

Molly Graham [00:03] This begins an oral history interview with Dr. Usha Varanasi on March 21, 2023, for the NOAA Heritage Oral History Project. The interviewer is Molly Graham. It's a remote interview with Dr. Varanasi in Seattle, Washington, and I'm in Scarborough, Maine. Well, Dr. Varanasi, I like to start at the beginning. Can you just say when and where you were born?

Usha Varanasi: [00:32] I was born in 1941.

MG: [00:37] And where were you born?

UV: [00:39] I was born in Myanmar. It was called Burma then.

MG: [00:45] Now, tell me a little bit about your family background, starting on your father's side as far back as you know.

UV: [00:51] My grandfather, when he was about fifteen years of age, went on a ship to Myanmar or Burma because he was from a small village in Gujarat, the state of Gujarat. He felt he didn't want to study, or he felt he didn't have any prospects where he was. So he wanted to try out something different. He was fifteen when he went – he didn't have money, so he just stowed away on a ship. And then somebody from the village found him. I mean, the purser found him and was very upset that this kid had gotten into a ship. But somebody bought a ticket for him, saying that he was from the same village. Then somebody else gave my grandfather – a Muslim family gave him some money – because where he came from, there were a lot of Muslim families. They were all businesspeople, so somebody gave him a job in a grocery shop, I think. Slowly, he built up enough. He must be very savvy. He built up enough savings, and then he started a new store (I wrote this story for my family called “My Father's Journey.”) My grandfather then settled in Rangoon or Yangon, and then eventually, in a place called Bassein, which is now called Patheingyi, P-A-T-H-E-I-N. It's a small town on the river, a branch of the Irrawaddy River. I forget the name of the river. That's where he opened the grocery store as retail. His main store was in Patheingyi – and then he had some grocery stores in Rangoon. Anyway, that's where he settled, and then he went to India and married my grandmother, who was a unique woman. She was only thirteen or fourteen when she married him. But she had a higher education than my grandfather because, in the state where she grew up, the education for boys and girls was until the sixth – not six standard (grade), I think, until they were about twelve, they had to study. She knew math, and she knew a bit of English. She actually was a great asset to my grandfather for his business. The fact that he allowed her to be a partner already shows that this particular branch of my family was not very typical businesspeople who didn't allow women to do anything. She was not openly a partner, but he listened to her, and she made all kinds of suggestions– she helped him. So, that's where my father was born. There were three boys, and my father was born there. Then my grandfather died young at the age of forty-five due to heart problems, and my grandmother went back to India – [took] her children and went back to India, but they kept most of the business still in Rangoon or Burma. So they kept going and coming. My father, after he got married, took his wife to Burma, and that's where I was born. That was more like a chance – they were not settled in Burma. He just wanted to show – he loved Burma. He loved the people of Burma. He wanted to show my mother, who was only seventeen – my father was nineteen. My parents were very young. They were more like a

brother and sister to me than parents because they were so young themselves. So in March 1941, I was born there. But a few months after I was born, Japan bombed Burma, and people then had to flee [inaudible]. That was my first trip on the ship, which I, of course, don't remember – I was a few months old – and went back to India. That's where I grew up.

MG: [05:58] I have a number of follow-up questions. Did your grandfather come alone, or did he bring the family over eventually?

UV: [06:07] So, he went alone. Of course, he was only fifteen years old when he went to Burma. Then when he was twenty-something, some family – any immigrant family in another country always had a connection to their own country. So they arranged the marriage for him. He went to India and got married and brought my grandmother, too. And then perhaps she didn't go back to India for a long time and had three boys. My father was the middle one. By that time, the family became quite well-to-do. So I actually went to – I had never been to Burma until 2019 because part of the belief was – and I don't know how true it was – that doctors and scientists were in high demand in Burma. So if your passport read – that you were born in Burma, there was some chance of being held back if you visited Burma, and I did not want to take such chances. So I never went there. But then, in January 2019, Myanmar was open for a short while as a part of democracy. I thought that was a good chance to go. There were several things – I do not [want to] take too much time [on] how I ended up going, but we ended up spending a few days there. I saw where my grandfather's shops used to be in Edward Street. So to answer your question, my grandfather stayed for several decades in Burma, and then when he was having some heart issues – those days, if you have a heart attack, you almost die. So my grandmother decided that they all, with my grandfather, needed to go to his place, the village where he was born, in Gujarat, India. So, they went back. Since they had a lot of money, they built a very nice house there. They stayed. My grandfather died at age forty-five, and my father perhaps was fourteen or something. Then my grandmother ran [the] business in Burma from India. She took care of family relations in India. She was a force of nature. She was a wonderful woman and also unique because that is a business community where girls – they were not that much educated. We all got a college education because, in India, education is separated from the economic aspect of it. Women are given education; girls are given education because they would make good mothers. I think this is my belief. Somebody in social science might say that's not true. But nobody questioned our going to high school. Nobody questioned our going to – it was given that if you were good enough to go into university, you would get a bachelor's degree for sure. Mostly, you would go into arts and commerce because commerce, for our community, that's a good thing. But working outside of the home was unheard of. Why did I go for higher education? I was just saying because my grandmother had some education. She made sure everybody got educated in the family.

