

ASIAN VOICES

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INTERVIEWEE: Ravinder Singh
INTERVIEWER: Andrew Jilani

(START OF TAPE 1, SIDE A)

ANDREW JILANI: My first interview with Ravinder at his home on Wednesday, April the thirteenth. It's about 6:30. April the fourteenth! [correct date of interview] At his house. Ravinder, Shall I ask you in English or Punjabi? What is your preference?

RAVINDER SINGH: It's all equal for me.

AJ: It's all equal for you?

RS: Maybe we can use both.

AJ: Okay. We can use both. [laughter] Okay, tell me first of all, what motivated you to come to the United States?

RS: [pause] Well, there was- [pause] there was a lot of motivation as such. Well, I used to work in a travel agency. I used to travel, and before coming here I was in Europe for quite a few times- [pause] and well, I just wanted to see U.S. and I had the visa for it and came in here. That's it, I guess.

AJ: Did you come alone? Or did you come with your family?

RS: No, I came alone.

AJ: How long have you been here?

RS: Now it's almost an year now.

AJ: And during this time have you mostly lived in Chapel Hill and Carrboro?

RS: Yeah. All the time I've lived here. In Chapel Hill.

AJ: What do you like here?

RS: Well, it's a mixed feeling. And I like a lot of things, and dislike lot of them too. [pause]

AJ: You want to mention which things you like?

RS: [pause] Well, I don't know. Maybe you can suggest me something what do you want.

AJ: [laughs]

RS: What do you want to ask me. How do I () about it.

AJ: Yeah. Are there certain things you liked about this community, about this place which you want to mention.

RS: Yeah, it's good, it's beautiful. I don't know much people here, but all the people I meet, I think, they're busier, I mean, the whole system is like that. They're busy with their works-, [pause] and-, [pause] I don't know, maybe they don't have time for other people. [pause] And, I've been living here in this apartment for more than six months now and I don't even know the names of my neighbors- [pause] my neighbors. Well, we just see each other, we just walk across. We say "hello, how're you doing?" and that's it. And sometimes you just try to pick up and well, [pause] I don't know--.

AJ: Why do you think people don't say-, say "hello" to each other or just--.

RS: No, they do say. They're very brief--. [pause] They're always up to something, really. [laughter]

AJ: Are there things which you miss from your home country?

RS: Yeah. There're a lot of things I miss. My family, my country, my friends. Everything and everybody. I mean, I've spent twenty five years of my life there. So I miss all those my twenty five years.

AJ: So, when you miss home, what do you generally do, when you miss your family, when you miss your friends, what do you do?

RS: Well, I can say that you just miss them. Although I mean, if you don't have friends--. I mean you have friends like here I'm living with my house mates. There are three or four of them, and they're all good. But- [pause] yeah, we call them friends, but they're not friends. I mean, friends I call--. Friends are the people who have time for you when there's no time, and with whom you can share all your thoughts, your life, and they'll listen to you--. [pause] And some things are, I mean, there are some things you can't even share with someone. Yeah, I miss them. I miss my family. Sometimes, I mean--. I mean, you can cry. [laughter] No, I don't cry.

AJ: What do you think about the community in Chapel Hill? Are there times when you can participate in the community life? Maybe in gurdawara life? () religion. Do you belong to any club?

RS: Well, by birth I'm Sikh, but--. I don't know I'm Sikh or not, but by birth I'm Sikh and- well, I do respect all religions. But I've never been to a gurdawara here in Chapel Hill. We don't have a gurdawara here, around here, I guess. We have in Durham.

AJ: We have in Durham. Yes.

RS: But I've never been there. Always wished to go there, but it's so busy. Maybe tomorrow I'll go, I mean, day after tomorrow. [laughter]

AJ: Okay. [laughs]

RS: Because I've been thinking that for a couple of weeks "I'll go tomorrow".

And maybe I'll find some people from my country.

AJ: Yeah.

RS: And well, it'll be nice talking to them.

AJ: How about the community here in Carrboro and Chapel Hill? How do you find-, find this community? When you have time, when you have off two days a week--?

RS: What do I do?

AJ: What do you do on those two days?

RS: Well, just bought my car Last Monday--. [laughter] Shut up! You're making me laugh! [laughter] And well, I drive in the countryside and sometimes come back, and in the night I go dancing--, and especially the Hispanic community in this regions Chapel Hill and Carrboro, and they really appreciate--. [recorder is turned off and back on].

AJ: () tell me about your association with the Hispanic community?

RS: Association, you mean, ah--.

AJ: Do you socialize with them, and how, and how often?

RS: Yeah. I live with them. All my three housemates are Hispanic. Two are Mexicans and one is Puerto Ricanian, and they're really nice people and I believe their culture is closer to Indian culture than American culture. So, we're getting along quite nice.

AJ: How is their culture closer to Indian culture? Could you give me some examples of their culture and--?

RS: I mean, their eating habits, their living-, and--. [pause]

AJ: Do you cook together sometimes?

