

FORT BEND COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION

ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE

Interviewee: Riddhi Pankaj Desai

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Interviewer: Jane Goodsill

Transcriber: Olga Barr

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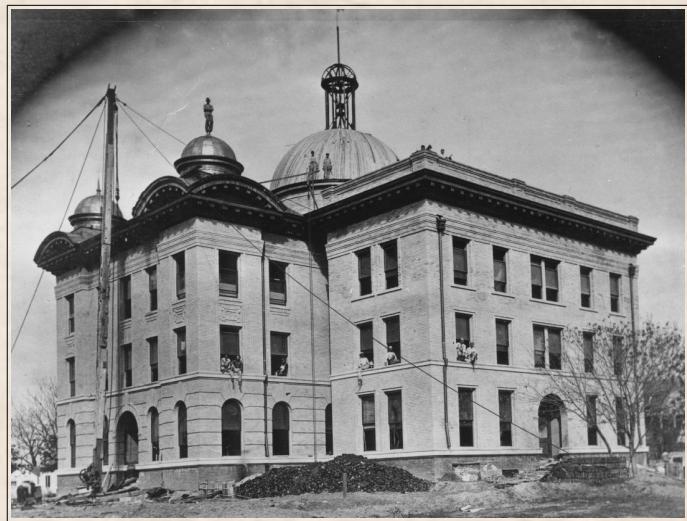
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Transcript

GOODSILL: Mrs. Desai, would you introduce yourself, please?

DESAI: I am Riddhi Desai.

GOODSILL: When were you born?

DESAI: I was born July 23, 1958.

GOODSILL: Do you have a career?

DESAI: Yes, I am an attorney, and I practice in Houston.

GOODSILL: I want to hear about that as we go along. Where do you live in Fort Bend County?

DESAI: I live in Sugar Land.

GOODSILL: When did you come from India to America?

DESAI: I came here in 1980 to study, to go to school for computer science.

GOODSILL: Will you tell me about your life in India before you came to America?

DESAI: I grew up in a joint family. What I mean by joint family is I had my father, mother, and two younger siblings, a sister and a younger brother. I am the oldest of three. In addition to that I had my grandmother, my dad's mother, living with us and my father's two younger brothers. It was a small joint family, but nonetheless a joint family.

We called father's youngest brother Kaka. He came to the United States in 1967. He was an inspiration when I was growing up. I also wanted to go to the United States and study. I did my bachelor's degree in business and then I got an M. B. A. in India. After I did my M. B. A., I decided to come here to go to school for computer science. I was going to go to school in Dallas. However, my Uncle Kaka lived in Toronto. His wife was expecting a second baby, so I went to Toronto a few months early to help her out and also to familiarize myself with Toronto. My uncle's wife had relatives in Chicago and some other friends in the United States. They introduced me to the man who would become my husband, Pankaj. It was an arranged marriage. They introduced me for the purpose of marriage. That is my middle name too, Pankaj.

GOODSILL: By coincidence or by tradition?

DESAI: When a girl is born her fathers' name becomes her middle name. When a woman gets married the husband's name becomes her middle name.

GOODSILL: What was your middle name when you were born?

DESAI: Jayendra and last name was Shah.

GOODSILL: But you don't have any of those names now?

DESAI: No.

GOODSILL: Where did Desai come from?

DESAI: My husband's last name.

GOODSILL: I see, got it.

DESAI: Pankaj and I met once and agreed to get married, so we got married in a month's time. He lived and worked in Houston. I got married and came to Houston. Instead of going to school in Dallas, I decided to go to school in Houston.

GOODSILL: Where did you go?

DESAI: I had to reapply and go through the application process. It took me some time, but I joined the University of Houston. I started at the Business School to do a Ph. D in finance since I had an MBA in Finance from India. That was, I guess, the natural thing to follow.

GOODSILL: Did the credentialing that you got in India follow you here?

DESAI: It actually does not always follow. I had to talk to each adviser and get every course approved. They would ask me what books we were using and what test, etc. Yes, they did finally accept it because the program that I did in India was fairly new. I was actually in the second batch. We did not have any books in India. We were using the books that were from here.

GOODSILL: That probably helped.

DESAI: The professors were all familiar with those books, so that did help. In my Ph. D. program I was reading a book on my way to California with my husband. It was a children's book. A prosecutor is the heroine of the book. I said to my husband, "Law is interesting!" I always liked law in India also.

