

Interview 39

This interview was conducted by The Middle East and Middle Eastern American Center (MEMEAC) of The Graduate Center, City University of New York (June 2002 – June 2003)

Gender of respondent: Female

Age: 28

Q. I'm going to go ahead and ask you a few questions about yourself first. Where were you born?

A. In India.

Q. Where did you grow up?

A. I emigrated to the U.S. when I was five. I grew up in the Bronx.

Q. And where were your parents born?

A. They were both born in India.

Q. So you would be second generation. And what do you consider your ethnic background to me?

A. Indian. I prefer to call myself Desi (South Asian).

Q. What is your religious affiliation?

A. My parents are Hindu, but I'm atheist.

Q. How old are you now, if you don't mind?

A. Twenty-eight.

Q. Are you a U.S. citizen or a permanent resident?

A. I'm a resident.

Q. Okay. And what is your highest level of education?

A. I have a BA, no, BS from college.

Q. What college did you obtain that from?

A. I went to Cornell University.

Q. What is your main occupation, if you can just describe your job title and briefly what it is that you do?

A. Okay. I'm the Director of a community organization called [name removed], and I'm also a community organizer there. So my job is to basically develop the organization. And our purpose is to work for immigrant rights with a focus on the south Asian community and with a focus on building a campaign to end the system of INS detentions.

Q. And for whom are you working? Is it your own or is it private?

A. It's a non-profit organization and I'm the Director so I ... we have a Board that I answer to, a board of directors.

Q. What is your marital status?

A. I'm single.

Q. Now I'm going to go ahead and ask you a few questions about how you experienced 9-11.

A. Okay.

Q. Where were you on that day around 9 a.m. and how did you hear of the attacks?

A. I was at home and I was sleeping. I had a call from my boyfriend who was watching the events on the TV and so I turned on the TV and I was on the phone with different people watching it live as it was happening.

Q. When you heard of the attacks, or when you were watching it on TV, what was your first reaction?

A. The first thing we saw was just one of the planes had hit so we all ... I ... I was thinking that it was just an accident. And then when the second plane hit, it was pretty clear that this was, like, orchestrated; that it was planned. I was, I was ... my first reaction was one of, like, just ... I guess like shock but also fear for the people who were in there that they would get out, but also just, like, amazement because this is not the kind of thing that you see happening in America. It's the kind of thing that the rest of the world is really used to.

Q. Did the possibility of the attackers being Muslims come into your mind at all?

A. I think what I ... one of the first things I thought also, like, being somebody who is South Asian and who's been an organizer in the community for a lot of years around these issues is that I was, my first thought was, Oh no! They're immediately going to come after us because they're going to think it's us.

Q. Us meaning...

A. Meaning Muslims, Arabs, South Asians, you know, whom they all sort of ... all the people that America sort of categorizes together. And so I was just afraid that regardless of who it was that we would get targeted.

Q. So you did have that thought in your head.

A. Um-hum.

Q. What is your most vivid memory of September 11th, something that will always stand out in your head and you think you can never forget?

A. I think it's just the images over and over again, of the destruction of like, the fires and the, like, everything that was destroyed, and the people also, but the thought that this is what war looks like to so many other people and this is the first time I'm seeing...

Q. What were your feelings immediately afterwards? Did you feel pain, grief, sadness or any type of guilt?

A. I felt a lot of pain for the people who were in there because I had a feeling that it was going to be a lot of, like ... It was just so early in the morning and I knew a few people who worked in the restaurants over there. So I had a feeling there was going to be a lot of people who work in restaurants and do that kind of stuff so I felt a lot of pain for them and their families. And I also felt a sense of, like ... like I was saying, like, amazement that--you know ... Like honestly, I had a feeling of the ... the phrase of the chickens come home to roost. You know? That this is something that America's been doing around the world for so many years and now America's seeing it happen to them.

Q. Did you feel anyone look at you differently?

A. Um-hum. It took me a while to get out of the apartment because where I live there's not a lot of Desi people or Arab people, and so I was honestly worried about, like, my neighbors and what ... how they would look at me. And I remember I stepped outside later in the day and I definitely felt, like, a very cold vibe. And most people who say hi to me all the time, they wouldn't look at me.

Q. Really?

A. Yeah. And I felt it, like, the next few weeks, living there. And a lot of my friends that I called up who were also Desies, said the same thing, that they were just not even going outside that day.

