the mother's will fight.  You follow me?  It became an animosity between whole family and they broke up.

So, sense of humor, I mean I could sort of...from there and I was always amused at certain things, like we will have...you can imagine a scene: summertime, mangoes are very popular.  In India there is a mango that you suck on.  You make it loose and you suck on it, okay?  And, you got ten of those to eat, because they're little.  And I look at my family where everybody's after them...I was standing out and I didn't like them.  And I could see what's going on there, you follow me?  I mean, this whole scene is to you is a...really comedy.  And there are lot of those kind of things and people getting...and most of them are food related.  If a big dessert came, everybody's sort of...I'm sort of...[Laughs.]  The fights, this kind of things and...or somebody getting a new something from somewhere, it's all very amusing to me.  And that's the reason why I always felt that growing up in that family, the good thing was that you could define your own happiness the way you want to define it.  Which is, not my idea.  (name of an author) said that in a book, but I totally agree.  He says...if you grow up in an environment where you are able to define your own happiness as you grow up, then that environment must be right.  And I totally believe that, you see.

INT (91:19): Do you feel you brought that here when you raised your own family?

VB:   Yeah.  In our case it cannot be my part, it has to be joint.  But in that sense I feel very, very fortunate to be married to Ranjana because she had really a very giving attitude.  And that worked well for us, even moving to live here where most Indian families live in suburb, I mean, we are moving to the South side and predominantly Black culture, we have no problem with that.  But, it allowed our children to understand what problems are and they both understood them and tried to work with them and help in those environments, so very positive in that sense.  And, but to me that's part of where I came from.

This also working at Michael Reese was a plus in that sense.  You know, you got introduced to--there are people who live in suburb and go downtown offices, never have any idea of what the other fence is like.  They had great doctors who were from all religions and all color and we had employees of all colors.  Michael Reese was a great place to work.  And then, living here had been very positive to us, for us.

[Pause.]

INT (93:13):   Did you experience any culture shock when you first came here, or...?

VB: No.  No.

INT: It seems like you were pretty flexible.

VB: Yeah, and there are lot of discrimination, all those kind of stories, okay?  Only two things happened in my life and I took them lightly.  One happened in England.

I used to work for a design office where we'll prepare drawings and when I joined that place--again, my professor helped me get it, the job--and most people in the office won't relate to me because I'm the only different-looking guy.  Except the guy who was head of the office, talked to me extensively although at that time I didn't understand his accent.  But understood that I could do lot of thing, and he recognized that I could do calculations, okay?  So any job came, I did all the calculations in terms of estimating how much it would cost and all that.  And, in his mind I learned lot of things that are necessary to do that very quickly.  But then people in office didn't talk to me.  And my desk was in a corner, at lunchtime I sit there, had my cheese sandwich and orange drink.

One day, this guy approached me and then he said, "John," (our boss), he says, "John tell me you're a wiz! You're a wiz!"  I said to him, "John can lie too, you know." He said, "No, I have this homework problem, I'm going to polytechnic here. Can you help me?"  I said, I look at the problem, I says, "Do you want me to solve it for you, do you want me to teach you?"  I said, "I can solve it, you will submit it, you will get a grade.  Or teach you."  He says, "For now, solve it."  I said, okay, solve it.  He submitted.

Two days later he came back and he has another problem, I said, "Look.  If you want to work with me, you have to learn.  I can teach you but otherwise my solving it..." Well, started relating to him, he's a good guy, relating to him.  Now, suddenly there are other people in the office.  So, it reminded me of a scene from Shawshank Redemption.  Where...he gets one guy’s taxes and then all people are coming for taxes.  Exactly same thing.  At one time there were 17, 18 people who's helped them with the homework in that office because they are all going to...

So, this guy who become, at first become my friend, and then at Friday evening we'll go to bar with him.  And one day we go to the bar which, new bar.  And I go with him and the guy, the bartender say, "Throw him out, I don't want to serve him."  And my friend, Ian, he says, "What did you say?"  He says, "Throw him out."  Ian was six foot, two-inch tall, he went across, lifted like him--the bartender--from this side [gestures grabbing someone by the collar] and threw him on the floor. 

INT:   Wow. 

VB:   Okay?  And in England, you have to understand.  Clapping is great thing.  Everybody in the bar: clap, clap, clap.  [Bhargava laughs.]  And then, everybody in bar walked out.  At the same time.  I said to John, “You know what?  We can go to a lot of bars."

"No, no, no, they have to serve..."  The manager who's sitting in the back room came running.  And, he said, "Twenty, thirty people walked out!"...He's apologizing, and [one of Bhargava's friends] says, "You don't apologize to me, apologize to this guy!"  He has a problem talking to me, but then he apologizes.  Ian says, "Not only [the manager], that guy has to apologize to him."  The bartender, who is obviously hurt because [Ian] dropped him, but not hurt.  So, bartender come apologize to me and thing like that.  So, that was one experience.