But as a lawyer it is very hard to survive there. It is not a very prestigious profession. I never really considered being a lawyer there. I discussed it with my husband and ultimately I decided I should try to get accepted into law school. So I did and I was accepted! The next year I started law school, but for the year that I was in the Ph.D. program for business I had sufficient credit and grades that could qualify for another MBA. So I got another MBA from the University of Houston in Finance. That was by default. It was never planned but I'm glad that I got it. Then I went to law school and finished at the University of Houston in July 1985.

GOODSILL: Where did your law school career take you?

DESAI: When I finished law school, I was nine months pregnant. I had a baby in August, a girl named Shilpi. I graduated in July 1985, my daughter was born in August. Then I took the bar exam in February. I passed [chuckles] in May 1986. Luckily, everything worked out time wise as it was planned. However, I could not work for anybody since my husband traveled a lot and I had a little baby. So I just started a law office in Houston off of Hillcroft and Hwy 59.

GOODSILL: What kind of law were you practicing?

DESAI: It was a general practice. Even today, what I do is a general practice. But at that time I was happy to handle wills and small contracts and anything that I could lay my hands upon. I was happy to assist any attorneys who needed any help in doing anything. I also interned while I was in school at the IRS and District Attorney's offices. I also started doing some criminal work. Right now, my major concentration is immigration law and family law.

GOODSILL: Tell us something about that.

DESAI: Immigration law is a fast changing area. What we did 20 years ago is actually extinct, I would say. New laws keep on coming. New changes keep on coming. Now what I do mainly is H1 visa, which is business immigration visa, or family visa. I don't do much of deportation, which is called removal now, because my clientele is from a different class. Most of the Indians who come here have entered legally; either they came here as a student or they have a job and they need to change their visa. So my immigration work is of a different kind, not much of removal litigation. I do some, but not that much. Of course, divorce is unfortunately part of life nowadays. More and more people are being divorced.

GOODSILL: Is your clientele mainly Indian?

DESAI: I would say about 70%, by word of mouth. I do advertise in the Indian newspaper. A lot of times people feel comfortable because I speak their language. For example in divorce cases even though husband and wife both speak English well, their parents do not speak English. They want to talk to me, or they just feel culturally connected. There are some things I would understand, for example talking about dowries. They don't have to explain too much because I understand. That helps.

GOODSILL: Explain what the cultural approach toward divorce is if you were from India.

DESAI: From India, even here, people needing attorneys will always encourage in the early stage that if you can, reconcile. That is our ethical duty I would say. But if it did not work then you can still give ideas that involve your parents, your relatives. That is a more cultural approach, to see if there is a reconciliation possible. The idea of privacy is much looser in India than here.

GOODSILL: What do you mean by that?

DESAI: What I mean is that usually here once the couple is here married, parents don't interfere much. Over there your life is owned by both sides of parents. They can ask you anything, they can tell you anything. They don't have to think how you would feel about it. It is their privilege, I would say. If you have an uncle here you can definitely talk to him about how you are not getting along in the marriage, and he can advise both of you that way. If you are from a Muslim culture, the priest can also assist. Lots of times, the priest will also help you out. The exchange that took place during the marriage is strictly cultural, for example what the wife's parents gave, who has it, how was it managed, etc. etc.

GOODSILL: These matters have to be decided in the divorce?

DESAI: Right.

GOODSILL: Traditionally is divorce fairly rare in India or not?

DESAI: Until I came here, it was fairly rare. Now, I hear, it is not as rare.

GOODSILL: Why do you think that might be?

DESAI: Well, there are several reasons. More and more women are becoming independent and working. They feel that they are not dependent and they can make their own decisions. They can do what they like. Family and society pressure is not there for anyone to stay alone. I would just say this is the reality. I wouldn't make women responsible for increased rates of divorce.

GOODSILL: I'm thinking about the immigration. Many of your clients will come to America with a student visa or work visa?

DESAI: The majority will be student visa. Some portion will be with a work visa if they are changing jobs or something. A smaller percentage will have a visitor visa.

GOODSILL: How do they become citizens?

DESAI: The first step before citizenship is a green card. You have to have a green card for a number of years before you can apply for a citizenship. It just depends what their situation is. Supposing they are a student? Then they cannot get a green card. They need to have some kind of work visa before you can even apply for a green card. Depending on their situation then I would advise them as to what would be the next step and all the procedures.

