

FHS Oral History Project – Jasbir Mehta

Description:

Jasbir Mehta was born in India in 1955. She recounted her upbringing in India, particularly how her family moved around the country frequently, as her father worked for the government. Jasbir also remembered how the transition from colonialism to post-colonial independence affected her early life and family. She particularly recalled stories her family passed down about the 1947 Partition, and how her father “lost everything.” In 1976, Jasbir emigrated to the United States mainly for educational reasons, as she attended the University of Pittsburgh. Despite increasing opportunities for women in India, Jasbir also cited such gender restrictions as circumstances that prompted her to leave the country, and her father to support such a decision. The Foreign Students Office at the University of Pittsburgh assigned Jasbir to live with an American host family, and Jasbir explained how this family introduced her to American culture. During her time in Pittsburgh, Jasbir produced a radio program that featured Indian music for public radio station WBUQ. She described her motives, the evolution, and how people responded to such cultural programming at that time. In 1989, Jasbir moved to Orlando, Florida, and almost immediately established the Asian Cultural Association (ACA). She feared raising her children in a place that lacked organizations that highlighted and promoted Indian culture, and thus created ACA. Jasbir thoroughly discussed how the ACA has changed over thirty-six years, emphasizing several groundbreaking initiatives such as establishing the oldest South Asian Film Festival in North America and partnering with several universities across Central Florida to educate people about Indian culture, including creating the first accredited course in Indian Music in the state of Florida. Through her leadership with the ACA, Jasbir has significantly elevated and supported the Indian community in Central Florida. Given her deep cultural connections, Jasbir shared more broadly how Orlando has changed over the past thirty-six years.

Transcription:

00;00;00 - 00;00;18

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: This is Sebastian Garcia interviewing Jasbir Mehta on May 13th, 2025, at Jasbir’s home residence in Orlando, Florida for the Florida Historical Society Oral History Project. Can you please restate your name, your date of birth and where you were born?

00;00;18 - 00;00;33

JASBIR MEHTA: Jasbir Mehta is my name. Born April 4th, 1955. I was born in India. The desert state of India, Sri Ganganagar.

00;00;33 - 00;00;45

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Can you tell me about your childhood growing up in India in the 1960s, 1970s?

00;00;45 - 00;02;10

JASBIR MEHTA: My father worked for the government, so he got transferred a lot. Every three years, he was sent to a new place. And the school systems were not necessarily there in all the places that he was in. So the best way, they decided, was I was sent to a boarding school when I was six years old, and I was there up till ninth grade in the boarding school. It was a Catholic boarding school, and we were residential. We were not allowed to go out every

weekend or anything like that. They allowed the parents to meet us once a month because they said it distracted the kids from the education. And then we came home during the summer and the winter vacation. So that was where my young life was. And then I went to, for high school and early college education, I went to another state in northern India, and I was there for a few years. And then I came to United States to go to school here. So I went to the University of Pittsburgh.

00;02;10 - 00;02;13

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Were you an only child?

00;02;13 - 00;02;19

JASBIR MEHTA: No, I was the fourth. I had three older brothers.

00;02;19 - 00;02;25

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: So how was it like living with three older brothers?

00;02;25 - 00;03;43

JASBIR MEHTA: I was in an all-girls boarding school. So I got to see my brothers over the summer. So in the summertime when we went home, then all of us used to be together because they were studying at a different place. And we did not have much communication during the school year because there were no phones and the only communication was through letter writing, which we did regularly. And in the summertime, it was great having three older brothers, and I guess I grew up with them more like a tomboy because I wanted to do everything they wanted to do. So it was fun. There was no television at that time. The only thing was the radio at that time. And so over the summer, we used to invent a lot of games ourselves with the four of us. And we kind of stayed together as a family because since my father got transferred everywhere, we never had the local community to kind of rely on. So we stuck to ourselves in that way.

00;03;43 - 00;03;52

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Interesting. Were there any particular challenges your family faced during this time?

00;03;52 - 00;05;06

JASBIR MEHTA: No, actually. The challenges were basically in terms of getting good education. So that was the most important thing to my parents. So they spent a lot of money for our education. My father had a very good job. And it was the post-colonial period. So they used to have big bungalows. So they had a lot of stuff in terms of more than the average people and because he was in a higher position. So we did not face very many challenges that way. And I think it was a great childhood, come to think of it, because now you really do not communicate very much. But we communicated a lot with the family as a unit because we had to do all the planning, playing, cooking, eating, everything together. So we were all involved in it.

