

Interview

with

Kanwal Rahman

July 15, 1999

by Rajika Bhandari

The Southern Oral History Program  
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**ASIAN VOICES**

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INTERVIEWEE: KANWAL RAHMAN  
INTERVIEWER: RAJKA BHANDARI

(BEGINNING OF TAPE 7, SIDE A)

RAJKA BHANDARI: Okay. Ahm... I'm just gonna start by, sort of-, you know, like we discussed, just asking you about-, ahm... sort of the background to your being here-, what brought you here-, and-, sort of, what-, what some of your experiences were right at the beginning. So-, ahm... why don't you tell me about when you came here, and-, why you--? Yeah! Why did you decide to come to the US?

KANWAL RAHMAN: The motivation behind it?

RB: Yeah. Yeah.

KR: Well, actually I came in August , twenty-first, nineteen-, ninety-one. That would be the exact date I landed at the JFK airport. But-, for my background, I came here for graduate studies at UNC Chapel Hill in public health and policy & administration. Prior to that, I had a government position with the Ministry of Health, Bangladesh, as a dental surgeon, working in public health-, work in rural areas. I had a dental surgery degree from Dhaka University, Bangladesh, and I just thought it would help my career-, further a lot if I had a Master's from a recognized university. I talked to my friends who had a lot-, er.... who were physicians-, were already doing their master's here in public health. One of them suggested that UNC has a very good program, considering the out-of-state tuition rates, compared to other universities, and-, er... I thought I'd apply. They accepted, and the other places I applied was Ann Arbor

Michigan. They had accepted there too, but North Carolina being warmer, I decided to come here. I had no clue what I was coming into, just that I was accepted and I'm going. And-, er... my background was such that-, er... I really wasn't-, expecting any kind of independent work apart from education. I wasn't mentally prepared for living alone and-, and-, er.... Doing everything alone with very little help. But I came—and the first semester was terribly hard—I landed in-, within a week I decided I'm going back. There's no way I'm gonna complete it. And-, er.... I had made up my mind, and then-, talked to my father pretty often asked him and he said that, "well, finish the semester. You cannot-, you have to give a try to a country before you can leave it—at least three-four months". So I just did it. I stuck to the semesters, not really liking it, very depressed. I by that-, I mean, the first three months I had no contact with any other sub-continental, or Bangladeshi person. So-, ahm.... I really felt like an alien-, till a professor of mine introduced me to another professor who taught in Duke, and-, ahm.... I got to know my fellow community member.

RB: So-, so you came in ninety-one--.

KR: Ninety-one--.

RB: Did you-, when you were on your way here, did you ever imagine you would be here—what—eight years now?

KR: When I was in the plane, I already--, had second thoughts. Why am I flying off the ground that I know very well? Why am I leaving the family, and the support and the-, ahm... let's just say the ease of living and comfort of something known-, for something totally unknown.

RB: Yeah...

KR: And then, I guess I answered that-, I said it's maybe-, it's my wanderlust, and-, if I don't make it, fine, I'll come back. But I never imagined I would stay eight years. And, I think, after the third year of living here I decided that I will stay here and try to make a life of mine here. Prior to that, I was going to go back home, and I was actually very determined.

RB: So, right at the point where you felt made that decision of-, I'm going to be here and not go back, was it more about America, or was it more about Bangladesh? Do you-, do you see what I'm trying to say-, was the decision more about because you wanted to live in America, or was it more about that "I don't want go back to Bangladesh"?

KR: My heart still wants to go back to Bangladesh. That's where my home is, and I think, America will always be a home—a second home—but never my first home. Ahm... to be very honest, the reasons are far more deeper and very personal. The reason I decided to stay back was-, sort of, a stubborn decision making that okay, I came here-, I got my degree. If I go back home-, there are a lot of expectations-, not from my immediate family, but around--. "Oh, she couldn't make it in America".

RB: Right!.

KR: And-, er... that's one of the reasons I stayed back and as I was saying was I spent so much time already—four years. Might as well try to make the rest of it here. And-, er.... That was basically my motivation, otherwise-, the other—the second—thought was because of the global politics, America is a forerunner in-, er..... political power.

