

# Hasan Abbas

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

Accounting, Austin, Community, Culture, Culture shock, Dawoodi Bohra, Diversity and inclusivity, First-generation Americans, Houston, Immigrant parents, Moving, Multicultural, New York, Pakistan, Pakistani-Americans, Pop culture, The University of Texas at Austin

## SPEAKERS

Mehlam Bhuriwala, Hasan Abbas

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- M** Mehlam Bhuriwala 00:05  
Hello, everyone. The date is June 21, 2021. This is oral history fellow Mehlam Bhuriwala interviewing Hasan Abbas for the Muslim Voices in Texas project. I'm calling from Austin, Texas. How about you, Hasan? Where are you calling from?
- H** Hasan Abbas 00:25  
Hi, Hasan Abbas here. I'm calling from Houston, Texas.
- M** Mehlam Bhuriwala 00:30  
Great. And how are you today?
- H** Hasan Abbas 00:33  
I'm great. Very happy to be here. Looking forward to this interview.
- M** Mehlam Bhuriwala 00:37  
Yeah, me too. Just to get started, maybe we can gain a little bit of background about you and your life. I was wondering if you could tell me a little bit about your childhood, maybe

starting from where you were born, where are your parents are from, and what your family dynamic looked like for you at a young age and your childhood?

H

Hasan Abbas 01:04

Sure, yes. Both my parents were born in Karachi, Pakistan. My dad came here pretty early on, around '73. He originally came to Chicago when he arrived in the United States. He lived there for about sixteen years. At some point during that sixteen years - he arrived in '73, and around '81, I believe, he went back and he married my mom in Pakistan, and basically brought her over here and brought her back to Chicago. And after living over there for a couple of years, my brother was born in '85. Then after living in Chicago for three years after he was born, he moved to New York. You fast forward about five years after they moved to New York, I was born in '93. I lived in New York for about twelve years before I ended up moving to Texas. I was about twelve or thirteen, when I moved to Texas, and now I am twenty-eight years old. I've lived in Texas for more than half my life.

H

Hasan Abbas 02:21

But I guess I'm a first-generation American, my parents came here as immigrants, came from a Pakistani background, and I think at a young age, my parents were pretty adamant on making sure that I had very strong ties to my culture and my identity as a Pakistani, but also wanted to make sure that I was raised in a way where I would assimilate and sort of embrace American values, American culture. Despite being from a traditional background, after moving here to America, I think they wanted me to have a sense of both identities and have values from both America and Pakistan. My whole life, there has always been sort of this dichotomy between traditional culture, especially as making sure that I live with those values. My household and my parents, they come from a background that's very traditional and very conservative, but I felt like growing up, the culture that I encountered in school, all the friends that I had, they were all American, they were Western, they were more liberal. A big part of my childhood, and I feel like even on into today, is learning how to basically balance those two cultures, and those two identities.

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 04:06

Yeah, thank you for sharing that. I like the way you phrased it, the dichotomy between the two cultures that you're surrounded with from a young age. I think it's something that affects a lot of people who identify as first-generation Americans. I do want to talk about that, but before I do that, I was just wondering if you could elaborate a little bit more upon

what you think your parents tried to do to preserve - you mentioned them trying to preserve their native culture. What elements of your childhood were kind of pointed to that and had that native Pakistani culture element to it.

H

Hasan Abbas 05:03

Yeah, no, that's a great question, and I appreciate you asking it. I would really say the biggest way in which they tried to make sure that Pakistani culture and my Pakistani identity impacted me was, at a young age, we made frequent trips to Pakistan, especially while my grandparents were still alive. I would say nearly every year, we would make trips back to Pakistan, and the reason for that being is because they really wanted me to get a sense and understanding around where they had come from, what the culture was like over there, how different it was from America, and sort of have ties to that cultural identity, and to make sure I had an understanding around my roots, and where my ancestors came from. America is a society that's very multicultural. Pakistan, that is not the case, it's an Islamic Republic, meaning that the primary religion that people practice in the country is Islam. In South Asian countries, typically, whenever you go there, there's really not a lot of racial diversity the way there is over here in America.

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Hasan Abbas 06:32

Another point I guess I would really want to bring up is, there's this sort of alignment between culture and religion in a place like Pakistan, whereas over here, religion has no bearing on your day-to-day life, right? We have separation of church and state over here. So majority of the people in their schooling and in their daily way of life, it's a very secular upbringing that you have over here in America. Whereas in Pakistan, that's not the case. Religion is really a lens through which all aspects of life are viewed. It has a huge influence on your values and generally, your day-to-day life. I think at a younger age, it was not really something that I paid attention to. But I think as I got older, and whenever I would go back to Pakistan, these were cultural differences that became more apparent and a bit more stark to me.

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Hasan Abbas 07:42

I think that it was beneficial to get that perspective. I think that it's important to be able to understand where people come from, different walks of life, and gain a respect. Gaining that understanding helps you gain a respect for people who come from other walks of life, who may have beliefs that are totally diametrically opposed to yours. Despite them having different beliefs, different values, it's still possible to have mutual respect and to engage in dialogue with people that come from, like I said, a different moral stance, may

have different beliefs, different values, yet still have some sort of relationship with those people and even learn from them. It helps broaden your horizons, broaden your perspective. It just makes you, I would say, a more well-rounded person, a more cultured person.

