

Transcript for Oral History Interview

Conducted for University of Maryland Course IMMR 400 – Spring 2020

Instructor: Dr. Robert Chiles

Interviewer's (Student's) name: Retu Domnic

Interviewee's name: Nallathambi Domnic

Interviewee's Country of Origin: India

Interviewee's Current Residence: Denton, Caroline County, Maryland, United States

Date of Interview: April 28, 2020

Place of Interview: Denton, Caroline County, Maryland, United States

Introduction: This interview between Retu Domnic and Nallathambi Domnic goes in depth on what the immigration process was like for Nallathambi Domnic and his family. Nallathambi Domnic is a 52-year-old Indian American who was born in India on September 23, 1967. He then moved to Bahrain in 1991 in order to provide for his family back in India. He met his wife in 1992 back in Bahrain as they were working for the same company. They then had their child in 1999 and migrated to the United States of America in 2003. Nallathambi's dream was provide the best education for his child and he believed the American school system was the best. He also wanted better job opportunities for his line of work which would be possible in America.

Keywords: India, Tamil, assimilation, biculturalism, green card, visa, culture, Asia, race, immigration, family, Indian, jobs

Retu Domnic: My name is Retu Domnic and today I will be interviewing Nallathambi Domnic who is an immigrant and also my dad. Can you please introduce yourself?

Nallathambi Domnic: My name is Nallathambi Domnic.

Retu: Okay, and we can go ahead and start with the questions. Um so, what was it like back home?

Nallathambi: I am [part of] a family of six. I am the fourth member of the family, like uh after my father's retirement from a government company, I was the only bread winner for my—the whole family, so I had to come out of the country to earn a living. So, I was working in Bahrain for almost like 12 years then, then I thought I could migrate to U.S. for the better fortune and prospects. Well, my daughter was born in Bahrain, like so we left Bahrain around 2003 June when my daughter was 2 and a half years old. The main reason for us to come to U.S. was uh for better prospects and uh my daughter's education because we were in the Gulf, the education was not much to do after your high school graduation you have to look for a new college elsewhere so that's a reason we thought we could move to U.S.

Retu: So how was it possible for you to come to America, like what was that like?

Nallathambi: When my daughter was born in Bahrain, I just was browsing, that's the introduction of the new internet system, so I was just browsing all the companies in U.S. in my field what I was working for. And uh I got an opportunity to just apply for a few of them, maybe around 20 or 25. On that 6 responded and 3 were very much interested in me, hiring. So, I just went through the process. During that time one of my brother-in-law was in New Jersey who used to help me out during the immigration process with the lawyers. Then um the—the company which I came for, the—the boss was very accommodating and helpful in during the process so it's a long process to come to U.S. So, we have to file a H1B visa to—other then—I mean to say it's an employment visa to get into the country. So, we applied, and it took almost 6 or 7 months to go through the process and I got it approved. That's—that's the reason I'm here today.

Retu: Okay, so what did you have when you first came to America, like did you have any like money or like valuables?

Nallathambi: No when we started from Bahrain, we had to leave everything there. Like uh we couldn't bring much only rather than some U.S. dollars, like we converted everything there and brought around \$2,000. The rest we started from the scratch here, all the housing and things like that when we [I] started new job. So, we started from the scratches.

Retu: So, were you the only person working in your family at the time, when you first came to America?

Nallathambi: Yeah, the visa, H1B is only granted for uh me, and my wife and daughter were [my] dependent. In other words, uh it's called H1B and the dependents are H4. H4 visa, the people are not eligible to work, so. And my wife was uh—she is a master's degree holder and uh unfortunately, she was not eligible to work. Um so, she used to be my de—she was legally here, me and my daught—she and my daughter, but my wife couldn't work because of the immigration policy. For almost ten years until my status—not status, I mean the immigration policy changed, my wife uh couldn't work legally anywhere. Being [having] a master's in accounts, she couldn't—she got a job, but she couldn't work legally. She used to do all the voluntary work in the church, local community and she was doing the tax preparation for AARP voluntarily without any monetary benefits. So almost ten years, then uh like in around um 2014 or '15 I think the immigration passed a law like uh that dependants can work like who are fighting for their permanent residence, um and that is still uh on process like the dependents can work. So there, after that only, Retu and my wife, Anne, got their work permits.

