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ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE

Interviewee: **Rathna Kumar**

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Transcript

POLLICOFF: Please tell us your name and date of birth.

KUMAR: Rathna Kumar. October 27, 1946. I was born in Shinij, India. I have four siblings, two brothers and two sisters, all younger.

POLLICOFF: What did your parents do?

KUMAR: My mother, who is still alive, was a professional singer. She was one of the first women in India to have done extensive research in folk music. She traveled the length and breadth of the country, collecting folk songs from villagers. She studied their intonations and their dialects and has the largest collection, I think, probably in the world of folk songs from different parts of India, especially her home state of Andhra Pradesh, in southeast India.

Her name is Anasuya Devii. She is also the author of many books on music and other topics. She has won many awards for her non-fiction books. She is very recognized, a well-known singer. She and my aunt used to sing together. My aunt was the first woman in India to have actually received a Masters in folk music, comparing with the classical music, and showing how it was the basis for classical music a long time ago.

POLLICOFF: Wow, that sounds fascinating. And your father?

KUMAR: My father was a building contractor, but he was originally a singer too. That's how my father and mother fell in love. He also was a hero in Indian movies in my native language which is Telugu. He stopped acting after he got married. I think Mother didn't like that (laughing).

POLLICOFF: Just wanted him to have a regular job too, no doubt.

KUMAR: Right, right, right that's what he was, he was...

POLLICOFF: So he ended up in construction?

KUMAR: Yes, buildings as well as roads. In Andhra Pradesh, there were many villages that were not connected to the city because of bad roads. He also took up the construction of laying roads.

POLLICOFF: At what point did you all come to the United States?

KUMAR: I came after I married Anil. I got married very late for an Indian girl, much to the despair of my mother. I was 27 going on 28, which is very late, most of them get married at 23 and 24. I was quite adamant about not getting married because I was a professional dancer. I was traveling the world, and I just wanted to dedicate my life and my time to dancing. I didn't think I wanted to be distracted by anything else. I think being the oldest of five, my parents were a little concerned and didn't like the idea of my not getting married.

POLLICOFF: Was there any rule that the oldest was supposed to be married first?

KUMAR: Well it's kind of an unwritten rule. It's an understanding, and the feeling that people will talk. So, it was a lot of pressure on me and I still resisted. I finally married somebody that I knew who had a lot of theater background, an electrical engineer (laughing) but has spent time in London and also in Houston studying. In fact, he studied theater under Doctor Sidney Burger at the University of Houston. He was passionate about theater, and I about dance, so we had a lot of common ground. So, I thought okay, it's safe to marry a person who has some similar interest, no regrets.

POLLICOFF: And you have been married how long now?

KUMAR: 38 years. Strangely enough, our families knew one another for four generations. My mother and aunt sang at his parents' wedding. They were all friends. My mother-in-law and her sister were friends of my mother and her sisters, and they were all the same ages. Also, my father-in-law and my father were very close friends. All of them were involved with the most popular medium at that time, the radio. There was no television; they were all radio artists. My mother, my aunt and my father all sang for the All India Radio and became very well known. My father was even a radio announcer.

He was a talk show host as was my father-in-law. They all had very deep and very beautiful voices. My father-in-law was a writer. He wrote in our native language, and he was very well-known. He wrote plays and books. They were very literary and very arts oriented, so the families were very close friends.

POLLICOFF: So they approved the match.

KUMAR: Oh, of course, yes. Nobody expected it. It was kind of surprising because my husband was here five years before I was here. We used to meet off and on. After one visit I said, "Okay you come and meet my friends." I was acting in plays at the time. I was part of a theater group and I knew how crazy he was about theater.

He was very impressed, and then I had a performance. So, I said, "You can come to my performance." We just started talking. That's how it happened, he proposed to me, and I said, "I'll think about it." (chuckling).

POLLICOFF: What year was that? You were married in India or here?

