

Interview 58

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: Male

Age: 58

Q. First, I would like to start by asking you a few questions about yourself. Where were you born?

A. I was born in Lahore.

Q. And where did you grow up?

A. Delhi. New Delhi.

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

A. Twenty-four.

Q. Where were your parents born?

A. In Lahore.

Q. So you would be first generation. What do you consider your ethnic background to be?

A. Asian-Hindu.

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

A. Fifty-eight.

Q. Okay. And are you a U.S. citizen or a Green Card holder?

A. A U.S. citizen.

Q. And what is your highest level of ... And where did you receive your education?

A. Delhi University.

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

A. I'm in real estate, developer and owner, and I'm the owner of my organization.

Q. What is your marital status?

A. I'm married.

Q. Any children?

A. Two.

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

A. I was watching TV and the first thing that I heard there a small commuter plane or some small plane hit the World Trade Center. Of course, in fifteen minutes the whole world knew it was not a commuter plane. It was a terrorist attack, a plane maneuvered by the terrorists and it was directed in one of the towers, the World Trade Center Towers.

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

A. Really disappointed and really sad because if you know the area, you can understand what kind of disaster and consequences this kind of silliness, this stupidity, will bring. Of course, while you're thinking and going through this the second plane hit the second tower. That was a very sad day or ... or very disappointing--very disheartening.

Q. Was there anything in your mind which led you to believe that the terrorists were Muslims before them showing it on the news?

A. No. It was not in mind it was Muslim, but common sense just dictates, just tell you who will it be, who they were. It was just a very, very stupid thing to do.

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

A. Oh, just ... just knowing the area. And I felt--and I thank God it didn't happen that way--that at least any given time, there's about forty, fifty thousand people in and around the surrounding area. And when I saw the Towers crumbling I really thought there would be fifteen, twenty thousand people who would die. So the ... made sure when the first estimates came about. And it's still sad, whether four thousand people die. The sadness is why ... these are people who came to work ... tours and ... loved ones just disappeared like that there's no ... there's no explanation.

Q. Afterwards, did you feel pain, sorrow, sadness, anger?

A. Everything, all these things.

Q. And have your feelings changed ever since the events?

A. No, because I think it has brought in more troubles in the peaceful world. It definitely was more peaceful than what it is now because you're fearful going through the tunnels, you're fearful of going over the bridge, and ... and ... and all kind of thoughts go in your mind when ... when you hear of fear. They can have all these poisonous gases or they can mix this thing in any of your water reservoirs and you can have thousands and thousands of people dying for what? And just ... just the whole thought process makes you really sad and it's very hurtful.

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

A. I'm a Hindu. I'm an Indian.

Q. How about immediately afterwards?

A. Absolutely the same thing. Nothing changed.

Q. And now the same thing?

A. Absolutely the same thing, nothing to hide. I've got nothing to shameful about. I always ... I always feel this is the greatest country in the world and I'm very thankful to the people and the nation that they gave me the opportunity to be here and do what I do for them. And as a matter of fact, if they ... if this nation asked me for something to help this nation, 'cause I feel I am part of this nation ... I feel more committed to this nation than before, if there's anything changed.

Q. Right. Has your level of political awareness changed in any way? Has there been an incline towards the international and domestic policy than prior to September 11th?

A. No. I always was like that. I've been like this from the eighth grade on so there's nothing changed that way.

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

A. It's been increasing over the years. I've been here thirty-three years and there's more time I've passed here than anywhere else, including my birth place or the country I belong to. And ... I have done for them, and it's my turn. If there's a call for my duty I'd be more than happy to do it.

Q. After September 11th?

A. Oh, I guess this is again a gen--again a generalization. We shouldn't just put all these Libyans or Muslim nations to be bad. But the thing is if you're bad it's very hard to just ... one dead person because these are civilian terrorists. If there's a military attack you at

least know who's your enemy because the class military people, you know that's your enemy. These enemies you don't even see and that's the sad part because that's why the generalization comes. I don't believe that every Muslim or every Libyan should be accused of being a bad guy and a terrorist, but I also believe the ones who are not terrorists should come out and prove themselves to be so and people would believe them. They will be believed because I think people of this nation give you an opportunity to explain yourself. And if they are not wrong, if they feel committed to this nation, or what is asked of them to prove themselves they are not the bad people, they should make ... put their best effort because I do believe in my heart this nation will give them a chance before they accuse them of anything. I think that after living here for so many years, there's so many stories that you do get a chance first before they shoot you. And I think if there's any guilt feeling it's only the people who feel guilty of themselves and they should make an effort to prove it other wise.