[Pause.]

I mean, that was the major thing...

INT: Generally, you did okay...

VB:   No, I mean, working at Michael Reese.  Michael Reese was a conglomerate of Indian doctors, foreign doctors.  It was another place where they saw a new face.

I mean, the only other thing I had was, I went for an interview to Louisville, Kentucky to Alcoa company, when I was looking for...And the human resources department was fine, but the engineer who saw me, he didn't talk to me and I could hear whispering to the other guy, "I don't want to hire this guy."  You know, that kind of thing.  They paid my airfare, I came back.  But, I could hear them.

I mean, I never experienced--I think Ranjana and some other people have more stories to tell you about that.  At Michael Reese, maybe because of my position, under Vice President which makes a difference in some sense.  But I also was, I understood...Batting average is 300 in baseball, that should be alright in life, too.

[Bhargava chuckles.]

INT (98:22):   Do you remember helping Ranjana when she moved...to adjust to American culture?

VB:   Mostly, she had difficulties and she came...she knew how to cook fancy dishes; she didn't know how to cook regular dishes.  So, that was easy.  And not only that, her father was opposed to her dancing in India, although she learned dancing when she came here.  I said, by all means.  And she wanted to work, there were no problem.  Initially she was in Indian clothes, at some point she changed and I said there's no problem with that.  You have to decide those steps yourself.  The only thing is, you can be in background and support a person in that sense, but...I think there are maybe other people who had more difficulty than Ranjana did.  After all, her brothers were here and thing like that.  And she, herself is very brave in that sense.

INT (99:24):   You said there are certain steps that you have to take yourself, like making the decision to not wear--

VB:   That's right.  Yeah, like if she wants to change from your Indian dresses to whatever, you have to make that decision.  I was a vegetarian, but if she wanted to eat meat for certain reason, there would be no problem from my side.

INT:   Were there any decisions that you made to go from--shift culturally, in that sense

VB:   ...In my case, I remain a vegetarian, okay?  Alright, so that's sort of...the--most of the people from India, 80, 90% convert because in those days--'60s--there were very few vegetarian places and all that.  In my case, Ranjana could cook and even when I was staying in dormitory, eating salad and mashed potato and rice and corn was not a problem for me because after all, I lived in England.  And although I cooked in the evening for myself, because this place where I stayed in England most of the time, they would give me kitchen after seven o'clock.  I came home six-thirty, quarter to seven, so...So I had no problem with the meals here at dormitory and then I was cooking at home.

So, the meals I did cook, and fortunately for me, in Jewish faith, that is very well-respected.  And so, most of my administrative contacts were Jewish people.  I went to their home, they respected my religious faith, there were absolutely no problem in that regard.  And even at Michael Reese, there were...When my boss found out I'm vegetarian, there were provisions made in the cafeteria, like, instead of one vegetable, there are two vegetables.  Thing like that.  So, I didn't have to...

Now, there were certain things I did to prepare myself for U.S.  Because I had experience living in England.  In England, when I reached there, I decided--and where I got this wisdom, don't ask me--I figured out that in order to settle in a culture, there are certain things you must know.  You should be very well-versed in sports.  It takes you long way with men's side of...And then you should understand the other aspects of theatre, music, and all those things.  Politics, you usually figure out, because after all, news is over there.  You heard news two times a night anyway.  Six o'clock and nine o'clock.

So, I got to know symphony, I got to know pop music.  I got to know...I even visited an opera.  Or whenever I could afford, I would go to theatre and I went to theatre...So, I had no other expenses, other than the fact that I was educating myself.  So, when I landed here, for example, even coming to U.S. when I figured out I was coming to Chicago, I figured out baseball teams and all of that, before I even landed here.  So, at that time, White Sox were in the pennant race, I knew the names of the top players and people were surprised the first day I'm here, and I know the names of the player.  I had knew how football works, thing like that.

INT:   Was that a conscious effort?

VB:   Yes.

INT: To educate yourself on those things?

VB:   Yeah, and what I'm saying is--where that wisdom came from, I can't explain to you.  Except that I was--nobody told me that you had to do that, but I figured out that, in order to relate to a different culture, you have to know what their popular things are.  You know, then you can integrate things you can understand later on.  So that, I did.  And, so other than that cultural education...No, and as far as churches and all that, what are difference between different religion and all that, people would explain to you.  Going to synagogue or whatever you're doing and what is their ritual, people explain.  There were never any problem with that in that regard.  And, fortunately for me, people accepted me as I was.  And my stupid sense of humor or whatever those things--Michael Reese people had absolutely no problem with me.  Which, again, I call being lucky.