Q. All right. Well, we'll come back to this issue again. But have your feelings changed since the events, like this feeling of pain and sadness for the people?

A. Not really. I still feel that pain and sadness but I think it's been added on by a lot of ... a lot more pain because in the past year, over three thousand people have been killed in Afghanistan as a retaliation. And I don't agree with that so I think it's just been more and more pain in the past year.

Q. When Americans asked you about your ethnic background before September 11th what did you tell them?

A. I think I'd usually say South Asian.

Q. And how about immediately afterwards?

A. The same thing.

Q. You say the same thing now also if anyone asks you?

A. Um-hum.

Q. Have your feelings towards the United States changed since 9-11? Like, has your level of political awareness changed in any way?

A. It's definitely heightened a lot, my awareness ... but I think for me I was always an activist and I was always critical of U.S. policy. I'm ... I call myself an anti-imperialist, which means that I was always organizing to raise awareness about what the U.S. does around the world. And so it was not ... it was nothing surprising. It didn't drastically change my politics. What it is, it was just confirmed, what I ... what I already believed. And then it really made it an immediate need to raise more awareness about U.S. foreign policy because I really believe that it was the result of U.S. foreign policy.

Q. Since you emigrated here when you were five years old, do you feel a sense of belonging in the United States? Do you feel at home here?

A. Um-hum, definitely. This is the only country that I've lived in, that I know ... all my friends and culturally and everything, this is what I know. This is...

Q. So you haven't gone back to India?

A. I've been back a few times but just to visit, so I can't ... I don't know how it would be to live somewhere else.

Q. Do you think that there has been a change in the way people from the Middle East and south Asia have been treated since 9-11?

A. Um-hum. Absolutely.

Q. In what sense? How?

A. I think the main thing, if you were to, like, sum it up, it's South Asians and Middle Easterners have now become historically how black people have been viewed in this country or other people of color, Native Americans, which is always kind of like as criminals or as the people you don't want to be like. And so I feel like we're the new class ... the new race of people being criminalized. And so I think, like, other people have gone through it before us. And even within our community, there's a lot of differences. You know? There's people who are, like, professional class who are a little more sheltered, and then there's people who are working class who are not as sheltered who have experienced harassment, for a long time. So I think in general, though, it's changed the political awareness of South Asians and Arabs and I really feel like it's made us see us ... ourselves more as people of color rather than as connected to white people.

Q. Have you personally experienced any backlash since 9-11?

A. Personally, like I've dealt with a few racial comments and also my family has.

Q. You personally, like what type of racial comments, if you don't mind.

A. Yeah. I think when I was in the post office one time I was just, like, dropping of mail and somebody from behind the line was, like, agitated and told me to go back to where I came from. Like, I think I've heard that kind of stuff growing up, but there was just a whole different...

Q. Right, after 9-11?

A. Yeah, a whole different feeling behind it. Besides that, I think more than individually because I do a lot of public work as, like, a community organizer and so in that work I've definitely faced backlash. So, for instance, we did a demonstration at Union Square Park in January with the families of people who were being detained, Pakistanis and Muslims who were being detained, and during that demonstration a group of people, like, came out and were harassing us and basically telling us to go home and we don't belong here, and we belong in jail and ... so we face a lot of that kind of stuff when we face demonstrations and when I speak in public. The other big, I think, form of, I guess, retaliation or harassment that I've faced is also politically back in last October my family who's in India, they were visited by local police over there with pictures of me--current pictures of me--and they were asked about my political activities here. So it was clearly, like ... you know I got assistance on it from lawyers and it was clearly because of the political work that I do here and of being pretty outspoken about what's been going on since September 11th. So that kind of surveillance of me and of the work that our organization does is something that we've dealt with for the last year a lot.

Q. You've mentioned your family members as well have gone through such a thing?

A. Um-hum.

Q. Would you like to briefly explain that?

A. Um-hum. My father, he has a beard and he looks very Middle Eastern, [he] looks very Arab, so he....

Q. Is he here or in India?

A. Yeah, he's here. He's in Queens. So he faced a lot of comments just on the street. He was living by himself at the time in the Bronx. And in the Bronx, there's not a lot of immigrant communities where he's from, so he faced a lot of comments, like on the trains and everywhere. And he actually cut off ... shaved off his beard 'cause he didn't want to look so Middle Eastern.

Q. Oh, okay. Do you think that the Middle Eastern and the South Asian organizations here in the U.S. have been effective in handling this backlash against our community?