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 08:51

Yeah, I agree, one hundred percent. I really want to go back to what you mentioned about this perspective that you have, which is a very mature perspective. It's not the same point of view that you had throughout your life, and maybe at a younger point in your life, you didn't really understand the significance of the things you were being exposed to. I'm curious if you could walk me back to when you were like a kid, and when you were being exposed to visits to Pakistani family back abroad - the language, food, whatever it is that goes into your cultural upbringing. How did you feel about that when you were at a younger age and before you had this understanding that you do today?

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Hasan Abbas 09:50

Starting off, I think the biggest disparity that I may have noticed at a young age was Pakistan is a Third World country, right? Unlike the US, which is a developed country, Pakistan is a developing country. The starkest difference that you're going to notice between a Third World country and a country like the US is the economic prosperity that you see over here in America. There's not as much economic prosperity for people in Pakistan. Of course, there is a wealthy class. But there's significantly more poverty in Pakistan, and it's a lot more visible, it's a lot more apparent than it is over here in America. I think seeing that, going to a Third World country and getting exposure to that, and realizing how people are able to get by, what their life is like, and how people are basically able to get by with so little. And how much tougher life is when you don't have access to basic resources.

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Hasan Abbas 11:10

A lot of times, thinking back on my visits to Pakistan early on in childhood, initially, for the first couple of days, we wouldn't be able to eat out, we would only be able to eat home cooked food, we wouldn't be able to eat food from restaurants. The water over there -here in America, typically, tap water is drinkable. You don't have to have any reservations about turning on the tap, filling up a glass of water, and just drinking that directly. That's not the case over there in Pakistan. Anytime before water is drinkable, you need to boil it, it needs to either be filtered, boiled, or both. I remember this always being an issue there

whenever we would go. A lot of the times, we would either be just drinking bottled water, or like I said, the water would have to go through some sort of purification process, whether it be filtered, or whether it be boiled.

H

Hasan Abbas 12:09

Things like that. A lot of the times, there were sewage problems. There are sanitation issues, whenever you go out there on the street, there's a lot of trash laying around, they don't have the sort of infrastructure we do where a couple times a week, a garbage truck will come and pick up the trash. Or over here we have regulations where it's required that sewage be built into houses or be built into public places. There's government regulations in place to make sure all of this stuff is done properly. Whereas in Pakistan, even if there are regulations - I'm not aware of whether there are - they're definitely not enforced as stringently as they are over here. As a result of that, society over there is just not as advanced as it is over here yet.

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Hasan Abbas 13:09

People are still very much happy. They have their families, they live life on a day-to-day basis, they work jobs to put food on the table for their families. Despite having so little, despite [not] having access to the same sort of resources that we do over here, they still figure out some way to be happy, right. I think that was definitely an eye opening experience. Every time coming back to America from Pakistan, you would come back feeling humbled, and feeling a lot more grateful for all the things that we have over here and all the luxuries that come with being able to grow up in a First World country. I think it was really important, for that reason, realizing how blessed we are to have the opportunities available to us that we have over here in America. I think had I grown up in Pakistan, maybe a lot of the opportunities that are available to me in America, I may not have. I may not have had access to a secular education, I may not have had access to clean water.

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Hasan Abbas 14:28

Another thing is the same sort of independence that I have over there. Over there, just being part of a traditional culture, most of the time - one big contrast I can draw is typically over here post-high school, once a kid turns eighteen they're typically put out on their own. They start a life and they begin to live their life independently of their parents. Back in Pakistan, that's typically not the case. The culture is a lot more communal. Even after you turn eighteen, you're sort of expected to come back home and live with your parents. The idea there is, is that your parents have supported you your whole life. Now

the expectation is, once you're ready to be on your own, you're educated, you're independent, if you're earning, the expectation is to repay the effort that your parents put in into raising you by taking care of them. That's also a difference in values. Over here, there's a lot more emphasis placed on independence and individualism. Whereas over there, it's a lot more of a communal society, there's a lot more emphasis placed on collectivism. Like some of the economic differences, those social differences were evident to me at a young age. Those were probably the things that stuck out the most. Like I said, having access to a lot of the luxuries that we have available to us over here and opportunities that we have available to us here. Learning how to be more grateful for those things.

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Mehlam Bhuriwala 14:54

Right, yeah. It sounds like it gave you a lot of perspective on life in general. But I'm also curious about whether these travels, as well as the cultural indoctrination that you experienced growing up - which we can definitely get into more detail about. I'm wondering if that also affected the way that you viewed yourself as an American citizen, or a resident of America. Did those experiences affect you and the way that you thought about those concepts?

H

Hasan Abbas 17:04

That's a good question. On a day-to-day basis, living here in America, going to school, it wasn't something that I was totally conscious of, just because, I think, I spoke English fluently. Most of my friends over here, like I said, the society is pretty multicultural. I was lucky enough to the point where the places where I was raised and where I grew up were pretty multicultural. Despite the school I went to was predominantly White, there were still a lot of people of color there, there were people of South Asian descent, there were African Americans, Latinos, Hispanics. The color of my skin or my racial background or ethnic background, that wasn't something that was really - I didn't feel otherized too much, in a sense. Of course, there were instances where I did run into situations where I may have been discriminated against because of my ethnic background or because my racial makeup, but I was fortunate enough to be shielded from a lot of that just because, like I said, being able to grow up in very multicultural places here in America. Was there another part of your question that I missed that I didn't answer?

