

“Our Immigrant Story: South Asians in Illinois, 1945-1965”

Full Report

Summary

This oral history project is focused on a group of South Asians who lived in Illinois before the major wave of Asian immigration began in 1965. They are a little known community of pioneers who have made significant contributions to the building of America but whose story has never been told. They are a highly educated articulate group, eager to tell their stories, as seen in the interviews conducted for this project.

Thirty-three interviews were conducted for this project under the supervision of qualified researchers. Many of the interviews were conducted by relatives of the interviewees themselves, usually members of the younger generation. This report presents an analysis of those interviews.

A methodology section describes how the project was conducted, using community events to seek input from community members and elicit the involvement of volunteers, donors, and students from area universities.

The analysis is divided into the following sections:

- *General Profile of Immigrant Interviewees* describes the demographics of this group
- *Origins* traces the diverse backgrounds of the immigrants before they came to the U.S.
- *Coming to Illinois* identifies what drew the immigrants to Illinois, why they came, and why they decided to stay
- *The Journey* describes their arduous travel by boat in the days before commercial jets
- *The Early Days* reveals what it was like to be away from home, what measures the immigrants took to deal with their loneliness, and who were the people who helped them overcome their difficulties
- *Looking for a Place to Stay* places the Indians in turbulent times, squarely in the middle of the civil rights era, when they encountered issues of racism and prejudice, yet found ways to cope with them
- *Proud of their Achievements* showcases the contributions they made to their new homeland
- *Conclusion* is an attempt to summarize the significance of their immigrant experience.

•
Appendix 1 lists the questions used in the interviews

Appendix 2 lists the interviewees

Appendix 3 is a sample transcription in its complete, unedited form

Scope

The project undertook to collect at least 25 oral histories of South Asians who came to Illinois between 1945 and 1965. The interviews were to be recorded, transcribed, analyzed, and prepared for publication and archiving.

The project also undertook to engage community members and the youth, both South Asians and non-South Asians, in the collection and interpretation of the data.

This report will describe the process by which the above-mentioned objectives were accomplished. It will also present a summary analysis of the oral histories and show how they contribute to an understanding of immigration history.

Methodology

Since the project called for the continued participation of community members, all community events (held in January, February, June and August, 2006) were used as opportunities for obtaining feedback, recruiting volunteers and donors, publicizing the project, and giving individuals a chance to share their stories. Community events thus became part of the process for furthering the research.

The project was announced to the public via a news release in December 2005, and a letter to community members inviting them to a kick-off event on January 28th at the Indo-American Center in Chicago. At the event, participants gave their input on the draft oral history questionnaires, and referred new names for interviewing. Family members and student volunteers willing to conduct interviews were identified, and the interviewing process began, using the revised questionnaire. (Appendix 1.)

A second community event was held on February 25 in Downers Grove, hosted by two major donors. Participants identified more potential interviewees and volunteers, and gave suggestions on how to increase support and outreach.

The third major community event, held on June 19 in Oakbrook, was both a fundraiser and an opportunity for interviewers of the younger generation to talk about what they got out of the interview process. Personal stories from interviewers and interviewees touched the audience, inspiring them to give generously to the project.

Periodic presentations to university audiences (University of Illinois at Champagne-Urbana and Loyola University students) enabled the recruitment of students for conducting interviews and helping with transcription.

The final community event, held in conjunction with India's Independence Day observances at the Indo American Center on August 12, created historic connections for the pioneers and other immigrants. Activities, such as presentations by children of immigrants who interviewed their parents for the project, and creation of a timeline that connected immigrant arrival dates to historic events, made the oral histories come alive for the audience. Stories of isolation and discrimination, struggles and triumphs were shared. As one observer remarked, "the stories were at once personal and universal."

Instead of the estimated 25, the number of oral histories recorded amounted to 33. (A list of the 29 interviewees whose oral histories have been transcribed so far is included as Appendix 2.) Several interviews were videotaped. Twelve, or a third of the interviews were conducted by members of the younger generation, either relatives or university students. In one interesting case, the son who was interviewing the father was himself eligible to be interviewed, since he came as a teenage immigrant in 1963. Even as he was interviewing his Dad, he recounted his own experiences as a teenager in the pre-1965 period, thus adding a new dimension to the story.

