RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH PRATAP SINGHAL

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

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and
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NEW BRUNSWICK, NEW JERSEY
JULY 20, 2022

TRANSCRIPT BY

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Shaun Illingworth: This begins an oral history interview with Dr. Pratap Singhal. Did I pronounce that correctly?

Pratap Singhal: Yes, sir.

SI: All right, great. The interview is taking place on July 20, 2022, with Shaun Illingworth. Maria, say your name.

Maria Marin: My name is Maria J. Marin, and I am in Elizabeth, New Jersey.

SI: Great. Dr. Singhal, thank you so much for joining us and sharing your story. To begin, could you tell us where and when you were born?

PS: I was born in India, in the city of Dhuri in Punjab, in 1940, May 1940.

SI: For the record, can you tell us your parents' names?

PS: My parents: my father's full name is Mahasha (this was the honorable surname) Mahasha Kundan Lal Singhal. My mother's name is Lajwanti Singhal.

SI: Wonderful. Can you tell us, starting with your father's side of your family, a little bit about what you know about his life, your grandparents' lives, and the family background in general?

PS: Sure. My father was born to a family of a landlord. But after he was born, shortly after, his mother died. So, my grandfather married a second woman. After that, my father left home as soon as he became an adult or independent and moved to a different city called Dhuri, where he started his own business and was a very successful man. He believed in social reform, charities, and he was a kind of social reformer, I can say. He wanted to bring something to the community. He helped many students to go through schools and colleges with tuition because he was well off.

We were a big family actually, seven brothers and three sisters, all raised in one big house. My two brothers were working with my father on the business side. My father was one of the founders who started a new school based upon the religious affiliation of Arya Samaj. There was no school before that in that city. There was a government school and there were two more schools of different denominations, but he started one for the Arya Samaj denomination, where the principles of Arya Samaj were followed. All of our family members were educated there.

I graduated from high school in 1955. I was only fifteen years old at that time, but at that time, high school was up to tenth grade. In the USA, it is up to twelfth. Thereafter, I went to college in the state of UP, Uttar Pradesh, where my brother had migrated to expand the business, and where I went to college for four years, D.A.V. College, again, based upon the Arya Samaj principles. [Editor's Note: Established in 1918, D.A.V. College is located in the city of Muzaffarnagar in the Indian State of Uttar Pradesh (UP).]

After that, I joined medical college in Patiala in Punjab, where I graduated in 1964. After that, I went for postgraduate training at [P.G.I.] Hospital in Chandigarh, where I did one year of residency in ophthalmology, i.e., in eye. Thereafter, I went to Civil Hospital Karnal, where I did rotating internships in the field of surgery and OB [obstetrics]. Thereafter, I joined the government services. I went to Himachal Pradesh, where I practiced for six months, but it was up at the bottom of the Himalayas. It was too cold for us, so we moved back to Bondkala, State of Haryana. I was there for three years. Then, in 1969, we came to [the] USA.

SI: Before we talk about going to the United States, can we do some follow-up questions on your life in India?

PS: Yes. I got married immediately after I graduated from medical school. That was in February 1965. My wife's name is Sushum--S-U-S-H-U-M--Singhal. She's a housewife. She never carried any job by herself, but she has been with me ever since. Anything going backward, or going forward now?

SI: I wanted to go back to the religious school of which your father was one of the founders. First, can you tell us a little bit about what is unique about that sect of Hinduism?

PS: Yes. This is a sect of Hinduism. Hinduism has many, many sub-denominations that believe different belief systems. As you know, in Hinduism, they believe in 33,000 gods; in reality there is only one god. But in India, everybody has their own god; that's why most of the people are religious in India because they can choose a god they want. But Arya Samaj is based upon solid principles. It is based upon the philosophy that you have to be the best, and you have to do the best for others. Those are the basic two principles. It believes in one God. It believes every knowledge has its roots in Vedas. Vedas is a book written indirectly, not directly, by God, by the prophets or the saints who came to this earth who had the knowledge of the Vedas. Vedas is basically the Bible of Hinduism. But in Vedas, there's every possible information that you can think of: art, science, medicine, art of living, what to eat, what not to eat, how to behave yourself, how to behave with others, how to deal with others, and all about God. Anything and everything you can think of in life is in Vedas. There are twenty-eight thousand *shlokas*, or you can say messages, which translate into all that information. It has chemistry, physics, biology, mathematics, astrology, astronomy, everything, not, of course, in that advanced stage, because it was written about five to ten thousand years ago. However, every information is there in its root. [Editor's Note: The Vedas are a large body of religious texts consisting of poems and hymns that originated in ancient India. Composed in Vedic Sanskrit, the texts constitute the oldest Sanskrit literature and the oldest scriptures of Hinduism. Members of the Arya Samaj regard the Vedas as an infallible authority.]

SI: You and your siblings went to that school. Were there a lot of other children that wound up going there as well?

PS: Oh, my god, this is a big school. It's a huge school. It had about two hundred students, starting from primary school, from fifth to tenth. So, it's a huge school.

SI: Was your father involved with it after founding it, or were there other educators who took over?

PS: No, he and a few others were responsible only financially. He was not the teacher. They had their own staff. It's a huge staff, huge. As you can imagine, about two to three hundred students, you need teachers of all sorts, you need sports people, you need athletic people, mathematicians, scientists, artists, everybody. It was a big organization. It is surviving, thriving as of today, getting bigger and bigger every day.

SI: Wow. What business was your father in?

PS: It is called, in a way, if I can explain to you, stockbroker in the English language. There's no such noun which could be equally translatable. But you can say stockbroker in [the] present term, or commission agent. You can say commission agent. So, they buy things for you. They sell things for you, and they make a commission.

SI: What about your mother? Can you tell us a little bit about her and her family?

PS: She was a homely lady, very affectionate, loving and caring. You can imagine, we had a big house, we hosted two or three students at no charge for the full education, free lodging, free everything, because either they could not afford or they could not travel to school on a daily basis. One thing I want to tell you. Two of my brothers are married, and their wives are equally devoted. They were following in the footsteps of my mother, always helpful. Can you imagine raising such a huge family? Seven brothers, three sisters. Every brother has children. My first brother has six children. The second brother also has six children. It's a huge family by today's standards.