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Mehlam Bhuriwala 18:44

No, no, no, that was it. Yeah. I was just wondering about how your cultural experiences

affected the way that you viewed your status as a US citizen at the time. I think that really captures it.

H

Hasan Abbas 19:03

I think, yeah, there were definitely times where I felt like there was a line I had to walk between the life I lived outside of my house and the person I was when I came home to my parents. Outside of home, my interaction with my peers and with my friends, it was all happening in English. The values that they held, like I said, we're very Western and the music that we listened to was pop music. I'm a millennial, so I grew up mainly in the 2000s and the 2010s decade. A lot of the music that we were listening to, a lot of the movies that we were watching at the time, they were all very American in a sense. Whereas when I came back home, I would interact with my parents in Urdu, which is a language. Most people in Pakistan speak Urdu. The language in which I would interact with my parents was Urdu. A lot of the movies, a lot of the music that we would listen to would be Bollywood movies. A lot of the values that we had at home, my parents were much more conservative, and their outlook on things was a bit different. Definitely over there, there was some contrast between the person I was when I was step outside of home, and the person I was when I would come home. There was a bit of a dual identity I had, and dual cultures that I feel like that's something I still have to work through today.

H

Hasan Abbas 21:00

This was something that I was inclined to embrace. I was always sort of interested in learning more about my Pakistani culture, or my South Asian identity and my South Asian background, because I felt like that was part of what made me unique, and it was something I wanted to lean into, and I wanted to learn more about. Despite not necessarily feeling different, I knew I was different. I wanted to have a good understanding of what the reason for that was, and how I was different, and what my identity was. I feel like there definitely was a curiosity there to gain a better understanding of what is my cultural background, my ancestral background, my identity, as a Muslim, as a Pakistani.

H

Hasan Abbas 22:02

That required a lot more of a concerted effort on my part, right? When it came to learning about American culture and American history, that was something I was getting in school. I was able to go to school, and we took classes about American history and the American Revolution, and industrial revolution, and now what we're living through, the technological revolution. We learned about all these things in school, and we would celebrate American holidays, we would get days off for that, we would get July 4 off, we would get Memorial

Day off. A byproduct of that being is just I didn't have to make as much of a concerted effort to learn about the significance of those things. Whereas when it came to my Pakistani identity, or my Muslim identity, we don't always get Islamic holidays off. You may get Christian holidays off, we would get Christmas break, but we wouldn't get breaks for Eid.

H

Hasan Abbas 22:02

I had to make a lot more of a concerted effort to learn about Pakistani history, and those sorts of things. There was definitely curiosity there. There was an effort that I had to make on my part to learn more about those things, so that I had a knowledge and I had an understanding of who I was, my background, my identity. I wanted to be able to be very well-versed in those topics, so that if I was ever called upon share this with other people that were maybe curious about my cultural background, my identity, I wanted to be able to explain to them and help them understand with confidence. Yeah, it definitely fostered a sense of curiosity in me.

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 24:20

When did that sense of curiosity start to appear? How old were you, would you say, when you really started making that concerted effort?

H

Hasan Abbas 24:32

I think really, I would say in high school. I became a bit more interested in wanting to learn more about the history of Pakistan. Trying to understand more about my identity as a Muslim. I felt like I started thinking about those things more. I felt like as a kid, I was just sort of going through the motions, not really being introspective when it came to other aspects of my identity or myself.

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 25:13

Yeah, that makes sense. I'm just curious, aside from investigating your ethnic and religious background, what else were you passionate about or interested in when you were that age or even younger? Through your childhood, what are the other things that mattered to you and that you were as excited about as these questions?

H

Hasan Abbas 25:48



I would definitely say I always had a fascination with hip hop culture, with pop culture, when it came to music and movies and boy bands and pop artists. I think in that realm, that was definitely something that I would spend hours just going down rabbit holes trying to explore and learn more about and I was so fascinated by Michael Jackson, and Madonna, and Kanye West, and all these different - I spent the first twelve years of my life in New York, and I think New York was definitely a big hub for pop culture, and it was very diverse, it was very multicultural. I grew up with people on my block that were from Colombia, that were from Dominican Republic, that were from all these different parts of the world, whether it be Latin America, whether it be Asia, East Asia, South Asia, or Europe.

H

Hasan Abbas 27:06

I think that there were a lot of people in New York that came from that ancestry, but were first-generation American. The same way that they were basically using elements of their culture, despite being first-generation Americans, they were drawing on elements of their culture to basically create art. That was something that I was always fascinated by, because I felt like I was able to use music, or movies, or just art in general, as a medium to learn more about different aspects of American culture. American culture was basically a fusion of all these different cultures, pretty much. I definitely felt like, as I said, music, movies were definitely a medium through which I was able to learn more about other cultures other than my own. I think me being a first generation coming from a Pakistani background, being interested in my own culture, that also made me more inclined to learn about other people like me who are first-generation American, but not necessarily from Pakistan, that were from other different parts of the world, but were sort of navigating this similar experience.

