

Desis of Silicon Valley Speak: An Oral History
Tanaz Sutaria Interview

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Interviewer (I): Okay. Thank you. Thank you Mrs. Sutaria for joining us today

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I: for the "Desis of Silicon Valley Speak: An Oral History" archive for San Jose State University's Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Library.

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I: And I will start with the first question, which is, please tell us about yourself and describe your journey up until now.

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Tanaz Sutaria (TS): Okay. So my name is Tanaz Sutaria and I'm a retired librarian.

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TS: And my journey so far, I have lived in three countries.

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TS: I started my life like, when I was born in Kenya, East Africa.

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TS: And then we moved to India for a while and I went to school in India for my elementary years.

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TS: And then we moved to England when I was in maybe junior high.

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TS: And then I was educated in England and I moved to the U.S. about 34 years ago when I got married to my husband who lived here.

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TS: Although he is also of Indian origin. We are Parsis, Zoroastrians.

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TS: So, you know, it was good we met each other because, you know, we are from the same community.

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TS: And although we had like a romance across countries, it, you know, we both ended up here.

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TS: So that's my story.

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TS: And anything else?

I: Yes.

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I: Yes, that's amazing. So given all your, all your traveling, your experiences across the world and the fact that you settled in Silicon Valley,

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I: what does Silicon Valley mean to you?

TS: So, I wasn't really that much aware of Silicon Valley, except like, you know, news articles and stuff

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TS: I'd read about it until I met my husband.

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TS: And he being an engineer was very much kind of based here and had a career here, although he started off doing his master's in New York.

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TS: And then he worked for a while there and then moved to Silicon Valley.

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TS: So, I really didn't have much exposure to Silicon Valley until I met him.

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TS: And then once I was here, I was totally immersed in Silicon Valley because we lived in this area.

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TS: So, you know, we also had friends that he grew up with.

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TS: I mean, in the sense that he went to college with them both in India, and they also moved here.

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TS: So he'd done his master's with them. So we move in the same sort of thing,

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TS: Desi circles that he brought with him

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TS: kind of, you know. So when they moved to California, they also worked in the East Coast, and then he moved later.

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TS: So, you know, when he started it was in the sort of early 80s and that's when Silicon Valley was really coming up.

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TS: So there were a lot of jobs for people like him.

I: Mhm.

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I: That's great. So, given those Desi circles that you mentioned and your Parsi identity,

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I: would you say that you identify yourself as a Desi of Silicon Valley and what would that mean to you?

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TS: I do. I do identify as a Desi in Silicon Valley more culturally, because ever since I was like a kid,

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TS: we've always visited India and my extended family is there.

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TS: So every two, three years we would always visit, even since I was a little child, you know.

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TS: So, my mom's family's definitely rooted there. My husband's family is rooted in India.

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TS: So, we do number one, consider ourselves Desi,

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TS: and then within the other, the other portion is that we also meet Parsis and try to, you know,

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TS: be involved in that community too, because that's like our religious identity, I guess you could say.

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TS: But culturally, we are very much into the Indian stuff, you know, the eating, the food,

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TS: and we have the similar kind of customs, you know, also because, most of the Parsis came from Gujarat and we speak Gujarati at home.

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TS: And, you know, we are kind of more...Indian in that respect, you know, culturally.

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TS: So, yes, we have a sort of intertwined connection.

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TS: But there is definitely binding to India, you know, that we

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TS: have more in common with people from India than we do people who are brought up here, you know.

I: Mhm.

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I: Yes. I'm curious to know more about your interactions with the Parsi community.

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I: How did you find interacting, like finding those spaces within Silicon Valley when you came here?

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I: Like, was it plentiful? Was the community big at that time?

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TS: So I was more involved in the Parsi community in England, because I was part of the young Zoroastrian Youth Group there.

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TS: So we did a lot of stuff together, and there they have a more established community.

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TS: So it was, and since I was near London, I was able to participate a lot. Here, not so much because everyone is spread out. And

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TS: they maybe meet once or twice a year at the most, like maybe some people meet more often.

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TS: But it was more difficult to get involved in the Parsi community here because, basically because of the geographical spread outness of

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TS: you know, the different people and where they have their functions and all that.