Many of the interviewees promised to donate memorabilia which included a book in progress about the early days, the first suit ever sold by a custom tailor interviewee, old passports, tapes of old songs and LP records, newspaper recognitions, letters, articles in school papers, and photographs. When archival facilities become available in the community, there will be follow up with these interviewees to collect the donations.

Each one of the oral histories is unique and needs to be read in its entirety for the full flavor of the personal life that unfolds. But collectively, these oral histories also represent the experience of a group. So what follows is an analysis of the transcripts. It consists of a general profile of the interviewees, and a narrative that identifies some broad patterns. Woven throughout the narrative are quotations that capture the immediacy of the experience in the immigrants' own words.

Appendix 3 is the complete, unedited transcription of one interview, provided as a sample. It captures the full range of emotions that both father and son experienced as they relived their past.

The interviewees ranged in age from their mid-sixties to late seventies (born between 1927 and 1941). One person who came as a teenager was born in 1948.

Most of the interviewees came between 1952 and 1965, with the exception of one who arrived in 1945. This meant that most were in their early twenties when they arrived.

They acquired their green cards or permanent resident status in the mid 1960s when it became possible to do so. Most became US citizens soon thereafter, in the early 1970s, after waiting for the mandatory period. Only three of the interviewees retained their Indian citizenship until later. Two of them decided post 9/11 that it was safer to become US citizens while the third one, a woman, is seriously considering acquiring US citizenship now that she is collecting Social Security y (I feel I "owe America") and it is now possible to have dual citizenship in India.

13 were family interviews, which means both husband and wife were included in the same interview.

The number of women included in the interviews was 18. Five of the interviews were with women alone, and three of them came as single women to the US.

There was broad religious and linguistic representation in the group.

The religious breakdown of the interviewees is as follows:

13 Hindu, 7 Catholic, 6 Muslim, 2 Jain, and 1 Parsi

The native languages spoken by the interviewees included Hindi, Malayalam, Gujarati, Tamil, Sindhi, Urdu, Kannada, and Konkani. All of them spoke English, indeed most were fluent in English even before they came to the US, thanks to their high level of education in India.

Origins

Most came directly from India, though many were born and had lived during childhood in pre-partition days in what is now Pakistan. One person recounted the trauma of fleeing from Pakistan, amidst the carnage of Partition in 1947.

- *Pitaji used to work for a revolutionary Gandhi and Nehru. He came to our house running. "Leave in 5 minutes, they're a mob of Muslims who are coming to our house, in that directio....they're killing everybody inside, all the Hindus." So we have 5 minutes to escape, whatever jewelry my mother could gather. I was down with a typhoid fever, so my brother Jagdish picked me up. We had a 1936 Chevrolet. And we jumped into the car, and all kind of people who climbed on top of the car to escape. And we had 30 people on top of the car. There were dead bodies all over. It was kind of sad.*

Many were from well-to-do families, though a few of the families had a more modest background.

- *It was a well-to-do family that I come from. And there was nothing that I couldn't hope or wish or desire that was not in my hands immediately. My father had lot of business with Japan and France and in our home, at lot of foreigners came.*
- *My parents were simple farmers.*
- *We were a middle class family, in Bangalore, India. Live in a modest house...just enough to survive. We were a very large family. It was an urban life, but with exposure to village because my mother was born in a village and her parents were in a small town.*
- *I grew up in a rural environment. My father was a landlord. Lots of people surrounding our area depended (on us) for their livelihood, for jobs, they used to come to our place and used to work in our farms.*

One immigrant came from Hong Kong, another from East Africa.