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Mehlam Bhuriwala 28:43

Yeah. Okay. Thank you for sharing that. I think that's pretty profound, the effect that artistic expressions, like music and film, have on people that may not have - you don't look like the people that are creating the albums and the movies. But you have a very specific relationship to it as a result of that. I think that's very profound. Now that you mentioned being around twelve, thirteen years old, that's also the time that you moved to Texas. Talk to me a little bit about what the move was like, maybe some of the first things that you noticed, or the things that really stuck out to you, as you were making this big transition, and maybe also just for your family.

H

Hasan Abbas 29:43

Yeah, absolutely. I think that's a great question, and I'm really glad you asked it. Speaking to the move, I think growing up in New York was definitely - making the move from New York to Texas was a really, really big change for me. Prior to moving to Texas, I was born in New York. That was the only place I had ever lived. I didn't know of a life outside of New York. Of course, like I said, we had made trips to Pakistan and stuff, but New York was my home. That's where all my friends were. That's where I spent the majority of my time. When we would go to Pakistan, that was only for a vacation for maybe a couple weeks at a time. Majority of the year, I was spending in New York, that's where my daily life was. That's all I knew. That's where I would ride my bike around, all the parks I would go to, the people I would meet. They were all New Yorkers.

H

Hasan Abbas 30:57

I guess what I'm trying to get at is when I moved to Texas, I definitely felt a bit of a culture shock. Because it dawned on me that not every place inside of the United States is like the East Coast. I started to gain an understanding of the concept of regional differences. [The] East Coast has its own distinct culture, the West Coast has its own distinct culture, the South has its own distinct culture. This was something that I guess just really had not registered with me prior to moving to Texas. Coming over here, I think the biggest differences I noticed is that people are definitely a lot more polite. I grasped the concept of southern hospitality very quickly. There are certain formalities that I became accustomed to living here in the south that didn't exist in the East Coast, or that may have existed and may not have been as prevalent or as apparent.

H

Hasan Abbas 32:05

I think New York and East Coast culture is very much associated and stereotyped as a very fast-paced life. People, whenever they're talking to you, they're trying to just get to the end of the conversation as soon as possible. They're very to-the-point and very direct and a little bit rough around the edges. Whereas I think here in the south, the culture is sort of characterized as more slow-paced, people will take a lot more time, they want to exchange pleasantries, they want to have a little bit of small talk. They'll take the time to go through those motions before getting to the point of a conversation or getting to a point if there's something that specifically you want to talk about. They always like to preface things with a little bit of small talk. People just aren't as direct, I would definitely say. I would say Americans overall, as a culture we're direct. But within America, there are definitely regional differences that exist, and that it took time for me to get accustomed to moving from the East Coast to the South.

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Mehlam Bhuriwala 33:25

I think it's interesting that you mentioned culture shock, because I was just wondering if you could compare the culture shock between coming from the US to Pakistan, and the differences between moving from New York to Texas. I mean, you mentioned the differences between regional differences and country to country, but if you could compare the two, what would that look like for you?

H

Hasan Abbas 33:56

That's a good question. I would say more broadly, I think the regional differences between Texas and New York, they're not that different. When I'm thinking of Pakistan, relative to Texas, or relative to New York, I see a lot more similarities between Texas and New York than I see between Texas and Pakistan, or New York and Pakistan. Ultimately, Texas and New York still exist in America, and there's still this overarching American culture. When I'm drawing a contrast between Pakistani culture and American culture, I'm more thinking about it in those terms, in terms of the overarching culture of America, and drawing it as a contrast to Pakistani culture. I feel like when you're looking at the differences, it's hard to compare Pakistan directly to Texas or directly to New York, because there's a lot more similarities between New York and Texas than there are - yeah, New York and Texas are a lot more similar than Pakistan is to New York or Texas.

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Mehlam Bhuriwala 35:33

Yeah, that makes sense. What did you like about Texas when you moved here?

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Hasan Abbas 35:43

It took me time to adjust and gain a liking to Texas. I think the biggest thing was, people are a lot more friendly. Like I said, southern hospitality is definitely a thing you learn. Formalities here that I just had not really been accustomed to, being in New York. I remember, one of the first things was, I had PE class, and my coach had asked me to do something, and I responded with, "Yes." He jumped in to correct me, and he was like, "Yes, sir." That was the first time that I had ever had anybody ask me to address them as "sir." I was not accustomed to that in New York. I had never encountered anybody that had asked me to address them as "sir," nobody had ever addressed me as "sir." So that, I think, is one formality that just sort of really sticks out to me.

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Hasan Abbas 36:51

I think that and just people, like I said, they will take a lot more time for small talk. Yeah, there's just a lot more formalities, I feel like, as opposed to New York is just - the way life over there, it's a lot of times characterized as very fast-paced, very go, go, go. People aren't trying to mince words. They're, like I said earlier, very direct. Whereas over here, it's not explicit, but I think you're definitely going to be exposed to a little bit more indirectness. People will, like I said, over there, people don't miss mince words. Over here, people will sometimes walk on eggshells, be a lot more polite. You don't need to have thick skin, they're a lot more sensitive, I feel like. When it comes to telling you something about you that they may not like or that they may not appreciate, they won't be as direct about it. They'll try to say it in the most polite way possible. Whereas in New York, like I said, I definitely felt like there were times where they wouldn't do any sort of dance, they wouldn't beat around the bush when it came to telling you how they felt about you or about something.