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TS: And so it's more difficult, but I found Parsi friends in Fremont.

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TS: So it was kind of neat because, somehow while connecting with the wider community, you know,

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TS: you end up with people who are closer in the geographical space and you end up with more in common with them.

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TS: So I kind of have Parsi friends here in Fremont, some of whom have also moved from England.

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TS: So I know them like doubly, you know,

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TS: so. But other than that, like I was saying, I also have non-Parsi Desi friends, you know, and I'm pretty close to them too

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TS: because we've just kind of grown together like, so, you know,

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TS: because a lot of them were wives of my husband's friends and, you know, they came here too like me.

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TS: So they're kind of, you know, we have a lot in common.

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I: Yes.

TS: And then, you know,

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TS: mostly like you, when you have young children, you tend to make friends with people with young children

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TS: also, when you are sort of; at that time, I wasn't working when my kids were very young,

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TS: and so I tended to sort of go with the people that had similar age group kids, you know, and things like that.

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TS: Yeah. I: Mhm.

TS: So I had more in common with them.

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TS: Yeah.

I: Yes. Just to follow up on what you saying, Tanaz, is

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I: so do you think in Silicon Valley, the way it is understood right, a hub of innovation and things, right?

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I: So talented people come to this hub of innovation, right?

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I: And then whether, you know, you find Parsi community friends or you find other non-Parsi, but maybe from India, you know, friends and colleagues.

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I: So do you think that kind of community building, meeting up, keeping cultures, traditions alive is possible because it is Silicon Valley?

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I: Have you seen similar things in other parts of the United States in the Parsi

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I: community?

TS: Actually, some of the Parsi communities that I know of, like in certain

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TS: like cities like Houston and all are also pretty big and close, you know.

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TS: But maybe in the Silicon Valley there is more, like you said, there's more sort of science, engineering kind of focus.

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TS: So, it's a little different, you know.

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TS: There's also, from my experience as an educator,

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TS: I feel like there's also a lot of emphasis on the kids having that kind of STEM education and all that.

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TS: And I think there's a lot of pressure on these young kids, you know, that are from a Desi background

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TS: because parents want them to like succeed, as all immigrant parents maybe want their kids to succeed.

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TS: So I feel that part of it. And since I worked in a school in Fremont at the end of my career, I found that was

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TS: different from any other place, you know, that I've experienced.

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TS: It seemed to be much more intense, the educational kind of piece.

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TS: Maybe because the parents are highly educated too.

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TS: But you know, I found that was different from anywhere else that I've been.

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I: Mhm.

TS: Yeah. It's a lot more difficult for the kids

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TS: I think than we had it because, you know, we didn't have that much pressure on us,

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TS: you know, maybe.

I: Right.

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I: Right, and speaking to the Desi community and Desi culture in Silicon Valley,

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I: why and how do you think Desi culture is so vibrant in Silicon Valley, and like how it is able to thrive here,

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I: even with like the terms of education and how Desi communities are presented here and what you've noticed as your time as an educator,

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I: what do you think makes it so special within Silicon Valley?

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TS: I think a lot of it to do with the numbers of people and they're concentrated in certain areas.

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TS: So, for example, Fremont has a lot of people from the Desi background,

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TS: so they have more restaurants, the more cultural events, you know, and that all kind of feeds into that

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TS: feeling of, you know, being

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TS: more Desi. You know, you kind of feel like participating more in all those things, you know,

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TS: the events and the, you know, everything that's around you because it's so vibrant actually, you know.

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TS: And maybe it's just the numbers of people in this area that are concentrated, because I don't feel like-- there's some places I feel like I've visited

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TS: like where I don't feel as much like that I belong as in others places. Here,

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TS: I feel that sense of belonging more, you know,

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TS: that whereas in other places you feel like an outsider because you're the only one that looks like you that, you know, is around.

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TS: So that, that feeling is here, which makes me happy because I feel safer, you know,

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TS: amongst people who are more alike and who have experienced people like us,

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TS: you know. So, so it's I think it's a sense of security gives, you know, that feeling of community.

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I: Yes. Yeah, I'm also curious to know more about your career, because I'm sure you've come into direct contact with your local communities.

