

# Miqdaad Bhuriwala

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## SPEAKERS

Mehlam Bhuriwala, Miqdaad Bhuriwala

**M** Mehlam Bhuriwala 00:02

All right. Welcome to the Muslim Voices oral history project. This is Mehlam Bhuriwala interviewing Miqdaad Bhuriwala, who is my first cousin. I'm very excited to interview him today. The date is January 26, 2021.

**M** Mehlam Bhuriwala 00:18

We're just going to get started. Miqdaad, would you mind introducing yourself, telling me where you were born, and maybe a little bit about your childhood, and we can go from there?

**M** Miqdaad Bhuriwala 00:32

Yeah. Well, thank you for having me, Mehlam. I was actually born in Karachi, Pakistan in 1997. Then when I was four, I moved to the US, actually to briefly live with you guys. Thanks for hosting for a few years, [that was a] wild ride.

**M** Miqdaad Bhuriwala 00:54

It was surprising just the timing because we moved basically a month after 9/11. That's kind of a heavy topic, but that's how we faced it right away [since we] moved to the US a

month after all that happened. And it was just bizarre, so I guess based on even the topic of this podcast, [that] fits in pretty well.

**M** Mehlam Bhuriwala 01:22

Yeah. Based on that timeline, you must have been around four years old when you moved. Do you remember anything about before moving to the states or anything about your life in Pakistan? Or are your first memories more in the States?

**M** Miqdaad Bhuriwala 01:41

I definitely have a few memories in Pakistan. Though, I think some of them might be fake based on pictures creating a narrative in my head. But I definitely have some clear memories and I think most of my memories started forming really after the move. I think that's because as kids, we're so used to routines, and then if something really traumatic happens, that really shifts a lot of perspective. I think I really started having a clear trace of my memories right after my move, starting from the plane ride to first seeing your house and asking your mom for a glass of water. From then on, it's been pretty steady. I would say most of my memories started after that big shift happened.

**M** Mehlam Bhuriwala 02:29

What did you know about the move before you and your family actually got on the plane? Did y'all know what was happening or where you were going? Or were you just confused?

**M** Miqdaad Bhuriwala 02:42

I never really thought about it, honestly. I knew we were moving, but I don't really have many distinct memories of processing that. The few memories I have is [when] my parents left us in the house with our grandma because they were at the embassy to get visas. That was one memory. That was probably one of my oldest memories. And then another memory related to this is just the day we were moving out. All of our stuff was being moved out of the flat and we were literally on the way to the airport. Next thing you know, I'm on the plane going to a place, I had no idea where we were really going. I can't really say I had really any expectation or understanding of what was happening.

**M** Mehlam Bhuriwala 03:32

Did you know anything about the United States before you came here?

M Miqdaad Bhuriwala 03:36  
I really don't think I knew a single thing about the United States.

M Mehlam Bhuriwala 03:41  
Yeah, so very new experience, clearly. It's interesting that you use the word traumatic. How do you feel about that? If you wanted to maybe elaborate on it.

M Miqdaad Bhuriwala 03:53  
Yeah. I guess it's just something you could attribute to a blunt force impact. Moving across the world as the youngest sibling in a family and being put in this completely new environment, it's kind of a big jump. I felt like [I was] being dragged. I didn't really know what was happening. I was too young to have any either control over the situation or even some understanding of the situation. I just ended up from one school to another, from one house to another, everything was different. It was just very perspective altering - and just a lot.

M Mehlam Bhuriwala 04:42  
What was the language transition like? Did you find that there was a difficult transition or maybe you were just at the perfect age?

M Miqdaad Bhuriwala 04:51  
I did go to an English school over there, so I did learn English. I didn't know it very well, but it was an easy enough transition. I started school pretty early over there, at two and a half, so I had some time to catch up. There was some other language barriers. As you know, we have a religious/cultural language, Lisan Ul-Da'wat - a little off base from Urdu - which is the language I grew up learning. When I first came to the United States, we were encouraged to not speak our native language and favor English [over] our cultural language, which I still think about a lot to this day.

M Miqdaad Bhuriwala 05:35  
I'm pretty upset that I lost that ability. Now I can still listen to it and maybe understand, but I can't really speak a language that was my first language, which is weird to think

about. I lost it in a pretty short time, so the language transition wasn't too bad towards English. My older siblings had it a little bit harder. My sister ended up being in the ESL program. And Llamaq, my brother, had probably a different experience [because] they were a bit older than I was. I think I generally integrated pretty quickly into the English-speaking landscape.