MG: [09:50] Yeah, she sounds like a remarkable woman. What was her personality like? Tell me more about her.

UV: [09:55] Yeah. Of course, I never saw her as a young woman, obviously. By the time I was born, she was in her fifties, I'm sure, or maybe even older. But fifties for sure. She loved my grandfather. So when he died, for a while, she went through a, I would say, deep depression. She had all kinds of health issues. But her mind was sharp as anything. She would read – in the

morning, I remember her – because, for a while, when my father and my mother went back to Burma after the children were born – at least I was born, and my sister was born – we were left to be with my grandmother. So I spent my first ten years or so quite a lot of time with my grandmother, with my young family going to and from Burma to Mumbai and other places to find out where to settle. So myself, my younger sister and my two cousins all lived with my grandmother in the town of Jetpur in Gujarat. The thing that I remember about her from that time, that period, is that she read every newspaper that was available in that small village. They were delivered to her, and in the post, she got some, I think, weekly news magazines. She was up on all kinds of world news that even my father and other people in the business community never paid attention to. So that was one thing I remember. The second thing I remember is because she knew so many things, she was sort of considered in the village as somebody who had the smarts and the money. There were two things; she was very rich – the woman – at that time, and then also knew so much. Then it was general knowledge that she helped her husband in business in Burma. People came, even the businessmen in small shops. They all come to see her in the afternoon if they have some investment questions or they want to make or start a new business or home or something. She was very unusual in that she was respected as an advisor. She couldn't do something outside of herself because of her health, and she was very generous. There were those two things I remember; she was very strong and wanted children to be educated, and she was really quite generous, so that many kids who couldn't afford to go to school, especially girls, would make sure they had school fees or whatever. Those are the things I remember about her. Those are the traits that helped me when I was a teenager and wanted to go abroad because she's the one who was the force behind my being able to come. So that is my good luck to have somebody like that. Then I think I – I haven't given you “My Father's Journey,” but I think you have my own writing in the ICES [International Council for the Exploration of the Sea Journal of Marine Science] paper, right? So, when my mother came back, and when my father was working back in 1942 after I was born – women all (were sent off to India) left by ship, but then the bombing was going on, so my father could not travel by ship but had to walk to India. He was twenty-one, maybe twenty-two, at that time. He was twenty-one when I was born, so he was perhaps twenty-two. So all the young Indian men were sent off by the people in Burma to walk through the forest or jungles. During that period, my father heard from people – the villagers used to come because all this conversation about where the bombing was happening was all done by word of mouth. People heard that a Japanese plane was going to hit this ship or something, so the young men, when they were going to go on the ship, were told, “Don't go on that ship because that is targeted.” That's why they walked. But while they were walking, my father said – people were coming and giving him money because they heard that my grandfather's young son was walking back to India, and they owed money to my grandfather, and they brought money back to give him. He said by the time he reached Calcutta, he had forty-thousand rupees, which was a huge amount of money at that time. He also heard that my grandfather paid for the education of a lot of children of these villagers on the river. They would come on the little canoe and buy all the groceries and go back to their village. They told how my grandfather paid for education. So that is when my grandmother felt really strongly that her children should also be highly educated. But her children never went beyond high school, all three, because there was a lot of money. They were [a] rich woman's sons. And also, education wasn't that exciting. That is why I ended up getting higher education because she said my grandfather had that wish that children should be educated. That's my background.

MG: [16:03] Was the expectation that your father or his brothers would go into the family business?