SI: Where do you fall in the birth order? Were you in the middle?

PS: I had two elder brothers, then three sisters, then myself, then four brothers after me.

SI: You described your father as a social reformer. Was he involved in any of the independence movements?

PS: Yes, yes. There were three movements in which he and even the whole family were involved. Firstly, Mahatma Gandhi started a movement where--there was a caste system in India. There were four caste systems. The lowest caste was called untouchable; they were kind of kept apart and looked down upon. They were supposed to do the menial job. Mahatma Gandhi came up with the message that this discrimination is bad. So, my father took a very bold step. There were meetings. My father came on the stage and shook hands with those untouchables, drank water with them, ate with them on the stage; for that, there was a kind of repercussion among the higher-class people. But, eventually, things became normal. [Editor's Note: A Dalit is a person not belonging to one of the four traditional caste groupings in India or a member of the lowest class in the traditional Hindu social hierarchy. Dalits were formerly referred to as untouchables, a term that is now understood to be offensive.]

Then, there was a movement with Hindus and Muslims. Muslims were a part of India, but they were not equally accepted by many Hindus. So, he took another bold step in [a] similar way, came on the stage, shook hands, drank water, and, again, that was not appreciated.

The third movement was there was a struggle going on in Punjab State. That was in, I will say, 1954 or something close to that. There was a movement going on that the state language should be Punjabi and not Hindi. So, that was a big movement, and a lot of people had to go to jail. This was a political movement. My three brothers and two sisters went to jail for that purpose for a short time. Of course, my father was old. He could not do it physically, but he gave a lot of money for this purpose.

SI: Tell us a little bit more about your early education. What interested you the most? Do any of your teachers or experiences stand out as being formative?

PS: Can you repeat the question, please?

SI: Do you have any memories of your early education, things that really shaped what you enjoyed in education, maybe led to other things you did later in your life? Are there any teachers that might stand out as particularly influential?

PS: Coming to my personal life, I was a very shy boy. I was just a very average student, not very bright. I'm talking of primary school. But, as the year went on, I am becoming sharper and sharper every day to the point in high school, there were eighty students; only fifteen of us got first class, and I was one of them. It was very hard to get first class [in] those days. It was first class, second class, and third class. That was the system at that time. So, fifteen people who got the first class had a chance to go to professional schools and colleges. People who got second class or third class did not have much chance to advance for higher education.

SI: You would have been about seven years old when the partition happened. What do you remember about that? How was your family affected, if at all?

PS: I'm sorry. Please, can you repeat again?

SI: I was asking you about the partition period in '47. Do you have any memories yourself of that time?

PS: Oh, yes.

SI: Did it affect your family?

PS: Oh, yes, very much so. Actually, 1947, I was only seven years old. I remember that very sad day, the day when India was liberated from British rule, and Hindus were killing Muslims and Muslims were killing Hindus. One day, my younger brothers and I were sitting in the sun, basking in the sun, and my neighbor was Muslim. Hindus came to kill them, and they killed the Muslim brothers and parents. But two young girls of that family jumped over the wall and entered our house. We got scared. We didn't know. We were innocent. At that time, I was

seven years old, very innocent. We ran to my parents (we were in the west wing of the house and my parents were in the east wing of the house) and told them, "The two girls are here." My father says, "Stay quiet. We have to save them." So, we kept them for a day or two. Then, my father found a way to make them travel to Pakistan, where they were safe. That was a very unforgettable, strange experience of life.

SI: So, your father himself took these girls to Pakistan.

PS: I do not know how he did that, because we were too innocent to understand at that time. He said, "Stay quiet," because if anybody finds out that these are Muslim girls, they would kill them. In Pakistan, the same thing was happening. If they find any Hindu, they will kill them. There was the state of partition, because India and Pakistan were one country before 1947 but, all of a sudden overnight, became two countries. So, the west part of India became Pakistan, which was given to Muslims, all Hindus had to leave; otherwise, they will be killed. Most parts of India became for Hindus, and most Muslims were required to leave, although most Muslims did not leave. Gandhi started a movement, and my father was involved, that we have to accept Muslims as brothers and sisters because they are human beings. In India still, I think the second majority is Muslim. The first majority is Hindu.

SI: Before the partition, had there been a lot of Muslims in your neighborhood, a lot of people you knew?

PS: Yes. My neighbor on the right and on the left were both Muslims, and they were killed, except these two girls were saved because they jumped over the wall and entered our house.

SI: What led you later on to study medicine? Was it something that happened early or in high school, or did you move in that direction in college?

PS: What happened is one of my aunts was a nurse. She loved me very dearly, and she used to visit us often. She told me, "Pratap, you have to become a doctor. You have the features of a doctor. You're very caring and loving." So, that was engraved in my heart and brain. At that time, I was only in seventh grade. From there on, I took a determination that I will be a doctor.

SI: How did your family view education? Did they encourage the kids to go as far as they could go?

PS: Yes, yes. My father was big in education. That's why he supported many students who could not afford tuition. He supported actually my two uncles, to pay for their college education. My father believed in equal rights for women and men, girls and boys. See, in those days in India, girls were looked upon a little bit at not an equal level. My father did not believe that. My father also believed that when my brother got married, that his wife is as good and has equal rights as my brother because he believed in equal rights. So, at that time, ladies' education was not a big thing. My two elder sisters did not get much education because there were not many schools actually at that time, except when my father started this Arya Samaj school and there is a small section for the girls. But there were another two schools where there was no education for girls.

SI: Can you tell us a little bit about what you would do for fun growing up or what your interests were besides school?

PS: There were not many games. I was never athletic. I used to play a lot like every child does. I used to play a lot, every time we had a chance, but I was not athletic per se. So, my ideal interest was in studies, studying what is going on in the world, what is happening. There's so much unhappiness. That bothered me. When I saw anybody unhappy, that bothered me. I come from a very happy family. Everybody was happy. I started even studying books on happiness when I was in the ninth grade. I have been studying ever since. Now, I have written three books; all have a message that happiness is a privilege for human life. There's no other life, no other entity on this earth, maybe in the whole universe, who has this privilege. If we don't enjoy that privilege, we are not doing a favor to ourselves. So, that was engraved in my head, and I began to study literature on happiness.