Now, Ranjana had to--what adjustments she had to make at work, she probably talked to you about.  She felt more in the area of discrimination than I did.  But then, she's more feisty, you see.  She's more competitive.  And as far as I'm concerned...if somebody didn't want to relate to me, fine.  There are other people.  And I fortunately didn't run into anybody like that.

INT:   I think we should be wrapping up. 

VB:   Oh, okay.

INT:   We can probably squeeze in a few more questions.

VB:   Yeah.

[Pause.]

INT (104:56):   I guess before we close, I'd like to know: do you, or how do you maintain your Indian heritage on a daily basis?  Do you still feel connected to your Indian heritage?

VB:   Yes.  Very much.  There is no conscious effort on my part.  I do not go to temples because I have great difficulty generally about using religion to create differences that I feel are unnecessary.  Because unfortunately to me, religion is only provide you with contract between you and God, which is personal, and has nothing to do with what goes on in temple and all that and our Hindu religion doesn't say you have to go to temple to worship, you know?  God is everywhere, kind of thing.  So I...In terms of...My values are based on where I came from.  One could argue that they are universal values and that is true.  Treat your neighbors as...you know, those kind of things.  Since I grew up in a large family, accommodating people was essential to survive.  And accommodating people is a good strategy.  Because I learned that from there...

The other thing to me is very important is provide people with spaces.  You know, as much as you say you grew up in a joint family, you had your space if you wanted to create it.  And therefore...you know, I have friends who are staunch Trump supporter Republicans that find a common ground and work with them...That kind of thing.  So, I have no...Where does this come from?  I say it's from my upbringing.  I relate to my cousins, my uncles, everybody lot more than people in India and I know everybody's birthday, they get cards from me all the time.  And so, I'm connected to them, I'm connected to relatives on both sides.  I'm willing to help them in any way I can.

Lot of people say my uncles--who turn 90 two weeks ago.  He said he's closest to me!  And there are nephews living there right in that town.  Only because I remember stories.  I remember the first time I...First time I thought I remember him.  And I can write to him, you know?  And his thing that he did for family, in precise minute detail, I know.  And I knew about other uncles.  So, and that's how I'm connected, I'm connected my side.

I...Indian classical music, I could have gone to learn Western classical music.  But, my objective is not to learn music, I was trying to survive.  Have it...have problem if I don't use my throat muscles, they will die and sayonara.  So, but I went to Indian classical music because it connects to me that side.  Although I had a wonderful, wonderful teacher through my acting side who taught me Western music, but she agreed that this was fine if I'm doing that.  Because I'm doing all the thing that she would have done, except the violin.

But, in the end, this is my country.  This is where I live, okay?  It...Might do most of things in this neighborhood and I have no problem with that.  I am master gardener but I want to go garden on this side of town, I don't want to go north side.  Because this is where I live.  And lot of people say "Danger, Danger!" I said, "If you lived there, you live with the pluses and minuses."

So, for example, two years ago, we created a garden in the senior center here, which was surrounded by young people playing basketball and we are creating this.  And those kids could have helped us dig up the ground, so I said to one of the senior citizens, can we ask them.  He says, "Stay away from them."  We dig up the ground, we prepared it, and as I was leaving, one of those guys said to me: "Hey!"  And I said, "My God, what is he going to do?" He came to me and he thanked me for doing that.  So, I said, "Can you do me a favor?"  He said, "What?" I said, "These people cannot drag that pipe from fire hydrant to water, because commissioner of city."  I said, "Would you help them?  [With] your friends?"  He said he'll do that.

Except that winter, that little plot we created was vandalized.  Totally destroyed.  But I will grow something here again, I mentor people.  There are young Black people.  Now, somebody come from their side I will do that, but if I have limited time, this is where I live, this is my preference.  I'm very happy with my neighbors.  I will do anything for them and they will do anything for me.  So, that's what it is.

INT(110:47):   As we're closing up here, is there anything else that you would like to add?

VB: Only thing I hope that Heritage Museum is inclusive in total tapestry of India.  India is like Europe.  But, India also has a problem of separation by language, by...all those things.  Food, because the south food is different.  I just hope the museum bridges that gap and involve a lot of people in doing whatever the museum...whatever we are creating.  If it doesn't do that, then it doesn't do justice to Indian heritage.  Then it's part heritage and...you know. But that's the only thing in that area, if I can be of help.  That's all.

INT:   Okay, well thank you so much, Vijay.

VB:   You're welcome.

INT:   I'm sure this will be a very valuable resource to the museum and generations to come, so.

VB:   And, thank you for taking time to do this.

INT:   Thank you.