

FORT BEND COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION

ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE

Interviewee: **K. Balasubramanian**

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Interviewer: Jane Goodsill

Transcriber: Carlos Rubalcaba

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16 Pages



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Transcript

GOODSILL: Would you please introduce yourself and spell your name?

BALASUBRAMANIAN: My name is Balasubramanian

GOODSILL: What shall I call you?

BALASUBRAMANIAN: Bala.

GOODSILL: Great, would you tell us when you were born?

BALASUBRAMANIAN: I was born in December 1942.

GOODSILL: That was an interesting time, a lot going on right then. Where were you born?

BALASUBRAMANIAN: I was born in India, in Chennai, India. That's the southeast part of India, on the Bay of Bengal.

GOODSILL: What was it like?

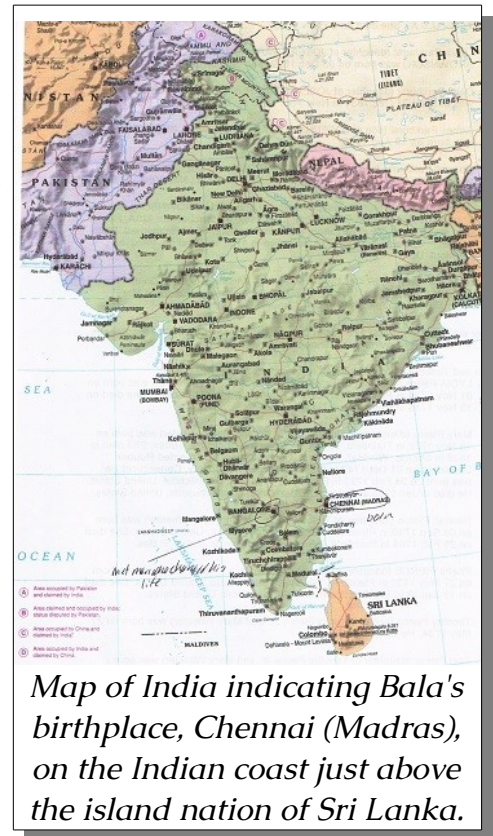
BALASUBRAMANIAN: It was an awfully crowded place.

GOODSILL: Because of high population?

BALASUBRAMANIAN: High population, but it was fantastic. It really is a cultural center of India in many ways. Large temples, arts and signs were sort of born there. If you look at the history, many thousands of years ago the kings of that place established themselves in Malaysia, Singapore, Cambodia and so on.

GOODSILL: What's the terrain like?

BALASUBRAMANIAN: It's pretty flat, probably more like Houston. It is very tropical, humid, and muggy like Houston. I was as born in the city, grew up in the city and spent all of my life in India, from primary school through college. I took the electric train, like a subway except it wasn't underground. I was a city boy.



GOODSILL: How far was your house from the beach?

BALASUBRAMANIAN: From the house that I grew up in the beach was probably two or three miles, but then we moved and the beach was a five-minute walk from our house.

GOODSILL: Did you go very often?

BALASUBRAMANIAN: Oh Yes, every day just to walk around.

GOODSILL: Tell us something about your family.

BALASUBRAMANIAN: My dad was a businessman. He owned a restaurant in Chennai. I am the oldest of five children; three sisters and one brother.

GOODSILL: What was your father's name?

BALASUBRAMANIAN: Krishnan

GOODSILL: And your mother's name?

BALASUBRAMANIAN: Lakshmi.

GOODSILL: He was a restaurant owner?

BALASUBRAMANIAN: Yes.

GOODSILL: What was his father's business?

BALASUBRAMANIAN: I think he was a priest in a temple.

GOODSILL: You didn't know him?

BALASUBRAMANIAN: No

GOODSILL: And your grandmothers?

BALASUBRAMANIAN: I don't know too much about my dad's mom. But my mom's mom was always with us. In fact, I think she brought me up more so than my mom.

GOODSILL: What was her name?

BALASUBRAMANIAN: Her name was Kanaka.

GOODSILL: What was the language you grew up speaking?

BALASUBRAMANIAN: Tamil.

GOODSILL: Do you speak other Indian languages?

BALASUBRAMANIAN: Yes. Malayalam.