SI: Maria, do you have any questions?

MM: What is one of your earliest childhood memories?

PS: We had a big car accident when I was in middle school. It was a major blow to the family because two people died and many other family members were injured at the same time in this accident. My grandmother and my nephew both died. It was a very shocking event. My father dealt with it in a very religious and spiritual way. He invited a spiritual master to stay with us for a week. We'd have morning prayer, afternoon prayer, evening prayer, and we'd have discourses from him to tell us that how these accidents are part of life and we need to get over it. It gave us a lot of strength and a lot of positive messages, and we got through. In this accident, one of my uncles, who was my age--ten years, but uncle by definition because he's my father's stepbrother--became an orphan. So, he became my classmate, and he shared my room. We studied for five years together. That was a very good memory because he was very pleasant. He was never negative. He was my best friend and best classmate for five years.

SI: Wow. You said that the college you went to was in another state.

PS: Yes.

SI: What was it like going there? Was it very different from where you grew up?

PS: See, I went there because I need to go to college. In Dhuri where I lived, there was no college. But there was a college in the city of Muzaffarnagar, where my brother had a business, so I stayed with him. Staying with my brother was like staying with father, no big difference. His wife was equally lovely. That was the one reason I went. Secondly, I went to D.A.V. College, where they have a good education. I graduated with high honors. I went into medicine after that.

SI: It sounds like your medical education was broad. Is that correct?

PS: Medical education is just like an MD, Doctor of Medicine, here, yes. So, that was a five-year program. In the U.S., it's a four-year program. In India, at that time, it was a five-year program. It was, again, back to my state, Punjab, about thirty miles from my city where I lived before in childhood. So, I could visit my parents quite often.

SI: At that point, did you have to decide what you wanted to specialize in?

PS: Not really, until you became a doctor. Then, you have to decide. At that time, choosing a field was not hard. Once you became a doctor, it was not hard to pick your specialty. It was not as competitive as it is now. To become a doctor was very competitive because the State of Punjab, it's a huge state. It's probably equal to California. It's huge. We have only 150 student seats to become a doctor at that time. There were only two medical schools in the State of Punjab. But after I became a doctor, choosing a specialty was not a big issue.

SI: Tell us a little bit more about your experiences between graduating from medical school and coming to the United States. What was it like studying further or practicing medicine in India at the time?

PS: In India, see, I practiced [for] about three years after finishing my internship. It was a government posting. The government had to post places where there are no doctors. It was not my choice to go where I wanted to go. All three years, I served in a village which was fair sized, not a small village. It was a government-run dispensary hospital. I shouldn't call it a hospital because there were no hospital beds per se. It was outpatient, basically. If anybody is sick enough, they were referred to a secondary hospital, which was nearby. So, it was relaxing, no stress, seeing thirty, forty patients in a day, working six hours a day. But you are supposed to be available twenty-four/seven for any emergency coming in the town or from a nearby town.

At the place of my posting, I did not serve just one town, but I served maybe twenty small towns adjoining that town. See, in India, the system is of villages, at that time at least. Now, may be different a little bit. Still, there are villages, but there are all the amenities available now. Before, they did not. People came as far as twenty miles, thirty miles, and [it] took one to six hours because they came by foot or came by camel or came by a cart, which is run by camel or oxes. So, it was a big issue.

One time it happened, in the middle of the night, a mother came, and she was pregnant. She was having a baby, and the fetus had a hand prolapse. Hand prolapse means the hand came out first, which is very unfortunate. Head needs to come out first. When the hand came out first, I had had some training in gynecology and obstetrics. I told the mother, "Listen, I cannot save your baby, but I can save you. But if you want to take a chance that the child could be saved, the chances are very slim. I can send you to a nearby hospital. We have ambulances standing by." They said, "No, we cannot afford that. You do whatever you can do." The husband said, "Just save my wife." So, the fetus, of course, died. I delivered the fetus under not the best circumstances, but the mother survived and they were thankful. I treated so many similar cases. You have no idea how people appreciate it because they have no place to go. I treated every disease, diabetes, heart attacks, pneumonia, because these people did not have the privilege or

the resources to run to a big hospital. It was very prideful for me. I felt very good that I was helping someone who cannot afford anything more than what we have now.

SI: Were you the only doctor at the dispensary?

PS: That is correct. One doctor only. Let me narrative one unfortunate incident. One day, I was standing outside the hospital. It was five PM in the evening. The hospital was closed. My hospital was located in front of a bus station. A marriage party came, and there were two buses that caught on fire. It was a very sad moment, very shocking. I ran to the dispensary. I called all the staff. All the staff lived very close by, a matter of one minute or two minutes. They lived in the premises. We all got together. Twenty people came in just a matter of five minutes. They were lying all over. We have only one big room and one small room for the medication. So, all the people laid on the floor, and I did my best to do whatever we could do. The ambulances started coming in. They started taking the patients away to a big hospital nearby. There's no way I could do anything for anyone except give them first aid. This thing I could never forget. In that incident, I think four or five people died.

SI: Wow. Maria, do you have any questions?

MM: Yes. When I asked about your childhood, you said there had been a lot of deaths in your surroundings.

PS: Maria, your voice is cutting [out]. Can you try to fix the voice a little bit?

SI: Yes, let me just repeat that. I might have a better connection. She was wondering, based on the story you told earlier where your grandmother and nephew passed away in the car accident to the incident you just described, you had to deal with a lot of death early on in your life. How did you and your family cope with that?

PS: See, children are very resilient. They can be very resilient. They can also get very easily shocked. I come from a family--we are a very resilient family because we believe in the philosophy that you need to live a happy life. So, my father took a bold step and called a spiritual master, who lived with us after the car accident. We had a big house, so he had a room, a prayer room, and everything. He was there twenty-four/seven for us. He was giving discourses three times a day, but we could go to him any minute and talk to him. So, it was a not so negative experience for me, although it is shocking for everyone. It is sad that two people died, but my grandmother was quite an old lady, very old. My nephew was very little. He was just an infant, I will say. I don't remember exactly. Maybe he was six months or one year or something like that. He was kind of sickly since he was born. So, all of it was shocking, but we got over it with a lot of help or a little help. Okay, Maria? Does that answer your question?

