

Desis of Silicon Valley Speak: An Oral History

Sudeshna Ghosh Interview

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Interviewer (I): Recording. We are from the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Library at San Jose State University. So we are interviewing you for the "Desis of Silicon Valley Speak: An Oral History."

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I: So thank you for giving us your time and welcoming us to your home to talk to us.

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I: So if you can just start telling us about yourself and about your journey up until now, and introduce yourself.

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Sudeshna Ghosh (SG): Yeah, I'm Sudeshna. Full name Sudeshna Ghosh.

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SG: I grew up in India and born, and got my early education there, did my undergrad there and then came after I got married, so I followed my husband here. Not directly in Silicon Valley.

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SG: But first we came to U.S. and my husband was studying in Texas. So we were there for two years.

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SG: Then once he joined work here, I moved along with him. And also I did my master's here from San Jose State University,

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I: Okay.

SG: and did my computer engineering degree. So, and after that, started my career here as an engineer.

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SG: After some time, when I had my son, my family grew and then decided to change my career and left my engineering for

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SG: did quite some time, and then after, once he was in middle school I just decided to leave and then start my own business.

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I: Mhm.

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SG: So, here I am like doing an entrepreneur and then like managing the household.

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I: Mhm.

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SG: So, that's about it in a nutshell. What, what else do you want to know?

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I: So what does, what does Silicon Valley mean to you?

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SG: So it's the name Silicon Valley, yeah, it doesn't strike me as much. It's just a bunch of cities that I have been I have lived through several of them already. So,

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SG: it's, it's a different place because I have lived in other places too, in Oregon and Texas and

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SG: But it's mostly the people, so which are highly optimistic and, you know, very entrepreneurs. So,

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SG: it's, I mean, and a lot of different communities that's living here.

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SG: And obviously the high-tech industry is sometimes crazy competitive. So that's what it is Silicon Valley to me, so

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I: Okay. So because you have lived in other places, right? So, since it is an oral history about Desis, right, so, what about your being Desi in other cities or your experience in the community and here?

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SG: Yes, so there is a huge difference because in, I lived in Austin. When I was living in Austin, Texas there, there wasn't a whole lot of big Indian community, but I've heard that that has changed now. It has grown.

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SG: But still I would think, I lived in Seattle too. So I would still think the community here is huge.

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SG: And it's so diverse, like any part of India it can touch. Like, that is what I never, when I was in India, I was a very regional

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SG: expo- I had a very regional exposure. I didn't have the exposure from the rest of India,

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SG: which I got when I moved in Silicon Valley, which is strange. I got to know India a lot more when I moved here, because you get to mix with a lot of different parts of India and community is huge.

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SG: And my son, for example, he's growing up in, in a school where there are a lot of Indians, a lot of Asians, and also like white. I mean, a lot of different kinds. So he also doesn't feel that

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SG: too detached from India. Obviously he's more of has the values of here growing up, but

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SG: that is what's very different than, like culturally he has a lot more exposure to Indian community. He has grown up in a different place. Like he also did schooling in Seattle, one year. It was completely different.

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SG: He was the only Indian kid in the whole class. So, he loved it but it was very different. Here is also very different. So,

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SG: that part definitely we don't miss India that much.

I: Mhm.

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SG: So it's more have all the kind of people we mix with, but there is an insularity that you, you can get used to

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SG: if, if you have so much of your own tribe and then you just don't feel that its very necessary to go and mix with other people, which is pretty bad part of being in Silicon Valley.

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SG: We definitely mix with a lot of different people, but there are people I know like who really don't have to go and talk in a different language because they can be fine in their own

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SG: tribe. But yeah, that's true for Asian people, true for Hispanics, true for Indian, here. Because you have a huge population of all their own so.

I: Right.

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SG: That is what is different. Definitely there is a humongous population that, and the influence is pretty big.

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I: What do you mean by that?

SG: Influence means the cultural influence, because you get to celebrate every festival here you want to. If you can attend the whole year long, there is festivities going on from

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SG: different part of India which we never were exposed to when we were in India.

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SG: We had only that particular region and we were participating there. Now, we get to know of different festivities happening and it's probably a lot more than if we were in India.

