

Interview 49

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: Male

Age: 18

Q. Okay. I'd like to start by asking you a few questions about yourself.

A. Go ahead.

Q. Where were you born?

A. I was born in Bangladesh.

Q. Where did you grow up?

A. I grew up in both places. I grew up in half and half a little. I still remember. I mean, it feels like I had ... I had two lives.

Q. Oh, okay. So you mean half in America and half in Bangladesh. In New York State particularly?

A. Yeah it was.

Q. How old were you when you came to live in the United States?

A. Something like seven ... Oh, I don't know. But it still feels like, you know...home.

Q Yeah. Well, I was six years old so I know how you feel. Where was your father born?

A. My father was born in Bangladesh also.

Q. And your mother?

A. The same place.

Q. What do you consider to be your ethnic background?

A. Just plain Muslim.

Q. That would be your religious affiliation. But your ethnic background?

A. I know, but I don't ... I don't believe in nationalism.

Q. Oh, okay. So you don't believe you're Benghali-American? You don't believe in that?

A. No.

Q. Okay. And how old are you now?

A. Eighteen.

Q. Are you a U.S. citizen or a Green Card holder?

A. A U.S. citizen.

Q. And what is your highest level of education right now?

A. I'm a senior in high school.

Q. And your occupation, are you just a student or you do something on the side?

A. I'm a student. I do an internship here and I also got another job. And that's all I do.

Q. Okay. And for whom are you working apart from this? Is it a private organization?

A. Oh no. It's just, I have like a regular job.

Q. Okay. And your marital status?

A. Not yet.

Q. Not married. And no children?

A. No.

Q. Okay. Now I'll ask you a few questions about September 11th and how you experienced that day. Where were you on that day around 9 a.m. and how did you hear of the attacks?

A. I was in school and my teacher came in crying. And she kept on crying and we were, like, why is she crying? So after a while she finally broke out and she was saying that a plane crashed this hotel. And we were, like, huh? I mean, we didn't ... we didn't, like, believe her, I mean, until, like,

ten minutes later when we actually saw the windows. Like, Oh! And a few students started crying, but she was mainly the one that was making noise.

Q. What was your first reaction when you heard of this attack?

A. I actually didn't believe it at first. I didn't ... I mean, I really didn't believe her. It was ... it was just all ... all of a total sudden that all, you know, this big, that big attack happened. And rumors spread so much that, you know, planes are everywhere and they're going to crash, and that crashed, and that. And just word gets around. So you're, like, it's a lie. It's a lie. So ...

Q. Okay. So eventually when you did believe that, okay, this is true, did the possibility of the attackers or the terrorists being Muslims pop into your mind?

A. Oh, of course. I knew they're Muslim.

Q. Oh yeah? Okay.

A. Yes.

Q. So what do you believe is your most vivid memory of September 11th, something that you think you'll never forget which will always stand out in your mind?

A. How the reaction was in the Muslim community. I knew a few people who threw out the Koran way in the garbage and a few people who shaved their beards right away. I knew a couple of friends who shaved their beards right away as well. And just how the reaction of the Muslim community was. A lot of people, they were like, "Oh ... Oh, you know what could happen," 'cause you had ... you had two sides, the one side that said that, "Oh, this is wrong," and implied that the Muslims are doing bad stuff and all that, while you had another side that's saying, like, "Oh, you know, America deserved this," you know, "for all the crimes that they did," and stuff like that. And in between, you had these two sides. Like, I know one of my friends, his ... his, like, two aunts supported the attack and while the rest of the family didn't and they ... they had constant arguments

and stuff like that. And in the Muslim community, like, all ... all the groups and everything like that, all the groups split up as well. For example, I don't want to go into this actually, just ... It just like, several groups split up into separate things and they just kind of attacked each other.

Q. Right. So that would be after September 11th, but anything in particular on that day, which will always stand out in your mind, something you saw, something you felt, something you heard?

A. Just all the attacks on Muslims. For example, these two sisters in Flushing, they got jumped by white guys. And my friend knew them really closely. Just that's ... that's the first thing I heard ... that's the first thing I heard when I came back. So he called me and cried "Oh, these sisters got attacked and they're in the hospital." So it's just ... I was like upset. And I knew a couple of friends in Philadelphia and one friend in Michigan, and they were ... they were on line and they were telling how sisters over there were getting harassed as well. So I was just hearing things ... these things so it's just, like, freaked out.

Q. Did those sisters wear the hijab?

A. Yeah. Yeah, they had ... they had the hijab on. And just so that just kind of hit me, that reaction, and it's just, like, first things ... the first time I ever had it, like, you know, this is going to be something serious.