RS: Yeah, sometimes we do. Yes, I love Mexican food.

AJ: Do you cook Punjabi food for them? Indian food?

RS: Well, I haven't cooked as yet. Maybe-- [laughter] But they--, I mean they've tried it. They say they like it.

AJ: How did you find them?

RS: Hmm. Well, earlier I used to work in- you know- the Indian restaurant down in Franklin Street. I used to work there, so one day, ah- Pedro, he came over there and that time I knew a little Eng-, Spanish, so I started talking to him and- well, that evening we came to know each other, and finally I dropped from there- from Indian restaurant, and well, I didn't work for fifteen or twenty days. I was living with him, with Pedro and his other housemates there, and he found me a job in another restaurant. And-- [pause]

AJ: Pedro found you a job?

RS: Yeah. Because there're a lot of Hispanic people working in the restaurant, so he knew quite a lot of people there. So he helped me with a job, and that's how I came to know him.

AJ: And how do you--? I know you speak Spanish also. Could you tell me how you learnt Spanish?

RS: Well, like I told you I used to work in a travel agency in India, and well, there I learnt it for two months- I mean, the elementary level and later I was-, for about six months I was in Spain, and I had a Spanish girl-friends-.

AJ: Okay.

RS: And with her- but I never- we never spoke in Spanish. With her and I spoke in Spanish. And then I came here, and ever since I've been with Hispanic people. That's how I know that.

AJ: Okay. How did you find Chapel Hill? How did you decide to come to Chapel Hill?

RS: As you know, I told you I was working () Indian restaurant down there, so that guy, I mean the owner of that restaurant, he's known to my father. So, my father told me if you go to U.S., you can go over there. So I came to him directly. From New York-, New York to Chapel Hill straight.

AJ: Okay. [pause] We talked about some of the things when you miss home, miss your family. Now I would like to know what are some of the things you like in this country?

RS: Hmm. [pause] Well, there're a lot of things like in our country they are poor countries--. Well, I can only say that poor countries are unfortunate. That'd be better to say, and there's lot of corruption there and a lot of population, and because of that-, that gives rise to all the other problems, and I find that we don't have any problems of that kind here. So that makes a life quite easier and better here. And I like that. And, well, people are quite educated, sensible, intelligent.

AJ: Ravinder, can I speak some Punjabi also with you now?

RS: Yeah. You can.

AJ: Okay. [in Punjabi] You told me a while ago that sometimes you feel like crying when you miss your home and your family. At such times, how do you console yourself when you miss your home, family and friends?

RS: I mean-, at such times I call them and talk with them for ten or fifteen minutes, and I ask for their welfare. If you don't talk to them, you keep getting different thoughts in your mind, but if you talk to them once, you are satisfied that they're all doing well, and you feel nice about that. That improves the mood immediately. [laughter] Otherwise-, [laughter] otherwise one can go out somewhere, have a few beers, and come back home and go to sleep. That helps. And, I don't have many friends here, but-- Well, I do have some friends-, but I mean, one doesn't really know if they're friends or not. And one cannot speak to them openly and there are many things that I cannot share with them. [sigh] Then, I mean-, one can try to sleep, but sleep doesn't come easy. And I lie awake thinking for one or two hours, and at last I do fall asleep.

AJ: If any of your friends or a member of your family wish to come to the U.S. and ask for your advice, what advice would you give them? Would you advise them to come over, or not to come? And if you do advise them to come, how they should come and what they should do here?

RS: I mean-, that would depend largely upon what motive they have for wanting to come to the U.S. If the person comes from a very poor family with little or no education, I think it's better for them to come here. Those that are unable to earn a salary of one thousand to two thousand [rupees] per month, will earn thirty to forty thousand [rupees] here. So for such people it's obviously better to come here. But those that have an established business or are well settled there, they are better off over there, because if they come here and are unable to find jobs according to their wishes or the kind that they want, they will not like it here and will feel defeated. And, I mean, our society over there is such that people would talk about people talk about each other. For example, my

mother would say such & such family's son has also gone to America, and if that person was to quit from here and go back, she would have negative comments about him, saying that people here are dying to go to America and this one has been there and come back.
[laughter]

AJ: It's the same in Pakistan also.

RS: In India it's like that. Come to think of it, what's the difference between the societies of Pakistan and India?

AJ: No difference, absolutely.

RS: Yes, that's how people think. And only those who have been there can understand this. That's how newcomers here think like. And [when things are not going well] one thinks what am I going to do there if I quit here and go back.

AJ: Do you ever feel like going back?