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SG: So, that part is there. Whether you are actively participating or not, you get to see those people all the time, and since I'm in a business which

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SG: is like, I felt like Indians are. So I'm like more involved in Indian festivities in a different way, like you know, people buy those things because they have to attend those festivities.

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SG: So I get to see a lot more. I get to, I get invited for those festivals and so, it's different. Definitely a huge

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SG: India, total India packed into a small Silicon Valley

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SG: So, and through my son, like I, I don't think he has a lot of influence through his school for Indian, but through our communities he is exposed. So that's what I feel,

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SG: but the culture is there. The kids who his friends are, it's, it's very different than, now he is in high school. So I get to hear from high schooler from other states where very different than the kids who are growing up here because of the cultural difference.

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I: So in the sense difference for high schooler, how would you, in Silicon Valley?

SG: Yeah, it is

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SG: it's mainly they are not they are I think highly influenced by Indian culture and Indian upbringing more in a conservative way, like especially the girls.

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SG: Also the boys are not, like the social, you know when you are in high school, in summer you used to go out and mix with different people and

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SG: those kind of cultures don't exist here in the high school, so they don't. So they are very much, very much into, maybe it's my, I don't know. I cannot tell about all the kids, but that's the feeling that I get for most of the kids because there are, there are some social norms in India that's also gets followed here, so.

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SG: Which is not to free, like in the other part of USA you, I mean yeah, people do go out and they also do date other kids but that's very, a very small fraction of kids.

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SG: Not too prevalent in most of the high schools here. There are, but not to certain degree. So that, that restrain is there. That's what I saw

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SG: in most of kids, and most of the friends' kids that I know. But definitely I cannot generalize. There are other kind of, other, and all are fine. But that's the, since the majority of there mixing are coming from very similar kinds of values and backgrounds, so that's what it generates into. So they don't have a peer pressure

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SG: to act some way or do some way. There is like very uniformity, I would say.

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SG: That's good or bad both. They are not exposed to as much of other cultures, as much as they are exposed to Asian and Indian culture. Most of the schools are like 30% Indian, 30% Asian, and 30% White. So yeah it's, it's not too diverse.

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I: It's not too diverse.

SG: No. Especially in Silicon Valley in the core, here and also if you go to Fremont. Those, Fremont is even less diverse, but here it's a little bit more but it's still not diverse.

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SG: So that's what we feel. We don't feel that we are living in U.S.

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I: But why is Desi culture so vibrant in Silicon Valley? I mean a lot of Indians here.

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SG: Because lots of Indian, and lots of immigrants in different age groups still coming and populating. Like,

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SG: even from different parts of U.S., if they have landed there, because of the job prospect like a lot of Indian engineers, techie. So they are coming over here, like because of job prospects. Some people are moving out.

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SG: They stayed here and now I'm hearing a lot of people are moving to Austin, Seattle, other areas, but still this is the huge hub of opportunities. So, people still coming in volumes, so it's not like it hasn't stopped yet.

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I: Yeah.

SG: It is in a way, it's a very you know, you have heard about the bubble in Silicon Valley right? So it's once something, the job market is not too bad, people will also start living in flocks. So, but now everyone's coming here so it's growing rapidly.

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I: So you said that because of your business right now, right, you get invited to a lot of Indian festivals. And so, you being Indian or being Desi, like so how does that, can you elaborate on that? Like how does that influence the work that you do and helps you succeed and challenges and opportunities related to that?

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SG: Yeah, definitely it's a big opportunity for me because I'm right here in Silicon Valley. There are a lot of other vendors who are also selling similar kinds of things, but I am being right here. It gives me a tremendous opportunity to connect with those people, know their

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SG: absolute like what, because each culture has a slightly different test. So you can cater towards what's like in the South Bay in Silicon Valley.

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SG: Even, even it's like funny because even within Silicon Valley, it's not Silicon Valley, even within Bay Area, if you expanded a little bit more like in Fremont or East Bay, so the people and population changes.

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SG: Here, predominantly in the South Bay, mostly are people from South India.

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SG: So, when I started, I had no idea. So when I started my business, I gradually kind of adapt to their taste and because I saw that particular kind of saris that are more popular here in this area, than if I were doing business in Fremont, or in San Ramon, or in Dublin.

