

Interview 60

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: 21

{The respondent requested for her age to be changed as well as some of her personal details.}

Q. I'm going to start by asking you a few questions about yourself and then I'll go ahead and ask you the questions about September 11th? Where were you born?

A. I was born in Bombay, India.

Q. And where did you grow up?

A. I grew up in the Middle East, in [name of city] actually.

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

A. Eighteen.

Q. Where were your parents born?

A. They were born in India.

Q. Both of them?

A. My father was born in Oman, actually in [name of city].

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

A. South Asian, I think.

Q. You're not, like, Indian or....

A. Indian, yeah.

Q. What is your religious affiliation?

A. Hindu.

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

A. I'm [early twenties].

Q. You came here when you were eighteen? You have no accent.

A. I know English.

Q. That's amazing. Are you a U.S. citizen or a resident?

A. Neither.

Q. What is your highest level of education?

A. [removed].

Q. In what?

A. [removed].

Q. Where did you obtain your education?

A. At [New York college].

Q. What is your main occupation, if you can briefly explain what it is that you do?

A. I'm a community organizer....[removed]

Q. Okay. And you work for a private organization?

A. On the way to being a non-profit organization.

Q. Okay.

A. I mean, so it is ... this ... all of this won't be on there. Right? All this information?

Q. Whatever you want me to eliminate just let me know.

A. Okay. I'll tell you when to ...

Q. Yeah, yes. That's no problem. I mean, at any point you can refuse to answer any question. That's no problem. What is your marital status?

A. Single.

Q. Do you have any children?

A. No.

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

A. Around 9am I was on my way to class. I usually go with my roommate. We ... we share a class together. She was waiting for me downstairs. And then she came back up and said, "Guess what just happened? They say that a ...a plane has crashed into the World Trade Center and they say that terrorists did it." And I thought it was a joke and I was just, like ... 'cause she ... she jokes around a lot. And then she was like, no, no, really! And we went downstairs and somebody had the radio on and so we could hear a little bit on the radio. And since I was at [New York college] we were pretty far downtown, so we kept walking towards class. We were walking down [street] and that block, I mean, [streets], like, if you looked down you could see the Towers very clearly. And we just saw people frozen on the street, like, looking to our ... our left, and then we looked over and we could see ... we could see the Towers on fire. I think the ... I think the second plane had just hit so it was just, like ... it was right in front of us. And there were all these people on the street taking pictures and everyone kind of in shock and we heard ambulances all around.

Q. So what was your first reaction when you heard about the attacks? Did you think in your mind that, okay, the attacks ... whoever's behind it might be Muslims?

A. No. I mean, I don't think it even hit me that ... that it was any kind of terrorists or anything like that. I mean, I ... I hadn't ... that wasn't in my head at all. I was just looking and I was, like, Oh my God! You know? I--you know--had no idea of ... I ... I don't think

I was even thinking about who did it and what happened? Like, it hadn't even registered whether or not it was an accident or terrorists or-- you know? I was just looking at the buildings. You know? And so we went, I guess, met a lot of students. I think people were very confused and--you know--some people were crying. The roommate I was with was trying to figure out where her uncle was 'cause ... 'cause he works very close to there, but .. so we were trying to get closer to pay phones. But the pay phone lines were amazingly long and no one's cell phone was working. We went inside the building for a while, waiting in line inside one of the [school] buildings, and it was about--I don't even know; maybe, like, forty minutes later or something. We came back outside and realized that the Towers weren't there.

Q. Oh my God!

A. We ... we just looked and they weren't there and I guess we had ... we had missed the entire scene. And for a while both of us were just very confused. We were, like, but they were just here. You know? Like, if we moved a little bit further uptown will we suddenly see them?

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

A. I ... I think that initial scene, like, when we got to [street], like, the ... that image of the towers--you know-- both of them on fire. I mean, that still sticks in my mind a little bit. And, yeah. I mean, it was just quite chaotic around the streets and everything.

Q. So what were ... what were your feelings immediately afterwards, after seeing that? Did you feel pain, grief, sadness, anger, after you found out that this was a

terrorist attack and the Muslims were behind it, Osama Bin Laddin or his work?

What were your feelings?

A. Well, I mean, I did ... You know, I was pretty shocked. I did feel--you know--pain and grief. But I ... I think when we returned home and started looking at the news, like, I think I just started getting annoyed at--you know--those images just kept getting played over and over and over again, the ... the plane running into the tower and everything. And ... and I think that I was a ...--you know--I was worried but I was also, like, this is so soon. How do they know who did it? You know? Like, what ... what happened? You know? And--you know--I ... didn't trust the news at all.

Q. Okay. Alright. Have your feelings changed ever since the events?

A. Changed in terms of ...

Q. In terms of, like, do you think that immediately when they said, it's Osama Bin Laddin and you mentioned that you thought to yourself how do they know so quickly. Do you think that they were right in making that judgment immediately afterwards?

