

Narrator: Aman Dhruva Thamminana (ADT)

Interviewer: Aditi Kulkarni (AAK)

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Narrator Sketch: For my oral history sketch, I am choosing to interview my friend Aman Dhruva Thamminana. He was born in South India and moved to the United States in his childhood, and I believe his diasporic identity would make him a good interview subject. He lives in Midland, Michigan currently with his mom, dad, and younger brother. In his high school years, he was part of the school's robotics team, which fueled his interest in coding. At Michigan State University, he has three majors: computer science, computational mathematics, and mathematics. He also has two minors in computation mathematics science and engineering (CMSE) and entrepreneurship and innovation. This shows his drive and commitment to academics and education. Currently, he lives in an apartment in East Lansing.

Aside from his intensive studies, Aman loves traveling, spending time with friends, and coding. He aims to get a new license/certification every year, and he started by getting his motorcycle license earlier this year. Therefore, Aman loves adventure. He loves the thrill of adrenaline, and will never shy away from a late night walk at 3 am.

To me, Aman was the perfect person to interview since I would like to learn more about his adventures. Was the immigration process an adventure to him? Does his dual identity excite him or scare him? I would love to understand Aman's background, and how that shaped him into the driven man he is today.

Transcription:

AAK: Alright. Hello. My name is Aditi and I will be interviewing Aman about his diasporic identity as a South Asian American. And the date today is November 13th, 2022 and it is 08:15 P.M. Eastern Standard Time. Before we begin, I just want to say thank you again for meeting with me and agreeing to take part in this Aman.

ADT: You're very welcome.

AAK: So I'm gonna kinda move in chronological order throughout this interview. So I really want to understand how diasporic identity has really started to shift your life and to define diasporic identity. It's really that bicultural... having an Indian identity but also having an American identity. And so I really just want to learn more about you and learn more about your life. So if we go all the way back to childhood, Tell me a little bit about that. Where were you born? How long did you live there? And tell me about your experience?

ADT: I was born on the east coast of India. Ever since birth we've always been moving around India. I've changed approximately 12 schools throughout my lifetime. And we haven't exactly been stable at a spot. My parents with their software job, we kept moving in-between big cities. So although I had a lot of relatives down there, I was often living a couple hundred miles away from them. So yeah. I think the most I've lived in a specific location was about three years or so. But after coming to the United States it has been much more stable, I suppose. Actually we lived in the same location for six years. We have shifted once, but yeah.

AAK: So you have a lot of memories from your time in India. How long did you live there until you moved to America?

ADT: I think I was at the age of 13 when I first came here. I remember that Summer being extra long because of how different schooling systems and the summers work there. Yeah. I was about 13. So I spent about six years here in the States.

AAK: Okay. So how was your schooling in India? Would you compare it to something different in the United States or...?

ADT: Certainly. It was a lot different back there. Especially. This is one thing that was difficult for me as I was moving around. Each state had its own official language. So when I was moving in-between states, it was quite difficult to catch up with the other language. And then just by the time I was setting, becoming good at it, we used to shift to a different state. We spoke in different official languages. I remember when I was in sixth grade, we settled in a location which offered French and I suppose ever since then. That's what I took. Yeah. And the schooling other than that was I'd say more about the things that were more about memorization, at least back then. I was fortunate enough to go to international schooling. There is a decent bit of schooling that aside locally or government schools are usually taught in the language of the state. A lot of private schooling, and that's what a lot of people choose to go to. Yeah, I had a lot of schooling with English and a lot of Americanized culture, I suppose. Yeah.

AAK: So you said like either like different states that you moved around in different languages that were spoken. Can you tell me some of the specific areas that you've lived in?

ADT: Certainly. I don't exactly recall this in my memories, but I've lived in Hyderabad the very first, although I haven't exactly recalled any memories of studying there. And then we moved to Karnataka where we switched around in different locations. Bengaluru, Karnataka. We also bought a house there and it looked like our life was relatively stable and that's probably where I would live for the next ten years of my life. I think life had different plans. I remember my dad got an opportunity to go to Canada around that time. There were some issues with my passport or whatever. So I think they were not able to bring us there. I suppose life would be very different if that was the case. While that was happening, me and my mom went back to my hometown and I stayed in a school there. My mom was also teaching science, I believe back then, in the same school. And about after six months, my dad came back home and we lived in Bengaluru at a different location for a bit. And then he went to Denmark again, in which I had to go to our home village and hometown. And that was not so long. That was about a semester. So about three months. So yeah. And then eventually we went to Hyderabad. I suppose people here would say almost all of middle school there. So everything from 5th to 8th. My dad eventually got a work opportunity at Illinois and then that got shifted to Midland. And then we eventually came to Midland. So yeah, a lot of traveling.