MM: Yes, it did.

SI: That religious philosophy helped you through later situations, like what you faced at the dispensary?

PS: Of course, of course. See, in India, in the Arya Samaj philosophy, we believe that there is reincarnation. Anything which really exists never ceases to exist, whatever it is. That's why we have recycling. Everything is recycled. Even life is recycled. Everything in the universe, the stars and galaxies, are recycled. You see new stars are being formed. The stars that are desolate and disappear, because then they become not capable of existing. In life, your life just goes on. After death, these new lives start, like you're moving from fifth grade to sixth grade, sixth grade to seventh grade and so on. Similarly, life continues. Life is a continuum. That is the understanding and philosophy of Arya Samaj.

SI: Tell us how you came to move to the United States and what led to that.

PS: I came in 1969. My uncle was a big helper. He was pushing me to come for good reason, not for his purpose, for my purpose, because my father did a lot for him. "Now," he said, "it's my job to do good for the family." So, he brought a lot of us here. He said there were very good prospects here. I came here in 1969, landed in California to my uncle. He did his best to get me started in life. For one month, I was very sad [and] disappointed because I have no place to go. I didn't know what to do. I was not very smart in worldly affairs. I was good as a doctor, but I was not as street-smart. I will say that. But my uncle brought me. He tried to apply for different jobs and so on. In one month, he worked with me day and night, I applied to about thirty positions to get a medical internship started. I got a lot of offers. As a matter of fact, I got three offers in just Philadelphia alone. I didn't have much money. So, I flew to Philadelphia because I had three interviews. I said to myself I will take one at least. That's how I got started in Philadelphia at my first internship.

I came alone. I did not come with my wife. Once I came here, I got settled in a period of one or two months. Then, my wife and my one son came. He was the only son at that time when I migrated to the USA. Then, I had two more sons later on who were born in the USA.

SI: Did you have any trouble with the immigration system? Did they give you any difficulties?

PS: At that time, the immigration system was very easy for doctors, very, very easy. As a matter of fact, they were demanding doctors. You just have to apply, and it's a question of months, not even years, that you get your visa. They were looking for doctors and engineers at their time. As a matter of fact, you have to pass an exam before coming to the USA, and the tuition was fifty dollars. You do not have to pay tuition. Can you believe this? The exam was administered by an organization located in the USA. If you're taking the exam from abroad, you do not have to pay tuition; you could pay whenever you come to the USA. If you come to the USA, then you pay. Otherwise, you don't need to pay because they wanted people to come. Fifty dollars was a lot of money in 1969.

SI: Tell us a little bit about that first year in Philadelphia and what that was like for you.

PS: The first year in Philadelphia was my internship. It was something very difficult and very strange for me because, in India, I was a boss. I have a Jeep. I have a truck driver. I have a clerk. I have a secretary. I have a nurse. Here, I was just a nobody. In an internship, you're a nobody. You are the bottom on the ladder. You have to do everything, collect blood, collect

urine, because it's part of the training. In India, you work six to eight hours; six hours was a lot. Here, you worked twelve hours, twenty-four hours, even thirty-six hours. It was very challenging. At times, I felt, "Why did I come here?" I have no status. Nobody knows me. I felt nobody wants me because my English was not the best at that time. I knew English, of course. English is a language in India you learn. Everything in medical school is in English. It was not that I didn't know English coming from a foreign country, but it was not as fluent. So, I have some difficulty with pronunciation, and my English pronunciation was not that great. So, I had a lot of difficulties I had to face, hard work, no position. And there was a lot to learn. It's a different system, much to learn, very challenging.

MM: I have a question. What was the biggest culture shock for you, besides work, between the United States and India?

PS: That's very good. Thank you, Maria. That's a very good question. I'm glad you asked me. See, in India, when I went to the hospital, everybody stood up to honor me. That's the way it was. I don't know now. Here, when I went to the nursing stations, where there were a small number of chairs and the nurses are sitting, the doctors are sitting, and I had to stand. I felt so awful and awkward. I said, "What is this? I have to stand? The nurses are sitting." It is kind of shocking. But then I realized that when an American doctor came, again, the nurses did the same thing. So, I learned to accept that this is the culture here. The nurse doesn't have to stand for the doctor. It was a big cultural shock, yes. Thank you. I felt it for a long time.

SI: Were there other points of culture clash that you recall, maybe outside of work, living in Philadelphia?

PS: No, not really, because there were a lot of Indians whom we could make friends with. But in the hospital, I faced difficulties because of pronunciation. Some people couldn't understand me many times. But they were very accommodating. They were pleasant. They never gave me a hard time. But I felt myself that I should do better, but I was never discriminated against.

SI: What department did you serve your internship in?

PS: It was a rotating internship. Rotating internship means that you go through all the fields--surgery, medicine, ophthalmology--because I want to get an overall experience, so I could decide what specialty I want to go into later.

SI: You left Philadelphia for Allentown. How did you decide on the specialty you wanted to go into? How did you decide that you wanted to go to Sacred Heart Hospital?

PS: My training was in emergency. Sacred Heart was a job for the emergency room physician. In the emergency room, as an emergency room physician, you're supposed to be all rounded. That's the training I have. I have training in medicine, surgery, orthopedics, and pediatrics, and that was a perfect fit for me. It was a very good offer at that time. So, I took it. Then, somehow this emergency medicine became a field of specialty. Before, it was not a field of specialty. When it became a field, I took the board. I passed the boards. Now, I became an emergency medicine field specialist.

SI: Are there any memories that stand out from your time at Sacred Heart, either about experiences in the emergency room or how things operated differently there?