UV: [16:08] Yeah, that was the expectation because my grandfather died so young. If somebody from the family was not managing the business, the business would get taken over by people who may not be as much of well-wishers as the family itself. So the two older sons, my father's older brother and my father, were put into the business early on. They also were not educated. They didn't really want to study that much. So, this worked fine because my grandfather had a series of grocery stores, several of them in Yangon and other places, and also movie theaters. For some reason, he had movie theaters. I saw one movie theater area – the theater is gone in Yangon, but I saw where the locations were. So my father took over all the movie theaters. He was a great movie buff. My older uncle worked on the grocery store side of it. My uncle was very young at that time. Anyway, so they did take – and that is the only thing they knew. So, finally, in '64 or – way before '64. In the 1950s, Burma was closing, and they demonetized currency a couple of times so that all the money that immigrants were saving not in the bank but elsewhere was all suddenly wiped out. So, they transferred much of their resources, and they all moved back to India. Primary immigrants, I think, were from India and businesspeople. So my father then had – he had no other trade. He had no other trade except business. So then my grandmother gave each of the sons money to start their own business. My other grandfather, who was also very well-to-do – my mother's side – they both set up my father into a business, which was weaving artificial or synthetic silk; they call it artificial silk, but it's like nylon and rayon. They made saris, shirting material, things like that.

MG: [18:43] Did your father serve during World War II in the Burma theater?

UV: [18:47] No, by the time he came to India – because he had a child, family. So he was very fortunate [inaudible]. I don't think in India there was a draft. It was enlisting. Because our religion is a Jain religion, which is very much like Buddhism, fighting in war is not – they would perhaps be conscientious objectors. So they would not – anyway, there was no draft. So they all, perhaps, helped the government in certain ways, but not fighting, going on the front.

MG: [19:38] Did the family leave Burma for the extent of World War II because it was such a battleground?

UV: [19:44] Yeah. So they left Burma during that period. So, they left Burma actually when my grandfather was ill. So that was the first time, which is almost ten years before I was – eight years before I was born. They had already moved to Gujarat. But they had businesses in Burma. My grandmother's brothers were managing some and training my father – at that time, my father was just fourteen, but by the time he was nineteen, he was being trained to run the business. So, the business stayed there. Then during World War II, of course, most people – the businesses did not do well, especially now you had two things – the Burmese Government and Japanese invaders; both were not very good for Indians. So the Indian immigrants left. The only people who were not allowed to leave were doctors and scientists. So some of my grandfather's very good friends, children – I mean, my father's contemporaries – those were children – same time, they all grew up. Some of the women were doctors, and they were not – their passports were confiscated, so they were not allowed to leave. They had to leave like – you'd sneak them out

from – they had to leave sort of – what is it called? They left without permission; they just left as refugees, and they came to India. Then they got settled there. My father helped. So, in wartime and afterward, until '64, my father was sort of where people sent money, whichever money because he was known to be very honest. So, he did not – he could have easily pilfered people's money, but it was known in Burma that you could send money to Mr. Balwant rai T. Shah [inaudible]. I remember growing up – in college, they actually had several Burmese students – because most of the Burmese students went to India for university education. So when they came there, I remember them coming to our house on the weekend because our house – we didn't have a house, but an apartment – was a place for them to come for – it's like family. So my father, that way, had a very good acceptance of people from diverse cultures, but not, as I will tell you later, when it comes to marriages and traditional things like that. He had lots of friends from different parts, but when it came to the marriages of his children, he was totally conventional.

MG: [22:51] Tell me a little bit about your parent's marriage, and then I'm curious to hear about your mother's family background.

UV [22:56] Right. So when my father was fourteen, or maybe fifteen – I don't know how old he was. I know my mother was twelve – there's a family in Gujarat called Kamani, who were very well-to-do, and my maternal grandfather was a Kamani. That maternal grandfather also left his home state and went to the northern state [of] Bihar because he felt he wasn't going to do well in his own home state. So both my grandfathers, I would say, were really pioneers because he went to the state, Bihar, where there were no Gujaratis; nobody spoke Gujarati. But he settled there, and he had a car dealership. He had big business in Jamshedpur, which is a town close to Calcutta in Bihar. Jamshedpur is known as a very well-planned city; it's one of the unusually well-planned cities because Tata, as you may or may not know – Jamshedji Tata was a big philanthropist in India. He's from one of those Parsi families who actually came from Persia and settled in India. He was a big industrialist. So, Tata, T-A-T-A – if you look up, even now, it is one of the biggest philanthropists and industrialist dynasties. So that town, Jamshedpur, was actually founded by Jamshedji Tata. It's where there are all kinds of iron factories and engineering, and they make cars. So my grandfather, my maternal grandfather, settled there. And then he had three daughters. They could not marry Biharis. There was nobody there in Bihar – the Gujaratis. So they come home to Gujarat. All immigrants go home to get married. So that's how my mother was engaged to my father – they were engaged at the age of twelve and fourteen, respectively. My father said he wanted to wait – he didn't want to get engaged, or he wanted to see the girl. My grandmother said to him, "What do you know about girls? I know what is good for you." And my father always said, "Well, my grandmother knew that," because they had a happy marriage.

MG: [25:46] Tell me a little bit about how their married lives unfolded. Were you the firstborn?

