

Desis of Silicon Valley Speak: An Oral History

Jaya and Sky Basu Interview

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Interviewer (I) Okay. So, good evening, Mr. Basu and Mrs. Basu.

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(I) I am Mantra Roy from the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Library at San Jose State University,

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(I) and we are doing an interview for Desis of Silicon Valley Speak: An Oral History.

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(I) So thank you very much for participating in this oral history.

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Sky Basu (SB) Our pleasure.

Jaya Basu (JB) Thank you for having us.

(I) Sure.

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(I) So we'll start with the very first question is, tell us a bit about yourself and your journey up until now.

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(SB) Okay, so let me start. So like many Indians here, and I'll use the word Indians rather than Desi.

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(SB) And, so I came here for a job.

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(SB) My background is engineering. Before coming here, I started a company in India just after my post-graduation.

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(SB) So I actually went to two very good, well-known schools in India,

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(SB) IIT and Indian Statistical Institute. I did a bachelor's in Mechanical, master's in Computer Science, and started a company just after my master's.

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(SB) After that company got acquired, I, we moved

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(SB) actually, the whole family moved to U.S. back in '95.

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(SB) So it's almost 30 years. Then I started my second company here in the U.S., and actually I had three companies in the U.S. after that.

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(SB) And just like many other entrepreneur,

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(SB) many other tech workers, I have gone through, or rather we have gone through ups and downs with the economy and the business and everything.

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(SB) But saying that, I would say that it is possibly,

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(SB) possibly, only possible in this country when we came literally with a few dollars in the pocket.

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(SB) And where we are now today in Silicon Valley, which is a very, very expensive place, mostly doing on your own is unbelievable.

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(SB) I don't think there is any other country where because possibly, including

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(SB) India, and being somebody completely coming out of, as a...documented alien,

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(SB) I came through H1-B, then the green card, and then citizenship like the normal path.

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(SB) And that is actually, is an amazing path and it's, I'm not unique. There are many

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(SB) many people and actually in Silicon Valley you'll find most of the people have gone

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(SB) through a very similar kind of path. In many cases people come here for education, though

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(SB) I was completely educated in India. I never went to any school here for any degree.

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(SB) But...but other than that, this is a amazing kind of, I would say, the life path we have followed.

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(SB) And I'll let Jaya talk about her point of view.

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(I) Yes, sure. (JB) Yeah. My point, my journey is very small that way to mention. Like, we have started our life together

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(JB) pretty earlier, like very early, almost like high school sweetheart kind of story.

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(JB) So, so after that, he continued his studies after our marriage, wedding. He was in M.Tech (Master of Technology), he has done his M.Tech, and then he started his company.

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(JB) But I always think that I'm the student, I am the wife of a student

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(JB) who always is like, Sky is like my best friend

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(JB) you can say. Everything I share with him as it, because we were friends before we getting married and

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(JB) still we are. And after doing my graduation, I had my daughter, my daughter

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(JB) and after four years, I got my son. And then my son was two years old,

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(JB) then we got to this country. There is not really a lot of things to say, but I get, I got involved with Bengali communities, some cultural activities.

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(JB) I directed few renowned Bengali plays, Abanindranath Tagore's "Khirer Putul" and Rabindranath Tagore's "Dak Ghar (The Post Office)"

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(JB) I staged it with one of my kid's friends that had been from the Bengali community.

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(JB) It was a very like satisfying for us. And at the same time I started a nonprofit, which we got 501(c)(3) just after 9/11 happened.

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(JB) Then it was a remarkable thing.

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(JB) Like my lawyer didn't believe me that we got to do even seven days of 501(c)(3), and she said, are you reading the right script, are you sure?

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(JB) So this way we started, it was very small from our pocket money.

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(JB) We started with my friend Sushmita.

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(JB) And then, after so many years, I have 679 kids and we have started a new project with their moms.

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(JB) Women empowerment. So this is my story.

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(JB) Very, very humble, small story. (I) No, but it's very impactful story.

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(I) And thank you for the work that you do. It's really important.

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(I) And I think one thing that both of you mentioned was, you know,

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(I) the tech path that Mr. Basu has followed and then the nonprofit world, the cultural impact kind of work that you have done.

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(I) So, and like you said, it's not a very unique story because a lot of people do this in Silicon Valley.

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(I) But you have done something that has created an impact in several children's lives, and that is remarkable. That very few people do.

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(I) Right. So but, I will, having said that, I will ask my next question.

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(I) I think it's related to the journeys that we kind of journeys have described,

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(I) is what does Silicon Valley mean to you as being residents of Silicon Valley, as having participated both in the tech side and the cultural side?

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(I) What does Silicon Valley mean to both of you?

(SB) You want to go first? (JB) No, you can go.

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(SB) Okay. So Silicon Valley, we first came here in back in '95.

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(SB) So for a long time, though I have been to many other American cities and communities,

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(SB) especially New Jersey, since we have quite a few family there in New Jersey.

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(SB) So I've been there, spent some time there. So I was pretty familiar with the typical Indian Bengali community and how people interact there.

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(SB) They have their dramas and the pujas and things like that.

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(SB) So coming to Silicon Valley, Silicon Valley of course

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(SB) when we came, at that time there was I think there is just one Bengali organization called Prabasi or maybe two, Prabasi and Sanskriti.

(JB) It was only Prabasi (SB) Only Prabasi, okay.