RB: Yeah.

KR: And-, er... Bangladesh has always had its political problems—this party coming in, and that party going out—lot of strikes, and I just thought if I could stay here, and make my life worth living, I might even be able to do something in public health there. Maybe from the-, er.... Country's capital, like D.C.--.

RB: Right.

KR: Make--, make our policies--.

RB: Yeah. Right. Right. [pause] So I was next gonna ask you what you consider your home to be now, and why-, and I think you've already--.

KR: Answered that!

RB: Yeah. So-, okay. So you at all interact with-, what you would consider, sort of, your community here, or-, what would the term "community" even mean to you-, here in this context, in America?

KR: I believe that the community feeling is very strong among most Bangladeshi's and they-, interact very much with each other, and-, er.... Because most of the people who are from Bangladesh over here in Chapel Hill, Raleigh/Durham areas, are either going to college, or studying their master or higher studies or working in a field relevant to their studies--. I, per se, have not been much in touch with my community, only because there are certain limitations right now—not having a car, not having the time—not being in my field of work yet, as I wanted to be--.

RB: Okay.

KR: And-, er.... That--.

RB: But you feel that they as a community are quite open to that. They-,  
Otherwise there's a lot of interaction between, sort of, other Bangladeshi's who-, you  
know--.

KR: There is! There is a very strong--. Because they celebrate their national  
holidays among themselves, or a Saturday--. So-, er... the communities are pretty strong.

RB: Okay. [pause] Okay--. Do you interact a lot with-, er.... Americans, as in  
friends, as well as American families?

KR: I-, do interact with a lot of American friends and I think-, ahm... to tell you  
the truth I have-, because of my work and because of the way I'm living my life right  
now, I-, I interact more with Americans than any of my community members, and-, er....  
But this families-, I never had much of a chance, apart from my older sister's in-laws,  
who are Americans and-, maybe on an odd Christmas I'd go out and have-, to Chicago  
and have dinner with them, or spend Christmas with them. But otherwise, all of-, all of-,  
er... people I interact with are Americans, and they are friends.

RB: Uh-huh. So-, er... Could you talk a little bit about your experiences about that  
for-, I mean, just to give you an example, when I first came to this country, I really  
struggled in my first year-, because I found that-, er... I just felt I had no friends, and it  
took me about a year to adjust to this culture and to realize that very often friendship-, the  
way we understand friendship in the Indian community is a little different from the  
concept of friendship understood by a lot of Americans. So, once I got over that, I found  
that I had a lot of American friends, so-, just using that as an example, what have some of  
your experiences been? And have they, sort of, largely been positive, or negative, or  
mixed?

KR: Ahm... Well, I had a very hard time the first year too, only because I thought that-, you know, the-, the friends I met at graduate school, on a-, on the whole they were very open, and they were all very open to me and-, and I was invited to a lot of parties and-, er.... Like happy hour and hanging out. But maybe because I was new in the country and I wanted to retain myself in my culture and I-, was staunch about that, so I didn't do that much. But now I have friends, I would say, from all walks of life, from bus drivers to cafeteria workers to sometimes, even people-, who ask money in the streets--.

RB: Yeah.

KR: I pass them every day. I've lived in Chapel Hill for eight years. I more or less see the same people. Friends are friends as long as you take them on their basis, on their face values, but yes—I have learnt to not-, not to expect the kind of depth I had as friends--. Of course when you are younger your feeling of friendship and ideas of-, er.... Closeness and bonding with people are much more stronger. Because of the busy-ness of life as you grow older, you realize that friendship-, you have to take as they are on the face value and not expect or demand more--. [pause] I don't really have a hard time with-, er... making friends or-, but I do feel that I have-, still have to explain a lot about myself. Even close friends of mine and I still feel that there-, are certain things that makes me feel I am-, one of them but I'm still an outsider.

RB: Yeah. Yeah. Sure.

