

Interview 16

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: 32

Q. Thank you for participating in my project. This is called the September 11th Digital Archives, and I'm going to be asking you some questions about yourself and about how you experienced September 11th and if you've had any backlash. There are no right or wrong answers. And if there is anything that you do not want to answer, feel free to tell me at any time. Okay? So first, where were you born?

A. Madras, India.

Q. Okay. And where did you grow up?

A. All over India, Delhi, Bombay, Lucknow, Kanpur, Calcutta, Madras. And I'm still growing so I don't know about growing up.

Q. When did you come to live in the United States?

A. 1991.

Q. Where was your father born?

A. He was born in Bellary, India.

Q. And where was your Mom born?

A. Madras. She was a city girl and he was the... the country guy, -- country bumkins.

Q. So when people ask you about your ethnicity, what do you say?

A. I'm of Indian origin. But I ask them why... why they want to know, 'cause why is it important.

Q. What is your religious affiliation?

A. I was raised as a... as a Hindu, but I find organized religion doesn't really fit... any specific organized religion doesn't fit what I'm looking for in terms of a direct connection with God. And my beliefs are really more spiritual, based on kind of a combination of

Hindu philosophy and... and Buddhist and Islamic as well as Judeo-Christian thought. It's a combination.

Q. How old are you?

A. I can't answer that question. Sorry. I'm just kidding, thirty-two. (laughs) You were perfectly comfortable with, like, yeah, okay. No problem.

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

A. I'm a permanent resident. I have a green card.

Q. What is your highest level of education?

A. I have a Masters degree.

Q. From where?

A. The University of Texas in electrical engineering.

Q. What year?

A. 1993. Taking me down memory lane here: where did I grow up?

Q. What is your main occupation?

A. I'm a sales consultant with Microsoft.

Q. What exactly do you do?

A. I am a technologist as part of a sales team that helps manage customer relationships, close large revenue opportunities for business software.

Q. What is your marital status?

A. Single.

Q. Now I'd like to ask you a few questions about how you experienced September 11th. Where were you on that day around 9 a.m.?

A. I was in... in bed in San... in the Bay Area.

Q. In the Bay Area?

A. In the San Francisco Bay area. I was in bed in my house in the East Bay.

Q. How did you hear of the attacks?

A. Well, my sister called me and she actually lives... lives a block down from me, so she

came over and she told me to switch on my television. And she was just horrified at what was going on. She'd seen the first plane hit the World Trade Center, and so she was just horrified. And I don't have television. I mean, I have... I have... I have a TV but I don't watch television so I actually had to go over to her place to watch what was going on.

Q. What was your first reaction?

A. Surprise, shock. You know? I really couldn't believe it. I thought it was... it was some dreadful accident, really, is what I thought it was. Two... two different. I thought the airlines, had... had really screwed up their radar systems and perhaps the pilots had... there were two consecutive accidents, really, is what I thought it was.

Q. So how did you feel about the possibility of the attack being done by Muslims, Middle Eastern...

A: Yeah. You know, I... I really think that, you know the fact that people are Muslim has very little or nothing to do with, you know with the use of violence for political means.

Q. Right. But when... when it was revealed that the attackers were Muslim, how did you feel about that?

A. I just felt very sad. I felt very sad.

Q. And why did you feel sad?

A. I felt sad because I... I, you know, I think the purpose of religion in... in our... in civilization is to... is to civilize. You know? I think the purpose of religion is to bring us in touch with our compassionate, kind, living selves who we really are as human beings. The fact that anybody used, you know a religion as a platform to commit acts of violence, terrible violence and hatred has always been very... very shocking and sad to me. I just can't believe that human beings do that.

Q. What is your most vivid memory of September 11th? Is there anything that stands out in your mind that you think you'll never forget?

A. Yeah. September 10th, the night before, I was in Newark Airport. I was on United... on a United flight non-stop from Newark to San Francisco, because I had just come into

... to New York to watch the U.S. Open tennis tournament that past weekend. So what stood out was the fact that I was basically too... and there was actually a storm that night so I was... I was pretty much a weather situation away from being on United Flight 93 coming back to San Francisco; that I could have been on that flight. In fact, I managed to get on that flight... We were supposed to be on a later flight. He called me from the airport and said get in here as quickly as you can and try to get on the earlier flight so that even if it gets delayed we'll still get... get out to San Francisco tonight instead of tomorrow.

Q. So what were your feelings about what happened immediately afterwards? Did you feel anger or pain or grief or... did you feel guilt as a South Asian?