A. I think that we've been incredibly organized and we've responded really well.

Q. Your organization in particular or overall?

A. I think in general, South Asian and Arab organizations. We work with, dozens of organizations around the country and in New York, and I think like, this has been the most level of political and community activity that I've ever seen in the South Asian community, since I've been in this country. So I think there's been a lot of strong and positive response that effects...

Q. Do you think that they have managed to organize and mobilize the community politically?

A. I think they have, but I'm a little wary or concerned about which direction our ... is our community being mobilized. Now, are we being mobilized to react and prove how American we are and prove our patriotism or are we being mobilized to be critical and assert our rights?

Q. Okay. You have your own organization, but ever since September 11th, have you joined any other organization or religious organization or any ethnic organization?

A. No. I haven't had time to do

Q. Just to do with your own.

A. Yeah. Exactly.

Q. Okay. In your opinion, what do you think is the nature of the relationship between your ethnic group and others in the United States at the time? Do you think that ever since 9-11 they have been more tolerant towards each other or they're more oppositional and strained?

A. Within the South Asian community, you mean?

Q. Yeah, within the South Asian community as well as, let's say the Muslims and the Jews or the Muslims and the Hindus.

A. I think that there's been a lot of solidarity building between south Asians, Arabs and other communities, particularly I think, other immigrant communities who've also been under attack. I think the relations between white citizen communities and South Asian and Arabs have definitely been strained because we've been facing immense amounts of, like, racial harassment really originating a lot from those communities. And I think that something that we work on a lot is really building solidarity between the South Asian community and other communities of color so I think there has been a lot of closer

relationships between, say, us and the Latino community or the black community. But I think specifically with the African-American community it can be better. I think there's ... there's a lot of resentment and misunderstanding on both sides.

Q. Amongst the African-American and...

A. And the South Asian and Arab communities. But I think that we...

Q. Why do you say that?

A. I think that we've been mis-educated about each other. I think there's a lot of racism that our communities have against African-Americans. And then there's also a lot of anti-immigrant sentiments amongst African-Americans against us. And I think ... like, we really focus on building that relationship because we go through ... more and more we're going through similar experiences, whether it's racial profiling or imprisonment, unjust criminal justice policies, so it makes a lot of sense for us to build alliances and solidarity. So we're trying to do that. But I ... I also understand a legitimate resentment from African ... African-Americans who've been suffering under these policies for years. And a lot of that ... the sentiment from that community is well aware ... where were all of you when we needed your support, and that's ... it's real. Like, most of our community was not aware of these issues or taking a stand on it until it directly hit us so hard.

Q. In your opinion, what do you think that members of your community can do to improve the relationship amongst such group?

A. I think one is really start holding just things like community dialogues, community meetings where organizations or members from the African-American and South Asian or Arab community can come together and talk about our issues, our problems, how [we] might work together. I think that our community, especially a lot of the people who after

September 11th have gotten politically involved or have gotten involved with organizations, need to really reach out to African-American organizations and people and need to really respect that there are so many people in that community who've been working on these issues for many, many years and that we should really learn from that history and that we should work with those communities.

Q. So what has your organization done so far? What has [your organization] done to improve these relations?

A. We're part of a lot of different coalitions in New York City and nationally. In New York City the main coalition we're a part of is called Third World Within, and it's a coalition of grassroots people of color led organizations who are progressive and work on all sorts of different issues from prisons to women's issues to racial profiling to housing, welfare. So we've done a lot of solidarity events with like thirty other organizations who are part of that coalition on ... you know, last year we had two large events after September 11th. And then this year on September 11th we had a concert for peace and Justice that over a thousand people came to and it was held in Manhattan. And then we also had a press conference we held on September 4th of this year outside of City Hall where it was representatives from all of these different communities of color speaking to what September 11th has represented for us, how there's been an increased attack on minority and people of color communities and how our communities don't ... support the war on terrorism here and abroad by the U.S. government.

Q. Given your understanding of the South Asian and Middle Eastern immigrants here in the United States after 9-11, would you still encourage these groups to emigrate to the U.S.?

A. I think that ... I don't think that I can encourage or discourage people from doing that. I think people ... most of the folks we work with, who are immigrants emigrate here because they have to. They don't have a choice. A lot of them are fleeing, really bad economic situations back home where it's a matter of survival. So I think, like, those conditions aren't going to change New York anytime soon for our countries so people are kind of ... they're forced to come here. And this is one of the places that--you know-- it's relatively easier to get to, or that people have relatives in. So I think it ... it's ... it makes sense. I think that the U.S. should change its policies on immigration, if anything.