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 36:56

What did you miss about it when you when you initially came here?

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Hasan Abbas 38:56

I think the biggest thing was obviously the friends that I had left behind, that was really tough. Like I said, prior to moving to Texas, that was all I had known. Those were the people that I had grown up with, to that point. Those were friends that I used to hang out with on a daily basis. Being uprooted from all of that, having to come to a new place where the culture is different and having to start all over and form new relationships. I think as adults, people see children as very elastic and very malleable and they can adjust quickly. But I think as a kid, putting myself in my shoes, when I was at that age, like putting myself in my shoes now, when I was at that age, I think that was something that was very tough. It was definitely a very big burden. It took a lot of time for me to adapt.

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Hasan Abbas 40:10

Also, New York generally, we lived in the suburbs while we were there, but it's just much more of an urban landscape. Texas is a lot more spread out. Living in New York was a lot easier for me to get around on foot or a lot easier for me to get around on a bicycle. If I wanted to go somewhere and step out to go to maybe a supermarket, or maybe go grab a slice of pizza, I could do that by just going out for a walk and walking to a pizza place or walking to a supermarket, or riding my bike to those places. Whereas over here, when I

moved to Texas, it's not as urban of a landscape. For me to get from one place to another, the closest gas station was three miles. There was no way for me to go anywhere if I want to grab a bite to eat, or if I want to go to the supermarket without having a car. I was a lot more dependent on my parents to get around. I had made friends in my apartment complex, but in New York, I felt like a lot of the kids that I went to school with, and that I used to hang out with, I would be able to get to them, they'd be a bike ride away. When I moved to Texas, I had made friends in my neighborhood. A lot of times I'd be dependent on my parents to take me to a friend's house to go and hang out with them. Maybe that was something that was a little bit specific to the neighborhood that I lived in. But I was definitely a lot more dependent on my parents to get around. Being over here, you definitely needed a car a lot more. That was definitely a big difference, I definitely felt much more isolated, much more constricted in my movements. That was frustrating at times.

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Mehlam Bhuriwala 42:26

Moving to Texas, fast forward a few years, and you're getting ready to apply for college. I know that you did end up attending and graduating from the University of Texas, but was there ever a moment where you considered applying outside of Texas or away from this place that you had major new home? What was that process like?

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Hasan Abbas 42:55

I think living in the East Coast, there were quite a few people - I have an elder brother. Around the time when he was deciding to go to college, and looking at his friends group, the universities that they decided to go to were spread out across different states. Whereas over here, when I graduated from high school, most of my graduating class was going to other universities in Texas. My line of thinking was sort of similar to my peers in that I just figured that there are enough schools out here in Texas for me to apply to and end up getting a good education at. I never really considered going outside. I felt like I could get a good enough education staying here in Texas. Ultimately, my family had a lot of family friends. My parents had a lot of family friends with kids my age or older than me that had ended up going to schools here in Texas. They had come out with job security, job prospects, and were able to get on their feet post-undergrad, so to speak. I think that I was pretty open to just staying exclusively in Texas for my post-secondary schooling, for my undergraduate degree.

H

Hasan Abbas 44:50

But I think my parents were pretty set that they wanted me to go to UT Austin. Like I said, I think they had a lot of family friends with kids that had ended up going to UT. My brother had gone to a private school. UT being a public school, I think tuition was also a better value. It was a better value, it was a good school. They were definitely strongly leaning towards me going to school in Texas. They felt that I could get a good enough education going to school here in Texas, as opposed to me going to a school that may have been just as good as UT Austin, but it would have been private, and they would have had to end up shelling out way more money. It sort of made sense for me to go to UT. I think another factor was that growing up in Houston, it was also close to home. I was only a couple hours away. I did want to get out of Houston, or get away from home, but I think I also wanted to not be too far away from my support system, being my family. That was just what I had in mind graduating from high school is to go to school in Austin.

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Mehlam Bhuriwala 46:30

Moving to Austin, you mentioned that places like Houston are a lot more spaced out, a lot more driving involved. Austin isn't exactly like that. What was your comfort level with the semi-urban orientation of Austin and the landscape being more public transportation friendly, more gridded, walkable streets, but not at the the level of a city like New York? What was that like for you?

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Hasan Abbas 47:16

To be honest, having lived in the suburbs of Houston for so long, where things weren't as accessible, where I had to get around by a car, I was definitely looking forward to moving to a place like Austin, a city with all the characteristics that you mentioned earlier. A bit more public transportation friendly, a bit more walkable, it's easier to get from one place to another on foot if I want to step out to go to a convenience store or to get groceries at a supermarket or go out and grab a bite to eat. All those things were in a close vicinity, whereas that was not the case when I was living at my parents house going to high school. That was something I think I was definitely looking forward to. I think there was definitely a level of disappointment moving to Austin, because I think New York was the framework that I had in mind in terms of a place where everything is walkable. Austin didn't quite live up to that standard, but I think over time, the city definitely grew on me. It has a charm of its own, and I ended up falling in love with Austin.

