



# ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

in Celebration of the  
City of Sugar Land  
60th Anniversary



CITY OF SUGAR LAND

Chitra Banerjee  
Divakaruni

Author, Poet,  
Educator



**GOODSILL:** Will you tell us where you were born and when?

**DIVAKARUNI:** I was born in 1956 in Calcutta, India. I lived in India for the first 19 years of my life. When I was 19, I came to the United States to continue my higher education. I started doing a master's degree in Ohio at Wright State University in English literature. I went on to get a PhD in English literature at the University of California at Berkeley.

**GOODSILL:** What was your childhood in Calcutta like?

**DIVAKARUNI:** I guess it was like the childhood of many of my friends. I grew up in a big city. One of the things I remember most from my childhood is that my grandfather lived in a village about two hours away from Calcutta by train. I spent many of my school holidays and summers with him. He is my mother's father and his name is Nibaran Ghosh. My grandmother passed away a long time earlier but one of my uncles, his wife, and his children lived with my grandfather.

I got my love of reading from my grandfather. He was a wonderful man. When I was old enough to get to know him, maybe eight, he was in his 70s. To me he looked very old! (laughing) He had been a doctor but was retired and came back to his home village, Gurap, where he ran a free dispensary for the poor of the village. In the back of the dispensary was a little room with all his books. I would often hang out in that little room and read while he was doing his work.

**GOODSILL:** What kind of books?

**DIVAKARUNI:** Novels mostly. A lot of children's books. Maybe he got them for his grandchildren. So that was very nice. Both my father's parents had passed away by the time I was born, so I only had one grandfather.

**GOODSILL:** Where did he go to medical school?

**DIVAKARUNI:** I don't know, probably in Calcutta because that's where the big medical school was at that time.

**GOODSILL:** What was your mother's life like?

**DIVAKARUNI:** My mother grew up in that village and went to college in Calcutta. She never finished college because she got married and had children, which I think is the story of many women of her generation, probably all over the world. She had a great desire for education so she made sure that all her children got a good education. And especially for me, as a daughter, that was very special. Daughters did not always get a good education.

**GOODSILL:** Was it unusual for women of your mother's generation to go to college?

**DIVAKARUNI:** For her it was unusual. I think she really wanted the education and her father said okay. My grandmother had died when my mother was very young, so my grandfather had to make all the decisions. I remember that she had an uncle and aunt in Calcutta so she lived with them and went to college. So she was not on her own in the big city. Later she took teacher's training and became a Montessori teacher.

**GOODSILL:** That was very modern back then, wasn't it?

**DIVAKARUNI:** Yes. In fact, she had met Madame Montessori and she was very impressed by her.

**GOODSILL:** Was your parents' marriage an arranged marriage?

**DIVAKARUNI:** No, I think they met when she was in Calcutta. He was working and was somewhat older. They came from villages close by so they probably had a village connection, and when they met in the big city, it probably drew them closer together. That was unusual for the time. My father was studying accounting and went on to become an accountant. He had a successful career and worked all over the place, so we moved often. His company would transfer him whenever they needed an accountant in one of their branches. He was pretty high up in the company. His name is Rajendra Banerjee. My mother's name is Tatini. I have three brothers; one is older than I. Two are younger. The youngest was adopted.

**GOODSILL:** Tell us about your education.

**DIVAKARUNI:** I went to an English medium school, Loreto House, which was difficult to get into. Because my mother was a teacher, she had some connections, and I think they favored the children of people who were in education.

**GOODSILL:** Difficult to get into academically, or financially?

**DIVAKARUNI:** Financially difficult and academically difficult, but mostly difficult because so many people were trying to get in. I started there in kindergarten. As I grew up I understood the whole socio-economic situation of schools. Our family was not rich, we were in the middle class, and very Bengali. We were very much into the Indian culture. Most of my classmates' families were extremely rich. They all came to school in cars. I came to school in a rickshaw. (laughs)

**GOODSILL:** Was it embarrassing to you?

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**As I grew up I understood the whole socio-economic situation of schools.**

*Chitra Banerjee  
Divakaruni*

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**DIVAKARUNI:** When I was little, it wasn't. When I was older, it was for a while. And then I got old enough that I didn't care anymore. That was just who I am. I moved around a lot. Loreto House School had branches in all the major cities, so I was able to transfer when my father's job moved us. The school was run by Irish nuns and was a Catholic all-girls school. When my father was working in Assam, in the oil fields, I went to boarding school and that was also a Loreto school. The curriculum was very uniform so I didn't have problems changing schools. I was pretty studious and interested in my work. I didn't have academic problems. Socially, it was difficult every time I moved, especially as I got older. I would go to a school where everybody had their friends and their groups. But after some time, I realized that was just how it is. I could weep and wail about it or just accept it. I think in some ways it made our family closer because my brothers and I were always there for each other.

**GOODSILL:** When you say you were Bengali, the other students were not Bengali?

**DIVAKARUNI:** No. India is a very multi-lingual, multi-state, and therefore multi-cultural country. Others would speak other languages, such as Hindi. Maybe they were from the south but living in the north so they would speak another language. But in school, we all spoke English. That was required. We came from varied backgrounds. There

were also girls who came from a Christian background. These girls were privileged because the nuns wanted to educate the Christian girls. But we all got along.