Coming to Illinois

Almost all (except one) had had at least an undergraduate education in India. Most came on student visas, with scholarships to pursue graduate studies in engineering. The universities that received the Indian students were Loyola University, University of Illinois at Chicago, DePaul University, and University of Chicago. One immigrant came on a business visa. Some others studied medicine or sociology or literature. Many of them, after pursuing brief engineering careers on training visas, moved on to other fields

as academics or businessmen. Among the interesting career paths chosen by immigrants were: custom tailor, librarian, social worker, and real estate broker.

They chose Illinois because they had contacts here. Someone knew a Jesuit priest at Loyola, others had relatives, yet others came because this is where they were offered scholarships or found jobs. The very first arrivals attracted others that followed and gave them a place to stay or supported them in some other way.

The intention for most of these early arrivals was to study, work for a few years on a training visa, and then return to India for good. Immigration was not an option for them at that time since it was not until 1965 that the laws were relaxed to allow them to stay.

- *I came here to pursue a dream. I could only come as a student to pursue studies. I was resigned to going back since there were no immigration quotas.*
- *I had full intentions of going back to India after school. I applied to the University of Illinois because I had an aunt in Chicago. I decided to stay after meeting (my American wife) and graduating and getting a good job.*
- *I thought I'd come to America, have fun getting my Ph.D. and return after a long vacation.*
- *I was very much encouraged by the employment level I received from Johnson controls. That was to train me and send me back to India after my training. That fulfilled my desire to go back to India, so I was very enthusiastic about the whole thing.*

Still, there were some among them who were determined to make the United States their permanent home, especially those who had children and wanted to give them a brighter future.

- *I got a scholarship at DePaul University. I planned to go back after studies. I then thought of bringing over my wife so she could also see this beautiful country. The kids came in 1967 and then 1968. They were in gifted programs, doing very well in schools. They wouldn't get this kind of opportunity in India, so I decided to stay for the kids' education. That is the main reason.*
- *I came to improve quality of life for me and my children. I planned to stay. I didn't want to go back.*
- *Because at that time, our relatives and friends think I am kind of crazy. Because I was already well-established in the seminary high school as a teacher....I convinced (my wife's brother.) I am not going kind of fancy dreaming, but this is good for my children, for their future, for my family.*

Several did return to India after their studies, took up jobs there, but came back to the U.S. They were frustrated in their jobs in India, and got new opportunities to return to the States, this time with a green card, or the promise of one.

- *I returned to India and wanted to do poultry farming but my dad (who was a doctor) wouldn't support it, so I returned to the States.*
- *My visa expired and I had to go back to India. I was lucky to get a job at a post-graduate institution in Chandigarh. But I was not satisfied....I jumped at the first chance to return to the US.*

For the single women, coming to the US sometimes meant overcoming the fears and resistance of family members and following their ambitions.

- *My mother didn't like the idea, didn't think I could manage on my own. I wanted to get away...from the tension in the family. I don't know why, but I wasn't content.*
- *Being a primary school teacher (in India) was just not good enough for me.*
- *I think that everybody in our immediate family, and also some of our acquaintances and friends, all thought my parents were very foolish, sending off a single girl to the United States, because they just felt I should be married. ..., but my parents were forward looking. They thought it was important for us to study, to do what we wanted to do.*

And then there are those stories that defy categorization....

- *When I came to Chicago, I remember my very first evening when I stayed at the Sheraton on Michigan Avenue. The next day I was all dressed up (in a suit and tie) and went down to the restaurant for breakfast. When I came down, a hand came forward "Mayor Daley, welcome to Chicago." I didn't know what to say. This could never happen to me in any other place. So then I decided, Chicago is my town.*

They embarked on their journey, their heads filled with images of America from the movies or history books.

- *My idea of America at that time was Doris Day and Rock Hudson and Cary Grant.*
- *I thought of America as Utopia.*
- *I thought I would have enough money and life would be easy. I wouldn't have to work too hard. I didn't expect I would have to work and study at the same time.*
- *I had studied American history, so I had book information. Chicago was the beef capital, Detroit was for cars.*

The Journey

Most of the early immigrants came by boat. As one of them observed, commercial jets were not common until the early 1960s. The boat from India (either Cochin or Bombay) came via the Suez canal and took 23 to 27 days. Occasionally there were delays and multiple stopovers. Some were cargo ships that accommodated only a few passengers. Sometimes they traveled with a large group of students--as many as 60—at other times, an immigrant would be the lone Asian on board. The boats stopped in Southampton, England before proceeding to New York. One immigrant who came from Hong Kong traveled via Honolulu.