PS: Yes, actually, I do have a few good experiences. First of all, the boss was very nice. My colleagues were very nice. One day, what happened was there was a big fight in the town. There were a lot of bars in Allentown, Pennsylvania. There were two groups that were fighting with each other. One bar was put on fire, many people got burns. I was the only physician when nine patients came to the ER in a matter of ten minutes. It was shocking. I was the only physician. Also, we had a call system; you can call everybody and anybody at any time. That system was activated. There were multiple casualties. I had to decide who lives and who dies. Nine people came, and I have to decide that only five people have [a] chance to make it. Four people were burned so badly that they have no chances of making it, and we do not have staff to work on nine people. As soon as this thing happened, we called the code, the code emergency, and many doctors came from all around who were on the staff to help. But that was an event I could never, ever forget. Four people died. Five people we saved. They stayed in the hospital for a month or two. Finally, they went home. But I was in charge of that event.

SI: After Sacred Heart, you then went to West Virginia.

PS: That's correct.

SI: What led to that?

PS: Well, in the Sacred Heart Hospital, at that time, they were paying like thirty-three-thousand, thirty-four thousand, something like that, a very small salary. That standard was an okay standard, not very low, but not a big salary for a doctor. So, I was looking for a higher-paying job. I got the offer for sixty-thousand. That's a big jump, so I took the job. That job I did for six months. It was too demanding. We had to see more than a hundred patients a day, just impossible. So, I looked for another job. There, I not only became a co-director of the emergency room, also I loved that job. You'd see a reasonable number of patients. Usually, it was thirty, forty, fifty. That's [a] very reasonable number of patients, and you could do a good service. You could also pay proper attention to the patients.

SI: Were there any differences between Pennsylvania and West Virginia that stood out to you?

PS: I'm glad you asked me. It's a very good question, actually, because I want to answer that question. We went to West Virginia. I have three children. One was in the third grade. One was in the fifth grade. The third was still too young for school. The education system there is not of that higher level. When I came home one day, my children were not happy. Usually, they were very happy and blooming children. I said, "Why are you not happy?" "School is boring," they said, and then I asked, "What do you mean school is boring?" So, I went to the school and asked the teacher why my children are not happy. "What do you need me to do?" They say they are too bright. The one who's [in] third grade, they gave him a test. He should be in the fifth grade. The one in the fifth grade should be in the eighth grade. But they say, "I would not recommend it because they would be too young for that grade."

I had to make a big move, actually. I took a house in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, which was seventy miles away, where my wife and my children lived. I traveled on a daily basis. I commuted on a daily basis because we have to give the best to the children. That was one-and-a-half years that went like this, very tough, very tough. Every day, I would get up [at] three o'clock in the morning because it took me two hours. I woke up at three o'clock, took shower. At four o'clock, I left. I got there by six, had a coffee, and I went to work from seven AM to seven PM. At seven PM, sometimes I went home. Sometimes, I stayed in the hospital and slept until the next day. Commuting was a big challenge, especially in snow days. There were a lot of snow days in West Virginia. In the summer, it was not so hard. Winter was very hard.

SI: Maria, do you have questions?

MM: Can you please elaborate on your kids? I know that one of them is a plastic surgeon, one a cardiac surgeon, and one is a thoracic surgeon. Talk about raising them and how they chose their careers.

PS: Yes, okay, Maria, thank you. My children did very well in school and college academically. My oldest son Arun was an honor student. I did not have to pay for his medical education. After high school, he studied four years at Lehigh University in Bethlehem. Then, he went to Charlottesville, Virginia, University of Virginia in Charlottesville, for a seven-year program in MD and Ph.D. He's a cardiac surgeon. He got all his education free because of his honor grades. They were all bright kids. The second one, he's a thoracic surgeon now. For both of the younger ones, I paid their tuition. But they went to the top schools. The second one, Sunil first went to Dartmouth College. From Dartmouth College, he went to the University of Pennsylvania Medical School in Philadelphia. Then, he went to Johns Hopkins for medical school and for postgraduate residency. He's the chief of thoracic surgery at this time now at Penn Medicine in Philadelphia. The younger one, Dhruv, went to Kimberley Academy, a private school in the town in which we lived, in his high school. Then, he went to Cornell University in Ithaca for his college degree. Then, he went to Pittsburgh Medical School for being a doctor. Then, he went to Harvard Medical School, where he is now a plastic surgeon. Any questions?

SI: Did you encourage them to go into medicine, or did they just find that on their own?

PS: My elder son, I encouraged him. I wanted him to be a doctor. He wanted to be a doctor, too. The other two brothers had the freedom, but I think they had the effect from my elder son. So, they also choose medicine.

SI: You mentioned earlier that when you were living in Philadelphia, there was an Indian community that you could join and socialize with. In these other areas of Pennsylvania and West Virginia, did you have that opportunity, or were there not really any other Indian Americans around?

PS: In West Virginia, there's no such thing. Even in Philadelphia, it was one year only for me. I didn't have time, because the schedule is very tight for interns and residents. You work sixty to eighty hours a week, so there's no time. There's time only to eat and sleep. But my wife went to

some social events here and there for the sake of my only son at that time, one son. But I had no opportunity to be part of any Hindu organization.

SI: Did you find that that changed your life a bit, things like religious practice or diet or any other aspect of your life?

PS: No. When I came here, to this place in New Jersey, we live in Glen Ridge, New Jersey, and my practice is in Belleville, actually, I started an Arya Samaj here with the help of a priest and my wife. Three people got together. We started an Arya Samaj. It's just a flourishing organization. Because we had no funds, we started at our home. For two years, we had all the functions at our home. We still have a big home here. As the congregation grew, we started renting a place; it was a masonic temple. Then, we bought it. Now, it is flourishing. I was very deeply involved financially, emotionally, mentally and spiritually. So was my wife.

SI: That was after you came to New Jersey though?

PS: That is correct. That was 1985. It so happens that we were celebrating my youngest son's birthday at my home. It was on August 25, 1985, and I thought, "My god, it's my son's birthday. Why don't we start this Arya Samaj here?" It just so happened, and, okay, we started working on it. My wife had full cooperation, and the priest who was helping her to celebrate the birthday said, "I will support as much as I can every day, every time." I was not a priest. So, he came to every event. Now, I could perform functions. I do marriages for people for free. I never charge. This is not my profession. As a courtesy, some people need to do some prayer. I do it for the family as a service, no fees. I have performed three or four marriages. I have done prayer many times in people's homes if they requested, only my friends who knew me and say, "Okay, we accept you as a priest for that event."