A. No. I really didn't feel guilt at all. I felt... I don't feel anger. I just felt a great sadness, a great sadness enveloped me, and it was sad. Really. Sadness at the fact that people could be so violent in their expression of political id, you know ideas for... to... to bring about change. I mean, ultimately what these people were looking to do was to try to bring about some change, and I believe... I don't believe in the means that they were using.

Q. What do you think this change was that they were trying to bring about?

A. I think the change was related to, you know, ultimately it was calling attention to their country. I think, you know, I think the majority of them were Saudis, you know? Maybe one or two Egyptians, and so on. But, I mean, there are countries... some countries in the Middle East have just really not stepped into the modern era, in my mind, in spite of a huge amount of wealth being available to there... to them. That wealth, I think, you know, should belong to the people in some form of democracy. And unfortunately, many of those countries are ruled by, you know very autocratic, totalitarian regimes that may or may not have external support. But I think there's a quiet rage that develops within young, single men and that's the rage of powerlessness, born out of powerlessness and an inability to change their socio-economic and cultural...you know, really be... be a voice... have their voices be heard.

Q. So it seems like you believe it's an internal problem within the country, why would they attack the United States in order to show their anger and to try to bring a change in their country?

A. I think... I think the majority of them believe that their governments in their countries were supported - like the princes and the royal families- supported by the United States through political and military means and that these select few amass wealth and control the natural resources of their countries, including their people. I believe there is a great rage about, really, the lack of humility. From what I've read and what I've heard, I think there's a great rage about the lack of humility and the lack of... this is again related back to Islam and its practice, you know, its true practice. And I don't believe the people who rule those countries in whatever form practice Islam in quite the way... that some of these gentlemen want their country to represent or be, or be represented by.

Q. Have your feelings changed since the events?

A. My feelings have changed about a few things.

Q. About what?

A. Really about the United States... I did a lot of research and I read about the United States involvement in the Middle East for the last thirty, forty years, and I'm... I'm very sad and disappointed about what this country, this great country, some of the measures that this country has taken to enforce its polit... to get political leverage, military leverage and socio-economic leverage.

Q. Such as?

A. Military, obviously, bases in Saudi-Arabia. Political is the ability to... to form, really, a set of buffer states against communist, create... and socio-economically to have access to oil. There was no cultural... I mean, the United States really doesn't care about culture or religion or... I think our government aims to protect its interests, primary political, military, socio-economic.

Q. When Americans asked you about your ethnic background or origin before

September 11th what would you tell them?

A. I'm of Indian origin.

Q. What about immediately after September 11th?

A. I did feel a little uncomfortable, in a way, about the fact that people did, you know, some people did mistake me for being Middle Eastern. A lot of people were concerned... a lot of my friends were concerned about what kind of treatment I was receiving because I traveled a lot for work, and what sort of treatment I received in... at... at airports, or when I traveled in other parts of the country 'cause the West Coast, San Francisco, where I lived, was very liberal; very broad minded, nothing like other parts of the country that I traveled to.

Q. So what kind of treatment have you received on airports?

A. There's a guarded... I mean, there's a wary guardedness, you know, a little bit of wariness about... about me. I can sense it. It's... it's covert. It hasn't been overt. You know, I think I've... I've gotten my bags checked about on average as much as probably the other, the next person right next to me. I think my name helps, the fact that it's non-Islamic helps in averting... If my name were you know, an Islam, a Muslim name I think I'd be in a in more... under a lot more scrutiny than now.

Q. So...

A. And I'm sad about that too. I feel sad for my... my fellow East Asians, in a sense.

Q. Understandably.

A. Not...West Asians, West Asians.

Q. So what do you say now when people ask you about your ethnicity?

A. I still say the same thing. I'm of Indian origin. Grew up in India.

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

A. I do. I do feel at home in the U.S. But I'd qualify that. What I'd say is that I enjoy the great freedoms and opportunities that this country affords me and I feel I belong in that. I... I've always felt that I was a free spirit and that I... I feel a great bond with... with

people around me who are free spirits. But at the same time, you know, I really don't believe in a deep level of attachment to places or things 'cause I think those are temporary. I think relationships with people are what matter and have some degree of permanency.

Q. Do you think that there's been a change in the way people from the Middle East and South Asia are being treated in the United States after September 11th?