RS: Hmmm. Sometimes. I mean, by the Guru's grace, my family is not very poor and we have our business, etc. We're not very rich either, but at a comfortable level and they don't really require money from my earnings. On the other hand, they frequently ask me if I am in need of any financial assistance. They ask me if I have enough to live on. All that matters to them is that I am well, and they ask me to call frequently and let them know that I'm okay. But there are many people who have come here and are in much worse circumstances than I am in. They have their families-- children, wives, parents depending on their remittances, and I think to myself that I am better off than people in such circumstances. I mean, I have no reason to be demoralized, thinking that people who are in much tougher circumstances are still happy living here. And- [pause] if one wants to come here, it should be undertaken with proper planning, calculated mind,

and being clear in their minds about what they're going to do here and with advice from those of us who are already living here. And if one comes here with the aim of studying-, [chuckle] what should I say, education is quite expensive also. Very expensive! If one can come with some scholarship, etc., it's very good, because education is very good here and if one can study here, it's a very good thing. [pause]

AJ: Ravinder, our living style in Punjab is such that we cannot live without people. I'm impressed that you're living here with four, or rather three men that come from a culture that, according to you, is similar to ours. If you had to live alone and on your own, what kind of difficulties do you think you would face? What made you decide to live with these particular people?

RS: Alone--. Maybe if I had been required to live here alone, I probably would not have taken this decision (to come to the US). Like I told you earlier, I came here because I knew one person who could help me. If I'd not known anyone here, I probably would not have come at all. All those that come here, do that because they know someone already living here or have some family already here. I mean, those that come here to live. I'm not talking about those that come here just to look around and have lots of money. And-, living alone has its problems here. If you don't have a good job and you are unable to meet your monthly expenditure, living alone is very hard. Well, but when one does decide to stay here, he finds ways and means to do it.

AJ: I will now ask you one or two questions about your work. You told me that when you came here first, you worked in an Indian restaurant. How do you find your experience of working as a cook in an Indian restaurant? Tell me a little bit about how you feel about your experience of working as a cook in a restaurant.

RS: I was-, in India, you know, I was not a professional cook. I worked in a travel agency there.

AJ: So you learnt that trade here?

RS: I mean, the kind of food that is served here in the Indian restaurant, is the type that we used to cook in our house too, and I did not have many problems learning it, but I came here with a goal of studying further if I can--. Like in India if a person is still studying at the age oftweenty five to thirty years of age, people would say this person will spend his lifetime studying, going to school in his old age [laughter]. But here I have seen that people as old as fifty or sixty also study--.

AJ: Whenever one feels like, one can start studying.

RS: Whenever one feels like-. And-, I mean my ultimate motive is to study further. These jobs like the Indian restaurants, etc., are like milestones in the way. I mean, these jobs are helping me in achieving my goal of further education, and--, () [pause]

AJ: Okay, now a little about your dreams. One is about studying further. Tell me about what other dreams do you have.

RS: No other dreams. I want to study, and have a good job. I was doing my computers engineering for three years in India--,

AJ: Computer engineering in India--.

RS: Before the travel agency. I would like to continue the same over here. But, you know when one comes from India or Pakistan, or from anywhere else for that matter, he does not possess a green card. The first problem – the nightmare – is this, and continues for many years. Without a work permit or green card, wherever you go, you stop at the column [in the employment application form] where you are asked to fill in

your social security number, you wonder what to fill in here [laughter]. I think up to now that is the barrier. I don't know if I'm correct in calling it a barrier or not, or if I have not made enough of an effort in this area. I think it should not be a barrier. If I try I can overcome this. I have to study and after that, find a good job. Other than that I have not given it much thought. If I try to think beyond that, I foresee a rather disturbed system [here – in the US]--. Right now I cannot think beyond this. Family will be here or there - because we have a home there [in India] also – I have not really thought about it yet. Right now the main motive is to study and find a good job.

AJ: And-, do you have a girlfriend here?

RS: Not a girlfriend as such, but I have several girls that are friends.

AJ: What are your plans about marriage, to marry here or back home?

RS: One doesn't know where this can happen. This happens – you don't know where. Can't say, it could be here or there. I'm not too worried about that. But, if one does not have a girlfriend, or is not married, sometimes you feel lonely [laughter] [pause]. Maybe one day. She's waiting for me somewhere. I don't know--. [laughter]

AJ: Ravinder, tell me where do you now think your home is? You live here now--.

RS: I live here now, but I don't think my home is here. My home is still there, in India. When I go out over here--, if you go somewhere and find it nice and more beautiful than India, you look at things and appreciate them but feel that these are not mine, in a way--.

AJ: What kind of, and what things?

RS: I mean, if you look at the countryside or things you find better, look good to the eyes-, I'm not talking about girls – [laughter] but you get a feeling that it's not yours.

Your things are those and your home is that (in India). And thus, I think of India as my home. My family is there, my parents are there and I still owe a lot to my parents.
[pause]

AJ: Okay. Do you think there have been any changes in you since you've come here? If there have been any changes, what are those?

RS: Changes-, what kind of changes do you mean? In my thinking?

AJ: In your thinking, in your lifestyle.