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 06:18

Yeah. I mean, that's definitely a profound feeling to deal with losing that native language you had. I'm sure we're going to talk about this a lot further, but how do you feel, now that we're on the subject - do you feel like that influences the way that you view your nationality and sense of your state identity, if that makes sense?

M

Miqdaad Bhuriwala 06:53

I definitely think it does. I mean, language, I believe is very important. It's the link, it's the connection to culture, it's the connection to people [and] to society. Moving to the U.S, there was nothing really to hold on to from a Pakistani identity. We were around other Pakistanis, but there's not a national sport that we could follow over here or [a way to] just emulate things. Language is the main, I would say, the main bridge or one of the main ones - and losing that really changed my perception.

M

Miqdaad Bhuriwala 07:31

I consider myself Pakistani, but as years have gone on, when people ask where I'm from, my first thought 90% of the time is Houston, Texas because that's where I spent most of my life. Sometimes the other percent, I just don't feel like explaining the whole backstory, the origin story. I consider myself Pakistani, but at the same time, if I go to Pakistan and talk to my cousin's, I don't think I would just be like, "Yeah, I'm Pakistani." It's a little bit more like, "Okay, I'm understanding [that there is] more nuance to it." It is a confusing state to be in sometimes, where you just don't know.

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 08:17

Yeah, definitely. For me, at least being in obviously not the exact same position, but being in a somewhat similar situation of being Pakistani and American, sometimes I think it's like we omit to acknowledge the fact that there's no reason it has to be a binary. It's not like you have to be Pakistani or American. Not even to say that Pakistani-American is its own thing, but you don't have to be any one thing. And everyone is a lot of things, right.

Obviously, there's the whole like intersectional approach, which is kind of what's guiding this interview.

**M** Mehlam Bhuriwala 09:05

So after you got to the states and you said that's really when you started collecting a cohesive base of memories - walk me through what your grade schooling experience was like and what was it like to grow up going through elementary school and middle school and so on?

**M** Miqdaad Bhuriwala 09:27

Yeah. Oh, that's a lot of years. I think school is a very, like for most kids, it is just a very important time. There's so many things that have happened over the years and so many memories from all the grades and all the teachers and all the few best friends I would make. There's a lot. I moved schools a lot. After we moved out and got our house, the house ended up being in a zone where it was split between multiple zones [and] there was new schools coming up. In a span of four years or five years, I'd gone to four different schools and it's two different demographics, different parts of the city.

**M** Miqdaad Bhuriwala 10:12

I think that was very interesting because I was surrounded by a multitude types of people, which is weird because none of those people ended up being like me. There's very few Pakistani-Americans in my economic class and surroundings and things like that in a suburb of Houston. And so, I've met a lot of different types of people growing up in schools and was friends and was in social cliques of all sorts of different groups. But it was never a place that I felt like there's other people like me, so I was kind of a chameleon in a lot of ways all throughout school. [I was] trying to find the best way to survive, basically. And to survive in school is to have friends [and] be good with the teachers.

**M** Miqdaad Bhuriwala 11:03

I had to learn a lot about what it meant to be an American kid. I think I just tried to be the best American kid because I had so many different influences of so many different people trying it their own ways. I just tried to take the best of all the different approaches I saw. I wasn't tied to any one expectation, so I could really just be who I wanted to be, which was pretty cool. It was confusing to develop that identity, but at the same time, over the years, it's an identity that I can say is mine.

M Mehlam Bhuriwala 11:41

Well, I'm glad that you were able to - even though you might not have seen other people like yourself in that scenario - at least experience and engage with people from all kinds of different backgrounds too.

M Mehlam Bhuriwala 11:58

Would you say that environment carried on through your school career or did that ever change? Were you ever placed in a different environment where, which maybe it was not so diverse?

M Miqdaad Bhuriwala 12:11

Yeah. Monday through Fridays, I was in this completely different world with all these different people, very confusing, all different types of everything. Then Saturday rolls around and I have my religious school that I was not very fond of. That was the complete opposite, I would say. It was very homogenized. It was literally the opposite of the rest of my week. And I think that experience was a very, very formative and influential experience, to put it lightly. Looking back at it now, just learning how dynamic it is to be in a group, a very chord, close knit group, and also being on the outside. I would see that every single week. It would cycle through and I think that really gave me an understanding of how belonging works to a group. That was something that all throughout school kind of persisted.

