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Hello, and welcome to Origin Stories, a podcast by the Immigration Policy Lab that explores migration through research and storytelling. I'm Adam Lichtenheld, IPL's executive director. Across the world, migration has become one of the most contentious political and policy challenges of our time. With branches at Stanford University and ETH Zurich in Switzerland, the Immigration Policy Lab generates rigorous evidence and innovative solutions to help policymakers make more informed decisions on immigration.

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We also try to highlight the human stories behind the data. Our guests in this episode are Sonja and Sheela. Sonja is a fiction writer, opera singer, and freelance editor and academic. Sheela is a writer and faculty member at Vermont College of Fine Arts. Both graduated from Stanford in 1995.

[00:00:51:955]

We'll let them take it away.

Hi, Sheela, it's good to talk to you.

Hi, Sonja, it's nice to see you, too.

I just figured this opportunity was too hard to pass up when they put out the call for immigration stories, because you and I have so much in common, even to the point where I remember freshman year, a couple people would call me Sheela.

[00:01:14:102]

I would say, no, I'm Sonja. So I guess it was a connection that was meant to be. So I'll start by asking you first. So this is one area in which we differ. Where were you born? Where did you grow up? What is your family background, and have you been there?

[00:01:31:611]

And tell us a little bit about your own origin.

Sure, well, this is a really fun opportunity, Sonja, to talk to you, because I feel like we know so much about each other, but we haven't really compared. And this is our chance to fill in some of the holes in our background.

[00:01:49:665]

So this question about where I grew up is kind of how I usually start when I introduce myself to kids. I write for children. And I was born in India, and I came here in the 1970s with my family. And I really came during this wave of immigration.

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My father came as a visiting professor at Iowa State, and then later on, he became a professor at the University of Iowa. And that's where we lived for ten years. So I was three years old, my brother was nine. And we really came as academics, and we were all scientists, but I was different.

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I was interested in books and reading, and that was sort of what shaped my world. But when we came, we really tried to fit in. We tried to be like everybody else. And yet I grew up in a very traditional household. I don't know about you, Sonja, what characterized your life growing up, but when I look back, I think about our language is important, our food, our religious celebration.

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So those were sort of the things that punctuated my inner life at home while I was trying to be like everybody else on the outside. But books was really my common place, were my friends, like in the library and stuff. So what about you? I know you kind of have a similar background to me, but I'm also interested to know what was different.

[00:03:20:412]

Yes, well, my father immigrated here in 1961 to do a PhD in the deep south pre-civil rights. And so he did a postdoc, he married mother, she came in 67. They lived in California, where my father worked. And he really wanted to be a professor, so he found a position in a small college town in Ohio called Bowling Green.

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So I was born in Bowling Green, grew up there until I was 18. So I joke that I come from the cornfields. So I would say my household was less traditional for sure, even though we certainly did have our traditions. Language speaking, Tamil was certainly a big part of my childhood, mix of Tamil and English.

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And so I lived in Bowling Green till the time I was 18 and went to Stanford. Books were also a huge part of my upbringing, as was music. I know that's something we also have in common, with the violin. Starting when I was four and a half and through my high school years, I was quite serious about it.

[00:04:33:204]

So my hopes when I got to college was that I was going to double major in music and either linguistics or English. And we had a lot of friends from other parts of the world. There was a huge gap between town and gown. But many of our close family friends were other Indian immigrants from different parts of India, and also friends who were Americans with deep roots in the US, as well as some other internationals.

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So only now as an adult, I realized what a unique upbringing it was. And what about for you? I know that after Iowa, you lived somewhere else before you went to Stanford?

Yeah, it's really interesting because you think of academic life and being in a professor's household, that you just stay put in one place.

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But I actually moved several times. I moved first to Iowa, then I moved to Pullman, Washington, and then from there, because I did different degrees, I had a history of just moving and picking up and starting over again and again. And I actually think that's what characterizes immigration, being an immigrant, this idea of starting over.