- *It took 26 days from Cochin to New York with stops in Aden and Italy...came with a group of Malayalis with scholarships to different places.*
- *I journeyed by boat to Marseilles, then overland to Paris, Dover, Southampton, London—8 or 9 days wait and on to New York in a luxury liner.*
- *I came by boat to New York—23-24 days. I had some friends on the ship who helped me get on the bus. I felt excited and confused.*

- *I was on a cargo ship for 27 days with one Punjabi and one Tamilian.*
- *I came by ship from Cochin to London, from London I also came by ship on Queen Elizabeth to New York. I was very excited before I landed. We saw the liberty statue and we had heard about it on the ship.*
- *I came alone. I was the only Asian in that ship which was an American ship. It was a cargo-cum-passenger ship. And I was very lonely in that ship. But every once in a while, a couple, two or three co-passengers, they would say Hello to me, and you know, talk to me. Had a lot of time. I would read. It took 31 days for me to get here. Normally it takes only 26 days. Five days we spent in Port Suez because we had an accident.*

The journey from New York to Chicago was invariably by Greyhound. Such a long bus ride was a novelty for the Indians and by the time they arrived in Chicago, many had used up a major chunk of their meager finances allotted by the government—ranging from \$100 to \$400. And they learned lessons along the way.

- *I carried my own steel trunk on my head. So I learned, as soon as possible, not to rely on anybody. Not very many people here available at low pay, so you have to be self-reliant.*
- *In some of the states we passed, we were shocked to see restrooms that said, “Whites only.”*

The early days

The Americans whom the Indians encountered when they first came had very little knowledge of India. They were friendly for the most part, and curious. Many had stereotypical images of India as a place with wild animals and no electricity.

- *People were not aware where India was on the map. They had never seen an Indian before. They were fascinated by the way I spoke British English.*
- *They asked if India was in Africa.*
- *We stood out on campus in our saris. There were very few Indian ladies, so we were sought after. People were attracted by my long hair.*
- *Some people thought we were Spanish. They had no clue what we were.*
- *Americans were very kind but I found them a bit impersonal. Students were very competitive, not unfriendly but busy doing their own thing. I was advised by a priest that I would be better off wearing a sari and be seen as an Indian than try to wear western clothes and be taken for a black.*

The initial experience for most Indians was an overwhelming feeling of isolation and homesickness, especially for those who had left behind their wives and children. There were financial hardships for students, and very few Indians with whom they could share their troubles.

- *I lost my Dad and cried myself to sleep for over a year.*
- *It was hard to leave behind my wife, two children and one on the way.... We longed to see the children and wrote letters every week. It was a psychological not a physical hardship.*

- *We couldn't even call home it was so expensive. We put our voices on tape and sent them back and forth. We missed not being able to share our children with grandparents.*
- *The hardest part was being a wife without the support of extended family.*
- *There were no Indians here. I didn't know anybody, any Indian, in Chicago....Slowly other Indians started coming in, six months later, some more students came and I happened to know them.*
- *Being a first time mother was totally frightening. I felt very lonely. Whenever my Mom or Dad would call (from India) I would burst into tears.*
- *You missed home-cooked food, your own people. Nobody helped you with anything. It was most frustrating.*
- *I missed going to an Indian temple, no Indian food, no Indian restaurant. I used to eat beans and rice in Mexican restaurants and dream that I was eating "dal-chawal"*
- *Whenever (my wife) would cook dal and sabzi and all that, I would go to the pizza place and ask them to give me a pizza without anything on top of it. And they were baffled. "Why would you like this?" They didn't realize what we were doing, using it just like naan or roti.*
- *As foreign students, we couldn't afford to flunk a course, we would lose our student status and face deportation. We got jobs easily but they would terminate us whenever there was a financial crisis so we had to keep looking for new jobs.*
- *The hardest part was not having enough time to study and work. Not enough money.*
- *The weather was simply horrible!*