M Mehlam Bhuriwala 13:30

I don't mean to cut you off, but why did you feel like you were on the outside?

M Miqdaad Bhuriwala 13:33

Well, again, it's like not feeling like you belonged. Any really group that I wanted to belong to, I had to start from the outside and work my way in. I felt like I had to gain ground a lot of the time, just being normal, like I had to prove myself a lot of the times for very basic things. And even the benefit of the doubt in terms of a lot of things like sports or just friend groups or being liked by the teacher or any things like that. A lot of the times I found myself obviously within a good friend group and towards the end of high school, that fear went away and I was comfortable with my own self and the friends I made that just naturally occurred. Well, people also grew up and changed too.

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 13:40

I want to pivot a little bit now, and talk about family for a little while. Obviously, you mentioned your siblings from earlier, but [as] you mentioned before, for the first few years of your stay in the United States, your family obviously stayed with mine at the same home. So if you could kind of backtrack a little bit now and walk me through what was that like, just kind of walk me through your experience and your relationship with your family starting from the beginning.

M

Miqdaad Bhuriwala 15:14

We lived in a multi-generational house the first few years we moved to the United States and I think that eased a lot of the transition. When I was in Pakistan, we didn't really live in a multi-generational community. But before I was born, my entire family, that's all they really have known for a long time. Fast forwarding to the United States, for my family, I think that comfort level and the close knit community that you can rely on immediately, which is our dads are brothers, and we have a grandma that kind of was like a whole family tree.

M

Miqdaad Bhuriwala 15:54

I think that was really interesting. And having cousins and a sibling that were very close in age, I think became my best friends from a very young age. Even though sometimes, like in school, I struggled to find a community and things like that, it was always nice to have that at home. I believe those first few years were probably some of the best years of my life, I have really fond memories, even though things were very tumultuous. It was a very great childhood because I had people that were like me, very similar to me, in so many different ways, by blood, and by culture, and our tastes and music to everything, and cartoons, [so] that was a really good time.

M

Miqdaad Bhuriwala 16:39

And I believe when we moved out, that's when things got a lot more lonely for me. Even making friends at school, I would come home and then be kind of alone a little bit more often. I think I shut down a little bit after I lost that comfort zone. You remember my angsty phases? I still think I'm riding those waves. I think that [our] family dynamic really did create a sense of community and it worked out pretty well.

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 17:22

So you mentioned the move, obviously, still very much in your childhood and moving out of this big family home to a different suburb. Do you just want to walk me through that experience itself and what that was like and talk about where that went?

M

Miqdaad Bhuriwala 17:45

Yeah. I mean, moving to a suburb, to a different part of town, it was pretty exciting, but also kind of scary. It was independence in a way and again, with independence kind of comes both ways. It's exciting. It's scary, different schools, different people. A lot change, but at the same time, we'd still see each other basically every weekend with Saturday school and then our families just always being around each other. It was a weird time. My mom had gotten breast cancer around that time. So honestly, my mind is pretty fuzzy from those years. I remember I was just in a really bad space at that time. I think my mind is more so preoccupied with that aspect of life rather than I didn't really pay attention much to the move as much, now that I think about it.

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 18:51

If you don't mind me asking, how long of a journey was it for your mom?

M

Miqdaad Bhuriwala 18:58

I'm not sure exactly. I was kind of young, but I believe it was probably somewhere in the ballpark of one to years total, somewhere along that. I'm not sure exactly how long the treatment for cancer in her category or what the details were, but I just remember snippets and defining moments and stuff. I would say like one or two years, but the recovery process is long.

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 19:38

Did it feel that long to you or did? I know you're telling me that your mind is kind of fuzzy, but I'm just curious about what - maybe walk me through a little bit what your headspace was like during that time and afterwards, if you don't mind me asking.

M

Miqdaad Bhuriwala 19:56

Yeah, definitely. That time about life was actually really interesting. It was pretty dark. I think that was the first time being confronted with the reality of death. And not knowing what's going on, existence came up to question, but at the same time, I felt so isolated



because I was the youngest, again. I don't really believe many people in my family took the time to just talk to me and tell me what was kind of happening. In my head, I had really no idea what was going on. I would have very imaginative nightmares and my creativity really skyrocket around this time.