Q. Like, get more strict or...

A. No. Well, one is ... I mean, I believe in open borders and so does our organization. we believe that the U.S. immigration policies have a history of exploiting immigrants, and particularly immigrants for their labor that they bring here and that U.S. businesses and government that profits off of millions of people who come to this country. But that instead, the people are criminalized--I mean, the people are put into detention centers or made to work for like, two dollars an hour and not have access to basic rights such as health care and housing. So I think that it's immigration policies and ... and social policies in this country that needs to change towards immigrants.

Q. Okay. Since you're so involved in the community, after what you've experienced, would you still encourage people to come to the U.S.?

A. I mean, I don't think ... even before September 11th I wouldn't have told anyone that it's a land of opportunity. I would have said that it's a land of exploitation and that people who come here have to sacrifice a lot and are put in ... that there's a real classism and racism in this country that people have to face. But the reality is that they'll probably...

the dollars that they make will convert more to supporting their families and it'll be a better situation than what they're coming from. So I understand that.

Q. So far we've spoken a bit about the negative consequences of September 11th. Do you think that there have been any positive consequences that stemmed from those events?

A. I think the positive consequences have been that when any country and under any government when there's a period of repression that's so high and so visible it forces people to come together and build a movement for justice. And I think in the past year that social justice movements: the anti-war movement, had really picked up and become strong because the situation has been so bad and because it's been so obvious what this government is doing here and around the world.

Q. How do you feel towards the thought of more visibility of Arabs or more visibility of Muslims and improved understanding?

A. I ... you know, obviously there's been more visibility. ... As far as I see, it's negative.... The media has totally criminalized and demonized South Asians and Arabs and then it's been turned into law, through Congress, through the US Patriot Act, through the Homeland Security Act, the deportations, the racial profiling ... so I think the visibility has been negative. It's been a scapegoating of us as the culprits and keeping the focus away from the U.S. government and its policies, particularly its foreign policies. So ... it's sort of like the media and the government has been successful in putting the focus and the blame on Arabs and south Asians as this evil group of people and shifted the blame away from, well, what is the U.S. military and the U.S. military doing around the world? Why does the rest of the world hate ... hate the U.S. so much?

Q. Why do you think the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon happened? Do you think that the Arabs in the Middle East hate America?

A. I think that the majority of the rest of the world which is poor, poorer than the U.S., which is people of color, have a history of anger and pain because of the U.S. and its policies and its domination. And this is not something that started on September 11th. It's been going on for many years. I think that the ... most of the rest of the world has a legitimate demand for justice towards the U.S. that the U.S. has historically ... it's so arrogant, it's so powerful, it doesn't care. You know? Internally most U.S. citizens, Americans don't even know what its government does around the world. So I think that particularly with the Arab and Muslim world that there's even more of a legitimate reason for pain and anger. The U.S. concretely has been carrying on low wage warfare against Iraq ever since the end of the Gulf War. The economic sanctions have taken the lives of at least five hundred thousand Iraqi children directly as a result of the sanctions. You know? People in Iraq are dying on a daily basis and the U.S. government refuses to stop its policies that are killing those people. In Palestine, the bombs that are falling on Palestinians are all U.S. made bombs. The U.S. has been supporting Israeli occupation which even the UN has declared is illegal. The U.S. continues to support it even though the rest of the world is demanding justice for Palestinians. So Palestinians have a legitimate pain and anger against U.S. policies.

Q. What do you think that the United States can do to resolve this issue of terrorism which is directed against it?

A. Well, I think September 11th happened because ... as a direct result of U.S. foreign policies of exploitation and imperialism around the world, both in terms ... economically

what U.S. corporations are doing around the world exploiting third world labor, forcing Third world countries to-you know-get rid of its environmental protections, get rid of its social welfare programs and employ ... allow U.S. corporations to come in and employ people and treat them poorly, not pay them decent wages. And the countries can't do anything about it because then the U.S. will pull away its aid or will tell the IMF or the World Bank to take away the loans. And or poor countries, for third world countries, that's not an option. So third world countries are at the whim of U.S. policies. And then the second thing is, I think, militarily ... the U.S. military has its reaches all around the world and plays a critical role in inciting warfare all around the world. In fact, think it's pretty well known that the U.S. CIA is one of the main forces in the creation of the Taliban and the creation of fundamentalist movements around the world. If you dig back far enough the CIA was probably involved because the U.S. gains to profit from fundamentalist movements that don't allow democracy and more rights in other countries.

