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Interview with Asha Kapadia

Asha Kapadia Ph.D.

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TEXAS MEDICAL CENTER
WOMEN'S HISTORY PROJECT

Asha Kapadia

Interviewed by: Natalie Garza
Date: October 17, 2014
Transcribed by: Michelle Kokes
Location: Asha Kapadia's Home

NG: This is Natalie Garza. It is Friday October 17th 2014 and I am interviewing Dr. Asha Kapadia in her home on Robinhood Street. Can you begin by telling me your full name?

AK: Asha Seth Kapadia.

NG: And is there a maiden name?

AK: Seth is my maiden last name.

NG: When were you born?

AK: I was born in 19 on the paper 1937.

NG: Why do you say on the paper?

AK: Because you know there was a mix up we were all living in India and then India and Pakistan became two countries and all the paperwork was left in India we just ran with whatever we were wearing. So when we moved to India my grandfather took us to admit us in schools and all that and we were all very little. And whatever date of birth he gave us so that's why we are five girls a year or so apart. The 13 girls in his family (granddaughters) so every year one or two were born so he didn't know so that's the date of birth for me.

NG: So you have no idea what your?

AK: I think most probably '39 but I go by '37 because I've going by '37 all my life.

NG: What is your official birth date then that's on your paper?

AK: On the paper August 16, 1937.

NG: Okay and where were you born?

AK: In Lahore which is now in Pakistan. It was in India, in undivided India.

NG: Okay and you said that when you were young that Pakistan and India get divided up.

AK: Yes.

NG: How old were you when that happened?

AK: I was 8 or 10 I don't remember. Yes.

NG: Right so do you remember much of your childhood prior to having to flee Pakistan?

AK: Yes we had a very happy childhood. We were five girls in the family and my dad was an RAF (Royal Air Force) officer. My mom was a very educated woman for that time. So we had a very secure safe upbringing and good neighbors playing with kids and going to good schools and learning a lot. Then one summer we went in 1947 to Kashmir because we used to go to Kashmir every summer because it was very hot in the mainland you know in Lahore. So we used to go to Kashmir my mother would take all the kids to Kashmir and we would rent a house there for two, three months during summer vacation which was really hot in the plains and my dad would come for a month or two depending on how much leave he got. So then we would come back to Lahore when the school would start.

NG: So you said that your father was in.

AK: In the royal air force but he was in the... he had a Ph.D. and everything and during war time he joined the royal air force.

NG: And what was his Ph.D. in?

AK: His Ph.D. was in Mogul history. You know Mogul's were the invaders to India in the middle ages the 1700's, 1600's like that and for that he had to learn Arabic and Persian and to convert some of the books from that time into English so he had to learn. So he was very proficient in Arabic and Persian. But his dissertation was English speaking. His Ph.D. was in History medieval Indian history.

NG: And then was he from a fairly prominent family?

AK: He was from a very prominent family in Lahore but when it was time for him to go to college all his cousins all studied in Oxford and Cambridge and like that and very educated people uncles and everybody. But when it was his time to go to Oxford or Cambridge his dad passed away so he had to stay at home in India, in Lahore to take care of his mom and his younger brother. So that was his unfulfilled ambition and then later on he got his Ph.D. in India. That was his unfulfilled ambition and he wanted all of his daughters to study in Oxford and Cambridge.

NG: Did any of you study?

AK: I had admission in Oxford and Cambridge but I wanted to come to MIT so my dad took me and he insisted that I go to Oxford and Cambridge and he took me to the British Council Unit kind of part of the British Embassy in New Delhi and told them within two weeks they wrote a letter saying that Oxford and Cambridge University was willing to accept you, willing to admit you and I didn't show that letter to my dad because he would have insisted. Because I wanted to come to MIT and today I have guilt

feelings about that because sooner I didn't show that letter to my dad and soon after that he passed away and I still have guilt feelings about that.

NG: You said your mom was educated for that time.

AK: Chemistry major and you know she talked at that time like the women's liberated people talk these days you know. So she was very ahead of her time.

NG: So you would say that wasn't typical for women at the time?

AK: No. But my mom also comes from a very educated background. My grandmother wasn't educated. Both the grandmothers weren't [educated] but my grandfather on my mother's side was a lawyer, plus he was chief of police in one of the southern states. So this English woman would come and teach them English and horse riding, and things. My mother would always remember that. She graduated from the most difficult college at that time, from Madras University which was considered very difficult. So she was ahead of her time. My parents got along very well. And I still remember we were 5 girls and my dad if we were all in one room my dad would put his arms around my mom and say, "None of you is as pretty as my wife." You know ahead of his time, in India people don't do such things even now.

NG: Right. So what kind of influence do you think that had on you to have a mom like that that was educated and...?

AK: It was very helpful because once one of my younger sisters she got - the one whose daughter is in the hospital - she got divorced in India and he was no good, the guy. He was a Colonel in the Indian army but not good so my mom just said, "You have to get your divorce." This is after my dad passed away and my sister wasn't quite sure at all. She [my mom] said, "No you have to." So when they went to the court the guy came

with a gun, a rifle or something like that. I vaguely remember I was here. And my mom said, “Okay I’m not scared of your rifle or your gun okay?” So she insisted that my sister... I mean not insisted but helped her go through the process and kept her at home and you know took care of her and her mentally challenged daughter and then they came here once I was settled in Houston. I was married at that time and I called my sister and invited her to come here. She then met this most wonderful Texan the most wonderful human being we have ever met and got married so they are happily married for 25 or 30 years. He was a swimming champion at UT Austin and after he was swimming in one of the Caribbean countries I forget the name, he had a heart attack.

NG: Oh my goodness.

AK: So that has been a big tragedy you know besides my mom passing away and my dad passing away at a very young age and my mom was 93 or something like that when she passed away.

NG: So when your dad passed away did your mom still have children at home? You were getting ready to go to MIT.