AAK: So how do you think all the traveling affected your childhood and how do you like what kind of child you were? Because of all the traveling, did you make a lot of friends? How were you in your childhood?

ADT: I'd say I was able to make a lot of friends, but I don't think I ever got an opportunity to solidify that friendship, I suppose. Because we constantly kept moving. So it forced me to, the good thing about it is that it forced me to make new friends because otherwise life got really boring. Especially since I went to different schools. But yeah, I don't feel like I could have exactly formed a concrete bond with a lot of people. Especially before technology became a thing and people started getting phones and we're able to communicate. I still am in touch with friends who I lived with in Hyderabad. This was around the time where everyone started getting phones and WhatsApp became a thing. So that was pretty easy. But other than that, I barely remember anyone else from my childhood.

AAK: I guess, like kinda like moving into immigrating to the US. Can you walk me through that process? What was it like? How did you hear you're coming to the US and what was it like actually moving here?

ADT: It's a funny story you ask. I remember I wanted to go on this trip, this school trip to somewhere. It was like about a week or so. I was really mad at my parents because they said, we cannot do that. And I well, at that point, I suppose I didn't care about the reasons. I was just wondering why. But they eventually told me, Hey, we have an opportunity to go to the US so we might have to do fingerprinting and other stuff and documentation. And I think that was the first point at which I realized, oh, okay. I suppose we are coming to the US or we will not go to the US. I guess we had an opportunity to go to the US. And I think it took us a year or two because I remember my dad saying that the project for that got canceled or the tender moved to a different

company. So we waited a year or two and then my dad got an opportunity, as I was saying, then he eventually came to the US. And then my mom and I had to come to the US. It was our first time traveling. So yeah, that's how I work. I suppose.

AAK: Tell me more about that memory. I mean, you and your mom traveling to the US for the first time, like do you remember how you felt?

ADT: Yes. I suppose vaguely. I can remember my mom being concerned at that time because she was alone. Like we've gotten across a lot of states, but look, she hasn't exactly traveled alone. So I remember us talking to our relatives and them being like it's gonna be fine, it's gonna be really smooth. I could remember that she was kinda concerned about it. Yeah. I suppose we flew from Hyderabad to Amsterdam. And we spent a lot of time in Amsterdam because the flight was delayed by three or 4 hours. Then we came to Chicago, I believe. And it was a very I suppose first time experience. I say it went relatively smoothly. Overall. I don't remember. We did get stopped by the TSA agent. I suppose. My mom wasn't exactly feeling well. She had to use the restroom and we waited a little bit after everyone boarded out. We're just being questioned why. Which was an interesting experience. Yeah. I remember my dad picking us up. Well, yeah, there wasn't that much of a line because I think it was everyone left by the time they questioned us. It was like it took us 30 min. So there were no queues or whatever. It was quite interesting. They didn't take us anywhere or lock us in a room. We were just in the plane and the plane staff stopped us. And the TSA I think a couple of agents came in. Just a couple of questions like what's happening. I vaguely remember this. But then I also, I was after that we were really tired. It was really intriguing to watch the highways. It was a different experience

like, I suppose I didn't exactly know what to expect, but we were sleeping through the journey. And for the next couple of days, I think we were really jet-lagged and we were really interested in why the sun was there until 06:00 P.M. So yeah. Yeah, that was I suppose our first time here in short summary.

AAK: To clarify, you ended up in Chicago and then you guys drove to Midland, Michigan?

AddT: Yeah, that is correct. It was either Chicago or Detroit. I can't I can't honestly remember which one it was around the time of April. Yeah.

AAK: So then did you adapt quickly to the US culture? Like how did you start school immediately?

ADT: I had to wait. I remember I went to the high school just to pick my courses. I think summer relatively close to when school started, but I honestly didn't know what to expect when first getting to school. I never exactly watched the TV shows or anything like that. Which gave me an expectation. My parents used to say that the schooling system should be relatively easy compared to the rigor we had back home. But that's one of the expectations I had. Then. Yeah. I yeah.

AAK: So you said you had expectations from TV shows and stuff?

ADT: No, I did not. I didn't watch it. I was not exposed to the TV shows or movies of high-school.

AAK: You basically started like on a fresh slate. You didn't know what to expect, you didn't know what was gonna happen. So what was it like for you?