But Americans also befriended the Indians. Through the YMCA and Foreign Students Associations, Indians were invited by host families to stay with them over long holiday weekends or share a special meal for Thanksgiving or Christmas. Some of those early contacts led to lasting friendships. Almost every interviewee could recall the names of professors, employers, neighbors and others who provided them valuable support.

- *The people I worked for as a student were very supportive. They became my friends. One of them gave me \$50,000 for a down payment when I went into real estate. Bankers helped us.*
- *Our professors were so nice to us, they'd invite us for dinners and Thanksgiving.*
- *Monsignor befriended me. His secretaries bought me clothes, taught me everything.*
- *Two people who made a strong impression were Saul Bellow and Richard Stern, both novelists. They saw me as a gifted writer and rescued me from the anthropological card catalog...*
- *People at Barker Chemical Company (where my husband worked) were very kind to me. We got support from our neighbors who played with our kids. One of them even gave my daughter free piano lesson because she had long fingers...*
- *All the engineers, all the secretaries, the management...they were very helpful getting them (my family) here. Even the tickets were purchased by the staff for them to come here. When they arrived at the airport, I had twenty people with me*

from the staff to receive them at the airport. Not only that, the company employees decorated my apartment, provided everything for their comfort, bought us a television set, some furniture and some clothing for them. And one of them...he came to our house to visit my children with four bags of toys.

But others remember being totally self-reliant.

- *I never wanted anybody to give me anything for nothing. If you call it a favor, I don't want it.*

Making a Living

At first, many of the students were prohibited from working, but at least one immigrant was not afraid to confront the authorities and demand permission to work.

- *I went to the immigration officer and told him, "You gave me permission and visa to come here. I have \$100. You think I can live on \$100? I'm paying \$30 for rent. So you should give me work permission."*

He did get permission. Others found some way to get part-time jobs so they could support themselves. These were usually jobs in retail or in the factory, making anywhere from a dollar to \$2.50 an hour. The jobs they took included working in a cafeteria, as a shipping clerk, wiring and soldering, front desk in a hotel, chef in a cafeteria, and nursing assistant. Once they graduated, most got jobs in their professional field and started making good money. A few stayed on in their first jobs until retirement. Others faced hurdles or encountered the glass ceiling.

- *I got an offer to work full time for \$9,500 a year, with a raise every year. I worked for 25 years with the company and traveled worldwide.*
- *My boss was excellent, he gave me promotions and raises. I ended up as VP and Chief engineer.*
- *My business (making custom made suits) thrived in Chicago, because of the extreme weather.*
- *I couldn't get an engineering job because Indians had a bad reputation of working for a few months and leaving. At my consulting work, if I criticized them, they said, "You foreigners tell us how to do things?" But my boss was supportive. He said, "Hey, he's come to help us. We called him."*
- *My first job as a student was in a factory. In my first engineering job, people were good to me but my accent was a problem. Working class Americans weren't as good to me.*

According to the American wife of one Indian immigrant,

- *He worked for 12 years as a Project engineer and realized it was a dead end job. He would get to a certain point and would never be promoted above it. So we bought buildings...and found we could make much more money managing that than working a 40 hour- week.*
- *I found it very hard to find jobs because of discrimination. Impression I got was all bank jobs were reserved for whites. People were always talking about the shortage of labor but when you went for a job or an apartment, that was taken or filled.*

Generally, interviewees said that they were treated fairly at work, and given fair wages. Some suspected that they and their Indian friends whom they were recommending were being hired because they worked hard for low wages, but they were prepared to overlook it because these were part-time jobs, and they were happy to get the work as students. The women did observe that they found it hard to get better paying jobs or were hindered in their career path.