M

Miqdaad Bhuriwala 20:40

Because I really didn't know what reality was. It didn't happen to me, but it happened to the most influential person to me at the time, which was my mom. It was a really just a weird, warped sense of time. I felt the ramifications of those emotions heavily until I wrote my college essay and I realized all those underlying emotions that had kind of developed my character. Even now, I [still] feel somewhat of it, [like] the fear of unknown or not knowing what's going on coupled with moving from a different country, not knowing what's going on, seeing my mom being very sick, not knowing what's going on. That feeling of being dragged and just helpless. Even now, I struggle with that sometimes when I feel loss of control, I kind of spiral sometimes and really do a lot to regain that sense of control.

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 21:35

Yeah, obviously, I can see where that's coming from. It's really interesting to me that you had this moment where it all came full circle and you had this awareness that like, "Oh wow, this is something that affects me and has been affecting me."

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 22:11

I'm not gonna ask you for too many personal details, but I'm wondering what is the coping process been like for that once you could bring yourself to acknowledge the fact that there was this trauma that you needed to process? What is the coping process been like since for you?

M

Miqdaad Bhuriwala 22:31

That's a good question. I think for me, it's to be able to separate my emotions from what is going on. Even if it's about me or even other people, I tend to take in emotions kind of strongly and [I'm] not a really good gatekeeper of that. So [I'm] working on gatekeeping my thoughts to a reasonable extent, like being able to express my emotions, being just expressive, but at the same time, understanding some things are out of my control, and just redefining my own sense of control so I can be okay when things are out of my

control.

M

Miqaad Bhuriwala 23:20

I think having my own house, having a pet, I don't have a pet right now, but having plants to grow or just establishing my own routine and a sense of independence, that really helps me just take the hits that control a little bit easier. Knowing that, "Look, I have my little world that I can control, but I have to understand that some things are out of my control." And especially when it comes to other people or anything like that, that's usually my ground. I just know I have my little world and I can focus on that.

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 23:59

That absolutely makes sense. Understanding the things that you can control helping you accept the things that you can't. Definitely. So I want to pivot a little bit now and circle to the concept of faith. And again, we're going to backtrack a little bit timewise, so walk me through your relationship with your religious identity, starting from whenever you feel like you really started maybe being aware of it, if that makes sense.

M

Miqaad Bhuriwala 24:42

Yeah. I will say religion has been very important to me for a long time. I have a lot of memories about it, even from Pakistan. Even not directly in my religious institution, but even in school because a lot of school is intertwined with Islam in Pakistan. A lot of snippets just stand out like Quran class and certain things that were said. I think the thing that stands out to me is I've always been very questioning about things. The memory I have in Pakistan is questioning something that my teacher had said. I think that really defines a lot of my feelings towards my religious identity.

M

Miqaad Bhuriwala 25:25

Regardless of how by the book you would call me, like a follower of my religion, I've always been one to question and challenge and just ponder something. A lot of times not out loud, not trying to instigate or create friction, [but] sometimes it's been necessary. Most of the times I've always kind of thought about why things are said. Islam is a very, in my opinion, it's a religion that tells you a lot of what to do and when to do it. And it does talk about why to do it. I can't say I've really read the religion all the way through and the fundamentals, but I think about like, "Is there a better way? Was that way demanded in that context of that specific time? So is there a better way?"

M

Miqdaad Bhuriwala 26:28

I know some of that can be very blasphemous thinking and some of it is very normal thinking. That's just the place I've kind of gone with. I've struggled, not struggled, but I've been very malleable with my religious identity, in my own religion. I am Dawoodi Bhora, which is a sect of Shia Islam. It's a very particular sect. It's kind of small and insulated, so the ideals are rooted in a lot of history and they're long standing and they're generational. Really, any new generational thought is a little tricky situation to navigate. It's been a lot of questioning, but I do think I deeply understand my religious affiliation.

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 27:32

Why would you say you deeply understand it?

M

Miqdaad Bhuriwala 27:36

I'm very attentive to the sermons that we've had [at] my Saturday school. I've always paid attention to it, either subconsciously or consciously. Even when I found something I didn't agree with, I would often find the rhetoric to be at least interesting. I could understand the line of logic that people were going on, not necessarily if I agreed with it or not. A lot of it I agreed with, a lot of I did not. But even then, that line of logic sticks out. Whenever I listen in sermon and even if I don't catch full phrases, I can put together the pieces of what the speaker is trying to communicate to everyone. I think whenever topics come up, whether they're intricate topics or not, I have a pretty good, I feel like I have a pretty good understanding of what is being said and being communicated.

