

Desis of Silicon Valley Speak: An Oral History

Sujit Saraf Interview

1

00:00:00.579 --> 00:00:05.639

Interviewer (I): Hi, Good Morning, I am Mantra Roy from the Martin Luther King, Jr.

2

00:00:05.640 --> 00:00:09.990

I: library from San Jose State University and we are interviewing for the

3

00:00:10.300 --> 00:00:17.969

I: Oral history project called Desis of Silicon Valley Speak. So thank you for your time and we will start with the questions.

4

00:00:19.300 --> 00:00:24.689

I: So, please tell us about yourself by introducing yourself and describe your journey up until now.

5

00:00:26.260 --> 00:00:31.649

Sujit (S): My name is Sujit Saraf. I am your typical like Silicon Valley techie.

6

00:00:31.650 --> 00:00:32.739

S: I'm an engineer,

7

00:00:32.739 --> 00:00:37.379

S: went to IIT in India, came to the US as

8

00:00:37.870 --> 00:00:42.419

S: many of us that come. Got a PhD at Berkeley in engineering,

9

00:00:43.059 --> 00:00:46.079

S: worked for years as a research scientist at NASA Ames.

10

00:00:47.170 --> 00:00:48.300

S: Went back to India.

11

00:00:48.300 --> 00:00:54.480

S: I was a professor at IIT for a year, worked in a few startups, and now I have my own software company.

12

00:00:55.740 --> 00:00:58.840

S: About 25 years ago when I was a graduate student at Berkeley,

13

00:00:59.230 --> 00:01:02.549

S: one of my close friends who had done a lot of theater with me,

14

00:01:03.219 --> 00:01:07.529

S: was a graduate student at Stanford. So we found ourselves within

15

00:01:08.080 --> 00:01:13.589

S: driving distance of each other. So we started a theater company named Naatak. The name was rather

16

00:01:14.470 --> 00:01:17.879

S: unimaginative name; a theater company called theater or drama and

17

00:01:19.540 --> 00:01:22.019

S: we staged a play on February 16

18

00:01:22.990 --> 00:01:24.549

S: 1996.

19

00:01:24.549 --> 00:01:29.969

S: Since then Naatak has grown. It has now become the largest Indian theater company in the US. We have our

20

00:01:31.180 --> 00:01:36.329

S: 70th or maybe 73rd production or 72nd production, opens in three days

21

00:01:37.210 --> 00:01:39.210

S: in Palo Alto and

22

00:01:40.119 --> 00:01:48.029

S: over 25 years we have of course seen thousands of engineers pass through our organization. One hundred thousand people have perhaps watched our plays

23

00:01:49.140 --> 00:01:50.290

S: and

24

00:01:50.290 --> 00:01:54.840

S: we hope that we will continue to do this forever until we aren't even allowed.

25

00:01:56.260 --> 00:02:03.929

I: That's, that's very impressive and though Naatak seemed unimpressive as a name, but it speaks volumes today.

26

00:02:05.170 --> 00:02:11.100

I: So thank you for your contribution. So now what does Silicon Valley mean to you?

27

00:02:12.910 --> 00:02:17.399

S: What does it mean? What does Silicon Valley mean to me? Well, first and foremost, it was a place to work in. I

28

00:02:19.540 --> 00:02:25.200

S: did all my jobs, except the IIT professorship, have been in Silicon Valley and

29

00:02:25.570 --> 00:02:29.939

S: to me it means, what it means, perhaps to most techies, it's a place where a large number of

30

00:02:30.640 --> 00:02:33.360

S: opportunities exist for people in the IT industry.

31

00:02:33.940 --> 00:02:40.800

S: To live, a beautiful place to live in, with lovely hikes and there are oceans and there are lots of jobs.

32

00:02:40.800 --> 00:02:46.109

S: So it means to me what it perhaps means to most Indians working in the Valley; a wonderful place to live and work in.

33

00:02:47.170 --> 00:02:54.330

I: Hmm. And as a theater person, what does Silicon Valley mean to you?

S: As a theatre person? It means less,

34

00:02:55.420 --> 00:02:57.540

S: to be honest. We in Naatak, of course,

35

00:02:57.540 --> 00:03:01.319

S: we began because we were keen to bring Indian theater to the Bay Area.

36

00:03:01.650 --> 00:03:06.929

S: The vast majorities of all our plays in the beginning were set in India and were Indian plays.

37

00:03:08.049 --> 00:03:12.779

S: About 10 or 15 years ago, I did begin to wonder that, I did

38

00:03:14.340 --> 00:03:17.819

S: begin to wonder if I should continue to do plays always set in India because

39

00:03:18.400 --> 00:03:19.450

S: a

40

00:03:19.450 --> 00:03:24.239

S: large part of my own lived experience was not being captured by these plays. Take a lovely play like

41

00:03:25.060 --> 00:03:29.009

S: Mohan Rakesh's "Aashad ka Ek Din" about Kalidas's

42

00:03:30.069 --> 00:03:31.269

S: travels from

43

00:03:31.269 --> 00:03:37.379

S: a small village to the great city of Ujjain and how he leaves a woman he loves behind and then he