- *I faced career hardships as a faculty wife and teacher. My husband's career rose. I made moves as his camp follower...always over or under-qualified for jobs...could not work outside the house...husband's emotional expectation was traditional.*
- *I observed that people with light-complexion from India had better chance.*

Looking for a place to stay

As students, the early Indian immigrants had housing provided for them, either in the dorm or in International House at the University of Chicago. When they moved out, either because they wanted to cook their own food or found it cheaper, they got together with other Indians and went apartment hunting. It was here that they had their first encounter with discriminatory practices that were institutionalized in the Chicago of the 1950 and 1960s. Even those who had never felt discriminated against in their jobs, experienced discrimination in housing, and those who had not experienced it themselves could easily remember hearing about the experiences of others.

For some Indians who were unaware of racism in the United States, this came as a shock. Some saw this as a problem between blacks and whites, and felt they were somehow caught in the middle. Even when they became targets of discrimination, they could find it in their hearts to move on and not become angry or embittered. This may no doubt be due to the feeling that this is not necessarily “their” problem, but it could also be a simple strategy for survival. Many respondents felt that this was a problem that existed largely in the south, and this was reinforced for them when they went traveling by road in the southern states.

- *I had a hard time finding a place (in Aurora) because when I went to look at a place, people look at my face and tell me place was already rented.... I think people thought I was black or Spanish or God knows what they were thinking.*
- *In Louisiana, when I was looking for my first place, one guy asked, “Don't Indians have a mixture of Negro and Chinese blood?”*
- *It was hard to find a house in a purely white neighborhood. When you call for an appointment, they say, Yes, you can come over, but when you go there, “I'm sorry, it's just rented.”*
- *We were perceived not at par with American white people. Not exactly like black people, but in between. We are not first class, we are second class, blacks are third class. ...I took a black friend when I was invited to a white family in Oak Park. He had never been in a white person's house. He was all excited. “Gee, they are very nice.”*
- *One of my fellow students from the south (of India) very dark, in Tulsa, was asked to sit in the back of the bus. I had to convince the bus driver he was not black.*

- *My brother came to America and was moving into his apartment. And I had checked out that there is availability, etc. And he told me there is no vacancy. And so he was really upset and he told me you must call and find out if it's really vacant. And I called and it was vacant. This was a really white suburb in South Holland.*
- *This one gentleman was returning to Florida and he sold his home to a black person. Overnight, the whole neighborhood turned black.*
- *The real estate agent wouldn't show me the house that I liked in a good neighborhood because he thought his clients in the area may object. My guess is that that was the reason.*
- *My application (for an apartment on Michigan Avenue) was rejected even though I had \$50,000 in the bank. A good friend, an attorney, called them and they gave me the place. Maybe he suggested a lawsuit.*
- *At the YMCA, when I went down for breakfast, they wouldn't serve me. "Do you mind if we serve in your room?" I knew why. They didn't want a colored person sitting in their cafeteria. Those kinds of experiences, I took with a grain of salt...The illiterate treated us differently from the literate.*
- *I only came to know there was so much prejudice and discrimination when I was looking for an apartment. This is right near Holy Name Cathedral area. Some people would say openly, east of State Street non-white people would not be allowed to rent. I was unhappy but I accept the reality. When I called for a number west of State Street, the landlady asked to come over but when she saw through the glass door I was not white she said "No room, no room" and wouldn't even open the door.*
- *When we took a long trip to Florida, as soon as we crossed the border of Virginia and Tennessee, we felt it. There would be a Vacancy sign in a motel but when we go there, there would be No Vacancy. We felt bad about that so what we started doing...you send the ladies. They knew what the sari was, they knew we were not black people, then they would give us a room.*
- *In those days, you would see the lines separating blacks and whites going to the bathrooms. We were always on the white side, I believe because of the saris, we were never challenged.*
- *I knew people in Crossroads (Student Center) were very involved in the civil rights movement. The leader of Crossroads went to Selma and marched there. Meetings and some violence associated with that. There was SNCC. We noticed that white people were more friendly towards us than towards black Americans. They sort of looked down on them and felt it was a waste to educate them.*
- *When we came to the north side (looking for apartments) we would give the deposit and suddenly they would return the deposit. They said, "No, no, the apartment is taken."*