GOODSILL: Do most people speak more than one?

BALASUBRAMANIAN: Yes.

GOODSILL: Did you grow up speaking English as well?

BALASUBRAMANIAN: English. When I was in the seventh standard as we call it (the seventh grade) I switched to an English medium where everything was taught in English. So you had no choice, you had to learn English, which was probably the best thing in those days.

GOODSILL: Did you do well in school?

BALASUBRAMANIAN: Yes. Well, there was no alternative. My grandma had a whip and made absolutely certain that homework assignments were done before I got out of the house.

GOODSILL: She wanted her grandson to prosper and do well!

BALASUBRAMANIAN: Yes, in fact, I think I was one of the few to get an engineering education from my family.

GOODSILL: Of anybody in your family you're the first professional?

BALASUBRAMANIAN: Yes.

GOODSILL: Your grandmother, Kanaka, what did her husband do?

BALASUBRAMANIAN: I don't know because he was long gone by the time I was with her. In India you may know that there is a caste system.

GOODSILL: Explain that to us.

BALASUBRAMANIAN: Right, so there are fundamentally four castes. One is called Brahmin. They were the advisors to the kings and they were the educated people. They were mostly in religion and were the priests in temples. The next caste was the warrior class.

The third one is the Vaisyas or the business community and the fourth was the Untouchables. Those are the people who cleaned your house and your toilets and that sort of thing. We belonged to the Brahmin community. The religious and intellectual side of things.

GOODSILL: So you got your engineering degree when you were what age?

BALASUBRAMANIAN: I was 22 when I finished my engineering degree. When I was a junior in the engineering college, the Indian air force wanted to recruit people. I was short in stature for India but wanted to see what happened. They selected a few people and there was an all-India five-day interview. Five days, it was not a question-and-answer test. They would take you out and ask you to solve a problem. They would say, "Imagine you are in the enemy territory, there is a big valley in front of you and your side is on the other side of the valley and they have no ammunition. You have a drum of ammunition and you have a pole and a rope. Now you've got ten minutes, figure out how to save them. If you walk over there all by yourself, your entire team will get killed. If you just roll the ammunition, you will be killed. Your task is to figure out how to take the drum of ammunition to the other side using the pole and the rope."

GOODSILL: Let me guess, our young engineering student could figure it out? Even though he was short?

BALASUBRAMANIAN: Yes. (laughs) After five days, there were 100 students, two of us were selected and then we were sent for medical checkups. The other guy gets rejected and I was the only guy selected! Now here is where the real story starts. I was so happy. After all of that I go home and tell my mom and my dad, "I am selected. I am going to go join the air force!" My mom started to cry, "Oh, my, you are the oldest child, if you go to the air force you might get killed and what am I going to do?"

Over the years people deposited money in my account for the final year of college and I had to take all of that to go to the air force office and tell this air force chief that I am not going to be joining. He said, "Why not?" I said, "My mom doesn't want me to join." "Did you not ask your mom before you went for the interview? Do you know how much money we have spent on one hundred people and we select one guy and you're sitting in front of me telling my you're not going to join the air force?" It was pretty ugly; he chased me out of his office. I went home and I decided to get my masters in engineering.

The Indian Institute of Technology was one of the most famous institutions in those days. I joined and I felt like I was learning the same things over and over again. I quit which was unheard of in India in those days. When I look back I think I was stupid.

GOODSILL: Young, you were young and confident.

BALASUBRAMANIAN: Yes. Anyway, so what happens is I joined as a trainee in the only electronics company we had. That was in Bangalore. It was called Baharat Electronics.

I joined Baharat Electronics and guess what? My bosses, bosses, bosses, boss, you know five six levels above me was from the air force. One day, late on a Friday evening I was working and the man comes to me and we started to chat. I explained to him what had happened and he said, "You are the stupidest guy I have ever seen in my life. Look at me. I am the air commodore in the Indian air force and you had every opportunity to become me and you screwed it up."