SI: Can you tell us what brought you from West Virginia and Pennsylvania to Princeton and how that came about?

PS: Yes. See, again, I mentioned to you in West Virginia, the problem was the education. It was very troubling for me to travel seventy miles one way and 140 miles a day. So, I was looking for a job. I got an offer from Princeton Medical Center, and I was there as an ER physician for one year. Again, it was very demanding. My wife said to me that as you get older and older, you will not be able to keep up. So, I started looking for a practice. I was looking in the newspaper for this opportunity, and this doctor was retiring. So, I interviewed him. He gave me a good offer. I took his practice. He was a very nice man. He stayed with me for one month after I bought his practice. He said, "I will help you get started," and that's how I am here today.

SI: What was it like getting acclimated and introduced to the community?

PS: It was not hard, actually. See, I am very close to my patients. When we started the Arya Samaj here, most of my patients became part of the congregation. I have very deep relationships with my patients, not only medically but emotionally and spiritually. I advise them, whatever help they need in their family affairs or personal life. I'm not a life coach, but I can advise them because, see, my father has a big influence on me. I was very close to my father. He was a very

smart man. Every day he would tell me educational stories for the purpose of training me, educating me. What is the wisdom in the Vedas, that is like a Bible here. There's a lot of wisdom. He gave me a lot of information, lots and lots. My brothers are like that, too. We have a very good atmosphere at home. I learned a lot from my father and my brothers and so on. That is different from being street-smart, but how to deal with challenges, how to deal with life situations, the stresses of life. I share with my patients, and they share with me. As much as I give them the information, also I learn a lot because they also share.

One day, one of my directors in the Clara Maass Hospital asked me to give a talk. She said, "Give a talk." Every week, different lecturers, different authors came to give a talk in the medical field. But she said, "We want to have a talk from you. You are a happiness coach." She said, "Talk about this." I said, "Sure." I gave a talk, and people appreciated that. Somebody came from the audience. They say, "You should write a book." I said, "Sure, I'll write a book." So, I write the first book. Then I write the second and then the third. Now, it is easy. I can write another book. This one talk led to a book. [Editor's Note: Dr. Pratap Singhal is the author of *How to be Happy Today and Every Day with A New 7 Minute Magical Plan* (2021); *One Solution to Many Diseases: Presented in 24½ Inspirational Storie*s (2021); and *Health, Happiness & You: Everything You Need to Know* (2011).]

SI: Can you sum up a little bit what is in each book? What is it you are trying to get across in each book?

PS: Okay, sure. The last book is *How to Be Happy Today and Every Day with A New 7 Minute Magical Plan*. In this book, I have tried to share that you can bring happiness in your life in just seven minutes a day. You have to just promise and commit to yourself that you will dedicate seven minutes a day. This is how. In the first step--use your mind and program it for the mission [happiness] that you have committed. I have shown how you can do that by just investing three minutes a day.

In the second step--use your intelligence and come up with a new idea on a daily basis, how to make life better and happier. I have shown how you can do that. You do need to invest two minutes a day for this part.

In the third step--use your soul [soul is the inner self] first you empower it and make it strong and then use it for your mission, whatever your mission may be. I have shared a method how you can empower it. Anybody should be able to do that by just investing two minutes a day.

You see, it requires only seven minutes a day. Therefore, I have named this plan "A New 7 Minute Magical Plan for Happiness."

I have also created a chapter in this book entitled "The Law of Nothingness." This is the shortest chapter, yet the most powerful one. Please be clear that nothing does not mean zero, but it means nothing important, that is, something very basic. The message is everything is cyclical in nature. That is, everything comes from nothing and goes to nothing. First, everything rises to the top and then goes to the bottom. That is what I meant by cyclic in nature. This is applicable to living as well as non-living entities. This is applicable to our life and any other living entities.

It is equally applicable to entities like earth, stars, galaxies and everything else in this universe. There are fourteen tenets of this "law of nothingness." For example, you come with nothing and you go with nothing, you belong to nothing and nothing belongs to you, and you need nothing more than you already have to be happy. There is nothing on this earth that loss of which should make you cry. Equally, there is nothing on their earth that should make you jump in the sky because everything is temporary, and so on. Once you have that concept, you will see the life from a different perspective. You will understand not only that everything is temporary but how precious this life is that we are gifted with.

Coming to the second book--I'm going backward. The second book is *One Solution to Many Diseases*. Based upon the power of the mind, I'm a hypnotherapist. In hypnotherapy, the focus is that your mind is the real power. Your mind is a computer. So, I have shown that with the power of your mind, you can do almost anything, you can lose weight, you can stop smoking, you can be brave and strong, you can be happy. There are a lot of practical things which you can do once you make the decision to do that.

Coming to the first book, this is a big book. This is five hundred pages. The other books are two hundred pages each approximately. There I have addressed first how to be strong physically. Second, how to be strong mentally. Third, how to be strong spiritually. And in the last chapter, I have elaborated how to heal yourself. I have given a lot of clues because I am not only studying just medicine. I have studied naturopathy, homeopathy, magnetism, nutrition. So, I have discussed a lot about healing. I have tried to put it all together, because now I understand that no healing medicine is perfect. All healing medicine has drawbacks. People call this the alternative medicine; I'd rather call that complementary medicine because it complements--you can do a lot more for yourselves and for others when you have that concept. This is what I have discussed in the fourth section.

SI: When did you start espousing this philosophy of blending these styles into complementary medicine?

PS: Okay, very good question. Actually, I forgot to mention that when I was in India, just before I came to the USA, I became very, very sick. I was so sick; I thought I will die. I was in the hospital. The doctor could not do anything except giving the pain medication. That was not the answer. One homeopath came. He said, "You can be healed very quickly, but this is beyond my scope." He gave the name of some doctors who could help me. My wife took a brave step. She went to the doctor, a twelve-hour journey. She left me alone with my son, who was only three years old at that time. She went to see their doctor and tell him, "My husband is sick, and he's in very bad shape. We think he will die." He said, "Bring to me." The next day, we rented the car. We went to see him. You would not believe, Shaun and Maria, in five minutes, in less than five minutes, I was on my feet. Up until that time, I had not eaten for one week. I had not taken [a] bath for one week. I was smelling like a rotten egg. I was smelling so horrible. But within five minutes, I was on my feet. On that day, for the first time, I took a shower and had my first meal. That changed my life. I thought to myself, "I must investigate this medicine."