UV: [25:50] Yeah. I was the firstborn. So, they were very young, right? My mother was sixteen when they got married, and my father was eighteen. She immediately got pregnant. Then they went to – she didn't want to be in Gujarat with her mother-in-law – she wanted to be only with her husband, so my grandmother said, "Have a delivery in India because I will get the best doctors." But no, she wanted to go to Burma because I was meant to be born there. In a

way, their marriage was traditional. When they were young, they were very much – both my parents loved fashion. They had very good design sense, although they did not know. They were, I would say, a young, smart couple. And then, I was born, and I was the first girl born in four generations of boys on my father's side. My father had only two brothers and no sisters. My grandfather had only one brother. His father also had no sisters – so since I was the first girl born after four generations, my grandmother was very excited. Because she really felt this was something unique. So I was considered very auspicious or whatever. The reason I'm saying this – usually, when the girls are born, they don't do very much about – not much fanfare. But when I was born, my grandmother gave money and things to all our village as if it was a boy. That was her third grandchild because the older son had two sons. So, that's when I was born; they cast my horoscope by some big astrologer – I mean, I was treated like a boy, I would say. Then my mother had to come to India because of the war. And then she stayed for two years at least with my grandmother. Then my father walked for six months to arrive in India. During that time, people thought he died because they knew they were going to come on that ship, but the ship was bombed, so they thought all those people died. Because they didn't have, those days, a quick way of knowing that those people actually never got on the ship. So my father turns up four or six months later in Bihar, where my maternal grand – because that's the first stop – Calcutta – from Burma. But my mother, all this time, had complete faith that her husband was alive, so they say. They were very connected somehow. Then they had a very conventional life because then she had another daughter, and then they really wanted a son because in India and all those Asian cultures having a son is most desirable – my parents had a total of four children, with the last two being boys. So she was very busy taking care of the children and taking care of the household. My sister and I grew up – up to twelve years – with my grandmother.

MG: [29:24] This journey, this six-month journey, must have been harrowing.

UV: [29:27] Harrowing. Go ahead.

MG: [29:30] Did your father share stories about this?

UV: [29:32] Oh, yeah. Right. So, I wrote about that in a story, as I said, called "My Father's Journey." If you want to read it, I'll send it, but it's a little dry – I did it for my father's grandchildren because when my nephews – and I don't have children, but my nephews – they all were looking at my father. And somebody said something like, "Oh, he's old. He doesn't really take any risks." So I thought, "They don't know." Just like what you are doing. What you're doing is trying to show how NOAA was built on so many different types of people. It's not all one type of man only. So the same thing. They did not know my parents' life. So, I thought it was time for me to do something about it. Then there was a circumstance. There was some kind of strike for eight days in Mumbai when I was visiting from the US. We were stuck at home, and my father was not going to work. So I started asking, just like what you are doing. You are taking an interview, but I did not have a tape recorder. That was because I just didn't think about it. I hand-wrote forty pages about their life. They kept saying, "We have such an ordinary life. Why do you want to write? Who would read it?" I said, "It doesn't matter." Once they got going, like I'm doing with you, the memories flood in, the history floods in. So, for eight days, I wrote all they remembered from their birth, and their life together, both sides of them. Mostly my father spoke because he was more facile with storytelling. I think I got his ability to tell

stories, and sometimes long-winded ones. So, I came back. Then, many years later, three or four years later, when my father had a heart attack, I decided I needed to finish writing it. So, I got the notes in 1992. I finally finished writing it in 1996. He saw it. I read it to him. He was on more or less deathbed. I read it to him. He had tears in his eyes. Then I just made six, eight copies because I have three siblings. But what was interesting was that their children, my father's grandchildren, all gave this book to their partners, saying, "This is my family." So, I felt very good because people sometimes think, "Who would read it?" Now, I haven't actually published it. Now, I have a great-grandniece. She was just born in 1996. So she said she doesn't remember her great-grandfather. So, I did a second edition of the book in 2018.

MG: [32:51] Well, I'm glad the tradition is continuing. I hope that many more of your family members do something like what we're doing and what you did with your father.

UV: [32:58] I hope so because I really feel that – I didn't write about me until the ICES asked me to write, but it is more a professional story with a very small amount of personal story. I have actually thirteen chapters that I have just started writing my own book, but it's really hard to write about yourself because it makes you feel a little like putting on airs. So, I have not finished writing this, but there is a woman here who is writing the life stories of ten Asian women of note in the Pacific Northwest. So maybe some parts of my personal story might come out there, and then some will come out with you. But it's still not a real family generation. My generation, as I've written [about] my father's generation

MG: [33:57] What language was spoken in your home growing up?