00;05;07 - 00;05;21

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: You mentioned the post-colonial period. I'm curious, so I have two questions. My first one is what was sort of life like living in that transition?

00;05;21 - 00;07;03

JASBIR MEHTA: My father worked for the railways, which was the system. My father, actually, when he was young, fought in the war and he fought in Burma for the, at that time, the British were there when he was a teenager. And after that, they were given options. Either you stay in the army, or you can go to the railways because the railways were big employers in India. And then they would send them to college. So my father chose to go to the railways. So he was an officer in the railways. And all those positions were really held by the British before. So most of the British housing, which they had, but quite luxurious, they were nice bungalows, which they were not really in the cities itself, but they were like a little bit away from the cities because the British lived that way. And so when I was very young, I remember my father living in those bungalows, which were really meant for the British at that time. And that was why we were not very much living in the city. We were living on the outskirts of the city and there was no shortage of help. So we had a lot of help around. So in that aspect, I think it was a great life. It was pretty comfortable.

00;07;03 - 00;07;19

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: And relatedly, my second question, you were born eight years or so after the Partition. I'm curious if your family passed down any experiences, stories, memories about that conflict?

00;07;19 - 00;08;27

JASBIR MEHTA: Yes. Both my parents were born in Pakistan. And they came to India during the Partition, and my father's side had lost everything. My mother's side also lost everything, but they had still a few relatives. But my father's side lost everything. He was going to college in Lahore, but he had to give up that because that was why he went to the war because he was the oldest. He was, I believe, eighteen or nineteen. Because he had to support his family because he had two brothers and a sister. So he went to the Army because he had to support and because they lost everything when they left. So we lost a lot of relatives at that time. And, I mean, I was born afterwards, so I did not face that. But that was the stories that we heard that everything they had was gone.

00;08;27 - 00;08;40

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: You mentioned how you came to the United States for college. When was this? What year?

00;08;40 - 00;08;41

JASBIR MEHTA: 1976.

00;08;41 - 00;08;54

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: 1976. And were there any other reasons besides academics that you left India?

00;08;55 - 00;10;29

JASBIR MEHTA: No. My father was very big on education, especially for girls. He always said that if he had the money to educate one child between a boy and a girl, he would spend the

money to educate a girl because the girl would pass down that education to the next generation. So when I showed an inclination to study a little further, my father was quite supportive of that and thought that it would be a good thing for me to try. And it was not very common at that time, and especially for single girls to come. I remember going to University of Pittsburgh and the ratio was we were only two girls of the Foreign Students Office from India who were from India who were single because people did not send single girls out of India. They had to be married or something. So the ratio was literally one girl to seventy boys. So that was very progressive of him to do that. And I guess I have many thanks to give him.

00;10;29 - 00;10;37

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Absolutely. Did you ever envision leaving India, though, when you were growing up?

00;10;37 - 00;11;35

JASBIR MEHTA: No. Not really, because the trend was that you got a good education. A lot of women did not work at that time. So you were groomed, you were polished, you were everything and you would get married into a very good household. So there were not very many options also at that time. But then I think slowly when women wanted to work, you know, I was lucky in that way that my father did not think that a woman had to stay home. She could work because a lot of my friends, their parents, did not want them to work. So they were given full education, but they were not given the option to go and get a job.

00;11;35 - 00;11;53

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: And you mentioned how in your previous answer, you were one of two single Indian girls at the University of Pittsburgh. What was the response to that, like from other classmates? How did you navigate that?

00;11;53 - 00;12;07

JASBIR MEHTA: No, this was not classmates. When I say it was seventy men, that was in the Foreign Students Office. I mean by saying that was with the Indian students, like seventy Indian boys.

00;12;07 - 00;12;08

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Okay.

00;12;08 - 00;12;14

JASBIR MEHTA: So in the Foreign Students Office, because it was a trend, it was not—

00;12;14 - 00;12;23

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: I understand. But regardless, once you were at the University of Pittsburgh, how did you navigate the cultural change?

