

# Van Govind edited



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## SPEAKERS

Nasriya Witt, Computer, Van Govind

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Computer 00:00

This meeting is being recorded.



Nasriya Witt 00:04

Today is the 12th of August, 2022. My name is Nasriya Witt, and I'm working as an oral history fellow for the Institute for Diversity and Civic Life. I'm in Kerala, India on a Zoom call with Van. Van, would you like to introduce yourself and tell me where you're joining from?



Van Govind 00:21

Yeah. My name is Van Govind. I use they/them/their pronouns, and I'm calling from Houston, Texas.



Nasriya Witt 00:32

Where were you born?



Van Govind 00:34

I was born in McAllen in the Rio Grande Valley in Texas.



Nasriya Witt 00:42

And where were your parents born?

V Van Govind 00:45  
So my dad was born in San Francisco, California, and my mom was born in Walsall, England.

N Nasriya Witt 00:56  
Interesting. And when did your mom moved to the US, and when did your dad move to Texas?

V Van Govind 01:06  
So my mom moved to the US when she was thirteen. She moved to Los Angeles, California, and my dad - both of my parents moved to Texas in 1995, the year before I was born.

N Nasriya Witt 01:25  
And so did they meet and get married in California?

V Van Govind 01:29  
Van Govind 01:30 So they met at a wedding in Florida, but they dated while they were both living in California, and they got married in India.

N Nasriya Witt 01:43  
Oh, interesting. And both your grandparents are from India, correct?

V Van Govind 01:49  
Yes, yeah. Both sets of my grandparents are from India.

N Nasriya Witt 01:54  
And when did they immigrate to the US and actually to England for your mother's side of the family?

V Van Govind 02:02  
Yeah, so my maternal grandparents moved to England before my mom was born. I'm not actually sure what year it was, but it was early 60s. Yeah. And then my paternal grandparents moved to California also in the early 60s, before my dad was born.

**N** Nasriya Witt 02:30

And has that immigration process or being a family that originated in India and existed in the US and also the UK, has it affected your upbringing?

**V** Van Govind 02:43

I think so. I tend to think that I have less of a traditional upbringing than a lot of my peers that are second generation, either Indian-American or South Asian Americans. Yeah, there's, I would say, more of a westernization to the way that I was brought up, versus my second generation or first generation peers.

**N** Nasriya Witt 03:14

And what is your relationship with the country or culture of your heritage, then?

**V** Van Govind 03:21

I would say that I have a pretty deep appreciation for the culture. For my undergraduate degree, I have a degree in anthropology. It's more focused on biological anthropology, so more of a science rather than humanities aspect of it. But it definitely did take a lot of classes on South Asian culture, specifically, as a part of my curriculum electives, you could say. So definitely more of a academic appreciation that became more of a cultural or more than an academic sense. Once I started to reflect more on the culture itself and my place within the culture.

**N** Nasriya Witt 04:17

Have you always had an appreciation for for your culture, or was that something that developed or changed as you grew older?

**V** Van Govind 04:26

I think certain aspects of the culture I've always very much appreciated. Like Bollywood movies, for instance, and clothing, I've always been very attracted to. Something like food, however, I kind of had a distaste for when I was younger, because I was, I guess, westernized so much to where I wanted to be eating the food that my White friends would be eating or even my Mexican friends would be eating rather than Gujarati food in that my mom makes at home, which I dreaded, but now intensely crave all the time.

**N** Nasriya Witt 05:05

Is there a language that you associate with your culture of origin?



Van Govind 05:09

Yeah, so my entire family speaks Gujarati. I understand a few words of it. And specifically, food terms and swear words. Those are pretty much all I know in Gujarati. But my older siblings do have a better understanding of it than I do



Nasriya Witt 05:32

And do you have a sense of community in Texas that's associated with your culture of origin?