UV: [34:01] Growing up? Gujarati. I also studied Gujarati. I actually didn't speak a full English sentence until I came [to the United States] – until I was on the plane. It's truly my second or third language because my family speaks Gujarati. Then I went to Gujarati school until high school. In college, the instruction – [in] university, the instruction was in English, but we all spoke Gujarati, including our teachers. So, only in the classroom, they were saying something in English – and since we were in sciences, there wasn't that much to write. I read a lot of American mystery stories, and I loved mystery stories. I had a lot of English vocabulary when I left India, but I did not know how to pronounce it. English is such an enigmatic language that you don't know how the words are pronounced. So, I had all the words in my head when I left for the USA when I was twenty. But the sentences had to be formed and learned, and pronounced correctly. I still have an accent that I have not been able to completely – it hasn't completely gone. So, sometimes, when I give a talk to students in this class, they say, "How did you do that? I'm going to Germany. I have a Fulbright in Germany, but I don't speak German, and I'm very intimidated. How did you do it?" And I say, "Well, you got to get words, for sure. You get to know the written language enough so that once you go there and start hearing and you are immersed, they just come to you. It's not easy, but it comes to you." So, it was Gujarati, yeah, the language in the house.

MG: [36:02] I meant to ask, in interviewing your mother and your father, were there things you learned about them that you didn't know previously?

UV: [36:09] Yeah, quite a lot. Anecdotes about how my grandfather had a very short temper. This is where I learned how much he had given for education to children. I learned about my grandmother, looking from – the shops are downstairs, and the living was upstairs. Now, they have that in New York. So, she had made a little hole that she could lift up the cover and watch the shop below, and that is how she knew about the business. She knew when my father and some young cousin had found a bottle of gin or some alcohol that they did not know. It tasted good, so it must be something different. Then they passed out, the kids. My grandfather was so angry, so my father never touched alcohol all his life. Because we used to wonder why he never – I mean, he was petrified of it. There were things like those kinds of things I learned. Some business side of it, I learned. I learned why my mother did not trust my grandmother when she was young to have her child– she could have had better delivery and postpartum care if she had given birth to me in India because my grandmother was a woman of resources; she had good doctors and all, but my mother was scared [because] somebody told [her], "No, no. In-laws are not going to take care of you." She was only sixteen. I learned so much. In later years, my grandmother and my mother were like mother and daughter. My grandmother was one of those whom grandchildren loved, and she was also very strong. We called her mother (Ba), and we called my mother (Bhabhi) sort of like a sister-in-law. Because my mother was so young, she didn't want to be called "mother." My grandmother took care of us. We actually called her mother. I learned lots of such things about generosity, about restrictions, about how my grandparents did not have good health, and how Burmese people – it was women who did all the transactions. They did all the business. The men, most of the time, according to my father, just did not do much work. They just – whatever. [laughter] I don't want to speak ill of the other cultures, but the women were very, very developed actually in the business sense and all. [In] their social life, they're suppressed, but in business or bringing up children, they were the primary, what I call, powerhouses behind each family. Even in Burma and India, mothers are revered, and women are revered at that stage. But then they are suppressed at the wife stage. So, I learned a lot of anecdotes.

MG: [39:42] In the ICES paper, you wrote about how your maternal grandparents' home had been occupied by British forces during the war.

UV: [39:51] Yeah. Right. That I had completely forgotten all these years. My maternal grandmother was also a wonderful – a different type of woman. She also started her life in a so-called foreign country because people didn't travel from Gujarat all the way up north. The language is different. She was a wife of a businessman who had to take care of all the Indian employees because they were all young men who came without family. So, she was a pioneer in her own way. She had an amazingly wonderful sense of humor. She told stories differently. My paternal grandmother was educated. She was all about education and quote-unquote "women's rights," not in this language we speak. Whereas my maternal grandmother had very little formal education but always had observations about the silliness of some of the traditions or people. For example, in India, even now, but [in] my grandmother's time and even my husband's mother's time, women don't call their husbands by their first name. They only call them – there is something about – I don't know what the reason is, but they don't ever call them by their first name. They always call them "my daughter's father," or there are all kinds of words. So my maternal grandmother told me, "Isn't that a strange custom? You don't want to say your enemy's name, but why wouldn't you want to say your husband's name?" But then she would laugh and