KUMAR: In India. Well, he came there because I said, "You know I have a big family. I will not get married anywhere else. I need my parents, my siblings, everyone here by my side (chuckling)." Ours is a very close-knit family, very close. Of course, his parents were there, too, so it was 1975, I got married.

I went to the US Citizenship and Immigration Services, in the American Embassy, and got my green card the next day! I was hanging around in India for a while because my younger sister was getting married. Now people wait a long time to get a green card.

POLLICOFF: So, you actually arrived here in '75, in the Fall?

KUMAR: Yes, I have a Master's in English. I was teaching English in college. I was an assistant professor and taught for seven years. I kept getting job offers right, left and center, and I kept turning each one down because I would go to the office and say, "Oh, my God, if I take this job I may not be able to spend any time dancing." For me that was the top of the list. I needed to be able to dance, and then I could do anything else. When I got scholarships for dance, I accepted those. They paid a pittance, but I did not accept jobs which would have paid like at the Reserve Bank of India. As an officer, my starting salary was (laughing) twenty times more than what I was getting in the scholarships. I was so afraid that if I got stuck in a job, then it would be like choking the life out of me, so I turned them all down. I got offered a job in television as a producer for dance programs, but I knew it was not just a 10 to 5 PM job. I said, "No, anything that will kill my creative process, I couldn't do that."

POLLICOFF: You were dancing the entire time through high school?

KUMAR: Elementary, middle, high, and college continuously.

POLLICOFF: Where did you go to university, and what was your study there?

KUMAR: I have a Masters in English language and literature from the University of Madras, as it was called. It has a very high reputation as being one the best universities in India. I went to a very famous college. Of course, in India, the best schools are the parochial, so we went to an English medium school.

We learned other languages as second and third languages. I went to Stella Maris College. I went to Catholic schools and colleges all seventeen years of my life. I think it was a great education that they gave us. Stood me in great stead.

POLLICOFF: How did you know that dance had to be your life?

KUMAR: My mother loved dance all her life, but she was born at a time when the British people had outlawed all kinds of dance. Before that, all dancing women were called Servants of God. They were beautiful dancers and artists, and scholars, and great singers, and composers. Then these women, overnight, lost their livelihood because the British people decided that it was 'not done'. "Women should not be dancing! Only women of ill repute dance in public." Her mother told her that she would jump into the well and commit suicide (chuckling) if she learned dance because nobody would marry her. She was told she would learn music and not dance, so this was just an unfulfilled dream for my mother. She loved watching dance all the time, but she became a very great singer and when she had me she looked at me and decided that I was going to be a dancer. I am so glad I fulfilled her dream.

I started learning it formally when I was four and always loved it. I remember being very thrilled and loved being on stage. I used to act in movies when I was little; I was like Shirley Temple, a child star. I acted in lots of movies, about 25, and then after that my father was more concerned about my education, and he told my mother, "Let her just dance." I didn't want to be in movies anymore. I just wanted to dance, so my concentration was on dance and education. I always, always, always loved to dance. As punishment when I was young, my father would tell me, "Now if you don't do this, I will not let you go to dance class." I definitely was doing what he told me. Sometimes when he made a fuss I said, "No. I want to go to a movie with my friends, I don't want to go to dance class." He would say, "Okay fine, you can quit dance." I'd say, "No, no, no. I won't go to the movie." (laughing).



Rathna Kumar was an Indian dance child prodigy who performed around India from a young age. She later moved to the U. S. and established the first Indian dance school in Texas, the Anjali Center for Performing Arts in 1975.

POLLICOFF: You married in '75 and arrived here in the fall. Your husband was living in Houston at that time. What part of Houston did you live in?

KUMAR: In the beginning, we were not too far from the medical center. We were all very close to one another. Then we moved to an apartment, not too far away, in the Fondren area near Houston Baptist University. Then we bought a condominium, and then we bought a house.