AK: I was getting ready to go to MIT, my two younger sisters were married, and my older sister she is the brains in the family... She has written all these books she was the Secretary of Health in the Indian Government and then later on she became the Chairman of UNICEF for a couple of years so my sister who lives here and I used to fly to New York to see her preside over UNICEF meetings. She is the brains in the family. She is the oldest.

NG: Well I was wondering when your father passed away...

AK: So only myself and my youngest sister, her name is Sweetie were living at home. Two were married and my oldest sister was transferred from one place to another wherever her job was at that time.

NG: How was your mother able to take care of herself, did she ever work outside of the home?

AK: She never worked outside of the home but my mom I mean money wasn't a problem and she always has learned to live within her means. We all do. We have all learned that we will not spend a penny outside our means you know? So she was able to manage. Then I came to America so my little sister Sweetie was the only one who was left at home. And my mother wanted her to have the experience of living in dormitories because she hadn't lived in dormitories in college. So she lived in the dormitory and my mother lived in the same government house we had from the government of India. My mother stayed there for a year or so and then she moved in with my oldest sister. In the meantime they built a house in New Delhi and so my mom lived there and you know she started traveling. She came here a couple of times.

NG: With all girls at home was there always expectations that all of you would go on to further your education?

AK: Yes very much, very much. We became second in class that was not good enough, no you have to be first. But in a nice way. Not in a stressful way you know. They emphasized the importance of good grades and good values and all but not in a stressful way. We were not stressed. But we knew we wanted to please our parents. But not in a stressful way.

NG: And would you say that was typical for young girls in India at the time that you were being encouraged?

AK: Not it was not typical. In fact at our age when we were growing up in the 50's and 60's my dad's colleagues used to say, "Dr. Seth you are wasting your money educating girls! They are getting married save money for their dowry!" Have you heard about this dowry system?

NG: Yes.

AK: We don't believe in it but it exists in India okay? So my dad would say, "Don't worry the dowry that my daughters are going to take, nobody else will have brought that kind of dowry. Getting good education working wonderful professional jobs that's dowry. Every month you will bring money right?" My mom and dad were way ahead of their time. So their colleagues... My dad's colleagues, my mom didn't work and she didn't have colleagues, so my dad's colleagues I don't think any of their girls especially even if they finished bachelor's or something they all got married and didn't have professional careers.

NG: Can you tell me a little bit about the move from Pakistan to India what that experience was like?

AK: You know we were little so it was exciting for us because we were so little. I just remember when we were in Kashmir the roads and all were closed and it was very unsafe to go and I just remember that one truck carrying sand bags or something gave us a ride to a place where we could take a plane to New Delhi. I remember we were all crushed up my mom and the five daughters you know just crushed up in the truck to get to the place. Then a couple of days later we took a plane to New Delhi and then my dad came to New

Delhi and got us. He was transferred to South India at that time so we all moved there. But it was exciting. We were little you know we didn't understand the implications.

NG: No sense of danger or anything?

AK: No.

NG: Did you know anybody in New Delhi?

AK: I had two aunts my dad's brother and his wife lived there and my mom had a younger sister who lived there. So we lived with some relatives for a few days with both sets of relatives for a few days and then my dad came and took us to South India he was transferred to South India at that time.

NG: And so where did you move to in South India?

AK: Near Madras. Have you heard about Madras?

NG: Yes.

AK: Near Madras two or three hundred miles from there a town called Coimbatore, a military station. Until I came here we always lived in air force stations. My dad was in the military so we got housed there you know. I played tennis, not when I was 9, 10 years old but later on. He was a tennis champion of RAF and he wanted all of his daughters to play tennis. So two of us ended up playing tennis.

NG: Did you enjoy playing tennis?

AK: Very much. In fact when I went to my undergraduate college in India I was the college champion in tennis and then when I came to MIT myself and a classmate of mine who ended up becoming my bestest friend in the whole world Ron Randall. He and I won the mixed doubles championship.

NG: Oh wow that's really good.

AK: And my son took me to Wimbledon a couple of years ago.

NG: Wow!

AK: Many times he gets tickets for me to see the U.S. Open. I'm crazy about tennis. If I don't go see during that time I'm watching on TV. I love it.

NG: That's nice. What was it like growing up the rest of the time in South India?

AK: My dad would get transferred every couple of years so then finally then after the South Indian transfer we went to Central India Rajasthan a town called Jodhpur and two, three years after that he was transferred to New Delhi and two, three years after that back to South India and then back to New Delhi and then we were in college by that time and we all lived in dormitories in college.

NG: So your education during this time period you were moving back and forth?

AK: From school to school. So finally when it was time for me to get to high school I had to do it privately you know because of all these transfers and all that. So I am the one among all five of us who did high school in a private setting.

NG: And where did you go for your undergrad in college?

AK: In New Delhi my sister she was the star of the college so my grades were very bad, so bad I can't even tell you. And my dad insisted she take me to the president of the college because she was the number one student in college you know and she said, "No how can I take her to the president she will think I am also dumb with this dumb sister of mine?" You know like that. But she did take me to the president of the college and I still remember the president saying (my sister's name is Mira Seth – they pronounce it as Mahy-ruh but it is Mī-rah, M-i-r-a) "That I'm admitting only because of you." So my

sister made me promise I will not tell anybody in the college that I am her sister.

Because I will continue to get bad grades so she didn't want to be embarrassed.

NG: What was that experience like? Did you start to do better academically?

AK: But then I got good grades compared to... A lot of people recognized me because we all look alike you know family resemblance. Colleges were not that big 200, 300 people, women and young girls in the school. So they asked her, "Do you have a sister here?" Some of the teachers also asked, professors. Then my dad insisted that I have to study math and math wouldn't come to me and none of my parents knew math. My dad was transferred from year to year so we didn't have any continuity that way. So he insisted that I do math major in college. After mid-term, we were 10 girls in the class. It was a girls' college you know. After the mid-term this guy he was the head of the department. He took the name of 9 other girls and not mine and that they could continue as math major but not Asha Seth so I felt so humiliated you know. I begged and cried and cried the rest of the afternoon. Then he said, "Okay I will give you one more chance. If you do okay in the final exam I might let you do that." Math wouldn't come to me and then my dad and my mom didn't know much math, you know college level algebra and trigonometry and things like that. Somehow I worked very hard and I came first in my class in the finals. Then I didn't stop. So he had to give me math major.

