

Interview 55

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 – March 2003).

Gender of respondent: Female

Age: 29

Q. I'll start by asking you a few questions about yourself.

A. Okay.

Q. Where were you born?

A. India.

Q. And how old were you when you came here?

A. Eight months old.

Q. Oh, wow. And where did you grow up?

A. In Flushing, Queens.

Q. And where was your father born?

A. India.

Q. And your mother?

A. India.

Q. So you're second generation. What do you consider to be your ethnic background?

A. Indian.

Q. Your religious affiliation?

A. Hindu.

Q. And how old are you, if you don't mind?

A. Twenty-nine.

Q. Are you a citizen or ...

A. Yes, I'm a U.S. citizen.

Q. What is your highest level of education?

A. I have a Master's degree in social work.

Q. Where did you obtain your education?

A. I have my [removed] also in New York.

Q. And if you can briefly explain what it is that you do, your job title?

A. Currently I'm program Director at [name removed]. And what do I do?

Q. Yes.

A. I basically assist in the management of the organization, and that includes supervising all of our program coordinators, doing some of our fund-raising and a lot of our public relations and advocacy work.

Q. So this is a private company. Right?

A. A non-profit.

Q. What is your marital status?

A. I'm engaged to be married.

Q. Any children?

A. No.

Q. Now I'll start by asking you a few questions about how you experienced September 11th.

A. Um-hum.

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

A. I was actually at home, getting ready to leave for work. Usually I put on the news every morning to listen to the weather and what's going on and I first heard about it on New York 1. I first heard about the first plane that crashed into the World Trade Center. My roommate and I started a conversation about it. And shortly after that they started to announce that it was a terrorist attack so that's when we sort of were quick to decide, well, should we leave? Should we stay? And so there was a lot of sort of frantic decision-making. So ...

Q. What was your first reaction when you heard of the attacks?

A. I think at first I said ... I said to myself, well, that's a weird accident--you know? And whoever was flying that plane was probably going to get into a lot of trouble because you could tell right away that it was pretty severe. But initially you had no idea what the actual scope was. It just seemed like a plane crash.

Q. Right.

A. And unfortunately you hear about that often enough.

Q. So after, on the news when you found out that it was a terrorist attack, did the possibility of the terrorists being Muslims cross your mind?

A. No, not necessarily. I think it was a lot of just open ended questions even when they said terrorist attack, like, where, who, why? It wasn't like there was a quick conclusion that I jumped to.

Q. I see. So what do you think is your most vivid memory of September 11th, something you think will always stand out in your mind which you won't forget?

A. Well, later in the day ... what ended up happening was, believe it or not, we sort of continued as if--you know-- you're New Yorkers so you proceed as if nothing can sort of

stop you, so my roommate and I decided to delay the time we left for work but leave for work anyway and I was just about to leave my apartment building when she saw on the news that the first building collapsed and at that point it was like, all right, well, this is really significant. No one should go anywhere.

Q. Right.

A. We ended up staying at home--you know--with no telephone—nothing--for the rest of the day because we actually live--you know--not too close but not too far away from the site. And so feeling in certain ways cut off, but then also sort of like being glued to the TV. I guess my most vivid memory was the fact that it was very quiet. It was quiet between the people that were together and we just in a way outside felt very quiet. Later in the day when I did eventually go out, there were a lot of people around but I felt that there was a silence that I've never heard before--you know--in New York from New Yorkers. So that was something that definitely was kind of eerie.

Q. What were your feelings immediately afterwards? Did you feel pain, grief, sadness? How did you feel?

A. I think I got probably very defensive because, again, I-- you know--I consider myself a New Yorker before even any other sort of identity. And to know that--you know--someone, whoever it was-- at that point again it was kind of still up in the air--did this to effect New York in this way, I think it really brought up, like, some defensiveness and almost like--you know--sort of this--you know--as New Yorkers what is the ... what is the response?