KR: That is-, er... that's the feeling, and I have worked in, like, you know-, places like retail and all, where all the associates are very friendly, and -, we have great times. Sometimes we even go out now, you know, when we have time to watch the movies with this friend or that friend, but-, er...



RB: There's always that one final barrier?

KR: That one final barrier and-, it hasn't--. I don't know, it isn't-, anything to do with race or people, it's the-, I think it's the American--, American-ness. With African--. I have very good African American friends and I have very good-, er..... ahm.... White American friends and, for both of them I have felt that I am close only to a certain extent, but of course, my expectations of very closeness is different from the expectations of-, of a, per se, an American person.

RB: Exactly! And I think that's, sort of, what I was saying earlier, and that's the same thing that I struggled a lot with that-, er... I was very frustrated initially, because I expected that they would expect the same out of a friendship that I would, and so once I got to the point where I realized that that wouldn't be the case, I was actually able to make some good friends.

KR: Okay.

RB: Yeah. But that's still-, that's still a concern, but then I had to tell myself this is a different world, it's a different culture, and I just have to accept that.

KR: True.

RB: Yeah.

KR: It's a more self-, er... more independent culture and I guess independence is taught from the very childhood, which we are not taught, but thrown into. Even at the ripe age of twenty five or twenty six, we come to graduate school, so--.

RB: Yeah.

KR: Then you have to learn to do it all over again on your own. There's no teaching.



RB: In fact, that's really interesting you mention independence because very often when I've tried to, in my mind, analyze the differences between the Indian culture—even the South-Asian culture at large—and the American culture, one thing is that I feel that in the US, what's considered a major-, handicap—a personal handicap—is actually an asset in our cultures and that-, dependence is strongly encouraged in all South-Asian cultures. That it's a social value and it's encouraged and in the US, in contrast, it's something that's discouraged and looked down upon.

KR: Yes.

RB: And that's across all generations, so I mean, that presents-, to me at least presents a very interesting conflict.

KR: Conflict in cultures--.

RB: Yeah. And expectations. I'm gonna pause this right here and just check very quickly that this is working.

[Recorder is turned off and on]

RB: Okay. So, we are continuing and-, ahm.... Again, this is Rajika chatting with Kanwal Rahman. So, we're going to continue talking. Ahm.... [pause] I'd like to ask you a little bit now about your family and your community back home, and if you could talk a little-, share a little bit about that and-, er... how you keep in touch with them, how you feel about the fact that you've been here all this time, and they're back there and-, sort of, how have you-, how have you struggled with that and-, sort of, reached a--.

KR: Reached a--.

RB: A level of acceptance in your mind that this is okay, this is how you want it to be.

KR: Well, let's say that-, [clears her throat] Oh, I come from a family of five sisters and no brothers. In an Asian culture where, usually brothers are-, are an important part of the family and not having a male member in the family, the only role model we ever saw was dad. And my dad was a very different kind of a person. He wasn't a nine-to-five worker. He wasn't an engineer, he wasn't a doctor, he was--. He was a very prominent movie star, actor, director, producer, and writer. But a person who was also physically handicapped. Being such a person's daughter, being part of all that, and also-, being-, trying to grow up as a-, you know, as my mother would say, grow up like everybody else, go to school, excel in studies, and focus only on studies, and nothing creative! Ahm... I think we tried to manage to do all that and-, motivation was-, everyone's going out to do higher studies. Well, so I came for higher studies for that. But-, ahm..... as you were saying that-, ahm... staying away eight years—which of course was my personal decision. They-, they wanted me to come back. How I have managed to accept that, being away from them eight years, not being able to go home--. The only way I can communicate with them is a-, through the telephone, which I do about once a month and-, er... that takes some of the edge off the craving to hear their voices and-, er... to tell you the truth, I don't think I have ever really accepted the fact that I have-, I have spent eight years away from my family, because in our culture family means a lot and-, er... because my father had-, had two strokes since then. I just felt that I have spent valuable time away from him and not been of service for him. And these are the issues that sometimes are deep back in my mind that-, er..... after all, all life is finite, and if-, er.... If I don't spend some of it with my close ones when they need me, what is there--? What will I have to look back on that okay, I have done my duty, and all. That's

the only issue that I have regrets over, apart from my-, er.. apart from that-, I'm quite adjusted to my way life that I'm living now, and-, er.... I don't think I will ever be adjusted to the fact that I have—eight years or ten years or how many years I've spent away from them.