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SG: So it's a different kind of people and taste. So that's you have to adapt and change, but then there is also a very good part of it that you get culturally exposed to other cultures, which I never had the opportunity and its, its really wonderful that people are inviting you over their house.

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SG: I didn't know them before, I just got to know them through my business. And how a different part of India absolutely celebrates a festival, same festival in a very different is very amazing to see.

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SG: So that part, it gives me exposure, exposure to their food, exposure to their music, exposure to their, you know, dance and other cultures. So it's Indian, Indian festivals involves all of them.

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SG: So, and that is, that is definitely a very, you know, good part of doing this business. I'm really thankful for that, I mean that gave me the opportunity to know more Indians here.

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SG: But yeah, anything else like you want?

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I: Yes, so and, so drawing from that and previously you were an engineer.

SG: Right.

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I: Right, were also a lot of Indians work.

SG: Yes, but not women.

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I: Not women. Okay, like tell us about that.

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SG: So yeah, I like, I was in a group where I was, I was in hardware engineering and I used to design chips. So in that group, like I was the only woman engineer and all are male. And some are, like they're mixed, like they're all not only Indians. There are all kind of people and

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SG: it was fine. But there are other groups where there are women engineer there. So that's fine, but this is a completely, from that, working in a completely male-dominated field.

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SG: It's a shift to my, this business is total, you know, 180 degree turn. Like it's like, now I only deal with women, and sometimes yeah men do come accompanying their wives, but that's, that's about it.

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SG: So and, the challenge is that when I was engineer, like I worked for quite some time and then faced a lack of flexibility. So I had, I thought you know, it's time for me to find something that I can have the flexibility that I want.

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SG: So I just, that's when I decided to leave. It wasn't, it was becoming too stressful for me to manage the home and the work. So that's a very personal decision. It has nothing to do with the job environment or anything. It was, it was very fulfilling for me when I was an engineer. But it's just the time management, I couldn't do it with my

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SG: I had to put a lot of effort in, you know, for my son, because that's all Silicon Valley is. If you want to be very competitive in a school that, my son goes to a private school which is pretty competitive.

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SG: So, and if you want a certain, expect a certain standard, you have to put that kind of effort on that, in them so.

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SG: And initially it was tough, leaving your career behind, and didn't know what to do.

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SG: But then, gradually, I saw so many fellow moms doing the same thing. It made you feel, okay, you are not alone.

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SG: It is probably, and now I feel it was needed. The change that I saw and it was needed.

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SG: And it's a huge change that I saw in him. I have no regret now leaving my career behind. And now my, this business also has picked up so, and it gives me the total flexibility of working from home.

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I: Right. So it seems like there's a lot of community building, right, where you were even as an engineer. You still have had community I guess beyond your work.

SG: Yeah.

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I: Right? And now you definitely have a huge community for your own professional work and personal. So,

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I: you know, it's a saying that community building and technology work very closely in Silicon Valley. Do you experience that yourself?

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SG: It, it also depends. Like initially, I had, when I was working as an engineer...

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SG: I used to, we rather, we used to mix only with the people we knew from before. We were fortunate enough that our childhood friends also moved along with us. So we have a very close group of friends and...

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SG: And then, in professional world, some people do mix with, you know, beyond their profession. They make them their

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SG: community. But we never felt that need just because you are so fortunate enough that we have a pretty big friend circle already. They were in school, they were in college with us. So, we didn't, but if you go around and look, you will find a lot of people make friends through their work.

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SG: But I didn't, we didn't have to. But when we-- I moved to this profession, yes, to certain extent the community, my community expanded

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SG: because of the nature of my job and that's the work. So, that's about it. We are a very, you will find all kinds of people in Silicon Valley who has a very private life. We are probably one of them.

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SG: We met in a very private, close group of friends and we don't go much beyond that.

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SG: And when we mix with the bigger community, we go outside in a festival and all those people-- places to go meet.

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SG: We are here in U.S. for 20 years, but in Silicon Valley 18 years. We know a lot of people. But in personal level, we don't mix with too many. So it's a different personal and me and my husband both are like that.