He changed my life; I couldn't sleep that night. I went back to him the next morning and said, "Okay, I figured out what I am going to do. I am not going to spend the rest of my life as an engineer working for this company. I am going to go to the U. S, get a Ph.D. and maybe come back; maybe my life will become better. But I need your help". He said, "In which way?" "I am going to start applying to schools in the U. S. right this minute and I am going to use you as one of my references. Can I do that?" He smiled and said, "Yes." So I started applying. I got admitted to multiple schools, but there was only one school that gave me an assistantship. That is the University of Rhode Island. I decided to go to the University of Rhode Island in 1967.

GOODSILL: Why not stay in India? Were the educational opportunities not as good there?

BALASUBRAMANIAN: No, they were but I noticed that even at my school the people who had gotten Ph.D.s from the U. S. were regarded highly.

GOODSILL: That's a good explanation. So you go to the University of Rhode Island?

BALASUBRAMANIAN: In those days the government of India would give you eight dollars. So, I had all of eight dollars in my pocket and I had a cashier's check for \$250 dollars.

GOODSILL: From your family?

BALASUBRAMANIAN: From my family. That's all you were allowed by the government of India to take with you. So here I was, my first time in an air plane ever. I land in New York and I had to go from New York to Providence, Rhode Island.

I did not know that I could request vegetarian food on the plane so I had not ordered any and everything they brought was non-vegetarian, so I hadn't eaten anything except candy. When I landed in New York, I came out of customs and I knew I had to catch another plane. I went to this lady at the information desk and said, "Okay here's my ticket, I flew KLM. What do I do?" She says, "See those double glass doors over there? Go through them, make a right turn, go to the third bus stop and stand there. A yellow bus with two black lines will come and take you to the other airport." She was speaking so fast I didn't understand half of what she said. I was hungry, I was twenty-three years old and tears started coming out of my eyes. I wanted to go home. I didn't want any part of this.

But look at my luck! There was a guy talking to this lady at the information counter. He looked at me and says, "Son, did you fly KLM?" I said, "Yes." He says, "Come here, I am going to take care of you." It turns out he was the general manager of KLM at the JFK Airport. He takes me to his office and as I sat there he makes a telephone call and said, "A young fellow from India just landed in JFK. He has to go to Providence. We have to take him to the other airport. Why don't you come right away?" I didn't know what he was doing. Turns out within five minutes a pilot walks into his office. "So this is the young fella?" "Yes, okay. Son, he's going to take care of you." So I was given a HELICOPTER ride by this pilot. He takes me from JFK to Newark Airport where my plane was going to take off to go to Rhode Island. Here I am sitting on the plane with eight dollars still intact, in my pocket.

My next issue was the Rhode Island school people. They told me if I arrived before four o'clock they would pick me up from the airport. If it was after four I should spend the night at the airport and call them in the morning for a ride. My plane was going to land at eight o'clock on a Sunday. I looked around at the few people on the plane. I went to one gentleman and asked, "Sir, is there a way I can spend one night in Providence for \$3.00?" He looked at me and he says, "Yes, but I wouldn't recommend that you go to such a place." "Is there a hotel at the airport?" He said, "Yes." "How much would that cost?" "\$10.00." I made up my mind I was going to spend the night right at the airport using my little green suitcase as a pillow. Look at my luck again!

I picked up my luggage and I heard somebody call my name. There was a Nigerian student and an American girl from the school. "We are here to pick you up and take you to school". I said, "Really? I thought I had to land here by four o'clock." "No, we had nothing to do so we drove from Kingston to Providence to pick you up." I remember sitting in the car and for the second time that day I cried. I had saved all these candies in my pocket. I took all of them and gave them to the girl and said, "This is all I can give you for what you have done for me." (chuckling).

Now look at the human mind. Here I was being driven from Providence, Rhode Island to Kingston, Rhode Island and I remember wondering if my room would have a pillow. Grandma told me to take a pillow and I said, "No, I don't want any pillow." So here is the guy, who was going to spend the night at the airport with no pillow, who now wants the comfort of a pillow! That is the human mind, you know? Anyway my international student adviser was waiting for me. He gives me a key, "Room number 4. I know how tired you are, don't say anything just go sleep and we will talk whenever you get up in the morning. Come by the office and we'll talk." I open the door of Room Number 4, there was a bed and FOUR pillows.

That was my first day in the U. S.

GOODSILL: Welcome to America.