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(SB) And over time, now it's a, I forget the county, maybe 27 or something of that.

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(SB) But saying that, Silicon Valley is very rich in culture and I'm talking about Bengali culture, that is where I participate. In India

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(SB) also, when I was in IIT I used to participate in drama, Bengali drama, and many of the literary activities.

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(SB) I was also the editor of students magazine.

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(SB) So, so the thing is that here, I found that

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(SB) there is a very rich Bengali cultural tradition and I could find opportunities to actually take part and contribute as well as get enriched here.

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(SB) So I have actually participated in a number of Bengali drama plays as well as many different musical programs,

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(SB) since I possibly sing a little bit and not like my wife.

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(SB) My wife is a more like a professional singer.

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(SB) So, we both actually participated in many of those musical programs that Mahalaya, you know that, the famous radio program,

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(SB) we actually started, restarted I would say,

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(SB) because we had learned that it was, some other people used to do it and we started it almost what, 20 years back?

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(SB) So, so I had, and I can say that if I were in India, if I were even in Calcutta,

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(SB) I don't think I would be, it would be possible for me to be involved so much in all these different cultural activities.

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(SB) Right. So that's something I think that I got out of the Silicon Valley, which was completely unexpected.

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(SB) That was not really the reason we moved here.

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(SB) But at the same time, I would say that this was one of the biggest boon I got.

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(SB) Now, one more thing I should add here. For a brief three years, we moved to Virginia from Silicon Valley.

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(SB) It was a beautiful place, very green.

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(SB) The demography is pretty similar to Silicon Valley that way,

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(SB) in terms of that there are a lot of technical Desi workers,

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(SB) Desi, Indian workers there as well.

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(SB) But the biggest difference was the culture scene, which is almost zero there.

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(SB) So in three years we were in Virginia, but actually Maryland was a little bit better, which was close by.

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(SB) But in Virginia and other Virginia, near Fairfax,

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(SB) we didn't get much of an opportunity either to participate or even to, even to kind of go to events and things like that.

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(SB) So, which was a little surprising given the number of Bengalis being there

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(SB) and I know that quite a few of them are pretty, pretty talented.

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(SB) But at the end of the day, for whatever reason, they didn't have that kind of enthusiasm or whatever you call it.

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(SB) So we came back actually, that was not the only reason we came back, but I do think it could be one of the reasons.

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(SB) And I would add one more thing that, both of our kids,

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(SB) we have, as Jaya mentioned, that we have a daughter and a son.

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(SB) Both of them are adults now.

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(SB) And during their childhood, they also participated in many of these cultural programs, which typically Jaya organized for the kids.

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(SB) So they also grew up in a very rich kind of especially Bengali cultural environment.

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(SB) Though are, though they both are very American in everything else,

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(SB) but still I think they, and especially my daughter since she knows how to read,

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(SB) write Bengali and so that actually, still she practices and Bengali songs and things like that.

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(SB) So it is not just us. I think Silicon Valley also has given to our children as well. As for as the professional thing,

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(SB) I think there was nothing spectacular I can mention, other than Silicon Valley being the

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(SB) center of the technology universe in a way.

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(SB) So obviously that has helped.

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(SB) I don't think anybody can, anybody can say that that will not have an effect for any company or any profession which is technology nature.

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(SB) So that, from that point of view,

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(SB) obviously the reason we came here in the first place and stayed here for such a long time is the reason that it is so aligned to our profession.

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(SB) Even being it is one of the most expensive place.

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(SB) But typically I tell everybody who says that it's so expensive,

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(SB) I said that, how do you cause the opportunity?

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(SB) Because the kind of opportunity you have here you will not have anywhere else in the world.

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(SB) So how do you balance that?

(I) So one thing that I will ask in, based on what you were saying, is so as the center of the tech universe,

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(I) right, a lot of innovation is happening here. So.

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(I) all of you in the tech field, you are very busy.

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(I) You are doing the work that makes Silicon Valley the center of the tech universe.

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(I) So you are very busy and long hours of work, right? Sometimes over the weekends too.

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(I) But then what is it that drives you to have the passion, the time, the energy to do your cultural work, even after so many hours of grueling work?

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(I) What is it, and you said Virginia didn't give you that and it is possibly not as fast paced as Silicon Valley.

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(I) But what is it about Silicon Valley then?

(SB) All right.

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(SB) That's a very fair question. As a matter of fact, this is an interesting; let me give you a little anecdote here.

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(SB) So around 2000, I started a startup.

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(SB) I was a co-founder of a startup, a co-founder and CEO. And in 2000

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(SB) there was a after, just after that, there was a dot-com bust, right?

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(SB) So, it was a pretty tough time. It was a very stressful time and there was not much of a funding and other things.

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(SB) So we have to somehow get a salary every month for our employees, which is a very stressful job, if you understand.

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(SB) Now, with that, the only stress buster I had in a way was to go to the Bengali place there.

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(SB) And since I do not have time, I could not really participate in those dramas because I cannot go to the practice, right, the rehearsals.

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(SB) And so that's why I cannot participate as an actor or director or any of these things.

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(SB) But I liked drama so much that I used to go to the play on the day and helped in makeup.

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(SB) So I was a makeup man. I didn't have any, any training or anything, just doing drama. I suppose

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(SB) I picked up some of these tricks and tips and things like that, so I helped people in doing the makeup.