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SG: We have a very close group of friends. So, I don't know what you mean by, you know, the building the community. Our community, its personal space is very small. And then, we have a very bigger community. We know a lot of people. We get to mix with them, we get to talk with them in the festivities, like for example, Durga Puja.

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SG: That's the biggest festival of the region that I belong. And we go meet with them, and hang out with them in the bigger circle. But, not quite so closely involved, so.

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I: So, does technology play a role even in the private, very close-knit group that you have?

SG: Most of them are engineers.

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I: Okay.

SG: So all the friends that I, all are, that's what I am saying. So all of them grew up, they attended the same undergrad college of engineering, college in India. So they are all our school and college friends. So all of them are engineers, there's no diversity there.

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I: Okay. So over all these years, like 18 years right, in Silicon Valley you said. So, how have you seen like the whole Desi identity, like what it looked like 18 years ago compared to what it looks like now, how is it different?

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SG: Yeah. It, I mean, definitely the crowd, Desi community has exploded. When we were 18 years back, just by counting the number of festivities you can tell, like it's just exploded to an extent like

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SG: I just can't imagine. Like so many, you go attend any festival, you'll see like explosion of Indian community there.

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SG: That was not there. You were, there were very few of the communities. And now you can see, just looking at the number of grocery stores, Indian grocery stores. That has exploded in the area. Or, it's the number has increased a lot. Also, what I saw is

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SG: that, that background of people has changed too. So initially, like when we were here or people who came a little before us, are mostly people who came to study in United States.

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SG: And then gradually settled down here. So the population was a lot smaller. But once this H1 thing opened up, so a lot of people from, who came here to work. Not for studying. So that's the definite shift that I saw.

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SG: And along with them came, also when they married, their wives are from different backgrounds. So they, there's a lot of explosion of different kind of backgrounds of people. But mostly technology related though, I mean you know. But even the people who are not from core technology backgrounds also came here, adopted, changed their you know, majors. And adopted the, because that's the main job.

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SG: Now, I'm hearing a lot of other kind of jobs are, you know, appearing. But that, because of the opportunity, the kind of opportunity it was there. Like some, some become, went into teaching and stuff. But that's a lot less, but mostly technology and technology. And that's the part, it's like there's very monotony. There's no diversity here.

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SG: Where compared to, if you go to other places. Like I have lived in Seattle for one year. Even though it's a predominantly, you know, like a lot of big companies out there, technology companies. But people are a lot more diverse.

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SG: The community is a lot more involved in a way, not like here. Like I don't, hardly, I know my neighbors but we hardly talk. We hardly meet. But there, the neighborhood is very much alive. There is a community of, you know, the neighbors are there together.

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SG: Raising their kids together. That part is not here. It's completely exempt, because maybe people are just too busy. Everyone has different schedules. No one has time.

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SG: That is, that is what Silicon Valley is. People are just extremely busy. Multitasking to the limit. So, but that makes it work for some people, don't work for some people. So it's, it's a highly competitive place, so.

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I: Yeah. So, over all these years like all the shifts that have happened, like your identity as a Desi. Right? From the time you started in Austin, to now, do you think that has evolved because of Silicon Valley?

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SG: I never thought of it that way. I think I have become more American and involved in more American politics than ever before. Just because, yeah it's the situation in the country. So, and I have become more detached from India, in the-- because

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SG: yeah, that is the fact. So when we came here, I was probably much more involved in India. And you can, if you call it Desi, yes that I was. But I don't feel I'm that connected with India anymore. So, even maybe because I never felt the lack of it.

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SG: Its just so many people are around you here. That is like, be it food, be it clothes. Be it anything Indian, you get it here. So you just don't feel the very need of getting connected India through these things. But obviously, family is there.

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SG: That's my only point of connection. And I go visit only for them, and not for anything other cultural experience. So, that part I never miss. So I have become, that's why I'm saying, I have become more detached from what's happening in India and

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SG: gradually become a lot more involved in, I think that's a gradual, I mean that's because through your kid, you get a lot more involved in community, learning about the U.S. and all those. But so, Desi part, in that way it probably has diminished. So I cannot say I'm like-- I was a lot more Desi before, not now.

