

Interview 48

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: Female

Age: 23

Q. Okay. I'm going to start by asking you a few questions about yourself. Okay? Where were you born?

A. India.

Q. Where did you grow up?

A. New York.

Q. How old were you when you came to live here?

A. Two years.

Q. Two years old?

A. Um-hum.

Q. Okay. Where was your mother born?

A. India.

Q. And your father?

A. India.

Q. Where in India?

A. New Delhi.

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

A. Hinduism.

Q. That would be your religion. Right?

A. Right.

Q. But your ethnic background?

A. Indian.

Q. Indian. Okay.

A. All right.

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

A. Twenty-three.

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

A. Citizen.

Q. And what is your highest level of education?

A. A college grad.

Q. And what did you major in?

A. Computer information systems.

Q. Where did you obtain your education?

A. Baruch College.

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

A. My job title is Help Desk Specialist and I basically support any computer problems over the phone.

Q. Okay. And are you working for a private company or a governmental one?

A. Private.

Q. And what is your marital status?

A. Single.

Q. Do you have any children?

A. No.

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 9 a.m. and how did you hear of the attacks?

A. I was actually at work and my co-worker came in and told us that he'd just heard on the news that one of the planes hit the Towers. And ... and we were at work and I was in front of a computer so the first thing I did was log onto one of the news sites and I got more information from there. And then we ... In one of the offices they had a TV and we just started watching what was on the news.

Q. What was your first reaction when you heard?

A. Well, when he first came in and he told me that a plane hit I just, you know, thought that by accident some ... somebody just, you know, slammed into the Tower. I didn't think it was ... I didn't think it was anything like terror ... terrorist related or anything like that. That thought never even crossed my mind. I just thought, Oh my God, you know, how could this happen? And then later on I came to know that, you know ... and then even when the second plane hit, you know, like a few minutes later when ... when it was showed on the news, it still didn't occur to me that it was done purposely or anything like that. I thought it was, like, just a coincidence or I don't know. I never thought it was anything ...

Q. When they started mentioning on TV that this is a terrorist attack did the possibility of the terrorists being Muslims cross your mind?

A. No. I just ... You know? I mean, just the fact that it was terrorists and you now, this was happening to us here ... You know? You don't hear about this happening so close to your home. I ... I ... I couldn't even think that far.

Q. Okay. What do you consider your most vivid memory of September 11th to be, something you believe you will never forget and that will always stand out in your mind?

A. Well, I ... I guess it would be just the way everyone was because we were all left ... we were all let go early. We could ... they said you could go home. And when we went outside in the streets, and you know, I worked in Manhattan, seeing thousands and thousands of people on the street like that, I can never forget it because, I mean, it's always packed, you know, people are always going to work, running here and running there, but to see so many people just outside ... and you know what? Even though there was so many people, it was so quiet. It was so quiet and I can never forget that moment.

Q. What were your feelings immediately afterwards? Did you feel sadness, grief, anger?

A. I guess a little bit of both. I was ... I was really sad because, you know, all those people lost their lives. I was mad because ... You know? I was mad because I came to know that it was done intentionally and that ... that, of course, upset me. But it was a little bit of everything.

Q. Have those feelings changed ever since the events?

A. No. I'm still angry. You know? I wish that it could have been prevented. I wish that, you know, ...I mean, when I saw it on the ... on the ... on the TV that it hit the Tower I never thought it would fall. And I think that was, like, one of the biggest things, like, why did it fall. You know? 'Cause if it didn't fall then not ... I mean, lives would have still been hurt or ... but not as many. But, yeah, I still have grief. I still have sadness. You know? I ... I have pictures, like, of, you know, if you see them on TV or ...you know, I can't look at it.

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

A. That I was Indian and ... and my religion was Hindu.

Q. How about immediately afterwards?

A. Same thing. You know? I ... I never held back. But, you know, a lot of them, like, a lot of my co-workers afterwards were more interested. I guess they ... they thought Indians and Hindus and Muslims went hand in hand and you know, they ...they would ... you know, they would say: Oh, so you're a Muslim too? And you know, not that I wasn't ... not that I wouldn't want people to .. I had nothing against being Muslim but it's just, you know, I corrected them and I said: No. You know? Hindus are from India, although there are Muslims from India too and I, you know, and I ... I explained to them. And I ... and I think they were more ...