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(SB) Now, interestingly there was a, there is a Desi magazine from East Coast, India Currents or something like that, I don't exactly remember the name.

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(SB) So they took an interview of me during that time.

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(SB) So they asked a very similar question that, what do you do under such a stressful kind of job?

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(SB) What do you do to kind of take time off and stress out?

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(SB) So I told them exactly the same. So I go to that place and do the makeup.

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(SB) So they actually had a, had an article out in their magazine saying that makeup man turned a CEO. So, makeup man,

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(SB) makeup was my first profession, and then. (I) Right.

(SB) But I hope that that answers your question that basically this was, as a matter of fact, is a safety valve

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(SB) you can say of the studies and all the fast paced life we have in the technology side of our life.

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(I) Right, right. Yeah. Okay, and to Mrs. Basu, what does Silicon Valley mean to you?

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(JB) You know, we did not come to Silicon Valley,

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(JB) we came to California. Basically, if you consider our political inclination or our liberal thoughts,

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(JB) I think California and New York, these are the two most reputable cities to start your life.

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(JB) And when we get, probably, eventually we got involved.

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(JB) But just one thing I have to mention, which is my realization,

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(JB) Silicon Valley is not anyway different than any other city, like what I am saying that like New York, okay? A liberal city, or a liberal city, or

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(SB) Boston (JB) Boston. So, because there are older generation. A lot of, a lot, here more younger people come and they're...

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(JB) the people, the standard, at least the state where they keep their heritage, they keep the standard of culture.

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(JB) This older generation, they have a lot more, I think profound knowledge of "culture," quote unquote,

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(JB) which in Silicon Valley you cannot see. When we were in Maryland,

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(JB) we can, we watch probably two or three programs, all are like classic programs and their halls were packed.

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(JB) It's not that, okay, this classical thing that has come, Bengali people don't go there because there is no dance still.

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(JB) Okay. Now, here, whatever be the reason,

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(JB) I'm not saying good, bad, ugly, whatever be the reason, we, at least I cannot find the standard of culture.

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(JB) when we grow up with. Like the...you can say that Bengali people are always known for part of their ego. So that small ego if we nurture it,

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(JB) Here you can see a lot of Bollywood influence.

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(JB) I think Bollywood influences are in our Bengali culture.

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(JB) Okay, there is no program, only music based on only...

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(JB) you can sing only. People won't come here. But a few years, a lot of years back, I think it was 2002 or 3.

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(JB) I made a program in Hayward there that Hayward, UC, no

(SB) State University (JB) State University, their auditorium.

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(JB) Rabindranath's influence, Rabindranath's some songs, you know, are very influenced by Western classical, Western music.

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(JB) I, I tried to organize a few of them

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(JB) original, a few of those original songs, followed by the "Rabindra Sangeet," Tagore Songs.

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(JB) A lot of people came. So in the last few years, yeah, I can see the change step by step.

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(JB) And now, really I am not very proud of which Sky mentioned, which I cannot say that, that it is very like a rich culture.

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(JB) Yes, we nurture definitely, we nurture our likings, our passion for culture.

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(JB) Definitely. But there's standards.

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(JB) You can see that deteriorated a lot. I think that is true for India

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(JB) also. You can see that older generation, they at least had, they had good taste

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(JB) I have to say. Maybe you can say whatever good to me, not good to other people, of course, but I can talk for myself.

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(I) Yeah. So do you think it is a reflection of the general culture of Silicon Valley as well, which is expressed in the cultural forms?

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(JB) Of course, in general Silicon Valley is like full of rich Indian people. Rich means sometimes like insanely rich.

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(JB) So they; did I think their views are like that,

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(JB) Bengali songs, Bengali culture, Bengali movies, Bengali intellectuals.

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(JB) They don't feature it. So they try to follow, like

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(JB) I am not really criticizing them,

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(JB) I can see that that is the trend now, they're following. That, because you know Bollywood culture,

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(JB) even in India, Punjab or Bollywood,

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(JB) they control the whole India. Their thoughts,

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(JB) that thought process, their, like whenever they have entertainment party, their wedding. And surprisingly Bengali wedding

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(JB) there is Sangeet, there is Mehndi. Not only India, here also we can see. Like Bengali people are getting married,

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(JB) still there are Mehndi, and there are, there is no need.

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(JB) I mean, if we are respectful to our own culture, then we don't have to go to other communities' culture because we have enough.

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(JB) But I think Bengali people are very, feel very inferior that way nowadays than other communities of India.

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(JB) So that is, again, that is my observation. I may be wrong.

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(I) No, sure it's your observation. So, you know, that's absolutely fair.

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(I) So having said, in harbor two of you are saying, would you identify yourself as a Desi of Silicon Valley?

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(I) And what would that mean to you?

(SB) I think by definition, we are Desi of Silicon Valley, right?

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(I) Yes, you are. But do you,

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(I) I mean, yes. (SB) I don't know, what is the definition of Desi of Silicon Valley, how it is different from the Indians of Silicon Valley, for example?

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(I) Yes, yes. The word Desi is being used to signify people of Indian origin or people coming from India for this project.

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(I) But what I'm trying to say is the cultural identity, right,

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(I) of Silicon Valley is not only in tune with, with the cultural forms that you're involved in,

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(I) but also the fact that so many professions are dominated by Indians,

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(I) right. So in that context, do you think your work, and that's a question I have coming up in the next few steps too

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(I) but, you know, I'll say this here. Do you think your identity as an Indian, also Bengali, does that influence your work in Silicon Valley,

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(I) both culturally and in your specific professional paths?