We always lived in Harris County. They started the Houston Arts Alliance which was called the Cultural Arts Council of Houston. I was on the mayor's arts task force. I chaired that segment; at the time I realized that if I moved out of Harris County then I would not be able to apply for any of those grants in Harris County. The City of Houston was the only place that was giving out grants, so I stayed there. Most of our friends lived in Fort Bend County, and we saw the way Sugar Land was growing, and the way it was so wonderfully becoming such a diverse little world in itself.

POLLICOFF: The Indian culture was very accepted here, you felt comfortable.

KUMAR: I felt very, very comfortable, and it was just so beautiful. There was something very welcoming, I must say, about Sugar Land. When we decided to move my studio, we picked it out with a very dear friend and architect, who told us Sugar Land was one of the best places to be.

That's how we came to buy this place. It's my home, and I love my studio in Sugar Land. I spend most of my waking hours at work in the studio. It's very quiet, it's amazing. It's off Highway 6 and Lexington, such busy roads, but it's a little world in itself. It's in a little cul-de-sac where everything is so quiet, and peaceful, and beautiful. Being there has helped me grow as a person and as a dancer because the ambiance is so good.

POLLICOFF: You still live in Houston, obviously.

KUMAR: I still live in Houston.

POLLICOFF: But you choose to have your business here.

KUMAR: Absolutely, I wouldn't move. 2003 is when we bought the building. We have had offers. "Would you sell this building for twice the amount you paid? Even if we pay three times more?" I say, "No, I am not moving from here."

We had students coming from all over the city. We wanted to find a spot accessible from everywhere and not too far from some freeway. We had people coming from the Woodlands, from Clear Lake City, from Pearland, from everywhere. We thought this was a good place.

We were right off Bissonnet near Highway 59. Then that place started falling apart. The entire area started getting very seedy. I came, looked, and I visualized this, and I thought, "What legacy do I leave behind? Is it my dancing, or do I just want to have a nice house?"

Shakespeare said, "There is a tide in the affairs of men, which taken at the flood leads on to fortune." I took the flood, and I am so glad because it's become not just my dance anymore. Earlier, it was just a studio where I taught dance. Now, it's grown so much that we have art classes, and we have math for children, it's called alpha math. We have music, vocal music, we have percussion, all kinds of things. We always give it free for different non-profit organizations that make requests for people who don't have money. If they want to have meetings, please take it, senior citizens you know use it, of course. We have a space, we don't want to waste it for anything that is good.

POLLICOFF: Tell me the name of your studio.

KUMAR: It's called the *Anjali* Center for Performing Arts.

POLLICOFF: It sounds like you have a wonderful breadth of courses and community offerings. Like you said, it has become more of a calling, a legacy, is that how you see it?

KUMAR: I hope so, I hope so. I have no daughters. I hope my students will carry this on for a long time because this is something very special. It's something, it's a heritage that I have brought with me to this country.

I am very happy I am a US citizen. I am very happy I was welcomed so warmly by Houston and Houstonians. I never did feel homesick. I was not allowed to feel that for very long when I came in '75, and there were just a few hundred Indians. I had tons of American friends who made me part of their family, and I have been so happy here. I think of this as home, but I still cherish my cultural roots and my heritage.

I feel happy that I was able to do something to keep that up and have been able to pass it on to the next generation. Children born and raised here wouldn't know it otherwise. I am sure the parents try, but now the children learn firsthand from someone who has lived it. I am glad that I am passing it on, and I hope they will pass it on, too, to their children.

POLLICOFF: Did you ever feel that it was difficult or challenging to be an Indian business owner, dealing with a community that was more white or diverse?

KUMAR: Surprisingly, no. I have heard other people say things like that, but I don't. I have been accepted into the mainstream. I have received at least fifteen individual artist choreography fellowships from the arts council. I think I am the only Indian that has received so many.

I compete with white, with Chinese, with all denominations, and I have never felt different or felt as if I belonged to a persecuted group or looked down upon because I am Asian. I always felt accepted.

POLLICOFF: Even from the beginning?

KUMAR: Yes. I know who I am, and if I have the strength of my own convictions, I don't need to feel scared or wronged in any way. I love what I am doing, and if I can persuade somebody that what I am doing is beautiful, and different, and special, that enhances the cultural scene in some special way. That's my outlook.