RB: Yeah. I thin--. I think, that's a--, I mean, that's something I really appreciate that-, that it's very rarely that one comes to terms with that sentiment. It's just something you accept as part of living here.

KR: That's true--.

RB: Or living anywhere else, I guess, in another country away from your home. That it's--, ahm.. there's never that point where you say, I accept this and this is-, fine with me!

KR: Fine with me. That never is there--.

RB: It's never fine. You just keep doing things that-, that'll--.

KR: That you feel that you have to do-, do what you have to do right now, but in the back of your mind there's--, something in your mind tells you that-, spending time with your family, working there, and-, er.... If anything happens to my dad—God forbid!—then I'll not have any regrets. Okay, I've spent-, I did--. I was of service, and now that part is gone.

RB: Yeah. Definitely. [pause] Do you think that that sense of community that you had back in Bangladesh is reflected here in any way? In the life that you live?

KR: I would say there's no resemblance to what the life I left-, lived back home. Ahm... Even the sense of community--. Sure, I was a newly graduated dental surgeon, but I was still living with my parents and I had-, ahm..... relations distant and close,

dropping in all the time. You're having interactions of community festivals, like your Eid festivals--, your-,er..... ahm..... I mean, Muslim festivals and Hindu festivals wherever everyone goes regardless of any religion. Even the Christmas holidays have far-, far more meaning--. Had far more meaning there, because you have so many Christian friends, you were invited out--. Here, more or less, it has been isolated because her, more or less, people spend time with-, with their own families and not go out of their way to invite-, outsiders for the family-, er.... Reunions during Christmas or Thanksgiving, and-, er.... There the life was more protected. Here the life is totally independent. I'm responsible for-, any kind of-, er.... Let's just say, any kind of negative-, er.... Situation. I'm always-, I always have to calculate I have enough time, whether I should be there, whether-, waiting for the bus at this time in-, Durham, for example, at this time, isn't safe, because-, where--. Those are the things that we never had to worry about, because there was someone or the other always with us.

Independently--. Independence is fine, but when a lot of your independence is taken away by doing stuff that-, you really--, need to spend time on concentrating on yourself or your creativity, which I have the time there, I don't have here. I have to cook meals-, full blown meals after I come back from work at nine-thirty, I-, cook an clean on my day off, and-, er... whatever time I have left after that, I usually spend time either reading or-, or trying to improve-, the self, and that's-, and I guess by the time you come to this stage in life, that becomes a very enormous priority.

RB: Yeah. Certainly. Yeah. [pause] Ahm.... One of the things that's really interested me about this project that we're involved in—Asian Voices—ahm... when we initially, sort of, conceptualized this whole project, one thing that really interested me

was how people have changed as individuals, after having come to this country, and not just as individuals, but-- just from my own interaction with a lot of South-Asians, and this is true even for myself—I find that it's not just an individual change very often, but it's also tied to gender. And what I find is-- and I speak more from the Indian perspective-- that Indian men and women go through very different experiences when they come here, and that they evolve very differently in-, and to me perhaps, that's one of the most fascinating aspects of this project that we're doing. And I was wondering if you could talk a little about: a) how you feel you've changed as an individual, and b) how you've changed as a woman? You know, if you would feel comfortable talking about that, how this culture has changed those two things for you, if at all.