H

Hasan Abbas 48:30

There were other things about Austin that really appealed to me. Relative to the rest of

Texas, I think it can be characterized as progressive. It has very much of a counterculture vibe, the whole motto of "keep Austin weird." The live music scene, the art scene. I remember there being points during college where I would see movie sets, movies being filmed either in the city or around campus. There would be premieres. Then Austin also has this label as being the live music capital of the world. There were always musical performances going on, when you would go out to either restaurants or bars, there were just places that were just strictly music venues. There were always artists, it had a very lively art scene, which I touched on earlier, but that was something I was really interested in, and it carried into my college years. I think it having that counterculture scene, the live music scene, all those things really appealed to me, it grew on me. It really helped broaden my horizons. Especially this notion of just being very counterculture, I think there were a lot of people and characters in Austin actively trying to go against the grain, buck the mainstream trends.

H

Hasan Abbas 50:35

That was something that I had really wanted to explore. That was something that I'd always felt like, a touch of my personality, it really resonated with who I was as a person. I always sort of saw myself as someone who was nonconformist, who always wanted to buck the mainstream trends. If there was something that everybody else was into, then I didn't want to be into that thing. That was not something I wanted to associate with. I felt like I found a lot of kindred spirits in Austin that were sort of on the same wavelength. Because of that, I think that they may have been bucking the mainstream, but not in the same way that I was. For example, if hip hop music was the mainstream, and I would buck it, buck the mainstream hip hop music scene to become more interested in electronic music, there were people that were bucking that same hip hop mainstream to go into something that was just way more experimental, like some sort of avant garde or experimental R&B or just whatever, something that was completely different, bucking the mainstream, but still completely different from the direction that I was going in when I was bucking it. Meeting those sorts of people, like I said, it really helped to broaden my horizons, and it really helped me to gain perspective and gain an appreciation of everything else that was out there as far as just art, music, fashion, politics, and it was definitely a very nurturing experience for me.

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 52:30

Good, I'm glad. Completing school, you ended up making the move away from Austin. Describe your next steps after that phase of your life for me. Maybe describe a little bit of what you did next and where you ended up.

H

Hasan Abbas 52:59

I grew up in a family, where there was a lot of emphasis on being career-oriented, finding some sort of track. I think there's always a stigma amongst South Asian people to go into some sort of career line, and there's specific career lines, whether it be engineering, whether it be law, whether it be medicine. It's basically always a running gag that is just like, "South Asians, if you're Pakistani, if you're Indian, your parents want you to become either a doctor, lawyer, or engineer." Going through college, I think that that was something that was always in the back of my head, that post-undergrad, there's this implicit expectation that I'm going to have to be career-oriented. I think that if it were up to me, bar any cultural influence, bar any parental influences, I probably would have gone and studied something that was very liberal arts-oriented. That was ultimately what I was interested in, but because of cultural influences, because of parental pressure, I think I ended up choosing something that would have been a bit more viable when it came to job prospects, so I graduated with a degree in economics.

H

Hasan Abbas 54:45

After graduating, that pretty much limited my options to roles that were in the field of either finance or accounting. After graduating I decided to basically pursue a career path as an accountant. Those post-grad years, three years subsequent to graduating, I basically spent, you could say, getting another degree in accounting. I was ultimately hoping to end up with a CPA, become a certified public accountant. Basically get some sort of professional designation that would result in me having financial security and basically result in me becoming a professional. Having some sort of technical skill that I'd be able to practice at a professional level. [Having] basically either a master's degree or having some sort of certification to show for that. I didn't end up getting a master's degree, but I did end up becoming a certified public accountant and getting a CPA license, that being a professional designation. Now I work as an accountant at a Big Four firm.

H

Hasan Abbas 56:18

So that is, like I said, a big result of probably cultural pressures, parental pressures. I don't want to make it sound as if I was doing something totally against my will, because that was definitely not the case. To a certain extent, I did want to end up in a job that provided me a sense of financial security, the ability to basically live a comfortable life. But I think that that was something that it wasn't on the forefront of my mind when I was in college. I didn't start thinking strongly about that until after I graduated. During my time in college, I was more focused on basically gaining experiences, not necessarily in an academic sense.



H

Hasan Abbas 57:21

But being able to come to UT, a school where I was going to class with students from all over the state, and in some cases outside of the state, and it being a university that on some level is selective, I felt like I wanted to take advantage of the opportunity to basically meet people from different backgrounds that were also thinkers and doers and highly productive. I was more focused on basically building relationships and meeting people than I was being good at academics, or basically figuring out my career path. Post-undergrad, I really didn't start think about those things and sort through those things until after I graduated. The three years subsequent to graduation is when I really worked through securing a career path and really focusing on that.

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 58:36

Yeah. That's something that, sadly, too many of us, I think, are in the same boat where you wish that you had the foresight that you do now. But that's life. Just curious, you mentioned earlier that your completely unchecked interests maybe aligned with something a little bit more like liberal arts related. I'm just wondering, if you had the chance to start over and do essentially college all over again, do you think you'd be in the same place that you are today?