44

00:03:37.380 --> 00:03:39.380

S: comes back to her. Those are beautiful plays and

45

00:03:40.150 --> 00:03:42.150

S: they do

46

00:03:42.760 --> 00:03:48.120

S: have some universal themes that perhaps appeal to anyone in any age. However,

47

00:03:48.730 --> 00:03:55.259

S: there is a large part of my lived experience and the lived experiences of people in Naatak that are not covered

48

00:03:55.420 --> 00:04:00.630

S: by such plays. So what does Silicon Valley mean to me in terms of theatre? About 15 years ago

49

00:04:00.630 --> 00:04:04.349

S: I did begin to write a few plays set in Silicon Valley and

50

00:04:05.230 --> 00:04:09.239

S: began to stage them. Now, there is a push within Naatak

51

00:04:10.599 --> 00:04:14.789

S: by me, of course, that we should stage more plays set in Silicon Valley,

52

00:04:15.579 --> 00:04:17.579

S: particularly our lives in Silicon Valley.

53

00:04:17.769 --> 00:04:21.809

S: There are many things going on here in our lives and in the world at large that

54

00:04:22.360 --> 00:04:24.100

S: perhaps cry out

55

00:04:24.100 --> 00:04:28.589

S: to be placed on stage and we do intend to place those stories on stage.

56

00:04:28.660 --> 00:04:32.219

S: I can perhaps give one of those, one of those examples.

57

00:04:33.010 --> 00:04:36.239

S: This is not particularly Silicon Valley. It's India connected to Silicon Valley.

58

00:04:37.270 --> 00:04:39.930

S: You are certainly familiar with Ammachi,

59

00:04:40.690 --> 00:04:41.710

S: the

59

00:04:41.710 --> 00:04:47.579

S: Hugging Saint who comes, she she's from Kerala, I think, and she travels all over the world once a year.

60

00:04:47.580 --> 00:04:49.620

S: She comes to Silicon Valley, she comes to Castro Valley

61

00:04:49.620 --> 00:04:54.840

S: I think, and does her thing which is hugging people and when she hugs them they supposedly

62

00:04:56.229 --> 00:05:00.989

S: feel vibrations. So I could, and this about 10 years ago, I

63

00:05:01.510 --> 00:05:08.639

S: think. She was of course visiting the valley and in the restaurant where I always used to eat at, all my meals in those days

64

00:05:08.979 --> 00:05:13.559

S: had posters "ammachi," "come and get hugged by ammachi," in the middle of Silicon Valley.

65

00:05:14.289 --> 00:05:17.519

S: So I wrote a farce where a woman,

66

00:05:18.280 --> 00:05:21.389

S: modeled on Ammachi, comes and does her hugging

67

00:05:22.750 --> 00:05:25.229

S: activity in Silicon Valley and of course things go wrong.

68

00:05:25.840 --> 00:05:32.160

S: So Naatak has only in the last, Naatak has been around 25 years, but only in the last 10 or 12 years

69

00:05:32.410 --> 00:05:36.389

S: have we begun to explore our lives in Silicon Valley on stage.

70

00:05:37.930 --> 00:05:43.739

I: Okay, great. So when you say our lives, I mean that is a segue for me to go to my next question.

71

00:05:44.410 --> 00:05:49.919

I: Do you identify yourself as a Desi of Silicon Valley? And what does that mean to you?

S: I do, I do.

72

00:05:49.920 --> 00:05:54.000

S: I'm very much a Desi of Silicon Valley. What it means to me? Wow, so

73

00:05:54.850 --> 00:06:00.299

S: Desis didn't choose to be Desis. We were born Desis. What it means to me: a certain set of

74

00:06:01.060 --> 00:06:02.670

S: You know what?

75

00:06:02.670 --> 00:06:04.860

S: I always like to say when I go to Delhi and meet

76

00:06:05.410 --> 00:06:11.819

S: highly westernized Indians, my own family, not necessarily my family, but people I know, I tell them that you have

77

00:06:12.520 --> 00:06:17.370

S: Desi; what do I tell them? you have Western tastes and Desi values

78

00:06:18.130 --> 00:06:20.820

S: while I, living in America, have

79

00:06:22.030 --> 00:06:24.389

S: Indian tastes but Western values.

80

00:06:24.730 --> 00:06:29.610

S: That's what it means, being Desi in Silicon Valley. To me means having completely Indian tastes and

81

00:06:29.890 --> 00:06:36.990

S: completely Western values, having grown up in your standard Western type schools in India, having been taught by

82

00:06:37.510 --> 00:06:44.370

S: Western educated people, my values of course are Western, perhaps slightly liberal left-leaning Western

83

00:06:44.590 --> 00:06:47.160

S: Silicon Valley values, and you would not be able to

84

00:06:47.710 --> 00:06:53.100

S: distinguish my values from that of my neighbor who's of course, not Indian or

85

00:06:54.070 --> 00:06:59.310

S: from my colleagues who again are not Indians, but if you were to look at my tastes, not my values;

86

00:06:59.310 --> 00:07:04.949

S: but my tastes they are fully Desi. I of course still eat. I just ate some dosa. I

87

00:07:05.710 --> 00:07:12.660

S: Listen to Indian classical music and I of course stage plays the vast majority of which are in Indian languages.