A. Absolutely. Absolutely.

Q. How so?

A. I think the jingoistic elements in this country, really the more intolerant elements in this country have used this tragic occurrence as an opportunity to highlight their intolerance. I think the fact that there were hundreds and thousands and millions of American flags flying all over, people flying... People were flying flags on their cars, was actually an unpatriotic act in a sense. I really felt that people were exhibiting their intolerance. You know? I would have farther have liked to see people maybe put up a flag of the earth and... and saying, you know we love, you know everybody needs love and affection and... and... and an opportunity to express themselves. You know? It's not about X number of stripes and X number of stars. Guess what? This country was built on the backs of, you know slave labor you know, for a long time. There's nothing very redeeming about the fact that Thomas Jefferson, one of the draftees of the constitution, himself had slaves, had children by slaves and refused to acknowledge them. So I think the reality is... this is an amazing nation. It's an amazing experiment in terms of a nation state. I think this is the best example of a nation of a democratic nation state that here is or ever has been. But do I like how people reacted, no. I think... I think people used it as an opportunity to exhibit their intolerance and feel powerful somehow.

Q. So what are the ways that people are exhibiting their intolerance other than, as you say, raising the flag?

A. I've... I read about incidents all over the place where people were attacked and...

Q. And when they... If you notice, there are no more flags really. People... That phase has sort of died out. Does that mean that people are becoming more tolerant?

A. No way.

Q. What does that mean?

A. I mean, I think... I think human beings do as little as possible to be as comfortable as possible. The base line behavior is to... is to go towards pleasure and away from pain so you know, ... I think there are a lot of evolved people though that have really started to question the underlying reasons for issues such as this... for a tragic occurrence such as this, both from a preventative standpoint, possibly preventing this from happening again, but also from the point of view of what needs to be done socio-politically or geopolitically in the world to bring... bring about an end to these sorts of events. I think the massive military-industrial complex in this country is partially responsible for the creation of you know of monsters such as you know Al-Qaeda, in my mind. And I think, you know, for example, the production of weapons on a mass scale that have ended up in the hands of these people is you know, nuclear weapons that were used as a deterrent during the Cold War... and I may be a little idealistic or... or display some naiveté about this, but the reality is there's no need for nuclear weapons on this planet, or any other kind of weapons of mass destruction.

Q. Have you personally experienced any backlash after 9/11 such a discrimination or any attacks, racism? Have you been made fun of?

A. I think in a... in sort of a covert way people used humor to express what they were feeling towards people that were unlike them. Again it's an impression of... they were expressing intolerance. But they used humor in my presence and with me to express their anger or express their...

Q. They mistook you as a Muslim?

A. No. No. It was more of... they felt comfortable. They knew I was not a Muslim. They knew I was not a Middle Eastern man, but they felt comfortable telling me... well, or you

know expressing their anger with me, for some reason, and also even asking me what do you think about... I mean, why are these people behaving like this? You know? With a feeling of... of you must... you may know some of the underlying reasons we don't understand what's going on here.

Q. Why do you think that they think you have a better understanding?

A. 'Cause most of the people I know think that I you know, I do read a lot and I'm well informed so they are very interested in my perspective. And then the people that were a little bit more intolerant that I really didn't know very well I think kind of were using me in... in sort of a... as sort of a you know... I don't know, like... like one of those dolls that you .. that you go in and box against, you know, for boxing practice, as... you know, using humor but then bashing, you know, for example, my looks or my skin color allowed them to feel better about you know expressing their intolerance towards the Middle Easterners. I don't know... It was... It was weird, but I could feel it.

Q. Have any members of your family experienced backlash?

A. Not my immediate family. But I did have a couple of friends that experienced backlash on flights, that they were detained and they were made to get off flights that they were on for business purposes.

Q. They were Indian also?

A. They were Indian. Yeah, and they were made to get off the flights, interrogated for several hours and missed their business engagements for that reason.

Q. For how long were they detained?

A. They were detained for probably you know, less than a day at a time.

Q. Do you think that Middle Eastern and South Asian organizations have been effective in handling backlash against these groups after 9/11?

A. No.

Q. Why not?

A. Have they tried? Yeah, absolutely. Have they made serious attempts? I'm .. I'm really

in awe of how... how much has been done in terms of candlelight vigils and trying to express you know more about the culture, explain more about the culture, background, both south Asian and Middle Eastern cultures. I mean, cultural organizations, religion organizations as well as political organizations have tried to explain, have tried to make clear, educate, I think, using the media. But I believe that they've been ineffective... ineffective or in effectual because the media has been.. has really not risen to the occasion. I think that the intent was there but the tools were not.