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I: And so I was wondering, how does being Desi help you succeed in your work in Silicon Valley?

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TS: Well, as an educator, I love the fact that people hold education dearly in this area.

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TS: And they always respected the teacher, the librarian, you know, the,

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TS: the people that are involved in their daily, educational learning life, you know. And to me

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TS: librarianship was always about service to others, you know, because I worked in college libraries and

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TS: and I've worked in different colleges, universities, like community colleges and then schools.

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TS: And I feel that, that value, being valued is very important in my career.

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TS: It was very important, and I felt valued because, you know, people who have higher aspirations and educational aspirations and,

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TS: and who value education will always make you feel like you're valued, you know, and that's that was the best part of my career.

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TS: You know, I really enjoyed my job because of that.

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TS: Yes. But on the other hand, after I retired, I am involved in more in art because I liked art and that's my sort of second career

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TS: you could say. I: Yeah

TS: I do some painting and stuff, and I've sold some now. And I'm also involved in this small community,

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TS: art gallery, art guild here in Fremont and involved in the scholarship side.

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TS: So any students who want to pursue visual arts and stuff, we give them scholarships, which are been established for a few years

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TS: and-- but they have to be from this area. So, I feel like I'm giving back to the wider community.

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TS: I would like to promote the arts more because I think generally they are not.

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TS: And I think there's so much you can do with both art and science, you know, it's like it's, it's

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TS: equally important I think, you know, to have that creative side acknowledged for people.

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TS: And I've met some Desi artists that have started doing art like me in later in life and also are vendors of, you know, their art and stuff.

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TS: So it's interesting because, you know, it's a different world and it's interesting also in its own way.

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I: Mhm. That's great.

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I: Considering your involvement in art and community,

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I: so when you look back at your journey and all that you've done,

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I: how do you think Silicon Valley may have influenced your identity as a Desi and your work?

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TS: Silicon Valley...

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TS: I don't know about how much it's-- because I'm not on the technology side,

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TS: but it has made me more go towards like learning the technical side of things.

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TS: But other than that, I don't know whether it's really influenced me that way.

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TS: But you know, it's, generally it's, I don't know how to kind of put it in words, how it's influenced me.

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TS: But it's been an interesting place to be in, because like you said, it's innovative and people are always looking for things that are new.

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TS: And you know, that makes it exciting, you know, in anything you do because it's like something different, you know.

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TS: But...

I: Yeah, if I can add something to that.

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I: So, so you know, in other places where we see, you know, like Desi communities thriving, right, in different parts of the United States.

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TS: Mhm.

I: And in your travels, you know, visiting family or friends, or you may have lived in other parts of this country.

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I: Have you seen the same kind of, like you just talked about a second career, right?

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I: You know, you are you're doing art on your own, right?

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I: You know, and that's almost and I'm sure you're doing it with a level of professionalism and dedication that you have done throughout your,

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I: you know, your educator's life, right? You know, teaching or as a librarian. Do you think if you were living in a different part of the country,

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I: at your specific stage in life, you know, you have children have grown up, right?

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I: Those kinds of like, and you have like, technically you have retired from being a librarian, from being an active educator.

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I: Do you think you would be doing this kind of involvement in, you know, like going on an artist guild, doing your own art role,

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I: do you think you would be doing the same thing in other parts of the country,

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I: or do you do this here because there is a quality in Silicon Valley that probably speaks to you?

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TS: Maybe I would be doing the same thing, I don't know, because I've never lived in any other part of the United States.

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TS: But I do see there are pockets of places that have this kind of thing, like New York.

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TS: My daughter lives in New York, and I see that is sort of-- I think it comes with the, the cosmopolitan nature of those places,

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TS: you know, where there's a lot of people, mix of cultures, which is always more open to doing different things, you know.

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TS: So, yes, that way I think it fits me the, the Silicon Valley, the place, culture, and all that.

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TS: Yes. But I don't know, I might have still been doing art after I retired because I just always loved art.

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TS: So, and I would have tried, have tried to find an, you know, an, a way to you know, get to do that.

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TS: So, but yes, this place has a lot of different opportunities, you know, I think more than other places.

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TS: Especially like more than other places which might be more rural and all that.