KR: Well, of course, eight years in a culture without going back home periodically like a lot of-, er..... my friends from Bangladesh do, or have the lucky opportunity to do so. I didn't have that. It has changed me a lot. It has made me more reflective. It also could be-, er..... something to do with the fact that you're more alone, and-, and it's not-, er.... And most of your decisions you make alone, most your strivings you're doing alone. You may have friends, but they're not with you at night when you're going to bed, in the next room, like your parents were and the rest of your four sisters were. So, you don't have that feeling of security, and-, er..... how it has evolved as-, me as a woman, I realize strengths in me that I didn't think eight years back that I have. I would say I've matured at a faster rate, regardless of the fact that from your twenties into early thirties there is a growth change and you are reflective, because of the decade-, er.... Change. But-, er... it has made me mature before-, somehow, I wouldn't say about all of South-Asia but-, I don't know, in Indian cultures-- regardless whether it's Pakistan, Bangladesh,

or India— ahm... girls, or daughters of relatively upper middle-class families, or upper class families-, are sort of encouraged to be spoilt and dependent. I wouldn't use the word "spoiled", but I will use the word "dependent". You are not allowed to drive, because your father forbade you, so you come to United States not being able to drive. You can't-, er... you can't go out and do grocery shopping, because you've never done it, so you have to learn that. You have never cooked in your life because somebody had always cooked—whether it's your mother, or whether it was somebody, and you were-, you were just--. So, those are the things that you learn very fast. How to be on your own footstep, and also, not to expect the world to do it for you, or give it to you. And I would say that for a long time—maybe the first couple of years—I was very upset that--, I chose to stay here, but I didn't have what I-, what I have from home, meaning I wanted a-, I wanted both worlds at the same time.

RB: Right.

KR: And that--. I think, one thing that happens is, is a continental girl or South-Asian girl stays here alone—I'm not saying with the support of a husband—it's a whole different story than someone who come here with her husband who already has a job and she's a housewife here, and--. Er....

RB: Oh, yeah. I know exactly what you mean and I agree with that and when I posed that question to you, I was talking exactly about those people. People like you and me, who come here as single, independent people and not already in a relationship, because I think if you change-, if at all you change, that change is going to be very different if you come here as part of--.

KR: With a spouse.



RB: Yeah, with a spouse, as opposed to coming here alone and, sort of, navigating your way--.

KR: Navigating your way around--. And then finding the best way of-, er.. dealing-, and then learning to also respond the way--. You end up learning to respond the way they expect you to. Not necessarily giving up your -, identity, but basically, you end up being-, er... behaving and acting in a way that is more common with Americans, and that's also giving out the image that you're very confident and mature, and responsible, which develops anyway, by the time you're eight years. But Inside, you can still be insecure, regardless of the fact that you have developed all these other aspects, too. The feeling of insecurity as a single Asian woman in America, for the future, or for anything or-, you know, the fact that we don't have a support system—is there.

RB: Yeah. Let me, sort of, ask you a related question, and this is-, it's a little personal, so if-, if you say you do not want to address it, that's fine, but just delving into this idea a little more. Do you feel--? I mean, coming from a very patriarchal, male-dominated society, like India, Bangladesh or Pakistan, do you feel that being in this culture has changed your expectation of relationships between men and women?

KR: Tremendously! But not totally to the point of equality. I-, er... a lot of my American friends find me ext-, not extremely-, pretty liberated-- even by American standards, but I explain it to them that that's not liberty, that's basic human rights as a-, as a-, as a human being, as an individual. If I-, but--.

RB: Could you give an example?

KR: Example, like--. Ahm.... For example, I have a--. Oh, this a sergeant I-, who works at the place that I work at and-, we make conversation, and he says well, what



