

Interview

with

Mary Mathew

April 25, 1999

By Rashmi Varma

The Southern Oral History Program
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

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ASIAN VOICES

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INTERVIEWEE: MARY MATTHEW
INTERVIEWER: RASHMI VARMA

(BEGINNING OF TAPE 6, SIDE A)

RASHMI VARMA: This is an interview with Mary Matthew at her home, in her living room--. [pause] Okay-, this is an interview with Mary Matthew in her living room. Thank you, Mary, for agreeing to participate in this oral history project. To begin with, I would like to-, you know, how you came to the United States, when you came, what went into your decision for coming here. Just, you know, some background as to what brought you to this country.

MARY MATTHEW: Ahm.... I came a year after our marriage, when my husband became a graduate student in Chapel Hill, and---.

RV: What year was that?

MM: This was nineteen sixty-nine. He came in that year and we came the next year—we, meaning our baby and I. So, it's his admission that brought us here, even though I should say that practically all my life I wanted to go to the west-, myself--.

RV: Why is that? Why did you want to go to the west all your life? And also, did-, you and your husband make this decision together that he would come here for-, for graduate work?

MM: Ahm..... Well-, together in the sense, there was a time when my husband did not come over, but since I liked it so much he also began to entertain the idea after a while. And also, his parents had been in this country since nineteen-, early nineteen

sixties. So there was a natural pull also for him to come here. As to why I wanted to come, I have-, have always been avaricious reader, and all the years I was growing up-, ahm... I stayed in a girls schools which was founded by the British and I read so many books about the snow-, and things-, [laughter] happening in the west and I just developed this great appreciation for seasons, and their changes, and all the things that I read about in the books. And so, that's why I began to be fascinated with the idea of immigration from an early ages, never really thinking that I would one day come.

RV: That's interesting that you say your husband's parents were already in the United States. How did they come? And they must have been among the earliest-, er.... South-Asians of the second wave-, you know, to come to the United States, so what brought them here?

MM: My husband's father is an IAS officer and he had been the planning secretary of Kerala, and the agriculture and then the health secretary, and-, when the Indian government sent-, er... their representative to the World Bank, he was the one they chose, and so he started working in the World Bank-, ahm... at that time, and then he-, ahm.... Worked in it for many years and rose to the position of Advisor to the Executive Vice President--. Okay, so that is the history of his career in this country.

RV: What is your community here? I mean, is your life basically around your family, or do you-, you know, spend a lot of time interacting with people outside? In other words, who are the people you interact with on a regular basis? How would you define your community here, who's in it, and so on?

MM: Ahm... I would say that there three different groups that I interact with regularly. One, of course, the family. The second one, my work related, or professional relationships. And-, ahm... a third is the church. So, it's a three-pronged approach.

RV: Er.... You want to-, er.... First talk about the church? What's the denomination, how did you get involved, what do you do for it? Do you interact with people in the-, from the church socially as well? Ahm.... Whatever you want to say about it.

MM: Ahm.... We began to attend the () Baptist Church because the friends of whom we bought our house, were attending that church. And--.

RV: What--? What church did you go to India?

MM: We are Saint Thomas () Christians from Kerala. Okay. After coming here, w don't have that community here. So--,

RV: There is no community of () Christians here?

MM: Not in this area.

RV: Okay.

MM: Yeah. So, we began going to this church and soon found they had a good youth program which our children could use and when I first began to work, I worked a couple of years as a teacher, in their academy, and later I resigned and started studying and my career-, took a different direction. Ahm.... What we do in our church environment now? Ahm... we attend the church on Sundays, of course. My husband and I belong to various-, oh-, committees. He, in the finance committee, and the baptismal committee and I sing in the choir. And--.

RV: ()?

MM: Uh-huh. Yeah. Well, not as good as she is, but I like music too. Ahm... we don't socialize with them outside of church for lack of time, but we have known these people for many years and our children have grown up with the people in the church, and so they have become a second family.

RV: What's the racial composition of the church member? Er... Are there other Indians who attend it, or-, you know--?

MM: It's a white church. And, for the longest time, we were the only non-whites there. But of late, we have, like-, oh-, three of four African Americans also.