[00:05:48:287]

When you go to college, you start over and everybody is starting over. But I would continue to do that many times. And so that is part of, I think, how I see the world, which is so different. I'm married today and I have two children. They have grown up in the same town from the time that they were born.

[00:06:07:955]

They've had that experience of sameness. But I've had to change over and over and over again and start over. Have you had to move around a bit or?

Yes, as an adult. So similarly, we were in same places in the Bay Area after college. And then I went to New York for my first round of grad school, and that's where I reconnected with you after having lost touch.

[00:06:30:692]

We bumped into each other at a post office on the side near Columbia. But, yeah, after that, I've lived on both coasts in California, New York, Great Lakes area, brief stints during college at Stanford and Oxford, and then one summer in DC. So yeah, that's a really good point you raise about immigration in our own lives.

[00:06:50:722]

It sounds like you and I, we've moved around a lot as well, and with a lot of different people, and I think that really teaches us a lot. I've also traveled quite a lot around the world, done homestays in many countries. And in high school, I had exchange student friends.

[00:07:07:474]

And so I think, yeah, that's something that really is very enriching, to be able to have those experiences, especially when I come from the same town from birth to 18, and everybody knew each other for those whole years. So that was a big change when I went to Stanford.

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I definitely think that moving around has been wonderful for me as a writer because I'm personally interested in these insider-outsider stories. I think of that more than immigrant-migrant, and really what makes you feel like an insider to community, what makes you feel like an outsider. And it's great actually to be an outsider because you get to sort of see from the outside in how a community work, how friendships work, how relationships work.

[00:07:53:859]

So I feel like I've benefited by moving, even though it is personally hard to start Start over again. I think that being an outsider is helpful to art. And how have you handled being an.

In some ways, I've always wondered if we writers are always to some degree, an outsider for our art.

[00:08:15:006]

I guess the way I tend to see it is with immigration. A lot of my friends are other kids of immigrants or internationals. And then I have some friends, you know, since childhood, who have long roots in America as well. But I feel like, more than the question, kind of insider or outsider with my writing, I feel like knowing different people and having lived in different places and travelled a lot gives me a broader palette of characters and sensibilities.

[00:08:43:448]

And so I think that informs my characters and the situations that they're in. There's a big cast of characters from all different backgrounds. And that's something that I find fascinating to think about a global audience, if I'm writing or the people who've inspired me. That's interesting, when I teach and I talk about setting, diversity has been important to me as a children's writer.

[00:09:08:732]

And I think their diversity in different ways. And I always look at the setting and sort of some of what you were saying now reminded me of how we can look at our setting and we can look at people who are in our setting and how they really.

[00:09:21:780]

Just their backgrounds can be different in so many different ways. Their age, their economics, where they live, the climate. There are lots of things that make a setting what it is, but so do the people. I think that's a great point that you made about widening your palette.

[00:09:39:536]

And speaking of setting. So the setting that we have in common at our origin of our friendship is Stanford and diverse people. Tell me a little bit about that, about when you got to Stanford.

Well, I think for looking through the lens of immigration, I didn't really know what to make of myself when I was growing up, except that I knew I was different.

[00:10:02:076]

And then when I came to Stanford, all of a sudden I saw all these people who looked like me, and I felt the same, I never really get to feel the same. I always feel different without really knowing why. And the sameness was a little disorienting for me, just to suddenly see so many Indians.

[00:10:22:573]

And then I started to wonder what that really meant to be an Indian. I had never thought about it before, assumed everybody from India was like me. And here I was on campus and everybody who was Indian seemed to look like me. But then further investigation of that made me realize that there were amongst Indians.

[00:10:42:105]

This might seem obvious now, but there were different languages, different foods, different backgrounds. Not everybody grew up in a household with academics. I just assumed that we all lived in college towns. Of course not, but coming to Stanford made me realize just how varied our experiences as Indians were.