Q. Wow. So what were your feelings immediately after the attacks? Did you feel pain, sadness, sorrow?

A. Of course. I felt ... I thought at least 'cause I knew that I would know some people who were ... who were ... who were killed there, or I would know some people who were killed in there. And I also felt that, you know, that this is going to change a little of the way I live now 'cause it won't be, like, normal. But it just mostly depression and stuff like that.

Q. Did you feel any guilt since you knew that the attackers who were involved in this were Muslims and since you yourself are a Muslim?

A. Well, of course, yeah. I mean, you do have a little guilt that ... that they ... that their opinions on ... on some ... some aspects of Islam are a little different. But it is up to the rest of the Muslim community to, like, to explain it or change their views. Of course, it ... it is difficult.

Q. Have your feelings changed since the events?

A. Well, it did ... it did change to anger because of the reaction of America towards the rest of the world and what's going on, and stuff like that. Of course, it ... it did change to anger. But it still didn't go through, like, yeah, you know, yeah. I'm angry they did that. It didn't go to that 'cause no one deserves what happened.

Q. Right. Absolutely.

A. But the reaction was ... was totally and just...

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

A. I told them I was Muslim.

Q. And immediately afterwards?

A. Muslim still.

Q. Okay. Have your feelings towards the United States changed?

A. Oh, of course.

Q. How so?

A. Because before this, like, you just had some groups that said ... that said a lot of things but it didn't show, because most of the things America did, they weren't, you know, bitter or anything like that. You could always, like, see what they were doing. But right after September 11th it just

changed into, like, you know, you must learn about what they're doing and why these people are doing it. So after that I was, like, constantly ... I knew ... I knew a couple of people who, like, started reading books and getting a lot of books to read also. And reading all these things just made me realize, you know, that America is what they say.

Q. So has your level of political awareness changed in any way?

A. Definitely. Yeah. It made me become more ... more ... more, like, political, like, learn about countries. Like, for example, I never knew about Afghanistan. Now, with the attacks, I'm going to start reading about it, something like that.

Q. I see. So are you more involved with the foreign policies, domestic policies and such?

A. Definitely.

Q. Okay. Do you feel a sense of belonging to the United States? Do you feel at home here?

A. Not at all. No, not at all, especially with these ... all these, you know, detainees and everything, and all these people that have to register, especially ... it ... it just shows that you don't belong in this country when you have to register. Of course.

Q. Did you feel like this before September 11th?

A. Before September 11th I just felt like it was ... America was made of immigrants and stuff like that. But when I realized that it's not... sometimes...

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 September 11th?

A. Yeah, of course. All the videos that I have seen that social activists that have been made and, like, all these attacks and stuff... And especially when you see in Jackson Heights, for example, all these people that are just acting different from ... from they are it is ... it is being an issue.

Q. Okay. Have you personally experienced any backlash, racial profiling or discrimination?

A. Yeah, I have. I'm in ... I'm in a religious group myself so they're just giving out ... we, like, give out, you know, fliers and stuff like that relating to, like current ... like, current issues. I remember, like, a week after September 11th I was giving out a thing about U.S. terrorism in Afghanistan. So that's not a really good thing to have, you know, especially in Astoria where the majority of people are white. So I had these, like, posters. My ... my friend had a poster and some white guys came and took it and they, you know, ripped it up and stuff like that. They were cursing Arabs and spit on us. And the cops came and the cops took their side, of course, so they're, like, you know, "You guys can't do this," and stuff like that, "You guys got to get the hell out of here." So I was like: "Okay... ." You know, because you say whatever you want but we have proofs of all you're saying. These guys just came in and started just doing all this stuff so, whatever.

Q. Was any action taken after that or you guys just had to leave?

A. We just had to leave. We couldn't do anything about that.

Q. Has any of your close friends or families experienced discrimination or racial profiling?

A. My Dad. He went to court because of a ticket and he was going to argue against it. So ... but when the judge saw that his name was Mohammad he was, like, "You have to pay for it and just pay for it right now." So he came home, I ... I remember, all depressed. He was, like, "This and this happened to me," so he was, like, you know, we ... we can't live in America no more. It was just like, because my name is Mohammad, you know, the judge ... just because my name is Mohammad he just said that, you know: No argument. He has to pay.

Q. What made your father think that, because of his name, the judge made this decision?

A. It was because, you know, my Dad was saying that, you know 'cause he just looked at my name. He didn't even look at me and he just changed it.

Q. Do you think that the Middle Eastern and South Asian organizations here in the United States have been effective in handling this backlash and effective in mobilizing the community?

