

## MORNING STORIES TRANSCRIPT

*Are You Sure You're From America? - Thirty years ago, Hitesh Hathi - part Indian, part African, all-American - began a lifelong search for a sense of home.*

### **Tony Kahn:**

Hi everybody! This is Tony Kahn, the producer and director of *Morning Stories*, from WGBH, in Boston. Hitesh Hathi, is of all the people I know, maybe the ultimate "outsider." He was born in Uganda, to a high-caste refugee family from India. Then when he was a teenager he was transplanted to a blue-collar community in Upstate New York. He went to Harvard and once again he is back in a working class neighborhood in what was formerly an Irish and Italian community, which is now rapidly becoming multinational, like so many neighborhoods. He has probably seen more sides of a changing America, day-to-day, than I ever will and and that I imagine, most Native Americans, ever will.

Every once in a while, we ask Hitesh if he could let us know how his life is changing. Today's report began actually two years ago, with an interview that we did with him, when he was not yet a family man and it concludes with a conversation we had just two days ago, when he showed up as the father of a sixteen-month-old boy. We call Hitesh's interim report, today's Morning Story: *Are You Sure You Come From America?*

### **Hitesh Hathi:**

[Classical Carnatic Indian music with a flute]

I remember very early on in America, this very beautiful girl, who was two years older, I was fifteen; she was seventeen, saying to me, "What kind of music do you like?" And I knew a lot was riding on the response. You must have a certain amount of disdain for say country music or bubblegum music; the mark of maturity was to have moved beyond The Jackson Five or The Osmonds. I mean, all through high school, I noticed that people were afraid in a way I'd never known, of being rejected, and it was the most separating thing. The idea that you were meant to have an opinion about everything. [Laughs]

On my first long trip, after being in America, being with some cousins, who thought I was the coolest thing because I was from America, and they were playing this music for me; I think it was *Dire Straits*, I'd never heard of it. And finally one of them said to me in exasperation, "Are you sure you're from America?" [laughs]

[Classical Carnatic Indian Music continues]

That's when I knew that the world I had grown up in was a world in passing. The India that lived within me wasn't quite alive in the same way, for them. It lived in the older branches of my family but certainly not in the same way in the young.

Of course all of us feel that the world of our childhood is gone forever, secretly locked up in us. That's part of the story of the Garden of Eden, I suppose, and in many other cultures. I think now, as I'm older and I'm meeting people from everywhere around, we have Buddhists from Laos and Muslims from Yemen, you know, in our community here in Boston. I think it's some real desire to connect, and even a form of kindness, some way of letting me know that whatever I might be, is acceptable here in multicultural Boston or Cambridge. But, most of you is silent. [music continues] No matter how kind and solicitous people are, your world is just a silent presence within you; there's almost no reaching out from it. You know when you've come from another place, a completely different life and history, how do you even talk to people about it?

In the last year and a half my wife and I, this interracial couple, we had a child, who is now sixteen months old. Neighbors who clearly were not very happy, [laughs] that we were there in the neighborhood, and hadn't spoken to us in four, five years, really, had barely nodded to us, all of a sudden were stopping their car when they saw me outside and saying, "How's the baby? How's the mother?" You know, "What does he weigh?" and, and it's been like that since then. So, it was a, it was a passport, I guess, of membership on my street.

[Sounds of children playing in a playground]

And I remember, we live right next to the schoolyard to which most of the people in the neighborhood have gone for two generations, or three. And you know, this schoolyard is now a kind of difficult place, too. Lots of swearing, lots of kids fighting. Some of the kids in the schoolyard had always been somewhat "iffy" about me and my wife. I was a foreigner and they were often unpleasant, lots of things shouted at us, my wife called a "yuppie," and that was among the nicer things. Myself, sort of called everything, people leaving messages about you know, oh, "Do you eat pork?" - a lot of these messages.

And then I talked to one of the mothers of these teenagers and she said, "You know" (I don't want to say the kid's name but -) "You know Dan," (let's call him Dan) "Dan looks at you and the other day he asked me, he said," "Mom, is that, is he one of the guys I might have to fight, if I have to go over to Afghanistan and Iraq?" Here's this sixteen-year-old boy, Irish-Catholic background, sweet guy, facing a different world, a world in which I represent the end of his childhood, in this small Catholic, working class Irish and Italian world that he knew, by bringing myself and my wife there. I also represent, dangers in the world. As if human beings can be so neatly categorized.

I think about, oh, my child. You notice in that schoolyard that the kids all more or less speak in the same accent, use the same words and wear the same clothes. The schoolyard is making them into one thing and that thing is American. It just so happens that America is this remarkable place, where part of that one thing includes some profound difference, too. Which is that, you know, Fatima's mother more or less covers her entire body and wears a scarf on her head. But somehow, it seems to become

for Fatima just an expression of her Americanness, that her mother is different. Just as Danny O'Reagan's mother is different and wears lipstick, which Fatima's mother would never conceive of wearing. And yet somehow they are becoming American, these kids, and I suspect that my child, our child will be rather like them. That he will have parents who don't eat hot dogs and cook all these odd foods, and he probably, poor kid, will have been forced to learn three different words, in three different languages, for everything. But that will be an expression of his Americanness.