Q. Do you think they've managed to organize politically.

A. Are they organized politically in this country? Are they well organized? I was surprised to see on television you know organizations like, you know I don't even remember the name of this organization but it was you know an Arab coalition, a Middle Eastern... I was very happy about that. I was very happy that there was a... there was a voice and there was a face representing the Arab people and the Middle Eastern people because they explained that this was only a small group of people that professed to the faith of Islam that were subverting it for their own reasons or means or motive.

Q. Have you joined any religious or ethnic organizations since the attacks?

A. No.

Q. In your opinion, what is the nature of the relationship between your ethnic and religious group and others in the United States at this time?

A. I don't think a relationship exists on... that level.

Q. On what level?

A. At a... at a religious, at a religious, ethnic level. I believe the relationship exists at a... at a social socio-economic level. But I believe that Indians primarily are people professing to Hinduism or Buddhism or so on, or from the Indian sub-continent, don't necessarily engage or have relationships with other groups or other communities through religious... through their religion. It's more through their work place, the people they associate with socially...

Q. Do you think these relationships are more harmonious now or less?

A. I think there's... there's more harmony. I think that a great many people in this country are better informed about issues outside this country. And there was a very isolationist view about world politics, world... both geopolitics and socio-economics. I'm sorry. And I think a lot more people have spent the time to get themselves educated on the world around them. So I think that there's more harmony. That's my perception.

Q. If the situation is worse, according to what you think in terms of relationships, what can members of this community do to improve relations between all these ethnic and religious groups?

A. Well, the Council of World Religions, for example, is a good idea. I think there are some solutions. There are some problems that don't have a political solution but that can be solved by religious groups working together. For example, in Kashmir I believe that a solution could be gained more easily by religious leaders getting involved than by the politicians and militaries... of two military arms and two you know large countries getting involved. So I really believe that religious leaders have a great role to play to harmonize and bring groups together. I'm in awe of the Pope, for example, over the last several years has taken such amazing, dramatic steps toward Judaism, you know, by you know extending apologies to other religions, people of other faiths for having... for all the... for all the violence that the church was responsible for over the years, over the centuries, really. So I think religious leaders could really create harmony between groups by spreading a message of... of good will and effectively preaching to their own flock that we're all one, you know and there are different paths. And the paths may, like different rivers, you know flow into the same ocean.

Q. So what do you think that the organizations themselves can do?

A. The organizations need to come up with a joint goal working with other organizations. You're... are you referring to South Asian and... and... Yeah. I think they need to combine their resources, reach out to members of other communities, ask for their advice and help.

And really the starting point would be work with other minority groups and organizations that have been successful in this country because as...

Q. Such as?

A. I would say, you know talk to the NAACP, talk to the Jewish groups in this country, try to figure out what is a... See, very frequently, you know the content of a message may be just and righteous but it's not ready to be accepted by mass numbers of people. There is a subtle amount... there's a subtle packaging that needs to take place, unfortunately. The truth is not the truth is not the truth. So there's a packaging of information and messaging that needs to be much clearer, and much more efficient and with one voice. I think all of the different groups need to come together and speak with one voice. And I think educa--educating the general public about Islam, like the formation of Middle Eastern studies groups around the country, you know making you know an understanding of Islam required reading in an undergraduate level at many universities. Those are the kinds of steps that will lead to enlightenment, I think. And once people are ... are informed, it's hard to make ignorant, intolerant... take ignorant, intolerant nations when you are actually informed and educated about an incident an issue or situation...

Q. Given your understanding of the status of Middle Eastern and South Asian immigrant groups in the United States after September 11th would you encourage people from those countries to emigrate here now?

A. Absolutely.

Q. Why?

A. Well, I think the benefit is twofold. I think honestly there is a great socio-economic reason to emigrate to this country as... as well as political because you have political freedom. You have freedom of speech. There's a... a right to practice your religion openly. You have, probably, a great many rights... women have phenomenal rights in this country compared to some of the Middle Eastern countries that I've been exposed to or cultures, just in terms of western you know, a western civilization concept of rights for

women, women's rights. Not that we know what's right, but... The idea that I would say it's a win/win situation. This country really has benefited from the tremendous Diaspora of various cultures and... and immigrant movements really into the country. Immigration has been a great boom, bringing the best and the brightest of various cultures, various disciplines in a socio-economic sense, various ethnicities into this country from... even from a pure biological sense in terms of evolution, you know, it's very obvious that, in fact, the more disparate your ethnic strains that actually combine and merge, the healthier the offspring will be. That's just how it works. So the more inbred you are, the less healthy you are because you... you protect and preserve a very small number of healthy genes in every succeeding generation.