88

00:07:12.850 --> 00:07:14.850

S: But in my case mostly Hindi.

89

00:07:15.250 --> 00:07:18.359

S: In Naatak stages, Naatak is about to stage Hindi plays.

90

00:07:18.360 --> 00:07:23.100

S: We stage plays coming in English, Tamil, and Bengali, in Marathi, in Gujarati.

91

00:07:23.140 --> 00:07:28.770

S: So to answer your question in one line: being Desi in Silicon Valley to me means having Desi tastes and

92

00:07:29.410 --> 00:07:31.410

S: Western value.

93

00:07:31.600 --> 00:07:33.600

I: Okay, that's very interesting.

94

00:07:34.330 --> 00:07:39.349

I: Why and how is Desi culture so vibrant in Silicon Valley?

95

00:07:41.100 --> 00:07:46.909

S: Well, some of it is just the power of democracy. There are I don't know, 2-300,000

96

00:07:47.759 --> 00:07:49.759

S: Desis in the Valley

97

00:07:49.860 --> 00:07:54.080

S: with lots of money to throw around; so they are able to fund it, this culture. When I do

98

00:07:54.080 --> 00:07:55.880

S: my plays, my shows sell out.

99

00:07:55.880 --> 00:08:00.799

S: One of the simple reasons is there are a very large number of Desis with money to watch the play.

100

00:08:00.800 --> 00:08:03.620

S: I know of almost every Indian theatre company in the U.S.

101

00:08:03.620 --> 00:08:09.679

S: Because many of them are in states like, there are some in Seattle, Houston, Chicago, Washington, DC, Virginia.

102

00:08:09.680 --> 00:08:14.030

S: I know them all. None of them are able to stage plays on the scale that we do

103

00:08:14.699 --> 00:08:18.228

S: and as I said, the primary reason is just the power of numbers and

104

00:08:19.620 --> 00:08:26.810

S: once people congregate in sufficiently large numbers, naturally they want to recreate a bit of the country they have left behind.

105

00:08:27.570 --> 00:08:29.570

S: Hence, Desi culture is

106

00:08:29.880 --> 00:08:31.880

S: prevalent and vibrant.

107

00:08:33.089 --> 00:08:35.839

I: Do you think Desis of Silicon Valley are

108

00:08:36.899 --> 00:08:40.399

I: quite distinct from Desis in other cities in the country?

109

00:08:41.729 --> 00:08:43.050

S: Hmm, I

110

00:08:43.050 --> 00:08:46.159

S: actually don't know; my best guess is no.

111

00:08:46.260 --> 00:08:52.249

S: We we Desis in the US are of course somewhat distinct from Desis in India, but

112

00:08:53.310 --> 00:08:56.089

S: my guess to the to the extent

113

00:08:56.089 --> 00:09:01.399

S: I know this, is that Desis in the valley are just like Desis in other parts of the US. We are mostly

114

00:09:02.130 --> 00:09:04.130

S: employed in white-collar professions; a

115

00:09:04.680 --> 00:09:05.730

S: very

116

00:09:05.730 --> 00:09:12.709

S: disproportionately large number are techie type people; we are affluent. We are somewhat conservative, you know, it is fair to say that

117

00:09:13.890 --> 00:09:17.719

S: When Desis leave India, they somehow in some ways become a little more conservative.

118

00:09:18.300 --> 00:09:22.190

S: We send our daughters to Bharatanatyam and our sons to

119

00:09:22.800 --> 00:09:24.600

S: something similar. So

120

00:09:24.600 --> 00:09:29.150

S: I think we are all the same, Desis in America all over, no matter where they live.

121

00:09:29.150 --> 00:09:32.749

S: Especially if they live in big cities, like metropolitan areas like the Valley,

122

00:09:33.360 --> 00:09:35.930

S: Chicago, Washington DC, Houston. I think they're the same.

123

00:09:35.930 --> 00:09:37.930

I: Hmm.

124

00:09:38.520 --> 00:09:43.099

I: How does being Desi help you succeed in your work in Silicon Valley?

125

00:09:47.140 --> 00:09:52.509

S: Well, in my case the answer is very specific. I run a software company; naturally all my engineers are in India, but of course

126

00:09:52.510 --> 00:09:54.510

S: that's not what you mean.

127

00:09:55.310 --> 00:09:59.679

S: Okay, when we Indians, I can now speak as a generic techie, like

128

00:10:00.260 --> 00:10:07.119

S: when we Indians come to the Valley, certainly there is a large network of Indians which helps us land our jobs and

129

00:10:07.550 --> 00:10:09.550

S: supports us through the

130

00:10:10.160 --> 00:10:12.999

S: problems that arise when you first start out in a career.

131

00:10:13.700 --> 00:10:20.950

S: Beyond that, we have, and this is not a Desi thing, being immigrants, we are naturally willing to put up with some discomfort

132

00:10:21.620 --> 00:10:25.630

S: And some inconveniences because that is why we came to this country.

133

00:10:26.630 --> 00:10:30.189

S: To do well in our careers even at the expense of some other things.