say, "Maybe he is the enemy." [laughter] She had an amazing sense of irony about women's lives and how they managed so many challenges and got no glory doing that. So, she brought that sense of irony into my upbringing – I didn't see her that often, but she had a real dignity – just like my paternal grandmother, she accepted all the people, all the workers who came from different regions, [who] spoke different languages, but she had a benign attitude towards them. She never put on airs about how rich she was. But my grandfather believed in leaving a mark. He felt just the opposite of my paternal grandfather, who gave lots of money anonymously to students. I mean, lots of scholarships, lots of donations, but everything anonymously because he felt putting your name puffs you up a little too big. But the thing is, we would have never found out about his philanthropy unless my father walked through the jungles under those difficult circumstances, and we would have never known. My maternal grandfather was exactly the opposite. He said, "You have to put your name on buildings you build or schools you donate, everywhere, so that your grandchildren and your children will know that that is a tradition in your family. Philanthropy is a tradition." And it is not that – I'm sure he enjoyed having his name on the buildings or being revered – once a year, the Kamani family would go to the schools as patrons – but there was also this other thing about philanthropy as a tradition. I remember hearing this when I was seven years old; I was hiding in my grandfather's big library – he had built a beautiful house, and it's still there. It was really like a mansion. It's called Kamani Mansion. I remember sitting in the library – he had a library and his office – and I was hiding. Then he came, and then my grandmother was saying, "Why do you put your name on every building and all? Because that is kind of showing off?" He said, "It is necessary." I believe now, as I see his grandchildren, including myself, are continuing his philanthropy and knowing what is going on. So, the thing is, because he built this big house on huge grounds – beautiful gardens, servants' quarters, and all – when the British came because they wanted to set up a post there – because Burma and other places were critical – a lot of fight was on the north, right? So, they needed – and they asked to move. They took over because that was what the generals or whoever military people thought was the appropriate household for them. So my grandparents and younger children – not my mother, who was the second child, my grandmother had a few more children. They all moved to what they had called servants' quarters. So there's this huge mansion. Then there is a big garden. And then behind, there were lots of small apartments for all the workers, like the managers of their showrooms or people who came from other places – mostly from Gujarat. My grandfather had made accommodations for them. So those people [had] to be displaced, and my grandparents moved there. It was very scary because my grandmother was absolutely gorgeous, and so was my younger aunt. So, there was also a little bit of worry when the British soldiers drank. I had forgotten because I was not subjected to it because I was a one-year [old] infant at that time. But my grandparents telling me that – my grandmother told me – nobody else talked about it, we were just children – I'm older, but none of my brothers or sisters or cousins know, or at least most of them do not know – see, again, history can be forgotten. But when I was writing my retrospective essay in the ICES paper 'Casting a Wide Net and making most of the Catch,' [<https://doi.org/10.1093/icesjms/fsab023>] where I was writing about the indigenous culture here, fisheries, and comanagers, I remembered that colonialism was a pretty big deal in India until I was six years old, '41 to '47, when India got independence. I was too young to have experienced British rule, as they say. Also, because we were a business community, we did not work in government offices. But it must be all around there, right? Because even in Gujarat, when my paternal grandmother came there and built a beautiful house outside of her village – again, I remember as a child, a beautiful house that also

was taken over by British generals, but not because of the war. They just thought it was too beautiful. They wanted to occupy it because he was a resident military officer, and how could he have a smaller house than this widow, my grandmother, who had built this? So after living there – I still remember that house because I was a little kid. My grandmother had Alsatian dogs outside, and it was slick with marble floors [inaudible]. So they sometimes say you should not do anything that gets you in other people's eyes. In the end, I remember my grandmother was forced to sell that house in about two or three years. The reason she built it, part of it was, of course, she was used to a well-to-do [place]. The reason she built it [was] because she came from Burma, and my grandfather was not known in Gujarat. She had to show that they had prospered because unless she showed we had prospered, she could not get a very good match for her sons. Do you see what I'm saying? There are all kinds of reasons for people. Some people just immediately say, "They're showing off." It's not showing off. It is more like a [status]. They're gone, and they're repatriating. They have to establish. Now, [in] those days, how do you establish your family? Wealth is immediate; everybody understands that – big house, a big car, you must be well-to-do. Therefore, my daughter married into that family, or my son-in-law is well-to-do. They are, to my standard, this kind of comparison had to be made when immigrants were repatriated. I learned all these things only when I became an adult. Those days, I didn't. But after coming here, I realized if we go back, if people don't know us, and if we have children, we have to do these things if we want to get them married traditionally anyway. I think you're going to take ten hours this way to interview me.

MG: [50:25] I hope it does because this is also fascinating to me. Were there other ways that your family or the communities where they lived were impacted by World War II?