End of section 1

NG: Okay you said you went to an all girls' school. Was that typical of colleges in India?

AK: At that time some women went to mixed schools also. But this was kind of an elitist girls' school also. You mean college?

NG: College yes.

AK: College so my sister had to put in a good word for me.

NG: And what was the name of the school?

AK: Indraprastha College.

NG: Do you know why your dad insisted on mathematics?

AK: I don't know. Dad knows best you know that's how we were brought up. I don't know. He was a historian but he was also the head of the Department of English. He was a very cultivated guy. He was a consultant to the Oxford and Cambridge Universities press you know whenever they released a book on he would be their outside, what do you call it not examiner...

NG: Like a reviewer?

AK: Reviewer, like a reviewer yeah. So my mom was a chemistry major and my two other sisters they studied home economics they got degrees in home economics. One sister, the historian got history and another sister she was English major the one who lives here she was an English major.

NG: So then after that semester when you did so well.

AK: Then I never stopped I was always number one in the class. So much so that after the exams you know they reviewed the exams in the class. After the results and all of that, after the grading they reviewed the exam in the class and I noticed that my teachers were presenting my answers on the blackboard.

NG: What do you think motivated you after that point?

AK: You know my sister was the big shot in the college and doing so well I wanted my parents to not think any less of me. But it just came to me at that time you know.

They were not women teachers, women tutors I could hire to teach me math and even the teachers at the university retrospectively they were very limited. But somehow it just I had to please my parents or whatever and it just came to me.

NG: Did something click in your head?

AK: Yes it just clicked yes and everything just came very, from being thrown out of the class I came first in the final exam and then I never stopped.

NG: So continuing on to MIT did you do that very quickly after finishing?

AK: No after finishing I did my Master's in India and but Master's in India is equal to Bachelor's over here. Now retrospectively I realized, and I got very good grades in that. And then I got a scholarship to do some research in India and I did that a few years and then the Government of India announced, advertised for a scholarship one scholarship for the whole country to study science and math comes under science sort of. They will pay all expenses plus traveling first class for whichever university in the world you choose. That's when my dad took me to the British Council and they sent a letter later on that Oxford and Cambridge are willing to accept you. I ended up getting that scholarship but I was so afraid of failure I didn't tell a single soul in the whole world. And one day I come home and this express letter had come the post man had delivered it and my dad had opened and said, "What is she getting an express letter for?" And, "You didn't tell us?" But I was so afraid of failure.

NG: You didn't tell anybody you had applied for this scholarship?

AK: I didn't tell a single soul. But then my dad, "Why didn't you tell us?" and all that. But there was one scholarship that the government of India gave for the whole country and I ended up getting it.

NG: That's very impressive there are a lot of people.

AK: There are a lot of people in India but many smart people didn't apply probably. But anyway all expenses they paid for three years. So then I had admission in Oxford and Cambridge and Harvard and Stanford and MIT I applied. But it was like June of that year 1963, I came to this country it was June and MIT said the admissions were closed. Admission deadline was January 15th or something you know in all the universities. So no in the meantime MIT rejected... they didn't reject they said, "Apply next year your qualifications are very impressive you apply next year" and in the meantime Harvard admitted me even though I had applied late there also. So Harvard admitted and I wrote to MIT and I said, "Look Harvard has admitted me how come you haven't?" And can you believe they admitted me? At that time you know there was no internet and all that. By letters. So I went to MIT.

NG: So why were you set on MIT?

AK: I don't know because I met a guy who told me a whole lot of things about MIT and I got very impressed and it was a little unusual. Harvard and all those places a lot of people from New Delhi were going, you know? So then I was the only girl in all the classes I took in MIT and I learned a lot there. They were very nice and I was in the business school and I'm the first woman graduate of their business school. So whenever the Dean from the business school comes to Houston I always have breakfast or lunch or dinner with him. Also, my sister over here and I donated a senior executive conference room in the MIT Business school in honor of our parents. Then, how I got into Harvard that's an unusual story. When I finished at MIT they didn't give me admission for the Ph.D. program because I was the only woman there and they didn't see any point in

giving... you know they could say things like that at that time. But anyway I don't want to hold that against them. I've forgotten because something better happened to me. And I had a very aggressive Jewish roommate. She said, "No you can't go back to India your mother will be disappointed!" I still had a couple of years of my full scholarship from the government. So I went to the statistics department at Harvard and I said since it was June or something of '65 and I said, "Since I'm going to the department let me go to the head of department why should I go to the secretary." So I knock on the door and he said, "Come in." So I go and I said, I took my Master's Thesis from MIT and I had gotten an A plus, plus for my Master's thesis (and I had very good grades) so I told him I wanted admission in the Ph.D. program in statistics. He said, "Young lady you know the admission deadline was January 15th." I said, "Yes sir that's why I came personally." He said, "Okay since you're here why don't you sit down." World famous statistician number one statistician in the world.

NG: Do you remember his name?

AK: Yes Mosteller, Frank Mosteller.¹ He called the registrar and the registrar said, "Sir it's too late." He said, "No but I'm sending this person." So he told me to go to the registrar's office, fill out the form and in my handwriting I filled out the Harvard application forms \$10 was the admission fees and in two weeks I get the envelope I'm admitted as well as this head of the department offered me a summer job.

NG: What was the summer job?

AK: As the research assistant for him doing research. So that's how it started. But I had been through the mill at MIT. It was hard but I got good grades. But it was hard. I worked hard. I learned a lot. So I found Harvard was very easy for me.

¹ Charles Frederick Mosteller

NG: Yeah I was going to say that even now I think that the female population at MIT is still not as high as in other places.