Q. So you pretty much think that foreign policy needs to be changed in order to resolve this issue?

A. Um-hum.

Q. Let's talk about the security. Do you think that if the security was tight enough the outcome could have been minimized or these attacks could have been stopped? 'Cause, as you know, all over the news they were saying that the people who hijacked the planes, the only thing they learned was how to take off. They didn't learn how to land. So they could have looked more deeply into that.

A. I think that the public in this county probably knows less than one percent of what its government actually does, especially intelligence agencies such as the CIA and FBI. So

much is kept out of the realm of public knowledge. It's not transparent at all. I think that there's a lot that's done that the public is never told about. There's a lot that this government knows that the public is not told about and there's a lot that's done in our name that we're not told about. I think it's ... I ... I think it's completely possible, and I actually personally believe that this government did have knowledge. I don't see how it could not have knowledge of something about to take place. And there is too much evidence that ... been collected that's not really talked about in the mainstream media, of how much information intelligence forces had in this government, not just within the U.S. but of the activities, whether it's the Taliban or Al-Qaeda, for years before September 11th. So I think that ... I just can't believe that ... that U.S. intelligence agencies, which are the most powerful that the world has ever seen, had no clue-- that this was about to take place.

Q. Going back to the security issue, do you feel more secure now? Have you traveled after September 11th?

A. Um-hum.

Q. Do you feel more secure now?

A. No, not at all, especially being somebody who gets targeted as a South Asian Muslim or Arab. I've traveled a number of times and I've been profiled at the airports. One time when I was in ... going to California a few months ago, I was actually followed by an armed federal agent who told me to come back. He interrogated me for a little while, asked me why I was traveling, and then they did they whole thing of asking me to take off my shoes and they actually ... they also patted me down, which is not legal. They did that twice. So that's ... that was clearly like, a racial profiling incident in the planes. So I

think that that racial profiling that's happening, picking out people based on their race and ... and names is not effective and it's clearly this ... the scary thing is that now people who before have believed that racial profiling is not ... it's not just, now are saying that it--you know--it might be appropriate. That's scary because racial profiling fundamentally it's called racial profiling 'cause it's based on racism and discrimination. So I don't think that that can ever bring security. I think that's just going to put a band aid on the problem. But the basic problem is that when a government's policies are so destructive to the rest of the world, the rest of the world is going to resist.

Q. Since you mentioned that you are an atheist, have you ever come across a situation where you had to explain yourself after September 11th, where you had to say: listen, I'm not a Muslim. Yeah, I'm from India but I don't practice Islam, because you can easily come across as Middle Easterner as well. So have you ever come across a situation like that?

A. Yeah. I've been asked to explain myself. It's more ... more in, like, an individual setting it's a public setting. So, I've traveled around the country and also in Canada doing speeches and talks at universities and different events, so I get asked a lot of questions like that publicly. And my response is never to deny that I'm a Muslim. You know? I would rather say that I'm Muslim, I am immigrant because I believe that we are ... we should all identify as that because the solution won't be for me to say: Hey, look. Don't attack me! I'm not Muslim. Get that person. That person's a Muslim. I think that that's absolutely not just. So I don't believe in defending myself. I don't believe in having to prove my innocence or ... I think that the people at fault is the ... the policies of this government and that government needs to explain itself.

Q. Are there any other points or issues that you feel you would like to comment on which we haven't mentioned in this interview? Any thoughts?

A. I think one important thing that ... that's really relevant for ... for Arab and South Asians communities is our ties to back home. You know? We have a life here whether we identify as American or not. But we also come from countries, in the third world that have a history with the U.S. particularly. So I know, a lot of times our communities which are ... tend to be more conservative here and less outspoken ... It happens out of fear. And I think there's been an incredible amount of fear in our communities is why people won't give these interview and talk for legitimate reasons. They're being attacked. They're being profiled. They're afraid of being deported. But at the same time that I ... I think there has been an incredible amount of resistance and political awareness in our community. We're just not in a position to speak out loud about it. And I think that understanding comes from the fact that we came from countries, whether it was fighting the British or fighting the U.S., has a history of understanding what ... what this country's policies have done to us.

Q. Well, thank you very much for your time and cooperation. This was a very interesting interview. Thank you.

A. You're welcome.