UV: [50:37] Oh, yes. Again, no personal experience. But my father had lots of friends. I remember one of his very close friends – I forget his name. He was actually what they call an underground activist. There was an underground movement in India against the British, and there was a big hero, as they call, or outlaw who actually felt that the British were using World War II to keep Indian people under their control – there was enough rebellion going on before World War II, where India was beginning to be guided by Gandhiji. India was beginning to realize that they need not tolerate British rule– they were protesting, as you know, under Gandhiji and learning the principles of satyagraha (nonviolent resistance to repression). But because of World War II, suddenly, we have a common enemy: Japan. So the Indians should be supporting Britain. So, lots of Indians were being – is it called conscripted? – or at least enlisting and things like that. But there was this group of people who felt that the British were using this as a ploy to put Indians – keep them under control. So there were young people who were working for [what] they called [the] Freedom Movement. And one of them was my father's very close friend. So, while I was not aware – as a toddler, I was in Mumbai, which is where – the big underground rebellion movement was active. So my father, I think, was involved in supplying him with goods, like food, because my father was not at all considered part of this. He was a very good law-abiding family man. [inaudible]. So I kind of vaguely know that he had some friends in the underground movement. But I don't remember anybody except this gentleman, who, later on, when I grew up, told me all kinds of stories. He survived. But my mother was very scared. My father had just survived the war, coming home, and then he got involved in that. But he got involved very peripherally because of his friendship.

MG: [54:19] What about the events after World War II? How did independence and the partition of India impact your family?

UV: [54:28] Yeah, it impacted because Gujarat is where Mahatma Gandhi came from. So he's Gujarati. As I said, the town where my grandmother settled was called Jetpur and had a very large population of Muslims; many of them were Hindus who were converted into [Muslims]. So they didn't come from the Middle East. But there were also some Persians, Parsis in Jetpur, but mostly Muslim. My grandmother's house, where I was still there, right next door, had a Muslim family. We played together, the children. We all played together and all. But we knew that when the girl – we were told that my friend (Hamida?), when she gets to a certain age, then she must wear hijab and all, and then she can't play out on the street like we used to do. But we understood each culture was different. My grandmother was an amazing hostess, so we always had some – she would always be doing some big feasts; everybody came, and did the Muslim family. But I realized later that at that time, which was in August 1947, when partition had occurred, the menfolk of our Muslim neighbors were not there. It was only the women [who] were staying there. So what happened during the partition [was that in] many families, men left for two reasons. One is to start establishing themselves in Pakistan before they moved their family or just because they felt threatened. So the thing is, in all this – generally, at least in my village, the women and children were never harmed by Hindus or Muslims at all. I don't remember anything about bloodshed. But afterward, thinking that Hamida's father and uncles came for some period, it was very hush-hush when they came to meet the children in the family, and then they would go away. But the family felt totally safe – there was no feeling of being persecuted [in] those days. I feel it's much worse now than when I grew up. As I said, my grandfather was actually helped by that Muslim family who gave him his first job. He was like his mentor. So there was no – I mean, that's why I sometimes feel sad now because when we were growing up, we knew different cultures, that people had different traditions. But as a child, I did not feel that "our tradition is better than [theirs]." Ours is ours; we will follow it. So when they came to eat at our house or came for tea sometimes, that was fine. But we were told we couldn't go and drink tea there because they ate meat, and we don't eat meat. So, when we went to their house, very occasionally, she would say – Hamida's mother to my grandmother – "You got to come sometimes and bring children to our place." But then she would order everything from outside, from a Hindu shop. They had disposable things even then. They would give us those containers. It's almost like being Orthodox Jews. We have some friends from Israel; they never ate in our house. We could eat at their house, but they explained, and I did not feel angry that they don't eat at our [home]. I understood. We all have different cultures. The best part is we live [by] following them and appreciating and respecting them and still being friends. So I grew up in that kind of environment. I didn't grow up in a very restricted atmosphere – although my family was very strict Jain. But then my grandmother taught us early on – both my grandmothers because they had established themselves in foreign places – that living and appreciating other people's cultures was a part of living peacefully. So that's why, when I came here, that was not a shock. We have more friends from all parts of the world. We don't only associate with Indian families, although we have very close Indian friends. But that is because we grew up like that.

MG: [59:39] Can I ask you one more question before we wrap up for today?

UV: [59:45] Yes.

MG: [59:46] In the notes I have, you mentioned Gandhi was an influence on you –

UV: [59:52] Very much.

MG: – and you grew up hearing about him. He was assassinated when you were probably six or seven years old.