A. I don't ... I don't know. I mean, to be honest, like, I don't even really remember everything that was going in my head, like, for those first two days. I mean, I think ... my family was trying to get a hold of me. I--you know--didn't know how to talk to them. Like, all of that confusion was here.

Q. Your parents were ... are in the Middle East right now?

A. Yeah. Yeah. So they were having a really ... it was just really hard getting through to them. I knew that--you know--everyone was worried and ... and I was worried about the people that I was seeing around. Like, there were some very upset people worried about

their friends and relatives downtown and it was sort of like, yeah, I mean, the news was on, but it wasn't on my mind yet. And ... and I was ... I mean, I think I was annoyed and sort of upset that .. of the possibility that it was Osama Bin Laddin or it was terrorists from the Middle East or some ...you know? I was just, like, Oh--you know-what is this going to ... what's going to happen now?

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

A. I told them I was from India.

Q. And then how about immediately afterwards?

A. Immediately afterwards I also said I was from India. I ... I think I started getting up...I started getting very upset, especially a couple of days later when there was all this talk of—you know--the bombing was going to start and this means war and all of this stuff, and talk like that. That obviously upset me very much. And that time, I think, it became ... because of my accent and because of--you know--like, people sort of take for granted that I'm not American. You know? I just sort of blend in a lot. But I think that ... that in a ... in a contrast of ... I think that that put a really big division between me and a lot of the people I was around and I was very vocal about it. You know? I was just like, what do you mean you're just going to go to war? You don't even know what happened. And I mean, I guess I just realized ... I mean, I was living with some conservative people too, and ... and they started really started seeing me as, oh, she's ... she's not American and she doesn't feel it the way we do.

Q. The roommates you lived with, are they South Asian as well?

A. They ... no. They were white American.

Q. Okay. I see. Have your feelings towards the United States changed since 9-11, your level of political awareness or....

A. Yeah. I mean, I think that the ... after September 11th, like, a lot of change for me in terms of how I saw the world and how I saw American presence in the world and ... and I mean, I started to see things a lot more clearly too, 'cause it just sort of like ... peoples' accusations towards America kind of became more real.

Q. Okay.

A. After

Q. Do you feel a sense of belong here? Do you feel at home here?

A. Yes and no for different reasons. At that time I felt ... I don't think I felt more of, like, being an outsider than--you know--than ... than ever. Even though I ... I went through it with people I--you know--understand, like, I was very upset too and--you know--I understand, like, how many people were missing and--you know--go around the city and look at all those pictures of, like, missing people that this is my family member. I recognized a couple of people there. It was ... it was pretty emotional. But at the same time, like, I thought people around me were just going crazy--you know--their ... their ... with all the flags coming out and ... and all this pro-America stuff. I just was very, very set apart from that. And ... and, I mean, I do feel a sense of belonging here in that I've--you know--found ... I'm a part of various communities and I have--you know--good ... good friends here and--you know—a base here. But ... but otherwise, I mean, it's definitely, like, very much like no, I don't belong in many ways.

Q. Do you think there has been a change in the way people from the Middle East and South Asia have been treated ever since September 11th?

A. Oh, I mean, there's been a big change, I think.

Q. How so?

A. I mean, I ... I think that, like, xenophobic attacks have been happening for a long time. But directly after 9-11--you know-- it increased by a really, really huge amount. There were ... there were many people I knew personally that were--you know--they were attacked or jumped in the street on their way home at night or ...--you know--many South Asians. Like, obviously many Arabs too. And .. and yet, I think that ... that especially directly ... like, the few months right after, that was a really heightened period of racial attacks. I think that in some ways it has gone down a little bit. But--you know--it could go up at any moment with the war on Iraq starting it'll start going up again.

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

A. I haven't experienced any physical violence but--you know....

Q. Not necessarily physical but verbal or

A. I experienced a lot of ... of. ... Yeah. Yeah. I think pretty often, actually.

Q. Where at, public ... public areas, in school or

A. Like, around school but also in Queens, like in ... in my neighborhood--you know--just people making comments like--you know--start ... start chanting, like, prayers when I pass by or something like that, like....

Q. Oh, okay.

A. You know--sort of like "Muslim, go home" kind of thing. Yeah, like shouts of, like, being Arab or some ...--you know--just random people yelling in the street.

Q. Have any members of your family or any close friends experienced anything? You mentioned that you've heard of friends being jumped on the street, if you can briefly share that experience with us?

A. I think ... well, a friend of mine wears a head scarf and I know that she was ... she was spit on a couple of times. She's been facing a lot of harassment and she's....