would you do--? Er..... I said well, if my husband goes out so many hours a day and with his friends, then he shouldn't mind if I also go out with my friends so many hours as long as I know-, he knows where he goes. If I can cook and clean after I come back from work, then I expect my husband—regardless whether he's American or India, or Bangladeshi—to come and help me with the same, and-, and-, and then-, er..... because-, you know, otherwise it gets too much for one single person. Then he-, then that person—maybe because he was in his forties, or late forties—he says you're very liberated, you know, even by American standards. A southern girl from these parts wouldn't--, say that, or expect that. I said-, I said I don't believe that. Anybody educated, or anybody who has some feeling of independence already established within their personality, would expect that, regardless of where you-, er... he she is from. And-, ahm..... patriarchal family is fine, but I guess it's the feeling of insecurity and being used to a patriarchal society, I still assume that it's the male's—which I don't see in America all the time—to look after the family or household, because that's the role that had always been playing from the very beginning. Even from-, ahm.... Pre-historic times. The men went out and hunted and brought the food home, and the women did the nurturing and the cooking, or whatever, grinding--. If you see those roles-, those roles haven't really changed and I-, hundred percent do not believe that-, you know, that-, it's fifty-fifty--. Okay, it's fifty--. If you're earning well, fine. But still it's the male's role to take care of the wife. Ahm... and be there for support--, and you know, be the major supportive role. If not financially, but even emotionally-, er..... but as an emotional stalwart-, I mean, he has to be there. And I don't believe in single mothers, or single parents bringing up--. If it happens, it's very hard work for the mother, but usually--. I mean, it's just not--.

RB: It's not something you would opt for, but if--.

KR: But if it happens, I would probably do my best to rear the child the best, but I could never even visualize myself as a single mother.

RB: Out of choice.

KR: Out of choice! Exactly. [pause]

RB: Okay, let's see. So, this stuff doesn't apply to you, because you don't have children, so--. [laughter]

KR: Right.

RB: But is that something you ever think about? I mean, now that you have been here eight years, I mean, I-, I don't even know if you ever plan on having a family but, if you do, is-, is that-, is that something you think you think about in the future?

KR: All the time.

RB: Bringing kids up--.

KR: All the time.

RB; in a culture that's different from what you grew up in?

KR: I've always wanted to have a child ever since I was sixteen--. [laughter]  
because I'm crazy about babies. I don't know-, to me they represent-, I don't know, they seem creatures from another space, or-, out of space. They're not-, er... adult human beings, their size and shape. But anyway, I didn't have the opportunity for-, to have a child of my own, because I'd like to be—if I bring a child only when it's completely-, when I have a good stable financial status and all that—but I do think, that if I brought up a child in the United States, would I really, how would I deal with it. I could put him to public school, but he'll learn a lot of things that I, sort of, didn't grow up with. And, even

though I'm a child of the eighties, I still would not agree with a lot of things. My other thought was, if I was affluent, I would probably send him to a boarding school—maybe in India or Bangladesh—where my mother or someone is around-, or an aunt to take-, keep a check on that-, child, whether it's a boy or a girl--.

RB: I'm laughing, because my mother keeps telling me that's what I should do, because I went to a private boarding school in India, and I went to the same school she went. And so she keeps telling me this, that if you decide to settle in the US and have kids, just send them over to India and I'll send them to the same boarding school.

KR: It's only because I think-, er... I'm proud of my culture. I mean, there's a lot of things that are very good with America But I-, I-, I-, I don't feel the need to be a totally different person and entity, and my children coming to a different entity and saying that oh, I don't know. I've never been to India, or I can't speak Hindi or Bengali. It's just part of-, I think, it's a part of the human ego to continue as who you are.

RB: Sure.

KR: And I would--. That's what I thought, if I was affluent, send my child to a very good boarding school in India. Of course, my mother has to have access every now and then, because I think a child away from-, er... any kind of maternal affection for long, doesn't have a healthy upbringing-, mentally.

RB: Yeah. Definitely. [pause]

KR: But the child will come back for college. When he's strong enough-, mentally.

RB: Have the best of both--.

KR: Both worlds--.

RB: Education systems, so to say. Yeah. Ahm.... [pause] just sort of a general question about this-, sort of, geographic area, in terms of South-Asian immigrants living in Chapel Hill and Carrboro, do you think-, do you think that these places in general are supportive environments for people from our culture-, and-, er.... If they are, why do you think they are, or if not, why not?