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 28:41

Yeah. And circling back to language, do you feel like you - obviously learning English and obviously our cultural language at the same time - walk me through how that has also corresponded with your experiences with religion? Because obviously, it's a big part of the faith. It's a really specific language.

M

Miqdaad Bhuriwala 29:06

I think it's like our first topic, it's the bridge. I do think growing up, I picked up the cultural language pretty well. I would say within the last few years, I guess I haven't been as much in practice or been around it. Honestly, my relationship with the understanding of the religion has also probably changed too. I do definitely think that language is a big either barrier or bridge [it] depends on how you access it. I know growing up, a lot of my peers

didn't have the same knowledge base in the language and that really caused them to [not] affiliate with the religion because it's such a big gate kept thing.

M

Miqdaad Bhuriwala 29:51

Most of our sermons are not delivered in English or translated. It was like you either hear it and you can understand it or you really are out of luck. And when our sermons are three hours long, it's really hard to watch a three hour long movie with lots of action without subtitles. It's a little harder to stay involved. Especially in Saturday school as well, if you didn't know the language, you're kind of screwed. And I know that affected a lot of people, it affected me too. I think it's a very important part of the connection.

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 30:31

Why do you feel like your relationship has changed in recent years?

M

Miqdaad Bhuriwala 30:37

Well, I think just being given more space to establish my own concepts and not having to justify them consistently to other parties has allowed me to have that mental head space to even have my own opinions. And I'm not bombarded so much from external factors. I think going to college, just the fact of [I'm] living the world a little bit more out of the bubble and just being able to experience things and piecing together what my religion has taught me and to the real world experience that I've seen and get to apply it. It's kind of a puzzle piece sometimes. Being given my own space and freedom to feel free to even have thoughts and explore them has definitely been something very formative.

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 31:38

Do you feel like that space, at least to that level, wasn't afforded to you before making that transition to living away from the community?

M

Miqdaad Bhuriwala 31:50

I definitely think so. Again, I feel like I'm not that different than I was when I was 10 years old. I always think about that question. Like, "If you met yourself at 10 years old, would you be surprised?" I really think I would just stop myself and be like, "Yo, your beard came in, finally." Other than that I'll be like, "Cool. I recognize you, I see you, you see me."

M

Miqdaad Bhuriwala 31:56

I think that space was nice, but it just made me feel more comfortable. I always felt like I had the same line of logic. The boundaries of what I explored obviously have changed in my perception, depth and knowledge. And the words that I use to describe these emotions, I've obviously gained more words to be able to process these thoughts. But I think that hasn't changed based on having space, but my personal ability to not feel guilty or being persuaded outside has changed by getting space.

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 33:09

I want to maybe transition to actually something you said earlier, when you mentioned having the ability to burst your bubble. When do you feel like was - I'm sorry, my slack is going off right now - why do you feel like or what would you say is the first time your bubble was burst, so to speak?

M

Miqdaad Bhuriwala 33:43

I would say probably an experience after Ashura, which is a Shia commemoration of about 10 days. I traveled to Karachi, Pakistan to observe it with our spiritual leader and it was a very big event. It's like our Super Bowl, but a lot of days. And it's a very insulating event, like all day for nine days, you're kind of in this trance. All you're doing is living this life. I came away from my experience really in a different headspace. It had changed in that brief time. I felt like things had shifted because I saw the world a little bit differently. I had a lens on and I thought all these things about being born again, basically, like finding my purpose.

M

Miqdaad Bhuriwala 34:43

I was like, "Oh man, I've been living life all wrong." I was like, "How did I not see this earlier?" And upon a few weeks, coming back to real life, as I would say, those sunglasses lenses, they're starting to come in cracks and finding [that] things are chipping away and that logic that had built up in those few days just wasn't holding up for small, everyday activities. It's kind of in depth and stuff, but eventually, those cracks became a really shattering mirror. And when I looked into the mirror, I honestly did not recognize myself whatsoever. I had no idea what I believed and I had no idea what I did not believe. That was a very bizarre experience because I'd come in, I'd gone to Pakistan feeling one way, left Pakistan feeling a whole different way. And coming back, I was like, "What is happening?"