**GOODSILL:** Was English the language that all the children in India were educated in?

**DIVAKARUNI:** No, only at the English medium schools. There a lot of schools where the first language was not English. It could be Hindi, which is the national language, or it could be Bengali or whatever was the state language. We grew up learning three languages. All my curricular education was in English. But in another school, all the subjects may have been taught in Hindi, and English would have been one subject, like we learn French or German over here.

I believe my mother had foresight. She wanted my brothers and I to be educated so that no matter where we went (and I don't think she was thinking about our going abroad but going to other states in India), we would be able to function in English. Certainly when I came to the United States, it was a big help for me.

We were not a rich family so my mother gave up a lot of things to put her children in these expensive schools. Later I really appreciated that. We had very little in the way of luxuries. Although my father had a big job, we didn't have much at home. I don't know what he did with his money! (laughs) I had two school uniforms. One would get washed and I would wear the other one. And if something happened to any of them, I was in BIG trouble. (laughing) We had very little in the way of toys or books. We didn't go out much. If we went to a movie, it was a major deal. But we went to the best schools. I think my mother invested the money in the way she thought would help us the most. She gave us the most important gift, which was education.

**GOODSILL:** Was religion a part of your young life?

**DIVAKARUNI:** Yes. We are Hindus so we always had prayers at home. We went to the temple. My father was not very into it, but my mother was. She made sure the children went with her. That was a good experience for me. In India, you go to temple when you want to go to temple. It is open all day, every day, every week. There are certain prayer times which you can choose, or you can go when nothing else is going on and you sit there and pray by yourself.

**GOODSILL:** So the idea of receiving a sermon is not part of the experience?

**DIVAKARUNI:** It was not at that time. I think now there are more organized religious groups on the weekends or the evenings, where they will have lectures by monks. It was more of a private spiritual experience when I was growing up.

My mother taught us a lot about Hinduism when we were growing up. Our major text is the Gita. When I was in my 20s, the Gita really started becoming a very important part of my life. It is a series of discourses, which give you the different yogas, or ways in which one can pursue spirituality in the world and in oneself. My mother would teach us certain prayers that exemplified those lessons. In my 20s, I was already in America, and I started reading and attending spiritual groups on Sunday, small groups where you can read and discuss on your own, similar to a Bible study. I still participate in these meetings.

**GOODSILL:** Were there any courses you were particularly drawn to as a young girl that reflected your eventual interests.

**DIVAKARUNI:** I have always loved literature and loved reading. Fortunately we had libraries and I could get books all the time, and my mother encouraged reading, and the schools had libraries. Reading was always a big part of my life. I did not ever think when I was in India that I would be a writer or a teacher of creative writing, which is what I am now. That happened after I emigrated.

I moved to Ohio when I was 19 to go to school and something dramatic happened. My older brother was already in Dayton for his medical studies and the first night I was in his home, he received information that my father had lost his job and there was going to be no money for my graduate school. He said, "Sorry, sister. This is the news I received." I thought, "What now?!" So I started doing small jobs, baby sitting, working in a store, trying to get enough money to go to school. And my brother helped where he could. I got enough money together to go to a local school because that was cheaper.

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**GOODSILL:** Oh, how awful. Was there much of an Indian community in Dayton at that time?

**DIVAKARUNI:** Not at that time. That was very difficult. I felt a great sense of disconnection. I'll give you a little story. I used to wear my Indian clothes all the time since they were the only clothing I had. When I would walk down the street to go to the mall where I was working, traffic would literally come to a standstill! (laughter) They would all be looking. Not necessarily in a bad way but I certainly felt different. I was very homesick in the beginning.

**GOODSILL:** So you eventually raised enough money to go to school?

**DIVAKARUNI:** Yes. I was very determined to major in English and American literature. I had gotten my bachelor's degree in India. I got my master's here and then I got into the PhD program in Berkeley. It was one of the top schools in my field. That year it ranked number three in English literature behind Harvard and Yale. I didn't want to go to either of those because they were in cities that were too cold for me!

Berkeley was wonderful. This was 1979 and it was toned down from the violent activism of the 1960s. While I was there the anti-apartheid movement was strong, so I saw a lot of political action. People felt strongly about an issue, made a point, and they were talking about wanting U. S. investors to pull out of South Africa until apartheid was ended. I thought that was all good. That was also where I became interested in women's issues, which eventually led to my own activism in the field of domestic violence.

**GOODSILL:** What was your specialty in your education?

**DIVAKARUNI:** Renaissance literature with a secondary in contemporary literature. Renaissance literature is a big field. The literature of that time is so exciting, starting with Shakespeare and followed by scores of other famous writers.