Q. After September 11th?

A. After September 11th. And other friends. ... Yeah. I mean, other ... other people I know have experienced--you know--physical violence against them--you know--I mean, real .. real threats and

Q. Are they Muslim or non-Muslim, or they just seem to appear....

A. Most were non-Muslim, but South Asian. And--you know--some were clear and--you know--would ... would not have appeared at all in the traditional way of what people would expect Muslims to look like, sort of like. ... You heard on the news that the ... the ... the main target of violence would be, like, women wearing ... wearing scarves or--you know--Sikh men or, like, real visible targets of ... but, I mean, even people--you know--even people who seem to, like, go outside of that ... of that framework are--you know--gender, queer people, they were ... they were really targeted too.

Q. Do you think that South Asian and Middle Eastern organizations have been effective in handling this backlash? Do you think they've been effective in mobilizing the community?

A. I think that there were many efforts made after September 11th to sort of ... to reach out to the community and try to ... to ... to--you know--have open meetings and have people kind of heal together and ... and ... and--you know--some organizations set up--

you know--resources, like, sort of made up sheets of numbers you could call and ... to talk about hate crimes and ... I think that that sort of ... that response was fast in ... in dealing with everything that was happening. I don't know. I mean, I think that that [the] response still has to continue--you know--because it's still ... it's still going on.

Q. Have you joined any ethnic or religious organization after September 11th? Did you come into this organization before September 11th or....

A. No, after.

Q. Oh, what was your reason for joining this. Was it because of September 11th or

A. I mean, I'm not sure. I think, like, after September 11th, I did realize that I really did want to do a lot more work in immigrant communities and South Asian communities to ... to--you know--to help with the effects of ... of ... of the attacks--you know--and everything ... everything that has resulted in our communities, not just ... not just hate crimes and sort of the violence like people losing jobs, but also the crack on law enforcement that's happened--you know--people being picked up also. I mean, I ... I did know that at that time I wanted to find out how I could help us as much as possible and I ... Yeah.

Q. Do you ... in your opinion, what do you think the nature of the relationship between your ethnic and religious groups is amongst other groups in the United States at the time? Do you think, let's say, the Hindus and the Muslims or the Hindus and the Jews or the Muslims and the Jews, do you think these relationships now, after September 11th, are more oppositional and strained or they're more harmonious and tolerant of each other?

A. I think it really ... it depends. I think in some Muslim and Christian groups really got together--you know--tried to have, sort of understanding between each other, like this is what Islam really is kind of thing and there was sort of that kind of interfaith, like, let's get to know each other; let's get to know each others' religions. But there was also a lot of ... there was a lot going on last year also I think, in terms of the riots in Gujarat and the rising Hindu fundamentalism around there, which is just ... you know? I ... I think that there are a lot of tensions that are building up. You know? I think that many Hindu groups started meeting with Jewish groups here and sort of getting together with their anti-Muslim speech and stuff like that. And ... and it was very scary and I think it's still ... still happening a little bit, I mean. And in some ways the ... with ... with the crack down on communities here some ... some very--I don't know--the right way--you know--some very hard-line Muslim groups have also come up a little bit. You know? And it's ... it's hard because--you know--obviously everyone knows that what's happening is very wrong. What's happening in our communities is very wrong, but it's, like, it's easy to ... to sort of. ... Extremism is kind of really coming up now in ... in every ... in all of the religions.

Q. So what can members of your community do to improve these relationships with each other?

A. Well, I don't know. I mean, I think that ... that ... Yeah. I guess I don't know.

Q. Given your understanding of the status of the South Asian and the Middle Eastern groups in the United States at the time would you still encourage these groups to emigrate to the United States?

A. Well, I mean, I think that ...

Q. If you were to talk to ...

A. Part of it ... part of it ... part of it is, like, I don't even see the question as if I would encourage groups to come to ... to the U.S. because I think that there are so many reasons why people come, and ... and for most cases it's like, they don't really have another choice. You know? People are just, like, ... I mean, the way global economics is set up it's sort of ... it's hard. It's like America really keeps. ... All the money is here--you know--and sort of makes sure that it's not ... with policies around ... around the Middle East and ... and in South Asia it's ... it's really hard to say, oh--you know--don't come 'cause--you know you'll get beaten up if you do. But ... but at the same time I think for many people I think it's really unfortunate that that's how it comes. You know? Like, people ... many times people don't have an alternative but to find a place where they can make a ... make a living--you know--and ... and sort of America's media blitz there is just, like, oh this is the home of democracy. I mean, it's important that people realize that it's not and to fight those ... that ... that media image 'cause those are ... those are complete lies in many ways. But--you know--I think that encouraging ... like, it would be hard ... it would be really hard to encourage people not to come unless, like, some major structural changes occur, too, in global finance. You know?

Q. So we've talked about the negative consequences of September 11th. Do you think that there were any positive consequences that stemmed from these events?