[00:11:03:304]

We weren't all just this monolith of people. We not only spoke different languages, but our relationship to our language and our cultures were different. So that was very eye opening to me about you.

For me also, I, I just couldn't believe how many Indians there were. I was one of maybe about five Indians in a school of almost a thousand.

[00:11:23:531]

And to go to a place where like, my God, there's so many Indians both who'd grown up in the US as well as diaspora and students from India was just astonishing. So that really made me also like, reflect on who I was and finding people of a similar background.

[00:11:41:214]

But over time like you mentioned too, I started to see some differences, you know, because it seemed like many students of Indian origin, Indian American origin, or South Asian American origin at Stanford were from suburbs of big cities or more urban areas. And it was very different, because I didn't know too many people like me, with a background like me except for you and maybe one other friend.

[00:12:05:749]

And what I did notice a lot at Stanford was class differences and geographical differences, because coming from the Midwest and a college town into a very urban area. And a lot of people who were of very well to do backgrounds was, that was very surprising to me to see coming from a ordinary family in the Midwest.

[00:12:29:217]

And I think also one of the really neat things too about Stanford was like meeting people from all over the world. When I look back at my roommate mates, there was quite a big diversity even one who was from Bulgaria that I got to visit after college. And so, yeah, just to see an institution that was so heavily tied to immigrants both children of immigrants as well as immigrants from universities, real immigrants, that was just incredible.

[00:12:55:178]

And I thought that was just so neat because I'd grown up in a place where there were very few immigrants and that wasn't always something that was appreciated and seen as a positive. So to come to a place like Stanford and see like, wow, this is just almost the norm or just so appreciated was Just incredible to me.

[00:13:13:921]

Yeah, I think that's probably what I was most grateful for. Going to Stanford was just having the world literally open up for me and to meet people from so many places, so many countries, my roommates even, I never ever had that kind of experience again. Even living near New York City now, that's not my day to day life, but in college it was my day to day life being immersed in that kind of global community, really special and something that I'm grateful for today.

[00:13:47:124]

It's definitely informed the sort of person that I am.

And did the question or things about immigration influence your course of study and the things you did at Stanford?

Not really, that's what's interesting. I don't think I was there in my journey yet in terms of what I thought about myself or what I thought about my writing.

[00:14:09:303]

I didn't major in creative writing. That is my life now, but I majored in economics. But I always was interested in writing. So even when I was studying for my econ exams for fun, I would be writing something that I wasn't supposed to be. And then I kind of realized that was actually what I should be doing.

[00:14:30:971]

I wonder how many writers are kind of their careers are born that way. They're doing instead of something else they dislike.

Right.

So it took me a while and what a great place to realize that I wanted to be a writer. Stanford has such a great writing program.

[00:14:46:656]

They have the Stegner Fellowship, and I just happened to be there. And so I just think that was a gift. And that's part of the story that I tell on school visits, is that when I was in college I slept outside in the quad the night.

Yeah, I don't even think students do that.

[00:15:04:816]

They probably get on their computers and I don't know what they do.

Did I bring a sleeping bag or did I just.

You must have, it's too hard to sleep on without.

There were 10 slots and we had to be one of the people there.

[00:15:17:457]

Probably more than one section, but we had to sign our names. And one of my really good friends asked me to do that. And that was how I started writing. And it was such a great experience. Every single creative writing, I didn't major in it or minor in it.

[00:15:34:156]

So I only took, I think, three classes. And every single one was amazing for me.

I was just kind of writing, doing my thing. And then I took development of the short story. And then I realized, there's actually the swarm, and there's a history behind that form and Roland Poe and I've changed my mind about forms and structures.

[00:15:55:713]

But for a person just starting to write, it was really helpful to understand. Understand that writing is this conversation, that people have been thinking about this form and you can break rules. But it was really nice to understand that there were rules.