M

Miqdaad Bhuriwala 35:48

[I was] caught always in between two extremes and just fighting constantly between two different sides and was like, "This doesn't make sense." Things can't be so, we mentioned earlier, things aren't so binary, it doesn't make sense to live in a sense of extremes. As soon as that mirror broke, everything shattered, [I] didn't recognize myself, I realized there's a place to operate somewhere in the middle where I find comfort and I find my faith. Since then, I've been working to put the pieces of who I am back together. Growing up, and for a lot of different reasons, I never felt in control of my own self. So that mirror and bubble bursting and seeing where I fit with all the different communities that I've been brought up in, I've been born in, I've chosen to put myself in, and where I fall in all those places, is my decision. That bubble bursting was around my junior year of college and it's been probably about three to four years since then and working to put the pieces back together.

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 35:56

Your junior year of college?

M

Miqdaad Bhuriwala 37:10

Yeah.

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 37:12

How old were you? Probably around 21 or 22?

M

Miqdaad Bhuriwala 37:16

Yeah, probably 20. Seems like a long time ago.

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 37:24

Yeah, and everything in a pandemic seems like another lifetime. Speaking of, obviously, this interview would be remiss if we did not discuss the world wide panoramic, just kidding [laughs], pandemic that we're in right now. So just to kick things off, what is your general experience been in the last almost a year?

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Miqdaad Bhuriwala 37:52

Last year has been a wild ride, lots of time by myself, I think, met some interesting people. But at the same time, I have not met many people. I usually view myself as a very social person for a myriad of reasons. And before the pandemic hit, I was working a lot, I had a couple jobs, but I was also really involved with a lot of different organizations and groups and just settings and I was meeting people left and right. Every day I'd be meeting someone. It didn't have to be a deep connection or anything like that, but I would meet someone new and we'd share a conversation and I'd learned something and move along.

M

Miqdaad Bhuriwala 38:42

Then the pandemic happened and I really haven't met a new person. Everyone has remained a stranger in the last 300 days or whatever it is. I think that's pretty bizarre for me. But at the same time, it's allowed me to really just slow down and I think that it came at a good time, in a weird way. Because this is the time I want to set a foundation for how I want to see myself in a lot of ways, but most importantly, my perspective on things, and my mental psyche, I carry that on to adulthood.

M

Miqdaad Bhuriwala 38:48

I've always been a really finicky person and kind of panicky, but I'm working on being still and being confident and go[ing] with the flow and not worrying about timelines, because time isn't real, basically. And just focusing on the small stuff and things that matter. I mean, [the] pandemic really sucks. It's really affected me in a lot of different ways from my schooling being affected to my career and financially and mentally, obviously in so many ways. A lot of relationships have been affected negatively, but it has given me time for myself. And I feel like for the first time of my life, I have time for myself. That can be very scary, but it also is, again, very, very exciting.

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 40:17

So walk me through some of the maybe positive effects of being able to devote more time to yourself.

M

Miqdaad Bhuriwala 40:28

Most importantly, I think it's helping with mental health to slow down and really process a lot of things, my feelings and who I am as a person in general, like how I see myself going on throughout the day. Again, I could feel my mood a little bit better and have a better

understanding about my moods and how I take things. Also it's given me time to work on small things that I've always wanted to and just paint a little bit. I might start learning guitar, I'm not good at it, I'm going very unconventional. I'm taking time to just slow down and appreciate things as they come.

M

Miqdaad Bhuriwala 41:08

Also not having a schedule, I'm being more open to whatever happens. There's not much that happens right now, but I'm very open to things because there's not anything really in the way. There's a lot more flexibility with my life, which I find very important going into the future. Regardless of a pandemic world or not, I think people realize how important flexibility is and control over their own time schedule or where they get to work and how much they want to work and things like that. I've been given more responsibility in my own self and I think that's been a positive of this situation.

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 41:57

And aside from the obvious, do you feel like there have been any kind of personal negatives to this experience as well?

M

Miqdaad Bhuriwala 42:07

Yeah. I feel like things have gotten very intense. When I feel isolated, I feel very isolated, there's not a go to thing I can do and doing my normal coping mechanisms. I do miss, again, missing people [and] not being anxious about meeting someone, talking to someone, not feeling like everyone's a potential threat. I know that's a weird feeling that we haven't had to face that in a lot of ways. Some people who are in different situations are a little bit more, in so many different situations, are a little bit more worried about strangers. But as a male in his late 20s, generally I don't have to worry. I've never had to really worry about strangers as much.

M

Miqdaad Bhuriwala 42:58

But now that gives you a perspective on how, in a weird way, how people are anxious around others. And I think, in a way, I understand social anxiety a little bit more. But just being scared all the time for my parents even if I did anything or not, I would always be like, "Okay, what happens if I get my parents sick?" And that was a scary thought to feel guilt about. Just seeing the negative effects that it's had on a lot of people, regardless of how I feel about it, it does suck knowing that people are suffering in a lot of different ways.