00;12;23 - 00;13;49

JASBIR MEHTA: Actually, it was a good time. The Foreign Students Office was wonderful at that time, and I do not know why they do not do all the things they did at that time now. We were assigned a family when we came to the Foreign Students Office, an American family, not

Indian, and they helped us integrate into the American lifestyle. So we went to baseball games. We went to the symphony. We went to the opera. They introduced us to the American life. We learned about Thanksgiving; we learned about Christmas. I knew about Christmas because I went to a Catholic boarding school, but I did not know about Thanksgiving. It was the first time somebody took me to a football game, and I was quite confused as to why the ball was not even round. So these were questions that we had because we had never seen that before. And then also, I was very confused why they had to have a conference, why they were not playing, why did they have a conference in a football every three minutes? So all this my American family helped me get used to the American lifestyle and that was a wonderful experience.

00;13;49 - 00;13;53

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: I'm curious, did they learn anything about your culture?

00;13;53 - 00;15;08

JASBIR MEHTA: Yes. They asked us. But at that time, there was no food available here for Indians. So even groceries were not available in Pittsburgh. So there was no Indian grocery store. In fact, there was only one person who used to go to New York, buy some groceries, put it out on the table, and we used to buy off of him and we did not know much about cooking. So we learned cooking here. And we learned how to improvise all the American, like kidney beans. We would buy kidney beans and alter them and make them into our taste. So we learned cooking here. And that was why when my mother came later on, she says, "America does one thing to you. They teach everybody how to cook and how to drive." I like cooking as it is, and I wanted food. As a result of that [learning to cook], there were a lot of other guys—when I say that the ratio was seventy, our friends could not cook—so they used to hang out with us. They used to come to our apartments because they wanted Indian food and then we learned how to improvise everything in that way.

00;15;08 - 00;15;15

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Interesting. What was your major when you attended the University of Pittsburgh?

00;15;15 - 00;15;16

JASBIR MEHTA: Genetics.

00;15;16 - 00;15;21

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Genetics. Why did you select that field of study?

00;15;21 - 00;16;13

JASBIR MEHTA: When we were younger in India, we were pushed into two things, either it was engineering, or it was medicine. These are the only two things. These are the only two options you had. And then when you are given another option, you go like, "Oh, Genetics. That sounds good." So the options came to us here. But those were different times in the 70s in India. It was a very good experience, the research. I [worked] at the medical center. So I [researched] there, and that was very interesting.

00;16;13 - 00;16;27

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: You hosted a program of Indian music on a public radio station in Pittsburgh. I am very fascinated by this. Why did you do this? And what did you see in radio to achieve this desire? Like, why did you go to radio?

00;16;27 - 00;19;04

JASBIR MEHTA: I used to be a ham operator in India, so I had friends in the engineering college in my high school. So I liked that, and I loved music. Music was to me the one thing that I thought brings people together. And even when you look at the history of India, number one, everybody is into music in India. We have a song from birth till death for every occasion. So that is one thing. Second thing is the songs, we have umpteen number of languages with umpteen number of dialects, but everybody sings a song and that brings people together. So to me it was the one thing that I could do to bring people together. Because when [I] came here, people were from different regions which [I] would never meet in India by itself. So [I] met two different people who spoke different languages and came from different parts of India. So that was the one thing I thought would be good to bring people together on one basis. So I did a show at WBUQ at Duquesne University, which was the public radio, and we were actually quite good. We were very popular. We were the number two fundraiser for them. So they liked us very much. And it was called “Music from India.” It started as a half an hour show, then became a one hour show, and then it became a one and a half hour show. And at that time also, there was a cultural exchange going on between India and United States with the University of Pittsburgh, where musicians used to come from India, and we would have different concerts. So I helped promote that, and I was part of that system. And so I [interviewed] a lot of musicians who used to come from India, and that became very popular. So the show that I had was very popular—I mean, in fact, even now, I meet some older person here in Florida who was from Pittsburgh, they said, “Well, we have a recording of your show.” So I was quite taken aback by that because I used to do popular theme shows and people liked that.

00;19;04 - 00;19;10

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Did you ever receive letters from your shows, like listener letters?

00;19;10 - 00;19;42

JASBIR MEHTA: Yeah. I used to get—I mean the very fact that even here. Two weeks ago I was at a party, and somebody introduced me, and they said, “Do you know her? She used to do a show in Pittsburgh.” So I am quite taken aback by that because I have gone past that. But for them to introduce me by that, it was quite interesting to me.

00;19;42 - 00;19;46

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: How many years did you operate that show?

00;19;46 - 00;19;57

JASBIR MEHTA: I started towards the end of '77. And I did that till 1988.