Q. Have your feelings changed ever since the events: this feeling of defensiveness and ...

A. Changed? I mean, that's not the strongest feeling. There's a part of that that's still there, but that's not the strongest feeling. Initially, that was, like, the strongest. I think since then it's become a lot more complicated. You know? Fifteen months later a whole bunch of again--you know--accusations later, policy changes, the other side of September 11th, which is the aftermath that the South Asian community has been facing, has really complicated the set of feelings to be beyond sort of as a New Yorker I'm going to respond this way and it's been about, well, as a South Asian this is how I feel.

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

A. It depends. Again, that's a complicated question. You sort ... for me I think I always sort of always kind of analyzed, like, why people are asking. You know? Sometimes when people ask and I sort of get a sense of why they're asking--you know--I might say, like--you know--I'm from Queens, 'cause that is really where I'm from. But then the question of where were you really from? So I think ... you know, I certainly still tell people that--you know--I was born in India and that's ... I do affiliate myself with that--you know--with that country. And now it's more about--you know--South Asian identity 'cause I think that that's something that has become a bigger part of my life.

Q. So have your feelings toward the United States changed in any way after the events, such as your level of political awareness? Have you become more inclined towards, like, domestic or foreign policies or ...

A. I would say ... it's hard to avoid. Right? I mean, I feel like on the news now most or--or in the paper--in the media most of what you hear had to do with--you know--foreign policy and decisions that the United States is making. So in that sense, whether you like it

or not, you sort of become more aware. I think I would, like ... I was always aware on a certain level. You know? I think ... My personal belief is that the best way that you can, whether it's ... be a citizen or sort of live in a certain place is to think critically about the government in that country and not blanket patriotism for--you know--whatever place you identify with. So even in the past, before September 11th, it was like, well, is--you know--is the U.S. kind of making the right decision? Do I agree with these decisions or not, so that ... that has certainly been the case after.

Q. Do you still feel at home here in the United States?

A. I would say yes, but I understand that's because of certain privileges that I have. You know? Being that I'm a U.S. citizen, a recent citizen but a U.S. citizen, I know that at this point in time that has certain meanings attached to it. Now, if I was a Green Card holder or--you know--a temporary visa holder I think my answer to that question would be very different. So based upon my immigration status my answer would be yes. The fact that South Asians, obviously a group very generally that I identify with, are now being targeted in many different ways after the events of September 11th, I would say no because that is an experience that I think to this degree is new for this ... to this community, the community which I'm a part of, discrimination and prejudice always existed--you know--against people of color, but now the fact that it has been very specific--you know--specifically targeting the South Asian community-- of course that's very unsettling and makes you sort of question, well, do I feel at home here now as I did before.

Q. Before September 11th did you still feel at home?

A. I think to a ... probably to a greater degree. You know, with all of the policy changes you sort of are--you know--we're in a very precarious situation now where we don't know what's going to come next--you know?--especially now with--you know--INS registration you have to wonder, well--you know--now what are they--you know?--what are they going to ask us to do next to sort of make us feel like, okay, well, they're identifying us; targeting us.

Q. So do you believe that Middle Eastern and South Asian organizations have been effective in handling the backlash which is directed against our community or Middle Eastern communities?

A. I do feel like commu--community based organizations have come together more than ... than they did before September 11th. People are taking on different issues, you know that they didn't necessarily work on before. Again, community ... community organizing efforts have increased. So, yeah. I mean, I think--you know--we're doing a better job but I still think that--you know--there's probably more work that we could do together.

Q. Do you think that these organizations have been effective in mobilizing the community as a whole?

A. To a certain extent. To a certain extent, certain segments of the community. Still don't think that we've managed to really create this really truly strong sense of South Asian identity that cuts across--you know--class lines; that cuts across ... You know, geo--even within--obviously within the United States geographic lines ... You know? I think New York--you know--South Asian community has probably become stronger but--you know ...

Q. Have you experienced any discrimination or racial profiling after September 11th, maybe at your work place or in a public place or in schools?

A. Definitely not in the work place since we're a South Asian organization. You know? Fortunately for me there hasn't been anything ... no specific incident that I've experienced except for--you know--right after September 11th just feeling like--you know--people looking at you differently or ... or yourself. You're like, is it just me or is it ... has something changed? And that was definitely a new experience. But no blatant discrimination.