If a person decides to become a citizen, they don't necessarily need a lawyer, but a lot of them prefer to have a lawyer. Unfortunately after 2001, things have changed.

Immigration has become a lot harder. Lots of things can confuse you or trip you up. I have seen many clients since I have been in practice for such a long time that if I did their work as a student or as a H1B or then they prefer that I just do the citizenship application for them, too. It just makes them feel comfortable. But you do not have to have an attorney to become a citizen.

GOODSILL: I have in my notes that you were a judge for a while. Is that correct?

DESAI: A City of Houston Judge.

GOODSILL: Tells us about that part of your career.

DESAI: It was 1994 that I was appointed as an Associate Judge for the city. At that time, I lived in Houston. I used to live in the Fondren Southwest area. It was an associate judgeship because I could not really leave my practice completely to be a judge full time.

GOODSILL: What kind of cases did you handle?

DESAI: Mainly traffic cases. The City of Houston also has an evening court. The evening court is from four to eleven.

GOODSILL: Did you find that interesting?

DESAI: It was interesting! I would do it about once a week. Sometimes it was Saturday morning. It was interesting when you are an attorney you are looking at one side. It is much more stressful. As a judge you have to be alert and hear both sides. You hear both sides, and depending on the matters you decide the case. It was less stressful. I did enjoy the circle of other judges and it was good to know them. I did that until almost 2001. The reason I quit was that I had moved to Sugar Land and Mayor Lee Brown decided that he wanted all the judges who were on the city bench living in the city of Houston.

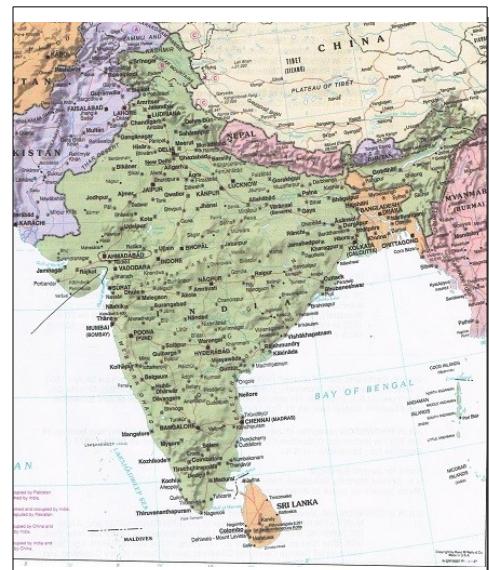
GOODSILL: Why Sugar Land?

DESAI: The first house that we had was in Alief. In 1988, we bought the house in Fondren Southwest. At that time, we had looked into Sugar Land. My husband worked in Pasadena and most of my clientele lived in the southwest part of town. So we bought a house in Fondren Southwest. After we bought the house, we felt that that was not the right decision. The schools were not right. My daughter was growing up and we were not happy with the public schools there. The crime situation was not very pleasant. So when we relocated, those were the two of the most important things that we considered. Also, a lot of our friends had moved to Sugar Land. Every weekend we were visiting Sugar Land anyway. We liked how peaceful it was. We like the neighborhoods. We really like the plan of Sugar Land. It was a grow city, so we moved to Sugar Land.

GOODSILL: Let's go back to India for a little bit. Please show me on the map where you were born.

DESAI: Ahmedabad. Abad means town.

GOODSILL: So this is in the middle of the country in latitude and in western India near the Gulf of Khambhat. What was life like there?



Map indicating Riddhi's city of birth, Amedabad, north of the Gulf of Khambhat in India.

DESAI: I had a very good life. My family was not extremely rich or affluent, but very happy. I went to one of the best schools of the town.

I was a child born in the family after many, many years. I was the oldest. Not only that, I was a daughter after fourth generation. Generally, daughters were not very welcome. But in my family it was a big joy because my father did not have a sister so I was a very welcome addition in the family. I was the apple of the eyes of all five parents; my grandmother, two uncles, and my parents. I was pampered, to some extent you can say spoiled, but quite disciplined, too. Of course, then I had siblings, too. I remained the apple of their eyes because I guess I was used to it and they were used to me. All kids were taken care of very well. I was generally good at academics, too. So things in my childhood were very happy.

GOODSILL: If you compare the childhood that your daughter is getting for example to the childhood that you had could you tell us some of the differences?