Van Govind 05:40

So yes and no. Yes, because my family is a part of an association in San Antonio for Gujarati people, they get together for holidays and stuff like that. It's not something that I'm heavily active with, so I wouldn't say that I'm super connected with the community. I think my community building is focused more so on just South Asian friends, essentially. Maybe not colleagues in a formal community sense, more so I just happen to make friends, and significant number of them happen to be South Asian as well. But a significant portion of them are also coming from a multitude of backgrounds. So yeah, yes and no.



Nasriya Witt 06:42

Why do you feel like you're less involved in the Gujarati community? Does it have to do with your queer identity at all?



Van Govind 06:51

Yes, definitely. I felt a little bit more involved with the community before when I was younger. I did have sort of a falling out with a large portion of that community, specifically in San Antonio. Not to sugar coat it - I was basically outed by some of the members in that community. So it's something that I do still a little bit resent them for, even though I have kind of moved past that within my personal growth and really coming into my queer identity, but definitely put a strain on it when I couldn't pick my own timeline for when I wanted to tell people about that.



Nasriya Witt 07:38

And you mentioned that you were born in McAllen, Texas.



Van Govind 07:41

Yes.

**N** Nasriya Witt 07:42  
How long did you live there, and when did you move to San Antonio?

**V** Van Govind 07:46  
So I live there from when I was born to when I turned - I must have been turning - So I was already nine. I would have turned ten a few months after we moved to San Antonio. So yeah, nine years old.

**N** Nasriya Witt 08:09  
And did you have a sense of community in McAllen, Texas as well?

**V** Van Govind 08:14  
Yeah. So actually our family was a lot closer to the association for Gujarati people in the Valley. We were less involved with the San Antonio community, I think because it was much more of a tight knit group down there since there wasn't as many Gujarati people specifically in the Valley. It's predominantly Mexican-American people and Mexican people that have immigrated. So yeah, stronger knit community than when we lived in San Antonio.

**N** Nasriya Witt 08:53  
And you were in San Antonio till you were eighteen?

**V** Van Govind 08:58  
Yes, I went to UT when I turned - I might have been already nineteen, because I did my first year at UTSA. So I moved to Austin when I was nineteen.

**N** Nasriya Witt 09:13  
And what did you study while you were at UT?

**V** Van Govind 09:16  
I studied anthropology with specificity in biological anthropology, like human evolution and primate evolution.

**N** Nasriya Witt 09:27  
Interesting, and you're in grad school right now?

**V** Van Govind 09:29  
Yes, I'm in pharmacy school at University of Houston.

**N** Nasriya Witt 09:34  
And did you maintain a sense of community while you were at university, and what did that look like?

**V** Van Govind 09:41  
Yeah, so I think I maintain that sense of community like I was previously talking about, where my sense of community building is through friendships that I make that happen to be South Asian, and we connect over that, and we can exchange our different experiences and stuff like that. But yeah, at UT here's plenty of South Asian people in general, so I definitely did make quite a few South Asian friends and build a community there. And I mean, UT does several different events for different holidays and cultural significance holidays. There's a Diwali celebration every year they always did, a Holi celebration every year, so community in that sense as well, I would say.

**N** Nasriya Witt 10:38  
And the conversations you had with your South Asian friends, what did they entail? What did you guys discuss that was related to culture?

**V** Van Govind 10:49  
Honestly, I think a lot of unpacking of trauma that came from the more negative aspects of our culture, and helping each other heal by talking about our own experiences and the things that we've seen wrong in the community that we, as the next generation, want to combat and undo some of that trauma, toxicity, whatever you say.