BALASUBRAMANIAN: I have probably told this story a million times, but every time I get emotional. Anyways that was my first day in the U.S; I was in school and still had my eight dollars intact in my pocket. I realized the next morning I didn't have any after-shave lotion. So I go to the store. Aqua Velva was \$0.42 cents. I immediately translated that to Indian currency and said, "Oh, it's too expensive. I can't afford to buy this."

GOODSILL: (laughing) That's quite a story, you got a tear in my eye. (laughing)

BALASUBRAMANIAN: In those days the computer lab was not open Saturday afternoons and Sundays, but a lot of people were doing their theses using the computer. They wanted it to be open Saturday afternoons and Sundays. I offered to be the computer operator. They were happy that somebody wanted to this on the Saturday afternoon, Saturday night and, Sunday shifts. They didn't know how badly I needed money.

GOODSILL: Did you have computer skills?

BALASUBRAMANIAN: Oh, yes, I had computer skills from India. So I became the computer operator.

GOODSILL: They didn't know all you had was that eight dollars?

BALASUBRAMANIAN: I still had my eight bucks in my pocket.

GOODSILL: (laughing)

BALASUBRAMANIAN: Then I was in the PHD program.

GOODSILL: Working on Saturdays and Sundays.

BALASUBRAMANIAN: Oh, yes. I had nothing else to do. Slowly but surely I realized that I could do my Masters, get a job and pay some money back to my parents because they had taken a mortgage on the house to pay for my plane fare.

GOODSILL: Did you have to pay tuition or did you get a scholarship?

BALASUBRAMANIAN: No tuition. I went to the only school that would give me a tuition waiver and a little bit of assistantship, University of Rhode Island.

GOODSILL: You needed to pay your parents back.

BALASUBRAMANIAN: Yes, that was in my head all the time so through this computer lab job, even as I was a student, I paid the money back to my parents. I was saving every penny, right? In fact I was on a meal program. I was staying in the dorm and on Sunday nights there was no food. My buddy and I used to go behind the computer lab where they had apple trees. I can still see those apple trees. We would go and get apples and that was our dinner on Sunday nights. To cut a long story short, I finished my degree in Rhode Island and my Masters. A friend of mine was doing his Ph.D. at SMU in Dallas. Somebody told me about a company that would pay for your plane fair if they invite you for an interview. So, I applied to Texas Instruments, which I figured out was in Dallas. I applied to T. I. in Dallas. They flew me for free from Providence, Rhode Island to Dallas, Texas. I was offered a job, but the job was not in Dallas it was in Houston. So I came to Houston in 1969.

GOODSILL: Had you got your Ph.D. by that time or just your Masters?

BALASUBRAMANIAN: I had my Masters. I joined T. I. in 1969 and stayed with T. I. until I retired in 2006, 37 years later.

GOODSILL: Wow! How would you describe the culture shock of coming to America?

BALASUBRAMANIAN: The culture shock. In India there is a saying, "*Mata pita guru deivam.*" It literally means the first person that you should worship in your life is your mom, second one is your dad, the third one is your guru (teacher) and the fourth one is God, in that order, right? In India when the teacher walked into the class we would all stand up and do *Namaste* for the teacher. Here it was very different; my roommate was a Ph.D. The professor would walk in and I would stand up. This American guy would be having a cigar and... I am thinking whoa! This IS a different culture.

But I found that in the initial years in Rhode Island my host family treated me like their own son and they didn't have a son. That lady said, "Do you have a winter jacket?" It was August when I landed in Rhode Island. I didn't even know about coats coming from Chennai, India. She said, "You need that, you know it's going to snow here." "Okay, but I can spend only ten dollars." She said, "Okay, I am going to take you to Boston." That poor lady spent probably three quarters of a day taking me from one shop to another shop and guess what? I found a coat for \$12.00. I used it for many, many years, right here in Houston. I finally threw it away. But what I found was that people were extraordinarily nice to me. From my professor to my host family, to the students from different countries, to the American friends that I had, they were all extraordinarily nice.