DESAI: Oh yes. My daughter grew up, I would say, more affluent than I did, but my daughter missed out on a lot of things; the love and care that I got from five parents. In her case, she had two parents but my husband traveled a lot and I worked outside the home. So she, of course, went to daycare.

GOODSILL: She never knew the difference, but you do.

DESAI: I do, right. If I had to pick again I would pick my childhood, let me put it that way. When I came home my grandmother would be waiting for me. My uncle dropped me. My uncle picked me up. I remember in second grade that my teachers scolded me. I told my uncle that my teacher was not nice to me and she did this to me. My uncle came the next day and he told the teacher next time you do something to my niece you will not be working in this school. He should not have done that, but what I felt was that I was really taken care of. I would not give up that part of my life for anything.

GOODSILL: How about culturally? When you compare how an American girl would grow up to how you grew up?

DESAI: Culturally Ahmedabad is a fairly progressive city. From eighth grade, I went to school on a bicycle by myself, so I had my independence. On the weekends, me and two or three other friends would go out for three or four hour excursions on bicycles and go anywhere we wanted to. We did not have any restrictions.

GOODSILL: Clothing, what were you wearing for clothing?

DESAI: Bell bottoms was the style!

GOODSILL: Ohhhh, yes, bell bottoms, so not traditional garb?

DESAI: Not at all, not at all.

GOODSILL: But you had traditional garb?

DESAI: I would wear traditional garb only to the weddings or something after I came to college. But no, I never wore traditional garb except for two months when I worked in India after I finished my M.B.A. That was expected at work. I was a higher level, I was 22 at that time, so I needed to have that garb to kind of...

GOODSILL: Authenticate you? [laughs]

DESAI: Yes exactly. I don't think if I wore bell bottoms anyone would have complained, but it would not be appreciated. No open pressure, but yes, it was pressure in the sense that I should wear appropriate clothing.

GOODSILL: The way you described your schooling and your eagerness to follow your uncle to America, it doesn't sound like it was a difficult decision for you to come to America. Did you think you were coming here for a lifetime?

DESAI: Not at that time. But, but there was a high likelihood because my uncle had also come here to study and had stayed. Then of course, he came to India and got married and came to India with his first son.

GOODSILL: At the time of your arranged marriage to your husband did you go back to India to get married.

DESAI: No, we got married in Chicago.

GOODSILL: What did your parents think of that?

DESAI: My Kaka in Toronto was my parent Locum. We got married in Chicago because my husband's uncle lived there, my husband's youngest, Kaka, too. Similar story that his youngest "Kaka..."

GOODSILL: Does Kaka mean uncle?

DESAI: Kaka means father's brother. So his father's youngest brother was in Chicago. Both uncles knew each other. That is how we got to meet each other, so we got married in Chicago. His parents did not come here. My parents didn't come here.

GOODSILL: But you had family there.

DESAI: We had family there, right. If I had agreed to marry and my husband had agreed, but my uncle thought that for some reason it was not appropriate then he could say no. If uncle said, "I don't think this union is appropriate" then that would be it.

GOODSILL: Can you imagine this ever being the case with your daughter?

DESAI: Absolutely not. I don't think my saying would matter that much. If she wanted to marry, she will marry [laughs].

GOODSILL: To most Americans the idea of an arranged marriage is different.

DESAI: It's different.

GOODSILL: To you it felt very normal. It worked out well in your case.

DESAI: It worked out EXCELLENTLY!

GOODSILL: Maybe we should go back to that system. Wouldn't you love to pick out someone for your daughter?

DESAI: Absolutely. Actually she would, too, because my daughter is 27 now. We are in that phase. She is looking for a match.

GOODSILL: We should all be looking for her [laughs]. We should pick.

DESAI: It is not easy. It is very frustrating process. This day and age with internet, it is even harder. People just don't go out on date as much. It is very hard to meet people. Even so, sometimes she says, "Mom, yours was better!" Even she says that. But now it is not possible to do an arranged marriage.

GOODSILL: There is too much independence. We are interested in is the cultural changes that happen within a person and around them as they move from their home country to a new country. When you first moved was it difficult? You are Indian and you've moved to America. Was it difficult finding a doctor?

DESAI: No, no, it was not difficult.

GOODSILL: Did you choose to go to Indian doctors?