**N** Nasriya Witt 11:21  
Would you like to share what some of those traumas or toxicities, if you'd like to?

**V** Van Govind 11:27  
Yeah, sure. I think one huge aspect of South Asian culture that I find alarming in today's society is the rampant anti-Blackness in the community and colorism. I think that's something that is

ingrained to us from a very young age. As you know, this model minority myth is peddled to Asian Americans specifically. And the resentment of Black people whose labor and suffering has built this country that we benefit from now, just immigrating with more higher education and opportunities that weren't ever given to the people that were enslaved in America in the past. So yeah, I think talking about the anti blackness in the community, and also colorism. Colorism is still something that's widely a problem within South Asian culture in general, within the diaspora, and even back in South Asia, where the most desirable people that are displayed and the most celebrated people are lighter skinned. And particularly, there's a North and South Asian divide among North and South Indian people. Because South Indian people tend to be darker, they're looked down upon a lot by North Indians, and I think that's something we definitely need to deal with and speak about.

N

Nasriya Witt 13:20

So I'm gonna pivot a little bit. Can you describe your family's experiences? For example, what was the typical day like when you were growing up?

V

Van Govind 13:32

I guess a typical day changed multiple times throughout my childhood. When I was much younger, my mother was a stay at home mother, and my dad owned a hotel in Edinburg, which is a town adjacent to McAllen, which is where we lived. I was just born in McAllen, but we lived in Edinburg. And my dad owned a hotel there, so he was wrapped up mainly with business handling every day. And my mom would be the one that took us to school and did things around the house and cleaned. Very traditional hetero-patriarchal, nuclear family kind of thing. But I think after my parents went bankrupt during the 2008 recession, we had to sell the hotel and that's when we moved to San Antonio, because my dad found an opportunity managing hotels there. So at that point was when my mom started working in retail along with my dad and managing the hotel. So I think definitely towards when we moved to San Antonio was when the day-to-day things started to shake up a little bit because of the two-working household that we had, at that point.

N

Nasriya Witt 15:01

And you've mentioned that when you were at university, you attended community related events. What were they, and were you a part of any organizations while you were at UT?

V

Van Govind 15:14

Yeah. So like I said before, there was always a Diwali celebration at nighttime, where they would have food and displays and stuff like that. And then Holi, the spring festival of colors, would be held in a park, and they would have the powder. I don't know what - I can't even remember the Gujarati word for it, but there's specific word for it, the colored powder, that they use in the Holi festival. So yeah, those were a couple of the community events. In terms of organizations, I wasn't in any cultural organizations. I was aware of them, but I knew definitely that there were more so for a straight South Asian experience. I think that there wasn't much

room for queer South Asians in that group, not on purpose, but just by the makeup of their members in their organization that I didn't maybe felt attracted to. Most of the organizations that I was a part of were anthropology-based. I was in a biological anthropology club, essentially. And yeah, I don't think it was in any other organizations. I worked quite a bit part time at the pharmacy during undergrad, so I didn't have a lot of time for organizations.

**N** Nasriya Witt 16:43

Were you involved with any political activism while you were at university, or even now?

**V** Van Govind 16:50

Yeah, so I was part of PSA. I wasn't a huge - again, I was pretty busy with my work, that I wasn't super involved. But I did go to meetings consistently for Palestine Solidarity Alliance. And yeah, they did an annual protest at - I can't even remember what it's called, but it's essentially just a celebration of Israel, and it's like a very tone-deaf kind of celebration that the members of PSA would protest every year. So I participated in that every year, and yeah, that's pretty much the extent there was quite a bit of inter-organization things that they had going on, like banner and creating signs for the protest. And so there was a lot of individual jobs that I got to do in that organization as well. But yeah, that's the only political organization I was in.

**N** Nasriya Witt 18:09

Would you like to share what your political values are? And what shaped them?

**V** Van Govind 18:14

Yeah sure, I consider myself generally a leftist. I know semantics is very important to leftist identity. I don't know exactly what where I would fall in, as of now maybe democratic socialist. But yeah, I think what shaped them a lot is how eye-opening organizations like PSA were for me, as well as growing up in the the age of the internet and the age of Tumblr, something really prevalent with social justice. So it's something that was shaped by I think the bigger conversation that was being had over online discourse. As well as a lot of what I hold onto through my moral compass comes through my interpersonal relationships, like getting to know the different problems in the Latine community from my Latine friends. Learning about certain aspects of the Black struggle from my Black friends, as well as doing my outside research on those things that I find kind of appalling in our history that has to be rectified. I think that really shapes the core of where my political standings and social issues standings come from, an amalgamation.