RV: So, you never felt out-of-place? I mean, you-, the religious community was important enough to embrace you? You didn't feel any cultural differences coming in?

MM: Ahm..... this particular church is known for a very loving and friendly attitude, and the fact that we are from a different country only endeared us to them even more, because they felt like they and we were brothers and sisters in Christ. So, we felt very welcome and were heartily accepted and I don't remember a single time when we even felt we were different from anyone else.

RV: Were you as committed to church activities in India, or do you think that something about your immigrant experience, or coming here, that drew you towards-, you know, getting more involved with religious community? Or was this just an extension of what you did in India, but in a different church?

MM: Ahm.... In a sense, it was just an extension of what I have always done, because I have always grown up in a religious atmosphere. Ahm.. and my father, who is no more "quasa-pastor". However, after coming, I feel that my spiritual life has deepened a great deal just because there are so many more avenues to learn from, and

there is a break with tradition that is possible here, and when you break with tradition, you always learn more and you come out of some-, ignorantly-held customs and-, that kind of things-, which take away from the beauty of true religion.

RV: In India, like, you think caste, and () region, language, what do you mean by the fact that you are able to break traditions?

MM: Okay. Ahm... To be very specific, the church I come from in India, always believed—and I think it could be a reflection of the Hindu notion of renunciation and so on—but my church would see poverty and illness and all of those things as-, ahm....., blessings! In fact, because they made you get closer to God and so on-, but—and I always went with it. But after coming here, and studying the bible on my own, I realized that what God is promising is that you will be blessed financially, your body will be healthy, and so, the blessings do--. [pause] So I realized that what the bible is saying is not that lack is blessing, it is saying when you discipline yourself and walk in God's ways—these are the ways in which you will be blessed. And-, and it-, changed my entire perspective on life, and I began to pray in line with what I personally understood as what the bible was saying. And-, you know, I began to receive answers and so-, religious life became a very thrilling, and fulfilling work.

RV: Was your husband also involved in-, er... religious life in India? His family, does he come from a similar background, or was it-, you know, with youth that you both got involved?

MM: Ahm..... At the time of our marriage, he was not religious, in the Christian sense of the term. He believed in doing good deeds, and that kind of things, but not the way the bible talks about it, as walking a personal relationship to God. That evolved in

course of time, and I was a factor, because it was so real to me, and I used whatever chances I could to convey to him-, my belief. And, in course of time, he began to experience some of it, and, so that's it came about. And, so now, both of us participate in church activities and so on, with equal enthusiasm, whereas at the beginning of our marriage-, ahm.... I was the one who would have wanted to go to church and he did not always see that as a necessity.

RV: Huh! [pause] [some problem with recorder] again-, and you also mentioned your professional community, and we can talk about that. But-, you know [pause] [faulty recording].....

MM: Ahm... At the moment, our interactions with the neighborhood is minimal, because we seem to have so little time—ahm.... And maybe, very little inclination also [laughter]. As a result, there have always been a couple of neighbors who went out of their way to make friends with us, and those we have really welcomed and-, ahm... all of those things--. But we have not, for example, engaged in backyard barbecues, and that sort of thing--. We have very cordial relationships with all of them, but are not really close to it-, them-, except for one or two families. [pause] [faulty recording] and while, we're not socialites as such, again for the same reason not having time and so on, we are not the party type-, so-, [laughter] so-, so we have not gone out much with them, but we've always had a very good circle of American friends. The South-Asian community-, ahm... that we move with, are mostly friends from our very early days in the country when we did give and go to a lot of parties. The only difference is, many of them continue the same practice-, to this day, whereas we have quit and have-, ahm... just

given up that kind of social life. So, we are close to them, but we hardly know what's happening in their lives--.

RV: Don't see them often--.

MM: Not at all! Not at all. Yeah.

RV: You keep in touch by phone, or--? Or just occasionally--?

MM: Very occasionally.

RV: Were your initial friends mostly from Kerala, or from the South, or-, you know, how did you find them here-, the group that you said that you used to initially socialize with?