POLLICOFF: So not in business, not in culture, not in diet?

KUMAR: Only once. I think it was Whataburger, Wendy's, or McDonald's, I don't remember. I am a complete vegetarian, and I asked, "Can you just put the cheese and the vegetables and take out..." This girl looked at me, and she had this super serious look on her face, and then she laughed. She turned and said, "Hey this lady wants a cheese burger without the burger!" Then I heard laughter from inside. I just looked at her, smiled and said, "You've never heard of a vegetarian?" She said, "No." I said, "You need to try it, it's very good." (both laughing).

POLLICOFF: You probably enlightened her, and she probably would thank you today (laughing). I bet you were not the last vegetarian.

KUMAR: There were so few of them in those days. Now there are so many people who are vegetarian and vegans.

POLLICOFF: They didn't have salads back in the old days.

KUMAR: No (laughing)

POLLICOFF: What about your religious preferences?

KUMAR: I am a Hindu. I am on the advisory council of the Shrimnachi Temple. I was one of their chancellor directors, and now I am on the advisory council. As I mentioned, I studied in a Catholic school and a Catholic college. I worked in a Muslim college for a year. My family has been extremely liberal and open minded. When I was a kid, I used to cross and say Hail Mary every night. I practically lived at the Jewish Community Center.

I may be a practicing Hindu, but I really feel that I am of all religions. I really love Buddhism. I feel it's got a great message. I incorporate all those when I am praying. I am not very rigid, I love all religions.

In fact, at one time, we did a performance called '*Harmony.*' This was soon after 9/11, and it was about the message that each religion teaches. I had something from Islam, Buddhism, Jainism, and Hinduism. I even did a piece to *Classmu* music because I believe that every religion ultimately teaches us the same thing in different languages.

So, this was our Council Chandell at that time. He loved it. Somebody else got worried and said, "How could you use something from Islam, won't you be in trouble?" I said, "I didn't do anything wrong, I actually went and met with Muslim friends of mine and asked if it was acceptable."

I was on the Miller Theater Advisory Board and used to wear my Indian clothes, and had this little dot on my forehead. They said, "Wow! I love that Rathna, so beautiful. Where did you get this from? Do you think you can get me one of those outfits?"

POLLICOFF: Sounds like you were a great emissary for all of it. How many children do you have?

KUMAR: I have two boys.

POLLICOFF: And their names?

KUMAR: Chaitan and Kedaar.

POLLICOFF: How old are they?

KUMAR: Chaitan is 34, and Kedaar is 31. Chaitan is married to a Hawaiian-born, Japanese girl, Mia, and they have two daughters; Carissa and Anjali. The little one was named after the school. Kedaar is a musician with a degree in music synthesis from the Berkeley College of Music and is working in Boston.

POLLICOFF: Did they ever feel any difficulties because of their background?

KUMAR: No, no. In fact, because we live not too far from the Jewish Community Center, my youngest son used to keep asking me if he could have a bar mitzvah. "I don't think they (laughing) will allow you to. But there is a similar ceremony for Hindus, and if you want, we can have that." (chuckling)

POLLICOFF: Tell me more about your studio. How many students do you have?

KUMAR: I have not taken a census recently. We have over two hundred students. I have a couple of people that teach with me. I teach the senior students. We have other people who teach the beginners and the intermediate levels. There are people teaching Bollywood dancing. There is a company that rents our studio and teaches classes there. We have classical music from North India that is taught by a very famous, very seasoned artist. We have percussion, and the table, that is taught also by a very well-known teacher, guru as they call them. We have alpha math. We have visual art classes, and they are all going extremely well. Everyone's enrollment is growing.

It is such a delight for me to come on a weekend to see creative activity going on in every single room. It is so wonderful. My assistant also teaches vocal music from South India. So, there are classes going in South Indian classical percussion. There is a lot of activity and a lot of children bringing a tremendous amount of joy and great vibrations to the center all the time. I feel very young at heart because they come with no baggage, no agenda. They are free spirits. They walk in, and they enjoy what they are doing, and they have smiles. They are very happy, and you can't but feel infected by this happiness. It's truly contagious.