RS: Like they say in Punjabi, "according to a new country or place, you change your behavior". Now I'm in America, so I have to live like an American. A little bit, I mean--, India is in my blood since I'm an Indian, but one adapts-, adapting American life. I don't know if I'm adapting the American life, or a new life is being formed for me--, [laughter] I mean, just kind of intermediary--, I don't know. There are no more changes. I mean, one's thoughts mature. I mean, I've never lived on my own before. I always lived with the family and never very far from them, and there one is inter-dependant in the family. Over here I'm independent and I have to take all decisions for myself, whether they're good or bad. And--, that's it.

AJ: Okay. You and I are both South-Asians. Do you think that Chapel Hill and Carrboro are good for us to live in? What should be here so that we can also live here and be happy like others?

RS: I mean, if you look at it for living--.

AJ: We have come here to live permanently.

RS: With your family?

AJ: Yes, with the family.

RS: You have none left back there, and you don't have to worry about back there.

AJ: No, there are family member back there also. Like in your case now. You have been here for a year now, you have dreams here, and you are sometimes sad but you control yourself and think that you will realize your dreams here, but when you go out and look at these two towns and think "these things don't belong to me" or "they are not from my home country"--. I'm asking you this question because I'd like to know what are the things that, if they were here, would make you feel that now this place is like the home that you left behind. In this context, you can consider the community life, lifestyles of people, or whatever you feel like including. Tell me what you think?

RS: I mean, now in America—[interruption][speaker breaks off to say goodbye to a third person] almost the whole population is from different countries here. Is your question related particularly to the Indian or South Asian culture? If we should have some particular entertainment, like the Hispanic community have their salsa nights? Do you wish to know if I think something on those lines should be here for us?

AJ: Yes.

RS: I say that our South Asian community is not large enough, but if you ask, we could do some get-togethers for us, I mean, we could collectively as Indians or South Asians sit together and think about our community and decide what we can do. That would be a start. [pause] We could then organize some cultural programs and such that could also attract the American and other communities. [pause]

AJ: Okay. Another question coming to my mind is about your work. You told me that you worked in computers for three years in India before the travel agency, but now you're doing something very different. Tell me, what difficulties did you face in working

as a cook when you worked for the Indian restaurant, and what difficulties do you face in your present job?

RS: Difficulties--. Computer work and travel agency work is not really tough work, but working in a restaurant is hard work. And it's particularly hard when you change from travel agency work to restaurant work, you find it quite difficult, but sirdars (Sikhs) do manage (in difficult circumstances), and-, [laughter] I did it too. I'm not from a very rich family, but where hard work is concerned, I'm doing it. And, one does get the fruits of hard work. I did not face too many difficulties. But sometimes I thought to myself what I *had* been doing and what I'm doing now. [laughter] But I think in a way it's a way to achieve my main motives. And over here there are no double standards as such, and nobody would say "you are a cook" or "you do janitorial work" or look down upon you, and I did not feel too much about it, like it would be back home.

AJ: You once told me that you had a colleague in the restaurant who used to write Punjabi poems – "America is a sweet jail"- could you recite some of those words for me?

RS: That was Baba Balkar Singh Ji. He had come from New York, and I was new here then. He was very critical of me because I'd told him that I used to work in a travel agency, and maybe I worked a little slow also, but I'm now quite confident. He used to tell me-- () [laughter]. He used to tell me to go back. I never said much to him, but he used to sing this song to me:

"Go back [to India], return even now

What is here in America for you?

This is a sweet jail

And remember you're being warned before you are trapped."

[laughter] Well, I'm stuck in the "sweet jail". I don't know how many years the sentence will last! [laughter]

AJ: Do you still think of it as a "sweet jail"?

RS: By "sweet" he meant that we see money – dollars!

AJ: But what do *you* think now?

RS: Every individual endeavors to make his own life better. I guess I'm doing the same. I'm not saying that my life in India was not better, but [pause] it is in a way a "sweet jail" also.

AJ: It's a "sweet jail" also?

RS: I mean, in a way, when one comes from there, the life here seems to be easy because here there's no harassment, no corruption, no fear of the police, so one is attracted to the life here, because one is working hard and has no serious problems. [pause]

AJ: Okay, now another question is that right now you're single, but God willing you will get married, and would you wish to have your children born and raised here or in India?

RS: [pause] Depends on where I get married. If--. I can't say anything about it right now. Wherever they're born and raised--. [pause] I don't know, I can't say anything about it right now.

AJ: Maybe it's a premature question.

RS: I'm still debating how this will affect their lives.

AJ: What is your personal opinion where your children--.

RS: Wherever they're born, whether there or in America, I mean, if one is going from one culture to another, like I have come from there to here, or my children go from here to there or come from there to here, the effect is there. I mean, both things do not accept each other readily.

AJ: I have one more question about community life. What kind of community life did you have in India?

RS: By community life you mean social life?

AJ: You can take it as social life, or religious life. Over there where did you intermingle outside your family? What did your friends do, and what did you do for entertainment?

RS: You know that in our culture we don't have much of a community life, but--.

AJ: Did you go out with your friends to have some beer or tea?