134

00:10:31.010 --> 00:10:32.810

S: So as you certainly know,

135

00:10:32.810 --> 00:10:35.859

S: we Indians who come to the US and that applies

136

00:10:35.860 --> 00:10:41.200

S: I suppose to Chinese immigrants and so and certainly to Mexican immigrants even though they come to do a different type of,

137

00:10:41.360 --> 00:10:44.380

S: different set of jobs, we come with the idea of

138

00:10:45.290 --> 00:10:51.909

S: making do and making compromises to succeed in our careers.

I: Give me some examples. What do you mean?

139

00:10:52.550 --> 00:10:57.399

S: You know very well, how we - when I first came to the US I was in, Massachusetts.

140

00:10:57.400 --> 00:11:00.249

S: I went to UMass Amherst to do my Masters. I

141

00:11:01.190 --> 00:11:06.249

S: had no money and my roommates and I shared rooms. Of course. We have two, two rooms.

142

00:11:06.500 --> 00:11:09.670

S: We got discarded mattresses from our

143

00:11:10.310 --> 00:11:12.310

S: neighbors, white neighbors.

144

00:11:12.500 --> 00:11:14.590

S: Those new mattresses are perfectly fine.

145

00:11:14.590 --> 00:11:15.310

S: We are Indian.

146

00:11:15.310 --> 00:11:21.070

S: We thought what they, how come, how can they throw such perfect mattresses? At least why they're not trying to

147

00:11:21.070 --> 00:11:26.140

S: sell them to us? But they weren't. They were your standard Americans who had already used those

148

00:11:26.660 --> 00:11:30.040

S: mattresses for a year or two. Maybe they were moving and they were very good neighbors.

149

00:11:30.040 --> 00:11:35.709

S: They see these graduate students and they just, out of the generosity of their hearts, they just gave us these mattresses.

150

00:11:35.710 --> 00:11:37.710

S: They could have sold them to us.

151

00:11:37.910 --> 00:11:39.320

S: So

152

00:11:39.320 --> 00:11:42.010

S: we Indians learn to live on borrowed, on

153

00:11:42.830 --> 00:11:45.129

S: secondhand mattresses and two to a room.

154

00:11:45.980 --> 00:11:53.050

S: It isn't an Indian thing. It is perhaps not even a white thing. It is an immigrant thing. When you go to another

155

00:11:53.660 --> 00:11:55.600

S: country, you go there to make these compromises.

156

00:11:55.600 --> 00:11:57.600

S: If you're born in a prosperous society,

157

00:11:57.740 --> 00:11:59.740

S: you take all this for granted and

158

00:11:59.930 --> 00:12:00.650

S: naturally

159

00:12:00.650 --> 00:12:06.699

S: you do not think just being in America is a blessing as many Indians do when they first come here as I did [inaudible].

160

00:12:07.130 --> 00:12:12.789

S: So just being here and earning even a paltry graduate student stipend which sounded like a fair amount of money

161

00:12:14.270 --> 00:12:20.439

S: in rupees, was a blessing. Those, so I was willing to make many, many compromises in my living conditions.

162

00:12:21.050 --> 00:12:26.200

S: Obviously, I was willing to live away from my family. I was willing to delay much gratification in life.

163

00:12:26.200 --> 00:12:29.679

S: I was willing to get up at 6:00 in the morning and take some bus to some lab.

164

00:12:30.860 --> 00:12:35.560

S: These service. Well, you could argue they deprived us of some joy in our youths.

165

00:12:36.620 --> 00:12:41.200

S: But they serve us well, and eventually these ensure that we all end up in

166

00:12:41.839 --> 00:12:42.980

S: relatively

167

00:12:42.980 --> 00:12:44.209

S: stable

168

00:12:44.209 --> 00:12:48.369

S: professions and, I don't know, we have comfortable retirements.

169

00:12:48.430 --> 00:12:50.440

S: I don't know if the trade-off is worth it.

170

00:12:50.540 --> 00:12:56.290

S: But certainly that is what it means being Desi, being a Desi immigrant, mind you. My children will not think like this.

171

00:12:56.959 --> 00:12:58.959

S: Being a Desi immigrant in the U.S.

172

00:13:00.080 --> 00:13:02.080

I: Yeah, and

173

00:13:02.149 --> 00:13:07.269

I: Your work with Naatak. So as a desi coming up with stories, right?

174

00:13:07.270 --> 00:13:10.659

I: That is how it helps you in your work as a theatre.

S: It does.

175

00:13:10.660 --> 00:13:14.829

S: So as I said in the beginning, I relied largely on well-known Indian playwrights.

176

00:13:15.410 --> 00:13:17.410

S: In a typical Tendulkar,

177

00:13:18.470 --> 00:13:23.110

S: Mohan Rakesh, Girish Karnad and people like that. Sometime around 10 or 15 years ago,

178

00:13:23.110 --> 00:13:29.589

S: I did begin to think that as a playwright. I happen. I was a playwright before Naatak came into existence.

179

00:13:30.050 --> 00:13:34.599

S: So as a playwright and a writer I should be writing about my own life in the Valley.

180

00:13:34.970 --> 00:13:38.589

S: So I ended up writing and staging. When I write a play,

181

00:13:38.589 --> 00:13:43.929

S: I just end up staging it in Naatak, partly because I decide who stages the plays. So, I cheat a little.