That obviously doesn't make me feel good about things.

**M** Mehlam Bhuriwala 43:54

We haven't really discussed school/career very much, so I want to maybe take some time to do that. This doesn't necessarily have to be pandemic related, but first tell me - you're still studying right now - so tell me what you want to do, what you're studying?

**M** Miqdaad Bhuriwala 44:20

Yeah. I did my undergrad in architectural engineering, which is engineering about buildings. I'm not really good at math. I don't know how I ended up in engineering, but I when I got into school, I was like, "I want to work on renewable energy." And somehow I was like, "I just want to be a part of the solution. I'm tired of waiting for someone else. If there's something I can do, I just want to be part of the solution." I've always been very passionate about combating climate change and just cleaning up our world and nature has been something very important to me for my entire life. Getting into college, I was like, "I want to do something about it somehow."

**M** Miqdaad Bhuriwala 45:02

I ended up doing engineering and through that had my own journey through undergrad. I ended up finding a field that I very much related to, which is what I'm studying now. I'm in my master's of urban planning and urban planning is city planning and that goes into so many different directions. I always realized that anytime I went to a different city, I would always just walk around and see what was going on. There's so many parts of city planning that fascinate me, but mostly it's human behavior and how we can coexist. And combining that with my love of nature is what I'm really working on the future - is how humans and nature can coexist in places like cities.

**M** Miqdaad Bhuriwala 45:46

Because I feel like it's very dichotomize. We have state parks and then we have cities and there's a big distinction between that. Suburbs and rural areas kind of tried to do that, but suburbs ended up being a mess, but I do think there's a way to have humans and nature coexist. That's what I'm focused on in my schooling, directly and indirectly. And that's what I want to see my career path going into. I believe nature has very good benefits, intrinsically and extrinsically, for our human societies and finding ways that nature can

boost economics because that's what people care about, but also socially, I think, is what I'm working towards right now.

**M** Mehlam Bhuriwala 46:37

Yeah. Could you give some examples of situations where humans and natures can kind of coexist peacefully [and] smart solutions for maybe more urban environments?

**M** Miqdaad Bhuriwala 46:51

Well, the biggest one I could say is what I'm trying to work on right now. I mean, it's as simple as planting trees. I am currently working with an organization in Houston, it's called the Bayou Preservation Association in Houston. Anyone who is familiar with Houston, there is a system of bayous, which are basically giant ditches that hold water when it rains, [and] it rains a lot in Houston, collect[ing] flood water, and transports it down towards the Gulf of Mexico. These become little streams and rivers, depending on the rain- they're all over. They're designated green spaces, but they're not always the most green.

**M** Miqdaad Bhuriwala 47:34

A lot of them are just an empty ditch - concrete line, sand line - and there's not really anything going on. And so, what we are working towards is how to integrate those bayous and make them more naturally infused that people can interact with. There are certain parts of the bayou system where there's hiking trails, there's kayak tours, there's animal corridors, and so we're trying to get that more streamlined throughout all of Houston. That really works by planting native plants, creating a watershed rather than an actual ecosystem in that bayou, and it has a lot of potential for biodiversity. It's [also] a good habitat for amphibians, which are really necessary for ecosystems. It's a really good habitat for birds and other marine species and very good for plants.

**M** Miqdaad Bhuriwala 48:32

It not only provides oxygen and carbon sequestration, but it also helps everyone involved. People like being around nature, it improves property values, it cleans our air, it gives us a place to have recreational activity, it just does so much for really humans. And then also it's giving land back to the natural environment and being able to foster that. I believe humans are very destructive and we're capable of a lot of destruction, but at the same time, we can really speed up the natural process really well. And I think that's a really cool

power that humans have. That's what I'm focused on is integrating these natural building processes with the local community and how everyone can be involved.

**M** Mehlam Bhuriwala 49:27

Obviously as a Houston native, how do you feel like that would impact the community itself?

**M** Miqdaad Bhuriwala 49:33

It's actually very cool. I get very excited thinking about it. People in Texas generally, we don't have much around for nature, but I believe that any real city needs things like recreation. To keep people happy, you need people to be happy, and outdoor activities [are] something that's very linked to happiness. Recreational zones, public spaces, nature, these are all things that being - also, even access to different modes of transportation - these body systems are all connected, in a way.