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I: Okay. Very interesting. So now, now that you are, you know, your child is in high school and will soon be going to college and then a career. So what do you see as, you know, as exciting opportunities or maybe challenges in the future of Silicon Valley for Desi kids who will be like second-generation?

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SG: I think he's extremely fortunate, because the opportunity that we got in India was far, far less. He's getting a lot more opportunities, so we are very positive about it. Like, I think

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SG: he has like a, like we never thought like he would become this or that, because the possibilities are endless anyways. So if you can explore your own possibility, there is no way that no one can stop you. So that's how we are bringing him up and, hopefully he will find his own way and we are there to support him to some extent.

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SG: Whatever he wants to. So I, I really think we had a lot tougher times settling down here. I don't see more challenges for him at all. So, because we are here. So when we left India, my parents were there. We had no support system, nothing. From that, we were able to establish ourselves and settle down here. And he's far more fortunate.

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SG: He has all the resources that he could have. All, all the support that he could have. So, I would imagine he would have much easier time than what we have experienced. So that's the hope, let's see.

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I: Yes.

SG: Situation do changes. But anywhere in U.S. he's free to go, so it's like not that he has to stay here

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SG: So any colleges that he will get opportunity to go. So we'll see what comes. That's exciting, because I'm really excited to see what, who he becomes, so.

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I: Right. That's great. So finally, like which, in terms of raising a child here, so do you think about his Desi identity?

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SG: Basically, see he, we are like the culture is so ingrown in us that we talk in our own language at home. He speaks fluently our own language. So, and like from the childhood I have been reading stories about Indian mythology and all those things, so he knows everything.

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SG: It's not we, they were enforced anything when they were, asked him to go to any language school or anything. He just picks it up as we are, you know, discussing things or the food. Everything like I don't make any, I...

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SG: What is the culture, right? Culture is predominantly food, what you talk, your own you know, historical stories, background, and your Indian history. So, he knows all of them so,

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SG: because we just talk about it. It's just in a very casual, we never enforced it. So he just picks it up and he eats all kinds of Indian foods.

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SG: So sometimes my parents get really surprised to see that he's so fond of South Indian food. Because there is a lot of exposure here. So and he eats very spicy food. So there is like no, nothing that. And he, that is the good part of growing up here, because he, in the food wise like he enjoys all kinds of food. Like

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SG: so, I think he's more fortunate. Because we never got that exposure. So there is just too much opportunity here. If you know how to grab it, you can so.

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SG: I, yeah that's, and the good part of raising a kid here, you also get to know a lot about America when you are raising a kid. So,

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SG: that I, without him, I don't know whether I would have get so much, you know, exposure to what America is. So that's, that's the part. And the Desi part is always there.

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I: Right.

SG: We all talk, eat, dress up, and all the time in our way. So never, and the good thing is that we never have to act something different, because there are so many of us here.

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SG: So I don't think he has any identity crisis as such that he would, might have if he were growing in a different place. Because he sees his type of person, like you know, his tribe like everywhere.

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SG: So, people talk about Diwali. People talk about all the festivals. People talk about the food. And he feels he's just one of them. He's also both. So that is a very good part of, you know, raising your kid here.

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SG: I mean, they are very much grounded in who they are. They know their roots very well. They are not confused about who they are, and they're very confident. So that's what I feel most of the kids

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SG: that, if you are growing up in other parts, I have heard those. I have never experienced those, because they don't get to see people like them that much. So they try to fit in, in the different community. These kids never had to fit in.

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SG: So, so I feel in a way it's very fortunate to be here and raising your kids. That's the good part of, you know. But then also, it's not very easy. You might have heard about, because there is so much Desi people. So, so many Asian people. It's more about competition.

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SG: And more about academics, than anything else. But my son always plays soccer, so he was more involved in other way and plays music and all those. So we tried to raise him differently, it ended up in a same, you know, channel. So you cannot avoid that.

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SG: Even, there's a good and bad part, both.

I: Right.

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I: This is great, thank you. Do you have anything else to add about the Desi identity, Desi community in Silicon Valley?

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SG: No, I think I probably have spoken enough, so.

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I: Okay, thank you. Thank you very much.

SG: Yeah, thank you so much for coming.