AK: No but now it's close to 40%. I get the statistics because I interview students. I used to interview students. I used to interview a whole lot of students in different students and now they have assigned me the DeBakey High School for Health Professions and I interviewed those students applying to MIT. So lately everyday I've been interviewing one or two students. Amazing those students, amazing! I can't even believe kids like that exist.

NG: You said that you did well and that everybody was nice but did you ever have any difficulties because of being a woman in these classes?

AK: No I don't think so. I was the only woman in all the classes I took in MIT and I used to wear Indian Sari's and all this and people were kind of intrigued but they were very nice and pleasant. And I had the best time in my life. I learned a lot plus I had a wonderful time. I lived in the girls' dorm undergraduate dormitory and at Harvard I lived in the graduate dormitory and I made good grades so you know that also helps.

NG: What about were there many international students in the business school?

AK: There were a lot of Indian guys and Greek tycoon's kids and Swedish guys and all kinds of people yes. These are international places you know so there were. At Harvard also even more so.

NG: So you said your interest in MIT started because you met somebody that told you about it, what was it about his stories that made you think this was?

AK: No but he just sold me on this about how great it is and how wonderful the students do afterwards and how much he learned things like that?

NG: And what did you think of Cambridge?

AK: I loved it it's my favorite city on earth. It was much smaller at that time. Now it is very crowded. But there is something in the air. So I go very often for something or the other. And I like going there.

NG: What about socially how was your life socially during that time?

AK: You are taping it so I can't tell you.

NG: Excuse me? I'm taping so you can tell? [Laughter] So you had a lot of fun.

AK: Yes a lot of fun. Wonderful, wonderful and then I was different looking. I wore different clothes a lot of parents of the girls in the dormitories they started inviting me to their homes you know in Boston. And then MIT assigned an MIT alumni and his wife as my... what is the word I forget the word but it's like my parents in residence in Boston area. In fact when I got married they had my wedding and reception in their home and like that, became life-long friends.

NG: Oh wow. Can you describe to me what the industrial management major is?

AK: It's the business school. Now they call it. It is the business school of MIT. MIT at that time at least everything had a mathematical type dimension to it and since I liked math so it was good for me.

NG: So why statistics, why the Ph.D. in statistics at Harvard?

AK: Because I did my Masters in statistics in India so I had a taste for that so that's what I decided to do.

NG: Okay. And what was the environment like at Harvard?

AK: Wonderful, congenial I was doing well so you know and I made lots of wonderful friends and my MIT friends would also come and see me. So it was very rich environment. And that's when I got married also, my second year at Harvard.

NG: Where did you meet your husband?

AK: I wanted to come back to India after my studies I never in a million years thought I'd stay on in this country. So I met this guy from India from Bombay and very smart good looking guy and he just started calling me and all that and so I just got you know very impressed, very bright guy. And we got married and there were cultural differences between us. He comes from a home where the women are very good Bombay family and educated sisters and all but women still are a lower status you know. So that was a little conflict between us but brilliant guy. And my son I have the most wonderful son who was born several years later and he lives in New York now and my ex has been passed away recently, this past January but my son 'til today tells me, "Mom I have yet to meet anybody as smart as dad on Wall Street."

NG: What was your husband's name?

AK: His name was Bipin Kapadia.

NG: And what was he doing at the time that you met him?

AK: He worked for Honeywell and he was very articulate and he graduated from The Wharton School of business you know in Pennsylvania. He had no accent and good looking. When he used to come pick me in the dormitories the girls would say, "The good looking guy's here! The good looking guy's here!" You know like that and very savvy, intelligent, fantastic. And what was the question?

NG: I was asking what he did?

AK: Oh yeah he worked for Honeywell Computers at that time and so much so that whenever Honeywell came up with a new product my ex-husband was so good looking as well as elegant in speech and so on he had no accent and they would show case him in a hall full of senior executives of all the companies he would announce their new product. So the president of Honeywell would invite us and you know I had a few good years with him. And then after Harvard I went to work for a management consulting firm and I learned a lot and during that time my husband took a transfer to Houston so things were not good so I said, "This is a good time for me to stay back here." But then he insisted so I left my job and I came here.

NG: What year did you get married?

AK: I got married in 1966 December.

NG: 1966. Did any of your family from India come?

AK: No.

NG: What did your mom think about you getting married?

AK: She said we don't know him so we just respect your judgment and they sent me lots of beautiful Saris and all that.

NG: Were there any other women in your program at Harvard in the statistics?

AK: At Harvard there were two girls one from Lebanon and one from Belgium and we were a threesome in my year and we were always together and after one year both of them left. They got their Master's and they left and I stayed on for my Ph.D. There was another lady there Yvonne Bishop she was a few years senior to me an English lady.

NG: Okay so again for most of the time...

AK: At that time not too many women.

NG: Right. Did that mean anything to you that you were you know the only woman or the first woman at MIT and one of the very few woman in the statistics program at Harvard? Did that mean anything to you?

AK: At that time I didn't think of those things. Retrospectively I think.

NG: What do you think now?

AK: I think how did I do it? How did I manage?

NG: Yeah I think it can be isolating.

AK: But I wasn't isolated. I didn't feel isolated and the men in my classes at MIT they were, they became good friends with me and we enjoyed doing things together so I was very soon not even home sick so it was just wonderful. Those two years were the best years of my life. I learned a lot because MIT is a very tough school so I learned a lot and I learned about social skills you know dating and things which I had never done in India.

NG: What was your dissertation on at Harvard?

AK: It was on queuing theory. You know queues?

NG: No I don't.

AK: Okay you stand in line at the bank. Those are called queues. So my dissertation was on queuing theory.

NG: What did you write about?

AK: I wrote about different queues there are some queues formed when you make appointments those are kind of scheduled. Then some are like at the bank everybody comes whatever time they want randomly. So I studied and then I studied the queuing system dynamics of this kind of queues and when the queuing system people come in they are called customers and the people who serve them are called servers. So the bank

teller they may be one server and a lot of customers so we decide on their waiting time mathematical models to determine waiting time. Sometimes the arrivals are scheduled and sometimes they are random. So I did a whole lot of work on that.