RS: I never used to drink. I started drinking beer a couple years ago. At my sister's wedding, my brother-in-law insisted that I drink beer with him, so I did.

AJ: There, in India?

RS: Yes, in India. And I never went out especially to drink, even in India. Only sometimes, once in a month or so. You can say once in a blue moon, we'd go out to drink, just for fun, not out of necessity. When I worked with the travel agency, with groups or with foreigners, there was some entertainment in hotels, etc.

AJ: Has that lifestyle changed after coming here? That kind of interaction and entertainment?

RS: Certainly. It has changed completely. You could have the same life here also, but- [laughter] as the Punjabi saying goes, "you enjoy either with a very close friend or when you have money" [laughter].

AJ: [laughs] Entertainment is with friends, and money--.

RS: I mean, you either have a very close friend-- an intimate friend-- and then you enjoy each other's company, or you have lots of money to go to all the good places, and enjoy by yourself. Now here, I don't have lots of money, so my entertainment has to be limited. Other than that ().

AJ: What do you think of this Carolina nights – the salsa night – on Wednesdays and Saturdays? Do you like going for them?

RS: Yeah. I love it.

AJ: Okay.

RS: I mean, when I went there the first time I did not even know how to dance. You know we don't have such things over there [in India]-- we do have night clubs, etc., in New Delhi now – but there was no Latino dancing at all. I went once with a friend and liked it. After that I tried to dance also, but girls won't dance with you unless you know how to dance [laughter]. The girls who know (how to dance), they don't want to dance with boys who don't know. And the boys who know, they want to dance with the girls who know and also with girls who don't know. And the boys who don't know how to dance, they don't dance at all. [laughter] And I was the last one [to find a girl to dance with]-, and after that I took classes. I really liked it, and I go to classes regularly.

AJ: Where do you go for classes?

RS: Durham.

AJ: Durham. Okay. Are you still taking those classes?

RS: Yeah. Every Tuesday.

AJ: Uh-huh.

RS: So that was very helpful. Now I love it.

AJ: What are you learning?

RS: Salsa--. Salsa, Merenge, and Kumbi.

AJ: Okay. That's good.

So, your community is now- primarily a Spanish community. Latino community.

RS: Yeah. That you can say. I have a couple of American friends also. Well--, I see them--, once or twice in a week. But they--, I don't know--, maybe I have not met the right persons as yet. So I won't say anything about them, they're good or bad or whatever.

AJ: Okay. I won't ask you. [laughter]

RS: Good and bad people everywhere.

AJ: You have left your heart behind?

RS: I have left my heart behind--. [laughter] Now I have to utilize my brains!
And--. [pause]

AJ: How?

RS: I mean, one needs not to get emotional. One has to be a bit rational. [pause]
You become emotional, you lose a lot. And--. [pause]

AJ: If you become emotional, you lose a lot?

RS: Yeah.

AJ: How? How do you--? Tell me how do you feel?

RS: Because you don't know about the other person. I mean, for whom you're becoming emotional about. And, sometimes you become exploited by him-, or her. [pause] It depends on the kind of person you meet. I don't be so emotional, don't be so rational. Just maintain a balance.

AJ: Maintain a balance. Okay.

RS: Matters of the heart, etc., are no more, but sometimes-, [pause] try to-, [pause] try to keep that romantic phenomena of love alive, but it's very difficult here, I think ().

AJ: Okay.

RS: I do listen to songs, etc. English on channel 93.9 () 80.9. You get a lot of emotional songs there. It's hard to imagine that such people do exist here. [laughter]

AJ: When you listen to the songs– the emotional songs– you think the people here are not emotional?

RS: [pause] Yeah, they are. Because they are the people who have been making the songs. So they are emotional. [pause] Er... maybe they don't show their emotions, or they just-, just tend to behave like that. People tell a lot of lies also! [laughter] Girls--. [Laughter]

AJ: How? Give me an example how you think someone told a lie.

RS: I mean, these people take each step very, very carefully. [pause]

AJ: Girls?

RS: Girls or boys. They tell lies at every step. And-, [pause] go to any night club and talk to a girl, the second, third girl– and you may get four or five numbers on a particular night. And when you call them later, you may get just one response.

AJ: Just one response?

RS: The others will say something like "oh, maybe I was wrong" or "you're quite nice-, you're a really nice guy. But I don't have time. Maybe you come next week and we have coffee together". And that next week, you know, it'll never come by. Well, that's a kind of-, you know, she's denying to you.

AJ: Okay. [laughter] Can you tell, when you talk to a girl, if she's telling you the truth or not being honest with you?

RS: Oh yes.

AJ: You can tell right then.

RS: I mean, if you ask a person two, three or four questions and she doesn't ask any questions about you at all, it's obvious that the other party is not interested. And— [pause] if you call the next day and say "let's get to know each other more" or "how about a cup of coffee" and if she makes an excuse of some sort, you can take it as a "no". I mean, she won't say openly that she doesn't like you. [laughter] She won't say that!