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TS: Yeah, it has a lot, lot, lot, lot of opportunities out there.

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TS: So, you know, it's sometimes too much.

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TS: You can, you can do so many things here. Yeah.

I: Mhm.

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I: Well that's amazing. I'm coming up on my last structured question, but, so given all that you've been able to do,

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I: how do you foresee your future or your family's future in Silicon Valley?

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TS: I think that we have our roots now in Silicon Valley.

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TS: Although, my children may go to different states and stuff,

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TS: I think we will definitely stay here and they will always visit

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TS: I think, so, but I think that two out of my three children prefer California to any other place. But, so it's kind of

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TS: rooted as far as I'm concerned, yeah, in, in this place.

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TS: But not to say that we don't like going to India and going to travel,

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TS: you know, we still like that. But I think when it comes down to it, we, we have all our home and everything here,

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TS: so, we are rooted here. Yeah.

I: Yes.

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I: And do you think the Desi community was a big part of that, your reasoning for staying?

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TS: Yes, it was definitely. Definitely. Because like I said, my husband had these friends and they, when he settled here,

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TS: they really helped him, you know, and they were like all young together,

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TS: so they all kind of were next to each other in their apartments in Sunnyvale.

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TS: And even when we came to Fremont, when he came to Fremont, you know, they helped him and pick a place, you know, that was

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TS: a good place to buy a house and you know.

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TS: So yes, it helped to have people of similar backgrounds helping you out, you know, which is something that

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TS: I guess I grew up with. So I grew up in a joint family in Kenya, so my cousins were,

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TS: I'm an only child, but my cousins were like my brothers and sisters.

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TS: And then when I moved to India-- that was my paternal side of my family.

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TS: When I moved to India, I got close to my maternal side of my family because we lived again with my grandparents for a while,

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TS: which were my mom's parents and my other cousins I got close to.

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TS: So I think that feeling of having something

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TS: that is close to you and helps you be grounded,

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TS: like family, was always you know, although spread in the diaspora kind of thing, we were always...had that to fall back on.

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TS: So we always, I mean, I'm still close to my cousins in India.

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TS: My husband's brothers and his family are in India, so we still visit. Although his parents are no longer there,

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TS: but you know, we still have a connection, you know, to India

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TS: and we still like our kids to know that, that roots, you know, their roots.

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I: Mhm. And going back to what Rea asked,

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I: so you think that, that this kind of friend circle was here,

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I: I mean, that helps you stay rooted here

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TS: Yes.

I: in Silicon Valley. It's almost like a replication of family ties here.

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TS: Yes. That's what I was going to say. When we moved to England,

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TS: we didn't have that much of a family tie, you know.

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TS: And we were in a place where there weren't that many Indians and people from India,

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TS: India. So it was different. So I, I was seeking out my Zoroastrian friends and all because I had no connection with like other people.

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TS: But when I got here, I was pulled in again with the Desi community more than the Parsi community.

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TS: So it was those people who were helping us and who were giving us advice,

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TS: and you know, those people who were more established like stayed here, that were able to

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TS: have us put down roots here, you know, in this particular place, which being Fremont, you know.

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I: Mhm.

TS: And Silicon Valley, because a lot of them live in other parts of the Bay Area.

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TS: But you know, just that feeling, you know, that someone to fall back on if you are in trouble or something like that, it's good to have.

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I: One question, as you have been talking about your life here and

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I: you know, I was thinking about it since you have, you know, you have, you came here after your wedding and then,

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I: you know, you have raised children here and then, you know, you have, the kids are grown up now.

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I: So have you, how have you seen the Desi community evolve?

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I: And you know,

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I: what are, what is like a couple of things that we may not have touched upon that you would want to say about the Desi community in Silicon Valley?

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TS: So I think the Desi community in Silicon Valley is on a growth path.

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TS: You know, I think in a sense that the children may not be so rooted in the Silicon Valley.

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TS: They all go to different states to study and everything to work.

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TS: So that might be like a different thing.

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TS: And also I've seen that we have become more, as a community, not just people I know,

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TS: but other people have been more, come, become more involved in politics and other fields of other than technology,

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TS: you know, which is probably making our community more kind of spread out, kind of you know, into other fields.