I'll tell you another story. Pretty soon they gave me more money for the assistantship because I was grading papers and tasks like that. Right before I graduated my professor walks in and says, "I want to double your pay from \$300 to \$600." I said, "I don't want any more." Dr. Kelly said, "Now look, Bala, I am giving you twice the amount of money and you're saying no." I said, "Yes Dr. Kelly, look at what has happened in my life in the last couple of years. I know there are students here from all over the world. They all need money. I have a job in Texas, so right after I finish my thesis I want to go earn a lot of money. I need for you to take this money and give it to other students. There is one from Nigeria, one from India, one from somewhere in the Middle East. Please give it to those people." He said, "You know, I learned something from you." That's all he would say.

So I came to Houston. I join Texas Instruments. They were building a building in Stafford. We had a leased chemical building on Kirby Drive at Richmond, I think. I started there, but within months we moved to the Stafford site. I got an apartment right on Beechnut. It was \$135 dollars a month for a one-bedroom apartment. My life started beautifully after that.

GOODSILL: Your job was interesting to you?

BALASUBRAMANIAN: Oh, absolutely.

GOODSILL: What was it that was interesting?

BALASUBRAMANIAN: I was a design engineer. My first job was designing integrated circuits that would go into a Canon printer. This is 1969 and right after that T. I. decided to do the single chip calculator. They said to me, "You are going to be one of the design guys." There were three of us. My part didn't work the first time. It didn't work the second time and I was absolutely convinced that T. I. was going to fire me.

It was a Friday and we had company at the apartment. Someone called me and said, "Hey, we still have a problem." So I went in and spent all night working on it. I fixed it but on Monday morning I was nervous. I told myself, "My bosses' boss is going to call me and fire me." He did call me and I went to his office and I was positive that they were going to fire me. He said, "I understand that you worked all night Friday?" "Yes." "You solved the problem?" "Yes." "Congratulations we need people like you." God has been good to me; people have been good to me. That's all I can say. There is nothing unique about me.

Slowly but surely I was promoted to being a design manager then design group chief.

GOODSILL: Did you enjoy doing the administration more or did you enjoy doing the design work more?

BALASUBRAMANIAN: Initially, I didn't want to do the administration. I wanted to do the design but then I realized that maybe by directing people I can get more out of the project. I was able to divide the big projects and do different segments and assign people. The thing is, I will never ask people to do what I wouldn't do. I would work all night, even today, I can work all night. So when people see that the boss-man is working I think that helps boost enthusiasm to get the project finished. Anyway I got promoted multiple times. I became a vice president of the company in 1983. I was probably 32 or 33 at that time. Then, I went away from design to manufacturing. Lead manufacturing organizations worldwide reported to me. Then finally I went to T. I. Japan because T. I. Japan was not very productive. We had 4,500 people there. We had the whole business, from the design, application, software, marketing and sales. I was the president of that operation. I lived in Japan for five years and came back to Houston.

GOODSILL: Were you able to get it profitable?

BALASUBRAMANIAN: Yes.

GOODSILL: Was that fun?

BALASUBRAMANIAN: It was fun.

GOODSILL: Problem solving?

BALASUBRAMANIAN: Yes. That was it; solving each problem.

GOODSILL: Whether it was people or whether it was circuit boards, it didn't matter?

BALASUBRAMANIAN: Didn't matter. I would tell my boss, "I am like the company sweeper. I can sweep things nicely and get it all cleaned up." With T. I. I had moved from Houston to Lubbock to Dallas to Houston to Dallas and then Japan. We could build a house anywhere we wanted in the world. We didn't even debate. My wife and I didn't even debate where we wanted to live. It was Houston because most of my life was spent in Houston. My kids were born here; they went to Saint John's and Rice University.

GOODSILL: You didn't even consider going back to India?

BALASUBRAMANIAN: No, because the kids were born here. They were Americans, and my daughter in particular wouldn't live in any other place other than Houston. She lived for some time in Washington D. C. She didn't like it at all. She wanted to come back to Houston for a simple reason: "Dad, people in Houston are the friendliest people ever." So we decided to move here. When I moved, somebody knew that this president of T. I. Japan had moved back to Houston. Metro Bank called me and wanted me to join their board. I said, "Yes why not?"

GOODSILL: Had you retired when you came back from Japan?