A. Well, I ... I think that people are--you know--are starting to ... to resist as much as possible now. You know? I think people ... I mean, I don't know. I feel like, with the growing state of, like, of Americans who are ... who are opposing the ... the rack down that--you know--the domestic repression that's happened after September 11th and ... and

the war on Afghanistan and the war on Iraq, I think that they're starting to ... to sort of listen to what many movements or struggles in ... in Asian and African and I guess what you'd call Third World countries are, and I think that, I mean, I hope that people pay more attention to that.

Q. What are your thoughts on more visibility and improved understanding of the Muslims and Islam? Do you think that that could be one of the positive consequences or

A. Yeah. I mean, I think ... I think that that is a positive consequence. I think that that has happened a little bit. It has happened somewhat. But at the same time it's ... it's sort of ... it's happened in a way that's kind of like, well, here are the good people and there are the bad people, both in terms of here, like, oh, we're the--you know ... Islam is not a bad religion and of course it's not, but in terms of, like, Muslims in the United States, like, a lot of times the way messaging comes out is that--you know--that--you know- we're good people at heart, but we're not the ... the criminal aliens. You know? We haven't committed any crimes here. We're ... we're not related to terrorism. But then so many ... so many Muslims around the City have been picked up and detained and larger communities do not show support for the ... for the people in detention. You know? Like, the community leaders don't show support for ... for the people ... for most of the people--for the working class people here, for--you know--the people who have, say, come here illegally or have, like, have all this, like ... you know and people make risks. People come here for various reasons. Like, not everyone has the ... the privilege of being able to come here to ... to ... to study and get a Green Card straight away or--you know--something like that. And I think that those risks are really there. And ... and so, in terms of the

messaging, I think that it ... it harms a lot of the community here as well as making ... making communities more visible and--you know--helping mainstream America understand.

Q. You mentioned that you grew up in the Middle East. Why do you think that the attack on the World Trade Center took place? Since you've grown up there--you were there until the age of sixteen, do you think that it's because the Middle Easterners or the Arabs hate America that's why?

A. Well, no. I mean, I guess, like, from what you're saying too, I've never even thought of it as, like, the Middle Easterns or the Arabs because their. ... I grew up there and there's so much difference between, like, communities within each country there and--you know--I mean, you can't compare some of the Persian Gulf countries to ... to, like, Iraq or ... or Iran or Jordan or Syria and compare it to, like, Qatar or Oman. There's just ... there's such a difference. There's ... there's huge difference between those countries. And then ... and ... and

Q. So where you lived at

A. Algeria and Morocco.

Q. Where you lived at in Oman was there a large South Asian community or you lived amongst the Middle Easterners?

A. In the South Asian community, yeah. I mean, I grew up in the South Asian community in a Muslim country and I think. ... Yeah. I mean, I think a lot of people are very critical of Americans ... American foreign policy sort of and... .

Q. So you think the American foreign policy caused the attacks? How do you

A. Well, no. I mean, I'm not Well, I think that it contributed to it. I think that ... that ... but I mean, I guess I was speaking more in terms of American support for ... for Israel and ... and the continued attacks on Iraq after the Gulf War. You know? I think that Iraq's ... And--you know--the economic sanctions have really crippled the country. And--you know--it's the ... the general population that's been suffering most for ... over the last thirteen years.

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

A. Well, it can't resolve it from bombing more people and throwing more people in jail here. You know? I think that a lot has to change. And this focus on, like, keeping American dominance around the world has to change too. I mean, America's a country. It's not ... it's not God. It's like ... you know? I think that it's sort of resources around the world have to be made more equitable--more equitable and more democratic. Bombing Iraq is not going to make Iraq a democracy. You know? Getting children in Iraq access to medical care, which they're not getting right now--they can't even get access to their glasses to read--you know--you know?--that's going to change things.

Q. Have you traveled after September 11th by plane, like, within the country or internationally?

A. Yes, I have.

Q. Have ... do you ... did you feel the security being tighter?

A. Yeah, I did. I think I was more worried about what peoples' reactions to me would be at airports. Luckily, none of my experiences were too bad.

Q. Oh, okay.

A. But ... but, yeah. I think security was tighter. There were a lot more searches. I was searched every time I flew.

Q. So do you think that if these security measures were taken before September 11th the attacks could have been prevented or maybe the impact could have been lessened?

A. In many ways I don't think so. I mean, yeah, you can search many bags. But what's happened in the name of national security is--you know--like, Operation Tarmac, like, targeting all the non-citizen airport workers is not going to help your national security. You know? None of that's going to help national security ... because the root causes are still there. I mean, it's America that gave ... that gave Saddam Hussien and Al-Qaeda and, like, everyone their weapons. It's America that sells weapons all over the world--you know--and it's American money that's made from selling all these weapons. And, I mean, I think that that's the ... that's the biggest threat to national security.

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

A. I think ... I think that that's good.

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