Q. So basically, after September 11th, you had to give a little bit more explanation?

A. Right, because they wanted to, you know, they want ... because for them, saying that you were Hindu was the same as saying you were Muslim and they didn't understand that, you know, that these are two different religions. Or, you know, even ... even though, you know, their, you know, their background is probably similar, but they didn't understand. You know? They ... they just put us in the same category.

Q. Have your feelings toward the United States changed ever since the events?

A. Not too much. I was never really, you know, political or anything like that so not ... not really.

Q. How about your level of political awareness? Are you more involved with the domestic or foreign policies? Has your political awareness...

A. Not ... not really. I was ... I've never been really interested. I mean, I watch the local news, but that's about it. I never really got involved further.

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

A. Yes I do. I grew up here so, you know, this is what I've known. I mean, I'm, you know, I'm Indian. You know? India was where I was born. My family is there, but New York, the United States is what I call home.

Q. Okay. So do you think that there has been a change in the way people from the Middle East and South Asia have been treated ever since the events?

A. I think right after it was kind of, you know, people were treated differently, especially, you know, you heard on the news people, you know, got killed, mugged, whatever because of their ethnicity or, you know? But I think it's ... it's ... now it's kind of back to normal, I think. But I think right after it was ... I mean, I even felt that people would, you know, stare at me and they would say, you know, I wonder if she's, you know, a terrorist, or I wonder if she belongs with, you know, that family, or, you know, what is she thinking, or, you know, just because of the color of my skin.

Q. So you've had people eye you?

A. Yeah, right after. I mean, the next day I, you know, I was on the train I felt everybody was staring at me. Maybe I was just imagining it but, you know, I really felt that people were looking at me. Walking down the street, you know, they would, like, look at me and ... and give me that ... that evil look.

Q. So apart from feeling that, did you experience any other type of backlash, any discrimination or racial profiling?

A. No. No.

Q. Anything at school, at work?

A. No. I mean, just ... at work just, you know, they would ask me: Are you Muslim or, you know, and I'm sure it's because they were ... they were thinking whatever they were thinking, whatever they heard on the news, and they wanted to know if I was Muslim or what? And, you know, and

then again I had to sit there and explain to them that, no, I'm Hindu and you know, we're from India. And Muslims can be from India, you know? All that. But nothing like, you know, nothing like, oh, you know, names or anything, you know? How people would call you, like, terrorism or terrorist or anything; nothing like that.

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

A. No, nothing ... nothing ... nothing too extreme or ...

Q. Do you think that the Middle Eastern and South Asian organizations have been effective in mobilizing the community to fight the backlash against members of their communities?

A. I guess. I mean, I think they could do more. You know? I mean, again, I think everything was done immediately, right after. Now it's like people are forgetting and they're kind of going back to normal. And that's when ... that's when I think, problems occur when, you know, you start going back to normal. You have to keep educating and keep, you know, sticking together and ... and ... and you know, protecting your own community, or whatever it is. I mean, not ... not really because it was still happening. You know? But I don't ... I don't think so. No.

Q. Have you joined any ethnic or religious organization since 9/11?

A. No.

Q. What do you think is the nature of the relationship amongst your ethnic and religious group and others in the United States at this time? Do you think that these relationships are more tolerant and harmonious or more strained since September 11th?

A. I re- ... You know what? I can't ... You can't say, like, the entire group ... You know? You can't ... I mean, I can only speak from my personal experience. And, you know, I have Muslim friends, Hindu friends, American, Christian, and we've been fine together. You know? I don't see a

difference between anything. But I'm sure if you look at the bigger picture and you know, if you look at it as a community as a whole then it probably has. You know?

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

A. Just, you know, instead of having ... I mean, I know, like, there's Hindu associations and they have Muslim ... I mean, instead of having separate, they should have something together, you know? Do something as a whole, you know, as a Desi community or as, like, you know, as an Indian-Pakistani community or a Hindu-Muslim community instead of saying, well, you know, we're Hindus. We're going to stick together, and we're Muslims. We're going to stick together, you know, find a common ground.

Q. Right. What do you think the Middle Eastern organizations can do?

A. I guess the same thing.

Q. Given your understanding of the Middle Eastern and South Asian immigrants in the United States right now and how they're being treated, would you still encourage these groups to emigrate to the United States?