MM: There were a few—like, three or four families from Kerala—with whom we very became very intimate as soon as we came here. We were always together, and we did many things together, so they were-, they continued to be very close friends, except we don't interact regularly now. And, we also had--, anyone from India was basically a friend. But those days the community was small—and I'm talking about the early nineteen seventies—it was a small community and we had a lot of-, get-togethers and so on, but when the community began to expand-, ahm.... We lost touch with-, most of them. Most of the newcomers, that is.

RV: So, you would say that most of your-, you know, daily life is devoted to family, and then on Sundays to church. Is that how would characterize your community-- , your most important community?

MM: Ahm.... I would sat that most of my time is spent with my professional acquaintances now. Right. With the family, I interact in the evenings. Ahm.... And the church on Sundays. So I think that is the order in which the time is divided.

RV: Do you have-, er... other family in the United States, you know, besides your children and husband?

MM: My husband's parents and his siblings are all in this country. I have four or five cousins and their families here. The ones we regularly interact with, are my husband's-, family.

RV: How often do you see them? Do they come and stay with you? Do you go and visit them?

MM: Okay. We are the only married ones, so they all come here and stay with us. And--.

RV: How often is that?

MM: Hmmm..... well, since the rest of them in California, and one is-, sick all the time and-, you know, they have personal difficulties in their lives—two of them are divorced—and so it may be once or twice a year for the-, ahm... brothers to come, and his parents in DC, we keep in regular touch with them. Call them once every few days and go up and see them, and bring them down here to spend time with us. So, with the parents, we have an ongoing contact. And we take care of many of their things since both are elderly now.

RV: Can you tell me something about your family or community-, you know, back in India, and-, er... you know, how much do you keep in touch with that community, if you do, and what are the ways in which you keep in touch?

MM: Ahm... I'm the only daughter of my mother and my father died when I was just five months old. So I have basically grown up with my mother-, ahm... all the time I was in India, and since she was the only sister to five older brothers and-, all of them took

a great deal of interest in our welfare, so we would go and stay with them when school closed for both of us, and so I had very close contact with my family-, uncles, and so on. Until I got married, and after I came here, the past few years I've been going back every summer-, to visit my mother, and-, [pause] [coughs] Ahm..... the past few years I have gon back every summer and then I see all my relatives. I don't write often at all-, to anyone except my mother.

RV: Do you call them?

MM: No. She lives in an old age home and her particular-, er... building does not have a phone, and furthermore, it frightens her if I call her because she thinks something dire has happened here. [pause]

RV: Ahm... is there anything about your community life or family life in India that you miss now, or-, ahm.... How is your community life here different from the one you left behind? In other words, are there things about India that you miss at all, or has it been a discovery of other things and you-, don't really miss certain things?

MM: Ahm... the truth is that I don't miss anything-, that I left behind in India. Ahm..... In fact, my life in this country has been a simple process of one dream after the other-, getting fulfilled. Ahm.... Educationally, and socially, and in personal development in terms of the family, and so on. So, there is nothing that I miss back home. Ahm... Of course, I like my family, society, and so on, but-, since I see them every summer and spend time with them, I don't feel that I am being deprived of-, these things. What I greatly like in my life in this country is that there is a great deal of freedom. I like the fact that I am anonymous, and I like the fact that I can wear the

clothes I like--. [laughter] Ahm... comb my hair the way I want to—in other words, manage my own life, and not have to-, justify my decisions to society in general.

RV: I think that would not have been possible in India.

MM: In the particular community I come from, it was not possible.

RV: Would you say something about that community?

MM: Okay. Er.... This particular community was-, ahm.... What shall I say? It was a very traditional, very conservative society from the North of Kerala--.

RV: What ()?

MM: These are the areas around Tirvalla. Right. And-, [clears her throat] everybody dress the same, everybody did the same things, and to be different was to be considered wrong and bad. And-, so, for example, when I grew up-, was growing up, I asked my mother, can I wear--, I wish I could wear a short skirt and a top, I wish I could cut my hair. And my mother would say, don't do any of this now, let me just find a groom for you and after that do what you want. [laughter] So, it was in those ways a very restricted kind of society and, I always liked freedom-, personal freedom. I should say, in defence of that community, that they had very strong moral and social, religious values and-, [clears her throat] in every way it was exemplary, but if you were different you paid a cost.