Proud of their achievements

Despite all the hardships they went through, or perhaps because of them, the Indians were very proud of their legacy. Even though they were small in number, they felt they had played a key role in building a positive image of India and Indians by explaining their culture and their homeland to a largely ignorant population of Americans. They also felt

they had helped their own families and friends by sponsoring and supporting new immigrants. Their own loneliness and need for organized support had led them to form the first associations in the community—religious, professional, and national—which were now a great resource for new generations of Indian immigrants.

- *We set up organizations—cultural, political—and founded institutions. Set up the Indian American Forum for Political Education and testified before the Senate Committee on Immigration against taking away the fifth preference, bringing brothers and sisters.*
- *We started religious groups, built temples and restaurants, and today our children don't miss these things.*
- *We explained India to others, they had preconceived notions that India was a jungle, we showed them it was civilized, had big cities, good education.*
- *We worked hard, gave our heart and soul. We had something to do with the prosperity that America saw.*
- *We contributed in terms of education—hundreds of thousands of professors and teachers and engineers and doctors.*
- *My husband wrote 25 books. I was his first reader and helper for 25 years.*
- *Wherever we worked, we held our heads high. We did not beg, nobody gave us a gift.*
- *We created a good impression, so much goodwill. Now people assume, if you're Indian, you're smart. Because we were all college graduates, we established a good reputation. Even if they see a dumb Indian, they still think you're smart. They think Indians pay their bills on time, don't commit crimes, so we deserve credit for that. We provided safety net for those who came after—my older and younger brothers—being able to sponsor your family and be self-sufficient.*
- *We started Indian Students Associations. I started NETIP (Network of Indian American Professionals) in 1971 in Chicago. Now it has 25 chapters, it is international, in Canada and England.*
- *We are good citizens.*
- *We are fully supportive of poorer Indians who are coming in, so they get accepted.*

After more than four decades of living in the Chicago area, these early immigrants are able to see why they decided to stay and why they are still here. They talked about those days and why they were meaningful.

- *My life is better here than in India. Even though I didn't lack for anything in India. Just being free and independent, but also having family here, I don't think I could have lived here if I were all alone.*
- *It was exciting to see, learn new things, meet new people.*
- *We had good friends and family, get-togethers. People don't interfere and we don't have to account to anyone. People mind their own business.*
- *People were very friendly, helpful, lots of things were available. Gas, everything was cheap.*
- *I had freedom. I misused it at times, had no responsibilities in my youth.*

- *If you can make it in Chicago, you can make it anywhere. We were attacked, terrorized by crime. But it was also exciting, in terms of intellectual and cultural ferment. It is a face-to-face society still. Unlike New York, in Chicago one could get to be known for who one is. In a sense it was the best, and it was the worst.*

Conclusion

The telling of these stories was an emotional experience for the immigrants, some of whom even broke down as they recalled a particularly significant event or moment from their distant past. The children who conducted the interviews learned things about their parents they never knew while the parents were forced to assess and evaluate their own lives for their children.

What emerges from these oral histories is the portrait of a group of adventurous young men and women who set forth on an unknown journey, and made good in a strange land. They experienced the isolation and alienation that every immigrant goes through, but in even greater measure because they were so few in numbers. They created their own support systems but also merged into the society in which they lived and worked. They developed strategies to cope with discrimination, and used available opportunities to find their own best occupations. By choosing to stay on in a country to which they had come seeking only higher education, they carved their own path to success and permanence in America. Yet they stayed in touch their roots, always conscious of their role as a pioneering group, as ambassadors for their homeland.

These stories needed to be told, and told now. Without a historical record of this vanguard group, South Asians would be missing a vital link to their past, a link that bridges the gap between the gradual trickle of Indians who came soon after WWII and the surge of immigrants after 1965.