Retu: So, what was it like when you first arrived to America? You mentioned that your brother-in-law helped you? So, was he like a part of settling you in or how was it like first coming here?

Nallathambi: In 2003 June, I just landed in uh JFK, that was in New York, but my work was in Maryland, Denton, Maryland. But I happened to meet my brother-in-law in the airport who drove me to New Jersey. So, from there we used to commute because initially we did not have a house, I used to just come and go on a weekly basis, just see the places. First, eh I bought a—I got a room in a—in a Countryside Inn for a week and I stayed there and uh go to work then slowly, slowly tried to get a rented place where I work. Then finally after a month I moved my family here. ‘Till then they were living in my brother in law’s house in New Jersey. Uhm.

Retu: So, when you settled down in Denton did you join a community of other Indians or did you join a different community?

Nallathambi: In Denton we don’t have much Indian community, so we had our local church community where we part—we have active participation and—and my wife used to do lot of voluntary work in the church, so we got involved in the local community as church.

Retu: So, do you wish that was different, like do you wish there were more Indians where you lived?

Nallathambi: Yeah of course I wish, but fortunately or unfortunately I got a job in Denton, Maryland (laughing), so I—because when I come to the country, I cannot just skip job anywhere as I want because the immigration policy is such, I have to get a sponsorship or an employer to sponsor me to get—‘till I get my green card. So, I had to work for certain companies or a certain employer.

Retu: Is there anything you regret about that? Like coming and working for like one company?

Nallathambi: Yeah of course I regret because, usually we like to live in a—with our own community, like the Indian community, but unfortunately, I did not get an opportunity to mingle because all I—if I have to mingle, I have to go drive out like one and a half to two hours away, to just to get along with the Indian community that was not possible every time. So yeah, I do regret for coming and

joining in Denton, Maryland (laughing). And I also regret that my wife, uh being a master's graduate, could not be employed uh to support me (clears throat) for almost ten years she was just doing some volunteer work in the church and helping the local AAR—AARP for the tax returns and all she used to do in the library. Other than that, there was no monetary benefits, which was difficult when a child like Retu was growing up, like she couldn't do much in a monetary, only my earnings were the only thing, it was tough for us because just we moved from another country, and we have to start from the scratch with one employment we had really a tough time but we just managed.

Retu: Do you think if Retu would have grown up with the Indian community that she would have grown up differently? Or like—

Nallathambi: Yeah, of course she would've gone different uh ideas and getting along with friends because now she is isolated when she meets any of our Indian friends, where she has to get into the groove to learn more things because whatever we learn at home is different from the community. So yeah, she was really lacking of that kind of uh involvement with the community, yeah.

Retu: So, do you want your child to assimilate into American culture, keep your roots, or both?

Nallathambi: I like to do both, as Retu is doing from the beginning. My wife also had the same idea of doing both. She put her in different ballet classes and the American dances and also simultaneously she taught the Indian classical dance, Bharatanatyam, which she is also learning and uh, as for the dances, even the culture we like to mingle with other Indian community and the American culture also. So, I prefer to do both for Retu.

Retu: So, did you ever visit or like go back to your home country?