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(I) Would you be doing something else if you are not Indian, for that matter?

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(SB) I think that the last question is possibly a little bit different kind of type.

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(SB) But yeah, I think there is no question that we are Indians of the Silicon Valley. Now, in terms of the Desi identity, right,

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(SB) I think what Jaya said and I also said, as you can possibly have heard a little

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(SB) bit of a different understanding of the...cultural nature of Silicon Valley.

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(SB) And I agree with her, that obviously the, when we say the Bengali culture, we really mean Bengali culture.

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(SB) We don't mean the Hindi or Bollywood culture, which has embedded in Bengali events.

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(SB) So in Puja, if you have a Bollywood star coming and singing the songs,

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(SB) that doesn't mean that that's a Bengali event. That's a popular event, popular event in Puja, but that's not necessarily a Bengali event.

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(SB) So when, whenever I say the Bengali event, typically I mean that which is in Bengali language, whether it's a drama, whether it's songs, etc.

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(SB) So, there is still pretty strong tradition and it's still going on.

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(SB) Jaya is a little disappointed about why many of the younger generations are not picking it up, which I do not agree.

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(SB) As a matter of fact, as a matter of fact, Mantra, you are also part of this BAAT (Bay Area Amateur Thespians) and these organizations,

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(SB) right. And that you have seen that a lot of younger generation, as a matter of fact most of the people are younger.

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(SB) I am possibly one of the oldest in that group.

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(SB) So there are a lot of, lot of interest. Now,

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(SB) many of those younger generation, they are coming to this Bengali drama,

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(SB) for example, but they are not necessarily grew up in Kolkata, not in West Bengal.

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(SB) Many of them are actually what we call the "pravasi" (person of the diaspora, someone raised outside home country/region) Bengali.

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(SB) So, which basically means that they grew up somewhere else out of Bengal.

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(SB) Many of them actually even can't read Bengali, possibly they can speak because, because of that, they're interested in grammar.

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(SB) Even there are people who are non-Bengali,

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(SB) they are also interested, because they are interested in Bengali culture and they have also changed, you know, possibly a couple of them.

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(SB) So, so the key is that, and I love, love that particular aspect that even though you did not grew up in Bengal,

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(SB) within Bengali culture, but you are attracted to this drama and these ways and things like that.

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(SB) In terms of my work, I think that professional work is completely deassociated with the cultural aspect of it.

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(SB) It's a completely technology work, so I don't think there is any Desi aspect there.

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(SB) Obviously, I work a lot with Indians. The team I work with, that's almost 100% in India.

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(SB) So I talk to them on a daily basis and it's an all-India team.

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(SB) So it is not just one, one particular,

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(SB) it's all-India company whom I work with. So all-India, which is a global company actually.

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(SB) So from that point of view, I do not see any Desi aspect of it. Being Indian,

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(SB) talking to the Indian coworker in India I think has an advantage, of course.

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(SB) So, I understand their, are many of their, I would say sentiments and some of the cultural nuances.

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(SB) I understand the festivals and even I sometimes explain to my non-Indian colleagues about what is

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(SB) Ganesh Chaturthi, for example, those kind of things. Yeah, there's an advantage being Desi, see being an Indian.

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(SB) But as far as the actual work is concerned, the content of the work, that has nothing, nothing to do with that Indianness.

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(I) Okay. But the observation that, you know, the for example,

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(I) the deterioration in standards, or like you're observing that there are younger people who are interested in the arts and,

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(I) you know, they are coming and participating.

(SB) Actually, I won't call it a deterioration, though Jaya possibly used that.

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(SB) I would say it's a change. Without any judgmental, good, bad, ugly,

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(SB) I'm saying that this is a change. Still, the, obviously for any culture it goes through changes over time.

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(SB) Right?

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(SB) The, our standard of culture was different from our parents and then theirs was different from their parents, right, our kids as different from ours.

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(SB) So, of course, change happens. And that change whether you like it or not,

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(SB) that's a very personal opinion, personal preference. But the change happens independent of you, whether we like it or not.

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(SB) So that's how I see it, that this is a change happening.

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(SB) There is a, even without going into the changes with respect to the Bollywood and other things, many,

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(SB) many of the as Jaya mentioned, the Bengali weddings, they are also; it doesn't matter if they're getting changed, in India, in Kolkata.

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(SB) People are having Sangeet and Mehndi and all this stuff.

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(SB) Right. So, so it is not unusual that here also you have the same thing. Now,

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(SB) like it or not, whether it is Bengali by tradition, that's a different question.

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(SB) But I'm saying that this change is happening globally, so that is just a reflection here.

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(I) Do you see similar changes in, say, other communities of the Indian diaspora here?

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(I) So, say maybe, you know, you have South Indian friends or you have friends from Maharashtra.

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(I) You have, do you see that kind of change in Silicon Valley, that they're trying to adapt certain things and do certain things?

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(I) No? (SB) No. I, I do not know their culture.

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(SB) I do not, we do not have enough friends who can actually tell us exactly what other change is happening and whether they are happy,

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(SB) unhappy, etc. Especially non-Hindi speaking people, not...Indian.

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(SB) That means typically if you think about Tamil or Telugu or Maharashtrian or Malayalam, they have got their distinct culture, right?