182

00:13:44.329 --> 00:13:50.739

S: I ended up staging a few plays about these women, like ammachi and some other quirks of

183

00:13:51.930 --> 00:13:55.259

S: Desi existence in the Bay Area that I thought I should be making fun of.

184

00:13:55.570 --> 00:14:01.410

S: So yes, and now my Desi experience in America informs my work in Naatak. In the beginning

185

00:14:01.410 --> 00:14:04.319

S: it didn't. Increasingly, it does and it perhaps should

186

00:14:04.319 --> 00:14:06.280

I: Hmm..

187

00:14:06.280 --> 00:14:08.999

S: And the good news is that there are others in Naatak

188

00:14:10.210 --> 00:14:12.210

S: who have also begun to now

189

00:14:12.940 --> 00:14:14.940

S: write stories that

190

00:14:15.160 --> 00:14:19.709

S: inform their lives in the Bay Area and I gladly and gleefully take those scripts

191

00:14:20.230 --> 00:14:22.559

S: written by these Naatak numbers and I put them on stage.

192

00:14:22.560 --> 00:14:26.970

S: I absolutely love such plays. Of course, not all are well-written, but I love the idea.

193

00:14:27.730 --> 00:14:29.710

S: So you nurture.

194

00:14:29.710 --> 00:14:34.590

S: Yes, I, I like to think I nurture these people. I probably did not provide them as much

195

00:14:35.350 --> 00:14:37.829

S: guidance as I could have partly because

196

00:14:39.220 --> 00:14:45.480

S: the thing with writing is it requires decades of preparation. People are refusing, people refuse to do the preparation.

197

00:14:45.480 --> 00:14:49.589

S: You know for every word you write you should probably have read hundred words to begin with.

198

00:14:49.870 --> 00:14:54.000

S: Much more should be going in than comes out. So because I'm not able to

199

00:14:54.760 --> 00:15:01.439

S: lay down such conditions, my nurturing is not as warm as it perhaps should be. Having said all that,

200

00:15:01.510 --> 00:15:05.879

S: I've still managed to create a small group of people in Naatak who co-write plays.

201

00:15:06.880 --> 00:15:08.880

S: I'll give you some examples.

202

00:15:09.340 --> 00:15:11.340

S: One of my members.

203

00:15:11.680 --> 00:15:16.439

S: Well, of course, we are all techies. So he, I think if I remember correctly he works at Netflix.

204

00:15:17.860 --> 00:15:20.430

S: So is your typical techie doing optimization,

205

00:15:20.920 --> 00:15:26.670

S: algorithms at Netflix or some such thing; from here. has Masters or some such degree in such fields, and

206

00:15:28.000 --> 00:15:30.119

S: he wrote a farce about

207

00:15:32.320 --> 00:15:34.980

S: about a unicorn, you know, the guy you know the term right?

208

00:15:35.710 --> 00:15:37.510

S: All these

209

00:15:37.510 --> 00:15:44.400

S: Dot-coms that suddenly rise up and become worth many billions of dollars and then they collapse. So naturally in the farce something similar happened.

210

00:15:44.920 --> 00:15:47.099

S: Another one of my members wrote the story about

211

00:15:47.830 --> 00:15:55.139

S: the children of an Indian diplomat, mind you, in San Francisco, who drift into Islamic radicalism and join an organization

212

00:15:55.390 --> 00:16:01.080

S: similar to ISIS. These are in some sense, well, this is not exactly a techy story, but you could argue

213

00:16:01.080 --> 00:16:05.189

S: these are the stories of Indians in the US and there are five or six such stories.

214

00:16:05.560 --> 00:16:11.109

S: So Naatak; you might see Naatak do increasingly more and more such plays. Naturally

215

00:16:11.110 --> 00:16:17.950

S: there is a paucity of good scripts of this type. So I'm always struggling to find such scripts. But I do find them.

216

00:16:17.950 --> 00:16:23.409

S: Of course, I told you about that Ammachi play I wrote. I wrote another play joking, another play making fun of our propensity.

217

00:16:24.350 --> 00:16:30.250

S: This is a very Western thing; it's not an immigrant thing. Doing fundraisers. You know when I was a grad student at Berkeley

218

00:16:30.250 --> 00:16:33.070

S: there was a big earthquake in India in Latur, in Maharashtra, and

219

00:16:33.740 --> 00:16:39.700

S: I believe 25,000 people died. It was horrible. Naturally, the

220

00:16:40.340 --> 00:16:44.590

S: Desis of Berkeley or whatever they were, had a huge dance party

221

00:16:45.950 --> 00:16:47.950

S: which was a fundraiser for

222

00:16:48.140 --> 00:16:54.129

S: the earthquake victims in LA - I found it ridiculous. People have been crushed under buildings

223

00:16:54.130 --> 00:16:59.380

S: and here we are having, we're drinking and having a big party and sure some good portion of that will go to the

224

00:17:00.410 --> 00:17:02.800

S: victims, but is it okay to do this?