AJ: She'll make excuses.

RS: Yeah, she'll make excuses.

AJ: So what is the trick, then? Have you learnt any tricks?

RS: Tricks for what?

AJ: Of "hooking" girls.

RS: Girls-- [pause] the first trick is that you have to be good-looking and handsome. And I know *that* I am not. I'm an average man. I know that. And, the other thing is that they like to talk. And then you find out whether she just likes to talk, and then it depends on what motive you have for "hooking" the girl [laughter] [pause]

Depends on what type of a girl you come across. Your first night can be *the* night or-- It depends. [pause] But as for me, I like more talking to people. To get to know more about the person, to have coffee or whatever & meet together. My motive is to-, just, you know-, not to "cave-in". [laughter]

(END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A)

(START OF TAPE 1, SIDE B)

AJ: Okay, you were going to tell me about a song.

RS: No--. I was saying "hooking" girls is not a very difficult thing. There's a song from a Hindi film: "any girl can get 'hooked'-- all you need is someone who knows how to 'hook' her". I mean to say exactly that, one has to know how to do it, and you can get through to any girl. [laughter]

AJ: Yes, that's correct.

RS: But my motive is not that. My main motive is to study and find a good job. These things come and go.

AJ: What are you interested in studying?

RS: Computers.

AJ: Computers? Uh-huh.

RS: It's very expensive- to study here.

AJ: It's expensive to study in a community college as well?

RS: I once made some inquiries at NC University, in Raleigh. They charge two thousand dollars for five classes. And if one does take them, it's no harm. I'm thinking of saving some money in the one or two months and buy a computer. I had debated whether I should buy a car or a computer first, and then decided that a car was more important. You can move around. Now I'll get a computer next and practice on it-, on my own.

AJ: Okay.

RS: Let's see now what the Guru's will is.

AJ: Okay. [pause] And-, Ravinder--.

RS: Ask me what you like to ask.

AJ: I don't have any more specific question. [pause] have you ever been invited by an American family--? Asking you over for a meal or such on a special occasion-- like Christmas, New Year, or any other occasion?

RS: I really don't know any family that well, but when I did not have a car I used to get around on buses, there was a driver of a bus that used to meet every day on the same route-, and he once even gave me a bus pass that he had found on a seat- he used to like Indian food, Indian culture. His parents-, his father- had at some time been posted in India with the East India Company. In India during the British times. He was quite impressed with India, and when he gave me the pass, he said I could use it. That pass was valid till August '99.

AJ: Wow!

RS: And-, he used to meet me every day and he talked to me. I mean, by birth he was Canadian. It was in the Christmas days, and he gave me his phone number saying that if I feel lonely at Christmas time, to give him a call and if I felt comfortable, I could join them for Christmas dinner. And-, after that I forgot all about it.

AJ: You did not go there?

RS: I forgot about it, and did not go. And-, [pause] he was the only one. [pause] Otherwise--. [pause] I feel that the youth here sometimes don't feel comfortable talking to-, because of my color or-, my race. I mean, they think I'm Hispanic or-, I don't know. Sometimes I feel that. Maybe they are right or wrong. Because of this-, [pause] I think that if I were an American or white, I would have known more people than I do now.

AJ: Uh-huh. [pause]

RS: Everyone says that everything is equal and there is no racism or anything like that, but there is.

AJ: You feel there is-- [interrupted]

RS: I mean, although they don't-, they try not to do it-, it just happens. It's in the blood. ().

AJ: It's in the blood? Racism is in the blood?

RS: Not racism. [pause] Just interaction--. I mean- like we have this cultural gap. There's a gap of language as well. And--.

AJ: But you speak very good English and Spanish. And beautiful Punjabi. And Hindi. Four languages. At least I know--.

RS: No, I speak French also.

AJ: You can speak French also?

RS: I learnt it for two years in India.

AJ: So, a multi-lingual person.

[pause]

RS: Well, what else?

AJ: That's enough! [laughter]

Now I want to know your thoughts about racism. In Chapel Hill and Carrboro. As a South-Asian do you--? How does this racism manifest?

RS: How to manifest it?

AJ: How does it show?

RS: How does it show? I mean--. [pause] Like, you know, if--. Have you ever been to BW3?

AJ: BW3? Is the--?

RS: The bar on Franklin Street.

AJ: The bar on Franklin Street.... Sometimes I've been there.

RS: You go there on a Tuesday-, and on Tuesdays there are only black people over there. And--. I mean, people go there on Tuesdays because they sell the wings-- chicken wings-- cheaper on Tuesdays. But, ninety five percent people over there are blacks, and-, I mean, if a white person goes among all those black people, he will not feel comfortable even if he wants to. And I've seen churches also. They have separate ones for blacks and whites. Even churches--. I mean, you have the same churches, the same bible-, they go to churches at different times. And a black person will not go to white church and a white person will not go to a church attended by black people. [pause]. I mean--. Although--.

AJ: How does it show for South-Asians? Racism--?