RV: Okay.

MM: Yeah.

RV: But what about being different in this country and this country? Was it ever an issue, or do you think-, you know, you were able to fit in and if you were able to fit in, what do you think were the possible reasons-, for that?

MM: Ahm... My personal experience in this country was that if you were different, you faced friendly curiosity, and not-, judgement. So, since that has been my experience-, ahm.... and since I was always surrounded by people who-, appreciated the kind of culture, the kind of values I represented, so it was never an issue of feeling different or discriminated against. I never felt that way, and I can't remember a single instance when I felt embarrassed because I was different.

RV: Uh-huh. At what point do you think did you start thinking of America as your home? Er.... You know, you talked about always wanting to have come to the west-, ahm.... Were the early years different-, ahm.... From the years more recently? Was there a particular incident, or event, or a certain time in your life, or a certain experience that made you think, okay now-, you know, this is my home? Or were you--, or had you always come with the intention of making this your home and-, there was never any struggle around it?

MM: Ahm.... The strange thing was the second I disemb--, disembarked in New York in 1970, I felt I had come home, because I had thought about that moment, thought about this country so much. However, [clears her throat] our first-, almost ten years in this country were filled with tremendous anxiety because we did not have the right visa. And we-, lived on-, ahm.... Teaching assistantship and so on. So-, we-, I-, plus in those days I did not have the visa to work and study, and for some-, and for all these reasons I always felt like I was not a part of the ongoing life. And-, I had my little sphere with my small children and my household duties and-, that defined my existence. To me the breakthroughs came-, from four different things. One was, we got our visa and the second was I began working. A third was that I stopped wearing all the time my

traditional sari, and I changed-, started using western clothes, and the fourth one was I started to drive. So, these four things took me out of my limited sphere, completely. And that, I would think, was the time when I began to really feel like this a new life, and that I was a part of it.

RV: And that this was your home? This country was yur home? That's when you realized?

MM: Hmmm... Okay. I would say that I always felt very much at home here, but there were many-, ahm.... Many times when I felt-, bored-, in the first few years when my work in-house would be done and there was nothing to do and-, so, my life became more meaningful, and my participation in the life in this country became exciting and challenging and all those things-, with these four turning points, and I would say, that's when it really began to be a home in the sense you felt so fulfilled and so comfortable in it. Yeah.

RV: Ahm... Would you like to talk a little about-, [faulty recording] your experiences of bringing them-, ahm.... up in this country? Were there moments of anxiety? Ahm.... Did you give a lot of thought to what kind of culture you wanted to bring them up in? Were they--, were you going to create a new culture for them? Ahm.... What sort of identity issues-, you know, did you face when you were bringing up your children? And maybe if you can say something about-, you know, what you think they think their identity is. So something about their growing up and you bringing them up, and-, something about what they are now, as a result of that.

MM: Ahm... both our children are, temperamentally, very sweet and easy to get along with. And, raising both of them in their childhood was delightful. And as they

grow up-, and during their early growing years-, - ahm... mentally, both of us were still firmly rooted in the cultural expectations of typical Indian parents. Things-, okay. Things such as-, ahm.... We-, it was unthinkable to us that girls would wear shorts. It was unthinkable to us that our children would think of dating-, boys, and-, er.... It was unthinkable to us that our children would want to-, ahm... go out on dates and return-, ahm... after nightfall. So, all of these are-, ahm... expectations or-, certain behavior--, well, expectations I should say-, that we had so firmly implanted in us, that we could not get reconciled to how our girls were changing before our eyes. So, when our older daughter who was the guinea pig in our-, child-rearing, went through these stages, she and us-, and we-, had encounters when we would try to explain our respective positions and so on. So, I would say that it took us time and a few years to realize that our children were not extensions of our personalities, even though they were Indian in terms of having Indian parents, they had grown up here and so these children who were, in the real sense of the term, Americans and we could not package them into a predetermined cultural entity. [clears her throat].

RV: Did they have questions for you, as to what-, you know, their identities were? Did you ever see any confusion in them? Or do you think that it was easy for them to just see themselves as Americans? Did they come ever with experiences from school-, you know, where someone had asked them about their identity and that had led to some confusion? Umm.... Some of their experiences growing up?