There were rules, but, we still had a lot of latitude in terms of what we were gonna do in our storytelling.

[00:16:16:360]

In fact, I'll share this one small John Leroux story, and I think I told you this.

Yeah.

When I got into my creative writing graduate programs, I was trying to decide between going to the east coast, to study at in Boston and or to stay in California.

[00:16:36:513]

And I asked him, which program should I go to, blah, blah, blah. And he said, life is so short and we're all miserable, so if you find something that you're happy, just grab it. And then he got all these books from the bookshelf and handed them to me and sent me on my way.

[00:16:54:215]

Wow.

Such a generous, sweet and truthful ones he gave me.

And I remember sitting in on one of your classes when I came to visit Boston once, and then lost touch with you and then found you in New York. So that was the writing connection really came through, and what a great story about John LaRue.

[00:17:13:389]

What about you? Did you have any experiences that shaped you at Stanford, or even beyond that has made you think about your life as an immigrant or your history?

Yeah, well, I had been writing and doing music from, very little up through Stanford and at Stanford for various reasons I ended up doing different things outside of the music and the fiction writing.

[00:17:37:584]

I did take one fiction writing class, but I majored in anthropology, social sciences, which was kind of a self design major within Anthro. Because I felt like I wanted to know how the world works, as strange as a thing sentence that might sound. But I think being the daughter of immigrants and having traveled and meeting people from different places, really piqued my curiosity.

[00:18:00:984]

And I think when I was in college, I thought, well, it might be really nice to work for the UN, work abroad or something, so that really taught me a lot. And then, I ended up working in and then also doing my first degree after college in higher education and focusing on international education as a subfield as well too.

[00:18:21:482]

So that was something that I think was definitely, the influence of being the children of immigrants and of an academic as well too, because so many people come from all over the world to study in America. And that was something I saw growing up with my father's students, his grad students.

[00:18:37:818]

So I think in terms of writing, maybe on some level, I felt like when I was younger, I really wanted to expand my awareness of the world and then come back to writing. And so I did start writing when I was in another graduate program that wasn't so happy.

[00:18:54:393]

So, yeah, my path was a bit longer and convoluted, to get into it, but I'd always wanted to be a writer. And then I think it's been interesting to see how that's unfolded as well, too. And then I ended up getting back into music, and for me, music is something that's really.

[00:19:15:863]

That kind of transcends boundaries, beyond what we are as cultures and people, which is not to negate that because those are such vital parts of our lives and shape who we are. But I think there is something so beautiful and transcendent about music, that I just love that.

[00:19:31:284]

You can go to an ensemble or workshop or something, and you'll have people from different places, different backgrounds, and we all love the same particular type of music, whether it's opera or violin. And then, of course, with different kinds of musics in the world as well, too. So, I think I felt like when I was younger, I was really trying to understand so much about the world.

[00:19:53:719]

And then later I came into focus with the arts, which was what I really wanted to do. Plus, I think I wasn't as brave as you were at a young age to really go for it, so I really admire that you did it.

I don't know if I was brave, I think, I was the failed economist, no, I'm just kidding.

[00:20:12:710]

Sometimes when you land on something and you know that it's the right thing to do, and I'm sure you felt that, it makes it easier and make choices.

Yeah, and what about today? Because you've touched on this a little bit before with you being, a writer largely for young people and especially, there's been a dearth of diversity in kids and middle grade and young adult books, and you've really done such a great job with that.

[00:20:42:605]

So how do questions of immigration and identity relate to your own work?

Well, this is a question really that you've touched upon that, we have been asking this in the children's lit community for quite some time. And when my first book came out in 2011, it was a mystery novel about an Indian American girl.

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She was the detective in this mystery novel, and her instrument, which is a South Indian stringed instrument called a veena.

My mother played that a little bit when she was young.

And I actually didn't play the veena, I play the violin like you, but I ended up learning some rudimentary.