Q. Okay. So we've talked about, we've spoken about negative consequences from September 11th. Do you think that there are any positive consequences?

A. Absolutely. Just like any great negative force, any great acts of violence such as the Holocaust I mean, you know six million people died. What that really allowed us as a species to learn was that not only do we have the capacity for great evil as... as human beings, as a species, but you know the ability to detect and prevent such catastrophes in the future depends on our ability to understand the dark side, the quote/unquote dark side, so to speak, or the different side of the equation. I think we still follow really a western civilization concept approach of rationalizing, of trying to find rational reasons for events rather than trying to determine the underlying root causes. So in an examination, symptoms become... become obvious and we immediately become engaged in the treatment of those symptoms. This is prevalent in western medicine as well, for example, rather than in the actual... in determining the actual root cause of... of something and trying to eradicate it. And this country has undertaken a great experiment and it's ... it's a very... it's the most successful experiment of its kind. It's probably the best place in the world to take these lessons from 9/11 which are that there is a great amount of violence in the world, man against man, man against animal, man against... in some ways against

plant species -- against our environment. Here's a great... There's a very combative stance, I think, that man has taken -- men and women -- and I think that there needs to be a change or shift, perhaps, in how we perceive the universe around us. And this is another step that's going to get us closer to that.

Q. So what do you think that the U.S. can do to resolve terrorism inside of it and directed against it?

A. You know, I went to a presentation once on leadership by General Norman Schwarzkopf who led something like five hundred thousand troops in Kuwait against Saddam Hussein. And then I took three pages of notes on what he said. He said the issue was about this, it's about that; it's about this, it's about that. Finally he said: I want you to take out your... all your pages of notes that you've taken so far and I want you to tear them up, okay? And I want you to pass them down the aisle so that the last person down in your aisle can throw them into the trashcan that's right there. And I want to tell you now what leadership is really about. When given the opportunity, take charge, number one. Number two: do what's right.

Q. So how can the United States take charge, and what is right for the U.S.?

A. I think that doing what's right involves an examination of the decision-making processes related to other governments. Our foreign policy needs to be examined in detail. The underlying basis of our foreign policy has to be based on a spirit of evolution and compassion rather than a spirit of what can I get out of deal making in these very short term perspectives.

Q. Do you think that that's too much to ask from a government?

A. Not at all. I mean, the amount of taxes I've paid in the last couple of years, you'd better get your act together. Use my money and you know get the best brains together and make it happen. I mean, this is where you've got the brightest people, you know coming together from all over the world here, wanting to work here and live here. Get your act together. Put together you know, something...you know, really a different approach to

problem solving. You know, one of the greatest exports from this country is... is not you know, wheat or corn or Pepsi-Cola. It's business strategy. It's one of the greatest exports from this country, policy and strategy. And if we can't strategize, if our government can't strategize on how to start looking at the long term perspective rather than short term, such as you know arming X global force people against these other group of people, and then, guess what? Ten years down the line the people you armed are now no longer on your side and they're using those weapons against you and you think that's somehow surprising.

Q. Right.

A. I mean, the policy of the '80s, Saddam Hussein was a great ally of the United States against Iran and the U.S. supplied him with see stocks for biological weapons. And how we're all concerned about Saddam has a biological weapons bomb. Well, guess what?

Q. We gave it to him.

A. Wake up!

Q. Would you say that Muslims and Arabs in the Middle East and South Asia hate America?

A. Some people do. Some... some people, -- some Arabs and Middle Eastern men and women do.

Q. Why do you say that?

A. I've just been exposed to... to people to... to Muslims in other parts of the world that don't hate... necessarily hate the United States for... because of the fact that they're Muslims but because of the fact that they claim the United States has practiced a very unbalanced policy towards these environments, these governments.

Q. So would ... so would you say that the hatred is directed more at the American government or at the American people, or both?

A. The American government, with envy of the American people and hatred of the American government.

Q. Okay. I want to thank you for answering all these questions. I'd like to know now if there's anything else that you'd like to raise, any comments you'd like to make?

A. I really want to thank you. I think, you know I learned... this was a very good experience.

Q. I appreciate it and I thank you for being honest.