RS: South-Asians--. I mean, we look a bit like Hispanics. [pause]

AJ: our colors are somewhat similar-.

RS: Colors are similar. Features are also somewhat similar. And I feel that there are some racist feelings for the Hispanics. [pause] I mean, when an American meets a Hispanic, his first impression is--. I mean, they under-estimate them in every way. Because most of the jobs they do are in restaurants or that kind of jobs--. There are good people also. [pause]

AJ: Do you ever meet them? The good people--?

RS: Yes, I do. [pause]

AJ: I mean, brief meetings-, or-?

RS: Er...

AJ: Do they become good friends?

RS: [pause] I have seen another thing here. If a person talks to you, he'll talk to you for one or two hours, or even three or four hours, but- [pause] they don't become friends. [pause]

AJ: They don't become friends?

RS: No. They do talk to you. That's all their purpose (is). Purpose—I mean, maybe they want to know interesting people. Maybe they were interested in you and they knew you, but as we South-Asian are-, tender of heart-, tender-hearted, we make attachments quicker. You know-. And-, we tell everything about ourselves. We are-, you're just-, you are just like an open book, and they're reading it. And--. But--. That's why we build up expectations from the other person, but the other person wakes up the next morning and goes about his own way. [laughter] [pause] I don't know why, but they are unable to become friends.

AJ: Hmm...

RS: Maybe that's what they call cultural gap. Or--. [pause] I mean-, we look like human beings but two different species of human beings. [laughter]

AJ: Yeah. [pause] Ahm.. You meet South-Asians living here also? People from India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh. How are friendships with them?

RS: I have not really met many of them. I have some living below here--.

AJ: In this apartment complex? Okay.

RS: I don't meet many of them--. I mean-, once or twice--.

AJ: Are there any Punjabis here?

RS: Once or twice I met some boys in the bus. Most of the people that live here are from South India. And-, you know about South Indians-, [chuckles]. They concentrate on studying. Their main motive is to find a government job-, even if it's just a clerical job, they spend their lives in such jobs.

AJ: Okay? [laughs]

RS: And the North Indians- the Punjabis- they're more into luxurious lives. [laughter]. They are not interested in jobs-, only business ventures.

AJ: They want to do business. [laughter]

RS: And-, I don't mean to say that they're more intelligent. They're good. They're good people. Our North Indians are more cunning.

AJ: North Indians are cunning?

RS: Yeah. South Indians are simpler people. If you tell one to go straight, he'll go and hit the wall! [laughter] He won't say there's a wall ahead-. [laughter]

Once I met four people at the Havana restaurant-- the Cuban café-- but they lived in RTP. They had come for the first time to the salsa night. And I was dancing--.

AJ: They were Indians?

RS: Yes, they were Indians. They looked educated-, they were dressed in suits. They looked like our own people, so I went up to them and met them. I felt nice about it. And I asked them to dance, but they said no. Indians are quite shy. I mean, in the beginning, I was also shy of dancing-, especially South Indians. They did not dance. They sat around for some time and then went away. They said they did not know how to dance. I said all you need to do is move around like this. While dancing Merenge, all you need to move is this part of you. [laughter] I did not invite the girls to dance,

because-, you know, our culture is different. If you invite American or girls from other nationalities, it's okay, but-, then they left.

AJ: Do you know any Punjabi songs? Or words from a Punjabi song. A song that's your favorite, or a saying that you like very much. [pause] Or some poetry.

RS: I'm forgetting those things now.

AJ: You're forgetting them?

RS: I have no music. And I have no cassettes.

AJ: You have no cassette of Punjabi music? Oh.... When I was about to leave, I had wanted to bring along a Punjabi cassette--.

RS: I have no Punjabi cassette, nor Hindi-, I have nothing. No Mohammad Rafi, no Kishore Kumar. Nothing.

AJ: You have nothing.

AJ: I have two Punjabi music cassettes. They're very good. I'll lend them to you. You can make copies of them. You have a system that you can make copies with?

RS: Yes, I have. It's a CD, or--?

AJ: No, they're cassettes. [pause] But, you know any song? You've been here only one year, you can't forget so soon.

RS: Songs--? I know one or two lines of some.

AJ: Please sing the one-or-two line of some song that you remember. Or some poem, or saying, or some other kind of poetry.

RS: If a person starts at poetry, it's likely that he gets into romanticism--. [laughter]

AJ: What's that? Gets into what?

RS: Gets into romanticism. [laughter] Or one starts poetry when he's in love, and begins liking it.

AJ: Okay, never mind--.

RS: I don't know if it's Hindi or Urdu--. What's the meaning of "boom"? Is that what you call an owl in Urdu?

AJ: "Boom"?

RS: What do you call an owl in Urdu?

AJ: "Ulloo".

RS: "Ulloo"?

AJ: Yes, it's the same in Punjabi.

RS: "these beautiful ones have been the cause of the ruin of many towns--."

AH: Aha...