00;19;57 - 00;20;32

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Oh, wow. Okay. So eleven years. Wow. So you know why I am asking so many questions about this in particular, my research is about the history of radio, but I am looking at radio from its “golden age.” So the 1920s, which I know radio fifty years later

[is] completely different. But still I am fascinated [by] that world. So how did your show change over time? I know you said the duration [program length] changed, but—

00;20;32 - 00;22;26

JASBIR MEHTA: First of all, access to the music was difficult. I had records because we had to play records at that time. So I had records. All my pocket money used to go to—because I bought records. And I had those records from India, which I do not know why I got them with me when I was here. So I used to play those songs. And then the collection, of course, got a whole lot bigger after that. So I used to play half an hour show. I used to do with just the songs that I liked, and people started liking those songs. Then it became thematic. So then I said, “Okay, let's do one music director or let's do a theme.” So then I needed to expand a little bit. And then because we got money for the station, they gave us extra time. So it became a one hour show and I did not interrupt after each song. So I played a set of three songs together with the same thematic. So people liked that. It was no commercials, nothing. So people liked the flow of the program, the sequencing and the putting together. I did not know that I had a knack for it at that time. I was just doing what I liked. So then I started doing that and then it became thematic. Then when musicians used to come from India, I used to interview them and put their interviews in between in them or take them to the radio station to interview. So then that became popular. Then somebody said, “Why don't you do a little piece of news?” So then I got some other person involved, and then they [did] like five minute news in between and then—

00;22;26 - 00;22;29

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: News about the US, India?

00;22;29 - 00;22;54

JASBIR MEHTA: Local news and about India a little bit, just because that time it was not easy to get information and access at that time. And then they gave us an extra half an hour. So the extra half an hour we used to play—so we played a lot of Bollywood type of songs in the first hour, and then the classical part of music in the second part. So that became even more popular.

00;22;54 - 00;22;57

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: And what time did you air?

00;22;57 - 00;23;07

JASBIR MEHTA: We used to air, I think, 6:00 pm to 7:30 pm.

00;23;07 - 00;23;18

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: And you keep emphasizing how it was popular, can you share a specific reaction that stands out to you during that time when you were doing it?

00;23;18 - 00;23;19

JASBIR MEHTA: I used to get calls.

00;23;19 - 00;23;20

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Okay.

00;23;20 - 00;24;05

JASBIR MEHTA: Yeah. People were calling me at that time, and they would tell me to play a certain song at that time, and then I would write down their requests and I would tell them, or people would—and it just became in the community a part of like when they [did] little events, they [called] me and [told] me to announce a certain information. So it became like a source of information at that time. I guess because at that time things were not easily available, so that was the reason I guess it was very popular. So it became so like somebody says, “Oh, there are having a picnic at some event.” So then they would tell me to, “Can you please announce this?” So it became more like a center.

00;24;05 - 00;24;16

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Yeah. Right. Absolutely. How did you learn to operate ham radio or be a ham radio operator?

00;24;16 - 00;25;00

JASBIR MEHTA: I do not know. We were young and we were curious. I had [a] few friends of mine who went to engineering school, and they were into it. And one of the guys was real cute, so I thought, “Fine, if you wanted to teach me, you could.” And they said, “You have to study to get this.” And I studied and I passed the exam, and I am going like, “Whoa. Okay, I can do this.” So my handle was “VU to JYL” something like that. And it was a good way to talk in the night. For the youngsters, we used to talk in the night.

00;25;00 - 00;25;02

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Were there a lot of girls that participated in that?

00;25;02 - 00;25;04

JASBIR MEHTA: Not very many girls. No.

00;25;04 - 00;25;05

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: So you were one of the few.

00;25;06 - 00;25;33

JASBIR MEHTA: Yeah. It was a time when the girls were just beginning to come out in India, and it was not very easily accessible. There were girls even at that time wanting to go to engineering school, but then again, there would be like in a class of eighty, there would be probably one or two of them. So it was rough.

00;25;33 - 00;25;42

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Right. Why did you move to Orlando in 1989?

00;25;42 - 00;26;45

JASBIR MEHTA: My husband got a position here. Actually, believe it or not, he was doing a fellowship in Buffalo. And he cleaned the driveway and then the morning it snowed again, eight inches. And he came out and he used to go to work at five. He was doing surgery fellowship. And he came home in the evening, and he said, “This is it. Get the map out. Mumbai, draw a

line. That is Miami.” He said, “No little bit north. Let's do Orlando.” And that was how he [said it]. He was done. We were done with the snow. And so he wanted very much to come and the opportunity for him was very good. And his advisor also advised him because the other choice was Wisconsin. And so you can see why it was an easy choice.