225

00:17:02.800 --> 00:17:06.339

S: Do the ends justify the means? Just because we're raising money for the victims,

226

00:17:06.339 --> 00:17:12.279

S: is it okay to have fun because people have died? So naturally now there is a play I wrote and staged

227

00:17:13.250 --> 00:17:14.780

S: which

228

00:17:14.780 --> 00:17:19.389

S: actually, that play was written 15 years ago after the Asian tsunami you might remember 2004?

229

00:17:20.589 --> 00:17:25.839

S: 2004. There was a big Asian tsunami even in India; hundred thousand

230

00:17:26.959 --> 00:17:28.959

S: tens of thousands of people died, so

231

00:17:29.539 --> 00:17:32.979

S: the Desis of Silicon Valley put up a big show. They invite

232

00:17:33.529 --> 00:17:37.628

S: Lata Mangeshkar or a Amitabh Bachchan and maybe Schwarzenegger who was then the governor;

233

00:17:37.820 --> 00:17:43.960

S: All of this is to raise money for the tsunami but in the midst of all this comes their own politics, and so

234

00:17:44.179 --> 00:17:48.158

S: so yeah more and more of our plays will hopefully be of that type

235

00:17:48.830 --> 00:17:50.830

S: Exploring and often ridiculing

236

00:17:51.559 --> 00:17:53.559

S: our lives in the Bay Area.

237

00:17:54.379 --> 00:17:56.379

I: It's great.

238

00:17:56.480 --> 00:18:00.519

I: When you look back at your journey, how does Silicon Valley

239

00:18:01.789 --> 00:18:03.789

I: influence your identity as a Desi?

240

00:18:06.950 --> 00:18:09.939

S: Yeah, you mean in terms of Naatak right?

241

00:18:10.789 --> 00:18:16.628

I: Yes, and also the fact that you know your day job as a techie, but also primarily Naatak's.

242

00:18:16.629 --> 00:18:18.629

S: Well, it influences it in a very very

243

00:18:19.549 --> 00:18:23.199

S: practical matter. First of all, being a techie

244

00:18:23.869 --> 00:18:25.610

S: provides me the financial

245

00:18:25.610 --> 00:18:31.629

S: freedom and the flexibility with my time that I need to do all this. Naatak is a pretty much a full-time job.

246

00:18:33.919 --> 00:18:37.538

S: The reason I'm able to run Naatak and the reason there is even a play going on right now

247

00:18:37.749 --> 00:18:42.099

S: in three days a play opens, is because all the people in Naatak are expected to,

248

00:18:42.799 --> 00:18:45.668

S: They're not expected to be Silicon Valley techies, but most of them are.

249

00:18:46.490 --> 00:18:53.859

S: So Silicon Valley makes it possible. I have been to theatre companies, many theatre companies in Bangalore and Delhi often stage my plays.

251

00:18:53.980 --> 00:18:57.459

S: So I know them very well. They're always looking for sponsorships and

250

00:18:58.129 --> 00:19:02.889

S: Struggling financially, there is no point. You can't stage a play in India just the way I do here. Naatak, I just

251

00:19:02.889 --> 00:19:05.769

S: don't care. I don't need any sponsorship. I just want people to buy tickets.

252

00:19:06.230 --> 00:19:13.659

S: So the first thing Silicon Valley did is it liberated me and my team members in Naatak to do plays exactly as we want

253

00:19:14.029 --> 00:19:15.230

S: rather than

254

00:19:15.230 --> 00:19:17.059

S: spending my time

255

00:19:17.059 --> 00:19:24.489

S: courting those with means to support my activities. The second thing it does is our jobs are such that we have flexibility, you know

256

00:19:24.490 --> 00:19:25.100

S: the,

257

00:19:25.100 --> 00:19:30.639

S: most techie jobs are such that you can manage your time as you wish and if you're good at it you can do

258

00:19:30.639 --> 00:19:32.480

S: five things at the same time.

259

00:19:32.480 --> 00:19:37.430

S: The third of course is, as, to go back to my older point, now my lives in Silicon Valley are

260

00:19:38.010 --> 00:19:43.910

S: informing the kinds of plays we do and the fourth which, some may not agree with, but well

261

00:19:43.910 --> 00:19:49.040

S: It's a very minor matter. We techies in the Bay Area who live in the Valley and work in companies

262

00:19:49.830 --> 00:19:55.280

S: have, I like to think, maybe not everybody agrees, have acquired some project management skills at

263

00:19:56.010 --> 00:20:02.180

S: defining a problem and meeting a deadline. I think some of that filters into the way Naatak is run. We,

264

00:20:02.850 --> 00:20:08.630

S: touchwood, nothing has ever gone wrong. We have over 25 years. I don't know, we've staged at least 500 shows.

265

00:20:08.660 --> 00:20:13.460

S: We're doing our seventy second production and a technical production is between five and fifteen shows?

266

00:20:13.460 --> 00:20:15.460

S: So you can multiply and see.

267

00:20:16.040 --> 00:20:19.860

S: Fortunately and I'm afraid to say this, no show has ever been canceled.

268

00:20:19.920 --> 00:20:22.729

S: The closest we've come to is there was a whole Palo Alto wide

269

00:20:23.040 --> 00:20:29.659

S: power outage two months ago which (had) nothing to do with us, which delayed our play by an hour; so

270

00:20:30.390 --> 00:20:34.369

S: we are very proud of how we manage our company frugally,

271

00:20:34.860 --> 00:20:39.620

S: efficiently, and productively and I think some of those

272

00:20:40.020 --> 00:20:44.660

S: ideas that we apply may have come to us from our jobs in Silicon Valley.