NG: Did you have a plan of how you wanted to apply your degree towards a profession afterwards?

AK: Okay yes I am... the research that I did it's all published and I got into some health related problems like the kidney transplantation system. You get a kidney it may fail it may not fail you may die you may not die and then whole lot of other people waiting for kidneys and how the dynamics of the kidney transplantation system works. That's the first time I got interested in health related subjects. So when I came to Houston I didn't have a job like a good wife I followed my husband. I had a wonderful job in Boston and I came here and one day in my jeans and my t-shirt my husband was at work I said, "Let me see what else is there in Houston."

I'm just driving around and I see you know University of Houston College of Business Administration. So all of a sudden I never thought I'd be in an academic career situation. All of a sudden I said, "Let me go and see if they have any job for me." So I went to the Dean's office and the Dean's secretary and I said, "May I, can I talk to the Dean?" and the Dean's secretary said, "Foreign student's go to foreign student's office." She thought I was looking for admission. I said, "No I have a Ph.D. from Harvard and I'm here from MIT and I'm looking for a position." That day the Dean was out of town so she took me by the arm to this guy who was in one of the departments there Business Quantitative Management Science and he told me, he says, "You know I have two

positions one I just made an offer to and the other guy wasn't at home and since you are here I can interview you." And two days later they made a job offer to me." Okay?

So I was the only woman in the entire College of Business Administration. Three years later I came up for promotion. I don't want this to be documented but this is what happened². I was one of the top ranked for the business school because I was the one who was publishing in good journals and all that. [I feel] they took some people at random from the list and gave them the promotion and rejected me and I was really upset. So I went to the head of the department and he said, "Asha don't forget you are a woman." I said, "How can I forget I'm a woman! Even in my next birth I want to be born a woman!" And you know I didn't have much support at home because my husband and I were drifting apart. So I couldn't even tell this. So I said to him, "Even in my next birth I want to be born a woman." I cried and everything. But I wanted to have the job and in the meantime I started looking and just a couple of days later the University of Texas School of Public Health advertised a job and I felt it's with me in mind. You know how sometimes you get that psychic feeling? So can you believe I called them? They asked me to come for an interview. I went and the third day they offered me the job. So when I went to resign, "Oh no get out of my office you can't resign you are the only woman in the College of Business Administration and you are our only Harvard Ph.D." He told me this. You know people could talk in crude terms at that time. Not now. I said, "But I was all those things when I was there what did you do for me?" He said, "What are your conditions?" Like a fool I stated 28 conditions and he said, "We can fulfill all of them." I said, "But I already accepted this position." But I still stayed friends with them.

² Interviewer received verbal permission from Asha Kapadia to keep this portion of the interview intact.

NG: Yeah, well you had to do that.

AK: I had to be aggressive. I had to because there were no other female role models that I could go for advice. But there were some female faculty at U of H in English department when they found out what they did to me all of them got together and there was a lawsuit also. For a couple of other women plus me they filed and all that, but it was too late. Public health was new for me, I started from scratch. It worked out for me.

NG: Did you feel like it was in your character to be aggressive or did you feel like you had to push yourself to?

AK: I had to push myself I'm not aggressive. And I'm kind of mousey in many ways I keep quiet you know. But I said, "Who else will fight for me you know who else?"

NG: So when your first positions though before you moved to Houston?

AK: Was in a management consulting firm, very prestigious management consulting firm. You've heard about McKenzie the management consulting firm? It was that level of firm a little bit higher than McKenzie at that time and my other guys who graduated with me at Harvard they called me, "Hey how did you get that job did you know somebody?" I said, "No I just applied and they called me for interview and gave me the job." My starting salary was more than all the other guys who graduated with me. Not big but still for that time 1969.

NG: And were there many women doing that job?

AK: That job there were a couple of women. I was only woman Ph.D. but there were a couple of other women doing very well and one of them ended up being a very close... we became very good friends and she insisted that I should go to Houston because my husband had taken a transfer and I didn't want to leave this job. I was scheduled to go to

France and London for part of a project I was working on. Oh and at that time I got interested in air traffic control and I applied my queuing theory, my Ph.D. thesis topic queuing theory to air traffic control and we published a book with the FAA on that. I was the only woman in all the meetings you know when I went to the FAA with the senior executives of different companies and transportation and shipping companies and FAA and all of that. She convinced me she said, “You can always find a good job but you can’t find a good husband.” I didn’t want to tell her I wasn’t very happy you know. So I came to Houston and I started from scratch.

NG: You mentioned that looking at kidney transplants and queuing, was that part of your dissertation or was that part of your later publications?

AK: Later publications.

NG: Okay.

AK: But later on I also applied all of the queuing theory on the air traffic control system you know for the FAA.

NG: And did they make changes based on it do you know?

AK: I don’t know, I don’t know.

NG: Was your son born while you were working at the consulting firm?

AK: No when I came here I decided let me have a kid. I decided.

NG: Had you thought about being a mom before?

AK: No. Because I wasn’t happy in my marriage and I said I wasn’t sure because a kid is a responsibility but that’s the best thing that happened to me in my entire life to have this wonderful son. And my husband and I got divorced when my son was six years old, six and a half years old and it was not a bitter divorce. My husband didn’t want but I

insisted and then on the day of the divorce I called my husband and I said, "Just because we are divorced does not mean we are enemies. It doesn't mean I don't respect you or like you but we just can't get along. That's the main reason. For the sake of our son we have to say the same things to him." You know like when he's 16 and I say, "Go buy a car and dad says, 'No' then he will favor me." And the judge said that my son can spend one day a week with my ex-husband and I said, "No you can have him as much as you want." So after my divorce I got a townhouse close to where my husband's house was in Memorial. In Memorial I got a townhouse so that logistically it would be easy. So I had the best divorce anybody can imagine. And you know people in the School of Public Health in Behavioral Science and all that invited me several times to talk about my divorce they never heard of a thing like that.