00;26;45 - 00;26;57

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Yeah. Shortly after your move to Orlando, you founded the Asian Cultural Association (ACA). What inspired you to create this cultural organization?

00;26;57 - 00;27;58

JASBIR MEHTA: When I came to Orlando, there was nothing here. There were not that many Indians. And I did not know anybody. There were few Indians. They had an Indian association. There was nothing in terms of music. There was nothing in terms of classical music and the arts as such. So I said, “If I have to raise my kids and for them to be exposed to the kind of stuff that I grew up with or that I wanted culturally, which I thought the kids should learn then I have to start this on my own.” And so I invited seventeen people to my house, fed them, gave them tea, and asked them to cough up fifty dollars apiece. And that was how I started the organization.

00;27;58 - 00;28;06

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: That is a fascinating story. Thanks for sharing. How did you grow the association over time?

00;28;06 - 00;31;51

JASBIR MEHTA: Initially, I was only doing music. Actually, I went to the University of Central Florida first, and it was much simpler to park and much simpler to talk to anybody. So there were only eight thousand or nine thousand students at that time. And I met somebody in the music department, and they did not know how to help me. I was used to up in Pittsburgh working with the music department and bringing musicians. So I knew a lot of musicians and I knew I could bring the musicians here, but how do I get set up? So they said that they would be happy to give me the facility to do a program, but I did not know how to go about doing that. So then we rented a place. So then the musicians came, and then I think it was at that time it used to be near the Science Museum, which is now the Shakespeare Theater. There was a small theater there. So we rented that, and we called a bunch of people to come to the program. And that was how we started the music division.

But then after that I made a better connection with Rollins College. So Rollins College was more receptive. And we set up a big music division there with the music department and the musicians used to come and they used to do a lecture demonstration in the music department because you cannot build an audience without the education. So I figured that I had to start from scratch. So I [thought] if we expose them to that, and Rollins College was very helpful in that. And then we have always made our musicians who came in globally, always available to all educational divisions, free of charge. We said because without the education, this division was not going to grow. But I got a lot of comments when I used to apply for grants or anything. The comments that I got at that time was, “We do not know when your music starts, when it ends, we do not know how this works.” Improvisation was not an easy sell for me. And the concepts were not easy.

And then I said we have to expand into the cultural division. So then I walked up to Enzian Theater at that time, and I said, "I wanted to start a South Asian Film Festival." And they were very receptive [to] that. And so we worked out a schedule to start. So we started the South Asian Film Festival in '91. And it was a two day event at that time. And then we of course, now expanded it into three day. And that helped me bring a bigger audience because people could relate to that. And then we got a spillover from the Film Festival to the music division. So in that aspect, those things from the performing arts to the visual arts, so and now of course, we are the oldest South Asian Film Festival in North America.

00;31;51 - 00;31;52

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Wow.

00;31;52 - 00;32;57

JASBIR MEHTA: Yeah. Because at that time there was no forum for independent Indian filmmakers to present their work, which could be sold to distributors. So that was the format. So I wanted to use that as a format that if an independent filmmaker present his work, then some distributor would want to take the movie on. So that was how we started that and that became successful. We expanded further into the performing arts division. We went into dance, which we developed also. And today we have almost a hundred kids enrolled in our dance division. And then we went into visual arts. So we have kids now who are taking AP [Advanced Placement] Art. And we have people who come and teach.

00;32;57 - 00;33;16

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Can you share any other notable events that you have hosted through your organization and why they are memorable, in particular throughout your thirty plus year time with the organization?

00;33;16 - 00;36;16

JASBIR MEHTA: There are several events that we have done. You know, the one or two events that I can talk about. The very first event I remember we did at the Beecham Theater, the Masters of Percussion with Zakir Hussain and his father, and they came, and we sold out the hall. And I was shocked, of course. When an event like that happens, then you get motivated to do further work. Also from there, we were also going to school systems in Seminole County to do lecture demonstrations for everybody at that time. And then 9/11 happened. The first person who was actually killed was from our community. My parents come from the Sikh community. And so everybody started calling that "do not go out wearing Indian clothes or something." And then I thought this was the right time to go into the school system to educate people. There are differences in people, but there are many commonalities. So we did a lot of lecture demonstration during that time period, using arts as the medium to bring people together and to educate them. So that was a very good moment for us, in terms of giving back to the community. And then [in] 2006 we did an exhibition with the Maitland Art Center on "The Six Yards of Magic," we called it. And that became popular I mean, even today, some people who saw that exhibition keep telling me to repeat that exhibition again. We were surprised because it was on for six weeks and even the last day when it was on, I think Ben [Brottemarkle] did a [radio] talk on that, that it was closing over the weekend. And we had twenty six people show