ADT: I suppose Firstly, there was a dialect difference, evidently from back home and here. And that took a decent bit to get over. I was able to make friends pretty quickly. In high school, I found out nerds were just more or less like me and who enjoy what I'm doing. So even if I didn't meet them one way, I would have met them a different way. And they were pretty helpful at the beginning stages. I suppose. I remember getting a lot of tardies because I was really confused about how or like... I was confused. And I suppose I was late and how to get to classes and whatever that was. An interesting experience at the beginning. I remember buying a lot of stuff that I never used. The first time. What else? I remember making friends. A couple of friends who are not of my grade here too. That was interesting. But yeah. I was able to quickly...academically I felt like it wasn't that challenging. I don't think I put enough effort or was as comprehensive of how they wanted it. So that took a little bit of adjusting. Math was a really interesting subject because back in India we go in...Our schedules are made in such a way that you understand that bit of each topic every year. And then the next year you go more about it. Then the next year you grow more about it. When I saw the US, you just hit topics head on. So I got really bad grades in geometry because I was supposed to have or understand that this is a bit of it. I also recognized late in the semester or year that I could retake the quiz, improve my score. That was an interesting realization I was like what! Yeah. That was and there were a

couple other classes where I did fine. I didn't do anything exceptional. But later on as I moved on, my sophomore semester, grades were decent but not exceptional. And then I started getting better at what I was doing. And Just understanding. I feel like by the end of sophomore year, I made enough friends that I've talked to enough teachers that my junior and senior year were more or less the same people. So yeah.

AAK: So then I guess like what were some differences between just American culture and Indian culture like during those initial couple of years. What was it like? Culturally? Did you see a lot of differences?

ADT: I suppose? Oh, well, we also with our relatives and everyone, we had a pretty good community. So if there was a festival or something like that, we would celebrate it with them. We would play games with them. So in those terms it wasn't exactly different. I also went to a town which is primarily not Asian, I suppose. There was another kid who later joined me Who lived here, went back home, came back again for schooling. But I don't think I exactly had a different expectation. I just was able to adapt to the things culturally. I suppose back in India I suppose back in India we had to wear uniforms and there was this sense of discipline. I suppose. You didn't have that much freedom about what you get to pick. I honestly don't think I could have gotten to pick biology over computer science or the other way around back in India, I think it was really fixed on what we can take educationally. But even in the sense of dressing and how we talk, I remember we were not allowed to chew gum. A lot of these small things that are things we don't know exactly recognize that we are free to do here. So yeah.

AAK: Did you think there were any downsides to immigrating to the US? Did you miss India at all?

ADT: I suppose I had. It's highly competitive back at home because of how many people, I guess, have the intention of being the best. I suppose it's not so much here. So that's a difference. I felt. I don't know if it made me less or more competitive. I can't exactly tell. Can you repeat the question again? I feel like I'm sidetracking from this point.

AAK: Were there any downsides for you to move to the US? Did you miss India at all? Do you still miss India? Did it feel like detaching something from yourself when you left home or did you just kind of accept your place in America?

ADT: I suppose I more or less accepted my place. I guess That would be how I describe it. Although as I grew later in life, I kinda missed my grandparents. And yeah, we used to go meet them almost every summer and we couldn't exactly do that while we're here so that is something I did miss. Yeah.

AAK: So then I guess now that we kind of understand how it was like when you started school here and all that. How do you identify yourself? Do you identify yourself as a South Asian American or do you identify yourself as just Indian, just American, a combination of both?

ADT: That's an interesting question. I suppose it depends on the perspective that the question comes from. If someone was asking me here, if someone asked me what's your hometown In Michigan State University, I would say it's Midland. And that's because that's where I'm most

attached to currently. But I would say I was born and raised in India. I came at an interesting point. Well, I wouldn't say that. But I came to the States when...I feel like compared to my brother relatively later down the line where I was not able to make those friends and those bonds earlier in life. So maybe if you asked my brother, he would have said he would have considered himself quite American. But if I would look at myself as a combination of both, like there are things that I do or the ways that I would react that are quite Indian. And I feel like living here for six years has also changed a bit of it. To think of it from a different perspective. We're looking at it from a different perspective.

AAK: So then quick note, how old is your brother?

ADT: My brother is about 13. Not 13. 13 by the end of the year.

ADT: So I guess you're kind of at this point where your brother is at the same age that you were when you moved to the US. And now, I guess if you can kinda look back on that almost as if your brother was yourself. I understand that you feel more like you can balance the Indian and the American identity. And while your brother can say, like you said, like more American. So do you think that immigrating had an effect on who you are today? I mean, do you think you'd be happier or do you think you would be feeling the same if you are in India? Or is it just too hard to tell?

ADT: Well, I suppose it's from what I've talked to with my friends and everyone around them. It would have been, I suppose, way more competitive if I was in India compared to here for good or for bad. I think it would have certainly made me have a different personality. And I think

since I've lived here six years, I strongly believe that it has changed who I am and who can and will be. I suppose it has opened and it has relaxed A little bit of that sense of trying to compete with others just to the best that it can be more free and trying something different or stuff like that. Did I Answer your question?