NG: What year was your son born?

AK: 1971.

NG: And you got a divorce then in '77?

AK: '78. I applied in '77 and then you know back and forth, back and forth, yes/no, yes/no finally '78.

NG: How did you feel throughout this time about staying in the US you said that you hadn't expected to do that?

AK: I hadn't expected to do that but then my jobs and all that was so exciting and I was learning a lot so I decided to stay here.

NG: And how did your family feel about you staying?

AK: They were okay with it.

NG: And at this time nobody was over here?

AK: No not one person. And you know when I got, when my husband proposed to me the condition under which I accepted his proposal was that we will go back to India after I finish my Ph.D. and he said, “Yes” and as soon as I finish my Ph.D. he said no he changed his mind. So that was the beginning of the end to some extent. But then I got good jobs and I started liking it and making good life lines and friends and all that and then when my son was born I didn’t want to take him so far away and all those reasons.

NG: You talked a little bit about your kind of initial interest in public health and then ultimately getting this job at UT. What was it like making that transition from you know kind of looking at other industries and then going into public health?

AK: It was new totally new for me but the people were very supportive and all that and I picked up the basics and I had wonderful people working on projects with me and we did a lot of good research and then I did a lot of good research with people in MD Anderson and Baylor College and UT Medical School and TIRR you know Texas Institute of Research and Rehabilitation and all that. I joined the School of Public Health on 1st of January 1975 and there was a conference in System Science in Russia and they asked me if I wanted to attend so I said, “Yeah I would like to do that and the Dean had to get permission from the Governor for Foreign Travel at that time. So I went to Russia that was my first foreign trip and it was the scariest (this was during communist rule) and when I went there somebody came to pick me at the airport and took me to the hotel. Then for 24 hours nobody called, nobody said anything and the conference is about to start and I just didn’t know anything and then the people in the hotel made some telephone calls and then they said, “Okay” they got me a taxi and then to the conference hall. Then outside the conference hall these gunmen are like this at attention and like a

military base almost. Anyway I go in and I just barely sit down and I hear. “Since Dr. Kapadia is the only woman attendee of this conference so we will have her make her presentation first.” And I was so nervous you know. I was already nervous from the night before so I don’t know what I said but this professor from Oxford University is showing my slides and all of that and after that they liked what I had to say. I had the best time.

NG: After all of that tension.

AK: Yeah, yeah, yeah. I think you enjoy more after you have been through the mill.

NG: Yes. Can you describe what being part of the Texas Medical Center at that time was like?

AK: It was wonderful I had wonderful colleagues and they were I was the only woman in the biostatistics department at that time and now even the head is a woman (who used to be my student but she is the head) but at that time I was the only woman faculty and wonderful guys and I learned a lot. I didn’t know much about health related applications but I picked them up and wrote several research papers with these people and did projects and all that I learned a lot, a lot.

NG: And what type of research were you doing at that time?

AK: You know applying statistical techniques to different problems that again we worked a little bit more on the kidney transplant problem the throughput of patients in different patients like the TIRR you know along this day what kind of services they need. But each time I did apply queuing but other statistical techniques also to health related problems. We worked on we made predictions on the rainfall you know things and a lot

of data from MD Anderson and all that. We made projections and you know costs, introducing costs into the models uncertainty into the models and like that.

NG: And part of your position was teaching as well?

AK: Yeah, yeah I was a faculty yes. I enjoyed that, doing research with my colleagues and not just in the school of public health but in the medical school and Baylor College of Medicine. A lot with gastroenterology department at UT and MD Anderson several projects. In my own projects and work with other colleagues. It's always better the output is much better if a whole lot of people from different backgrounds provide input into the project.

NG: How did you like teaching?

AK: I love teaching my students were my best friends. I like teaching especially the students at the School of Public Health were a little more mature. In University of Houston they were younger but I had a very good relationship they choose me as the best professor over there also and here also. I had wonderful relationship with my students. Some of them have become my lifelong friends. Some of them are back in the School of Public Health as faculty.

NG: What was the student population like when you first started?

AK: When I first started they were, it is a graduate program in UT School of Public Health so there were maybe 300 or so students but now I believe there are almost 1,100. It's a graduate program so they have only Master's and Ph.D. but they've got Master's in several different areas you know epidemiology, environment health, health promotion, bio statistics and like that. They have MPH, Masters of Public Health, they have M.S. and they have Ph. D. program and Doctor of Public Health program. They are more

mature students, emotionally mature and working people so the student population is fantastic, very interesting, you learn a lot from those students. Especially I don't have any medical background as such you know being a mathematician so I learned a lot about health and medical stuff.

NG: Has the population changed a whole lot in the time that you were there?

AK: I think they were raising the standard of admission from that perspective it changed and now there are a lot more faculty so the population is also I believe quite big.

NG: And is it in terms of like ethnic diversity and gender and things like that?

AK: You know I did admissions for bio statistics for several years, I was in the admissions committee you know. So yeah when I first went to the school there were no Indian students now you see only Indian students, medical students from India doing their Master of Public Health wanting to get into the residency programs here. And a whole lot of other cultures, Chinese students in bio statistics you see only Chinese students they are good in math you know.

NG: What do you think of those changes? Do you think they are important or do you think that is just a natural progression of how Houston is working?

AK: I think it is a natural progression because things in any environment any institution can't stay still because times have changed more information is available. What was important earlier is not important now. New scientific discoveries and all that. So a good school has to start working with those new things that come about. So from that perspective this school has really progressed a lot. I'm proud of having been there for almost 40 years I think.

NG: How do you see the Texas Medical Center having changed over time besides the physical growth of it?

AK: The physical growth, they are also becoming more academic. MD Anderson is totally academic. All of their physicians do a lot of research and all of that and now like Saint Luke's is associated with Baylor College of Medicine so all the heads of departments over there Baylor Physicians to be a head of department at Baylor you have to be an academician and know about the latest research and have done a lot of research and done a lot of good work. So it's not just like a free standing hospital you come and you get taken care of and all because I believe that especially with medicine the science is changing so fast that unless you keep up with it you can't be a good care giver you know physician I personally feel. But this is a very, very exciting place, Texas Medical Center.