DESAI: No. When we got married my husband recommended me to Kelsey-Seybold. So I just went there and whoever the doctor was. I don't even know the name, but definitely the doctor was not Indian.

GOODSILL: That wasn't an issue for you?

DESAI: That was not an issue at all.

GOODSILL: I imagine it would have been for some people though.

DESAI: Well, some people maybe. Depending on the language issue. The language was not a problem for me.

GOODSILL: Tell me why language was not a problem for you.

DESAI: I did my bachelor degree in my mother tongue, the Indian language, Gujarati. I spent one year working on my English because I wanted to take the M. B. A. entrance exam in India. The exam was in English because an M. B. A. was taught in English. I got accepted in the program. That was pretty competitive.

GOODSILL: Did you not speak English before that?

DESAI: I learned English from fifth grade, but just as a subject, as a language. Then even in college, we had English as a subject. I did read a lot of English novels, so I could read and write English very well. But speaking freely or thinking in English was not natural. It was not that hard of a transition for me to do. I basically spent a year to get fluent. I did an M. B. A. and that was in English. So by that time I was very comfortable in English. The only difficulty that I had when I came here was learning the accent, but that was not that difficult. I loved the shows "All in the Family" and all those TV shows that helped me TREMENDOUSLY to get adjusted to the accent [chuckles]. My favorite was "Three's Company" and "All in the Family." Even now in spite of living here for 33 years I still have an accent. I don't speak how you would speak or how my daughter speaks.

GOODSILL: Does your daughter speak with an accent?

DESAI: Not at all. It is because you learn to speak like all your buddies speak.

GOODSILL: Were there any problems with dietary preferences when you moved here?

DESAI: The dietary was a problem because I am vegetarian. So at that time it was harder to find food outside. Like when I started school, I remember the first time I went to the cafeteria and said, "I am vegetarian do you have anything?" The lady was very sweet she said. "Don't worry honey, I have fish, I have chicken." I wanted to tell her, "But fish and chicken are not vegetarian either!" But my definition and her definition were different. So in the early times that was hard, nowadays anyplace you go they know what you are asking for and are willing to go an extra mile and make something for you.

GOODSILL: Will you explain to us why vegetarianism is so common in India?

DESAI: All of India is not vegetarian but the state I came from is called Gujarat. The language is Gujarati; the state is Gujarat. Gujarat, I think, has a very high percentage of vegetarian people. There is a religion called Jainism. Jainism is a religion that believes in STRICT non-violence. Strict in the sense that if I say bad things to you that is also violence because I am hurting your feelings. Even though you don't know I am committing violence maybe to a lesser extent, by my thoughts, is that strict non-violence believer. I am Jain. My husband and I grew up in my family believing we would never eat anything that was non-veg, meaning eggs also.

GOODSILL: Because it would be violent?

DESAI: Yes! A majority of the Jains live in Gujarat. There are some in other areas, also. At one point, 400 years ago or so, the kings were Jains, so they would close all the slaughterhouses. They would have laws against any violence. If you hit a dog, you could go to jail or stuff like that. So that was kind of instilled in the minds of people. People became vegetarian at that time and that just continued even after the regimes changed. So then other people moved in, for example, Muslims moved in. Then eat non-veg food, but those who continued the family traditions would not.

GOODSILL: That is a good explanation, thank you. Is your daughter vegetarian?

DESAI: Yes, she is. Actually, my husband is not.

GOODSILL: He's not but he was originally?

DESAI: My husband was originally. When he graduated from high school he was a student of technology in a different town from Kanpur. He lived in a boarding house there. According to him, the food was terrible. He started eating non-veg. His dad had no problem. His mom had a problem. They just didn't like the 'don't ask don't tell' thing.

Then after he graduated he immediately came here in 1974. He was all by himself, and he continued eating. Then after that, he is working when he travels a lot. So it has remained convenient for him. He does eat non-veg food, but at home we don't buy anything non-veg food. So he is vegetarian at home.

GOODSILL: Outside he eats what he likes?

DESAI: Just like if he and I were to go out or three of us were to go out he wouldn't order any vegetarian, but he would otherwise eat. My daughter actually was not vegetarian when she was little because I could not impose that upon her if my husband was eating. So she had a choice, but she would never like...we would take her to McDonalds. She was never crazy about any of those things. She was a poor eater to start with. Then we have a Jain school for children, like a Sunday School. I was one of the teachers for a long time. One day she decided that she was going to become vegetarian and we said fine. She has remained that way, so if she wants to change her mind we would not be upset or angry because we cannot be. It wouldn't be fair.