H

Hasan Abbas 59:23

I think so, ultimately. But I guess if your question is that bar any sort of pressure or financial security or bar any sort of cultural pressure or bar any sort of parental pressure, I think I probably would have ended up studying something like history. As I've alluded to in past responses to your questions, history was something I was always interested in, whether it be American history, whether it be Pakistani history, whether it be the history of people from other ethnic backgrounds that were also first-generation Americans - like I said, I had an interest in art - that were drawing on elements of their culture, and it being evident in the art that they created. Just coming back to that, I was always very interested in history. I like just learning about how we got to where we are now.

H

Hasan Abbas 1:00:41

Especially, I think, having frequent trips to Pakistan and growing up here in America, and as I spoke to earlier, the economic differences, the cultural differences, the social differences. All those things are in some way, shape, or form a product of history, right? That was something that I was always intrigued by is just like, how did both of these respective places end up the way they are today? How did those societies end up the way

they are today? In a political sense, in a social sense, in a cultural sense. What were the drivers that brought that society to where it is in the present day? Even now, at this point, that's something I'm still interested in learning more about. That was something that in college, like I said, bar any sort of cultural pressures, that was something I would have really, really liked to take a deep dive into. Obviously, I made an effort to learn more about that on my own. Yeah, I would have definitely have liked to take advantage of opportunities to take more of a deep dive there.

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 1:02:12

Great. There's really one last topic that I thought we'd maybe discuss before we start coming to a close, because I know your time is precious and it's almost seven o'clock. I was wondering if we could discuss faith a little bit, and have a discussion about aspects of your religious identity. To get things started, you mentioned that Pakistani Islamic background and influence heavily influencing your childhood and your life, but would you identify today as a Muslim?

H

Hasan Abbas 1:03:01

I would say yes, I would identify as a Muslim. I would identify as a Muslim, but I would say, when it comes to my outlook and my beliefs, I look at those things through a completely secular lens. Because I am a Pakistani, there are a lot of aspects of my culture that align with Islam as a religion. A byproduct of that is me identifying as a Muslim, just because those two things, my religion and my culture, are so intertwined. But ultimately, in my beliefs, I am very secular.

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 1:03:54

What do you mean by that? Could you elaborate a little bit about if there's a boundary at which point you start to feel more secular than you do, let's say, religiously motivated?

H

Hasan Abbas 1:04:11

Yeah. I guess just give a little context here. I belong to a sect of Islam that is a very small sect of Islam. We have a religious leader, similar to the Pope. The structure of the religious organization is very much a top-down. That's something that is somewhat unique to our sect, as opposed to maybe Sunni Islam. We belong to a very small sect of Shia Islam. And majority of the Muslims in this world identify as Sunni, I would say probably the ratio is 85% to 15%. So 85% of the Muslims identify as Sunni, 15% identify as Shia. We belong to

a very small sub-sect of Shia Islam. The biggest difference there between the sect that I belong to, and the sect that majority of Muslims identify with, Sunni Islam, is that it's much more democratic in the sense that you don't have one sort of religious leader telling you that, "Okay, this is basically what we believe in."

H

Hasan Abbas 1:05:40

Obviously, with any Abrahamic religion, the basis of your religion is a book, right? Whether that be the Torah, whether that be the Bible, whether that be the Qur'an. We're relying on our religious leader to basically interpret the Qur'an. He basically tells us his interpretation of it, and then based on that, that's the interpretation that we choose to follow. Now, the difference that I would draw with Sunni Islam is it's much more democratic in the sense that there are multiple different scholars that you can look to, as opposed to in our sect, being just one religious leader. Each one of those scholars is providing a different interpretation on Islam. You can look to whichever interpretation you want that aligns best with your personal beliefs and your values.

H

Hasan Abbas 1:06:35

Now, overall, does that mean that within Sunni Islam, there are all these different versions? No. I think there are certain things that are universal to all Muslims, whether you be Sunni or Shia. Praying throughout the day, fasting, performing pilgrimages, going for hajj, these are all things that are universal to all Muslims. But I think that we belong to a sect that's a bit more orthodox, as opposed to when you're Sunni, you have a lot more latitude to choose your involvement in the religion, as opposed to the sect that we believe in, that's not totally the case. Like I said, it's very much top-down, and the community is very small. It's very tight knit, it's very conservative, and it's very orthodox. As opposed to when you belong to a Sunni sect, it is very big, right? There's no way you can know all the people in Houston that belong to the Sunni community, whereas that's not the case with the sect I belong to. It's very tight knit in the sense that everybody in the sect that I belong to in Houston, we all know each other. As a result, there is some inherent social pressure there. There is some groupthink. All those factors, they don't exist to the same extent in Sunni Islam. Because of that, there have been differences. There are certain parts of different sects of Islam that I align with and that I identify more with than the sect that I belong to, than my own.

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 1:08:55

Okay. Yeah, thank you. That's valuable. I agree, I think, in general, that's a pretty fair

characterization of both Dawoodi Bohra, the sect you are referring to, and Sunni Islam in general. But I'm just curious, now that you've elaborated a little bit and given more context on the Dawoodi Bohra community, and some of its key characteristics, how would you describe your relationship to that community? How attached would you say that you feel today to the Dawoodi Bohra community?