A. Yeah. Some ... some organizations ... for example, DRUM is doing really good and SAYA, South Asian Youth Action, they're just working with the teenagers and stuff like that. I had a few friends who were ... who were near the building 'cause they go to high school, study Economics and they were really ... they were really, like, 'cause all they had in their mind was that. So they had nowhere to go to. But SAYA put up these programs, like, anyone affected by this can just come and talk to us and they just really worked out. So they got the dudes together and stuff like that to work against it and they have videos against it and stuff like that, so that was really cool.

Q. Have you joined any ethnic or religious organizations since September 11th?

A. Yeah. I joined ... I joined, like, two and plus I got more ... more involved in SAYA.

Q. Oh, okay. In what capacity have you gotten involved?

A. Hum?

Q. In what capacity have you gotten involved with the organizations?

A. Yeah. Yeah, actually...I am active in SAYA, like, I'm ... I'm supposed to take two programs in the summer as well so ... so I'm really, really starting to get really involved in it.

Q. What do you think is the nature of the relationship between Muslims and Hindus or Muslims and Jews at this time, after September 11th? Do you think that their relationship is more strained or that they've become more tolerant and harmonious since September 11th?

A. Well, of ... of course ... of course, they're sped up. I know this ... I know this one group that formed during September 11th called Indiginous Unity so ... and what they all talk about is just bashing Muslims and bashing Muslims, and stuff like that. So they just ... Well, I'm not going to

say that, you know, you know, the religion, you know, is just putting up against the...It's just that more and more events ... for example, what happened in Gusharod, you know? And then Kashmir and Israel, what they're doing, it just ... it just kind of shows that, yeah, it is spreading out. So it's pretty much self ... self ... self...

Q. What do you think that members of your community can do to improve these relations with other groups?

A. Just come to ... come to an agreement on some things, for example, just, like, talk about some stuff that, yeah, you know, don't let these differences among us... Just like ... just, like, say that, "Oh, you know, we're with America now," or, like, "we're not with America now," 'cause like ... like the decision is not based on America. It's not whether you agree with America or not. It's just, you know, you have your rel--religious differences and everything like that, but you can still hold it up. Like, you know, it's still in our books ... in Islam it says also that, you know, we must come to an agreement. We must come to, you know, common terms.

Q. Right.

A. And, you know, in ... in Hinduism also I ...I read one book about it, it says that, you know, you must come ... it's, like, come to common terms as well. So, you know, don't let your judgment be on America. Just forget ... forget about America on this thing. If it's religious, see it as religious. Don't bring America into anything.

Q. Right. Okay. Given your understanding of the South Asian and Middle Eastern groups in the United States at this time, would you encourage these groups to emigrate to the United States after September 11th?

A. I would say yeah, because ... because at ... at this time, you know, more if more, like, of the masses of, like, Middle Easterners were here... there is a change in our... It would ... they wouldn't

be a minority. Then we would be, like, a little more so it wouldn't really affect us as much as if we were a minority. And I would still say yes.

Q. Okay. We've spoken about the negative consequences of 9/11 do you think there were any positive consequences that stemmed from September 11th?

A. Well, it ... it got very religiously aware. A lot of Muslims became better Muslims or a lot of Muslims became non- Muslims. I know a lot of people, because of September 11th, they converted and so it had ... it had some positive things. It had some positive things. For example, it did bring a lot of communities together. For example, you see, like, for example, when they had the lighting of the candles and stuff like that. It brought a lot of people together.

Q. I see.

A. It brought the New York communities together.

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

A. There are some groups that, for example, because of Israel or because of ... some of the groups, they have this strong hatred for it. And so if you get the right investment for it, of course they're going to find out something. But I'm not going to say who did it or, you know, what I believe who did it and things like that.

Q. Right. Okay. What do you think that the U.S. can do to resolve this issue of terrorism which is directed against it?

A. Just ... stop support Israel for what they're doing. Stop ... stop going into other countries and telling them what to do. Stop giving the resources for no reason or just ... just ... just leave people alone.

Q. Do you think that these attacks could have been prevented if the security measures which are being applied right now were applied prior to September 11th? Have you traveled after September 11th by plane?

A. No I haven't.

Q. But you've heard about the security measures? Do you think that these attacks could have been prevented or the impact could have been less?

A. No. I think it still would have been the same 'cause the Pentagon is the most secured place against terrorists. So I don't think just more and more cameras and more planes over there would have done any differently.

Q. Okay. Are there any other issues or points you'd like to comment on which we haven't covered in this survey.

A. Not really.

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