[Sitar music]

[Children reciting The Pledge of Allegiance]

"I pledge allegiance to the Flag of the United States of America, and to the Republic for which it stands, One Nation under God, indivisible, with liberty . . ."

[Classical Indian music interrupted with modern rock song, "Let's Go" which overpowers it, then fades]

**Tony Kahn:**

That was today's Morning Story, *Are You Sure You're From America?* from Hitesh Hathi. I'm here in the studio with Gary Mott.

**Gary Mott:**

How can you live in the Boston area and not eat hot dogs? [Gary and Tony laugh]  
Yeah, what, what a fascinating guy.

**Tony Kahn:**

I remember his telling me what he just couldn't get, and he mentions this is the piece, you know, this, this idea that you are your opinions in this country. That he grew up in a India, where everybody lived together. High caste, low caste, they were constantly walking through each other's lives, running to each other on the streets; they'd be in each other's houses in some ways. There's certain barriers that you had to respect because of the culture but at the same time, you grew up surrounded by people of every kind. And I think he misses that the most in America, that this so called "melting pot" of America, still likes to isolate people socioeconomically and that's, that's kind of surprising, to him.

**Gary Mott:**

And of course now, he's a father, which is -

**Tony Kahn:**

Yeah, yeah.

**Gary Mott:**

- no small change.

**Tony Kahn:**

When I hugged him hello he burped me. [Tony and Gary laugh] It was just a reflex. I knew that the guy needed a nap.

**Gary Mott:**

Ha, ha, ha...

**Tony Kahn:**

Last week we made a request to hear from people, where in the world they were taking us. It's been wonderful to get a sense of really what kind of relationship you have with the podcast. Gar, you've got some letters there, right?

**Gary Mott:**

Yes! Yes! We got a letter from Lloyd, who lives in the Baltimore area. "Each Saturday, I burn a CD with two tracks. The first track is *This American Life* and the second track is *Morning Stories*. I then pass it on to the ESOL (that's "English for Speakers of Other Languages") Department at the high school where I teach mathematics."

**Tony Kahn:**

Well, what an honor to be included cheek by jowl with "*This American Life*," which is a wonderful broadcast on *PRI* and which also tells the stories of people in somewhat longer form.

**Gary Mott:**

Lloyd has discovered a great solution for listeners of podcasts that don't have MP3 players, 'cause it's not...

**Tony Kahn:**

Put it on a CD?

**Gary Mott:**

You can put it on a CD.

**Tony Kahn:**

It really still is earthshaking to realize, that something that used to live just briefly on the wind, actually can -

**Gary Mott:**

In the ether.

**Tony Kahn:**

- in the ether - can land in solid form on the earth and be passed around like, like beads! [Tony and Gary laugh] Like currency, like an experience, it's great, to have it

affect, maybe to be used in the classroom, is interesting and it's also a theme.

We heard from a woman in Brazil, she says, "I'm a Brazilian lady whose been teaching English for many years, now." (She just listened to this *One Foot in Front of the Other*, story, Caleb Smith's story about walking every street in Manhattan) she "loved that," she said, "Just beautiful and what a great song." She says, "I love listening to *Morning Stories* and I wonder if I could use them as a teaching tool?" Well, we're actually gonna be speaking to her in a future podcast and catch up on the ways in which she actually is doing that right now, so, that, that was fascinating.

**Gary Mott:**

Also heard from Dean, in Rochester, New York, "I walk a lot. My iPod is always with me when I do and I frequently listen to you while walking in downtown Rochester, New York. Today I happened to be at the JCC, working out before heading off for a choral rehearsal."

**Tony Kahn:**

What's that, the Jewish Community Center?

**Gary Mott:**

Jewish Community Center. [Dean continues] "I think that I enjoy your short discussion, after each week's story, as much as I enjoy the story."

**Tony Kahn:**

Before we completely overstay our welcome with you, we, we can't leave without thanking our constant donor and supporter, Ipswitch, a leader in file transfer software, for all of the help they've given us in making this podcast a podcast! If you'd like to know more about them check out their website: <[ipswitch.com](http://ipswitch.com)> that's I-P-S-W-I-T-C-H. Check 'em out.

**Gary Mott:**

And once again our email address: <[morningstories@wgbh.org](mailto:morningstories@wgbh.org)> and feel free to surf on over to our website as well at: <[wgbh.org/morningstories](http://wgbh.org/morningstories)>

**Tony Kahn:**

Keep on letting us know how we fit into your lives and we'll keep on tryin' to make it a better fit. We'll see you next Friday. Take care.

[End of recording]

Transcribed by: Lynn Relyea