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(SB) Like me. And whether their culture is also getting changed, getting transformed because of the Bollywood culture,

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(SB) and especially as Jaya mentioned, which I agree, it's the Bollywood and the Punjabi culture, which is actually the face of Indian culture globally.

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(SB) So whether, whether it be here, their unique culture of these different communities are also changing.

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(SB) I do not know because I do not have any friends with whom I have spoken at this level.

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(SB) We know people, I know Maharashtrian, I know Tamil, but more from the working professional contacts.

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(SB) So that's why I can't tell you that whether it has happened or not.

(I) Mrs. Basu, what is your experience, about

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(I) if you have noticed similar things in other communities, as they are practiced in Silicon Valley?

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(JB) So far I know that other communities, they don't follow any interritual, sorry, Bengali rituals in their weddings.

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(JB) I don't think so. Bengali is very exclusive that way like "gaye holud" (turmeric bath), or like, the wedding is like more like social activities than like

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(JB) the Garland Exchange or the first, first look at the bride's and groom's faces,

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(JB) though they are almost five years, they are dating still. Those are really Bengali social issues which I don't think other community

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(JB) they follow Bengali community because they are very rigid. Especially South Indian

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(JB) people, they are very rigid about their own culture, own heritage.

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(JB) Like Bengali people, they don't jump to other cultures or other communities'

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(JB) rituals to make the wedding happen.

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(JB) I'm saying that against Sky,

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(JB) whatever Sky thinks that the change, overall that change, like our parents and us, there is not too much difference.

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(JB) Okay? Because my daughter still listens to the song which our parents used to listen. Like S. D. Burman, R. D. Burman, Kishore Kumar.

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(JB) But nowadays people like the kids, especially who are growing up in Calcutta and here, the rich people's kids I'm talking about,

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(JB) since our old acquaintances and our association is now not anymore,

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(JB) middle-class family, we came from middle-class family. You understand what I'm saying.

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(JB) Like Sky's old friends, they're from IIT, they're very high, in high positions.

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(I) Of course. (JB) All the rich people, they think that

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(JB) speaking Bengali is like, at least with Bengali people even, that is also not a standard cultural thing, you know.

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(JB) You have to use it in mixed Hindi-English-Bengali.

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(I) Yes. You know, interestingly, you may have seen there's a lot of South Indian families are doing the same thing in Silicon Valley.

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(I) Like the husband and wife, they speak to each other in their home language, Telugu or Tamil.

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(I) But when it comes to their children, they're speaking to them only in English.

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(I) It's happening in Hindi-speaking belts as well. People living, you know, those, the very rich tech families, they're

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(I) they're doing that. They're choosing not to introduce home languages to their kids.

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(I) Why is that happening in Silicon Valley?

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(JB) Number one reason I think people are really busy here now nowadays, both the parents work or they really don't think

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(JB) that taking that extra step to teach their kids Bengali is that much necessary in the society at this moment.

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(JB) I think that is the main reason. And since they are comfortable to speak in English, both of them to each other, they prefer it,

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(JB) of course, their kids will also do the same thing. They can pretend at home

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(JB) they don't understand English just to avoid that culture.

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(JB) But, unfortunately, that really don't happen that much.

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(JB) That doesn't happen. Another reason, I think...

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(JB) like, as socially

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(JB) if you just give a glance, you can see that here we are really arrogant. Like, you said that Silicon Valley,

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(JB) why it is different than other countries of, other states of USA?

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(JB) I don't think that the people are different, like Indian people I'm saying, and I always identify as an Indian American.

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(JB) Okay. I'm not Desi that way because I love American culture

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(JB) also, they have a lot of things to pick up. They have a lot of good shows you can enjoy, like ballet, like symphony, orchestra, anything.

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(I) Of course. (JB) But, but I don't know about our friends, that they really

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(JB) enjoy that much to go, like Hamilton, how many many people who know that they love it.

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(JB) So you can say, I am not saying that. I'm not really judging anybody, but what my observation is

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(JB) when you are here in this country, you have to be friendly to the aboriginals here.

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(JB) No? I mean, original American people, which we don't do.

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(JB) We, other than what we mix only with Indian people.

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(JB) I'm not talking about next generation, I'm talking about our generation,

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(JB) what you are asking me. They mix only with Indian people,

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(JB) they do only Indian party. Friday, Saturday, Sunday, the same old face, same kind of conversation.

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(JB) And there people sometimes reach at one point where that money arrogance comes, which kids follow.

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(JB) They know that, okay, we are very rich people.

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(JB) So socially, Indian people automatically become very judgmental, since they have a lot of money

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(JB) comparing to other immigrants' community. They always think we are the superior. They're not probably think, they're sure of, always, that we are the best.

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(JB) No other community can reach here, and especially if you are like minority,

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(JB) I am not, I'm not mentioning the exact terms, you understand what I'm saying there.

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(JB) That you don't belong to the society, almost like that kind of attitude.

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(JB) So the kids also pick it up from the parents, you know.

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(JB) I mean, if you are conservative, your kids get that conservatism from you. If you are liberal, your kids will be liberal.

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(JB) But of course, in the college, like here, if you go to any school you can find a lot of Indian kids.

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(JB) Okay. There are quite a few places where kids can get mixed with other kind of people,

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(JB) like whom they will meet eventually in the college. There you cannot say,

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(JB) okay, there is only Indian people I like to mix with.