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TS: And that is something that I noticed more in England when I was living there, that people were more in different walks of life.

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TS: They were not just concentrated in one field, you know, they go from doctors to postmen.

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TS: You know, they were all different Desi people doing different jobs. Here,

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TS: not so much. But I think with the next generation,

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TS: I think that's going to change, because they have their own ideas about what they want to do, you know, with their lives.

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TS: And sometimes they, they brought up in a place where there's limitless kind of opportunities for them.

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TS: So they will do different things, you know, and achieve different things, you know.

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I: And do you see that as a positive trend in the Desi community?

TS: Oh, definitely.

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TS: Definitely. As an educator, I would hope so, yes.

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TS: I hope that that people become more like

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TS: you know that more, not just, not integrated, but more...

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TS: that's not the right word. More like they spread their wings, you know, and then fly. You know, they're more involved in different things,

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TS: and which makes them grow more I think, you know, as a community. And be, be people kind of more pay attention to that,

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TS: what they're doing, you know.

I: Mhm.

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I: I'm also curious to know, since you mentioned like the different opportunities of how you,

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I: how in England that people tend to have different types of career paths.

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I: But even here in the Silicon Valley, like you having your Parsi and Desi identity working as a librarian,

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I: was that unique for you in that you found probably,

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I: did you find yourself being like the only one of your identity?

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I: Was that like, were you kind of like singled out in that space or any point?

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TS: So when I started out, yes it was, I was different.

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TS: But then as I, as my career progressed here in the school libraries, I saw that there were more librarians that were of Desi origin coming in.

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TS: So I think it was, it's changed.

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TS: And also perceptions have changed about what people do and, you know, how they do it and everything.

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TS: So, so yes, it has changed. But then I could say the same about when I started in the England in libraries.

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TS: There were very few people from, you know, librarians that were from my kind of background.

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TS: But as time went by, that too started changing. So I think

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TS: it's more about opportunities, I think. In the beginning, you have to kind of fight for your opportunities and then it gets easier,

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TS: I think.

I: Yeah. Mhm.

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I: Great.

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I: Yeah. Rea, you have another question for us?

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I: Let's see. I mean, it was great.

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I: Thank you for mentioning that part about the identity,

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I: especially with regards to your career as a librarian and educator,

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I: I'm sure it definitely provided a lot of unique experiences, especially working directly with your community.

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I: Do you think there's anything you, you've taken away as your career as a librarian working or an educator,

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I: working directly with the community, or especially anything to do with your Desi identity or like the geographic location in particular?

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TS: Well, I think I was most

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TS: comfortable in working with people from similar backgrounds, because I knew where the parents were coming from and,

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TS: you know. So that, that made me more successful, I think.

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TS: But on the other hand, I always try to

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TS: you know, help whoever is-- like I was always of the view that libraries should be welcoming places, no matter who you are, you know.

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TS: So, so that helps having that, you know, attitude because

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TS: then people recognize, you know, what you're doing and why you're doing it.

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TS: Because my goal was to have kids become lifelong learners, you know?

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TS: So that was-- I think I achieved that at the, like, you know, towards the end of my career and

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TS: I felt, like I said, I felt valued here more than anywhere else.

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TS: Although, I mean, I always did a good job in the other places too,

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TS: but here it just felt good.

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TS: And then I wanted to sort of leave at the peak rather than things going down,

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TS: because funding was always a problem in the school library, so I would rather have left

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TS: when things were good, you know. And plus my husband also retired,

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TS: so we decided we wanted to travel, want to spend more time places.

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TS: And then my mom is with us, so. Oh, that that's another thing about being Desi.

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TS: You have this home life that is different,

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TS: I think, you know, you're more able to take care of your parents and stuff without being,

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TS: you know, may be the major issue in like, in other cultures, you know.

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TS: So, so that all helped.

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TS: So, yeah.

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I: Great. If there's anything else you would like to add,

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I: I've come to the end of my questions now.

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TS: Not really. I don't think so, no.

I: Okay, great.

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I: So, thank you so much.

TS: Thank you for taking the time to do this.

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I: Yes, of course. Mantra, is there anything else you would like to add?

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I: No, just, just a big thank you Tanaz to our oral history archive, and I'll stop the recording now.