UV: [59:58] Yes, exactly. So, my mother says this – I don't remember him because I was so young. I knew we used to sing songs Gandhiji liked. But my mother said when I was three years old when we all were in Mumbai, Gandhiji came to Mumbai to give a talk. Those were huge gatherings. But after Gandhiji finished his talk, he always allowed women with children to come in the back because they wanted his blessings. So my mother said she took me because I was three years old. I don't remember it. But she said she took me, and then during that time, Gandhiji had said we would boycott all foreign goods, like cloth, so that everybody was to do their own weaving and things like that. So those clothes made of khadi – that handloom material – were very thick. Very difficult to wear saris because they are very thick. As I told you before, my mother and my father were very much in fashion– they loved clothes, and they loved to dress up and all. So, my mother – because I'm only three, she's twenty. A very young woman. So, she had worn one of the very fine Swiss organza saris. She was very proud of how she looked. She was a beautiful woman. So, she takes me there. And as we come close – my mother says the story – [Gandhiji] looks at her. He put his hand on my head like he did to all the children. And then he looked at – and they spoke the same language. Gandhiji spoke Gujarati. So he turned to my mother and said, "Now, that is a very fine weaving you have done. This is a beautiful sari. What a fine weaving." My mother said she was so embarrassed. She said if he had scolded her because she was wearing a foreign outfit, she would have forgotten his comments. But he didn't scold her. He just said, very humorously, "What fine work you have done, sister," or "daughter" or whatever the word he must have used. So, she always remembered – not that she ever gave up wearing nice clothes. But she always remembers that encounter. She told me that a long time ago, when I was a teenager. At that time, I didn't understand anything. I only knew that Gandhiji had put his hand on my head. Later, we were at a wedding in Gujarat when I was six or seven. We were all just about to sit down for a big feast when the news came that Gandhiji was assassinated. Immediately, all the festivities stopped – and I remember people crying. I don't remember exactly what I was doing, but I remember watching. Suddenly, it was absolutely quiet, and then the announcement came. People said, "Eat what is given to you because we don't want to waste it. But there is no more service. We are going to give the remainder of that food to poor people." People were crying all over, and it was real chaos and very sad.

MG: [1:03:42] Did you or your family attend any of the memorials that followed?

UV: [1:03:47] I don't know if my father – my parents were in Mumbai at that time, and I was in Gujarat. So if my parents, because of his friend's connection, whether they did not, or they did – I don't know what they did. Now that's something I should have asked when I was

interviewing them because that was a big moment in their life. They could have told me more. But I did not ask, and so those memories are lost [of] what they did.

MG: [1:04:16] It sounds like he continued to be an influence in your life and your family's life following his death.

UV: [1:04:21] Gandhiji? Oh, yes. Of course. There are several reasons. Because his movement was nonviolence, which is the guiding principle or *the* principle of Jainism, you shall not harm even bacteria. You shall not harm anything. So it resonated with those communities. He comes from that community. He wasn't Jain, but he came from a family that was more in business and things. He comes from Gujarat, so there is a personal pride or personal feeling of – he was one of us. Then what he told the nation and the world just made such good sense. He stood up again and again in Africa, in India, and everywhere for the truth. That is actually a good principle, I felt. My grandmother told me, “If you want to be a leader” – remember, one of my grandmother's quotes is, “If you want to be a leader, you have to be strong, and you will be criticized. Not everybody's going to love you, that's for sure.” I used that quite often in my career when people made comments about me or criticized me, or got angry with me. I realized that I had to see the larger picture. I cannot only think about who likes me and whether I'm popular or not because he wasn't very popular with lots of people. I mean, all the people who felt that he should not have allowed partition; all the people felt that somehow we should have held India together forever. And that would have made this Kashmir situation so much easier because so much personal misery was caused. So, did he do everything right? No, he did only what he believed in, but he was a statesman. He was not prime minister material. So you also learn that different leaders have different qualities. They can't be everything. There is a tendency to put heroes on a pedestal – like they can do everything. He did not do everything right. But what he did and what he stood up for until the dying day, he never got upset even [with] a person who was shooting at him. Those are amazing things. So that's definitely an influence on perhaps almost all Indians, but mine for sure.

MG: [1:07:01] Well, I've taken up a little bit more of your time than we planned. I'm so excited to keep this conversation going.

UV: [1:07:08] Well, you should stop me if I'm just going on and on because I have a tendency to go on many tracks.

MG: [1:07:18] Well, it's wonderful because it gives me so many things to ask you more about. Can I send you an email with some possible dates for our next session?

UV: [1:07:29] Sure, you can.

MG: [1:07:30] Okay. Well, thank you so much for the time. I'm so happy to meet you, and I'll look forward to continuing the conversation.

UV: [1:07:37] Definitely. Nice to meet you, Molly. Bye.

MG: [1:07:40] Bye-bye.

-----END OF INTERVIEW-----
Reviewed by Molly Graham 5/3/2023
Reviewed by Usha Varanasi 5/5/2023
Reviewed by Molly Graham 7/16/2023