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(JB) So that is my understanding.

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(JB) And Silicon Valley, you can say that now,

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(JB) I really don't like the approach of this particular area.

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(JB) They took, they rejected the poor community. In general,

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(JB) you can see. I'm not talking about socially. Even if you look at those high tech companies, big companies, they're making money like

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(JB) like a humungous amount of money.

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(JB) But for society, if there are problems, and I know at least one or two companies,

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(JB) very big companies who committed to the county before they get the land to establish their business.

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(JB) That they will take care of homelessness, which they did not.

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(JB) And now, we Indian people, if we criticize in our living room, sitting, or sipping either

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(JB) wine or coffee, you say that it is horrible. San Francisco is horrible.

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(JB) You cannot go there. There is so many homeless people. They're dirty. Like, as if it is only their fault. We really

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(JB) don't want to see our fault. And Mantra to tell you frankly, we Indian people,

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(JB) especially Bengali community, we are very selfish, very selfish.

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(JB) We don't think about my next door neighbor. Okay? So, you can see the completely two different approach from my husband and I, have completely different approach.

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(JB) Since I work in social aspect. I mix,

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(JB) I have other friends who are from, they're friends.

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(JB) They are not only coworker, okay. I came to know from them about Vietnam, about Philippines, about Mexico, about South Africa.

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(JB) And I'm proud of that and proud that made me a lot richer than only knowing India and Silicon Valley, you know?

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(JB) So, that is my opinion. (I) No, I completely see your point.

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(I) But do you think the flip side of it is that all these cultural art forms, right?

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(I) You know, music, dance. And you know, not only among Bengalis, but also among

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(I) for example, Carnatic music is very intensely practiced in Silicon Valley.

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(I) Right, and very high quality. So do you think the flip side of it, of, you know,

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(I) of constantly sticking to your own ethnic community is that you can practice art forms at that standard, at least among the Carnatic musicians, right?

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(I) Would you think that's the, that's an advantage that the communities get because they stick among them, stick to themselves?

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(JB) Yeah, they are.

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(JB) Like they follow their, like I'm saying that other communities, like what you are saying the South Indian or Carnatic people are,

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(JB) they are very strict about their heritage. They don't want to follow any other.

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(JB) I'm not talking about Bengali. I'm saying that they don't follow even American culture.[inaudible] they live here almost like 50 years, still they're

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(JB) like Carnatic in heart, and Carnatic in...You can say it is personal preference.

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(JB) We picked up like the way we are Indian American, we can be part of the American community.

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(JB) I do rotary. I work for rotary.

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(JB) I went to a homeless center for Thanksgiving. To feed them properly with proper cutleries.

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(JB) And we, in India we never thought that, okay, [inaudible] that homeless people in India that we will feed them with the tablecloth

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(JB) nicely done, with cutleries and everything. We never thought even that. Nowadays

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(JB) also people don't think that way. This exposure gives you that,

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(JB) it is an eye opener for everybody. I think, if people get involved a little bit with American society, they can learn a lot of things

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(JB) which all are not bad. You know?

(I) Of course.

(JB) Like what is our heritage, that is the only thing we have to respect, that is very;

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(JB) I don't believe in that logic.

(I) Sure,

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(I) yeah. Mr. Basu, do you have to add anything to this?

(SB) You said that

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(SB) so, let's give that Carnatic music as an example.

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(SB) I don't believe that if you eat hamburger and drink beer, that doesn't mean that you cannot participate in Carnatic music.

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(SB) On the other hand, some people will say, unless you follow a very strict "parampara" (an uninterrupted series or succession)

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(SB) strict "guru shishya" (succession from guru to disciple), "parampara"

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(SB) kind of thing, and only have vegetarian, then only you learn Carnatic music.

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(SB) On the other hand, I have quite a few examples, especially in, not in Carnatic exactly, but in North Indian classical music.

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(SB) Including Zakir Hussain, for example, who are pretty Western in their lifestyle. But nobody can say that he doesn't play good a lot, right.

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(SB) So it's, it depends, it depends on the particular family's cultural background.

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(SB) There are many, many families are extremely conservative, extremely strict.

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(SB) They don't allow even their kids to get married to, forget about American.

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(SB) There's very strict casteism there. Unless it is from the same caste,

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(SB) forget about getting any acceptance from the family.

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(SB) Even in Silicon Valley, it is true. And of course, it is very much true in India,

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(SB) but even in Silicon Valley, this is true.

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(SB) So there are quite a few families out there, also beginning to have more families like that than not.

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(SB) I would say that possibly Bengalis are a little bit more liberal from that point of view,

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(SB) even in India and here as well. The caste aspect is not as strict in Bengal,

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(SB) and that's why the Bengalis here also, they have less of a caste restriction.

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(SB) Marrying Americans is quite, quite, quite common.

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(SB) Actually, my daughter is married to an Irish boy. As well as, there are many of our friends' daughters and they are married to Americans.

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(SB) So, so from that point of view, I see that Bengalis have, are possibly a little bit more liberal.

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(SB) But there are families which are very, very strict, especially from caste point of view. In terms of the,

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(SB) and I think the caste is a very big aspect of Desi identity which people do not discuss.

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(SB) They don't want to discuss. There is a lot of

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(SB) what is called a higher caste arrogance, higher caste distinction, people like to say.