NG: I wanted to go back and ask you about your research. What about your research was the most exciting or do you think you made the biggest contributions in one area over another?

AK: You know I don't know how to judge the contributions. Some of the papers that I published I got response from all over the world. Several times that happened. So I guess I made an impression that way.

NG: Can you give me an example of one of your papers?

AK: Show me my resume can I look at my resume? Because these are all published in international journals. This paper that I published with faculty at Texas Institute for Research and Rehabilitation, it's not the queuing theory paper but it is the stuff I learned in MIT micro processes we applied that into a healthcare situation where people in a long term rehabilitation facility, what are things they need and how they move about the

system before they exit the system. Some people never exit the system or some people may die while in rehabilitation. That got worldwide acclaim. We also got an award from, not award but our paper was rated number one at a conference and from all over the world we got requests to send them our paper. That was one of our papers that got a lot of exposure. And I don't know a whole lot of papers that I don't want to be bragging about myself.

NG: Well it's not bragging. I mean because I myself am not familiar with this type of research so I don't want to miss anything that is really important that we are not going to talk about.

AK: And then this paper that I published with Dr. Jankovic who is "the" man for Parkinson's disease at Baylor College of Medicine. He says that we received requests for copies of that paper because he presented it, he was a senior author I was the second person. I learned a lot about Parkinson's disease and after the paper was published a year later my sister, this sister [Mira] got the Parkinson's disease. So Dr. Jankovic who was the head of Parkinson's at Baylor she comes every year for treatment with him.

NG: And what was the basis of that research?

AK: We looked at a whole lot of data that he had collected at 3,000 or something Parkinson's patients and we looked at the treatments they were getting and what kind of patients were showing deteriorating situation and what kind of patients were showing improvement, but improvement doesn't mean you get Parkinson free. But slow the progression of the disease. We studied the methodology for slowing the progression of the disease.

NG: And a lot of these projects did you seek them out or do people come and talk to you?

AK: Both ways. If I found a situation which I thought I can model as a mathematical model I would request data from those people and if they provided me with the data because you know you can't publish just theoretical anymore you need to show some concrete evidence. So they provided me with data but sometimes people came to me with, "We've got this kind of data and we want to do some statistical methodology". Because even right now in medicine you need to have some statistical analysis to publish your paper. So I got several calls from all over the medical center and then I brought the statistical perspective and analyzed the data to come up with some results for them. Because collecting data by itself is no good.

NG: Right.

AK: You need to have some scientific analysis to show what is happening to the patients you know.

NG: I noticed also that you have done all different kinds of consulting (and not just in public health in a variety of different industries and things like that). Does that comprise a lot of your work as well or are those kind of?

AK: No I did a lot of consulting first of all for when I was working for that company I did consulting we had as one of our clients the FAA and we analyzed their data and one of the big results that we came up with was (this was all based on queuing theory, my kind of stuff) that if take offs and landings alternate then the throughput of the system is maximized. That means maximum number of passengers can be taken care of if take offs and landings alternate. But that doesn't mean that if a take-off happens that you have to

wait for a landing. If there are nobody landing then take off but otherwise in a congested time a busy time then there is too much traffic the throughput is increased.

NG: And did you continue to do a lot of consulting after that?

AK: Yes I have been all these most of the research comes off of my statistical consulting work. Like the people at UT Anesthesiology and Pathology called us and they showed us some data because you know it's next to impossible to publish some research without some statistical analysis in health related subjects. So they came and they said, "What can we do?" And we would suggest, "Maybe you can show this treatment is better than this, or this group of people have a longer survival time." So we look at the data and come up with those things.

NG: Do you feel like a lot of your research within public health is medical related or like administrative related?

AK: No medical related.

NG: And the example that you gave with the FAA that you know you have statistical information but then that human intelligence needs to take effect we can't just follow the model?

AK: Yes, no.

NG: So do you talk about that in your other kind of statistical studies?

AK: No but each statistical situation is different. Each is not a traffic control situation you know. So many times you want to know which like the flow of medicines through the system, how long it takes for a medicine to exit the system. It's all queuing theory you apply. Anesthesia: well which anesthesia is better and how long it takes for the person to get the anesthesia working and that kind of stuff and then lately I did a lot of

work with the gastroenterology department at MD Anderson and UT Medical School. So we published several papers in good journals of gastroenterology and all that looking at alternative strategies for handling digestive related problems and which ones are more cost effective. You know not everything is queuing theory but other statistics and cost effectiveness and you know.

NG: I think also you mentioned a couple of other times of, for variations in there or I don't know what wording you used like unexpected factors I guess.

AK: Uncertainty.

NG: So does that play into everything that you look at as well or it just differs from case to case?

AK: It differs from case to case. Each case a set of data that is presented to us we consult on any project the outcome they want to see it may not be which medication is better than which okay? It may be how long does the patient stay in the hospital and exit and how long is the longevity; or how long it takes for them to be disease free? So each situation requires a different kind a statistical analysis. So statistics is very powerful because you cannot publish a paper these days without any statistical analysis.

NG: One thing that I've talked about with everyone is this effort that it seems like we only ask women about of balancing your professional life with your personal life. How do you feel like you managed that?

AK: You know since I've been working at the School of Public Health first I had my, I was married and I had my husband and all that to take care of and my kid was very little so one thing my husband and I agreed on was to have this nanny, a wonderful, wonderful lady who took wonderful care of my son. She would take him to school in the morning.