273

00:20:44.660 --> 00:20:49.900

S: So, very practical, it's a really practical matter. Silicon Valley may have made us better at just managing projects.

274

00:20:51.140 --> 00:20:52.360

I: Hmm. Okay.

275

00:20:52.800 --> 00:20:57.520

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

276

00:20:58.140 --> 00:21:00.949

I: given what you have been, what your experiences have been?

277

00:21:02.580 --> 00:21:04.440

S: My future is,

278

00:21:04.440 --> 00:21:07.190

S: So as far as Naatak is concerned, it'll continue.

279

00:21:08.280 --> 00:21:10.670

S: In fact, it will continue beyond me because

280

00:21:11.220 --> 00:21:13.699

S: by now we are quite stable. I will upgrade.

281

00:21:13.700 --> 00:21:15.700

S: I hope, I like to think that

282

00:21:15.960 --> 00:21:21.350

S: it is set up in such a way that it does not depend on any one human being or even any five human beings.

283

00:21:22.410 --> 00:21:25.459

S: For myself. I don't know. I may want to at some point

284

00:21:27.600 --> 00:21:30.560

S: retire to India for various reasons. I

285

00:21:32.280 --> 00:21:34.940

S: like to think that I probably won't spend my

286

00:21:36.510 --> 00:21:38.510

S: non-productive years here.

287

00:21:38.850 --> 00:21:42.120

S: This is nothing (to do with) the Valley. The Valley is a wonderful place. It's clean.

288

00:21:42.390 --> 00:21:47.640

S: You know what the air quality index is in Delhi right now? It's like 400 or something. So

289

00:21:48.280 --> 00:21:54.330

S: I'm not foolish enough to think I can have a clean quality of life in Delhi, but I still do not,

290

00:21:55.030 --> 00:21:59.580

S: how should I put it? I would not mind perhaps because of the Indian tastes that I mentioned.

291

00:21:59.580 --> 00:22:03.929

S: I do have Western values, but Indian tastes. I would not mind spending my

292

00:22:04.750 --> 00:22:09.869

S: remaining years elsewhere once I stopped working. Naatak will go on. For, for my family

293

00:22:09.870 --> 00:22:14.430

S: I don't know. My children of course are, they're kids; but they're Americans. So

294

00:22:15.700 --> 00:22:17.700

S: they will go, you know how it is. They'll go wherever

295

00:22:17.700 --> 00:22:22.649

S: they go, wherever they go to college and so, so I don't know but it is likely that,

296

00:22:25.240 --> 00:22:30.900

S: it is likely that I will not spend my retirement in the Valley even though it is a beautiful place to live.

297

00:22:30.900 --> 00:22:32.900

I: Hmm.

298

00:22:33.040 --> 00:22:34.270

I: So

299

00:22:34.270 --> 00:22:41.969

I: Besides these questions, I mean if you were asked a very broad question about Desis of Silicon Valley, right?

300

00:22:41.970 --> 00:22:47.520

I: I mean if you were to say a couple of, you know, broad brushstroke kind of statements about them

301

00:22:47.520 --> 00:22:53.580

I: especially through your experience, what would that be and something that you have not mentioned? And yeah,

302

00:22:53.580 --> 00:22:55.580

I: I may not have asked you either about.

303

00:22:57.340 --> 00:23:01.140

S: Well, they are very hardworking and they're very focused on

304

00:23:02.500 --> 00:23:06.060

S: what they came to America for and

305

00:23:08.650 --> 00:23:10.370

S: This

306

00:23:10.370 --> 00:23:16.339

S: very focused on what they came to America for and there is no doubt in my mind or their minds

307

00:23:17.279 --> 00:23:23.629

S: what they came to America for. They came for comfort and prosperity and good careers and a clean life and

308

00:23:24.659 --> 00:23:26.659

S: the Desis of Silicon Valley,

309

00:23:27.270 --> 00:23:31.789

S: just like the Desis in the other, in other parts of America are willing to work hard

310

00:23:32.850 --> 00:23:34.850

S: to get those things.

311

00:23:35.000 --> 00:23:41.200

I: Has that ethic changed over the 25 years that you have been here? So when you came as a graduate

312

00:23:41.200 --> 00:23:48.160

I: student and today 2019 the graduate students who are coming from India and then eventually becoming techies

313

00:23:49.200 --> 00:23:52.039

I: in Silicon Valley from other cities and becoming techies here -

314

00:23:52.040 --> 00:23:58.380

I: Is there a change that you have noticed and which will probably or is already informing the changing identity

315

00:23:58.380 --> 00:24:00.380

I: of Desis in Silicon Valley?

316

00:24:00.420 --> 00:24:05.620

S: The bigger change, the big change, of course, is in the next generation, but I think you mean the same the first

317

00:24:05.620 --> 00:24:07.620

S: generation arrivals.

318

00:24:07.880 --> 00:24:11.680

S: No, I mean the ethic is evolving a bit, as in there are many more of us.