MM: I would say that, since at home we were not-, like, into culture, in the sense that we were not socially active--.

RV: What about the language spoken at home?

MM: We always spoke in English.

RV: Okay.

MM: Yeah. Because I taught in their school, so they had seen me as a teacher—their teacher! So, speaking to them in English came naturally to-, both of us.

RV: Do they know any ()?

MM: They can understand it, and they can reply with an accent-, even though they don't.

RV: In ().

MM: Uh-huh. Right. They understand it. So, ahm.... it took us a few years for these issues to get resolved, and then-, then we had a few tough years when the girls felt that we were unreasonably strict with them, and that we didn't understand what their-, needs were, in these social areas, and so on.

RV: What about cultural areas? Do you think that they were ever confused about their identity? Did other kids perceive them as different? Did they ever have questions about that-, as to why they were different?

MM: Ahm..... They didn't. They didn't have problems in that area. One reason could be that their friends loved coming to our house and having dinner with us, so they found their cultural background to be a social advantage. [laughter] Well, and all our spicy food and so on were popular among their friends. Neither of them would wear a sari or-, things like that, at that time. Even though now they would.

RV: They would now?

MM: Yes.

RV: What has made the difference that now they would?

MM: Because when you're in your early and mid teens, you think to be different-, is to be-, socially inept, and now-, now that they're more confident of their-, themselves as persons, they see it as a way to look more attractive [laughter]. They see it as exotic, what once they would have seen as different-, you know, in a bad way. So, on the one hand as parents, we realized what our mistakes were, and we began to come out of pre-established cultural behavioral expectations. And-, () we started allowing them to date young men, who of course, always-, making sure when we could, that these were young men of good character and, you know, carefully counseling them about the dangers of-, not sticking within one's moral boundaries and so on. So, I would say that both girls have benefitted from our relaxing that stern grip-, on their social life and, they have both been very responsible and-, we are proud of the choices they have made.

RV: What sorts of choices have they made? Can you talk a little bit-, any of them married-, who did they marry, what career choices they've made-, and so on?

MM: Our older daughter married an African American and he's a wonderful young man and-, his character and his abilities and-, above all, his care and concern for our daughter and the child—all of these have greatly endeared him to us. So, she has a very happy marriage, so we are very pleased that they're together--.

RV: Were you always ()?

MM: No. In the beginning we were very anxious, because this would have been so against the social norms that we were trained in-, which is, if we were like Kerala Christians, you only married from within the Kerala Christian community, and so-, in her case, we're completely happy with the choice she has made. And we-, got acquainted with him and got to know a lot of things about him through the period of acquaintance,

which made us feel about him the way we would about a son. Ahm... Our second daughter is very career-oriented and-, to her marriage is not one of the top priorities unless she came across the right person and-, so it made sense career-wise. If not, she would study for the next few years and then marry, or not marry. She's not sure right now, but-, and she too-, she has many friends among young men and young women and she goes out with her friends and is perfectly responsible and leads a very clean moral life.

RV: She recently went to India. What drew her to India-, considering she's born and brought up here?

MM: Ahm... one of the reasons she wanted to go to India for a few months was that she has always been interested in the medical field. And also in maternal and child health. I would say, and also in under-privileged societies. So she wanted to go and volunteer in one of the mission hospitals where one of our cousins was the chief doctor-, ahm... and she wanted to have a hands-on contact with medical life. A second reason was that when she was in Chapel Hill, she came across many young Indian girls in SANGAM, who were culturally much more advanced than she was, in the sense, they knew so much about India, they spoke some kind of Indian language fluently. So she felt that culturally she needed a little more information-, or a little more-, something-, contact! And so she decided that this trip would help re-acquaint herself to her roots.

RV: So this ties in with what you were saying that as the girls-, or at least as your younger daughter grew older, that there was a need to somehow get back in touch more with her Indian heritage-? Even though she's grown up American?

MM: It was also that among-, in her work environment—her part-time work environment—there were people from other countries who felt passionately about their own countries, and so she would come home and say to me-, ahm.... What is it that draws people to a certain country? How does that kind of attachment develop? And-, so, she then-, kind of figured that she could go back and learn about our society and our culture, and that would be something that would enrich her own heritage.