Q. Have you personally experienced any backlash, racial profiling or discrimination after September 11th at your work place, in a public area ...

A. It's all in my mind. And if there is one I'm more than happy to explain. But if it's there, it's there because ...

Q. Have you felt anything or ... if you can briefly explain it?

A. No. No.

Q. Has any one of your family members experienced any backlash?

A. I think this backlash is in peoples' mind also. And then, once again, bad is bad. And if you're not bad and you know you're not bad just explain yourself. It's a matter of how you want to take it. Just because you read in the newspaper or on television. ... If this would

have been real I'm sure there would have been a lot of people here just because you're non-white or you're suspected to be or you're assumed to be a bad guy. There are some instances that people will attribute because of this, but it's natural. This society has been attacked. Their ... their lives being threatened and their being ... being threatened, and I think there should be more efforts made by the people who are threatening that they're not the people they're suspected of--they're suspected of.

Q. Do you think that South Asian organizations have been effective in handling this backlash?

A. I think they're complaining more than ... than ... than trying to prove that they are suspected of being something they are not. They should make more efforts for this explanation, which will definitely help them because this nation does listen. And they're ... they're more complaining what if this and what if that. They should take on a positive attitude towards the situation and try to handle them so to make sure they will do better than what they talk about. They should stop talking but do something about it.

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

A. I didn't feel anything. I'm still the same way I used to be and so I don't feel guilty of anything. If I feel ... if I'll ever be attacked or questioned, I will be more than happy to explain that I'm not what I am suspected of.

Q. In your opinion, what do you think the nature of the relationship between your ethnic and religious group is amongst those other groups living in the United States at the moment?

A. Such as

Q. Such as, what do you think the relationship between the Hindus and the Muslims is here, or the Jews and the Muslims, or the Jews and the Hindus? Do you think that the relationship is more strained and oppositional or it's more harmonious and tolerant of each other after September 11th?

A. I think there is more negative than what it used to be. And there is the question you asked me earlier that ethnic people should be making a better effort to prove it otherwise. And if they do it I'm sure they will be successful in ... I think they should try to convince them, convince the people here before us that don't mistake them. They should make a better effort.

Q. Since you're saying that they should make a better effort, what do you think members of your community can do to improve these relationships?

A. Oh I ... you're talking about Indians, I don't think there's any problem with them. They're not being suspected. As a matter of fact, I just read that Indian Consulate had issued more visas than they issued past, previous years and the question was asked why. And the American Consulate feels that they don't feel threatened by them unless there's really glaring proof. And the statement from that Consulate General was they do not have any leniency towards Indians than anybody else. The rules are same. But in their own experienced history they ... they feel ... they don't feel otherwise and that's the proof that they're giving more visas. As a matter of fact, with all these noise about the students in colleges and they have to report more--at colleges they report more, since last year there are more Indian students in America than ever were, the number one country in the world. What he is saying: if you're not wrong, if you're not bad, if somebody suspects

you, explain. Answer them before you start hiding in fear because this society does give them a chance. There are 80,000 students, Indian students, in this country.

Q. So what do you think other community members can do to improve their relations ??

A. The same thing. Instead ... instead of criticizing them, give every effort this national security or home security they call it now, just get in front of them and ... and make them feel at ease; that if the students come here, they are students. If they suspect that the students come in the name of student and then do other things, help them, help them to find the ones who are not and it will be easier. 'Cause I always have believed the ethnic community will find the guilty faster than the FBI or the CIA. And this is where the generality comes in 'cause how do they go out and look for each person? So sometimes you have the innocent person suffering something too. That's true too. But if you ask me what I think we should do, they should get along ... get in with them, don't criticize them, and make them feel that you want to help them to find or the weed out the bad ones. And that definitely will help.

Q. So given your understanding of the status of the South Asians and the Middle Easterners in the United States at the time, would you still encourage these people to emigrate to the United States?