A. Yes, because, you know, you can't ... you can't be scared Or, you know, run away from it. I mean, this is ... You know? I mean, you can't let something ... I mean, I understand it's ... it's a great tragedy and all that, but you can't let it effect you because then they've really won. You know? You can't ... and that's why, you know, I went to work the next day. You know? And everyone was home and they were, like, how could you go to work? And I'm, like how could you let it effect you? How could you ... You know? You have to move on. You have to ... You know? Life goes on. And, you know, if you ... if you sit there and you know, just not do certain things, or, you know, if you had plans to come to the United States and you had pla- and you don't do it, that's what they wanted. You know that? And so, definitely.

Q. We've spoken about the negative consequences of September 11th. Do you believe that there was anything positive that stemmed from September 11th?

A. In the beginning, you know, everyone became so patriotic with the flags and you know, America United States, which was nice because you would never see all these flags, like, in front of homes and on windows and cars. But again, you know, now it's like ... it's died out again. You know? So at first people were, like, okay, the United States. You know? They were proud of, you know, of themselves being American and all that. But, you know, maybe ... maybe a little came ... you know, a little ... You know, it was ... it was good in the beginning, but now it's kind of slow. But also, I think people were more interested in the history; like, they wanted to know, like, certain things. Like, even I was interested in, like, Pearl Harbor and you know, all, like, you know, big events that ... that happened, you know, in our history. Like, you know, then you want to know ... you want to know: Wait. What happened? I was never interested in it when I was sitting in history class, but now since, you know, this happened to us and we've seen and internalized ... you know? Then you're interested to know what happened before. I think people, you know, became more educated and they ... You know? Like, even with the youngsters and the children, you know, they wanted to know more.

Q. Right. What do you think about the possibility of more visibility of Muslims? Do you think that's a positive?

A. Of ... of what?

Q. More visibility of the Muslim community?

A. What do you mean?

Q. Like, right after September 11th. Before, not too many people knew about, like, what Islam was really about. Do you think that's positive?

A. I ... I don't think they still understand. And I think, you know, I've seen people who believed whatever they believed before September 11th still believe the same thing. I don't think ...

Q. So you believe that the misconceptions and the misunderstandings still exist about the Islamic religion?

A. Yes. I think so. And I think it's, you know, and I think you know, this is for all ... all the communities, I don't ... I mean, yeah, you know? I mean, they ... they ... on the news they would ... they would try to show, okay, well, Muslims aren't like them. You know? The ... You know? The Koran doesn't say this. You know? It's not good to kill people or to ... You know? And I'm sure people ... But the people who already had, like, presumptions and you know, people who, you know, still look at the color of their skin and have assumptions or whatever, I think they're still going to do that. I don't think, you know ... I don't ... Maybe, like, a small percentage changed their mind and their thinking, but as a whole or ... I don't think so.

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

A. I don't know. I think they just wanted to shake the entire world.

Q. Why?

A. Why? I don't know why. I just ... I wish I knew why. I have no idea, you know, what it was done for or ... even if everyone sits there and ... and they do research and they, you know, do their own analysis and come up with why, I don't think anyone will ever come up with the why.

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

A. I don't think they can do anything. I don't think they can do anything because you can't ... you can't, you know, drill certain things in everyone's head. You know? People are going to ... There's going to be someone that's going to be against something always and it's ... you can't do anything.

Q. Do you think that these attacks could have been prevented?

A. Maybe this attack, you know, maybe this way. But you can't prevent everything. You know?

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

A. No.

Q. No?

A. No. But I don't travel that much anyway so it's not ...

Q. Do you think that if the security measures that are present at airports now were applied to airports prior to September 11th, this disaster could have been avoided?

A. Maybe. Maybe if they were more cautious. But I think People, you know, still ... I mean, we ... there was some ... someone with ... with a bomb in their shoe ... you know, right after, you know, maybe a month or two months after. And, you know, and supposedly they were cautious and you know, they took ... so I think it can happen. I mean, you know? 'Cause someone can sneak in; something can happen; someone can be careless or they can find their own means, you now, different means.

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

A. No. That's about it.

Q. Okay. Thank you for your cooperation and time.

A. Oh, you're welcome.