KR: I think the Research Triangle Park Area, Raleigh/Durham, Chapel Hill-, is a good area for Asians to come in. Only because some of the best universities are situated in this area. Duke University, UNC-, this-, pioneering research going on in these universities, as well as Research Triangle Park, and I do believe a lot of Asians will keep on coming to this area—South-Asians—mainly-, and a lot of different-, people from different countries of the world, and -, er... that will make this area cosmopolitan and which is what Asians or any other continental person will need to be-, to feel-, er... not out of place. But to be at place--. And then, this is the area that is growing in that way. Ahm... I have done some research all around North Carolina in collecting data for the dental school and for the health promotion/disease prevention, and it was actual data in real clinical and public health situations where, you know, you don't have a very sophisticated equilibrium system and all that. I do realize those other areas would be a little more harder for Asians to adjust, only because those areas are not equally acquainted with foreigners and-, er... anywhere human beings will feel differentiated at, they'll feel uncomfortable. Otherwise the Research Triangle Park would be my choice to stay here, if I stay forever in North Carolina.

RB: Right. Ahm.... [pause]. Another question just occurred to me, and this is, sort of, like a concluding question and I don't really have this on a list or anything, but

hearing you talk just occurs to me that, do you feel that the American experience has made a difference to how South-Asians from each of the different South-Asian countries, and then different communities within those countries-, how they respond and react to each other. Do you think that's-, that has changed? That being in America, and being through the American experience has changed that?

KR: I do believe that whatever differences in their countries—and you have communal differences everywhere—and you see it and read it in the papers all the time, but I have a feeling, and just observing and just by being with people, or just the way I feel every time I see a South-Asian-, ahm.. doesn't matter if he's from Burma or Sri Lanka and, you know, and I can just tell that he's from South-Asia, I feel immediately bonded and I also feel that the other person bonds because they have a common basis of-, if not language, a common cultural basis-, common-, food habit basis, you know, and that-, that sort of—those are very strong aspects of a culture, food and other cultural aspects of-, living and family life—that I think makes us feel more unified together, and the American aspect is that being in America—I mean, I may be here, I may-- a lot of friends say you're very Americanized—but I don't perceive how Americanized am, because-, I don't feel as American as them. I'm not as American as apple pie, because I wasn't born or raised here, but I feel the bonding immediately with any South-Asian person I see, regardless of the background.

RB: Yeah.

KR: So I think that makes it a stronger, homogenousness over there as a whole, instead of-, er... separate pieces of a pie-. You know.

RB: Yeah. That's good to know. Is there anything else you want to talk about, I mean, in general, relating to this--. Ahm.... You know, what we've been talking about. This project, or questions, or anything else that strikes you that I haven't covered that you think would be important to-, to this interview?

KR: I guess you never you never asked how happy I was here. I guess you'd also ask every Asian, however successful, how deeply satisfied, or completely satisfied, and that peace in-, with this inner self and the outside that one is.

RB: Right. Right. Yeah! Didn't ask you that!

KR: Ahm... And I've-, I've had the same question. I mean, it's not a study, it's just that I like to see how different are people's responses from my inner feelings and I've asked everyone from someone who owns a grocery store, to some of the professors of-, er.... Duke University, or from Bangladesh, and--. Every one of them seems to have some kind of a feeling that if things were different at home, and if things were-, if the social conditions and the-, er... situations were different, if there were not so much corruption on grassroots level, in places like Bangladesh and India—and there are a lot of corruption, to be very honest--.

RB: Oh, absolutely!

KR: Here, it is there, but it's so much in a higher circle that you don't see it because America is a huge country. It's almost like a continent. You don't see it, but it's there. But as long as we don't see it, we see that it's not there--.

RB: Right.



KR: So-, ahm... I believe most of them would want to be home, if just situation was reversed. The same conditions existing there, job-wise, constitution-wise, political stability-wise, they'd rather be there.

RB: Yeah, and I guess that's true for almost any immigrant, because--.

KR: That's true.

RB: Yeah.

KR: That's --. Unless you're born and raised here—and I have met those, too—and, you know, they wouldn't, because you relate to your childhood experiences, till the age of sixteen or eighteen, the most in your life, and you keep on relating to them. Because even if when you say-, hear an old song-, I mean, sometimes I watch—it's funny, but it's twenty five years old, but I used to watch M\*A\*S\*H when I was thirteen—er... it's an all-American thing. It's an all-American medical team going Korea, but each time I watch M\*A\*S\*H, every time my heart gives a twist, because it reminds me poignantly of memories of sitting together, of-, of-, of ideals shared with class-mates. All those things come back. So M\*A\*S\*H, and a lot of stuff reminds you of that period.