A. Absolutely.

Q. Why?

A. There's nothing wrong 'cause these people ... the ... the law is changing. They're only becoming strict 'cause there are problems. There are terrorist cells. It did happen. These people were here already. There's a ... there's a fear for all this ... fear for gas and

poisonous gases and all that. Again, you ask me: these ethnic communities should get together and go to these Home Security people: what can we do to help you? What do you want from us? I assure you, the results will be better than ... than ... than just criticizing them and start hiding. The ones who are hiding ... they are not still picking people 'cause you're Middle Eastern. It sounds like it ... the press may sound like it. They have not put every Middle Easterner or Pakistani in jail. So you still have time to prove it. And these ethnic communities should help the Home security. I'm absolutely sure it will be a better scenario than what you read or hear in the newspaper and on television. The television loves this stuff--you know--and they ... they today they'll read you, tomorrow they ... what ourselves allow it. When the common sense drives, get on this television, make speeches, let them know, and don't try to become Jesse Jackson. Don't tell me Al Sharpton because we know that. They can't put him in jail or they can't put him out of this country. But we are still the guest here and guests must behave like guests. And that's what they have to do. And I think I'm going to stop there.

Q. We have spoken about the negative consequences of September 11th. Do you believe that there were any positive consequences that stemmed from those events?

A. Oh, I think that it ... it made the Americans more aware that they are not safe and they should ... they were very lenient. I mean, every ethnic person should know and how many illegal ethnic community lives here, not because the Americans don't know what to do. They just didn't care. They feel they're human beings. Let them live. Now they're saying we have a law in the ... our land and you must abide by it. And I don't know what's wrong with it. Chances are if we help them, if we're really concerned about the people back home or any new migration here, it will help better because they'll understand us

better. Right now we're suspect and that's what happens when you're suspect. You have to prove that you are not the guilty party. It's ... differently. There is a fear in the community here and if something ever happens, I don't think that gas or an attack ... or the attack on the two Towers spared any ethnic people. Whoever was in it, killed. I'm sure if you asked these attackers and terrorists they didn't want to kill non-white people, non-Americans, but there were a lot of non-American who were killed, people of the ethnic background. That's what exactly is happening. When they see these people have problems a lot of generalization is done and once again, that's ... that's what is to me the organization--ethnic organizations should do: go to them, approach them, how ... that they can be some positive results or help them. Help them to weed out the bad in the society. And there's nothing wrong with that. That will help us, that will help them, and hopefully we will see ... and more peace in this world. You know?

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

A. To hate it is very stupid. If they really do that, it's very stupid and consequences won't be good.

Q. But in your opinion why do you think the attacks took place?

A. Ethnic ... I think just ... just religious ... religion people do all kinds of crazy things. They destroyed the prosperity of Iran, in my opinion. They threw away the shah. That's why. Since the religious people took over you can see the results. They are less progressive. I think they're in economic turmoil for the last fifteen years. And is a bunch of a few thousand people, let's say, or a few thousand maybe and they wanted to teach the

world a lesson. Hitler tried to convey his message. Look what happened after? Twenty-four million people died. These people ... I don't know where they're going to stop but it looks like they're going to create a lot of commotion and a lot of problems just like Hitler did. He was not right and neither are these people. And ... and it's just not going to happen. A few thousand, a few million people just cannot teach a lesson [to] two billion people. It's not the billion Muslims, who are also a big number, are in favor of what these people are doing so it's only a few thousand people and it's just bad and whatever they're doing is bad. That does not solve the problem because I think if ... militarily if they want to fight with the western world they won't win. I think they will win if they come and ... come and bitch enough, complain enough, just like I was talking earlier. In the UN they might have a better message come across: whatever their message is; whatever they want. But just because some crackpot wants to teach a lesson by doing this bombing and all this destruction it's only going to create more problems. But that's really sad. It's not right.

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

A. Very complex question. One thing I think they got to do, they've got to understand Islam a little better. I think there's a lot of ignorance ... ignorance prevails too in this society and the ones who don't understand, they behave just like the terrorists behave. So there should be something. And maybe Islam Society or ...--after all there are a billion three Muslims in this world.

Q. How would understanding Islam help them to resolve this issue?

A. Because it has come to a point they just feel ... just like these terrorists feel that America is bad which we all of us know how bad or how good it is. Same way as the

Muslim-American community ... are thinking Islam is bad. They're just against us. And the same thing: no communication. But if they understand ... but the problem with Islam, people they don't ... because they really do not follow what their religion says. They make their own rules; what one mullah says to other mullah and they make their own rules so that will their house cleaning. Who knows when will that happen? Well definitely will happen if they understand what shariah is; what ... you know?-- Islam ... Islam is all about. It's not the religion said to be bad, the people. Bad are bad. A Catholic could be bad, a Hindu could be bad ... a bad person is a bad person. But definitely it will help if they understand them more, if they ... if they get some more familiarization; if there are more television programs talking more about Islam because Islam is not bad. It's their belief. It's not the person what they ... the religion is. It's what you do is what counts. And you could be any great religion. But if you're deeds or acts are bad, you're a bad person. It doesn't matter what religion you are from. You know? And that might help. But I also believe that if ... whatever the good Islam people are, they must try to convince these people that we are ... we are a human being just like they are, just like the people here and that's what ... that's what needs to be done.