[00:21:21:356]

So, yeah, I actually did, but, so I wrote it because I thought, there should be books like this. Where Indian Americans, we're not just talking about the same issues of caste and dowry and all these real problems, but not the only things that identify and shape us. I wanted to see something else, and it turns out I wasn't the only one.

[00:21:47:016]

That there were many of us, who had other immigrant lives and stories that they wanted to tell, and there wasn't just a single story about us. And so in the last 10 years, there's been really a push to have more diverse representation in children's literature.

That's wonderful, that's really wonderful.

[00:22:07:116]

I can't remember seeing anyone who looked like me in books when I was growing up.

Exactly, this whole idea really struck a chord in so many of us. And this organization called We Need Diverse Books started, and now there's really been this need, both from publishers and from classrooms and families, to have more representation.

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To have stories about growing up Indian, but not just growing up Indian, but also being like everybody else, having other stories that are not just defined by how we look different, but also by what we have in common. So I have been part of that, and it's gratifying to see all these changes that have happened.

[00:22:48:471]

I'm curious, because I'm just so immersed in children's literature.

Do you see the same happening on the adult side, too?

I would certainly love to see more of it, I think there has been a push. There is more and more diversity in literature, especially with MFA programs, because I did my MFA much later than you.

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And so I think curriculum is diversifying, faculty are diversifying. I think the publishing industry is, trying to catch up with that. But so, I write for adults, and I think there still is a way to go with that, to have all kinds of stories and not just cliched topics that people may think about, when they think about Indian culture.

[00:23:32:195]

In my work with a collection, I'm querying, I have very diverse characters from around the world. Indian, Armenian, American, Middle Eastern, very different people. And so, I don't know, I guess as an adult, being a creative person who's Indian American, I feel like with our generation, we're kind of among the first to break through.

[00:23:55:058]

There have been a few people, before us who were born here in America who've done that, but I feel like there's. There's still a way to go with that, and I think sometimes the challenge can be expectations put on us as to what we write. I tend not to be an autobiographical fiction writer, so I'm not writing my own personal immigration story through fiction.

[00:24:14:635]

But I write whatever strikes me, because I kinda see myself as an artist first, who's of course shaped by her background and culture. And, I'd like my vision to be out there because I think that's representative of who I am as a person. One thing that we touched on very briefly before we are both of Tamil origin, and tell me about your relationship to the Tamil language, and what it means to you and, what you think about it.

[00:24:41:635]

Well, my relationship is that I never felt that I owned this language eft at a very early age, and I assimilated I started speaking English, I forgot how to speak Tamil.

Really?

Yeah, and on top of that, I lived in a household where we were speaking multiple languages at the same time.

[00:25:03:601]

We were speaking Canada, we were speaking English and Tamil. And my Tamil was not proper Tamil, it was sort of intermixed with other kinda dialect and other words, and I was always self conscious about my ability to speak. And it was only really until I became an adult, and after I got married and my mother in law doesn't speak fluent English.

[00:25:28:584]

I see.

She speaks really good English, but in the beginning I didn't know that. And maybe she also learned over the years as my children grew older. But largely I've had to speak in Tamil with her, so I was forced to learn, and so, it's still not fluent.

[00:25:46:649]

And I'm sure that I use a lot of wrong words, but I'm more comfortable with the idea of it's okay, it's okay if it's a mixture, if I use wrong words, people really appreciate when you try. That was a very big realization for me when I went back to India in my 20s, was that when you make an effort that people will meet you there.

[00:26:08:327]

Sometimes it's really hard, you feel very self conscious.

Right. Do you speak to me in your own family now, with your family?

Not so much with my kids, I feel like the way I identify with my culture is through food. I tend to cook a lot of traditional South Indian cooking still there's many dishes that I made.

[00:26:30:131]

Even today I made a pot of ransom and-

I'm coming over.