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(SB) Many people tried to almost on five minutes of introduction,

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(SB) they will say that whether they are Brahmin or not, obviously it happens for the higher caste only.

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(SB) Not for the lower caste. Lower caste never say that, you know, I'm a Shudra. That doesn't happen,

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(SB) but the Brahmins, yes, they let you know that he's a Brahmin or they're Brahmin.

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(SB) So this happens, I have seen it personally.

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(SB) You know firsthand, that people actually do that. And often they, when they come to know that I'm not a Brahmin,

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(SB) though she is, before marriage, and I'm not a Brahmin, they get a little surprised and possibly a little disappointed.

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(SB) So, so casteism and as you know that in Silicon Valley, there are some caste-related incidents which is actually going towards state law.

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(I) Yeah. (SB) I think you can be on the ballot.

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(SB) So, yeah, so there are certain aspect of Desi culture, Desi tradition, which I personally completely against

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(SB) those kind of things, still alive and kicking in Silicon Valley among the Desi communities.

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(I) Yep. Thank you. So another question is, the work that you do professionally and in the cultural arena,

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(I) do you think you would have been able to do it at the same quality, pace, rigor if you were living in another city in the United States?

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(SB) I told you my experience with the one other city, Virginia.

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(SB) Also, I don't know about other places, and I know that there are many other cities, Seattle, L.A., Austin, New Jersey, Chicago.

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(SB) There they have a very, very strong cultural tradition there, Bengali cultural tradition.

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(SB) These are the, there are many of these cities which are, traditionally has an older

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(SB) Bengali community because people used to come there much earlier than the tech boom.

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(SB) So that's why there are people who are almost my parent's generation there.

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(SB) So I'm sure that there are a very exciting, thriving cultural scene there.

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(SB) But I have not participated or experienced it myself firsthand.

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(I) Sure. Mrs. Basu, would you be able to do the same work in another city?

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(JB) Here, whatever I did, I did it by myself.

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(JB) I didn't use any banner or umbrella here like Bengali community's umbrella.

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(JB) I never used that. So I always, and if I do that here,

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(JB) if I could do it here, why not in other cities where, Sky just said, that those

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(JB) places are also very enriched in culture. You can see that there are much more

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(JB) like traditional cultural activities for Bengali people. Like they bring only, they don't bring

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(JB) Arijit Singh for Durga Puja, not yet. I don't know when they will start. But here, Shaan is coming like, though Shaan is Bengali, still.

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(JB) You know, I'm sure he will sing mostly Hindi songs. He's famous for those, no? He's not famous for his Bengali songs. There are a lot of Bengali artists,

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(JB) but they don't bring that much, like other than NABC (North American Bengali Conference), only

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(JB) there is a Bengali word for that. And now it is also in Bengal, NABC also people sing Hindi songs.

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(JB) So my question is yes,

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(JB) I think I could do it anywhere, since I am not asking for anybody's help or umbrella.

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(SB) By the way, one comment I should make that we kind of made the word Desi almost replaceable with Bengali.

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(SB) It's, we made it synonymous. Right?

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(I) Yes, but that's alright, because I think we all have to speak from our own experiences,

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(I) right. So that is perfectly fine. And you did make comments about, you know, what you have seen in South Indian communities and,

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(I) you know, the music practice or the caste consciousness.

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(I) And that's something I think we are all aware of, that these are the realities and, you know, that they really inform identities here.

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(I) I guess my, another question would be, do you think Silicon Valley

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(I) influences your identity as a Bengali/Desi?

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(SB) I, I don't think so because we get a lot of, almost we go to the mothership, which is Bengal or Calcutta almost for everything.

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(SB) Right. So though, saying that, let me take Bengali play as an example.

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(SB) So, we go to very traditional Bengali plays which are written by the Bengali playwrights,

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(SB) and so we do that. But at the same time, there are some playwrights,

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(SB) one of our good friends. He's in New Jersey and he's writing original plays in the background, in the context of the Bengali lives in India; in USA.

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(SB) So those are obviously very contextual. But most of the original work, we go back to India, go back to Bengal for that.

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(SB) So to answer your question, I don't think that

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(SB) really, really, Silicon Valley has made me more Indian or more Bengali.

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(SB) I can't say that.

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(SB) As a matter of fact, Silicon Valley has made me more universal, more global, more knowing other communities, knowing other cultures.

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(SB) Obviously, that has enriched much more than my Desi or Bengali identity.

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(I) Okay. Mrs. Basu? (JB) Your question is like whether Silicon Valley made me feel like Desi.

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(I) Does it influence your identity as a Bengali

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(I) /Desi? (JB) I don't think so.

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(JB) I was Bengali. I am Bengali. But my identity has another feather

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(JB) to add like American. So I am very proud of both

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(JB) way. I worked hard that, okay, I am Desi means

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(JB) that I am only Indian? No. I am Indian too.

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(JB) So if one is my motherland and another one is my fatherland, that way I consider it, you know. Because here we got so much, this country

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(JB) gave us so much. Okay? That if we sit here and lament always that, oh we don't have here maids to help. We don't,

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(JB) we have to do so much work to do blah blah blah. That easily can be solved if we go back to India.

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(JB) But people don't do that. Not for maids, or not for less work, that

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(JB) people are going to India. There are some reasons why they go back to India. They have lost job or they,

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(JB) they have other problems in family, maybe for those reasons.