BALASUBRAMANIAN: Yes. I told my boss, who was the chairman of Texas Instruments, "That's my last job. I am going to retire. I have had it. I am going to sit back and do nothing." Which is what I did for a few years.

GOODSILL: Ha, I don't believe it. (Giggling)



"Bala" Balasubramanian enjoying retirement after a successful professional career at Texas Instruments.

BALASUBRAMANIAN: T. I. people cannot believe that either.

GOODSILL: I still don't believe it. You were problem solving somewhere on something.

BALASUBRAMANIAN: For 37 years it was very stressful because I wanted to get things done fast and done right. After that, I decided that I was going to take it easy. But today I am on the board of Metro Bank and a bunch of committees. I am on the board of Freescale Semiconductors, Audit Committee of that one, so I'm kind of busy.

GOODSILL: Tell me about your family.

BALASUBRAMANIAN: My Wife is Rama. My oldest daughter's name is Vidya. My son is Rajid. My daughter went to Rice. She got a chemical engineering degree and went to Washington. Then she got a law degree. She is an intellectual property lawyer working for Fulbright and Jaworski. When the first baby came, she quit her job.

GOODSILL: Really!

BALASUBRAMANIAN: She is a homemaker. She's got two little daughters now and her theory is, "Hey, my husband is a doctor. I don't have to work."

GOODSILL: Good for her (hearty laughter) Well there is a lot of problem solving that goes with raising children as well. And your son?

BALASUBRAMANIAN: He's an electrical engineer. He got his MBA and he works for a venture capital company in Austin.

GOODSILL: So how important has it been for you to keep connected to your cultural roots?

BALASUBRAMANIAN: Very important. Very.

GOODSILL: How have you done that living in America?

BALASUBRAMANIAN: When I came here in 1969 to Houston, there were not very many Indians but we all used to get together. We'd go on picnics, and get together in somebody's house and that sort of thing. Slowly but surely I think the most important thing that we wanted was to have a place of worship. That was the beginning of the Meenakshi Temple in Pearland. It's a huge temple. If you haven't been there I recommend that you go see it.

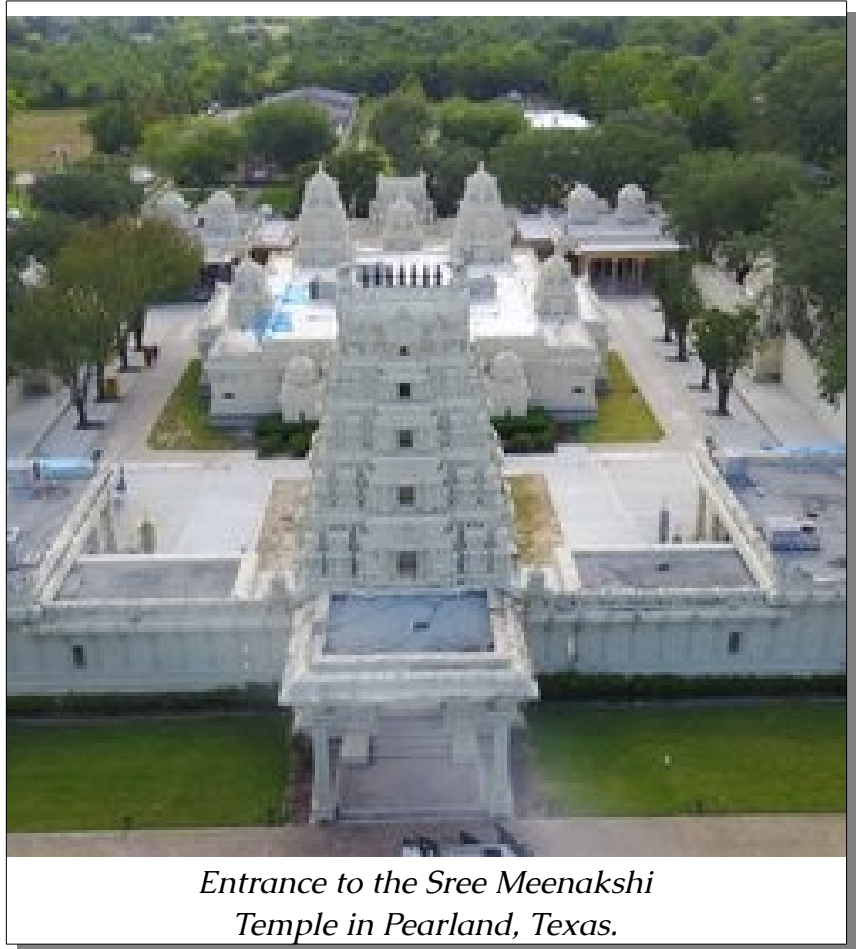
GOODSILL: What is the religion?