GOODSILL: So is the name of your religion Jainism?

DESAI: Jain

GOODSILL: When you moved to America, was it any problem to find a place for religious worship?

DESAI: Actually, I never grew up very religious. Like being vegetarian, when I grew up, that is what my family was. I never really ate non-veg food, so I didn't miss it. Actually, I did try a couple of times here and both the times I threw up. I don't know if it was psychosomatic or physical. Then I said why am I even bothering to try it. Finally, I just quit even worrying about it. So I didn't miss the religious place, the Hindu temple when I came here.

GOODSILL: May I ask about the relationship between Jain and Hinduism?

DESAI: Hinduism was the religion that was quite liberal at the time. Mahaveer founded Jainism for modern times. He felt that there is a lot of violence. The police are taking advantage. The language was Sanskrit which common people did not speak, so there is a different class. Jainism does not believe in a caste system. It believes in equality of people, non-violence, so on and so forth.

Hinduism is not of a competitor. I would go to the Hindu temple and have the same reverence that I would when I go to the Jain temple. So when I came here there was a Hindu temple, and we didn't have any children, we did not see any need really to do anything very religious at all.

GOODSILL: It is almost like the religion lives inside of you, you don't have to go to a place?

DESAI: It is inside. Exactly. I would chant my mantras in the morning when I woke up at home even now. So it wasn't really a big deal. Then when my daughter was growing up and started going to school we did have a Jain Society of Houston and they did have Sunday School. She started going, and then I started. Then dad started coming. That is how we started going to Sunday School at the temple. Otherwise I wouldn't classify myself as a very religious person, but I respect religious tenets and to try to follow them.

GOODSILL: How about adjusting to the weather when you moved to Texas?

DESAI: That was not a problem. The town I come from Ahmedabad gets hotter than this. It is less humid but get hotter than this, so that was not a problem. Actually, I would prefer this to being in any colder place northeast or upstate.

GOODSILL: How about prejudice?

DESAI: Prejudice I have not felt to a greater extent, but on a subtle level I have felt it. I don't know if it has made me change anything either way. I could ignore that and move on. That would not upset me.

GOODSILL: There is a prejudice, but it didn't interfere with your life?

DESAI: Correct.

GOODSILL: Good. How about ignorance of your customs or not being honored in that way? Is that a problem for you?

DESAI: Actually, I must say that people are quite accommodating and accepting in the sense if they don't understand they don't mind asking and I don't mind explaining it. That's fair. I don't know if someone comes from Afghanistan or Japan I would not know about them and I would be very happy to enhance my knowledge. That's fair.

The one most concerned was my daughter. If I wore Indian garb to her school when I went to pick her up she would say, "Mom don't wear this. Wear pants." I understand because she wanted to be mainstream. She wants to assimilate herself. I don't hold that against her, she wanted to let her friends know that she is one of them.

GOODSILL: Don't stand out, mom!

DESAI: Exactly. I understand and appreciate that.

GOODSILL: Has she embraced her native culture in anyway now that she is older?

DESAI: Yes, yes, she volunteers in the Jain Center. She volunteers in many places. Food she is not crazy about. She does not like ethnic food.

GOODSILL: She's not crazy about Indian food?

DESAI: No, she is not at all crazy. She avoids it to any cost, yes.

GOODSILL: Really, does that surprise you?

DESAI: It doesn't surprise me very much [laughs] because I always cook.

GOODSILL: It surprises me because Indian food is so good.

DESAI: It's so good, and she has a couple of favorite items. But she is not crazy about Indian food. She is very good at Jainism. She went actually to an Episcopalian school up to eighth grade. She went to Saint Thomas Episcopal. She knows LOTS about Christianity. Actually, she claims that she probably knows a lot more than many other children who went to just public school and did not have any formal education about Christianity. So she is quite balanced that way. She understands and appreciates the nuances in different religions. Now she wears Indian dresses. She looks very good in them. She wants to buy some. Yes, now she has grown and she understands that. Except for food, she accepts everything.

GOODSILL: That's a good story. When you moved here would spent your weekends in Sugar Land with the Indian population? Did you feel an urge to bond with people of similar background?