Nallathambi: Yea the H1B visa its uh—it's uh, validity of the visa is like six years, so within that six years, the employer has to file for a green card, the permanent residence, so through the employment process. Then in the meantime, once it's approved

then I could stay longer, so during my fourth year, almost—first, every three years we have—like for six years term, like three years we have to renew our visa, the H1B. So, we have to go outside the country to stamp the visa and come back. So that's what I did like in 2007, '06 I think, April, we had to go out of U.S. to India, to get it stamped for the renewal. So, I filed the renewal from the old company, and I left the country, so the papers were in the immigration for the renewal process. So, once I went to India my—the old boss where I was working for, he withdrew the petition because he ran out of business so unfortunately, he has to—the business was not going good, so he was rel—he was uh liable to me, like when I come back, he has to give an employment. He was selling—wanted to sell the company so he withdrew the petition which I filed for. That if he would've done here, I would've gotten another job and got a sponsorship but since I left the country, I—I—there's no means of coming back because the visa was expired, I was there for the renewal to stamp the new visa on the passport and come back. So, when he withdrew the petition, I—I got stuck. I couldn't come back, so I had to look for another. Because Retu was studying at the time, she had just uh finished her schooling in April, and we had to come back for the next uh year, beginning like before like from August or something, but we couldn't come because I was not having a job then I found a job in New York, through one of my friends and I uh got it. So, the immigration process took almost six/ seven months to get it approved. So, finally we came back on 2007, February. We left the country on April 2006 and came back around 2007 February. So almost seven months we were in India, just doing the—getting a job and filing for the immigration. So, it was a tough time for us, because whether we are coming back, we were not aware, we were not sure of it. So finally, we came back in 2007 February.

Retu: Does that make you frust—frustrated with like the whole immigration process?

Nallathambi: Yeah, of course uh it was uh, too much frustrating because I got a job, but the paperwork took—filing through the—through attorney to the immigration, it took almost seven months to get. Because the employer said it's okay, I—I have a job,

but to go through the process it almost took seven months to get it approved. Yeah, it's really frustrating because uh I was not working for seven months, I couldn't work there or here, so it was tough time for me and my family.

Retu: So, do you think you working in New York for that amount of time had an effect on your family?

Nallathambi: Yes, of course because I used to come home only on the weekends, I couldn't do much for the support the family, just only earn. All the things was taken care of by my wife for the daughter like schooling, uh going taking her around for all this community work and things like that. It was tough on me, just being there for the whole week, coming only for the weekend. And also, it took a lot of toll on my wife's health too. She couldn't—that's the reason we lost her. She used to care more for the family and do stuff and don't—did not care much for her health, and wouldn't say anything that she had issues, because of the situations. Yeah, I wish uh if the immigration policy was good when we come to the country, we can go anywhere as we want to work. We were lacking on—I was lacking on that. So, I couldn't come look for loc—another job locally where I could commute every day from home. I—I stayed in New York for the job. That's the reason like uh, it was tough for us the whole family for almost ten years 'till we got the green card.

Retu: Would you ever want to migrate back to India?

Nallathambi: No, not at this point because when we came here uh my wife was—the second reason to come here one was my wife was having breast cancer when Retu was like two years old. And uh she had a mastectomy on her left breast. Then we thought we could do for a better treatment here, so that's also another reason to come to U.S. Yeah, she was doing good like every year we used to have a thorough check up but uh another time, like around 2013 she had another lumpectomy in her other breast and yeah. It was tough for us like uh whenever these things happen, and finally in 2000—2019, September, she—we lost her. Unfortunately, she had another, the cancer had spread all over her body and it was

so severe and she was under treatment but we never expected this would happen, but unfortunately, we lost her and at this point I don't think I could migrate back to India, because with all this situation we came across here, we like to live here.

Retu: So, if you didn't have your green card and your like permanent residency um and you were still under H1 visa would you—would it be different like then would you want to migrate back?

Nallathambi: Yes, of course because no point in just staying every—working for three, three years extension because it costs more money for the renewal and also its very tough to like with the salaries we have, unless we have a green card or permanent resident, yeah.

Retu: So, do you feel you are treated unfairly in America because of your race?