AAK: I guess if we talk a little bit more about the present and the future, honestly. Tell me about your college experience right now. Where do you go to school? What year are you in and what degree are you studying?

ADT: So I am going to Michigan State University. I've been going here since the last two years. So that is right about the start of COVID, around September 2020. And I'm currently a junior, majoring in computer science and mathematics and minoring in computational mathematics science and engineering, and entrepreneurship and innovation. Maybe a masters, so we'll see how that goes. But for my experience too.

AAK: So why choose those degrees specifically, what draws you into that kind of engineering/math field?

ADT: My dad worked in the software industry, so ever since childhood I was really excited and good to an extent with that. I remember back in school in India, I was doing pretty good. One of the classes that I was doing really good with was computer science and I was not so much of a math student, although I would like to have a different perspective on how I looked at math. I suppose that's what everyone who's not good at math says. But as I came to the States, it has

been... my Computer science skills were already solid at the core and have only gotten better with taking AP Computer Science in high school. But my math skills, I'd say dimmed as I did high-school geometry and algebra, was a little bit better. And I did really good in calculus. But I chose to retake it in college, just off recommendation from other people. And so when I was transitioning, when I applied, I more or less had an idea. I wanted to go into computer science. That's the route I wanted to take. And slowly but surely I was doing really good at math. So one of my friends suggested, why not try taking a math major, which I talked to the advisor and they said since there's so much of an overlap, it's pretty easy to add it to your schedule and eventually get it. I eventually started taking courses for the natural science departments, the gen-ed courses like French, I re-took French and chemistry. So yeah, I suppose my, there's also this idea for people's beliefs in India that they want their kids to either be an engineer or a Doctor. So I suppose there's a bit of my parents' hand it to try to carve me to become one. But I would like to say I was naturally excited about computer science in general, and I was good at it too. So it was kind of a no-brainer for me.

AAK: I guess with all the degrees that are happening, what do you want to do in the future?
What's the plan?

ADT: I feel like I know just enough, but I don't know what I'm gonna do. There are certainly a couple paths I can take moving on from here. It was always my dream to become a software engineer. Work just like my dad is like now. So that is, I suppose the primary goal. And I suppose since I'm taking so much course load around it, it would make me a better software engineer. I feel like all of the course work I'm doing here, which is going to carve me out as it's

going to build up my skills. I've also been looking into either pursuing my career further with getting a master's and then a PhD. And I'm trying to find interesting problems and try to solve them. I suppose the actions I'll be taking in the next four years will kinda solidify which way I want to go. And I do love almost most things engineering and business. So if it wasn't for computer science, maybe I would have chosen...I'm pretty confident that we have chosen something in stem. Math was just the later on decision and CS was just my primary focus.

AAK: Do You think being an immigrant changes the opportunities that are available to you? Or do you think that living in America for the past six years has only opened more doors?

ADT: I suppose going back to the competitiveness, I certainly believe to an extent I feel like we have enough of a student population that we can start producing pretty good engineers. But I feel like I can only speculate that it would have been more stressful if I was in India. Although just because of that difference, I feel like I have more opportunities here, especially because of how big tech and everything is around here. So yeah. I would like to say that it has opened more doors.

AAK: So then I guess just kind of wanting to wrap the bow on everything that we said here. Do you think that your whole experience being born and raised in India, coming to the United States, do you think that you're happy in your situation? Do you think that America has granted you anything? Do you think that your life here is fulfilling?

ADT: Yeah, I would certainly say, I'm happy and grateful for the things that are present here. Although I feel like there's a great amount of work people here should be doing. I mean, I'm a permanent resident, so it's not my business. It's the people here who have to decide what they want. But I think it has opened a lot more doors. And I think I am grateful for being here and making such good friends around here. Although I suppose my counterpart, if I was in India, I would have said the same thing. Not experiencing everything. I think I think it opened my mind a lot more than it would have. I can more or less say that with certainty. I don't think that would have the same amount of exposure as I have right now back there. But yeah, otherwise I would say it was from my experience a really pleasant tool and a great one.

AAK: I'm really glad to hear that. That's all the questions that I have for you today. Do you have any questions for me?

ADT: How was your experience Aditi?

AAK: That'll be for another interview! It was really lovely talking with you today. Thank you so much for your time. And if you do want copies of anything, either the transcript, the video recording, or the final project. Feel free to email me or my professor at any time. Well, thank you for your time today.

ADT: Thank you so much. I'll see you later.