I started studying homeopathy. That was the medicine that saved me. Then, I found that there are so many other arts of healing. Before that, I have no such concept. I thought the doctor

knows best, the medical doctors knew the best. My concept was gone once I have that experience. My mind opened. My mental horizon widened. Not only did I start studying complementary medicine, homeopathy, fasting, nutrition, and self-healing, but I also began to study Vedas, the bible of Hinduism. Up to that time, I never studied Vedas because not only we didn't have time, but my mind was not that widely open to complementary medical sciences. Actually, as a matter of fact, from the time I became a doctor until 1967, I never studied anything. I thought, "Okay, I know everything." I have learned everything, whatever I know. But this thing opened my mind.

When I got better, I went to the bookstore. I spent a thousand rupees at that time. I bought every book on homeopathy. With the help of a teacher, started studying it. My mind kept getting broader and broader every day. I realized that allopathy, the science we practice, has no philosophy. How can we have medicine without a philosophy? Allopathy medicine, conventional medicine, has no philosophy. It's physiology, pathology, pharmacology and the application of pharmacology. There's no philosophy. But every medicine I studied, there's an underlying philosophy. First, you study the philosophy. Then, you study the medicine. That makes a lot more sense. Now, I am a very good doctor, I shall say, because not only can I help my patients, but I can help my family. I'm glad for this question. Thank you, Shaun. [Editor's Note: Allopathy is the system of medical practice that emphasizes diagnosing and treating disease and the use of conventional, evidence-based therapeutic measures.]

SI: That approach really guided your private practice as well.

PS: Of course, of course. I do practice complementary medicine, hypnotherapy, mind-body medicine, nutrition. The first book has mentioned everything in it, what I practice.

SI: Living in New Jersey now for about forty years, I was curious about your observations about how the Indian-American community has grown. You said your house of worship grew. The congregation grew. How have things changed over forty years since the early '80s?

PS: See, when I started my practice, I was very young, of course. Now, I'm eighty years old. I was very young and enthusiastic. My patients loved me. I loved them. There was no sense of discrimination on the part of the patient, and I enjoyed every minute of my practice. I made good money because of my training. Also, because this was an industrial town, I was the doctor working for the industries. But over the years--the first ten, twenty years was good--then the industries started to go down. They've almost disappeared now because of many reasons. Firstly, the insurance companies took over. Before, if anybody got injured, they came to me. Now, most insurance companies have their own clinics or doctors. So, my practice was still pretty good. In the last, I would say, five to seven years, I have started to cut down for two reasons. Number one, I need more rest. Number two, I don't need to make more money. But I don't want to ever retire. I want to keep my mind active. I want to help as many people as I can with the time I can allow.

SI: Since you're still practicing, can you tell us a little bit about how the COVID pandemic affected your life in general and your practice?

PS: Yes, it has affected it a lot, actually. My practice has shrunk for many reasons. Firstly, most of the elderly patients have moved away. Their children say, "Mom or Dad, you cannot live alone. Come live with me." In a general practice, I have patients of all ages, and most patients who come often are usually elderly. They need to see me more often. The younger generation don't need you that often. They need you once a year or twice a year. The older generation needs you six times a year or eight times a year or even ten times a year. The practice has shrunk quite a bit. But it did not affect me in any way because money is not that important at this age. But my practice has been shrinking. It's enough for me, whatever time I allow to practice.

I see a lot of sadness because of COVID. I see a lot of frustration on the part of the patients who are losing their job and feeling helpless, getting sick, and also using a mask. Using a]mask is very frustrating. A lot of my colleagues have died. A lot of doctors and nurses have died, you know that, from COVID. A lot of doctor friends have died. It's a shock but a shock that you have to accept.

MM: When patients go into your office, what type of questions do you ask to get to know them as a whole, to know if they need hypnotherapy or if they just need a dietary change or if they just need to read your book? What guides you in coming to a conclusion for your patient?

PS: Thank you, Maria. Very good question. When people come to me, the first consultation is always free. People have the choice to make. Most patients make the choice of seeing me as a medical doctor, allopathic medicine or conventional medicine, because for all other therapy, they have to pay. Insurance doesn't pay for it. The patient who cannot afford, they choose regular medicine or allopathy. But people who can afford and are intelligent enough to understand that conventional medicine can go so far, they choose the complementary medicine. For that, they have to pay. Insurance does not pay--we cannot bill for the services. Did I answer the question?

MM: My question was more about what questions you ask almost immediately. When they say they want to be happy, but there's something about them that they can't, or they just don't know what to do. They've tried everything. What do you say then?

PS: I tell them that, "You have so many problems." We have a brochure. I'll give them the brochure. "Listen, you have these choices. But these are the choices. You can do hypnotherapy. You can do homeopathy. You can do fasting or nutrition. Your choice." But, again, I tell them that, "You have to pay. Your insurance is not going to cover." So, the choice is in the patients' hands. It is their decision.

MM: What is your most common practice? Do they usually go with hypnotherapy? Do they usually go with fasting? What do they usually go for?

PS: What I see in hypnotherapy, most people who come for hypnotherapy, there are three types of patients. Number one is the stop-smoking patient. For that, people are very happy to pay the money, even if they are not well off, because smoking costs a lot of money. Most people who are smoking have spent more than a hundred thousand to 250,000 [dollars] in their lives in smoking. I make them stop for 550 dollars. I make them stop in one hour, whether you're

smoking for five years or fifty years. In one hour, they stop. That's a promise. That's a guarantee. The second type of patient who comes to me, they're usually well off. They have some issue with their life, issue with their happiness, marital issue--that's different. These are the people who can pay without problems. Anything else?