up two hours before the event was going to close. So we [went], “Wait a minute, what is going on?” So we were quite surprised at that. Ben was very helpful, [his radio] show the Arts Connection, because I remember bringing a lot of artists and Ben interviewed a lot of artists for us, and that was a very good medium for us to promote.

00;36;16 - 00;36;40

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Absolutely. And from your perspective, what impact has the Asian Cultural Association had in Orlando, especially since we started this part of the conversation by you saying that when you got here, there was nothing. So just reflecting on your organization, what impact do you think it has made?

00;36;40 - 00;37;57

JASBIR MEHTA: Well, I forgot to mention in between that when we were going around with all different institutions to partner, we also partnered with Stetson University. We used to bring in a musician from India who stayed here for six months, and we got accredited course in Indian Music started at Stetson University. So we got the first accredited course in Indian music started in the state of Florida. There is a course that is now taught at UCF also. Often people do not look at that different artists, just folk art. They do not look at us in terms of—when you do not understand anything, you do not know how to receive it. So I think education was the way that we used to get to people and to approach them.

00;37;57 - 00;38;15

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: I'm curious. What continued to fuel your pursuit in this organization. I mean, you are telling me right now the various ways in which you expanded the organization—

00;38;15 - 00;38;20

JASBIR MEHTA: Okay, I will tell you this out outright. There were many times when I wanted to quit.

00;38;20 - 00;38;21

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Okay.

00;38;21 - 00;39;23

JASBIR MEHTA: Many times. Many, many times. I remember the one time I wanted to, I said, “This is it. I have three kids. I am raising three kids and running around. I just cannot do this anymore” because I used to have literally ACA stuff in the trunk of my car to set up concerts and material to do exhibitions. And in Orlando you get visitors galore, and then they all want Indian food. So now [I am] not only taking care of kids, [I am] cooking for them. [I am] doing everything, and then [I am] doing stuff in the community. So many times I had pressure to quit. And [raising] money to get funding is a big challenge. And then once I decided, “Okay, this is it. This is what I—” and sure enough, there was a \$10,000 check in the mail from National Endowment of the Arts. And I go like, “Darn, I cannot quit now.” That happened three times for me.

00;39;24 - 00;39;25

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Wow.

00;39;25 - 00;42;04

JASBIR MEHTA: We just applied. We did not think we were going to get it. And it happened. Our educational programs were popular. So we got funded for that. And so I am opening the mail, and I am looking at it and I am going like, "You cannot return this, you got to use it." So I felt that at that time there was some supreme power that was pushing me to do this. So I said, okay. So I pushed myself. And the community has been very supportive. Many people in the community, I would go and ask [them] literally. I mean, I really [felt] sometimes like an international beggar because when I go and ask people for money for the programs, people would give it to me and that was very helpful. And then I learned how to do grant writing, and the arts community is my family here. I grew up with them and I learned a lot of art. I never was exposed so much to the arts myself. We were not encouraged to go into the arts. As Asians we are taught only two things. You do science and math. So every program of ours is a learning experience, not just for other people, but for me too, because we take on a challenge each time to do something different.

And now the challenges for me right now, why I am staying now in the arts is [because] it is very difficult to teach kids creativity. How do you teach them creativity? You can teach them technical aspects. You can teach them how to dance perfectly. You can teach them how to sing perfectly. So, this is my thing now. We are now [doing] experiments. And of course, the other challenge is to bring people together. Arts is the only medium that I feel now we can bring people together, otherwise everybody will be in their corner, on the iPhone or on the computer. So this brings them together and then challenging them on creative angles and working with young kids now [on] the creative angle, I think this is my motivation factor now.

00;42;04 - 00;42;51

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: That was going to be one of my next questions, like, what are you currently working on with the organization? But you mentioned something that I wanted to touch on more is, you know, I am just so fascinated by your career and your life because as you mentioned, you were not encouraged to pursue the arts and even when you were in Pittsburgh, you majored in genetics, so you did not study any of this. You were not encouraged to pursue this. But [there was] something within you, like why did you decide to do it then, you know, when you got here?