319

00:24:13.110 --> 00:24:16.819

S: But no, I do not think that ethic has changed. I have changed. I have changed of course.

320

00:24:16.820 --> 00:24:19.640

S: I was then on that side of the wall

321

00:24:20.399 --> 00:24:24.619

S: and now I'm on this side of the wall. So I am now taking it easy, of course.

322

00:24:24.620 --> 00:24:30.920

S: I'm no longer wildly rushing about trying to become more prosperous and have a better career, but that's

323

00:24:30.920 --> 00:24:32.920

S: because I have done the job. I

324

00:24:33.140 --> 00:24:38.620

S: don't think that ethic has changed. Naturally. It is somewhat different in our children.

325

00:24:39.149 --> 00:24:41.239

S: In the, in those who were born and raised here in the Valley.

326

00:24:43.110 --> 00:24:46.339

I: But not in the generations of Desis

S: I don't think so.

327

00:24:46.340 --> 00:24:50.329

S: I think the observer has changed. Now I obviously look at it

328

00:24:50.730 --> 00:24:53.689

S: with slightly different eyes because I myself am older.

329

00:24:53.909 --> 00:24:58.249

S: But I don't think it has changed. When I see young people and I see them all the time who come to the valley,

330

00:24:58.250 --> 00:25:00.409

S: I think their aspirations and

331

00:25:01.470 --> 00:25:07.069

S: the way they plan to go about it are all very similar to what mine were 25 years ago.

332

00:25:08.940 --> 00:25:12.799

I: Great, thank you very much Sujit. It's been lovely talking to you and

333

00:25:13.560 --> 00:25:18.300

I: Your work and are you, if I'm not wrong, you're doing Ismat Chughtai's work.

334

00:25:18.300 --> 00:25:18.889

S: Yes

335

00:25:18.889 --> 00:25:20.440

I: Well that's opening through

336

00:25:20.440 --> 00:25:23.140

S: we are doing four plays. One of them is laughs.

337

00:25:23.140 --> 00:25:24.960

I: Yes, of course. Mm-hmm

338

00:25:25.220 --> 00:25:27.600

S: come and watch it. It's it's lovely. Of course

339

00:25:28.440 --> 00:25:32.809

I: Did you know I, I follow what Naatak is coming up with but you know, I have a two-year-old at home

340

00:25:32.810 --> 00:25:35.299

I: so sometimes it's not very easy to, I

341

00:25:35.299 --> 00:25:37.299

S: Leave the two-year old with the husband and come. [Laugh]

342

00:25:38.640 --> 00:25:43.100

I: I Would love to because I, I come from a literature background so I'm very very

343

00:25:43.100 --> 00:25:44.820

S: well you do have you studied is much

344

00:25:44.820 --> 00:25:50.140

I: Something yeah, you know a lot of like post-colonial Indian writing. You cannot not read it.

345

00:25:50.140 --> 00:25:56.260

I: Should I write so

S: oh cool, you will love it. So one of the stories is Manto, by the way.

346

00:25:56.260 --> 00:25:56.980

I: Oh. Okay.

347

00:25:57.040 --> 00:26:00.960

S: Oh, very dark and show you cold. Oh, have you read Cold? Oh,

348

00:26:00.960 --> 00:26:02.120

I: No no I have not.

349

00:26:02.120 --> 00:26:07.360

Make your hair stand on end. It's just too dirty. By the way. These plays are very dark and sexual and

350

00:26:08.250 --> 00:26:14.869

S: yeah, of course, you'd only have the off is the sweetest softest clay, by the way in them the four things that we're doing and

351

00:26:15.840 --> 00:26:19.759

S: Cold. Oh, you should read I can email it. It's a stone. You read Hindi, right?

352

00:26:20.480 --> 00:26:22.480

I: I take a while to read Hindi.

353

00:26:22.480 --> 00:26:26.140

S: Oh, I have it in Urdu or do I have it in Arabic script and evening you oh

354

00:26:27.600 --> 00:26:31.180

S: So just read the English version just google it; it's, it's very dark

355

00:26:32.700 --> 00:26:35.809

S: history sir, yup is actually okay anything

356

00:26:36.500 --> 00:26:41.400

S: So you're waiting for Lesley half cold? Oh and two written by two of my members.

357

00:26:41.400 --> 00:26:43.140

I: Okay, great.

358

00:26:43.140 --> 00:26:46.910

I: Wishing you all the very best for all of Naatak's work, and I'm sure it's going to it

359

00:26:46.910 --> 00:26:51.019

I: I mean, I think it is it speaks a lot about Desi's of Silicon Valley and

360

00:26:51.540 --> 00:26:55.100

S: Yeah, yeah, you should see how hard people work every evening.

361

00:26:55.100 --> 00:26:59.569

S: There are people in the theater hammering of it all for free by the way. We don't pay anybody. I don't get.

362

00:27:00.330 --> 00:27:02.629

S: We're just doing it for fun. People are very hard-working;

363

00:27:03.840 --> 00:27:05.800

S: so it shows.

364

00:27:05.800 --> 00:27:07.800

I: Right. Thank you very much Sujit.

365

00:27:07.800 --> 00:27:09.800

S: Thank you Mantra.