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(JB) So that way as I was saying, Mantra, that I am very proud of both of my identities.

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(JB) And I am pure Bengali inside my heart and pure American in my thought process.

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(JB) I am very open. I can accept a lot of things without being judgmental.

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(JB) When I came here first in the USA, it's not like this, but this country made me like that.

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(JB) You know? There are, now I can consider before judging anybody,

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(JB) maybe there are some reasons which may deem him or her today in this miserable

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(JB) position they're put in. Why, everybody needs a good

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(JB) life. Tell me, who does not? Everybody likes to have a nice life, nice food, nice house to stay.

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(JB) But since I told you, that I am very much involved with social causes and I saw a lot of people whom

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(JB) probably, earlier I probably would also have judged. Like oh, okay,

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(JB) they could work, why they don't work? They can get money, but it is their bad

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(JB) habit on staying on, living on welfare.

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(JB) That is not true.

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(JB) You know, there a lot of problems which always go underneath, which is beyond our normal surroundings or normal friend circle, you know.

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(I) Yes. (JB) But that doesn't mean that we cannot see it everyday.

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(JB) That doesn't mean it doesn't happen.

(I) Of course, yes.

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(I) Great, and my last question. Are you hopeful

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(I) or are you concerned about Indian or Bengali identity in Silicon Valley?

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(SB) No. I, neither. Let me put it this way.

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(SB) I'm neutral. The thing is that the way

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(SB) it is happening in India, the Bengali culture is changing so much, and again, I am not being judgmental. Whether I like it or not,

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(SB) that's a different question. But I'm just observing that the Bengali language itself is getting less and less used.

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(SB) Being replaced by Hindi, even among the conversation between two Bengalis.

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(SB) So that is happening in Bengal itself, right?

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(SB) So, obviously you will see some reflection of that in Silicon Valley as well.

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(SB) I would rather say that we are in a time capsule here,

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(SB) so that's why we possibly preserve much of the Bengali culture more strongly than what is happening in Bengal.

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(SB) So, that way I would say that because we are frozen in time, right?

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(SB) So when we came, we had that frozen memory of that time.

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(I) So we recreate that here. (SB) Right.

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(SB) So, but when things are changing in Bengal, there's some reflections here and it could change eventually.

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(SB) So, I don't know what will happen 20 years down the line.

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(SB) Maybe in Bengal, nobody will speak Bengali, and the only place people will be speaking Bengali is outside India.

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(SB) In London and... (JB) Bangladesh. (SB) Yeah. Bangladesh, of course.

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(SB) London and New York and U.S. and places like that.

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(SB) Who knows? Maybe. (I) Maybe, yeah. And Mrs. Basu,

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(I) are you worried? (JB) I'm not really worried because when I can see that it is almost like obsolete in India itself, in West Bengal itself,

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(JB) then I think, okay, it is gone language. It is such a rich,

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(JB) I think that, since it is such a rich, Bengali literature, Bengali language,

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(JB) there is no even comparison with other kind of literature, the standard of literature.

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(JB) So modern at that time, the when Manik Bandopadhyay was there, like such a, such a modern writer at that time.

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(JB) But, I am not,

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(JB) I'm saying that nowadays if you ask any arbitrary question to anybody like, not everybody, but few people probably doesn't know even

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(JB) who are those people, why they are famous. If we,

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(JB) if, I don't think we are frozen in time. Okay? I don't think, because we have every, I at least go to India at least twice a year.

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(JB) Twice a year for my nonprofit. And, you know, you can watch people.

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(JB) It is not that people live there everyday they can, through their interaction

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(JB) they will understand the culture more than us.

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(JB) No, I don't think so. Because when I go there, with open mind, I can see that the changes are happening,

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(JB) but the changes are very copy, copy culture like Western, like U.S. mostly.

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(JB) They copy, there people are trying desperately to come to this country.

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(JB) I'm not saying this is bad. Everybody, as I told you, everybody needs a bit of life.

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(JB) But...Sky said that we are frozen in time,

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(JB) that I, I don't agree with.

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(JB) That change has happened a lot. If we were there, we probably could not

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(JB) use that one too, if we were in India. Okay? So, here at least if we can afford some Bengali good film club, you know, very good movies

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(JB) we can, we can show it to people like, okay, probably they never saw it before.

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(JB) I don't, I am not saying that they will like it, but they could.

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(JB) There is a possibility. If they don't see, if they don't know about them, how could they explore those areas?

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(JB) So those good Satyajit Ray, Ritwik Ghatak, Mrinal Sen, Tapan Sinha, Tarun Majumdar (film directors). I was thinking Naseeruddin Shah (actor)

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(JB) or like, not Naseeruddin Shah. Govind Nihalani, Shyam Benegal, Basu Bhattacharya's (film directors) movies.

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(JB) So I have a hope, still.

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(JB) Like, we are here to bring that change if it is possible, and if we get other people also that same kind of thought process, really doing this,

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(JB) we will be successful. Not maybe 100%, but 50%

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(JB) at least we can be there. (I) Yeah, great.

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(I) Thank you. And we are ending on a very positive note that there is hope.

01:02:29.000 --> 01:02:33.000

(I) You know, I think we can do better than what we are. And there's always hope for that,

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(I) right. So, thank you very much. I'm going to stop the recording now.

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(SB) Thank you Mantra. (I) Yes, sure. (SB) Thank you.