**N** Nasriya Witt 19:53

What historic events had an impact on your life, and why?



V

Van Govind 19:58

Yeah, so I think this could be said for a lot of South Asian and Middle Eastern people in America in the past two, three decades, is the impact of 9/11 and the destabilization of the Middle East that was a larger project of the US imperialist system. That's continued to affect every aspect of our lives. For instance, gas prices, something that's been so widely talked about now, is a result of the destabilization of the Middle East and the profiteering of the oil and gas industry that led us to this point, essentially. So I think we had talked about this in the pre-interview, but I think that it's kind of hard to pinpoint one specific historical event that has impacted my life, because I think in the past - I mean, it's been more than thirty years, but I'm using that as a time frame for when I've been alive, and just before that, the events that led up to that. I think there's so many compounding factors that created the environment that we are in today. I kind of lost my train of thought there. But yeah, not one particular event, more of a compounding of events, I would say.

N

Nasriya Witt 21:42

Can you describe some of your experiences related to 9/11, if you'd like to?

V

Van Govind 21:47

Yeah, I mean, I think this is something that you could relate to, and everybody in our age group could relate to, where we didn't really understand what was happening, because we were so young when it did happen. I would have been four going on to five that year. And I just remember the footage that we watched in school and immediately coming home, and my mom was crying on the couch. And I didn't really understand what had happened or why it had happened until much later on. Even past my world history education that I had in my K-12 years because even that is not an accurate representation of those compounding factors that lead to something like an act of terrorism like that. I think that's one event where you can see where my political leanings and political understanding had to be shaped and remolded so many times because I didn't fully get the big picture of why acts of terrorism like that even happen and what precipitates them.

N

Nasriya Witt 23:09

Did you experience any animosity at school or anywhere else related to this incident?

V

Van Govind 23:15

Not necessarily, I would say. I think when I was younger and living in the Valley, because I was surrounded by Brown people as well, that understand being labeled and people having prejudice against you, they didn't have an animosity towards our family, as if maybe if I was in a more White populated area where that animosity was so prevalent back then, and even still to this day, of course. But yeah, not particularly. I mean, there's always those stupid comments

that boys have in middle school about Aladdin, blah, blah, blah, insert joke about bomb here kind of thing, where it's, I think, just to get a rise out of people and probably just reflective of their parents values more than their own kind of thing.

N

Nasriya Witt 24:19

Aside from that, have you experienced any unfair treatment? What happened and why do you think it happened?

V

Van Govind 24:27

So that's interesting, because again, I don't really think that I've had many opportunities to be racially targeted, because I live somewhere so diverse as Texas where the - yeah, there's a large population of bigoted Caucasian people but there's a dearth of Brown people that live here that understand similar experiences and growing up in the same time frame as I have. I think more so the inequalities or prejudices that I felt that had been placed on me are more so related to me being queer and trans. Those things tend to have more of an outward effect, where I can visibly see it, and it's not something that's as overt as some acts of racism that you see in America.

N

Nasriya Witt 25:37

Have your views about living in the United States changed at all?

V

Van Govind 25:42

I mean, yes. Everybody is fed the idea that America is the best country in the world for so long. All of our history education is catered towards this romanticization of America and its history. And so I think with the political ideas and the values that I've come to adopt, it's something that I've really looked with disdain that I even in the first place thought that America and its history was something that was noble, or spreading the word of democracy and equality, when there are so many things that we see now are completely opposite from that. Just some very evil atrocities that this country has committed and still perpetuate to this day, that make me really not proud to have been born here and not proud that I'm a product of genocide and slavery. All those things had to have happened for me to have been here right now. And it's not a good feeling once you realize how the world has really been duped from this idea that America tries to display through nationalism and the the nationalist retelling of history.