POLLICOFF: I don't know how you fit all these people in. Tell me how large a facility you have.

KUMAR: We have a large facility. We don't teach in very large groups. I believe if you have a hundred kids at one time, you're not paying attention to anyone. For me, it is not a commercial venture. We charge such a nominal fee, people laugh, and it has not changed, ever. Gas prices may be going up, and there is so much inflation, everything else is going up, but our fee has not changed because I feel that this is a service that we are providing.

It is not money that really matters, so long as we are able to do a good job in what we are doing, and I feel that I have succeeded. I may not be rich, I may not be able to buy another building like that, but I am very happy that we are using that facility for really beautiful things.

POLLICOFF: Your boys, do they share that same passion for music? Well, obviously, you have one son who is a musician so...

KUMAR: The older son is a good singer and is a very good drummer. They both have an excellent sense of rhythm. They both have a great love for music, but the younger one is a Scorpio like his mother, and both of us have the same very deep commitment. It's not a passion, but we are completely committed to art, and neither one of us can live without... he without his music, me without my dance.

POLLICOFF: We'll add astrology to that list of religions that you are very open to (laughing). I understand that you have been recognized by the President of India for your accomplishments. You have been called a pioneer teacher, dancer and choreographer, who has brought Indian art to this area.



Indian Vice President Hamid Ansari honoring Dr. Rathna Kumar in New Delhi on July 22, 2011. The Sangeet Natak Akademi Award had never before been given to any artiste outside India.

KUMAR: I do two styles of Indian classical dance. One of them is less known, and when I started learning it and performing it, there were very few practitioners of this art form. It is from my mother's native region. We just call Andhra Pradesh, that's in southeast India. This dance form comes from a little village called Kuchi Pudi. It's a beautiful art form, very vibrant, fast and exciting.

My mother loved it. That is what she wanted to learn because she grew up watching this. It was not really known outside, and she searched and found teachers for me. I was born and raised in Chennai, so I really do not think of myself as belonging to Andhra Pradesh, though my family and all my relatives are from there. There must be something in my body which just responded to this particular kind of dance. A very great artist, one of the first dancers to leave India and take it to Europe, was named Rongo Paul. He once saw me and he said, "You know, sweetheart, you need to quit Bharatanatyam (the style that I was originally learning) and just stick to Kuchi Pudi. It fits you perfectly." He persuaded me that I needed to spend more time working on my Kuchi Pudi. I took him very seriously, and that's what won me the award. I was one of the first Indian dancers, not the first, one of the earliest to come to this country. In all of Texas, there was no Indian dance at all when I came.

POLLICOFF: In 1975?

KUMAR: La Mary from San Antonio was very influenced by Indian dance, but she was not an Indian dancer *per se*.

POLLICOFF: You had already been dancing internationally at that point anyway.

KUMAR: Oh, yes, I am used to travel...

POLLICOFF: Can you spell the two types of dances?

KUMAR: Yes, the more popular, the more established dance form is Bharatanatyam. Sometimes people use it as two words like Bharata is one and Natyam is another. I put it together, it doesn't matter. Bharatanatyam is the most popular classical style of India, but I also perform and teach Kuchi Pudi. Actually, the translation of that is Home of Dance.

Even now there are not too many who perform Kuchi Pudi. It's quite a strenuous dance form. I guess not too much has been written about it or not too much done in that and so...

POLLICOFF: I am trying to understand what the difference is between the two.

KUMAR: All of them originated from the same mother style. All dance forms stem from the same root, but they evolved into different styles. They had very articulate dancers who could talk about Bharatanatyam. Kuchi Pudi was confined to the village for the longest time, so it's coming out was very late. Now it's getting popular, but it's still not the most popular dance style.