RV: With you older daughter marrying an African American, was race an issue? Would it have been different had she been marrying a white man? I'm just curious-, if that played a role in some of your anxieties.

MM: Ahm... We would have-, yes, it did play a role, even though I would say that anyone who was not a Kerala Christian would have created the same amount of anxiety. I guess if he were an Indian, the anxiety would not have been so-, extreme, but now that these persons whom she considered attractive, were non-Indians, our anxiety knew no bounds at all. We thought it would end up in big catastrophe.

RV: Okay. Ahm... do you wish that your children knew some ndian language or-, would it have helped-, Susan, for instance, what she's interested in? What role does language and communication play within your family?

MM: Ahm.... Susan did take some Hindi classes while she was here and all the months she was India, she was taking language instruction and, so her contact with the villagers happened in Hindi. And yes, I do think knowing a different language—not in the sense of just making out what people are saying—but being able to communicate does add a wonderful dimension to your-, relationships. But our older girl, she

understands Malayalam and can read some of my letters in fact—letters that come to me, that is, but-, er.... To her it is not important.

RV: Just two more questions. One is something about your professional life, and your community there, and then lastly, about living in this area. How that experience has been, and if you would recommend this area to other immigrants coming from South-Asia? How would you compare it to other places in America-, based on what, you know, you might know through other people? So the first about-, a little bit about your professional life-, what you do? What kind of community you have there, and how you see yourself fitting in?

MM: I am right now an assistant professor in NC Central University, and I have a wonderful set of colleagues there and I have-, my classes are very enjoyable to me. I am a very fulfilled and happy professional woman. Ahm... my satisfaction comes-, not just from teaching, but also from the scholarly pursuits I'm able to pursue, and since I teach four courses, it requires strict planning and regimentation of time, and-, I enjoy the challenge of all of that. So, I see myself as a very happy and fulfilled professional

(END OF TAPE 6, SIDE A)

(START OF TAPE 6, SIDE B)

MM: Ahm... I socialize with my colleagues only rarely. And I seldom invite people home. Ahm.... This is because-, partly because it is so much easier to take people out [laughter] and that I do a fair amount-, I take people out to lunch and so on, when we need to get together. So-, ahm... otherwise, my life is a very tight, busy existence. Yeah.

RV: What about living in this area, geographically? How has that experience been-, as-, say, compared to a big city, a really small town? Would you recommend it to other South-Asians?

MM: I find this area ideal, for a number of reasons. One is, of course, that we are on-, we're surrounded by all these universities and-, intellectual life in this place is just beyond comparison. The variety and the richness of it. But a second thing is, while offering all these advantages of a university town, at the same it is not a big city and it doesn't have several of the disadvantages of a metropolis and, in that sense, I find this combining the best of both worlds-, this area. My friends who live in big towns-, big cities, often complain about the traffic and the busy-ness, and the sky-high cost of real estate, and so on, none of which are a factor here, and those in small towns will just complain for an opposite set of-, oh-, reasons like how much they have to drive to get to any place at all-, so on--.

RV: What about specifically for South-Asians? Do you think they have enough of a community out there?

MM: We have a large South-Asian community here. For example [clears her throat] the young people who need to-, who will speak in Hindi, the count was twenty

five hundred-- yeah--students who would require Hindi instruction, and this poll was taken to determine if-, certain department wanted to offer Hindi courses. So we have a huge number of South-Asians and--.

RV: You think () universities?

MM: Uh-huh. So, we have a huge community here.

RV: So someone can come and feel comfortable--.

MM: Yes. Provided they get into their particular network quickly.

RV: Do you think the networks are arranged according to religion, or caste, or region, or language that they speak, the professions ()?

MM: Ahm... they're strictly according to the states-, of origin. So they have a Talibu society, Kerala society, Tamil society, and so on. Once you get into that-, get under that big umbrella, there would be small satellite groups within it.

RV: Mary, you must be tired, but thank you so much for participating in this, and we really appreciate it and hopefully we'll have another chance to talk more with you. Thank you. [recorder is turned off]

(END OF INTERVIEW)