**M** Miqdaad Bhuriwala 50:14

There's different ways to navigate through the city if you were able to. There's been parts of the bayou that people actually use as a transportation quarter by foot or by bike. And by really investing in these zones, like we would invest in roads, I think that [it] opens up a lot of interaction with people to the natural environment and it brings pride back to the city, knowing that there's this beautiful natural thing right in your backyard, right in your neighborhood. I think it brings a lot of pride back into knowing where you live and being proud of where you live and that you live in a beautiful area and you work towards keeping in beautiful. These aren't very high class or very imposing things. We don't have scenic mountains here, but we all have something as simple as a bayou. And it can be a very beautiful thing. I think that really speaks to the culture of Houston, to the people, and just gives a sense of belonging.

**M** Mehlam Bhuriwala 51:20

Awh, that was very beautifully put. Okay, so I don't really have anything else. I wanted to ask you if there's anything that you wanted to discuss, now would be the time. Anything that you wanted to talk about or say or I can just ask the last couple questions I have.

**M** Miqdaad Bhuriwala 51:45

I guess one question is, based on this podcast and generally your feelings about - how capable is this interaction or intersectionality between Muslims where we've grown up, like Houston or Texas as a whole, what are your opinions?

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 52:11

What are my opinions about what? Sorry. About where this research goes?

M

Miqdaad Bhuriwala 52:16

Yeah. I mean, what are your thoughts on how Muslims are actually able to be a part of the Texan culture?

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 52:27

In my opinion, I think that there is a very, very monolithic image of Texas that people think of when they think of Texas. When in reality, it's probably one of the most diverse places in the world, if not the country. Or maybe that's the other way around [laughs] the country, if not the world.

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 52:55

I really do think that in a massive state like this, with all kinds of different environments, all kinds of different ethnic groups and histories and cultures, obviously the area is large, but somewhat in proximity with one another, just by state lines, I do think that there's a lot of inherent value to bringing out the multitude of perspectives from the state. In so far as the Muslim aspect, I do think as well that, if not the entire media community, maybe just the academic community or probably both, I do think that there is still some room to grow in people's understandings of Muslims of all different kinds of backgrounds, and particularly, maybe the Muslim American experience. I do think that there's still kind of a lack of understanding of this specific intersection.

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 54:08

And so, I also feel like the research is valuable in that way, which is why I get excited about the project and conducting interviews. Honestly, I know I'm probably biased, but I honestly feel like we've assembled a very comprehensive and impressive variety of stories, not necessarily Muslims, not necessarily Americans or Texans or whatever, even though they

are. I do think that assembling a collection like this, the product that you end up with, is a very, very diverse and extremely just fulfilling group of people that are all extraordinary in very different ways. Through this project, I've gotten to interview so many different people from so many different backgrounds, which is the point, right. Even though we're all considered kind of in the same intersection, the truth is, there are people on in this archive that you probably have very little to do - you have so little in common with them. I think there's some beauty in that as well.

M Miqdaad Bhuriwala 55:40

That sounds very nice. I'm glad you've had a good experience with that.

M Mehlam Bhuriwala 55:43

Yeah, definitely.

M Miqdaad Bhuriwala 55:46

And sometimes it's hard to meet people like that.

M Mehlam Bhuriwala 55:49

Yeah, absolutely, absolutely. I definitely recommend that you check out the archive when you get a chance because there are some really amazing interviews that we've done. But is there anything else you wanted to talk about? I was just gonna ask maybe one or two more questions.

M Mehlam Bhuriwala 56:11

The last thing I like to ask people that we host in this project is really to allow them the chance to, one more time, reintroduce themselves. As we were talking about the project, obviously one of the purposes of the project is to allow an ethnic group that is often spoken for in media conversations and by people that obviously don't represent us, so - I'm sorry, this is a really long lineup. But the last thing that I like to ask people is to basically allow themselves to reintroduce themselves in their own terms. And using your own language, just tell us who you are one last time. You can make it as short or as long as you want. You can just tell me your name, you could tell me whatever it is you feel like identifies you.



Miqaad Bhuriwala 57:18

I don't think I'm one for long Game of Thrones titles. I will just reintroduce myself. My name is Miqaad Bhuriwala. I was born in Karachi, Pakistan and moved to the US in 2001. I've been living here ever since. I am a current master's student and I'm studying urban planning. And all I really can add to that is I want to create a better world for humans and nature and that's just the identity that I'm working to build towards.



Mehlam Bhuriwala 57:57

Nice nice.