That's my favorite, and I have homemade yogurt sitting in it. That's sort of the same things that my mom would make, and this evening I'm gonna make pizza, I do both. So I might sprinkle some chat masala on the pizza whatever.

[00:26:49:687]

But, yeah, I do cook a lot of Indian food, and I think it's just because of the way I was raised. I know your Tamil is a lot stronger than I think that's I've heard you, so I believe-

Thank you. It's kind of odd though, because, the only people I really grew up speaking it with were my parents.

[00:27:07:181]

And then we had one set of husband and wife, really close family friends in Bowling Green I would speak it with. I mean, growing up, we spoke, complete mixture of Tamil and English. I don't think there's anybody who speaks completely pure Tamil, not even in Madras, Chennai. But, yeah, that's something that is very important to me, I'm very much a language person, I am a polyglot.

[00:27:29:318]

And I think the thing that struck me that was kind of odd when I got to Stanford was, yeah, I'm speaking English 24/7 I don't come home and have two languages spoken at the same time, but I'm in English all the time. So whenever I've traveled to India, when I go to Chenn, I make it a point to really speak as much Tamil as possible.

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And, if relatives are visiting, then I'll speak to them, in Tamil and some English. For some reason, whenever I see cats, I have to speak to them in Tamil, I think they just respond better. I just have this thing that I think cats really respond well to it, but it's something I would like to even deepen my knowledge of more.

[00:28:10:065]

But as you know the written and spoken forms, the diglossia, the difference between the two languages is so high. I can sound out the characters or write out characters, but I can't make sense of it really. So, I wish I could learn literary Tamil to be able to read, and write in it, but that's something else to add to the list.

[00:28:32:295]

I've really enjoyed becoming a part of the global polyglot community, because I find that I connect with people very well that way. People have deep interests in languages, and I think that's something that's so fascinating. So it kind of relates to what I was saying, that a lot of my friends are other kids of immigrants, I feel like, we have similar experiences in that sense.

[00:28:54:955]

We belong to this society, but we also have this other side of us or other place that we belong to, other culture, language, religion as well too. So I think language is something that is very important to me.

So I know that you're really well connected to Stanford even now that you went to the reunion, didn't you?

[00:29:19:311]

You've been.

Yeah.

So how has that been for you to connect back to the college, to other alumni, or even just the reunion, was there anything that stood out for you?

I love going to the reunions, I think I've gone to every one of them except for the fifth reunion.

[00:29:35:102]

And I think in the beginning, after I graduated and then was in New York, I wasn't so connected Sheela to the Stanford community, except a few friends here and there. But what I found was that like, Stanford was only the beginning. It laid the groundwork for friendships to deepen through the years, which has been wonderful, really to have this common origin experience, since the time we were 18.

[00:30:04:298]

And it's been wonderful to go back to reunions, I think everyone's just happy to see each other. And every time I go back, I'm like wow, what an incredible experience to have. It's so global, people doing so many interesting things, people who just had such intrinsic motivation and followed passions and, it's been always great to go back and visit, go to the reunions.

[00:30:30:226]

So, in touch with Stanford friends more and more over the years in a way that, perhaps I wasn't right out of college. And it's been a wonderful feeling, it's just kind of like this feeling, it's like we're the same tribe, especially you and I were in SLEE freshman year.

[00:30:47:014]

Structured liberal education, where we were with the same people, not quite 24 7, but the same dorm and life and work in the same place. So I think there's an especial, connection there, which is nice.

That's so wonderful, I actually have not been to a reunion. I had planned to go, and then I guess it happened during COVID and then I kind of wasn't sure that I wanted to travel during that, I think it was in 2021.

[00:31:14:623]

I never expected to move to New York, I was in California, and I thought I was just going out to grad school and coming back, and then I never did. Here I am in New York for the last 20 years, and so I-

Not a bad place to be.