Q. Has any member of your family or your friends experienced anything?

A. Not family and friends, but--you know--a number of co-workers--you know--were ... it was mostly verbal discrimination. Some young people in our program certainly also have experienced-- you know-- yeah. You know, sometimes it's in the form of a joke-- you know--blah, blah, terrorists; Osama Bin Laddin, is he your father?--you know--stupid kind of comments like that. And then for others it ... it was pretty nasty comments that were either made on the subway or on the street or sort of because of the way you look, people sort of making connections between you and who they're accusing--you know-- of ... of actually carrying out these acts.

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

A. Absolutely.

Q. How so?

A. Well, I would think ... let's see? What is the best way to put it? My sort of analysis of it is that, especially for poor and working class South Asians, the ... the jobs and

professions that they tend to be in are very sort of public sort of professions-- right?--very visible. And the sense that I get is that--you know-- again, people are more fearful. You know? If ... if ... if we are out there 'cause we need to continue working, we're really putting ourselves out there and more likely to experience--you know-- harassment and sometimes physical attacks. So all sort of--you know-- different forms of discrimination and targeting--you know--people asking you more about where you're from, what is your religion. You know? Even people who didn't talk or think about immigration status before sort of that becoming a factor in the way they perceive people. So yeah, yeah.

Q. Have you joined any ethnic or religious organization after September 11th?

A. No. I mean, I've been working at this organization for a number of years so nothing in addition to this.

Q. In your opinion, what do you think is the nature of the relationship between your ethnic group and others in the United States, for example, between the Hindus and the Muslims or the Hindus and the Jews? Do you think that these relations are more strained and oppositional after September 11th or they're more harmonious and tolerant of each other?

A. In my experience, I don't think that the relationships have been strained. I haven't noticed that--you know--personally. My roommate is a Pakistani Muslim. You know? I can't say that our relationship has changed in a negative way after--you know--after the events of September 11th. I think where the problem lies is really between--you know--the South Asian community and other communities of color and—you know--white communities. That is where the strain has really occurred like never before. But within,

you know ... within the South Asian community, I'm not so sure, I'm not. ... Personally I'm not so sure how much has changed.

Q. So, among, let's say, the South Asian community and the Jews or other ethnic groups, how do you think the relationships are between them at this point?

A. Well, again, pretty much--you know--specifically in the United States and probably to a certain extent, all over the world the South Asian people are being accused of--you know--something that--you know--was a really big deal. So even if peoples' personal beliefs are not You know, if people ... even if people personally don't believe that--you know--all South Asians are to blame, I think the media has done a very good job to portray--you know--South Asians as the one--you know--or people who look South Asian; whatever that means-- as the ones who are responsible. So it's, like--you know--you can't get away from it.

Q. What do you think that members of your community can do to better these relationships?

A. Yeah. I mean, what we're really doing. Unfortunately, we have to take it upon ourselves to educate--you know--educate members of other communities as to--you know--what ... what the community is really about and really sort of ask people to think critically about whether--you know--everybody should be blamed for an act ... the acts of a few. And that's what we've been doing here at our organization to really try to--you know--sort of rebuild those relationships, or really try to--you know--rebuild or build for the first time those relationships between South Asian ... the South Asian community and other communities.

Q. So given your understanding of the status of the Middle Easterners and South Asians here in the United States at the time, would you still encourage these groups to emigrate to the United States after what's happened?

A. I don't even now if it's an option for them. You know? It's become so much more difficult--you know--I don't even know if it's an option for us to say yes, you should still come to this country because, I mean, now with INS registration, the deportations, the detentions ... I mean, they're asking people who are already here to leave. Now, whether it's really an option for people who are trying to come over to still come over ... and--you know--and even if, let's say, it is because whatever--they've made it through the different security measures that are now being put in place, I think--you know--you do need to be realistic with people about what ... what that means right now to be an immigrant from South Asia.

Q. Okay. So we've talked a bit about the negative consequences. Do you think there were any positive consequences that stemmed from these events?