There is this *demeclae* position that is common to all classical styles, but the way you hold your feet, and the way you move your torso is the most significant. It's very different from every single style.

POLLICOFF: Is one more ballet-like?

KUMAR: Not ballet, but there is a lot more torso movement in Kuchi Pudi, and even more so in another style called Odissi. And more so in another style called Mohiniyattam, and the demi-plie the position of the feet is closer. In Bharatanatyam, it's farther away, and in Mohiniyattam, the feet are held in a different way in another style. I guess like languages and dialects. When people started moving, things just changed.

POLLICOFF: Are the styles ever blended at all, or are they still very much separate?

KUMAR: The people do like you to do a flamenco and tap or something. People do like little dialogues or debates between two styles, but it's difficult to blend them because they are very distinct. So, blending, and the costumes are different, and the languages also are often different. It would be difficult to blend them as such, but you can juxtapose them, and still make them look good.

As soon as I came, there was a dinner for the Indian Ambassador. There was no consulate here. There was an embassy in Washington, D. C. I think they had an office in Chicago and one in San Francisco. The ambassador was the special guest, and the India Culture Center, the oldest Indian organization here, asked me to perform. I was excited. I was not in the habit of performing to taped music because in India we performed to live orchestra. But I did it.



Dr. Rathna Kumar with Indian Consul General Anupam Ray at the "Incredible India" program at the Miller Outdoor Theater in August 2016.

After the performance, I was changing, and there were these numerous mothers waiting outside. I was very happy, so many people liked it, but no, they all wanted my telephone number, and they wanted me to teach their children. I kept resisting, saying no because I had intentions of doing my PhD in English.

I got into Rice University. I kept thinking, “What am I going to do with a PhD in English? Am I going to teach English, or do what I want and concentrate on dance?” Ultimately, I knew that my dancing would win hands down.

Hindu scriptures say that when you die, you cannot take two things with you; your money and your knowledge. These are things that you leave behind. You know the word *Anjali*? People call me, “Oh ,hi, Miss Anjali.” I say, “That is not my name.” People say, “Why did you name the school *Anjali*?” I say, “*Anjali* is a gesture in dance, it's when we join our two hands together, and this also is the gesture as we say *Namaste* in India. It's a greeting.” The word *Anjali* means offering, and it just felt to me that I was making an offering to Houston because it was my new home. I was given a new home, a new life, and I felt that I was giving something in return. So, I felt this was my humble offering to this city that was going to be my home for the rest of my life.

I used to have summer camps. They would come and spend a month with me. I would take care of them, cook and feed them besides teaching eight hours a day. Then I used to fly out to Rochester, New York, to Kansas City, to teach because it was not... classical dance and there were not too many dancers. There were so many people who were just dying for their children to learn. Ten of them cannot come to Houston, but one of me can go there. My children were young, so I used to tell them, “I'll come during holidays so I can bring my children with me.” I cannot neglect them, so I used to bring the kids with me.

My grandfather was a teacher and retired after 36 years. My father had a Masters in math. He was a teacher, too. So, I think teaching always came to me naturally, from teaching English to teaching dance.

POLLICOFF: How many students over the years do you think you have taught?

KUMAR: It must be more than a thousand.

POLLICOFF: I have read more than two thousand.

KUMAR: Maybe, I am not a great one for numbers somehow. When people ask me, I am not thinking how many I have taught. I am thinking about how much good work I am leaving behind me, which is more important to me.

The numbers are great, but I hope that at least a significant number of them still remember me for the good things that I taught them through dance. It's just lessons in life, it's not just the dance itself. Besides learning the art form, it's important that they have learned about a very great cultural heritage of a very great land.

I am very proud to be an Indian American. I am very happy to be here, I love this country, the people who have accepted me, and the people who have molded me while I am here. I have learned so much from great friends and friends in the arts, not Indians. I am very proud of my heritage, and I am very happy that I was able to bring that to children who may not have had an opportunity to know about it otherwise. I am glad I will be leaving something good behind me.

POLLICOFF: Alright.

Interview ends