Nallathambi: Uh yeah, I feel sometimes because, of course, I've been treated differently but indirectly, in other words like uh I did my degree back home, I didn't do my education here and it all matters here because after I got my green card I was trying to apply to a lot of companies for the same pose what I worked for, but there are lot of vacancies around but you know it all depends, like it'll come to the final phase of the interview and they'll drop you off because I don't have a education here. I did only, like back home, all my educations are—since I didn't do that's a—I feel that's the main point for me to be dropped off, or so I am lacking with that kind of situation, so yeah, I do feel that. Its uh—since I have been come from India it all matters. Uh they say it's like uh, it's, what to say, like yeah. I feel the discrimination is still going on. In my case I could really feel it because of the employment. Uh everywhere I go I really been treated that. I don't know how long, but now I have been in a better place to work.

Retu: Other than like getting jobs, have—have you experienced like getting treated unfairly like in everyday life?

Nallathambi: Yeah, everyday life, actually even the job I say, like I—I am from the—I was the project manager in a sign company where I worked, all my years almost 20, 25 years, but now I work for a retail company because I have not been given a job, like what I was, in the local companies where I live around.

Retu: That you are qualified for?

Nallathambi: Qualified for. I am not getting it so I have to go to another field, start from the scratch, it takes lot of time and effort to come back and start a new job but situation is there, that's what uh—

Retu: So along with that, um your wife, was she—like her education was it like banking?

Nallathambi: No, she was basically an accountant, master's degree—master's in accounts but she also, the same way I've been treated, like wherever she goes, “Oh you have a beautiful like education,” “You are qualified,” but when it comes to the final thing, they say, “We are sorry,” because it's all about—it's kind of a discrimination because they don't give a job since she has not done her education here. And finally, she ending up getting a job as a bank teller being an accountant so that's really unfair, but what to do, we have to survive, we have to get a job so she was working there for almost four years.

Retu: So, in the future, do you think like things will change and people will not be discriminated against?

Nallathambi: Yeah, of course I do believe because it all depends on the immigration policy because once the people come to know about—because nobody's aware of this kind of situation, locally. Unless if we're in of course in New York City or Jersey or Washington, Baltimore, you see people coming under H1B on a regular basis, people are aware, but locally, like Denton, Maryland nobody is aware what is H1B. So, unless people come to know what we are, because they think that we are just coming to the country and getting their jobs, it's not like that. We have been qualified and we are—H1B is a speciality occupation job, so immigration will not

just approve a job, or we come here just like that. They—it goes almost six, seven months for the process. So, they filter all the things and then give an approval. So, when these things come up to the higher level, I think everybody comes to know what we are, and the discrimination automatically goes down and people respect, it's not a kind of respect, at least we could get along with people freely as the others do.

Retu: How did you hold on to your culture or like what have you done to hold on to your culture?

Nallathambi: Just doing the basic as we did from the childhood. There's nothing new for the culture to, we have already been used to it. So, we just came here like ten years back, but only thing we tried to—me and my wife tried to implement all these local, like the culture towards Retu because she was growing as a kid, uh the more thing is we used to take her to a lot of Indian um gatherings and friends and families we move around and also watch the international channels from the—the back home channels to keep her more uh involved in the cultural activities. And also teaching her the cultural dance which she is now doing uh every year recital on that uh dances, so.

Retu: So, finally, what do you hope people will gain from your story?

Nallathambi: Yeah, the main thing people will come to know is like the process of the legal immigrant and the illegal immigrant. As we know, in America there are so many illegal people coming to this country. And once they get a case filed on their name, and within like three—two to three months they get their all facilities like food stamps, medical, everything is government—okay, of course they pay back when they get a job, but—but legally when people come in, there are so much restrictions. We don't have any—only thing we get is salary we get paid for the work we do. Apart from that we don't get any benefits like uh especially for the dependents, even if they are sick or anything, we have to go on our own to get medical facilities and stuff like that. But now, of course things have changed. I'm

talking about like ten years back. It was so tough, we did not have any insurance in the company, we were not given. So, when we come here, we just work and take—and we pay taxes as a regular local Americans do, but—but uh the benefits, we don't have anything as an immigrant. We've gone through a lot. Because with one salary, it was not enough for the whole thing to go. Um it was really tough on us. With my story, I just conclude saying that in future maybe the immigration policy can be more friendly towards the immigrants. Thank you.