I started teaching right after I graduated. I was a teaching assistant during graduate school and then I started teaching in the local California colleges. By the time I finished, I was married. I met my husband, Murthy, just before I left Ohio. We decided to get married. He moved out to California and we got married in Ohio in my brother's house before that. He was an engineer, working in Ohio and got a transfer out to California. We lived in California about 15 years. I had two kids. And then in 1998 he got a really good job offer from Shell. So he said, "Shall we?" And I said, "Why not?" And we moved to Houston. The University of Houston was kind enough to find a position for me so I started teaching creative writing, fiction to be specific. Their creative writing program is one of top programs in the United States, and is internationally ranked. We have students from all over the world who come to study with us. At that time the main Shell offices were in downtown Houston, so that's where Murthy worked. And I worked at the University, which is a little south of downtown. We lived in Bellaire.

We made some good friends in Bellaire but overall, that was not where I wanted to live. The schools were very good but did not have many Asian or Indian children. I think there was one other Indian child in the entire elementary school. I felt strongly that my children needed a more multi-cultural situation in school so we moved to Sugar Land. I've always been a big believer in public education. I chose public universities for myself to go to

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and to work in. I wanted my children to have a good public education and I felt Sugar Land would give them that. And that has certainly been the case.

**GOODSILL:** How old are your children now?

**DIVAKARUNI:** They are 25 and 27, both boys. My younger son went to Colony Meadows for elementary, they both went to Fort Settlement Middle School, and then to Clements. They both went to The University of Texas in Austin.

**GOODSILL:** And what kind of careers are they choosing?

**DIVAKARUNI:** One is in business and the other is in engineering. They are both big readers and both have a minor in what they call Plan II. That is a humanities course with a big literature component. They are both interested in reading and writing.

**GOODSILL:** Your grandfather would have been happy to hear that since he started you reading so early. Is there anything you want to tell me about your teaching career before you tell me about your writing career?

**DIVAKARUNI:** I started off in teaching and became serious about writing after that. I really,

really love teaching. I love my students. Of course I am spoiled because we have such wonderful students.

**GOODSILL:** What kinds of things do you write?

**DIVAKARUNI:** I write fiction, mostly novels and short stories, and some non fiction. I have some books of poetry as well. One of my novels was made into a movie, which was released here in the U.S. It's called *The Mistress of Spices*. I have a website where all of my books are listed: [www.chitradivakaruni.com](http://www.chitradivakaruni.com). I have a couple of other books made into movies in Indian languages as well and both of those won prizes.

I have 18 books; two textbooks I edited for colleges; and several other anthologies that I edited. The textbooks are multi-cultural books for freshman composition. I'm passionate about multi-cultural education with the goal that students should be exposed to writers from many different backgrounds. I put essays and stories with many cultural perspectives into each anthology. McGraw-Hill has published these two anthologies.

**GOODSILL:** What have I forgotten to ask? What else should we talk about?

**DIVAKARUNI:** I'm involved in a couple of organizations. One is called Daya and it's an organization that helps women who are in situations of domestic violence, trafficking or any other related kind of violence. We help them start over and get them legal help and job training if they need it. I'm on their advisory board. In the past I've been on their board and I volunteer also. I started an

organization like that about 25 years ago in the San Francisco area, named Maitri. It has been a longtime passion of mine, to help women get back on their feet. The website for Daya is <https://www.dayahouston.org/>

I'm also very interested in education so I'm on the emeritus board of a similar organization called Pratham. I used to be on their board. We raise money for children in India so the children, especially in the slum areas or in rural areas, can get a good education. We partner with local schools and teachers. They have come up with a very wonderful way of teaching literacy. Within six weeks they can make an illiterate child able to read basic things and do basic math. It's a very good organization. They work in the local languages as well as English. They also run a countrywide test system titled ASER to see how kids are doing in different schools. When they find that kids are not doing well, they will ask if they can come in and train the teachers. They have a wonderful teacher-training program! They also train women and enable them to own their own small businesses. You can find out more about them at <http://www.pratham.org/>

One of my friends is a very well-known dancer who lives in Houston, Rathna Kumar. We sometimes do events together where I write poetry and she puts it to dance. The city was interested in something like that, so we did an event at UH-Sugar Land in one of their big halls. I think that was my first "official" participation in a city event.

My parents have passed away but I go back to India to do book tours when my books are published. I have an Indian publisher but my books have been translated in 29 languages so they are published all over the world. They are set in India or in the U. S. Some are historical. Some take our ancient mythological stories and retell them, usually from a woman's point of view. I'm very interested in women's experiences.

I have really enjoyed living in Sugar Land and I like the diversity. I feel Sugar Land is very open to people of different backgrounds. It's a beautiful place and I've always felt welcomed here. We often take where we live for granted and I think I did, too. I moved from a very multi-cultural region, the San Francisco Bay Area, to Houston, another multi-cultural city. But I realize that not all cities have this aspect. My son lives and works in a little town north of Baton Rouge. I think he is one of three or four Indian families who live there. Everyone is friendly but I am a curiosity when I visit. It's hard to be one of the few visibly different people. So I understand that what we have here in Sugar Land is special. We have many festivals celebrated here, which showcase the many different cultures. I think in school my children never felt out of place because there were kids from so many different backgrounds. They learned to be comfortable with cultural difference and to respect and learn from each other.

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*Sugar Land*   
**HERITAGE**  
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