00;42;51 - 00;43;47

JASBIR MEHTA: Arts is the only medium when people can come together of different color, different faiths, different religion, different everything. This is the only happy medium that people can come. When you see a show, whether it is a sad show or a happy show, you can sit and laugh together or you can cry together with your feelings, where else are you going to go? These experiences is what is needed now. I thought it was needed more at that time because for people to come together, I think it is needed much more right now. I see kids being totally isolated, what are they doing? They are getting depressed. How do you learn to share your feelings?

00;43;47 - 00;43;48

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Yeah.

00;43;48 - 00;44;14

JASBIR MEHTA: And first of all, to feel the same thing also. And that is the onus on us as art creators, we have to create something that moves the people to bring out the emotion. So the challenge is much more for us. And the challenge is to bring the people together to see this and to share something.

00;44;14 - 00;44;25

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Absolutely. Do you think you have increased the awareness of your culture in Central Florida through your work?

00;44;25 - 00;45;42

JASBIR MEHTA: Definitely. I remember at one point in Seminole County system, we were one of the largest providers of the outreach program. We used to reach twenty [and] thirty thousand kids. And now also we have a program any school calls us to give us a presentation, we are definitely there to do a presentation. India is such a diverse culture, and everybody has such a diverse experience, sometimes getting unanimous kind of a presentation is difficult. So we have to give the right information with the right in the arts, because a lot of people who are here, they came [with the] same thing. They came with the they are in different fields and are not necessarily exposed to a lot. I was lucky in that way that my father got transferred every three years to a different part of India. So I was exposed to a lot of Indian culture, the diversity of Indian culture. I was exposed to different languages, and a lot of people do not have that.

00;45;42 - 00;45;52

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Right. Did you ever receive internal or external pushback from your cultural efforts?

00;45;52 - 00;45;54

JASBIR MEHTA: The internal, within the community?

00;45;54 - 00;46;02

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Within the community, like within your organization and outside your organization?

00;46;02 - 00;48;06

JASBIR MEHTA: I do not know how to say this, but the pressure is on. People want you to do commercial shows sometimes. People want you to do toned down shows. And pure arts is difficult. It is a difficult thing to stay in the arts. Our South Asian Film Festival is called South Asian Film Festival Beyond Bollywood. So we go out seeking much more than what an average person can get. So what you are going to get at any of our shows is always a very different perspective and a very challenging experience. We thrive on excellence. Our dance division has gotten really big now we have almost close to a hundred dancers right now, kids who are taking dance class and there is no curriculum in United States for Indian dance. So we got the curriculum from London where they have a curriculum in Indian dance style. So seventy, eighty percent of our kids want to take the exam. So that is much more work for us

now. So these kids are taking that exam, and we have to send the information, and they get graded from England. That kind of education you are only going to get once in your life, and it is a lifetime experience. If we cannot make them professional dancers, we can definitely make them very educated art supporters.

00;48;06 - 00;48;45

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Yeah, that is a great point. You cast yourself earlier as an international beggar. But in reality to lead an organization like this, there is some entrepreneurial spirit to it. So as an Indian woman, what was it like for you to be so involved in the cultural scene and be sort of a leader in that sense, [and] have that lead in the community?

00;48;45 - 00;50;11

JASBIR MEHTA: I do not know. That is a difficult question to answer. I do not know. I just think there is so much good stuff in the arts for us to have and for our kids to learn our heritage, our togetherness. There is so many lessons to be learned from the arts. We have kids now who come down and who want to do special projects with us. And when I see these kids and the creativity and the passion in these kids, we design programs for each kid, whatever their passion is, we design. We have one student who wants to go into medical school, but she loves art, and she wins at the state and national level. So I told her [to] use that also as a passion to further where to go. So we have a program that we developed now for seniors that we [want] people to go, just for mental wellness, to bring people together, using arts as a means to bring people together. So I do not know, I mean, I just do what I do, I guess.

00;50;12 - 00;50;12

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Yeah.

00;50;12 - 00;50;31

JASBIR MEHTA: It was never for the money. I have never taken a single penny from the arts in all my life, I have put in money, because I figured in my next lifetime, I am going to come as one phenomenal artist.