RB: So, how were you folks watching M\*A\*S\*H when you were thirteen in Bangladesh?

KR: It--. They used to come--. I think it came in seventy-four.

RB: Hunh! Interesting. I don't know, we had any foreign serials on the Indian National Network. But I think in some ways Bangladesh--.

KR: Pakistan and Bangladesh had them--.

RB: Yeah. Yeah, they opened their market economies much earlier than India did.



KR: Because I used to watch, what-you-may-call-it-, the same series, remember, they used to show--.

RB: Three is Company? No!

KR: Yes. You know, Get Real Smart, ninety nine, you know? Get Smart and all the stuff. When I see that with Danny—he's American—he says, but--, ahm.... One thing he said that because I'm ten years younger than him, he says, "Oh, you're twelve years old. You are so much younger". Because he saw it twelve years before--.

RB: Right.

KR: But for--. It was the same period that they showed it in Pakistan and Bangladesh. So, it's funny that a lot of people say, "these things remind you of home?" I said, why--. They ask why, because of the Korean paddy fields? [laughter] I said no! It's not because of that, it's just the representation brings the memories, like--. I was listening to on the radio, Pinkfloyd-, er.....

RB: Brick in the Wall?

KR: Brick in the wall! Poignantly of my teenagehood when I was a little rebellious--.

RB: Yeah.

KR: Sneaking out to parties at--, in the evening, not telling dad where we were going.

RB: Yeah.

KR: You know, you were not allowed to go out. Ahm. At the age of fifteen or sixteen--. And that Pinkfloyd was on, and I was hearing that it brought back a flood of

memories. So, those things will always be there. So that means, your-, er.... Like, where you grow up in, the first eighteen years matters a whole lot for the rest of your life.

RB: Absolutely!

KR: You'll always reminisce about it, regardless of how happy you are anywhere else.

RB: So, are you happy? You haven't answered that question.

KR: [pause] No, I'm not. Maybe, I would have been--. But there are a lot of Asians here—not necessarily the fact that I'm in America—if I found-, if I had supported environment, I had a--. At this stage of my life, I'm looking-, you know, looking for more-, in just a career, and a good living. I'm looking for a meaning. Looking for a meaningful career which would give out, rather than take in. Like, you know, like public health, have a family. Those things are becoming more and more crucial as the years are going by.

RB: But that's not-, what you're saying is that that's not necessarily tied to being here, or being in Bangladesh. Right now.

KR: That's true. And I would define-, I guess I would define myself completely complete only when I have a meaningful career and a-, ahm... I guess a-, conducive home life and being able to step back into my country every two years. I think, right now, that is what I would strive as my ideal situation of living.

RB: Okay. Anything else?

KR: I was very honest. I had to say what I had to say, so I don't know if it would mean anything, but-, ahm.... When you asked these questions, I had to speak from my heart.

RB: No. That's-, that's exactly what we're looking for in this and-, ahm... like I said if at any point in this process, you know, if you're uncomfortable about something, we can always scrap it, we can-, whatever. But this is going to be anonymous. We are trying to get, really, people's honest reactions, and it's-, sort of, trying to bring them together to see themes across different interviews, and you yourself said, that if we were to go out and talk to other South-Asian which we're doing and we've done, a lot of the same themes are probably emerging that although people are materially satisfied, there's a certain longing for being back in their own countries. So--. Yeah, I really appreciate the honesty because that's what we're going for, and this will be completely confidential. So--.

KR: Oh, that's wonderful. But, even if it isn't, I still would like to-, you know, say what is-, what's-, but I believe it is what I feel--.

RB: Well, thanks so much.

KR: You're welcome. It was a pleasure.

[recorder is turned off]

(END OF INTERVIEW)