N

Nasriya Witt 27:24

Does this affect how you view yourself or how you identify? For example, what do you identify as, as Indian-American or something else?

V Van Govind 27:32

Yeah, I identify as Indian-American still. It's not something that I can really even deny. I am someone from Indian descent that was born in America and is heavily influenced by an American culture. I am Indian-American, but what that means and what I do with it is different to what the larger idea of what immigrants should be, again, back to the model minority myth. But I don't think it's something that necessarily everybody should be proud of. Maybe they should be proud more so of communities that are built here, that also strive to subvert from that idea that a minority has to do this and look this way and act this way to function in our society.

N Nasriya Witt 28:31

So related to that, how do you feel about the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act and its impact on Texas?

V Van Govind 28:39

Yeah, I think you're gonna have to forgive me, because I'm not very versed in that act. But the one aspect of it that I do know well is something that I keep bringing up over and over again, is that created the model minority myth, where America really was prioritizing high skilled labor over a genuine desire for a more diverse group of people immigrating into the United States and creating a richer tapestry of culture and cooperation and community. But in fact, they were looking for a specific "well-behaved" quote-unquote, won't stir the pot too much of our White supremacist leaning towards how we operate this country. Somebody that's not going to shake the boat, and will just be there to be high skilled labor, so that they benefit our economy, the capitalist beneficiaries. It's a long winded answer, but yeah. Again, I'm not super familiar with it, so I couldn't tell you if it's a good historical impact analysis thing.

N Nasriya Witt 30:28

Just to pivot a little bit again, what kind of traditions and practices do you keep up with? Why do you continue to catches these traditions and customs?

V Van Govind 30:41

So I was raised Hindu, and I still practice Hinduism in, I guess, subtle ways. Me and my family, we don't go to the temple that often. But we still have certain traditions that are sometimes specific to Gujarati Hindus. We have one tradition that we do every year, just before Diwali, where you wash coins in milk and honey and spices. It's supposed to be a good omen for wealth and bringing luck into the new year. So we do that every year. There was a holiday that just passed, called Hirihatham where you can only eat cold food, you can't eat anything that's warm. So that was last week, maybe the week before. So certain certain holidays and stuff I still observe, but I'm not super, super involved in traditions outside of the house, unless it's something where it's a festival like Diwali or Holi where it's more so a fun outing, and it being cultural is just another aspect of it.

N

Nasriya Witt 32:25

How do you view your religion, and has that changed over time? And also related to that, do you think that Hinduism as well understood in the US?

V

Van Govind 32:37

Can you repeat that last part one more time I heard "Hindu" and "Muslim," but I didn't catch the rest.

N

Nasriya Witt 32:43

Oh, I just asked what's your relationship with your religion and how it's changed over time, but also related to that, do you think that Hinduism is understood in the US in an accurate way, is it well represented?

V

Van Govind 32:59

Yeah, so my relationship with Hinduism, I think it definitely was helped by the fact that I did take several classes about India and Hinduism during my undergraduate time. There was a class that was specifically about Hindu traditions from an anthropology lens that I found a new found appreciation for that. I also had a class called Women and Gender in Modern India, that really delved and validated my experience as a non-binary person, because one thing that we talked about in that class is the historical significance of there being a third gender in Hinduism, that subverts the male-female binary. And that really helped me put in perspective why I connect with it, and how I can still connect with it in a way that's not how its practiced where it's pretty much political at this point in modern India today where Hinduism is a tool for right wing violence and violence against religious minorities in India, specifically Muslim people and Sikhs.

V

Van Govind 34:52

So yeah, that's my relationship with Hinduism. As to whether I think that it's well represented in the US, I think there's two different aspects of it. Because I think in the US, obviously, there are a lot of Hindu people that live here that are from South Asia, are of South Asian descent. So that aspect of it, obviously, it's going to be preserved pretty accurately that way. But then there's another aspect of it that's not necessarily about religion, as more of the religion's impact on culture. Where you see something obviously yoga, that's been so widely popularized in the United States for the past fifty years, where it's a thousands of years old religious practice, that's been repackaged and made palatable towards the Caucasian majority in America. And many Caucasian people benefit and profit off of something like yoga, or even chakras.