RS: "these beautiful ones have been the cause of the ruin of many towns,
The owl is given the blame for nothing." [laughter] The poor owl gets a bad name for nothing.

AJ: That was good!

RS: I can't remember anything else. I used to know so many small things.

AJ: In Punjabi?

RS: Ahm....

AJ: Tell what's the meaning of "Sat sari kaar"? (the Sikh greeting)

RS: Sat sari--.

AJ: "Sat sari kaar".

RS: "Sat sari Kaar"?

AJ: Uh-huh. When Sikhs greet each other, they say "Sat sari Kaar".

RS: "Sat shri akaal".

AJ: Oh, "Sat shri akaal". What does it mean?

RS: "Sat" means "true". Sat shri akaal means God is true. Sat shri akaal. God is true.

AJ: "Kaal" means?

RS: "Akaal".... God.

AJ: Okay.... God is true. "Sat shri akaal". God is true. [pause]

Tell me something about Sikhism. When you were in Punjab, in India. Did you go to the gurdawara when you were there?

RS: I used to go there, but I was not much into Sikh literature--. I mean-, I respect all religions whether it's Sikhism, Hinduism, or Buddhism. But I've not been much--. My daddy--. [pause] I never used to go to the gurdawara at first, then my daddy got angry with me. I mean, going to the gurdawara- like, in the words of Bullay Shah, "you don't find God by washing and cleaning yourself, nor you get God in mandirs or mosques, only those with good motives find God".

AJ: [laughs] That was good!

RS: If one wants to find God, we don't need to go to the gurdawara. When you go to the gurdawara and listen to the sermons-, more effectice than that is God's "radio station" that does not let out of its range at any time. And-, I feel it's good like this. In order to be a good human being, it's important to implement the Garanth Sahib's sayings in one's life, one can be a good human being. And that, I think, is the motive of every religion. And-, I don't endeavor to find God, but I do my best to be a good human being.

And, if you can be a good human being, you can be a good Hindu or Christian, or whatever. [laughs] That's my philosophy.

AJ: True. [pause] Yeah.

RS: "People read religious books to their deaths, but none of them became 'pundits'; but one can become a 'pundit' by reading a couple () of love.

AJ: Tell me the meaning of this.

RS: It means that people read and read religious books like Garanth Sahib, etc., but the never attained the prestigious level of "pundits", but if you know a couple () of love- any kind of true love- make you knowledgeable or wise enough to be known as a pundit.

AJ: What is the meaning of "gayan"?

RS: "Gayan" means knowledge.

AJ: Knowledge? Okay.

RS: Wisdom.

AJ: These are Hindi words which I do not understand.

RS: "Gayan" means wisdom. Knowledge, or wisdom.

AJ: Okay.

RS: I do not have much knowledge about religion. And I feel that I do not need more. [laughter].

AJ: But your thinking is very correct.

RS: I have never felt that if I do not go to the gurdawara for worship, that I should be going there, or I'm being marked "absent" from there. [laughter]

RS: The "Baba" has marked my attendance with a red mark! [laughter]

AJ: You have been marked "absent". [laughter]

RS: I've never had such feelings.

[pause]

RS: If you're doing something wrong or committing sins, or whether you're doing good deeds, God is omniscient and He knows it. Whether you're in the gurdawara or in your home.

AJ: Right.

Okay, Ravinder tell me anything else you wish to tell about your community back home or here, or about your dreams, the lifestyle here.

RS: Only this that life is very restless here.

AJ: It's restless?

RS: I mean, one thing is that--. For the time being I don't see any light in that long, dark tunnel,

AJ: Uh-huh.

RS: And-, I don't know (). And-, [pause] The thing is that one can say "I want to wear this garment", but he has no idea how to wear it. I mean, till the time one has achieved something, you feel restless. I mean-, I'm growing older and my life is passing by and I'm not being able to do anything. Till the time I was in India I used to feel that I was ahead of time, but now I feel that time is ahead of me.

AJ: Time is ahead of you?

RS: Yes, I feel that time has left me behind. I mean, I had a very good to life in India. My parents gave me good education, and if I tell that to someone here, he'll say, "you can go back, what's wrong with you?" But you know why I cannot go back now.

[pause] And-, I know that I cannot do too much here because if you want to be somebody, you have to start very early. I mean, I know that I can be somebody. I have to do something- something respectful. You think my parents will feel good if-- [pause]

AJ: Okay, let it be. Thank you very much for your time.

RS: You're welcome.

AJ: Of your good feelings. [laughter] It makes me happy whenever I meet you. I believe in my mind that you're trying very hard-- to meet people-- whenever you see me, you always greet me and it makes me very happy.

RS: It feels good, thinking that I'm meeting someone from my culture and gives me a homely feeling. And I can talk to you. There are many things that I can't talk about with other people. I could actually talk about those things, but they will not understand. Well, it feels good. [pause]. That's it, I guess.

AJ: That's it. [recorder is switched off].

(END OF INTERVIEW)