00;50;31 - 00;50;42

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Yeah. That is incredible. Yeah. I mean, that question, it was not. I was just, as you are telling me all your experiences, I was just curious—

00;50;42 - 00;51;06

JASBIR MEHTA: No, I never learned music. I learned the piano for one year, and I was better at hockey. So my school people took me out of piano and put me in hockey. I never learned dance. I never did arts in my life. And this was my lifetime of learning.

00;51;06 - 00;51;30

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Absolutely. To that point, you spent most of your life in Orlando serving in this organization, allowing you to gain deep insight into the city's cultural and ethnic composition. How has Orlando's cultural landscape changed since 1989, broadly?

00;51;30 - 00;52;55

JASBIR MEHTA: Oh, tremendously. I remember [the] first time going to Tallahassee to go for the grant. I was totally lost. Nobody knew how to talk to me. They did not know how to ask me a question. I did not know how to address [it]. And it was a learning experience for me. And now, of course, people do know some of the names [and] people. I remember one time being in Tallahassee when I was so frustrated, when nobody knew what I was talking [about]. They did not know how to ask me a question because they did not know what I was talking about. And then I just stood up at one of the meetings, I remember I said, “someday there is going to be somebody across the table who will know what I am talking about,” because this was world music, which was getting so much publicity all over the world, and nobody would even know [the] name of any nobody [or] knew [the] name of any instrument. Things are very different now. We have so many people wanting to learn tabla, so many people wanting to learn different instruments. [But] they did not know. So that was all learning [experience].

00;52;55 - 00;53;00

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: What challenges does Orlando face today?

00;53;00 - 00;54;04

JASBIR MEHTA: Orlando. Some of the similar challenges are still there. I wish some of the bigger organizations would let us come and do some demonstration for them to see what our music or what our dance is about. Rather than saying “this is something different” because I am very tired of the comments that [I] get. “This is interesting. This is different.” An artist in one community, a Mexican dancer or a Spanish dancer or an Indian dancer, see their styles. And a hundred percent you will find something in common with them if you just give us a chance.

00;54;04 - 00;54;17

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Well said. From your perspective, how will Orlando change in the next twenty five years?

00;54;17 - 00;55;08

JASBIR MEHTA: I wish that we have more organizations that do projects together. We did a fusion with our Kathak, with the flamenco dancer. Because arts is dynamic. Arts moves, arts changes, it [becomes] part of the community and for us to grow in the arts, for the community to grow in the arts, we have to come together, and respect for each other and acknowledging each other's differences and their styles. Sometimes it will bring something great.

00;55;08 - 00;55;21

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: How has your Indian heritage influenced your perspective on life generally and living in Central Florida specifically?

00;55;21 - 00;56;33

JASBIR MEHTA: I always say two things. India gave me the birth, but America gave me the confidence. When I came from India, I was curious. I wanted to explore everything. But America gave me the confidence that I could do what I wanted to do. And then we also have something that is in our culture, we have *Janmabhumi* and *Karmabhumi*, [they] are two things. *Janmabhumi* is the earth, the place where you are born. And *Karmabhumi* is the one where your destiny takes you, where you do all your workings in that. So we always say that India may be

my *Janmabhumi*, but America is my *Karmabhumi*. This is where I work. This is where I live. This is where my destiny is.

00;56;33 - 00;56;55

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Fascinating. What was it, for you, about America that enabled you to fulfill that destiny?

00;56;55 - 00;57;28

JASBIR MEHTA: I do not know—the openness, the risk to take on something new and experiment with something new. In older societies, sometimes you are not ready to take risk because you are scared of what the community will think of you. America lets you do that.

00;57;29 - 00;57;41

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Lastly, if someone is listening to this recording fifty or a hundred years from now, what do you want them to know about your culture and the state of Florida?

00;57;41 - 00;58;42

JASBIR MEHTA: Florida is home to me. This is where I was destined to end up. And no matter what happens, this is home now. And Florida has grown a lot. I hope Florida prospers a lot and there are many people from different communities because you go up north and people have different neighbors, but here a lot of people are from different communities. And we have learned to live together. We have learned to share each other. And I just hope that togetherness comes—we are not intimidated by each other, [we] rather appreciate each other and learn the goodness in each other to live with each other.

00;58;42 - 00;58;51

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Well said. Absolutely. Thank you, Jasbir, for taking some time out of your day to share your life story with me. I really appreciate it.

00;58;51 - 00;58;57

JASBIR MEHTA: Thank you, Sebastian. This was a wonderful experience. I hope I did okay.

00;58;57 - 00;58;58

SEBASTIAN GARCIA: Absolutely you did.