Q. Have you traveled after September 11th by plane?

A. A lot of times.

Q. Have you felt the change in the security measures?

A. Absolutely, too much. It's a pain in the neck.

Q. Do you believe, in your opinion, if these security measures were put in place before, that the outcome could have been lessened?

A. It could be, but this is just a guess. I don't know what the answer is 'cause ... 'cause if they have these poisonous gases ... what they did, they just took over the plane and banged it for ... every time they ... they were used to hijack ... there used to be some concern about the lives in the plane. These people passed everything. I mean, it's okay to kill yourself for some cause but they took six hundred lives just like that. It had never happened. So imagine or guess anything: what this ... what would if this; what would if that ... I mean, these people have made everybody's life miserable. You can't walk anywhere safe ... Just like you asked me about the airports. They take your shoes off. You can't be

Q. You've experienced that?

A. Of course. You can't ... I mean, not only that ... that's why you have to go there two hours early, not just me. I mean, line after line people ... they take their shoes off. They're definitely checking luggage more and more. And I've got to live with it because maybe that's an answer to discourage this terrorism but it's not ... it's not right. That's not how a society should live.

Q. Has it taken place only on domestic flights or international flights as well?

A. Both.

Q. Both?

A. Yeah.

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

A. The basis ... They should explain or discuss their complaints. Don't take the arm. It didn't help ever. It didn't help for almost thirty years. When the Russians and American,

or western world versus Russians, they spent billions of dollars on hardware, but if didn't do a damned thing. Since this curtain has fallen off the ... the curtain countries are free now, I think this is a better society. So before that all this suspicion business did nothing but took billions of dollars which could have been spent on education, for medical, for agriculture or many there development versus just producing one dangerous plane, another one, or one more bomb for bombed another one, plus to spend million of dollars to invent all those. Now there's some ... ounce of brain or some comments in scheming them, not they're working on how to destroy them. Isn't it stupid? They spent billions of dollars for this hardware, on these destructive weapons. So another intelligence prevails. Now they're working on how to destroy it and I hope. ... That is exactly my point earlier. If Islam or any other country or any other society, if they're real, if they're honest, they must prove their honesty. They must talk about it. They must communicate. They must tell the society here we are not all bad and stop pointing ... 'cause that's easy, pointing a finger and just saying you're doing this to us. So I'm concerned, if you don't like it, if you feel really they discriminate you, go back where you come from. If you feel you're happier there, go back. If you feel it's a better place to live here, well, abide by the law. Abide by the rules. And in my opinion, I am a 100% convinced that will bring more peace. That will at least bring some solution. With this billions of dollars being spent on this security business, once again, again sadness. This money is wasted just because a few thousand people created this commotion. And you don't feel secure. You definitely don't feel secure in an airplane. Anything ever happens, all this military activities all over the place. ... This Iraq problem now, if he's so honest why the hell he doesn't call the Russians and Germans and French and say: Forget about the UN. I'm asking you to send

five hundred, a thousand people of your own and go anywhere you want. This game going on, 400,000 soldiers sitting ready to go for attack is billions of dollars again going down the drain. How's that going to help? And this is again and again. The Russians are saying this, the French are saying this, Iraq say I don't have it, once again, it's a simple example. If he's innocent, they seem to have enough belief for ... Just like you asked me earlier what should ethnic communities should do? Go out with an open book. I don't have it. I don't do this. We are not the terrorists. We are not the bad people. I'm sure somebody will listen to us and that's the way I feel. Again, I think that's the answer, not just saying, well, you're mistreating me. You know what ... ethnic people must know what mistreatment is. This is where we come from. We know. Our own people mistreat us worse than what we're talking here. Just because the democracy and freedom allows to open our mouth, use that mouth to convince them that we are not terrorists. We are not bad people. That will be more helpful than anything else. That's the way I feel.

Q. Okay. Well, sir, thank you for your responses.

A. Thank you.