[00:31:31:415]

And I dearly love New York, and I am a New Yorker now I think. I think I can finally call myself that. But it is hard when you move so far away from your college to go back unless you really make it a point. And I think even just today talking, I feel like, what am I waiting for?

[00:31:50:133]

I have visited, but I haven't really had a chance to go back and reunite with so many of my friends.

Are you still involved to music? Not me personally, I did start learning the veena for a few years after I published my book. I do wanna play again, I do look forward to the day that I'll be back in an orchestra, such a great experience.

[00:32:15:443]

Yes.

What about you? I now know you're focusing on writing, but how does music play into your life as well?

Well, it's my other hat. I'm an emerging professional soprano, just a couple days ago had a profession audition and at times I've gotten back onto the violin and I'm trying to get back onto it again as well, too.

[00:32:39:105]

So it's something as vital as air to me with music. I'm a very auditory person and love sound, love music. There's always the age-old question, is it the music or the words that are more important? That more of my time is in my writing, for sure, but they're my two halves, my music and my writing.

[00:33:04:284]

And each is so vital to my life. So yeah, it's very interesting to look at all these questions, Sheela, about immigration in our lives and our common interests and our differences, and it's been so great to talk about them.

Yeah, and I think it's important to even remember that music stories, these are common languages across cultures.

[00:33:35:675]

And I don't think it's an accident that we both started with music and that we'll have music in our life. I think it is a great meeting ground. So I do think about that, even as a teacher, cuz we are trying to figure out how do we talk about stories, how do we be more inclusive?

[00:33:54:184]

And it's important to think about the things that we still have in common, so.

Yeah, and I've also noticed as well too, there's a lot of Indians coming into performance, performing arts, acting especially, a lot more than when we were younger, which is really great to see, even other South Asian origin classical musicians.

[00:34:18:514]

So, yeah, we're not all just doctors, engineers, IT.

Not at all. Yeah, we're starting to see the second generation of students growing up, and taking these very different career paths.

Yeah.

So, yes, for sure.

Let me ask you this, have you gotten to go back to India often?

[00:34:40:773]

I haven't been back to India in several years now. I can't remember when, and for sure COVID changed a lot of that. I think I went there maybe five, ten years ago, I can't imagine, something like that. It's been quite time. What about you?

Yeah, I haven't gone for quite a while since 2014 grad school, and some other things, and the pandemic.

[00:35:06:056]

What I do love doing is every time I go, I go to Chennai and Bengaluru, where I have family, and I always pick one other region that I haven't been to before because India is just so culturally rich. I mean, there's so many different cultures and languages, and food, and dress styles, and landscapes, and things to see that it's just so fascinating.

[00:35:29:798]

So I think it takes many lifetimes to be able to see everything in India that I'm long overdue for a trip.

Yeah, no, definitely, I just remembered, I think on my last trip I brought the veena back with me, my.

Wow.

Veena, so that was quite an undertaking, and I had to get a big enough box to fit this veena.

[00:35:52:944]

Four or five feet, and so they fashioned a custom made box that looked just like a coffin. And we had all this coffin through JFK airport, and I was sure that customs was going to flag me and say, what are you doing? What are you transporting national waters?

[00:36:11:151]

But when I said it's an instrument and it's a veena, well, I don't remember if I said what it was because he said, yeah, it's like a sitar.

Okay.

Even the customs people knew about Indian instruments, so that was one of the things I did. And the other thing I remember thinking was that I really wanted to try the Pizza Hut there.

[00:36:35:698]

Indian style pizza, so.

And it was like a sort of a gourmet restaurant.

Yes, it's a really global world, so we've talked about how we're, Indians in America, but there's a piece of America in India as well too.

Exactly, well, this has been really fun, Sonja.

[00:36:54:892]

Yes.

To talk with you, I know kind of stepping back outside and looking at these questions, cuz we know each other for so many years that it's fun to talk about these things in detail, so thank you.

Thank you, it's been really fun.