No I would drop him or my husband would drop him and then she would pick him up and feed him and all that. It was not at 9:00 to 5:00 job and she was very flexible. Whatever time we would return from work she would stay with the kid and then I would call her, “Mrs. Max will you make sure my son is doing his homework for tomorrow?” And you know dictate to her what all he needs to do for the next day. Then when I was married and then after being single that’s how my life was. And then I came home I dedicated my entire time to my son because he was with me for five days a week and then on Fridays his dad would pick him up and bring him back to school on Mondays and the rest of the time he would stay with me and if I travelled international or out of town my husband was only happy to. We had the best divorce okay. It was very bitter in the beginning you know. My husband didn’t want it. His ego was kind of hurt. But he was the best ex-husband to have and so whenever I needed to travel he was only too happy. It was a big challenge for him to keep my son so from the point of raising my son we were both willing to sacrifice whatever we could and he grew up into a very good son with good values.

NG: So one of the things...

AK: That was the thing I did I spent most of my time.

NG: The other thing I wanted to ask you was being from India and I think also having an accent that sometimes it’s difficult in the classroom like when I’ve TA’ed and I have friends that teach and have accents that students can sometimes be really cruel and difficult about that. Did you ever experience that?

AK: I did not experience that thank God I would have been very hurt. No I did not experience that. And then in the School of Public Health over here... When I was

teaching in College of Business Administration at University of Houston I had big classes and I'm sure some people didn't follow but if you are from India or from Europe or from America they won't follow right? But I had the best relationship with the students. I was chosen the most popular and best professor in business school and you know the students had wonderful relationship. Here the classes were much smaller and if anybody didn't understand or something we worked on an individual basis with them so I won the award for for teaching excellence and all that. So I think I was a good teacher. I'm sensitive to that. Make sure that everybody is included in the class and I also have a style where I ask students, "What is your opinion about this? What should I write on the board?" I'm all inclusive. So nobody felt left out or threatened or the teacher doesn't like her. I made sure I had no favorites in the class.

NG: What about living in Houston? I mean I think Houston has become kind of a very diverse and global city but did you ever experience discrimination or hostility towards you?

AK: You know I haven't. Not once. I was fortunate I guess but I can't say, I'd be lying if I said.

NG: Yeah, yeah. Okay.

AK: It also depends a lot on how you carry yourself and the kind of people you interact with you know.

NG: Is there anything professionally that you feel like you are most proud of either an award or a committee that you've served on or anything like that?

AK: I have served on several committees. I was also the U.S. representative of the operations the European Operations Research Society we met every year in some

European city or the other. I met a lot of people in my field, operations research in different parts of the world. And so I was the U.S. Representative. Then I did the admissions several times. I was the head of we call it Convener but it's like the head of the department for bio statistics for several years and I think I recruited good faculty during that time.

NG: Can you tell me what you think about kind of the role or the future for women within the Texas Medical Center?

AK: I think the sky's the limit. If you are grounded. But if you feel that you need special treatment and, "Why this is happening to me? Or Why that?" And self-pity and all that then there is no. Then it is difficult for people to relate to you. But if you are grounded and willing to work honestly and hard work ,how can you go wrong? I feel that. It's my experience. I have wonderful friends, lifelong friends from there. And some are retired, some are still working and I mentored some junior faculty who are doing very well and I'm very proud of them. So overall it has been an excellent experience for me, bestest job for me. With my interest it suited me very well. And ups and downs here and there, there are always but that's okay we have to be tough enough to live. Nobody's life goes smooth like this [motioning hand in a straight line] it's always like this [motioning hand in a curvy path]. Right?

NG: Right!

AK: So I thought I had a wonderful experience here.

NG: Do you think it's important for women to mentor other women or have any mentor?

AK: Men can also... Have any mentor. In my time there were no women mentors so men were mentors when I was working for that company in Boston my mentor was one guy John Everett and he was the best friend of... you know the Atom bomb was thrown on Japan.

NG: Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

AK: The guy who pressed the button, this friend of mine knew him. He had come from, my friend John had come from working in the government he was like under the Secretary of State kind of situation and he was an MIT graduate and very brilliant man. He took me under his wings when I was at my very first job I was the youngest person there and I needed some mentoring. He took me under the wings and I learned a lot from him. We traveled together and we discussed everything so it was just wonderful. So people help you if you seek help and you can't be riding on a high horse if you are real and you are grounded help comes. Because people don't want to live with people who are snobbish and so on because they are scared even if they are doing something wrong they are afraid to tell them you know?

NG: Well is there anything that you were expecting to talk about today or you want to talk about that we haven't discussed yet?

AK: I don't know I wasn't even thinking because I've been so busy with my niece today when you were coming I said, "I don't even know what this interview is about." If I think of something I will let you know.

NG: Okay well thank you.

[Recording resumed due to a pertinent discussion taking place off record]

NG: One of the things I didn't ask you was what you see for your future?

AK: You know I am actually retired. But I am very busy. I work with Ph.D. students only I'm a professor emerita. I work with Ph.D. students and last year a lot of the Ph.D. students graduated and I have some more. I'm on their committees. Then I'm on the Harris County Hospital District Foundation and I am in charge of grants committee in that position. Until recently I was on the Bio Ethics Committee for the UT System but my term is over. Right now I am all the time occupied helping my sister with her daughter. I am very busy. Everybody says, "But you are retired." My son keeps screaming. "Mom you don't come to New York some mom you are!" But I am really busy. Everybody thinks I'm retired so I have a lot of time.

NG: So do they keep asking you to do things then?

AK: Do things and come visit them.

NG: So we talked when I wasn't taping about you being part of the Harris County Health what do you do with them?

AK: You know we are the arm that raises funds and so a whole bunch of us are on the board and we meet every so often raising money, strategies for raising money and we are also on some sub committees. Like I'm the chairperson for the grants committee, people from Harris County Hospital District apply for learning grants and we okay them and so on. We are all the time planning how to raise monies and what else we can do to... Ben Taub is the bestest hospital in Houston. They are the number one trauma center you know that. So the committee consists of people the Ben Taub brothers, one of them just passed away recently was a good friend of mine and the other Ben Taub is the chairperson of the committee and Dr. (I'm sure your husband knows this professor from

Baylor – God I'm having hang ups about names he is a good friend also) It's a meeting we plan fundraisers and things like that.

NG: Okay, thank you.

End of interview