DESAI: Yes, an urge to bond with anybody actually! Our child was growing up and the neighborhood where we lived in Fondren Southwest had older neighbors. Many were empty-nesters. There were not many kids to play with down the street. So we would seek out friends who had similar aged children so that my daughter would have company. We would find those friends from the temple that we would go to or some other functions like that. So that's how we did. I had some of my colleagues, my husband's work colleagues. But since he worked in Pasadena and then later in Clear Lake it was harder to meet with those friends. So yes, an urge to bond has always been there no matter who that is.

GOODSILL: I heard someone say one time that sometimes we hold on to our traditions stronger because we fear we will lose them. Especially true for people who have come from other countries. Does that seem true in your case?

DESAI: I would agree, yes. Simplest example, I did not grow up religious. Had I lived in India, I don't think I would have attended the Jain Temple or had my child enrolled in the Sunday School. My grandmother was quite religious, and still she did not insist that I attend, but here I did insist especially when my daughter was in high school and she started driving. She didn't want to go because there are always better things to do. But I insisted that that was not negotiable and we have to go. That was basically a desire to make sure that she gets enough familiarity with the culture and the religion that we came from. So I would say that, yes.

GOODSILL: Do you feel that you have been able to accomplish a nice balance between holding on to your traditions and living in the time and place that you are at now in America?

DESAI: I think so, I think so.

GOODSILL: Do you find that some people do that more successfully than others?

DESAI: Yes. I have found some of my clients have been more successful in doing that than I have been.

GOODSILL: Balancing?

DESAI: No, holding on to the past. I think I've tried to balance, and I think I have balanced. I wish I had done better with the food part. I think my daughter is missing out on a major aspect of our culture.

GOODSILL: Would your career had been the same if you had stayed in India?

DESAI: I probably would not have become a lawyer, but I certainly would have some career. That's why I got an M.B.A.

GOODSILL: Would be a professional and have your own business?

DESAI: I don't know about business because even when I came here I was working. I was a finance executive in a TV company. So I DEFINITELY would have worked. Again, I would have married someone and depending on what would have happened, but 99.9% I think I would not have become ONLY a homemaker because it is just not my personality. No matter if I been there or came here I probably would have WORKED outside of the home.

GOODSILL: Do you think you would have had the same level of prosperity or more had you stayed in India?

DESAI: When I came here, things were hard in India. So probably the level of prosperity would not have been the same. Now things have changed. In fact, the last time I went to India, about two years ago I met a lot of my classmates from high school. They have done wonderfully! I think it is possible. It could have been possible.

GOODSILL: Any regret about the choices that you made?

DESAI: Absolutely not, absolutely not. I am happy here. I've achieved so much in this country. I've received so much from this country. I have met so many wonderful people. Actually, my thought process has become more liberal. I would have been more conservative had I just lived there.

GOODSILL: Liberal in what way?

DESAI: Relating to human rights. I have become more accepting and respecting of other people's thoughts.

GOODSILL: Why do you think that is?

DESAI: In India there is still a caste system. Even though we don't believe in a caste system there is a class system in the sense you have a servant working in your house. When I grew up, I did not hesitate telling that person to "bring me water." Not "Please, bring me water." "Take the glass, do this, do that, whatever." Now when I go there, I don't have the heart to say that. I will get up and get my glass myself.

That person is often a 15 year old, a 16 year old. I feel that I just can't do that. I wish that person went to school instead of working in my house. I've become more familiar with how another person would be feeling. Maybe that would have happened if I grew more mature over there, too. I do not know.

GOODSILL: Very interesting. I appreciate you explaining some of your thoughts and philosophies, and experiences. Is there anything that I should have asked that I haven't. Anything that you were hoping to talk about?

DESAI: The last question is about the documents and photographs. I do not know if this would be relevant. My father-in-law came here in 1988. He was a very learned man and wrote a diary about what his experiences were when he came here. He saw a lot of things that were different, of course, culturally, economically. He wrote a diary. I don't know if that would be of interest. It is scanned.

GOODSILL: I would think that would be fascinating. If it's scanned we can make it part of the documentation.

DESAI: Yes, I would be happy to. Actually, that's what I did when I was eight, nine months pregnant and when I was home with my newborn. We bought the junior PC, so I typed his diary on the computer (laughs).

GOODSILL: Nice, tell me what his name was.

DESAI: Himatlal Desai

GOODSILL: I think that would be interesting

Interview ends