A. No, I wouldn't say ... it would be a stretch for me to think of something positive. I think the only positive thing would be the point that I made before about community organizing efforts--you know?--people who are objecting to--you know--the backlash and objecting to--you know--the potential war for the war. The fact that people are--you know--are organizing more than ever before I would say, okay, well, you could try to look at that positively. But--you know--if there wasn't ...--you know--if it wasn't for these sort of things that were going on--you know--maybe we wouldn't--you know--wouldn't need that.

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

A. I don't know exactly why it happened--you know--whether it was some. ... You know, obviously it was a very sort of political-- building up of political tensions. Whether it was--you know--sort of ... it's hard for me to say. But unfortunately, because a lot of people out there who are unhappy with the United States.

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

A. Yeah. I mean, I guess--you know--it sort of comes down to a basic, very fundamental sort of solution which is--you know-- trying to get an understanding of ... of other people or the sit--you know--issues and situations that are taking place in other parts of the world before making a decision without even having that understanding. You know? There's always a context that a ... that a situation is in and perhaps--you know--the U.S. and other countries as well, can do a better job to try to understand that before decisions are made about how to ... how to get involved or not get involved.

Q. Have you traveled by plane, domestically or internationally, after September 11th?

A. Yes.

Q. How secure did you feel now than before?

A. I don't know. I mean, I haven't ... I certainly haven't let it get to me too much--you know--being that I have to travel. I do travel to India on a fairly regular basis. You know? It wasn't really an option for me to stop traveling. You know, I've obviously noticed the

increased security. Whether I felt more secure or insecure is not really something that I think about.

Q. So seeing the security measures now, do you think that if these security measures were applied before September 11th these attacks could have been prevented or the impact could have been less?

A. Not necessarily. Not necessarily. I mean, from what I ... from what I hear, value of the increased security measures we haven't really prevented much. We haven't found anyone that we--you know--were looking for. And--you know--I ... I don't think it's a bad idea--you know?--I mean, certain ones--you know--air ... if we're talking specifically about airline security--you know--because everything is called a security measure now. But the fact that--you know--it hasn't really yielded the results makes me question whether it's really necessary. You know? And obviously some of them are more extreme than others and you really have to question, like ... well, I mean--you know--again, specifically with INS--you know—registration, it is my belief that what they're trying to do is find--you know—“potential terrorists.” Now, whether that's actually going to happen--you know--is ... is, in my opinion, highly unlikely. So why is it that--you know--they're making people go through this process?

Q. Are there any other points or issues you would like to comment on which we haven't covered in the survey?

A. Well, I ... I guess a point--you know--to ... to really make--and this is really how ... a lot of how I've been experiencing September 11th and it's ... and it's aftermath, is--you know--what this means for young people in this country and ... and young immigrants--you know--South Asian immigrants who, again--you know ... who come here for a lot of

different reasons, but probably the one main reason is really--you know--seeking a better life. You know? However, you want to define that. And now the fact that--you know--that is really being brought into question, well, what is that ... what is that better life? What is it going to take now to get to that better life? It's a setback. It's a tremendous setback for the community, a community who--you know--might have already been struggling--certain segments of the community who might have already been struggling, this has really set people back so it's ... it's going to, like ... it's really about, like, what do we need to figure out? What do we need to do to continue to move forward, which is the sole purpose of ... that is really, I think, what--you know--I've been experiencing through sort of various aspects of my life.

Q. So what has your organization been doing to help out the South Asian community, if you can just briefly explain?

A. Really, any number of things, but a lot of them have been focused on--you know--helping young people to really regain their sense of--you know--identity--right? Which is again being questioned now, so that confidence, that self esteem that any adolescent already questions, now this has added another layer--to really work with them, either individually or in groups, on sort of maintaining that. And then the second piece is--you know--to work with other communities on building those relationships between communities--you know? So we've sort of taken that two pronged approach: working within the community and then working outside of the community.

Q. Okay. Well, thank you very much for your time and cooperation.

A. You're welcome. You're welcome.