V

Van Govind 36:07

Chakras are widely integrated within the Hindu religion. And it's kind of been distilled down so much that it's a completely different thing from what the religious definition of those are, and the religious significance of maintaining aligned chakras and energy flow in the body and the more spiritual aspect of it that's been bastardized in a way, because it's been so wildly profiteered on, and that's something that America does very well is taking something with a cultural significance, and repackaging it to a product that can be sold to people and people benefit capitalistically through that, which I find very appalling and very disrespectful.

N

Nasriya Witt 37:10

Okay, so you mentioned several times in this interview that you took classes at UT that affected your perception of your culture and faith. When you compare your experiences to people who haven't taken these academic classes about culture and faith, how do you see that impact on yourself that may look different from, say, one of your cousins or siblings?

V

Van Govind 37:36

Yeah, so I mean, I'm coming, obviously - this more recent - I don't know what the word I should use for it is. The more recent importance that my culture and religion has on me from those classes, I think it's still from an academic angle. And I think that's just how my brain works in a lot of ways, is that I to understand things and appreciate them, but the best way for me to do that is through an academic angle, where it's a more traditional way of analyzing, there's specific parameters that are discussed within those classes that maybe aren't as natural or organic as cultural diffusion between a family or through community building where they may get aspects that I've missed out on being in this academic frame of understanding. And I may understand certain aspects that they don't, because they're not coming from an academic perspective.

V

Van Govind 38:39

I'm trying to think of something specific that I can make an example of. I mean, not a lot of people talk about - I think as a result of colonization and the valuing of the European values of the gender binary and heterosexuality and patriarchy - those aspects of, I think, South Asian culture has been whitewashed in a way that you don't really hear about there being a third gender, there being representations of homosexual sex on temples where they have heterosexual acts of sex being pictured as well. There's a lot of those aspects that I know from an academic perspective, because I was in classes Women and Gender in Modern India that I got a unique and more genuine view of queerness in South Asia and within Hinduism.

N

Nasriya Witt 39:59

That's very interesting. What goals do you have for yourself? You mentioned you're in grad school. Aside from that, what other goals do you have?

V Van Govind 40:09

Yeah, so I am studying to be a pharmacist right now, so that's number one goal at the moment. Eventually, I'd like to, once I've been more established and possibly just when I'm older and have a stable amount of money, I'd like to go back to grad school for anthropology and try doing human evolution anthropology academically. That's always been one of my dreams later in life, if I get to that. So I think that's a big goal. Obviously, I have personal goals where I want to eventually get married and have children. But yeah, right now I'm just laser focused on getting this degree.

N Nasriya Witt 41:13

So is there a message that you would like to share with anyone who would listen to this interview in the future? Is there a message you'd like to put out there?

V Van Govind 41:25

OOh, that's loaded. I think maybe just the overall message behind what I wanted to get out of this interview was that the South Asian experience in Texas is widely varied. There's many different interlocking pieces that create who I am and who my South Asian Texan peers are. And I think it's really beautiful that all of these different pieces had to be in the correct place for me to have the experience that I have today. I think maybe during this interview, it came across as a little bit pessimistic or somber, but there is a lot of beauty in being a South Asian in Texas and interacting. The cultures that are predominant in Texas with South Asian culture, I think is a really beautiful experience. And I think that my queerness also lends something to that experience as well. And yeah, culture is an amazing thing. I love anthropology, so I love doing stuff like this.

N Nasriya Witt 42:52

Is there anything else you'd like to share?

V Van Govind 42:56

I can't think of anything.

N Nasriya Witt 42:59

Well Van, thank you for joining, and I'm gonna end the recording.

V Van Govind 43:04

Cool.