H

Hasan Abbas 1:09:36

I would say I feel very attached to the community. The key here is to draw a distinction between community and religion. I think that a community can exist outside of a religion. I think that yes, the Dawoodi Bohra community, it is a religious community, but the extent of religiosity, so to speak, practiced by all the people in that community differs. There's a spectrum in terms of there will always be people that lie on one end of the spectrum, who have very strong beliefs, whose faith is very strong, who are very orthodox, do everything by the book, so to speak. And then there are other people within the community that lie on another end of the spectrum, that are sort of more loose in practice, that are less orthodox, a bit more liberal, a bit more progressive in their outlook. Yet, ultimately, at the end of the day, all these people belong to the same community. Where I stand in the midst of all that, is that I think there is value in having a community. Ultimately, you got everyone belonging to the same religion, that is something that is basically the common thread, right? But the extent to which you buy in to the religion, it differs. However, like I said, it's nice having a thought that there is a community out there of people that you guys can identify with each other on some level.

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 1:11:42

I think that's valuable, too. I think that's the basis for a lot of relationships.

H

Hasan Abbas 1:11:45

There's a sense of comfort in that.

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 1:11:50

And I'm sure that's kind of helped you develop relationships with people in the community as well based on that shared background.

H

Hasan Abbas 1:11:58

Yeah. And I think because people exist at all points in the spectrum, you can pick where you lie on that spectrum, and you'll be able to find people that share similar beliefs and similar values and buy into the religion to the same extent that you do, more or less, where it's just like, there's only maybe marginal differences. That's really enough for you to be able to form strong bonds and strong relationships,

**M** Mehlam Bhuriwala 1:12:34

Friendships, even.

**H** Hasan Abbas 1:12:35

And friendships, absolutely.

**M** Mehlam Bhuriwala 1:12:43

You have a very clear and articulate concept of your relationship to your faith today. I'm just wondering if and how that's changed throughout the course of your life, if you felt differently at another point in your life, or you wouldn't have the same response to the question that I asked earlier about your relationship to faith. Could you explain to me if there has been a shift, or maybe an evolution of the way that you think about your relationship with faith and religion and community?

**H** Hasan Abbas 1:13:30

Sure. At a very young age, I found myself to be withdrawn when it came to religion. It was not because I had any sort of animosity towards it, or I was repulsed by it, or anything of that sort. That was not the case at all. Generally, it was just something that I found didn't really resonate with me. But I think having involvement in the community, having involvement in the religion was really important, because I was able to see other people that had very strong faith, and what it did for them and how they found comfort and how they found peace and how they found solace in the religion. That helped me foster an understanding and a respect [from] me for those same people.

**H** Hasan Abbas 1:14:39

Despite religion not really being able to do much for me in terms of comfort and solace and peace, I felt like I inherently had those things. Obviously, life is tough. Everybody goes

through their fair share of struggles. So I'm not trying to say that it's all rainbows and butterflies. I definitely acknowledge that it's not, but I was fortunate enough to come from a socio-economic background where I had a lot of luxuries and I never really wanted for anything. I had a very privileged upbringing. As a result of that, I was comfortable. I didn't really have a lot of instances in my life where I felt like I was really down on my luck, where I felt like religion maybe could serve as a source of comfort to help me find solace. Because of that, like I said, I may not have had that strong of ties to it. But I think I definitely understand that that is something that it does provide to people. I'm grateful to have that perspective. It helped foster an appreciation that this is something that can be beneficial for other people, despite it not being super beneficial for me.

H

Hasan Abbas 1:16:24

Being able to take that concept and apply it more broadly beyond my own religious community, to other people who are religious, and other people belonging to other religions, whether that be Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, Christianity, Judaism, people that were devoutly religious and that were orthodox in practice, it helped me gain an understanding of where they were coming from and helped me gain respect for their devotion, and the courage to, a lot of times, practice it openly. Growing up, I had a lot of friends that were Jewish, and there would be kids in my school that wore yarmulkes, and that would grow out their sideburns in line with religious customs of Judaism. We have similar practices in our religion. There are people that are very orthodox, and they'll wear a headpiece, and they'll grow out their beards. Despite their devotion to the religion, and being orthodox in practice, ultimately, they're just people. The same way that we love and we struggle, and we have relationships to our families, to our friends, to our siblings, their children, our parents those experiences are not unique to us, despite them looking differently, despite them practicing their religion, wearing it on their sleeves, so to speak, they still go through a lot of the same things that we do. It helps, like I said, gain and foster an understanding of other people's beliefs and mutual respect.

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 1:18:36

All right, well, thank you for sharing that. I think we are just about ready to start wrapping up. The one last question that I always like to ask everyone is after going through this process, if you would just like to take the time to reintroduce yourself and maybe share whatever descriptors or whatever it is that you feel is fair. Feel free to include that, just share a little bit, reiterate who you are, and what about you you think is defining. Big lead up to the question, but it's pretty easy question.

H

Hasan Abbas 1:19:31

Sure, absolutely. My name is Hassan Abbas and I am a student of history. I am a universal citizen. I'm just doing my best to be as empathetic of a human being as possible, and staying intellectually curious when it comes to other people's beliefs and their way of life and their interests and their backgrounds, whether that be social, political, economic, cultural. Ultimately, a lifelong student on a journey to just gain more knowledge and live a richer life.

M

Mehlam Bhuriwala 1:20:33

Right. Thank you very much.