SI: You talked earlier about how the Arya Samaj that you established has been growing. Has that continued through recent years, the last ten years?

PS: I'm sorry. Can you repeat your question?

SI: Well, I'm just curious because, in general, people have been less likely to go to houses of worship or follow traditional religions. I was wondering if the growth had continued over the last ten to fifteen years, growth in the congregation.

PS: Actually, for the last ten to fifteen years, the growth has gone down, not up. One of the reasons is, see, there's a lot of politics getting into this congregation. I have stopped going. My wife still goes from time to time, but I have stopped going. Now, it's not growing for the last ten years. That's correct.

SI: I'm always curious because folks who come to this country, in some cases, make decisions about what they want to share with their children and grandchildren about their home culture and religion. What did you think was very important to pass on to your children?

PS: Well, my children, I want to pass on to them Arya Samaj principles. Whenever we get together, we do a prayer based upon those principles. Actually, my son was here last weekend. Whenever they get together for any event, or even if we go to see my children, we do some prayer and I give a little discourse, small discourse, because the children are too small, seven years and five years and two years. They don't have that much attention span, but I give a discourse for two minutes, three minutes, something that sticks to the head.

SI: Have any other members of your family come to the United States, or have they remained in India?

PS: No, actually, a lot of people are here. My two sisters have died. One sister is here. My three brothers are here. My one brother came and left. But he was here. He left for a reason, because my eldest brother--one of the elder brothers--is very sick. So, my younger brother went to stay with him to make sure that he gets everything that he needs.

SI: Is there anything that you would like to share with us that we have not discussed or any aspect of your life that we have missed?

PS: I will say only one thing; in life, everybody needs to make a mission of being happy. Life is full of challenges and difficulties, and once you're happy, your energy level is very high. You can deal a little bit more effectively, more comfortably. I have a slogan. I say, "Enjoy life in happiness and Happiness in life."

SI: That's a good philosophy. Maria, do you have any other questions or things you want to ask?

MM: I was curious from the beginning about your book and how you went towards the route of happiness. I know that you mentioned in your childhood that you would see people suffering and you would automatically want them to be happy. My question was, why the topic of happiness? I know a lot of people want to be happy, but we never really do much to get towards it. But you became a happiness coach. How did you establish yourself as a happiness coach?

PS: Maria, what happened--I come from a very happy family. Happiness is rooted in my DNA. When I see anybody sad, it bothers me. I want to give them the message, "This is not the way to live." What makes people unhappy? I'm trying to see how I can help people, from being unhappy to happy. So, this has been in my background all the time. Whenever I'm talking to somebody, when I'm reading some literature, I'm looking for a clue, a little clue. Then, I tried to put all those ideas in my book. Let me give you examples of those people who have made their lives happy even under the worst circumstances.

I'll tell you a story, a very interesting story. I have a lot of stories to tell; they're in the book. I'll give you a couple of stories, which are very interesting. A man came to me. He's my patient. He just died. He was ninety-two years old. He was a very nice man, and one time I asked him, "Mr. Z, you are such a nice man. Tell me, what did you do in life?" He said, "Dr. Singhal, I was a slave." When he said that, I got tears in my eyes. I could not say words for a few seconds. I put myself together. Then, I asked him, "What was your life like?" He says, "My life was to eat and work." But he said to me, "Listen, I made the best of it. I accepted it. This is the way it's going to be. There's no way out. When the liberation movement came, now I am free. I can do anything. I'm too old now, but I'm enjoying my life. I have no regrets because now I can do anything." So, you have to accept. What you cannot change, you have to accept.

I'll tell you another interesting story of a lady who was also a slave. She's not that old. I was surprised, actually. She's seventy years old, maybe seventy-five. She's a Black lady, and she came to me. I said, "What did you do?" This is my routine question, "What did you do in your life?" She said, "I was a slave." But she said to me, "Listen carefully. I'm a very happy woman. My owner," they're called the owner, "was a very nice man. He treated us like his children. He has no children of his own. He was filthy rich. When he died, he said, 'Divide all the estate that I have among yourselves.'" She said, "I'm a very rich lady, and I even took my name from my owner." Everybody took their name from their owner because they are proud of their owner. So, there's a lot of unheard stories in life. I don't want to go deeper into that.

SI: What is the most significant change that you have seen in America since you came here fifty years ago?

PS: I see. I think there's quite a big change. When it came here, people were more respectful, have more patience, and were less demanding. Now, it has been changing quite a bit. Not patients only, but people in general, have less patience. Also, I live in New Jersey. That is also an issue. Maybe if you're in the Midwest or somewhere else, that may be different. Here in New Jersey, they're more demanding. They have less respect. They see a doctor as a profession.

Before, a doctor was not just a doctor but a friend. Attitudes have changed. But also, with age, you learn to accept that very easily.

SI: I'm out of questions. Maria, is there anything else you would like to ask?

MM: No.

SI: Well, Dr. Singhal, is there anything else you would like to add for the record?

PS: No, that's good. It's very nice of you to give your time and share with me and ask questions, which hopefully will help some people.

SI: I think absolutely, yes.

PS: I will say in the end that the most important thing that you need to achieve in life is not money, education, or social status but how you can bring happiness in life. Happiness is the key element. Also, you cannot be happy either if you are not a good person. If there's something evil or malice in your mind, you cannot be happy. It also has a double benefit. Not only happiness gives you a positive life, a good life, but it also makes you a good person.

I have created a program on YouTube about how to bring all the happiness and joy in life that you can dream of with my new "7 Minute Magical Plan for Happiness." Please enjoy and benefit from it. There are seven short videos. [Editor's Note: Dr. Singhal's YouTube channel can be found at https://www.youtube.com/@absolutehappiness8206/videos]

SI: All right. Again, thank you very much, and we appreciate all your time today. I'm going to end the recording now.

----------END OF INTERVIEW----------

Reviewed by Molly A. Graham 12/16/2022
Reviewed by Kathryn Tracy Rizzi 12/22/2022
Reviewed by Pratap Singhal 2/23/2023
Reviewed by Patrick Mullen 3/6/2023
Reviewed by Pratap Singhal 3/27/2023