BALASUBRAMANIAN: Hinduism. Most of us are Hindus. In fact when I came here, 85% of the Indian population was Hindu.

GOODSILL: Why have they come to America?

BALASUBRAMANIAN: In my case it was lack of opportunity. Being an electronics engineer there was not much opportunity in those days in India. But today there are awesome opportunities in India.

GOODSILL: So the 'brain drain' is not still going on, people are staying in India.



Entrance to the Sree Meenakshi Temple in Pearland, Texas.

BALASUBRAMANIAN: I think it has significantly reduced. Indian people want to come here for short visits, to do a project and go back. They don't want to live in another country. But in our case the children were born here, they were raised here, they are Americans and transplanting them to India would be a disaster for their lives.

GOODSILL: So the reason to come was for career opportunities, the reason to stay is for the children?

BALASUBRAMANIAN: Yes, absolutely. If we didn't have children we probably would have gone back when we retired. Because of the children Houston is home.

GOODSILL: Right, but it has been important for you to continue your religious and cultural connection to your roots. Even though you live in a different place?

BALASUBRAMANIAN: Oh, absolutely.

GOODSILL: Somebody once said to me, "Sometimes we hold on to traditions more tightly when we no longer live in our homelands because we fear that we will lose them."

BALASUBRAMANIAN: Yes, absolutely. We always have this discussion, two or three generations down the road, what's going to happen. Are our children's children's children going to lose all tradition? I think there are two ways you can look at it. Indians in Singapore have been there for multiple generations; they are much more orthodox in their beliefs than the Indians in India.

GOODSILL: They held stronger to their beliefs because they were fearful of losing them?

BALASUBRAMANIAN: Yes, probably. When I look back, I tell myself I was stupid to be so bold as to uproot myself. Then on the other hand I tell myself, not bad for a guy who came here with eight bucks in his pocket, not bad.

Okay, now let me go to the foundation. By God's grace we have enough money that when I retired the first thing we did was to set up a perpetual scholarship in the engineering college that I went to in India.

The second thing we did was to set up a private foundation. When the value of some of my stock options at Texas Instruments goes up they transfer it to the foundation. There are two fundamental areas; one of them is education and the second one is religion.

GOODSILL: Tell us about education first.

BALASUBRAMANIAN: Education. There are a lot of people in this world who are brilliant, who are intelligent, who are smart but cannot afford to go to school or pay for their college.

GOODSILL: How do you identify them?

BALASUBRAMANIAN: I am working with the University of Rhode Island.

GOODSILL: You're very loyal, aren't you?

BALASUBRAMANIAN: God has been good to me. If it weren't for the engineering college in India and for the University of Rhode Island I wouldn't be what I am. We have talked about setting up scholarships in the University of Rhode Island. Even if I don't do it in my lifetime, I think it will get done.

GOODSILL: So you set up a scholarship through the University of Rhode Island for people who are bright but can't afford it. Nice. Tell us about the religious part.

BALASUBRAMANIAN: Hinduism has a lot to offer. It's very different from other religions; it teaches a person how to lead his life in a productive manner. We are working with the Asian Studies program at Rice University. Trying to figure out how we can incorporate studies of Indian religion.

GOODSILL: So you set up the foundation and now you're doing the problem solving to try and figure out the most effective way that this money could be used to help the people in the ventures you are passionate about.

BALASUBRAMANIAN: Right. My goal is figure out where the money can have the most effect.

GOODSILL: That's a great challenge! What a wonderful story. I have enjoyed being with you as you told it. Thank you so much.

BALASUBRAMANIAN: Thank you.

Interview ends